

Eyes of the Leopard 2: Vengeance

Isabella Jordan

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Chapter One

Nadia Kerensky smiled at the way Vitali's pretty American girl stared at the rare lamb dish she placed at the center of the table. Her big blue eyes widened as she took in the juicy portion of meat Nadia had prepared as an entrée for their meal.

"Roast lamb?" Nicole Stewart spoke slowly.

The Kerensky family, sitting at the table like old times, were speaking in English for Nicole's benefit. It made Nadia happier than she could say to have her brothers back in Lorzneca, their hometown in Serbia, and Nicole had willingly come with them. Apparently Vitali had explained to Nicole that his sister's English was tentative at best. Nadia didn't know whether to be grateful or annoyed.

There was a playful glint in Ilia's dark eyes. "It's *lamb*."

Vitali snorted from his place at the head of the long wooden table and Nadia smiled at the way Nicole frowned at each of her brothers in turn.

"It is not roasted," Nadia explained, smiling at Nicole. "But I hope you will find the seasoning quite pleasant."

Nicole returned her smile as Nadia took her place across the table from Nicole. Nadia's gaze swept over her. *She's a tiny thing*. Nicole barely reached her brothers' shoulders and had a waist so small Vitali could probably circle it easily with his hands. Nadia found it incredible that her two large brothers hadn't managed to tear the slender woman apart by now. Certainly no human woman would be able to take them both in bed.

Nicole, just like the Kerensky family, was descended from the victims of a barbaric cult, doomed to life as creatures not entirely human. When in danger or under duress, some were powerful enough to change at will. Their kind took the form of the

black leopard. Sex played a powerful role in their lives as sex with someone not of their kind also triggered the change.

The worst part of their curse was the transformation back to their human form because it required a kill. Not necessarily human kill, but human blood held the most power. Outside of human blood were the animals, and the bigger the animal, the stronger its blood.

Nicole would have been the only woman with whom Ilia could safely mate while they were in America -- with Vitali's permission, of course. Therefore, take them both in bed Nicole did. There was no mistaking Nicole belonged to Vitali, her older brother. The shy smiles and loving glances Nicole cast at Vitali spoke volumes. And they were all returned. But the scent of Nadia's twin, Ilia, was all over Nicole. Nadia was curious to see if Ilia would seek out another woman's bed now that he was home and there were at least many women of half-blood or lesser degrees who could take him.

But there was something in his eyes, something about the way he gazed at Nicole when she and her brother weren't paying attention that told Nadia he wouldn't. Nadia knew him better than anyone. *He has feelings for her.* It didn't bode well. While such arrangements of sharing were common among their kind, the basis was purely physical. It had to be.

Oh, Ilia.

Nadia wondered if she would be invited to join them tonight. Taking in the American's pretty full lips, the soft swell of her breasts, she rather hoped she would. How long had it been since Nadia enjoyed sex?

"I'm sure it will be wonderful," Nicole said, nodding toward the lamb. "I've developed a fondness for rare meat. Now I can eat a steak that's just been cut off the cow. Amazing. And to think I used to be a vegetarian."

Nadia didn't understand the word *vegetarian*. Ilia's voice was low as he explained in their native tongue that Nicole used to be a person who did not eat meat of any kind.

"For how long did you not eat meat?" Nadia asked.

Nicole grinned. "Until two months ago."

"Little wonder you are so small," Nadia pointed out. "Not eating meat? It is necessary for our people. Red meat for the blood, bread to fill the stomach."

"And vodka for the soul." Vitali grinned as he held up his glass.

It was incredible her brother had found a woman of pure blood, the demon blood, in America. As Nadia listened to their tales of America and all the wonders it held, she couldn't get her mind around Nicole's lineage and the fact that she seemed unaware of it. Supposedly, Bartok had identified all of the pure bloods before he returned to Lorzneca and there were so few of them, only thirty-seven. All but one of the pure blooded of their kind remained in Serbia and that one had moved under mysterious circumstances with his half-blood wife to New Zealand. Most of the pure bloods remained in Lorzneca though, and kept to their own kind...

Of course, Vitali and Ilia had traveled abroad to America. Though Nadia had never entirely believed them they claimed the trip to America was to seek out new women with enough of the demon blood to be with them. They knew all of the women of their kind in Serbia, they'd said. Well, Vitali *had* found Nicole...

But it made Nadia fearful. Of the thirty-seven pure bloods they knew of, only three were females of childbearing age, herself included. Nicole was now the fourth. Bartok would discover Nicole was a pure blood and quickly. And then Nadia feared what would happen.

Nadia loved her brothers, was so happy to see them. She knew in time she'd come to love Nicole as well... But why had they returned? *Why had her brothers brought Nicole to Lorzneca?*

"Nadia?" Vitali's voice broke into her thoughts.

She threw Vitali what must have been a blank look as she swallowed the bit of lamb she'd been chewing.

"I was just asking if you'd made lemon pashkas for dessert." Vitali's smile didn't reach his eyes as he gazed at her.

There *was* a reason her brothers had returned and Nadia couldn't shake the feeling it had something to do with her. Had Vitali found out about Bartok? About *her*?

Did it have to do with Misha?

But Nadia pushed any thought of Mikhail out of her mind. Thinking of him was too painful...

"Did you think I would not?" Nadia teased.

Nadia smiled brightly at Nicole and rose from her chair to fetch the creamy cakes her brothers had always loved. She returned with the small tray and walked around the table to place one on Ilia's plate, then Nicole's.

Vitali was the last one she reached. She could feel his eyes on her as she placed the dessert at the edge of his conspicuously full plate. Why had her brother eaten so little of his dinner?

"We need to talk," Vitali whispered in their native tongue. "Tomorrow. Come to us tonight. I want to share Nicole with you."

Just like Vitali, Nadia thought. Letting her know he had something to tell her, something she would probably not want to hear, but on *his* schedule. He couldn't tell Nadia tonight. No, he wanted to see to his pleasure first. Nicole's pleasure...

But there will be pleasure for me too.

Nadia's insides stirred just thinking about tasting her brother's beautiful lover, having Nicole taste *her*. Watching her brothers pleasure Nicole until they were all exhausted. And Ilia *did* plan to be there. Ilia's gleaming dark eyes met hers when she glanced in his direction and they were filled with expectation.

Turning back to Vitali, Nadia nodded. His news could wait until tomorrow. There was little he could tell her that could make her days darker than they already were.

* * *

Nadia closed the door to the bedroom she'd given Vitali and Nicole as quietly as she could behind her. Padding across the tattered rug, she approached the large bed. The scent of sex hung heavy in the air and a wave of pure desire swept through her at the sight that greeted her on the bed.

Nicole's body was all sleek long lines, creamy white flesh, and she was on her hands and knees between Nadia's brothers. Vitali, every muscle of his large body hard and glistening, gripped Nicole's hips in his hands as he moved in and out of her from behind. The expression on his face was one of pure bliss.

Ilia, more slender than Vitali but every bit as muscular, was on his knees in front of Nicole, his eyes closed, his hands in her short dark hair. Her mouth worked along the length of his cock with long, slow strokes. Nicole moaned softly and the sound shot straight through Nadia, making her pussy ache.

Vitali spotted her at that moment. "Nadia."

It was more of a command than an invitation. Nicole let Ilia slide out of her mouth and glanced at her with a welcoming look in her eyes. Nadia knew a moment's relief. While it was common among their kind for new family members to be welcomed just this way, Nicole had grown up in prudish America where such a custom wouldn't be acceptable. The woman's lack of surprise told Nadia Vitali had prepared her for this.

Vitali rolled onto his side on the bed and took Nicole with him while Ilia held out his hand to Nadia, helping her onto the high bed. Vitali stretched out on his back with Nicole draped over him, her back pressed to his chest and his cock still buried inside her. Vitali's large solid thighs spread Nicole's open to Nadia revealing the dark curls and pink flesh of his lover's pussy to her. Ilia knelt at Nicole's side, his large hand closing over one of her small breasts.

Nadia enjoyed Nicole's eyes on her as she slipped off her thin robe, revealing that she wore nothing underneath, and tossed it off the bed. On her knees she edged up the firm mattress between Vitali and Nicole's legs, sliding her hands up Nicole's body over her stomach up to her chest. Ilia pulled his hand away so Nadia could fill her hands with Nicole's breasts, the flesh so warm and firm under her fingers. Nicole's eyes closed and she sighed in pleasure as Nadia teased the hard points of her nipples. Nadia could feel Vitali begin to move beneath Nicole, resuming the slide of his cock within her.

Nicole's nipples were so lovely, so small and petite like the rest of her. Nadia planted a hand on the bed at Nicole's ribs and leaned across her body to taste one. The little peak tightened under the lash of her tongue and Nadia lapped at it, teased it, her own body humming with excitement. At first Nicole tensed under her. *She's never been with a woman.* But only seconds later Nadia felt Nicole's gentle hands in her hair, Nicole's breathy little sighs above her urging her on. Nadia pulled her nipple further into her mouth, suckling it gently. Just the way she herself liked it. The freedom was intoxicating. Nicole's skin smelled so wonderful, so sweet, and Nadia trailed kisses across her chest so she could taste her other breast.

When Nicole's cries became muffled, Nadia glanced up to see Ilia had moved up the bed and Nicole was again taking him into her mouth. Her little hand cupped him beneath, massaging his scrotum. Ilia growled his pleasure, threw his head back.

Nadia resumed pleasuring Nicole and felt Vitali's thrusts gain strength beneath them. Nicole's white flesh began to color, her body tensing. Nadia knew Nicole would come soon and it made her own cunt wet. Sliding a hand down the smooth plane of Nicole's stomach, Nadia reached for her dark curls. Her fingers searched until they found Nicole's hard little clit and she teased it with feather light strokes, making Nicole cry out above her.

Nadia knew the moment Nicole found her release and lifted her head to watch. Ilia pulled himself away to watch too as Nicole's lovely head tossed back and forth as she climaxed. Nadia didn't miss the tenderness in her twin's eyes.

Pushing that aside for the moment, Nadia moved down Nicole's body to press her mouth into the dark curls at the juncture of her thighs. Nadia found Nicole's clit with her tongue, tasting the most secret part of her while Vitali's cock moved in a determined rhythm in and out of Nicole's small passage. Nadia breathed in the scent of her brother's lover as she laved the tight little bud with her tongue, enjoying the way Nicole began to writhe under her ministrations, her cries becoming urgent. *She's pregnant.* Nadia recognized the scent immediately and her grip on the warm skin of Nicole's inner thighs tightened.

Nicole was pregnant. Perhaps she would be safe from Bartok after all. If she could get them to leave...

But Nadia had promised herself she'd push all her worries and fears away tonight and she turned her attention back to Nicole, suckling her clit as Vitali pushed into her just beneath Nadia's chin. With her tongue she traced circles around Nicole's clit, around her filled opening, and within seconds Nicole's body began tensing again and she screamed her release. Vitali's growls followed just after that and Nadia sat back as he pumped wildly into Nicole from underneath, finding his own release.

Ilia watched silently by their side, clutching Nicole's hand in his, and her heart sank. Nadia didn't want her twin to be unhappy, but it appeared to be inevitable. Nicole was Vitali's mate and carrying his child. Very soon it would be time for Nicole, Vitali and the baby to be a family. It would be time for their sexual arrangement with Ilia to end.

Rolling off Vitali's body, Nicole approached Nadia on the bed and embraced her, a full embrace that had her small breasts pressing against Nadia's larger ones. Nadia was almost shaking with need now. Nicole surprised her by gently pressing her onto her back on the bed and kissing her mouth, a butterfly kiss that was feathery soft and sweet.

"I want to taste *you* now," Nicole whispered, her blue eyes asking Nadia for permission.

Nadia nodded and stretched out on her back, knowing her brothers watched as Nicole spread her long hair out around her on the bed. Nicole gently cupped Nadia's cheek before sliding her hand down her neck and over her chest to cup her full breast. Her inexperience with a woman's body was charming and exciting, her touch hesitant at first. Nadia moaned in pleasure as Nicole cupped both of her breasts, massaged them before bending to press her mouth to one of Nadia's nipples.

The gentle touch felt so good to Nadia. How long had it been since someone had touched her with caring? With a desire to give her pleasure? Nadia's eyes slid closed as

she enjoyed the feel of the other woman's tongue teasing her nipples, first one and then the other. It was pure heaven not to be pinched or slapped or ordered about.

Nadia's thighs were quivering with desire when Nicole's hand slid between them, finding her pussy wet and ready. Pushing her cunt up into Nicole's hand, Nadia came almost instantly, delicious spasms racking her body as Nicole's fingers teased her clit, sliding in and out of her passage.

Before she could recover, Nicole was spreading Nadia's thighs open and moved to sit between them. Nicole bent low to take Nadia with her mouth, her little bottom sticking up in the air. Nadia groaned at the feeling of Nicole's small tongue sliding into the folds of her pussy. With quick lashes she teased Nadia's clit until her hips shot off the bed and she pushed herself at Nicole's mouth. When Nicole's tongue slid toward her passage and entered it with marvelous stiff, quick thrusts, Nadia grabbed handfuls of the comforter at her sides and opened her legs wider as another orgasm came on.

Ilia climbed behind Nicole as she tasted Nadia's pussy, entering her from behind and began a steady, driving rhythm. Nicole's tongue never slowed on her, lapping and teasing until Nadia screamed, enjoying the sweet contractions as the world spun away.

* * *

Little Nadia. Mikhail Turgenev had been watching her for two days, waiting for the right moment for a little reunion. One Nadia might find unpleasant. In fact, he would make sure of it. That moment would come very soon now.

Very soon.

Mikhail was hard as a rock, watching her through the bedroom window with her long dark hair shining like silk all around her. Nadia lay on the huge bed with her brothers watching while the skinny American girl ate her pussy, her lush breasts thrust upward and her full, creamy thighs spread wide. Oh, he was sure Nadia was enjoying the little tongue and hands of the other woman. But Mikhail knew the American girl's hands could inflict pain as well as pleasure. His side still ached from the wound the bitch had made when she'd slipped the knife between his ribs back in New York.

That girl would pay and so would those fucking bastards Nadia called her brothers.

Vitali Kerensky, once as close as a brother to him, had trapped Mikhail in leopard form, and with Ilia had taken him away from his native land. They'd made Mikhail an impotent sideshow in American zoos. The rare black leopard from Serbia. For two fucking years they held him captive.

Until he'd ripped the arm off of that stupid boy at the last zoo. Mikhail knew eventually he'd find someone with their guard down, someone too stupid to fear the leopard. Killing the young man had restored his human form. Since he'd had no desire to dress as a stupid zookeeper, he'd followed another, well-dressed man back to his apartment, killed him and found something decent to wear.

Then Mikhail had gone after the Kerensky brothers and the American girl. That little plan hadn't worked out and he was still pissed about being stabbed, slashed and having to crawl out of the apartment before the pathetic American policemen with their guns had arrived.

The trio had disappeared into the night but Mikhail had known exactly where they would go. Vitali and Ilia feared for their little sister. Had they not taunted him for two years in his cage about his assault on Nadia? How he was lucky they allowed him to live?

No one *allowed* him to do anything. They thought he hurt their little sister? Mikhail would show them what pain was.

They were right to fear for little Nadia.

On the other side of the window, Nadia screamed as she came, reminding him of her passion and the fire within her. No other woman had ever made him feel the desire, lust and devotion he'd once felt for Nadia.

Mikhail was mad as hell that he still wanted her at all. Once he loved her more than anything in the world -- would have died for her. And how had the faithless bitch rewarded him? By rejecting him, telling him she would never see him again. Mikhail

could bring that moment in time to mind and replay it with incredible ease. The pain was still fresh and more terrible than anything he'd experienced since.

Stab him, slice him, lock him in a cage. Mikhail didn't give a shit.

But Nadia had brought him low, leaving wounds deep in his heart that time couldn't heal.

And everything he'd experienced since that day, the rage, the bloodlust and most especially his captivity was linked to her. *She* was responsible for it.

Nadia would be the first to pay. Mikhail would own her and she would be *his* captive just as he had been captive to her brothers. Mikhail would use her in any way he wished and there wouldn't be a damned thing she or her precious family could do about it. Once he'd satisfied himself with her, rid himself of his sick, lingering obsession with her, he'd deal with the rest of them. Kill the three of them to amuse himself.

Kill Nadia?

Mikhail leaned closer to the window in the chilly September night and watched as the brothers made a sandwich of Vitali's skinny girl, fucking both of her holes in a stack of three bodies. He watched Nadia move to their side, cup the girl's face in her hands and kiss her. A long lingering open-mouthed kiss that made Mikhail want to tear down the walls to get to Nadia, to claim that mouth, to fuck all of *her* heated passages, to --

Kill Nadia?

Mikhail knew in his soul he could never do that.

Pulling the long heavy coat tighter about him, he watched them, his cock aching in anticipation of what was to come. Of how he'd find the right moment to claim Nadia and use her until she no longer consumed his every waking moment. However long that might be...

Chapter Two

Nadia rose early the next morning and began preparing breakfast but her mind wasn't on it. It was *Tuesday*. And that meant tonight was her night with Bartok. Even after two years she could barely stomach the thought of what the night held.

What would it be tonight? The whip? The cane? Bartok couldn't get off without inflicting some sort of pain or humiliation on her. Sometimes it involved spanking her in front of his guards or having her suck their cocks while he fucked her. Sometimes he enjoyed having her crawl across his bedroom floor naked on her hands and knees to bring him his shoes, one at a time, with her teeth. His shoes were enormous and heavy Italian leather. She'd always fail to bring them to him as quickly as he wanted and he'd always beat her. And just when she thought she couldn't bear any more he fucked her, long and hard.

That's coming soon enough. Don't think about it. Think about Luca instead.

The image of her small son's smiling face made her smile. She'd endure hell to spend five minutes with him and sometimes that was exactly how it went. Nadia's original agreement with Bartok was that she would spend two hours each week with him, being his slave, servicing him, whatever he wanted. In return she would get to see her tiny son for a couple of hours afterwards. But over time that arrangement had tipped in Bartok's favor. Often he kept at her until well after Luca was asleep and her time with her son amounted to ten minutes of holding him as he slept before the guards dragged her out.

Nadia kneaded the dough for her bread, taking out a mother's anguish on it. How long could she endure this? Bartok had taken her son when he was only six months old. Arrogantly believing Luca to be his, he used him to control Nadia. He had

no right! Nadia didn't want just ten minutes with her son once a week. She wanted him with her always, where he belonged.

Oh, how she'd dreamed of finding a way of getting Luca out of Bartok's mansion, sneaking him away to America. If she just could've reached Vitali with Luca, knowing Bartok couldn't hurt him, her brothers would have protected them, kept them safe.

But Bartok was terrifying. He'd left Lorzneca a young man and had returned a mercenary. He'd claimed the one older mansion just outside of their town for himself when he'd arrived and no one knew what had happened to the family of half bloods who had once lived there. Then he'd set about taking over the town with his small army of half-blood brutes. They were skilled soldiers and dangerous men. Lorzneca had been an easy conquest.

Bartok had gotten his hooks into her before that ever happened, before her brothers had left for America. And they never knew. About her association with Bartok, about her son. They'd come close to finding out when she'd tried to break away from Bartok and he'd beaten her horribly for it, chained her to a bed in his 'dungeon' and raped her for two days. She'd been pregnant with Luca at the time but didn't know it. It had taken weeks for her battered face and body to recover from the attack. But she'd never admitted it to Vitali, no matter how much he'd insisted or pushed. She'd been too afraid.

Now she and her son paid for her failure and fear every single day. How different things would have been if she had only told Vitali...

If she'd only told Mikhail...

But then if she had, she might have gotten one of them killed. And that she couldn't bear.

"Good morning, Nadia."

Nadia jumped at the sound of Vitali's voice. Turning from where she worked at the counter, she couldn't help but notice the haggard look on her brother's handsome face as he stood watching her, dressed in a dark red robe. She'd left her brothers and

Nicole sleeping in the early morning hours for her own bed. She would have thought her brother would look well rested and satisfied this morning.

Instead Vitali looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. The time had come for him to tell her what he intended and she had a feeling she wasn't going to like it.

"You don't look like a man who slept well, Vitali." Nadia turned back to her dough, pulled it up and smoothed it into a loaf pan. "Something on your mind?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Nadia saw Vitali reach into her cupboard for a glass. He filled it at the sink with water, taking a long drink.

"Many things, Nadia," he finally said.

"I like Nicole," Nadia had to say as she opened the oven door and pushed the loaf pan into it. "She looks fragile and frail, but she is strong. She will be a good mate for you."

Nadia felt the radiance of Vitali's smile before she turned to see it.

"Yes, she is."

"And she's with child," Nadia pointed out.

Vitali's eyes rounded with amazement when they met hers, but his surprise faded quickly. "I shouldn't be surprised you know already. There are no secrets from Nadia."

"Is she ready to be a mother?" Nadia asked. "Especially since things have come about so quickly for her?"

Vitali sighed. "She doesn't know yet."

Nadia wasn't surprised. Nicole couldn't be more than a month along. And there was much Nicole had to learn about their new culture. Motherhood would teach her much.

"Does Ilia know?" Nadia pressed on.

Vitali's features darkened at the question, telling Nadia he knew what she had suspected about Ilia's feeling for Nicole. "If he does," Vitali spoke slowly, "he's said nothing."

Nadia said nothing, her silence inviting Vitali to say more.

"Nicole is a beautiful, loving woman, Nadia. I would have wanted her had she been completely human. And you can't imagine the shock of discovering her blood was as pure as yours or mine."

Nadia smiled at her brother, nodding.

"But we've reached the point where Ilia and I must talk." Vitali raked a hand through his rumpled dark hair. "I think Ilia feels a longing to find someone like her, someone to be *his* mate. I don't think he is actually in love with Nicole so much as he thinks he is. I think he confuses longing with love."

There was a quality of doubt in his voice and Nadia didn't like it.

"It is quite obvious to me, brother, who her mate is," Nadia explained, leaning back against the counter next to him. "It is in her eyes when she looks at you."

"Yes?"

Nadia hadn't seen such a look of hopeful longing on Vitali's face in years.

"Yes," she said with authority. "And the child is yours, yes?"

The certainty she read in her brother's green eyes was a comfort. Their kind had always been able to identify their young by scent even during pregnancy as the scent emanated from the expectant mother, and the stronger the demon blood, the stronger the scent on mother and child.

"Ilia will be hurt," Nadia explained. "But he is strong and your bond as brothers is strong. In time things will be fine."

Vitali's gaze dropped to the floor. "I wish I could be so sure of that, Nadia."

Laying a hand on the lush sleeve of his robe, Nadia said, "Be sure."

Vitali nodded, taking another sip of water.

"This is not why you have returned, is it?" Nadia wanted to know. "You are here for another reason."

Vitali nodded, his gaze locking with hers. "Nadia, it's Mikhail."

Mikhail. Just the mention of his name had her heart racing. In longing? Or regret? Was Mikhail all right?

"Yes?" Nadia's voice was little more than a whisper.

"I have reason to believe," Vitali spoke slowly, his gaze unwavering, "Mikhail may return to Lorneca soon if he is not here already."

Mikhail back in Lorneca? To see her former lover again, have him see what a pitiful wretch she'd become would rip her apart. But at the same time her heart ached with the desire to see him again.

Misha...

"Mikhail is looking for me, Nadia. And for Ilia." Vitali's expression was grim. "He means us harm. He means Nicole harm, though she is blameless. And you... I will not allow him the chance to hurt you again."

Again? Mikhail had reason to feel anger toward her but when had he hurt *her* before? Nadia had sent *him* away. Nadia had told him she didn't love him and never wanted to see him again. Lies, all of it. Bartok promised he'd kill Mikhail if she didn't send him away. Mikhail had left Lorneca after that.

Nadia had died inside that day.

Bartok brutally killed one of his own soldiers in front her, illustrating just how he would kill Mikhail if she didn't acquiesce to his demands. Nadia could still see the murdered man's severed head at her feet...

"Again?"

Vitali set the water glass aside on the counter and gently gripped her upper arms in his large hands. "Nadia, I know Mikhail was the man who beat you, raped you."

Oh, my God. Nadia began to tremble. All this time her brothers thought it was *Mikhail?*

"W-what makes you think it was him?" Nadia fought to keep the fear from her voice, but failed.

The scowl that formed on Vitali's face was tinged with rage. "I asked him," Vitali answered calmly. Too calmly. "And he didn't deny it. He said he didn't care if you rotted in hell. I know him, Nadia. I saw the truth in his eyes."

No, you didn't. Nadia swallowed hard. She had no trouble believing Mikhail had said what he had to Vitali about her. But *why* had he not denied her brother's accusation? *Why?*

But then she knew why. Mikhail was nothing if not proud, honorable.

"I know you loved him, Nadia." Vitali's jaw tightened, color rising in his face. "I know you wanted to protect him. But the bastard wasn't worth protecting. Do you understand?"

One thing she understood perfectly. If Mikhail was following her brothers and Nicole with ill intent, he had provocation. Nadia couldn't believe he would seek revenge against her family just because *she* hurt him.

There was something else. She could sense it.

"Vitali, what have you done?"

"It doesn't matter, Nadia." A muscle twitched at Vitali's jaw. "It is done. All you must know --"

"Vitali, what did you do?" Nadia demanded.

"*Nyet!* I do not --"

A loud pounding on her front door stopped them.

Nadia dashed to the front door, knowing unless there was some emergency only one person would call on her so early. When she opened the door, her suspicions were confirmed to find one of Bartok's henchmen standing on her doorstep.

The tall man in his camouflage uniform looked her up and down. A wave of humiliation swept over her under his stare, knowing what he had seen her forced to do, what he'd seen done to her. "Bartok wishes to see you, Nadia," he announced.

Nadia couldn't meet his gaze. "It's Tuesday. I know this. I will be there this evening as I always am."

"Now, Nadia." The man's tone was more forceful. "He wishes to see you *now*."

Nadia shook. It was too much to take in at once. Her brother telling her Mikhail was coming after them for something her brothers had done to him. Bartok wanting to see her right now. This moment.

"I'll get my coat," she told the man without looking up. Closing the door, she quickly grabbed her coat from the peg on the wall behind it. Vitali walked into the living room and watched her struggle to pull the coat on.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

Nadia prayed her brother couldn't see how badly her hands were shaking as she pasted a smile on her face. She wanted to finish their conversation and find out what had happened between her brothers and Mikhail.

But they couldn't finish it now. Bartok wanted to see her.

Nadia realized she couldn't tell Vitali what actually happened, that Mikhail had not been the one to abuse her. Not unless she was prepared to tell him what really happened. And that was something she couldn't do.

Not while Bartok had her son.

"It's nothing," she told Vitali. "A neighbor who needs my help. I will be back shortly."

Her eyes briefly met his as she opened the door and walked out. She didn't miss the skepticism in her brother's gaze.

* * *

"What kept you?" Bartok's eyes were hard and mean, boring into hers as she walked into his study.

Bartok was a menacing figure sitting in the stuffed chair by the window, wearing his customary black silk robe. He kept his head shaved which called more attention to his piercing black eyes and the long white scar that ran from his left temple to the left corner of his mouth. His features were sharp, cruel. The dim light from the cloudy day outside cast an eerie gray halo about him, making him look like something spat up from hell.

To Nadia that's exactly what he was.

"I came at your summons." Nadia was careful to keep her voice low, her tone respectful. "I am sorry you had to wait."

"As well you should be." Bartok's gaze moved over her, his expression one of disgust. He sniffed the air. "What is that I smell?"

Jumping up from the chair he marched toward her and Nadia instinctively cowered as he stalked around her, sniffing.

"Your brothers have arrived." Bartok spoke in a menacing tone. "Did you fuck them?"

"Nyet."

Bartok roughly grabbed the front of her coat, shook her. "Don't lie to me!"

"I -- I didn't." Nadia fought to hold his gaze, knowing it would go worse for her if she looked away. Bartok hated that. "I wouldn't."

"Then who do I smell on you?" His spit flew in her face as he shouted. Bartok shook her violently and she bit her tongue. The salty taste of blood filled her mouth.

Nicole. Oh, God, she had to be careful, so careful what she said about Nicole...

"A woman," Nadia answered.

"What did you say?" Bartok hissed.

"A woman," Nadia repeated louder.

"She is our kind." Bartok pulled her close until their noses almost touched. His breath in her face was foul. "Who is she?"

"She is my brother's," Nadia explained. "Just some woman he brought with him."

His fingers caressed the lapels of her wool coat as he held her against him. Nadia wanted to slap his hands away. Bartok's touch was loathsome. It made her sick to her stomach.

"But she is our kind," he said again, his eyes searching hers. "Her scent is strong on you. What else? Where is she from?"

Vitali loves her. She is pregnant. Please don't ask me about her...

"I only just met her, Bartok, I swear." Nadia hated the plea in her voice. "She is from America."

That bit of information seemed to slightly diminish his interest. Just as she had thought when she'd first met Nicole, how likely was it that an American would have anything but traces of the demon blood flowing through her veins. It gave her a little hope.

"So you fucked around with her?" Bartok shoved her away from him, but in the next instant began to pace in a circle around her. "Didn't you?"

Nadia fought to keep her chin up. "Yes."

He stopped before her to glare at her. "Did I give you permission to fuck her?"

"Nyet."

"Nyet," he mocked her. "And you'll be punished for that."

Nadia cringed, wondering what form his punishment would take this time.

"What is your purpose in life, Nadia?" he asked quietly.

She hated saying it. And she didn't believe it. Only to survive, she reminded herself. Only for the chance that one day she and Luca would be free.

"To serve you," Nadia bit out. "And to bear you sons."

"That's right." Bartok started pacing around her again. "There are only three women of pure blood who are of age to bear me sons. You, Nadia, have the distinct privilege of being the only one so far who has."

What an honor, she thought bitterly. *And that wasn't even the truth!* Nadia knew the other two women. One was in her thirties as she was and the other in her twenties. How Bartok controlled them she didn't know.

"But I want many sons, Nadia. Not just one. Sons of pure blood. That's why all three of you belong to me. Your cunt and the cunts of the other two pureblood women are mine and mine alone! Do you understand? I am the only one allowed to touch them!"

"Yes, Bartok," Nadia said carefully. The last time he was in such a temper he'd striped her back.

"I've been generous to you, Nadia," Bartok threw at her. "Have I not allowed you to live beyond these walls? Trusted you to follow my rules?"

Trusted her? She'd kept to his rules because he had her son. Period. Aside from that there were his men following her, always watching. Men with guns to ensure she followed his rules.

"I didn't know I had the choice to live *within* these walls," Nadia knew she risked angering him more but didn't care, "with my son."

Bartok's laughter was deep, an evil sound. "Why, Nadia, to hear you talk it is all you can do to take what I dish out on our Tuesday evenings together. You are giving me the impression I am letting you down."

Her heart quickened in dread when he again stopped before her.

"Do you really think you'd see your son any more than you do now if I allowed your filthy self to live in my home?" he whispered.

Nadia saw his fist coming in a flash. The pain from the blow to her ribs dropped her to her knees. Burying her face in her hands, she hid behind the curtain of her hair, praying he'd do what he was going to do quickly.

"But I'll consider it, Nadia," Bartok continued above her. "Because if I ever smell someone else on you again and I didn't give you to them you *will* live here. I'll chain you to the fucking wall in the dungeon and you can live and breed like an animal!"

Nadia said nothing, only nodded and fought back the tears. He wouldn't break her, she vowed. No matter what he did to her he wouldn't break her.

"Your brothers must leave."

Again she nodded. She'd known without Bartok telling her. Nicole could be in danger, her brothers with her. No, she would do whatever she had to do to convince them she was fine, she was safe. It would also make it more difficult for Mikhail to find them if that were his purpose.

Oh, Misha.

"Until they *do* leave you will not see Luca. Do you understand?"

Cruel bastard.

"Look at me."

Nadia slowly pulled her hands away and glared up at Bartok, proud of the fact she had no tears to show him.

"Do you understand what I've said to you?"

"Yes, my brothers must leave and I will not see Luca until they do," Nadia replied.

Bartok's smile didn't reach his eyes. He had the blackest eyes.

"Clever cunt. You left out a big part of it."

She hated him.

"I'm never to be with anyone else unless you give me to them or I will live chained to the wall in the dungeon."

Bartok nodded. Turning his back to her he walked back to the stuffed chair and sat down, pulling his robe open as he did. His erection stood high and hard against his belly. It was slender and purple; it repulsed her.

"Crawl over here and service me, Nadia. I'll punish you another time for your transgressions today. And you know my memory is long."

Indeed, Bartok forgot nothing. The only bad thing was that while she was allowed a reprieve now, he'd choose to punish her later when she wouldn't anticipate it. Since his punishments were terrible, she'd live in dread until it happened.

"Besides, it wouldn't do for your brothers to see you are not happy and healthy here in Lorzneca, now would it?"

"Nyet."

"Crawl," he demanded.

Sending up a prayer that her son would be safe until she could figure out a way to get Vitali and Ilia to take Nicole and leave, Nadia leaned forward onto her hands and began to crawl toward Bartok.

* * *

As she always did, Nadia walked from Bartok's mansion once he released her and headed for the river. Normally she was able to evade his men and reach the

Danube unnoticed but today she could feel someone's eyes on her so she didn't have the luxury of privacy.

The Danube of her childhood had been more beautiful, more colorful than it was now. Ribbons of gray fog hovered above the water and she noticed the trees on either side of it were beginning to die as the water eroded the shore, their dark trunks leaning toward the river.

The Danube was where Nadia came to renew, to wash away her sins and the sins of others.

Nadia slid off her coat and began to unbutton her blouse. Just a quick dip, she promised herself. Just enough to get Bartok's stench off her body before she returned home to her family.

In seconds she'd dropped her skirt, her bra, stockings and panties and stood shivering at the water's edge. The water was cold when she stepped into it with first one foot then the other. But the faster she got in the more quickly she adjusted to the temperature.

Finally she was in the river up to her shoulders and began to swim. Her ribs were sore from Bartok's blow so she swam in slow circles with and against the moving water, swimming out a little farther each time she went. All the while she could feel someone's eyes on her, Bartok's mercenaries.

Let them look, dammit. They couldn't touch her unless it was to drag her back to Bartok because he wouldn't allow it. And they'd already seen everything she had.

But as she drew nearer to the other side of the river, she sensed something wasn't right and it was more than the eyes she felt on her. She couldn't put her finger on it. Her mind scrambled with thousands of possibilities, first and foremost her son. But she tried to put that out of her mind as she headed back to the shore where she started.

As long as Bartok believed Luca was his, Nadia didn't think he would hurt him. The fact that Bartok *did* believe Luca to be his had always puzzled her. Vitali and she had just been talking about how parents knew a child by scent as their own. Vitali knew Nicole carried his child when she didn't yet. Why didn't Bartok know Luca was not his?

Her family!

Nadia scrambled out of the water and raced for her clothes on the shore. Would Bartok do something to her family? Her heart began to race as she considered that he'd had time to send his soldiers to her house while she was swimming in the river like a fool.

Nadia had just snatched up her panties when a familiar voice stopped her.

"Hello, Nadia."

Oh, my God.

Nadia glanced up into his eyes, amber eyes that still haunted her dreams at night. Mikhail's face was a mask of fury as he grabbed her upper arm in his powerful hand, his grip painful.

"It's time to settle accounts, little Nadia." Mikhail's tone was so cold. "Be a good girl and it will go more smoothly for you."

Nadia's world began to spin. She could see Mikhail's lips move but she could swear he was speaking in Bartok's voice. With her free hand Nadia clutched at his shoulder, trying to keep herself from falling. But he didn't catch her as she fell into blackness.

Chapter Three

Mikhail watched Nadia sleeping as he waited patiently for her to wake up. He could have thrown water in her face to bring her around. Considering she'd been swimming naked in a cold river when he'd found her maybe it wouldn't have worked.

It had thrown off his plans. He'd expected to catch her on her way back to her brothers, fully clothed and terrified. Then he'd planned to drag her back to the cottage his uncle had left him where he now waited for her to wake up.

As it was she'd surprised him by sneaking off to the river, stripping off her clothes and taking a swim of all damned things. It had taken every ounce of his will not to push her down on the soggy grass of the riverbank and fall on her, fucking her right there. And if that hadn't been enough to shake his control, she'd taken one look at him and passed out.

Mikhail had snatched up her clothes and shoes and carried her back to the cottage. The path leading from the Danube to the back of the cottage allowed him to take her without being seen. She was still magnificently naked, curled on her side in his bed. Her full creamy breasts nestled enticingly together against one arm while her other hand was tucked away between her thighs, shielding her pussy from his view.

Nadia wouldn't keep anything from him once she woke up.

Her hair was still wet and clinging to her face and neck in wet strands. She looked so peaceful in sleep. But in the waking hours she'd looked different to Mikhail than she had two years ago. Gone was the serenity, the confidence and self-assuredness he'd always admired in her. Watching her over the last couple of days she'd looked weary to him, resigned.

Good, I hope she has been miserable since we parted ways.

But deep inside, it bothered Mikhail. Took away from his victory. His revenge.

Nadia stretched her legs in her sleep. His eyes darted after the movement. Only a second later her eyes began to flutter open. She spotted him instantly and he watched her move slowly, rolling onto her back and sitting up on the bed. In the next instance it seemed she realized she was naked and she pulled her knees up to her chest, crossed her arms over her breasts.

Her dark eyes were wide on him. The same chocolate brown eyes he remembered that slanted upwards slightly at the corners. Her dark lashes were a thick fringe that framed her eyes dramatically, giving her a look of mystery. Mikhail had missed her eyes. He'd missed *her*.

But that was weakness on his part. Mikhail knew now all her "love and caring" before had been a lie. She'd never loved him, he reminded himself. He'd lost two years of his life because of this bitch and he could never let himself forget that.

Sure, Nadia was a beautiful woman and he still desired her. But he had to rid himself of the romantic notions he still clung to about her. Get over his little infatuation with her. He'd use her. Over and over he'd use her tight little body until he'd purged her from his system.

Now was as good a time as any to start.

"Let's try this again," Mikhail said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he sat watching her from the chair. "Hello, Nadia."

Nadia watched him like a snake that would strike any moment.

Good. She *should* fear him.

"Hello, Mikhail."

"You look surprised to see me," he said calmly. "I would have thought your brothers would have told you I might be visiting."

Nadia swallowed hard and Mikhail watched her throat work.

"They did tell me you might be here, yes."

"Were you looking forward to seeing me, Nadia?" Mikhail baited her. "Did you miss me?"

She continued to stare at him on the bed. He didn't think she even blinked, as he waited for an answer to his question.

Finally she said, "Yes."

Mikhail's hands fisted. *Little liar.* "How sweet. Did your lover train you to be so submissive and humble, Nadia? Or does it just come naturally? Do you like that kind of game now?"

As he watched, her pretty features colored, the apprehension in her expression grew. It urged him on.

"*Nyet*," she said so quietly he almost missed it.

"*Nyet*? That's interesting." Mikhail rose from the chair to tower over her on the bed. "You did it so well back in that mansion on the hill. How prettily you crawled across the floor, took off your clothes and sucked his dick."

"Misha, please --"

"Shut up!" Her use of his boyhood nickname flared his anger. "Does your lover allow you to speak whenever you wish?"

Her little mouth dropped open at that. *Good.*

"Answer me," he said in his most menacing tone.

"*Nyet.*"

"Then why should I allow it?" Mikhail went on. "The whole ideology of dominance and submission has never been very appealing to me, Nadia. But perhaps that is because I never gave it a try. Perhaps I can try it out on you since you are so well trained."

Nadia blinked, her eyes shiny with tears. *Goddamn her.* She would not make him feel sorry for her! He wouldn't! She didn't deserve his mercy.

Mikhail resolved to harden his heart to her as he slipped off his overcoat and walked around to the other side of the bed. The mattress gave under his weight as he climbed on next to her, enjoying the way Nadia moved as close to the edge on her side as she could in an effort to get away from him.

"Lay down, Nadia," he commanded.

She blinked again and a tear slid down the smooth skin of her face. Mikhail allowed himself just a moment to gaze at her face. How lovely she was. Nadia had never needed the cosmetics the American women wore and she was ten times as lovely. Her skin was perfect and white, her lips the color of a blooming rose, just as soft and full. Her nose was slender and straight, slightly turned up at the end.

Whenever you are done waxing poetic, Mikhail. The woman is the reason you were locked in a cage for two years...

"Lay down!"

Mikhail watched her lie back on the bed and his cock ached at the thought of being inside her tight little body. Bracing himself on one arm, he turned toward her, loomed above her. An ugly bruise at her left side caught his eye, but he chose to ignore it, focusing instead on his purpose.

With a finger he traced a line from the hollow at the base of her throat to the peak of her left nipple and circled it lightly. To Mikhail's satisfaction it drew up into a hard little point. She wasn't immune to him regardless of everything else. When his hand slid over to cup her other full breast her breath caught, and desire blended with the wariness in her eyes.

Mikhail had to admit to a little relief at that. He'd done many bad things in his life, but no matter how much he wanted Nadia to fear him, to feel his wrath, he didn't think he could take her unwillingly.

"Did you like Vitali's skinny American girl, Nadia?" Mikhail teased her nipple with his fingers, arousing himself with the memory of her stretched out on the bed with the American woman's mouth between her legs.

Nadia's eyes left his fingers and met his gaze. "You've been watching me?"

"As the Americans would say, 'duh'."

"Mikhail, please, I need to talk to you."

Nadia's breath came fast as his fingers slid down her belly to the dark thatch of curls at the top of her thighs.

"We will talk when I say it is time to talk," Mikhail said as his fingers slid into the curls, into her folds. Her little pussy was so hot and his finger slid so easily into her passage on her wet heat. Slowly he moved his finger in and out of her tight little body, glancing up to see her mouth gaped open, her eyes glazed with need now.

When he slid a second finger in, her hips lifted to meet his hand.

"Right now," he explained as his fingers slid in and out of her, "I want to fuck. I haven't had pussy in a very long time, Nadia."

Mikhail pulled his fingers from her and put them in his mouth for a taste of her. *He'd missed her taste.* He wanted more.

"Spread your legs wide, Nadia," Mikhail commanded as he moved down the bed toward her feet. When she hesitated, he grabbed her thighs roughly and pressed them apart. Her eyes were wide as he stretched out at the end of the bed and grabbed her ass in his hands.

"Hold yourself open for me, Nadia." Mikhail leaned forward, breathed in her scent and growled. "Hold your pussy lips open."

Nadia's hand shook as it slid down her body to do just as he'd asked. With her index and middle fingers she spread her pussy lips open for him and he smiled.

"Would you like for me to eat your pussy like that woman did last night, Nadia?" Mikhail asked. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes," she whispered.

Mikhail started to move forward but then stopped, peered up her from between her thighs.

"Beg me."

"Please." Nadia's voice shook.

"Please what?" Mikhail pressed her.

"Please eat my pussy."

"Very good," Mikhail bid her as he leaned forward, burying his mouth in her pussy.

Nadia had always loved his tongue and he gave it to her, running it up to lap at her hard little clit and back down to fuck her while she writhed and squirmed. Mikhail had thought about her pussy often while he was trapped in his cage for two years. He'd had no hands to jerk off with. Now it was all his again and he tongued it, savored it, didn't stop until Nadia's hands were in his hair and she was shoving herself at his face, coming.

It hadn't taken a lot to bring her off and his cock was throbbing. Mikhail pulled himself up and worked frantically to unfasten his slacks, pulling them down with the silk boxers to show her his cock, rock hard and ready.

Nadia reached for him but as he came up over her, he collared her wrists in his hands and pressed them to the bed on either side of her. Mikhail would have told her had she asked he didn't want her to touch him. The truth was he was afraid he'd come undone if she did.

Parting her thighs with his own, Mikhail teased the seam of her pussy lips with his cock. He didn't miss Nadia's sharp intake of breath.

"Now, little Nadia, I'm going to fuck you until I get my fill."

And with a strong thrust he pushed inside her, his entry easy within her slick flesh. Nadia's thighs trembled around his hips at first. But once he was inside her pushing and pulling his cock out of her tight little channel, her thighs closed tightly around his hips. Satisfied any resistance in her had been overcome, he fucked her harder, almost roughly.

Mikhail drove into her and she moaned beneath him, her body rising to meet his so he was balls deep with every thrust. Her body greedily closed around him, tried to hold him with each plunge he took and that made Mikhail all the harder. He was lost in a wave of lust and joy as he pushed into her again and again. Nadia's wrists moved little in his hands as she writhed beneath him, naked under his partially clothed body. It made her more vulnerable to him and Mikhail liked that.

Nadia had been the only woman he'd ever known who responded with such passion. She'd been the only one he'd ever met worth killing for. Dying for. Her

beautiful face contorted as she came again but he just drove on harder, pushing her, enjoying the way her body convulsed around him. Desire and raw sexuality ran like the river through his veins. He was on fire. How had he ever been able to give her up regardless of what she'd said? Why had he not chained her to his bed and fucked her like this until she agreed never to leave him, never to even look at another man?

Mikhail fought off release until he made her come again. He widened his cock within her before he came, filling her and stretching until she couldn't take more. Nadia's cries rang through the room as he drove into her relentlessly, clutching her wrists tightly as he focused on his own pleasure. Just as his orgasm was about to burst through him, her body quivered around his again and she screamed. It drove him over the edge. Throwing his head back as his seed shot into her, he growled out his release with the cry of the leopard.

* * *

Nadia struggled to catch her breath as Mikhail released her wrists and his weight lifted from her. Her thighs were trembling as she pulled them together, her pussy sore from Mikhail's forceful lovemaking.

But it had felt so wonderful.

She'd never forgotten what an amazing lover Mikhail was. He'd always satisfied her every need, been gentle and attentive. Nadia had been in love with Mikhail since they were children and he'd been best friends with Vitali. Mikhail had been her first lover, her only lover.

Until Bartok.

Oh, God, if Bartok finds out about this...

Mikhail zipped up his slacks and moved to sit at the edge of the bed, staring at her with narrowed eyes.

"As I mentioned, Nadia, it had been a long time since I'd had pussy." His tone was nonchalant. "Don't expect all of my attentions to be so pleasant."

Nadia didn't miss the warning in his voice. She knew he must hate her for how she'd treated him. She'd been ruthless and hurtful and he'd believed her. He had no

way of knowing she did it to protect him. He didn't know she'd lied when she said she didn't love him. She'd never stopped loving him.

But the man staring at her with angry eyes was not the same man she'd pushed away two years ago. Mikhail with his sun streaked hair and golden skin was the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. His masculine features were strong, his body muscular and solid. But he looked different now. He was larger physically, the muscle she'd felt beneath the shirt and slacks hard and imposing. Three long scars marred the beauty of his face at his left cheek. Claw marks she realized. Had one of her brothers done that?

His eyes were filled with anger and mistrust as they fixed on her. That was the hardest thing for Nadia to take.

Nadia deserved his anger for the part she'd played. She would accept it. But she didn't know the whole story or what part her brothers played. And with the threat Bartok posed...

It was clear to Nadia she had two choices. She could try to get away from Mikhail, pray Bartok never learned of what had happened, and maybe everything would be as it normally was and she'd be back to her miserable existence.

Or she could tell Mikhail the truth. *Oh, God, she wanted to.*

But that might sentence Mikhail to death. She'd done enough to him already.

Nadia's eyes scanned the room. The view outside the window by the bed looked familiar. She could see the river not far in the distance.

"Don't even think about trying to escape me, Nadia."

"What is it you intend to do with me, Misha?" Nadia fought to keep her voice calm. "What is your plan?"

"To fuck you until I don't need to any more," Mikhail answered with a sneer. "And to pay you back for the last two years of my life, Nadia."

Nadia's heart began to race. The lines of his body were tense, his rage barely held in check. Mikhail was powerful and her chances of escape slim.

But deep in her heart she didn't want to leave him. Nadia had never thought to see Mikhail again. Part of her was overjoyed to see him again, didn't care that he meant to punish her.

He couldn't do worse to her than Bartok had.

"Vitali said you were looking for him." Nadia spoke quietly.

With a savage growl Mikhail jumped from the bed and spun to face her. "Don't think to toy with me, Nadia," Mikhail snapped. "You know damned well why I'm here."

Now she was afraid. All she could do was shake her head. She wasn't lying. Vitali hadn't had the chance to tell her what happened between them.

"I'll humor you, Nadia." Mikhail stalked around the bed to stand at the foot of it. "I'll feed your ego. I'll tell you I went mad when you tossed me aside as you did. You promised you would always love me, Nadia. You lied to me. And I wanted to hate you. I wanted to *hurt* you."

Nadia sat up quickly, pulling her knees to her chest protectively.

"Instead I hurt others, Nadia, changing from demon form and back again with abandon." Mikhail's laugh was tight and cruel. "It is so easy to drown one's sorrows in depravity and bloodlust."

Nadia understood immediately what he meant. He'd slept with human women, or women who didn't have enough of the demon blood to be with him. He'd allowed himself to change into the leopard. And to change back he'd had to kill...

"Bloodlust, Misha? What did you do?" Nadia had to know.

"You mean did I kill the poor human women I fucked?" Misha's eyes narrowed on her. "*Nyet*. Most of my victims were of the criminal element."

That made her feel a little better.

"It was so easy for Vitali to catch me with my guard down," he explained. "Your bastard brothers trapped me in my demon form and took me to America in a cage."

Oh, my God.

Mikhail moved in closer and Nadia cowered.

"For two years they kept me locked in a cage. We went from one American zoo to another, Nadia. And when I wasn't a sideshow for those stupid, fat Americans, I had to listen to your brothers berate me for what I had done to you. To *you*!"

"Misha, please, I --"

"You are all fools!" Mikhail pounced on the end of the bed and Nadia squealed in fright. "Your brothers for thinking they could keep me in a petting zoo and you for thinking you would get away with being the lying little bitch you are."

Nadia's heart beat frantically when Mikhail moved to grab one of her ankles. Snatching her legs away from him, she scrambled away from him on the bed.

"I didn't tell them --"

Mikhail cut her off by grabbing her about the waist and hauling her toward him on the bed. He wrestled her down, pinning her to the mattress as he had before only now instead of great pleasure it appeared he meant her harm.

Nadia struggled beneath him, met his glaring amber eyes squarely.

"I didn't tell them it was you, Misha!" Anger mixed with fear as she managed to yank one of her arms free and tried to throw a punch at him. Mikhail dodged easily.

"I don't believe you," he taunted.

"It's the truth." Nadia swung at him again, her blow connecting with the side of his head this time. Misha growled at her, grabbed her arm and pushed it to the bed, but he didn't hurt her.

"Why?" he demanded, fighting her as she struggled on. "You couldn't do worse than to tell me you didn't love me, you didn't want me. Wasn't that good enough for you? Did you have to humiliate me too?"

"I didn't know!" Nadia shouted at him. "I didn't tell my brothers it was you! I never named the man who beat me, who raped me!"

Mikhail froze above her. "What did you say?"

Nadia took advantage of his shock and shoved him off of her.

"I said I never told my brothers it was you," she bit out.

He recovered quickly and pulled himself onto his knees before her. “*Nyet*. You said a man beat and raped you.”

Nadia glared at him. “You claim you haven’t believed anything I’ve said until now. Why would you believe *that*?”

The grave expression on his face told her he *might* believe her. His amber eyes darted to her midsection and back up. Nadia knew he was looking at the bruise Bartok had left on her.

“Where did that come from?” His voice was low.

“You’ve been watching. Don’t you know?”

Mikhail’s eyes narrowed, his moment of sympathy passing. “You chose *him* over me? A man who beats you? Who takes you against your will? It was him, wasn’t it? Your man in the mansion.”

Nadia’s control snapped. She crouched on the bed ready for anything he could dish out. Bartok had taken away her son, taken away all the people she’d cared about and loved, including Mikhail. But she’d be damned if she’d be accused of wanting it, of being a willing slave to Bartok’s will. Not after everything the bastard had done to her.

“He’s not my anything!” Nadia felt the signals coursing through her body now, the demon blood ready to spring free with her rising fury, and she allowed it, reveled in it. “He came to Lorzneca and took what he wanted, including me. There are only three women of pure blood left among us of childbearing age, Misha, and I am one of them. That’s why he wants me. He wants sons of pure blood. He’s mad! He rants and he raves about his legacy and his house and all the while he is beating me, using my body. I’ve been a prisoner every bit as much as you have these last two years. And I hate it! *I hate him!*” Nadia screamed.

The fire in Mikhail’s eyes didn’t diminish. “You expect me to feel pity for your mistake?”

Nadia opened her mouth and hissed at him. “Mistake, Misha?” The leopard was trying to take over Nadia as Mikhail moved even closer to her. And that’s what she really was. A cornered animal. “That would imply I made a bad choice. That is what

you don't seem to understand. I had no choice! Bartok threatened everyone I love, threatened *you*! He killed one of his own men before me to prove his point, dropped the man's head at my feet like a rotted head of cabbage."

Mikhail scoffed at that. "You didn't know me at all if you thought he could defeat me, Nadia. I would have fought to the death for you."

"There was never any doubt in my mind you could take him, Misha," Nadia threw back at him. "But he has a small army of half-blood mercenaries with him. They kill anyone who displeases him. Are you so arrogant you think you could take on his army too?"

Mikhail moved in closer. Fueled by the demon blood, Nadia tried to spring off the bed before he could catch her. But catch her he did, pushing her down on the bed and pinning her there with his large body.

Glaring up at him, Nadia paused, waiting for him to make his move. She'd fight him. She had little chance against him but she'd fight just the same. Adrenaline coursed through her body, the demon blood waited to be unleashed. Nadia held her breath as she waited for Mikhail's wrath.

"I don't want to believe you." Mikhail's gentle voice took her off guard. "I don't want to need you so much."

It broke her.

Nadia started to cry, years of anguish and anger flowing out in her tears. Mikhail's weight dropped on her as he cradled her in his arms, his hands gentle as they brushed hers away from her face, wiped at her tears.

When Mikhail's mouth claimed hers the passion of his kiss took her breath away. His tongue invaded her mouth and she welcomed him, opened to his skillful exploration. Nadia's hands worked at the buttons of his fine linen shirt before sliding inside to find his warm skin as his muscles rippled beneath her hands. He growled low in his throat at her touch.

The hard heated length of him pressed into her thighs through his slacks and Nadia pushed her pussy up toward him, wanting his possession, needing him. His

mouth burned a trail across her cheek to her ear and his hot breath filled the sensitive shell, making her toes curl. Nadia spread herself beneath him, curled herself around him, her hands sliding up into the silk of his hair.

"Fuck me, Misha," Nadia pleaded as his tongue dipped in and out of her ear in a mimic of the act to come. "Please."

"I'm going to fuck you, Nadia." Mikhail's voice was rough and low in her ear. "I'm going to give you all you can take and more."

His rough palms felt good against the tight beads of her nipples and Nadia pushed herself into his hands, grinding her pussy against him. Mikhail wedged a muscular thigh between hers and the pressure was so good against her aching cunt, but she wanted more. Her thighs closed around his and squeezed for all she was worth, her juices soaking the fine fabric of his slacks.

Mikhail roughly shoved a hand under her back and pushed up her chest, baring the full globes of her breasts to his lips and tongue. His mouth dove for her left nipple, catching it between his teeth and biting her. The light pain mixed with pleasure drove her crazy, had her raking her nails across his scalp. His tongue flicked crazily against the stiff peak before he feasted on her other breast, sucking that nipple into his mouth. Desire shot like lightning through her body, down to her pussy. She ground against his leg harder, wanting him to fill her, to fuck her senseless.

When he let her drop back to the bed Nadia grabbed for his shirt, a slave to her lust now, and she ripped it open, sending the lower buttons flying. Mikhail shared her urgency, barely managing to pull the linen back from his shoulders before pouncing on her.

"Oh, yes!" Nadia gasped as Misha's rough fingers skimmed down her belly to the wet curls at the top of her thighs, and she spread them wider, pushing her wet flesh at him.

Mikhail teased her clit with his finger, his stroke steady. There was satisfaction in his amber eyes as he pulled up to look at her, controlling her in her lust.

"You are so wet, so ready for me, Nadia." Mikhail's voice was rough in his passion. "Your body cannot lie. It cries out for me."

Nadia could barely find her voice to speak. "Yes."

The fabric of his slacks gave way as he ripped them open and shoved them down his slim hips. Mikhail's cock was inside her the instant his weight returned, his hot, hard flesh pushing deep. He widened himself as he drove into her, filling and stretching her pussy until it almost hurt. But oh, the sensation was exquisite!

Nadia went wild beneath him, raking her nails down his back as he pounded her pussy with his enormously hard cock. She wrapped her legs around his waist, using her heels at the small of his back to try to control his thrusts, to hold every hard, pussy-stretching inch of him inside her cunt.

Mikhail wouldn't be controlled. Pulling out of her abruptly, he roughly rolled Nadia to lie on her stomach. His delicious cock was back inside her before she'd realized what had happened, pounding her harder now as his weight dropped on her. Mikhail's hand slid beneath her body, his fingers searching through her curls to find her clit. Nadia's body was trapped between him and the mattress and the rough pads of his fingers teasing her clit as he fucked her, driving her mad.

"I'm going to come," she cried as the tension built in her body.

Mikhail's breath was hot on her shoulder. Nadia cried out in surprise when his teeth nipped her flesh.

"I want you to come," Mikhail whispered in her ear. "I want you to scream for me, Nadia."

And scream she did. Her body went up in flames as the orgasm shook her, convulsing around Misha's cock still driving into her cunt like it would never stop. Nadia tried to squirm away from his fingers, her clit almost too sensitive to be stimulated at that moment but he was unrelenting, unyielding.

"*Nyet!*" his voice rasped in her ear as she came down. "*My pussy to play with. My pussy to fuck. You'll take it until I am done. You are mine.*"

Ripples of pleasure spread from her ear and coursed along her body, his words exciting her as much as his claim on her femininity. She *was* Mikhail's. No matter what happened she always would be.

Mikhail spread her thighs further apart and pushed deeper inside her, his thrusts growing more forceful and his balls slapping against her with each one. Nadia's thighs began to quiver as he maintained the steady, driving rhythm within her and the sensations began to build in her again. With his fingers and his cock he made her come again and again, growling and biting at her shoulders and her neck the entire time. But he never hurt her, never gave her anything but unimaginable pleasure. He had Nadia crying out, begging for more, taking all he had to give.

His grip on her tightened painfully and his weight threatened to crush her as his strokes within her quickened and he widened even more, stretching her pussy to its limits. Nadia screamed in pleasure as he growled out his release.

Mikhail's heavy body collapsed on Nadia but she didn't care. She allowed herself to enjoy being surrounded by him, conquered by him. Nadia had never dared dream she would ever see him again, much less be held by him again...

But she couldn't linger long for her situation grew more desperate by the moment.

Nadia had to get her brothers and Nicole out of Lorzneca. Vitali would soon be a father and Nicole had yet to learn about her heritage. Then there was the situation with Ilia to deal with. They didn't need the additional ugliness of her plight on top of everything else to make it worse. The sooner she could convince them to leave, the better. How she would manage that, she had no idea.

And then there was Mikhail.

Nadia's eyes squeezed shut as she considered what he'd been through at the hands of her own brothers. And it was her fault. One more consequence of her fear. If she'd had the courage to tell Vitali or Mikhail what Bartok had done, none of it would have happened. Perhaps they'd still be friends...

Perhaps they'd be dead...

She had to go talk to her brothers alone. Mikhail might never forgive them for their actions regardless of the cause. She knew him that well. And if Mikhail knew that's where she was going, she'd risk his wrath. She risked the chance he'd try to force a showdown with Vitali and Ilia.

Her heart quickened in dread as Mikhail rolled off to lie at her side. Even if she managed to sneak away from Mikhail long enough to talk to her brothers and even if she thought of a clever enough lie to convince them to take Nicole and leave, what then? Once Bartok discovered she'd been with Mikhail she had no doubt he would do just as he promised -- chain her to the wall in the dungeon like an animal.

Nadia had to tell Misha everything. She had to tell him about her son.

His son.

Mikhail's breathing slowed. Nadia lifted her head to see his eyes were closed.
Good.

As gently as she could, Nadia eased her body away from his, climbed off the bed. Her eyes frantically scanned the room for her clothing and she spotted it in a neat pile on a small chair in the corner of the bedroom.

Nadia had taken two steps when the sound of his voice stopped her and sent a thrill of fear up her spine.

"Where are you going, Nadia?"

Chapter Four

Nadia froze where she stood at the sound of Mikhail's voice.

Stay calm, Nadia. You can't tell him anything now. You have to get to your brothers. Think!

She'd thought he was asleep or else she wouldn't have tried to make a run for it. She'd just have to make sure she left him sleeping this time. A thrill of excitement went through her pussy at the thought.

Turning back she smiled at Mikhail, pulled her shoulders back to show him her breasts. His amber eyes dropped to them immediately.

"I -- I wanted a tissue," Nadia said meekly. "I think I have one in the pocket of my coat."

Nadia knew it would go more easily for her if he believed she was still afraid of him. And she *was*. Just not as afraid as when she'd first encountered him. He hadn't hurt her after all. Quite the opposite.

And the bottom line was he wouldn't have been in Lorzneca, wouldn't be angry with her at all if he felt nothing for her. But Mikhail felt so much for her. It gave her hope.

Her gaze moved over his handsome face, his beautiful masculine form, and her heart pounded in her chest.

She loved him so much...

Mikhail frowned at her. "Come here."

Nadia walked toward him slowly, provocatively. He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, magnificently naked, and she stopped just before him, leaning forward slightly so her breasts hovered in front of his face.

Mikhail went for her left nipple with his mouth, taking the bait. Nadia cradled his head as he suckled her, running her fingers through his gold streaked hair.

"Were you going to leave me, Nadia?" he spoke against her sensitive flesh.

"*Nyet*," she lied. "I just wanted a tissue."

And that sounded innocent enough. And didn't really require further fabrication.

Nadia sank to sit on her heels in front of him, pushing his thighs apart to reveal his proud cock, hard and ready for her again. Gently she took him in her hands, running her fingers along his velvety length. With one hand she cupped his sac, massaged him just the way she remembered he liked. Mikhail's eyes closed and he let his head fall back as she took his shaft in her other hand and pulled him to her mouth.

She could taste herself on him as she ran her tongue along smooth hot flesh at the head of his cock. The smell of sex, the smell of him had her body humming with pleasure. Nadia circled the head with her tongue before easing it into her mouth, suckling him gently as he moaned.

Mikhail's hands sank into her hair, urging her to take more of him, to take his length. Taking a deep breath she worked her mouth down on him, the craving in her pussy building with each inch she took. She wasn't able to take all of him with her mouth, but she swirled her tongue along his shaft and tightened her lips as she worked along the length of him, loving him. His sac tightened in her hand and the muscles of his thighs flexed at her sides as she moaned to let him know how much she enjoyed pleasuring him, how beautiful he was. Nadia didn't allow his hands to hurry her, didn't allow his attempts to thrust wildly in her mouth to quicken her pace. Nadia was in control now, in control of *his* pleasure.

And she loved that feeling of empowerment, of control. She'd had no control or say for so long...

"*Nyet!*" Mikhail pulled his cock away from her, grabbed her under the arms and hauled her up from the floor. "I want your pussy now. Give it to me."

Once Nadia was on her feet, she planted her hands against his shoulders and pushed him back on the bed.

"I want to be on top," Nadia whispered. "I want to ride you."

Mikhail grinned at her and it stopped her cold. It was the first time he'd smiled at her since he'd re-entered her life. It was like balm to her soul.

Not wanting to ruin the moment, she scrambled onto the bed, straddled him and positioned his big cock at her ready opening. Nadia didn't waste a moment and slid down on the hard column of his flesh, enjoying the way his dips and swells hit different spots, good spots within her from the position.

Bracing her hands on the muscled wall of his chest, Nadia began to work her pussy up and down on him, gliding easily on her own wetness. Mikhail grabbed her hips, hurried her pace but she let him this time. She just wanted to ride his slick shaft and she did, reveling in being able to go at her own pace, to be able to pleasure herself with his body.

Mikhail's eyes were on her and desire replaced rage as his mouth gaped open and he began thrusting up toward her center and Nadia's heart swelled with happiness in her chest. She gasped in pure pleasure as he began to buck under her and she rode him all the harder, meeting him thrust after thrust. Currents of pleasure coursed through her body and quickly spiraled out of control. Mikhail watched her closely, knew when she was ready to come. When the exquisite spasms began racking her body he thrust into her wildly, pushing her further down on him with his hands on her hips and she cried out her release, digging her nails into the firm flesh of his chest.

Mikhail rolled her onto her back before she had time to come down and drove into her like a man possessed. Nadia held onto him as he rode her, claimed her pussy and dominated her totally.

"You will never leave me again, Nadia," he growled low in her ear. "Do you hear me? You can fight me. You can even hate me. But you are mine, do you understand? Mine!"

His grip tightened painfully on her as he began to jerk and his hot seed shot into her channel again and again. Nadia wrapped her arms about him, held him to her as

they struggled to regain their breath. Mikhail's heartbeat was strong and steady against hers, his body still tucked inside hers.

Nadia stroked his hair, kissed his shoulders. She felt his body relax into sleep and she eased him onto his side while she still held him in her arms. God only knew how long they lay there before his breath evened out into the cadence of sleep. She only knew the moment she was certain he was asleep, she had to get moving.

Once she was fully clothed and ready to slip out, the sky beyond was growing dark. Nadia took one last look at Mikhail before she walked out of the bedroom. He looked so beautiful stretched out across the bed. Only the scars at his cheek and a scar she hadn't noticed until now at his side kept him from being physically perfect.

But it didn't really matter what he looked like. Mikhail had her heart. He always had.

Because she had to, she walked quietly back to the bed, bending to kiss his cheek.

"I love you," she whispered. "I always have. And I always will. I'll be back, Misha. There is something I must do now. When I return, I will tell you everything. Sleep now, my love."

Brushing away a tear, Nadia walked out of the bedroom.

* * *

"It is late." Vitali raked a hand through his hair. "She should be back by now. I don't like it. I'm going after her."

Ilia watched his brother pace back and forth across the small living room while Nicole's eyes filled with worry. Something *was* wrong. Apparently she could sense it too.

"Do you think something has happened to her?" Nicole asked. "Do you think Mikhail..."

"I don't know." Vitali's voice was sharp. Regret immediately flashed in his eyes as he stopped pacing to look at Nicole.

Her eyes met his and then she burst into tears. It wasn't like her.

Vitali joined her on the couch and took her in his arms, comforting her.

Ilia began to pace now. He wanted to comfort Nicole too but knew it wasn't his place, knew he shouldn't feel that way.

Where the hell was Nadia? Ilia had felt a sense of foreboding all morning, knew something wasn't right. Why the hell had Vitali allowed her to go out alone when they knew Mikhail could be there?

If Mikhail had touched a hair on her head, Ilia would kill him.

Feeling as if he couldn't breathe as he watched his brother with Nicole, Ilia grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

"I'll go," he announced and slammed the door behind him.

* * *

Nadia found Ilia just outside the village, talking to a woman who lived down the road from her. His back was to Nadia as she approached and the older woman didn't see her.

The woman pointed in the direction of Bartok's mansion.

"Just beyond the woods you will find it," the woman explained. "It is surrounded by soldiers so you'll have to be respectful in your approach. He may not agree to see you."

Nadia was about to interrupt as she stopped just behind Ilia. A movement by a large tree to her right caught her eye.

It was one of Bartok's soldiers and he was aiming a rifle at Ilia's head.

"Ilia!" Nadia screamed.

Ilia spun around in surprise to face her. The crack of the rifle echoed but Ilia's sudden movement had ruined the man's shot. The neighbor woman fled in terror as the soldier, along with two others, ran out of the woods.

Ilia's clothing shredded as, with a great growl, he transformed into a black leopard. Two of the soldiers hesitated as Ilia snarled at them, placing himself between them and Nadia. Half bloods couldn't transform and Ilia could rip them to shreds before they had a chance to aim their weapons at him.

The third soldier seemed unimpressed. His hat was pulled low over his eyes and it wasn't until he was standing right before Ilia that Nadia realized it was Bartok himself.

Pulling a pistol from his camouflage jacket, he aimed at Ilia's side just as her brother prepared to lunge for him. Nadia screamed as the gun went off but there was no impact to suggest that Ilia had taken the shot.

That's when Nadia saw the white tips of the dart.

Ilia sprung at Bartok but his movements were clumsy and Bartok dodged him easily. Ilia was unconscious before he ever hit the ground.

Bartok's black eyes bored into her as he stepped over her brother's motionless form. "Bitch!" he hissed as he drew back his fist.

Pain exploded in Nadia's face when Bartok landed his punch. It was the last thing she remembered.

Chapter Five

Mikhail watched silently from where he stood at the dungeon door wearing the camouflage uniform of the soldier he'd killed to get in. Four other soldiers stood guard around two cells surrounded by iron bars. One contained Nadia's unconscious form. The other contained the prone form of the leopard.

Ilia had always been such a hotheaded little shit, Mikhail mused.

Nadia began to stir and he felt like marching over to that cell and wringing her beautiful neck. He knew she'd try to leave. Sure she'd lied to him prettily when he'd asked her the first time. And who was he to refuse a blowjob from her? Or another round with her sweet little pussy?

The second time he'd just let her go. He wanted to know what was really going on. And if he watched and listened, he would finally discover the truth.

And he wanted to know the truth. His need for vengeance against Nadia was wavering now, battling with the words she'd whispered to him when she thought he was asleep back in the cottage.

I love you. I always have. And I always will.

If he were to believe what she told him, the bastard who owned this mansion wanted her because she was a pureblood female and he wanted her to produce sons for him. Mikhail had seen that type of man before. They gained control over a woman by beating her, humiliating her, taking away anyone who would offer her support. The son of a bitch had done all of that. If he believed her story, she sent him away because the bastard threatened to kill him. And that had subsequently taken care of her brothers because they'd blamed him for beating the hell out of her and carted him off to America to be a resident in a zoo attraction.

One thing didn't make sense to Mikhail. Nadia would not be easily dominated. It wasn't in her nature. Nadia's temper rivaled that of her twin and then some, though she exercised better judgment in handling it.

Why had she stayed with the bastard? What had he held over her head?

A tapping sound drew his attention to the heavy iron doors of the dungeon and the guards stepped aside to allow an older woman with a small child on her hip to enter.

Nadia climbed awkwardly to her feet as the woman stopped in front of her cell, one of her eyes black and nearly swollen shut. She clasped the hand of the tiny boy the woman carried, tried to embrace him through the iron bars. Tears flowed down Nadia's cheeks but she smiled at the boy, hanging on to his little hand for dear life.

That was it then. Nadia *had* born him a son. And he used the child to control her.

Mikhail was barely able to control his anger as he watched the woman walk away with the boy, who couldn't be more than two years old. The child cried, reaching for his mother, and Nadia clung to the bars begging for another minute with him.

He'd kill the bastard for this. Forcing a child on Nadia then withholding it from her? Oh, yes. The bastard would die a slow, cruel death.

Taking advantage of the fact that the door was open, Mikhail rushed after the woman carrying the toddler, walking briskly by Nadia's cell so she wouldn't notice it was him. The guard by the door was just about to close it when he approached. Mikhail mumbled that he had to take a shit and just like that he was out, following the woman up the wide white hallway.

Following the sound of her footsteps, Mikhail arrived on the second floor of the huge mansion. He could hear the woman speaking to the child within one of the rooms of the hallway where he waited around the corner, though he didn't know which one. But eventually the woman walked out and it was his good luck she walked in the opposite direction. It made it very easy for Mikhail to walk to the door and try the knob.

It was unlocked.

Mikhail half expected to walk into a room with multiple children but quickly realized the small neat room was for a single child. Nadia's child. The room was cheerful enough, there were toys, books.

But no mother.

Mikhail was going to take Nadia's child. Then he was going to get her the hell out of here.

Snapping on a tiny lamp at the child's bedside, he found the boy tucked in his little bed. He had Nadia's dark hair and her stubborn little chin. Sleepy eyes the color of amber gazed up at him in fear.

Mikhail's heart began to race when he sniffed the boy, rubbed the top of his small head to calm him.

The child is mine.

His son with Nadia. Mikhail didn't know how old he was, but he sure as hell knew Nadia hadn't showed any signs of pregnancy when he saw her last. He'd smelled nothing on her.

Had Nadia even known when she sent me away?

Mikhail stared at the child, his child, feeling so many things at once; joy, humility. *Rage.*

"Don't be afraid," Mikhail told the boy as he hauled him out of bed. Pulling a blanket from the bed, he wrapped it around the boy. "I'm your father."

The child gazed up at him with his own eyes in fascinated silence as Mikhail rushed with him into the hallway. He'd get the boy out of there but he'd be back. And then the man responsible for all of this would wish he'd never been born.

* * *

Nadia managed to halt her tears by the time Bartok, flanked by two of his guards, had entered the dungeon. Ilia had just awakened in the cell next to hers, doomed to die as she was, and she knew it was only a matter of time before Bartok went after Vitali and Nicole.

At least she'd gotten to see Luca one last time. His nurse had taken pity on her and brought her son to her so she could see him.

Nadia hadn't realized Bartok intended to kill her until she looked into the woman's eyes.

"Bring her out here," Bartok barked at one of his soldiers.

Instantly the guard unlocked the door. Nadia cried out in pain as the man grabbed a handful of her hair and dragged her out of the cage by it, throwing her at Bartok's feet. His boots were so shiny she could see her swollen eye where he'd struck her earlier in them.

Ilia growled fiercely in his cell, lunged at the bars. His great paws snaked through the bars in his rage.

Bartok threw him an amused smirk before glaring down at Nadia.

"What part of our earlier conversation did you not understand, Nadia?" Bartok's voice was deceptively calm. "I thought we were pretty clear on the plan. You were to get rid of your brothers. That's all you had to do."

Nadia met his gaze but said nothing. What could she say?

"How convenient you forgot to mention Turgenev was back in town," Bartok went on, crouching in front of her. "Then you spent the entire afternoon fucking him!"

Bartok backhanded her so viciously the blow sent her back across the floor. Nadia tried to crawl away from him as he approached, backing up until she met the boots of one of his soldiers at her back. Bartok moved slowly across the floor as he closed in on her.

"You can't escape me, Nadia. And neither will your brothers. Or the little bitch with them," Bartok taunted her. "She's a pure blood, isn't she? She can take your place when I kill you."

Bartok lunged for her but the soldier behind her kicked him in the face before he ever touched her. Blood and spit flew from Bartok's mouth, his grunt of pain ringing through the chamber.

"What the fuck?" Bartok scrambled to his feet and turned to glare at the soldier with murder in his eyes.

Nadia scrambled away, her gaze rising to the soldier's face. Her breath caught in her chest.

It was Mikhail.

"Turgenev," Bartok hissed. "I would have thought you were dead by now."

The guards watching by the door flinched as Mikhail stepped around Nadia and walked up to Bartok as if to engage him in casual conversation.

"It wasn't for lack of trying... Bartok, is it?" Mikhail took the camouflage cap from his head and tossed it to the floor. "But your pathetic little men were really no trouble to dispatch."

Nadia was forgotten as Bartok leapt to his feet. Misha towered over Bartok, a head taller and probably twice his weight. But that didn't stop Bartok from circling him, glaring at him menacingly.

Mikhail was unaffected. "Were you a buzzard in another life?"

Bartok stopped, his face crimson in his rage. "I'm going to kill you. Just like I'm going to kill that bitch," he pointed at Nadia, "and her brother."

Mikhail glanced in Ilia's direction while Ilia went wild, spitting and hissing. He shrugged. "Kill *him* if you wish. Saves me the trouble. But that *bitch*, as you put it, is mine." Mikhail's tone was calm. "And no one hurts what is mine. No one takes away what is mine."

"Then what you own is a pathetic sack of shit, Turgenev." Bartok held out a hand, motioning to her.

"And the child?" Mikhail threw out.

Nadia's heart skipped a beat.

The question froze Bartok to the spot. Some of the color drained from his face as he stared at Mikhail.

"Why did you claim my child as yours, Bartok?" Mikhail asked. "I'm curious. Do you have trouble getting it up? Supposedly drugs are available for that ailment back in America."

Oh, my God! Oh my God! When did he find out? How does he know?

"You --"

"*Nyet!*" Mikhail cut him off. "Or maybe the truth is you aren't what you say you are. You're only a half blood yourself, aren't you, Bartok? You know on occasion a breeding between a pure blood and a half blood produces a child strong enough to transform. But *you* can't transform, can you?"

Bartok's fists clenched at his sides as he glared up at Mikhail. "I *am* of pure blood! Descended from the lines of Kolenkov. I have more --"

"Transform then," Mikhail goaded him. "Prove it."

The other occupants of the chamber watched in stunned silence as Bartok just stood there getting angrier by the moment. Veins popped out at his neck and his forearms. A drop of blood hit the floor from his tightly clenched fist.

But nothing happened, nothing changed.

Mikhail walked to Nadia as if he hadn't a care in the world, kneeling by her side. "You see, Nadia," Mikhail's voice was a persuasive purr, "you've had it in your power all along to kill this piece of shit. He's not full blood."

Nadia's mind spun with so many things, her child, Misha... The last two years with Bartok.

"Forget everything else right now, Nadia," Mikhail pressed her. "Remember the beatings, the rapes, all the times he forced his will on you. Think about him cutting you off from the world. Think about the fact he took your baby."

The signals began coursing through Nadia's body with terrifying ease. She felt her nails begin to harden, elongate. Her gums tingled in her mouth as the transformation came.

"Kill him, Nadia," Mikhail said low in her ear. "Purge your soul of him. Become wrath, become rage. Kill him!"

Nadia let the change come, yelling as her body convulsed and contorted, splitting her clothes. Black fur shot through her skin like the sting of thousands of needles and she welcomed the pain...

In leopard form Nadia stalked Bartok, enjoying the fear in his eyes as she hissed at him, forced him a step backwards.

"Shoot her!" Bartok shouted at his guards.

Behind her Mikhail roared, transforming himself. Nadia heard shots being fired, prepared to be hit, but the bullets went astray. The screams of Bartok's guards blended with Ilia's fierce growls to fill her ears as she stalked Bartok, backed him against the wall.

Bartok's boot shot out to kick her but she caught his foot in her mouth, sinking her teeth into the expensive leather and tasting his blood as she nicked his foot. Bartok yelled in pain, frantically trying to pull his leg free and Nadia released him. But she lunged at him in the next instant, wanting more of his blood, more of his pain for what he'd done to her. He'd taken Luca away from her, he'd take Misha away from her...

Her claws caught the front of his uniform and he screamed as she ripped through the flesh of his chest. Nadia lunged again, aiming for his throat with her teeth but he knocked her back down with a great swing of his arm. Scrambling back toward the door he managed to reach one of his men, lying in a pool of his own blood, and yanked the rifle from the dead man's hands.

Nadia managed to dodge the butt of the rifle the first time he aimed at her. His second attempt caught the top of her head and she felt as if her skull had exploded in the blinding pain. Nadia was disoriented, trying to clear her vision when she heard him pump the rifle. She got her vision back just in time to look down the barrel of the gun he aimed at her.

But Bartok never saw Mikhail at his side. The rifle fell from his hand as Mikhail's teeth ripped into his shoulder and Bartok screamed as her lover mauled him, ripping away the flesh of his arm, his chest in great chunks, red ribbons of blood shooting from his body.

Mikhail stopped when Bartok's movements ceased, holding the man beneath his great paws. Amber eyes glowed with unnatural light, demon light, as they fastened on Nadia.

He wanted her to finish Bartok. And she needed the kill to change back.

Ilia lunged at the bars of his cell with his teeth bared as she padded toward the man who'd held her captive for two years, the man who'd taken her child. She'd never killed a human or one of their kind before.

Nadia didn't think twice about it as she lunged for his throat...

* * *

"He's beautiful, Nadia." Mikhail's voice was barely above a whisper as he joined her on the bed.

Nadia held their son as he slept, so happy to have him in her arms at last. His little head snuggled against her breast, his dark lashes contrasting sharply with his fair skin. His hair was dark too, like hers, silky in texture. Aside from that he was a miniature version of his father. Her heart swelled with love.

Mikhail's hand affectionately rubbed the top of his son's head. "How old is he?"

"Fifteen months old," Nadia whispered.

There was so much she still needed to tell him though. "Misha, I didn't --"

"You didn't know about him when we parted ways," he finished for her. "I figured that out on my own."

Nadia had been stunned when he'd explained to her he'd been in Bartok's dungeon with her when the nurse had brought Luca to her to say goodbye. Mikhail had taken her child out of there and left him with one of her neighbors, saved him, with no idea he was the child's father. It had brought her to tears that Mikhail had done that for her.

"Don't." Mikhail's voice was gentle when her eyes filled with tears again. "No one will ever hurt you again, Nadia. No one will ever take him from you again. Not while I live."

"I'm so sorry, Misha." Nadia let the tears come. "I'm so sorry for everything --"

"*Nyet.*" Mikhail tipped her chin up so she'd look at him. "All of that is over now. Well, I do still plan to deal with your brothers, you understand."

Nadia didn't know how seriously to take him on that one. Misha made no offer to help her as she freed Ilia from Bartok's dungeon so her brother could take down one of the soldiers and return to human form. When she'd returned to her home with Mikhail and her son, the tension had been a living thing. The three of them had retreated to her room, leaving Ilia to explain to Vitali and Nicole what had happened. But she knew Vitali would expect a full accounting from *her*.

"Nadia, do you love me?"

"Yes." Nadia hoped he could see it in her eyes. "I never stopped, despite what I said to you that day. I couldn't stand the thought of you being hurt."

"Put the past aside, Nadia." Mikhail took her free hand, caressed it between his larger ones. "Can we start over? Can we make a new life together now? The three of us?"

The three of us. Nadia loved the sound of that.

"I want to start over with you, Misha. I never want to be without you again."

Mikhail pressed his lips to her neck, lingering there enticingly with the promise of things to come. But not tonight. He understood without saying her need to hold her baby. Stretching his large body out next to hers it was only minutes before he joined their son in sleep.

Nadia had just dozed off when she heard the slam of the front door. The sinking feeling in her chest told her it was Ilia, going off into the night, hurt and alone. He'd returned from the confrontation earlier at the mansion in a foul temper and Nadia knew it didn't bode well for the night ahead.

Vitali had spoken to him about Nicole and the baby...

All of her prayers had been answered this night so she said a prayer for her twin.

Nadia's prayer for Ilia was for him to find his mate. A woman he would live for and die for as Nadia would her Misha...

The End... For Now.

Isabella Jordan

By day Isabella is an instructor at a university in her native Virginia. By night she writes erotic tales and fantasies -- and eats chocolate! In her spare time she enjoys life. While Isabella enjoys spending quiet time with her family and reading, she also enjoys bungee jumping, hiking, walking in the rain, rock 'n' roll, and volunteering at her local women's shelter.