



The Unforgiven:
NICHOLAS

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ISBN 1-58608-962-5
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

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Dedication

To my husband John, whose bright personality and unfailing belief in me has never wavered. I love you, my darling.

To Jean, who has worked with me tirelessly on this book and did a wonderful job of editing it for me. You are fabulous, and I thank you for all the hard work that went into this book.

Chapter One

Russia 1762

Nicholas' dark, hooded eyes surveyed the room as he listened to the inane chatter floating around him. Their words meant nothing to him, his mind silently hunting through his own aristocratic kind, their blood like music to his body. He could hear their deepest, darkest secrets, nothing hidden from his vampiric mind.

"Russian appeals to my appetite," Drake said mentally beside him as they strode through the hall of Tsarskoe Selo Palace, the summer residence of Emperor Peter and Empress Catherine.

"Aye, as it does mine," he answered, his gaze traveling to the gold gilding on the walls and especially the ceiling, where frescos had been delicately hand painted. A smile curled his lips. For all the supposed brilliant "cunning," these humans had no idea predators hunted among them.

Sounds of music floated throughout the halls, filling the air with their song. Nicholas listened, focusing his full attention on the music and enjoying the skill of the musicians who played the waltzes. He had once tried to play the violin himself, a hundred years before, but found he had no tone or talent for it. Since then, he had always enjoyed the talent of others.

"Ah, my good Lord Wetherington," Serge Novanovitch called from across the room.

Nicholas turned sharply to see the fat man waddling toward him, the buttons of his waistcoat straining. "Aye, 'tis me." He executed a mock bow with Drake doing the same. "May I introduce you to my traveling companion, Drake Samuelsson?"

Serge's lecherous gaze traveled up and down Drake's form, encouraging a myriad of vile, disgusting thoughts thrumming through the older Russian's head. "A pleasure," he sighed softly, almost like a woman would. "What brings you to our chilly corner of the world?"

"Adventure." Drake smiled back, returning the man's sentiment.

Nicholas felt the hatred grow in Drake. The only reason he was acting as though he might consider bedding down for the night with Serge was as a potential meal, nothing more. "Much thanks for sending the invitation to the Empress' birthday celebration," he said, breaking the awkward silence between them. "London is so boring since the season is over, so this is a welcome diversion."

"Good, good," Serge said, gesturing toward the middle of the room where a group of Russian aristocrats waited. "Come, there are several people you simply must meet before the Empress arrives."

Nicholas had thought of joining him with the others, but he let Drake lead the way, staring at the sea of powdered heads. He had kept his hair its normal jet color,

refusing to give in to the style of the day. Mortals seemed to always hang onto one silly custom or another as long it was “fashionable.” He smirked. If they only knew what he was.

* * * *

Tatiana admired her reflection in the mirror, touching the angled planes of her face. Her porcelain skin and luminous eyes, she had inherited from her deceased mother, as well as the pale, silvery-blond hair. Sometimes she wished she could have been more like her mother, meek and mild, willing to do a man’s bidding. Instead, she’d received the stubbornness of her father, ready to take on any challenge without remorse, catching her into a net of intrigue that should involve no woman.

“Come help me put my necklace on, Tatiana,” ordered Empress Catherine from behind the curtain. She jumped. The Empress’ voice was so commanding and strong, a trait she wished she could display. In her current guise as a simpleton, she could not.

Quickly, she left the small dressing table and hurried behind the screen where several ladies-in-waiting tied Catherine’s lacings and fastenings. “Would you not like to wait, Your Majesty? Perhaps after the ladies are finished?”

“Perhaps,” Catherine sighed, waiting for the last thread to be tied. “You know, Tatiana, that you are a very intelligent woman.”

“*Nyet*, Your Majesty. I am the simple daughter of one of your generals, nothing more.” She hung her head, mostly for show for the ladies-in-waiting. “I am yours completely to command.”

The Empress waved her hand, and the ladies bowed, their jobs finished. “Be gone. I wish to address this girl in private.”

“Aye, Your Majesty,” they cried in unison, leaving the chamber amid the swish of the finest silk and satin.

Once the door closed, the Empress gestured for her to come closer. She obeyed and dropped to her knees at the Empress’ feet, discarding the simpleton guise, keeping close to the Empress’ ear so that if anyone was listening, they would hear nothing. “I have your letter from General Federov.” Tatiana reached into the pocket of her gown and produced the letter. “He asked me to tell you that he is eagerly awaiting your response.”

The Empress ripped it from her hands and tore open the letter, the bits of wax flying everywhere. Tatiana knelt patiently as the Empress’ eyes swept back and forth across the page, the expression on her face lightening.

Tatiana folded her hands in her lap, strengthening her patriotic resolve. She knew that this was important and that the Emperor needed to be dethroned. He was nothing more than a childish man, a puppet, preferring to play with toys than tending to the needs of the government. She had witnessed his many shows of childishness, knowing that he was not entirely right in the head. Catherine, on the other hand, was the true ruler of Russia, the only one with the country’s best interests at heart. Time seemed to have erased her past as Princess Sophie Auguste Frederike von Anhalt-Zerbst, of the forgotten little duchy of Stettin. Gone were her Lutheran ideas, replaced by the Russian Orthodox faith. She knew the Russian people better than they knew themselves, sparing

no effort to ingratiate herself with them. Peter had never bothered to know or understand his fellow Russians. When the Empress had approached her about ferrying messages back and forth between the monarch and her armies, she had accepted the duty without question. It was right for Russia's future.

The Empress held the letter against her white-satin brocaded breasts, a delicate sigh escaping from her scarlet-clad lips. "You will leave tomorrow for St. Petersburg and meet General Federov at the Black Horse Tavern near the Peterhof. You will give him my reply there. Once your task is completed, you will spend the night at your country home and change back into your normal attire. Return to me once that is done. Am I understood?" Tatiana nodded as she rose to her feet and picked up the heavy necklace from its bed of velvet, the large rubies and pearls glimmering in the light. Placing the heavy jewelry around the royal neck, clasping it tightly in the back, her fingers danced over the pearls. Perhaps one day she would own fine jewelry such as this.

"Many thanks," the Empress remarked as she turned and caught the edge of the message on fire from a nearby candle, laying it down on a silver platter and watching it burn.

"What time will I be leaving?"

"At dawn," the Empress answered, pushing the paper around so that the last of the flame ate the remnants of it. "You will carry the message verbally, so that if anyone stops you, there will be no incriminating evidence." She sighed wearily. "'Tis a nasty business that we women are a part of," she confessed as the flame flickered a bit more before going out, the ashes resting in a dull-gray heap. "We can trust no one, nor allow anyone to get close to us while we try to right the current wrongs." The Empress looked up, her pale eyes conveying the seriousness of the situation. "Trust no one, Tatiana, not even your own father, who I fear is a part of Peter's rebellion."

"Aye, he is part of it, Your Majesty," Tatiana confessed, the tears slipping from her eyes.

"Does he question you about my court?"

"He beleaguers me for information in letters, but I claim I have nothing to give him." Her head lowered as her heart broke nearly in half. "Please promise me that once you have the throne, you will not punish him too harshly?"

The Empress' warm hand slipped under her chin, lifting her face up. "Hush, my dear, there is no use in thinking of that now," she murmured, dabbing at Tatiana's eyes with her lace handkerchief. "What I will promise is that I will take into consideration your undying loyalty to me in this dire time." She set the lace aside. "Rise, my dear, for there is a celebration downstairs in honor of my birthday." She urged Tatiana to her feet. "There is nothing to cry about." The Empress took one last look at herself in the mirror, turning sideways. "Can you tell that I am with child again?"

"No, Your Majesty," Tatiana murmured, wiping the last of her tears away, her heart thumping hard in her chest. She had just given her father over to the Empress, who she was sure would execute him for treason. How could she be happy now?

"Good," the Empress replied in a staid voice, smoothing the silken folds of her gown down. "I do not wish to announce that fact at the moment, for there are many at court who know the Emperor rarely spends any time in my bed. Not that I wish him

to, of course, while he dandles with that obscene pig, Countess Vorontsòva.”

“But no one....”

The Empress’ spine stiffened, her jaw tightly set. “There are many who would sell their very soul if they could use this information against me, including my ‘husband’.” She spat out that word with utter contempt and turned to Tatiana. “Do you not agree?” She tilted her head. The Empress’ gentle lips spread into a wide smile. “I am glad someone is on my side in this fight.”

“Much thanks, Your Majesty, for all that you have done for me,” she murmured as the Empress took her hand. “I will never forget this.”

“Nor will I.”

* * * *

The feast took on a very jovial atmosphere. Musicians, some of the best Europe had to offer, filled the air with their lively tunes. Gilt ornaments glared at them from the olive-green walls. The floor was made of the finest parquet available. Nicholas had danced with every available young woman, finding them all suffocatingly boring. The only things they wished to talk about were their places at court and which nobleman they had set their eye on. He had longed for a woman who would be an equal to himself in both intelligence and wit, as well as fiery will. None of these women had a mind to call their own.

What he wanted was a woman like his beloved Cleopatra.

Just as he whirled about in another waltz, he heard the herald call attention. “All praise the glorious reign of Her Majesty, the Empress Catherine!”

He watched the Empress enter the room, her regal air hard to ignore. Suddenly, his attention was drawn to the lithe figure shining with exotic radiance behind the Empress. Strands of silver-blond hair, swept back from her face and festooned with small diamond clips, highlighted the porcelain quality of her skin. Dove-gray eyes peeped out from beneath a fan of inky lashes, the hue of her cheeks naturally pink. Her lips were full and spread into a smile that would light any man’s fire.

“Who is that woman?” he questioned his dance partner, the fire starting to build inside.

“Why, that is the Empress, my dear,” she purred, taking a hand and skimming his face with it, as if to tempt him.

“No,” he insisted, unable to tear his gaze away from the new arrival, “the glorious creature behind her.”

The woman’s mouth twisted into a snarl, filling him with revulsion. “Oh, *that* girl,” she huffed. “That is Tatiana Ivanova Gregorovich, daughter of Count Ivan Gregorovich, the Emperor’s general.” He felt her stare. “You would not like her. She is a complete dolt.”

He turned, pushing down the urge to take this woman and snap her neck. “What compels you to say that?”

“Because that is what she is,” the woman continued on, her formerly pretty face now fast becoming ugly. “Her father has tried to marry her off several times, but she refuses, saying that in her condition that she cannot marry. That is why her father placed her with the Empress.”

“What condition is that?”

His companion’s face became tighter, her mouth pinching at the corners angrily. “Why are you so preoccupied with the dolt? Am I not woman enough for you, at least for tonight?”

He waved a hand in front of her face. “Be gone with you and forget that you ever spoke to me.”

Her repulsive face turned blank as she stared into the empty air, affording him the freedom to walk away. Crossing the room in several strides, he halted in front of the mysterious woman, forcing her to stop. “Nicholas Greystone, Lord Wetherington, at your service.” He bowed, introducing himself quickly before she could get away. “And you are...?”

She giggled childishly, covering her mouth with her hand. “The Empress’ lady-in-waiting,” she said, her delicious smile spreading across her dewy-soft lips.

He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips, the cloth of her gloves cool against his flesh. In that instant, he saw flashes of her life, from birth until the present, giving him a deep look into her personality. Even though this woman played a child to the court, she was far more sophisticated than she led everyone to believe. She was involved in the political intrigue surrounding the Empress, acting as a go-between for the monarch and her generals in St. Petersburg. This little minx held a lot of secrets, a certain treasure trove that he would not mind finding. “Might I have your name, my lady, so that I might know whom I am addressing?” He did not offer the knowledge that he already had her name, for this was the surest way of getting her to lower her guard.

“Ta ... Tatiana Gregorovich,” she said softly, her clear, dusky eyes shining. Clearly, she was untouched, much like the first snow of winter. “You speak our language so well, my lord,” she inquired softly. “Were you schooled in my country?”

Nicholas laughed slightly. Her ruse was most amusing. “I have been schooled on many continents,” he offered, “and your country is the most fascinating that I have found.”

Her cheeks took on another shade of rose, much deeper than before. “Much thanks, my Lord Wetherington...”

“Please, address me as Nicholas,” he stated, the familiar stirrings of lust rising. “My title is much too stuffy for a man of my age to use. It reminds me of my father.” If only Tatiana knew the truth. He was thousands of years old, having lived during of the time of the pharaohs in Egypt.

She quickly cleared her throat, her delicate neck working in conjunction. He could almost imagine the sweet, virgin blood riding through her veins. “Nicholas, then,” she murmured, her gaze trailing toward her mistress. “Please, if you will pardon me....”

Nicholas grabbed her silk-clad arm, preventing her flight. “Where are you fleeing to?”

“I am not fleeing, my lord. ‘Tis just that the Empress requires that I be by her side at all times.”

He cast a quick glance at the Empress. Apparently, this was not the case, because the regal monarch was engaged with a large crowd, appearing not to need any of

her attendants. "Your mistress appears to be in good hands at the moment. Would you perhaps join me for a walk in the gardens?"

* * * *

Tatiana shivered lightly, not used to the feelings searing up and down her spine. She had never imagined a man this handsome to ever pick her out from among the beautiful women at the ball.

She gazed into the dark depths of his eyes, drinking in the flames residing in them. His face was utterly perfect. Dark brows hooded his eyes, accentuating his dusky skin tone. Jet-colored hair swept away from his face, held at the back in a queue. Instead of satin and silk covering him, he wore simple, light-colored linen breeches, with matching waistcoat and greatcoat. His cravat was white, making his bronzed skin stand out even more. For a moment, she felt the sudden, wild urge to disappear with him and make passionate love. She trembled again. Why should she feel like this for a man she had barely met? "I ... I have no chaperone," she muttered, not really understanding why she said it. She was a woman now, not a child, and needed no supervision.

His full, sensual lips spread wide, revealing his brilliant white teeth. "You need no chaperone while you are with me," he whispered low, making her belly curl with a strange excitement.

"No, I do not," she repeated, almost feeling as though some ghostly voice was speaking through her.

"Then come with me."

* * * *

Chilly night air, filled with the smell of roses and wildflowers, wafted from the well-manicured gardens of Catherine's palace, adding to the heady atmosphere around them. There had been many nights she would come out and wander around the gardens once the Empress had gone to sleep, dreaming of a time when all the intrigue was over and she could afford to find true love.

"This is a lovely night," Nicholas said at her side, breaking the uneasy silence.

Her hand looped through his arm as they walked, her free hand holding her gown up. "Aye, that it is," she said in a low tone, not really wanting to make conversation. It might reveal her true self.

"How long have you been at court?"

"As long as I can remember, my lord ... Nicholas," she corrected herself, raising her voice slightly louder. "Ever since my father discovered my impairment," she confessed. "He sent me to court to train as a lady-in-waiting to the Empress."

"Your father must be an important man," he continued, "to send you to the palace."

"How did you know that?"

"A simple deduction, my dear. He has secured you a position in the Empress' household...."

Before he could finish, she jerked her hand from his arm. Now she knew the truth. This man was a spy sent by the Emperor to see what was going on at the palace. "Please, my lord, I must go...."

Nicholas stood in front of her, in all his dark glory, preventing her retreat. “No, my dear, you wish to stay with me for a while until we have finished speaking.”

Suddenly, she felt her body relax in his arms, almost as if she had no control over it. What sort of bewitching spell had he cast over her? “Aye, I will stay with you,” she murmured, her hand looping back into his arm.

“Good,” he whispered. “I wish to be alone with you.”

She was unable to say anything as Nicholas led her around one hedge in the garden, where it led to a solitary bench. He guided her there, urging her to sit down, and taking the seat next to her. “You are a most beautiful woman, Tatiana,” he murmured low, his lips going to her neck, nuzzling gently.

Tatiana closed her eyes, swimming in the depths of ecstasy, the moisture between her legs forming quickly. Never before had a man been this close to her, though many had tried. Her father had just given up on finding her a husband, attributing it to her simplemindedness. “Oh, Nicholas,” she murmured as his hand cupped her right breast, his thumb caressing her nipple through the black silk. She felt it harden under his ministrations, making her naturally arch under his palm.

Nicholas sensed the blood pulsing beneath the skin was ripe and ready for his taking, the sweetest and most pure virgin blood. He hungered for it, his fangs trying to descend, but he forced them back. No, this woman would be his, but he wanted her of her own volition, not his own.

Taking her gasps of ecstasy as an invitation, he moved from her neck and temptation, toward her breasts. The full tops were exposed to his touch, the skin creamy and delicate. Lovingly, he tasted her sweet flesh, hungering for more.

Tatiana felt her laces loosen in the front, but she cared not. The height of her desire was too great, her body trembling from the surge of new feelings thrumming through her limbs. Cool air swept over her skin as her breasts felt the wind, the nubs hardening even more. She felt Nicholas’ mouth take in one ripe nipple, his tongue flicking over the button. She arched against his mouth as he knelt before her, her hands winding through his dark hair.

Teasingly, he withdrew from her and cupped her breasts together, his tongue flicking against both hard nipples. “Aye,” she whispered as he continued to tease her body to new heights, her hands winding through the strands of his black hair. “I want you, Nicholas,” she confessed as he rose up and took her mouth. His expert tongue ventured in and explored the cavernous regions of her mouth, her breath hitching in and out. Was this the passion of her dreams?

Nicholas found his way under her gown with his hand, pushing aside the various layers of material until he came to her undergown. Somehow, he maneuvered his way through the complicated material and found her underpinnings. Carefully pushing the cumbersome material aside, his probing fingers found their prize. Her moist womanhood greeted him, allowing him to slip inside of her easily. She gasped at the tight, invasive feeling, taken unaware by the action. For a fraction of a moment, fear filled her, the emotion quickly replaced with some strange comfort that it was Nicholas, and she was safe with him, no matter what happened.

Her body relaxed as he stroked her, his thumb toying with the ripening

sphere. Instinctively, her muscles contracted, holding him prisoner. He moaned against her as he continued his strokes, her hips rising with each one.

"You do not know what you do to me," Nicholas breathed into her ear as he continued to stroke her. "Perhaps, soon, there will be more than just my fingers inside of you."

"Aye, I would like that too," she gasped as he stroked a spot inside that sent her body out of control, making her weak. "What are you doing?"

"Giving you pleasure," he answered in a low tone as he continued to stroke her, the gasps of ecstasy trying to escape her throat. Unable to hold it any longer, she buried her face into his shoulder, letting out the moans in a muffled fashion.

Without warning, a flood of heat washed over, making her heart pound out of control, her body trembling. What had happened to her? "Nicholas?" she gasped, her breathing not returning to normal as quickly as she hoped.

"Open your eyes, Tatiana," he commanded.

When she did, they were sitting together on the bench, the moonlight highlighting the well-groomed edges of the garden, turned black by the night. Flooded by embarrassment, she looked down. Her bodice was laced together as it had been before, her gown smoothed down over her legs. Her face felt hot. What had happened?

"Is there something amiss, Tatiana?" Nicholas questioned innocently, staring at her through dark eyes.

She leapt to her feet, her heart pounding out of control. This could not be! It had to be a waking nightmare! "No, my lord. If you will pardon me, I must join the Empress."

On quick legs, she hurried from the garden, a thin sheen of sweat forming on her brow. What had happened back there? Was it all a dream, or had it been real?

* * * *

Nicholas watched her walk away, the strain in his breeches almost to the breaking point. Oh, yes, this woman did indeed harbor a great many secrets inside, and it would be a most interesting time indeed to find out all of them.

"You should not have toyed with her in that fashion," Alexandra's voice echoed through his mind. "You should have waited."

"What makes you say that?"

"Alexandra is right," Drake said in a low tone as he rounded the edge of the hedge, dabbing at the blood at the corner of his mouth. "You should have waited."

"Tell me why I should have waited?" he snapped, his gaze still on Tatiana's fleeing form.

"Because she is not ready for us, at least not yet," Alexandra said, the sound of her voice still echoing through his head. "She will be ready in time, and she will be yours forever, Nicholas. You must be patient."

He leapt to his feet. "No, I will not be patient! I lost Cleopatra through mortal intrigue and deception. I refuse to let that happen again." For centuries, his heart had burned for Cleopatra and he had hungered to lie in her arms once again. He had been her lover for quite a while, until Julius Caesar came into her life and took his place. For years, he had harbored the idea that the son Cleopatra had borne Caesar was

his own, but he knew better. The timing was not right. Now, in a way, his Cleopatra had been reborn in the guise of this very strong-willed woman.

"You may lose her if you are not careful, my friend," Drake remarked as he sank down on the bench next to him, wiping the last of the blood from his lips. "I cannot tell you how much I enjoy a Russian meal now and then."

Nicholas ignored the droning conversation going on between Alexandra and Drake. His mind remained on one thing and one thing only--Tatiana.

* * * *

Tatiana hurried past the throng of revelers, the heat staining her cheeks. What was she going to tell the Empress?

Gingerly, she approached the Empress' chair and curtsied before it, the crowd on either side. She was trembling and did her best to ignore the others.

"Yes, my dear, what is it?" the Empress asked kindly.

"If your Grace would permit me, I would like to retire to my chamber," she said in a quivering voice.

"Rise, my dear child and come to my side," the Empress ordered.

She rose and quickly hurried to the Empress' side, kneeling down. "Something is vexing you. Are you ill?" Tatiana nodded. "Retire, then, to your chamber and send the other ladies to me. I will speak to you in the morning and see if you are any better."

Tatiana kissed the older woman's hand, hoping that the Empress would not feel the quivering of her lips. "Much thanks, Your Majesty."

"Farewell, my dear, until tomorrow morning," the Empress said, giving her a short wink. "I will see you at dawn."

She bowed her head. "Yes, Your Majesty."

With those words still hanging in the air, she hurried from the gilded room, the murmurs of the guests rumbling through the air. She ignored them and made her way to the safety of her chamber. At least there, she would be safe from Lord Wetherington.

Once inside her chamber, she slammed the door shut and locked it, her breath hitching in and out of her chest. Who was this mysterious Lord Wetherington who had such a hold over her? How could a man make her imagine a dream such as the one in the garden?

Wearily, she wandered over to the window and looked out, the pounding of her heart beginning to slow, though the ecstasy still filled her trembling body.

Moonlight streamed from the heavens above, turning the world a ghostly gray. Bright green trees looked black in the night, their tall tops darkly ominous. The gardens looked beautiful at this time at night.

Suddenly, a figure appeared in front of her, standing on the carefully cut lawn.

It was Nicholas.

His dark hair, free from the queue, draped around his shoulders in an ebony curtain, almost appearing blue from the depth of hue. His arms were outstretched, the cape he wore dancing on the breeze. The magnificent clothes were gone, replaced by

a loose-fitting white shirt and onyx breeches, topped with jet knee boots, his legs splayed. He beckoned her to join him in the vast expanse of luxurious green.

Tatiana stood stock still, the fear mingled with desire soaring through her veins. Where had he come from?

No, this had to be a dream! She rubbed her eyes quickly and opened them again, expecting to see nothing but empty grass where he stood. She was completely wrong.

He was still there.

Tatiana jumped away from the window, flattening herself against the wall, gasping for air. What was the matter with her? Why was her imagination running away with her?

Taking a deep breath, she dared to look again. Thankfully, the lawn was empty this time, the grasses ruffling in the light breeze. She let out a sigh of relief. He was definitely gone this time.

A yawn encompassed her. Perhaps he was a figment of her tired mind, as it had been in the garden. Yes, that was it. She was just tired.

Unlacing her gown, she readied herself for another lonely night.

Nicholas watched her move away from the window, the desire pulsing through his lifeless veins, an emotion he had never experienced in his time as a vampire. Tatiana brought that out in him. She was far more than Cleopatra he was beginning to realize. So much more.

“Are you ready to feast?” Drake questioned, his body covered in black leather, all the easier to prevent prey from seeing them until it was too late.

“Of course,” he said, snapping his fingers so that his own suit of leather covered his body instead of his normal clothes. “Is Alexandra joining us tonight?”

Drake shook his head. “No. She and Siobhan are dining on French cuisine tonight.”

He cast one last look at Tatiana’s window. *You will be mine forever*, he silently told her. *My seduction of you has only just begun.*

Chapter Two

Tatiana did not sleep at all. She tossed and turned all night, her dreams haunted by the darkly handsome stranger. Who was this Lord Wetherington? Despite his richly British-accented voice, it was plain to see that he was from somewhere other than England, with his smoldering looks and darkly hypnotic eyes.

Pushing those thoughts from her mind, she stood in front of the full-length gold-gilt mirror, staring at her reflection. Dark green breeches covered her legs, topped by black boots. Her waistcoat, the edges trimmed in yellow silk, carried three sets of two buttons that fastened the edges. A greatcoat, festooned with gold aiguillettes denoting her rank as captain, topped her costume. The white linen of her shirt tore at her skin, making it itch. She was not used to this type of material at all.

Her hat, pinned with tassels, perched securely on her lightly powdered head. With her hair being so blond, a lot of lightening was not necessary.

Gently, her gloved hand touched the hilt of her ornate sword strapped to her side. Despite her slim appearance, she could easily pass for a man.

Tatiana let out a short breath in an effort to calm her erratic heart. She had ferried messages between the Empress and her generals before, but never disguised as a captain of the Imperial regiment. Her knowledge of the sword and pistol were unparalleled, having learned both at the Empress' insistence. She was more than capable of taking care of her herself.

Picking up the pistol from the table, she tucked it neatly into the holster on her other side. She was ready.

* * * *

Twilight fell over the sky like a navy blanket, chilling the air around her. Night music from the wild animals abounded through the thick forest, frightening her only a little bit. It was just a short distance to the city of St. Petersburg and to the tavern where she could deliver her message to General Federov.

Tatiana rubbed her head lightly with the back of her hand. In her heart, she knew this was right, and what she was doing was for the good of Russia, nothing more. The Empress had offered her lands as well as titles, but she had turned them all down. Her only wish out of all of this was to see the rightful ruler on the throne.

Her horse, draped in regimental colors, loped through the forest, the dry twigs snapping under its hooves. Silently, she wished for a little company on this journey, but instinctively, Tatiana knew there was no one she could ever trust.

Tatiana rounded a bend lined with trees, the gateway to St. Petersburg. Only a few more hours, and she would be meeting....

Shadowy figures melted out of the darkness and surrounded her horse, forcing her to stop. "Be gone with you!" she commanded in a deep voice, despite her fear, hoping to sound like a man. "I have no time for foolishness!"

“We do not care what you do or do not have time for,” growled one dark figure. “We want any money that you have in your possession.”

“I have no money,” she countered, the fear rising in her like the tide before a storm. “Go and seek another victim elsewhere.”

“Would we like another victim elsewhere?” the voice pondered, as if asking the other figures around him.

Nothing moved around her, the breath holding her chest. She could best these men with her skill. Slowly, her hand went to the hilt of her sword, the reins dropping to the sides. “I am giving you one last chance to save your lives,” Tatiana drew her sword out of the sheath with calculated precision. Moonlight gleamed on the metal, casting slivers of silver light all around.

“We know,” one voice muttered menacingly. “We are prepared to die. Are you?”

“Aye, that I am,” she answered and swung her sword in an arc, connecting with one of the figures, the sound of flesh parting filling the air. Grunts and groans surrounded her as she slashed to the left and right, the feeling of unfamiliar hands grabbing at her legs almost more than she could bear.

Kicking her horse in the flanks, the beast broke into a run, but not before she heard shots ring out, the musket balls flying close to her ears. Suddenly, her horse reared upwards and fell back as a bullet ripped through its chest, throwing her into the thick shrubbery covering the forest floor. Her hat flew off, her sword following in same direction.

Black figures advanced on her, and she ripped the pistol out of its sheath, firing into the night. A single ball rang out into the night. Her vain hope was that it would halt their advance, but it did nothing. Shadowy figures continued their advance upon her, their hands outstretched.

“You look delicious,” one of them muttered menacingly. “Good enough to eat.”

Without warning, their eyes began to glow a hellish red, the only thing visible about them. Sudden drifts of acrid odor filled the air, reminding her of dead flesh. Tatiana started to shake. What was happening?

Fear held her in its grip, the scream holding in her throat. Before she could strangle a shriek out of her mouth, more shapes melted out of the darkness, encircling the first group.

“Leave the girl alone,” ordered a familiar English-accented voice. “She belongs to me.” Tatiana whirled her head about, searching for the direction of the voice. Who was out here besides her and the unholy creatures?

“You have never put your mark on her,” the first figure that had spoken to her growled. “She is fair game to us.”

“I say she is not, mark or no mark. Now begone, before I...”

Suddenly, a blast of fire, stretching into a tall column, emanated from behind the circle. It blazed hard for a moment before dying down to a dull-blue flame. Parting neatly in the middle, the blaze made an opening as if to allow someone to enter through it.

Tatiana held her hand over her mouth to prevent herself from screaming, because for the moment, they had all but forgotten her. Gingerly, she started inching backward, away from the crowd, the throbbing in her head almost more than she could bear. Somehow, she had to get away from them without anyone noticing.

From between the pillars of fire stepped a beautiful woman with waist-length black hair and skin the color of rich cinnamon. Her eyes blazed with the same fire as the others, her slender body covered in some sort of dress comprised of silver, jewels and beads. A slim waist, indented like an hourglass, peeped out from beneath the gossamer-like material. "Come, my children, there is no need to fight," she purred, walking toward Tatiana's dark savior, the door from which she came disappearing quickly. "There is plenty to savor."

"No, Zakara, she belongs to me," the voice repeated. "I will not have her harmed in any way."

"You forget who owns you, my dear Nicholas," she stated, touching the dark figure's cheek.

Nicholas? Was it the same Nicholas who haunted her dreams? Lord Wetherington? Nay, it could not be!

She inched away a little more, trying to avoid making any type of noise. The flesh of her hands felt ripped apart by the dry twigs, sending shards of searing pain up her arms, but she ignored it. It was better to have the skin torn from her palms than to be dead.

"You own nothing, Zakara," the figure named Nicholas said. "We are not your slaves, nor your children. We wish to be free of you."

"That is not possible," Zakara stated in a low tone. "The only way you will be free is if that is what I desire. Until then, you will remain mine. In fact, I think I will take you back into my bed again, Nicholas. Perhaps it is just the thing to tame your wild heart."

Nicholas swiped her hand away. "No, Zakara," he said, his voice full of confidence. "I know your secrets and will use them to every advantage if I must. Now, let us leave your little 'family' in peace."

"No," Zakara turned her head, the fiery stare landing on Tatiana. "Do not move."

As those words slipped out of the strange woman's mouth, she felt frozen, almost as if she were a statue. Fear continued to soar through her, making her feel helpless and powerless. *Who is this woman who claims to own Nicholas?*

Zakara turned to face Nicholas. "Now, if you want the wench to live, come with me, and I will call the rest of my 'children' off. She will go about doing what she has set out to do with no memory of what has transpired. If not, then my 'children' will dine on her until there is nothing left but bare bones. Is that what you wish?"

"Call them off now, Zakara, or pay," issued another male voice--this time it was more English and aristocratic than Nicholas'.

"My, my, Raphael, have we not become the bold one," she cooed to another figure, as tall as the rest, but much more muscularly built. "If you want to continue to share my bed, you will cease this incessantly boring show of power."

“‘Tis no show, Zakara. I want you to know here and now, we are no longer part of your ‘family.’ This is the end of our loyalty to you.”

“Be careful of your words, Raphael,” she hissed. “What I did to Elizabeth will be nothing compared to what I have in mind for you if you do not obey me.”

“I am willing to risk the chance,” he growled low. “You had your chance to escape. Now ‘tis our turn.”

Six figures, some tall and some short, pulled away from the crowd, their hands linked together. A low, thrumming sound, almost like a murmuring, erupted through the air, words that were unfamiliar to her escaping their lips.

Suddenly, Zakara started to shake, as did the others, her body moving beyond her control. “Stop this, I say! You will--not--escape--me--forever,” she warned as her body went into deep convulsions, along with the others. “I--will--be--watching--and--waiting....”

Before those words died in the air, there was an explosion of light as another column of fire erupted from the earth and split into two beams. Air swept into that void, almost as if were sucked hard from somewhere inside of the earth. The first dark shadows swept into it, followed by Zakara, her scream echoing through the forest. Once she was gone, the void closed, and the fire disappeared, leaving no trace the vacant blackness was ever there.

“That containment spell will not last long, Nicholas,” the one named Raphael said as he strode over to her, his ebony hair flying around his face, dancing on the soft wind. “She is a pretty one, I will say,” he remarked with a touch of sadness in his voice. “She reminds me of my Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth will come back to you one day,” assured a female voice. The figure behind it stepped out of the shadows. Her hair was the color of fire, the delicate green orbs appearing kind. “When you least expect it.”

Tatiana waited for them to descend on her like a pack of wild animals on a carcass. Whoever or whatever they were, they were going to do something to her against her will, of that she was sure.

Her heart pounded, the numbness of fear spreading throughout her immobile limbs. She watched as Nicholas, the very same man who had accosted her in the garden, stepped forward, his dark beauty blanking out everything else. “You are beautiful, Tatiana, and hide many secrets, like a box long forgotten in a locked room. I hope to discover all of those secrets one day.” He knelt next to her and moved forward predatorily. Her heart nearly froze in place. What was he going to do? “I will not harm you, Tatiana,” he murmured, slipping his strong arms around her and bringing her toward him. “I mean to keep others from harming you. I promise I will not hurt you, but it is necessary to give you my mark.”

His head bent to her neck, brushing against her skin in a feathery fashion, the grip of immobility loosening. “Wh-what ... are you?” she gasped, still unable to move away from him.

“You will come to know in time, but for now, you will remember nothing of tonight except what you are to do and return to Tsarskoe Selo,” he promised, his voice low and filled with a raw, sexual tone. “Before then, I must do this.”

Before she could say anything, his lips found her neck, his cold but experienced tongue flicking out to tease the flesh, her body trembling. “No pain,” he whispered softly into her ear.

Suddenly, she felt a sharp sting, but nothing more, except a rising tide of ecstasy running through her, making her shudder harder. She could feel his teeth sink into her flesh and felt the warm trickle of blood flowing from the wound. Tatiana was not frightened, her terror calmed by the fact that Nicholas held her in his arms. Was it some spell he had placed on her? Now she knew who held her so closely in his arms. He was part of the Upir, or undead, as they were known among her people. Legend said they rose at noon and fed until midnight until they were forced back to their graves to rest. Why could she have not sensed that?

Nicholas withdrew from her, his mouth wet with her blood. “I have marked you, my dear, and no harm should befall you until you are back in my presence again.” He laid a hand on her forehead, while his other hand went to her neck. Strangely, she felt the skin closing over the wounds, almost as if they did not exist. “You will remember nothing of this night except what you must do. Fear not, I will be watching and waiting for you.”

* * * *

Nicholas bundled her onto her horse, an animal that had been dead a few minutes before. One of the greatest gifts he possessed was the ability to heal when he chose to use it. Thankfully, he had made sure that her mark was invisible to anyone who was not a vampire. Otherwise, she would know all too quickly what he was and never come to his arms. That was one chance he could never take.

Her blood sang in his veins, making him hunger more for her. His fangs tried to descend again, but he forced them back. They were not needed, at least not until she made the choice.

Tatiana sat on her horse, still dressed in her officer’s garb, her sword sheathed at her side. She was quiet and still, as stiff as a statue, her face pointed forward, eyes blinking slowly.

He smacked the horse on the rear. The animal reared weakly, walking slowly, then moved a bit faster, as if the memory of life flooded its body.

“Are you sure you wish to let her go alone, Nicholas?” Drake asked from his left, the rest gathering on his right.

“She will not be alone,” he answered, watching her ride through the night. Her memory should be returning very soon. “I will follow her until she reaches the tavern and her mind returns.” He turned, facing Alexandra, Siobhan and Gabrielle. “I ask you, my sisters, to watch her at the tavern and make sure that she returns to the Empress’ palace safely.”

“Aye, that we will, Nicholas,” Alexandra agreed, her strong hand going to his shoulder, squeezing softly. “I declare that here and now we form a pact that we will help each other in time of need, no matter what occurs. Agreed?”

“Aye!” they cried in unison.

“Then let this be done,” Nicholas said, taking his hand and ripping it open with his sharp teeth. “By our blood, we are forming our circle of trust, never to be

broken, no matter what occurs.”

The others followed suit and together, they held hands in a circle, their blood pumping hard. Nicholas grabbed the girls’ hands hard. He needed them now more than ever.

* * * *

Tatiana felt the fog lift from her eyes, the time seemingly having passed her by. She shook her head. Where was she? She felt as though she lived in a daze, as though time had no meaning. All she could remember was entering the forest, and now suddenly, she was at the gates of St. Petersburg. Wearily, she rode through them, feeling as though she could sleep for a week. What had happened to her in that short time? When she had left the Empress’ company, she was feeling very well and ready to complete the necessary task. Now, she felt as though a sickness had invaded her.

Slowly, she rode through the streets, keeping her head down. Young soldiers, bowed as she passed, mistaking her for an officer. The deep clops of the horseshoes hitting the cobblestone street hung in the air amid the bustles of daily lives of the peasants.

Tatiana did her best to ignore them, all the while trying to concentrate on getting to the tavern. She felt as though she could not go on any further, her body wanting to stop.

After what seemed like an eternity, she stopped in front of the tavern and handed the reins of her horse to a young boy standing there. “Make sure my horse is properly fed and watered,” she ordered in a low tone and pulled a copper five-kopeck coin out of her waistcoat and handed it to him. “Here, this is for your trouble.”

“Aye, sir! Much thanks!” the boy cried as he took her horse and led it toward the stable.

Tatiana went into the tavern, keeping her head down. Strange looks from the people hovering about landed on her as she entered, most of them probably thinking she was too small to be an officer. She ignored them. They were of no importance to her at the moment.

The tavern was small and dank, the smell of overripe body odor filling the air, as well as the smell of exhaled gas. Tatiana wanted to hold her nose closed, but it would be a dead giveaway to her identity. Men did not do something like that.

Wooden tables, scarred from years of use, decorated the sparse room. At the end of one wall was a giant hand-hewn rock fireplace in which a large fire blazed, big enough to roast the pig on the spit. At the end was a cage in which a scrawny dog treaded to keep the spit rolling.

Where was General Federov? She looked about the room, searching for the man.

She spotted him sitting in the dim corner, cozying up to a barmaid. He was a fat man, the seams of his uniform strained to the hilt. His white hair, the majority of it tied back in a queue, fell in greasy strands around his face. Tatiana took a deep breath, pressing her hand against the hilt of her sword. It was time to deliver her message.

She walked up to the table and clicked her heels, bowing her head.

“General Federov.”

He looked up, his dark eyes full of liquid lust. “Aye, Captain Gregorovich, I presume?”

“Aye, ‘tis I, General,” she said, casting a glance at the woman sitting next to the obnoxious man. Dark hair streamed over her shoulders, framing her pale face. Tatiana could not help but stare at her. She had seen the woman somewhere before, but where could that have been? Obviously, the woman had never been to court, so where would she know the strange barmaid from?

“Leave us,” Federov growled to the woman, and she got up quickly, leaving a battered chair for Tatiana.

She sat down, making sure that she was not in arms’ reach of the general. “Much thanks, my lord, for meeting me here. I bring an urgent message from the Empress.”

“What is her reply?”

Before she could open her mouth, Federov snapped his fingers for more wine. Another woman appeared with two tankards in her hands, bustling her way over to the table. Fiery red hair circled this woman’s head, catching Tatiana’s eye. Brilliant green eyes stared at her as the woman put the tankards down, the paleness of her skin almost the same as the first woman’s. Tatiana narrowed her eyes. This woman seemed almost as familiar as the first. Where would she have known this one from?

“Drink up,” General Federov ordered, lifting his tankard toward her. “It will loosen your tongue.”

“My tongue needs no loosening,” she said quietly, lifting hers, as well.

“Perhaps,” he remarked casually, taking a deep swallow, “it might loosen other things.”

“Perhaps ‘tis your own tongue that needs watching, General,” she snapped quickly, her ire rising. Something was not quite right, yet she could not place that feeling.

“You certainly are an impudent wench,” he remarked in a cold tone as he downed the contents of his tankard. “Perhaps I will speak to the Empress about this.”

“As you wish, my good General, but remember that your reputation precedes you,” she fixed a stare on him with cold, deadly gray eyes. “Whom do you think the Empress will believe?”

* * * *

Alexandra and Gabrielle watched Tatiana like predators, waiting for the right moment to kill Federov if he so much as laid a hand on her. “Do you think he will try something with Tatiana?”

“Of course,” Alexandra remarked harshly, pushing her black curls behind her shoulder, her eyes never leaving the fat man’s form. “He is a lewd man if I have ever met one.”

“Do you think you can draw his attention away from Tatiana?” Siobhan questioned over Alexandra’s shoulder.

“I can draw any man’s attention if I choose,” she answered slowly, reading Tatiana’s mind. She probed for any memory of what had happened in the forest, but it

simply was not there. Nicholas had executed a marvelous sweep of her memory.

"If he is mortal, that is," Gabrielle piped in, her mouth spreading into a wide smile.

Alexandra gave her a murderous look. "Are we in a jesting mood, today?"

"Always," Gabrielle answered in a light tone.

"Come, girls, there is no reason to be at each other's throats," Siobhan reminded them, her hand toying with a renegade blond curl peeping out from beneath the edge of her lace mobcap. "We are here to protect Tatiana for Nicholas' sake and lay any bitterness aside." She gestured toward the two huddled figures at the table, their faces dimly lit by the flickering candle before them. "Watch them closely, for I fear that the man is going to try and take advantage of Tatiana."

Gabrielle and Alexandra looked at him, their powers sweeping his mind. Nestled deep within the recesses of his mind were harbored fantasies of torture and rape, all of which involved the graceful, doll-like Tatiana. "Why, I should kill...."

"No, Alexandra," Gabrielle warned. "We must wait to see if he takes action."

"He will take action."

"Listen to Gabrielle, Alexandra," Siobhan said, laying a hard hand on Alexandra's shoulder. "We should not act precipitously. Nicholas would never forgive us if we harmed someone innocent."

* * * *

Tatiana felt as though eyes watched her throughout the tavern, burning through her back. Why was she feeling this way? She had been on trips for the Empress before, ferrying messages back and forth. Now, all of a sudden, it was affecting her? Something was utterly wrong, as though something had changed on her ride to St. Petersburg. "That is the message, my lord General. What is your reply?"

"I will give you one in the morning," he replied, getting up and stretching. "It is late, and I wish to retire." There was an evil glint in his eye. "Do you not wish to retire as well?"

"Aye, but I will go to my father's home in the country," she answered quickly, knowing it would be a perfect place for her to hide until morning. Hopefully, Father was not there. He resided in the Peterhof most of the time and returned home very little, especially since the death of her mother. The country manor was only a few short miles from St. Petersburg and would make a perfect resting place until she could return the next night. "I can rest and be ready to ride in the morning."

Rising, she bowed to him, clicking her heels. "General," she said and was about to leave the table when General Federov's meaty hand clamped onto her wrist.

"Not so quickly, poppet," he slurred, pulling her close, his hot, nasty breath close to her face. "I meant that you will stay with me."

"No, my lord general, I will not stay with you," she snapped through clenched teeth. "Now let me go."

"No, my little poppet, I want to...."

He began to whisper vile things in her ear about what he wanted to do with her, making her grimace. There was no way she would willingly let this man touch

her.

Tearing her pistol out of her holster, she jammed it in between his legs, burying the barrel deep against his manhood. She heard him suck in a surprised breath. "Let me go now, or I will castrate you with one shot of this pistol."

"You would not dare..."

"Do you wish to take that chance?"

Federov released her wrist, backing away from her slowly, his eyes drawn to her pistol. "You have a lot of fire," he murmured, "that would consume any man who spent a night in your arms."

Tatiana re-holstered her pistol. "That is something you will never find out, General." She adjusted the hat on her head, pushing it down to make sure it stayed secure. "I will be back early in the morning. Be sure to have your reply for the Empress."

With that, she walked away and exited the tavern, collapsing against a wall outside where no one could see her.

Her breathing labored as the excitement and wonder stormed through her veins. Where had she gotten the strength to do that? She had always been a strong woman, but never this strong. If this sort of thing would have happened before today, she more than likely would have told her father, allowing him to take care of it.

She took a deep breath. General Federov was a powerful man, and perhaps refusing him had been a bad decision.

No! Tatiana stood up. When she took a man into her bed, it would be out of sheer attraction and desire, not a forced relationship. Everything in her life would be on her terms, no matter what.

Looking up, she spotted the stable boy lounging against a horse pole, his fingers digging hurriedly in his nose. Inwardly, she cringed, ignoring his actions. Gesturing for him to come over her, she reach into her pocket for more gold. It was time to go home.

* * * *

Alexandra, Gabrielle, and Siobhan stood in stunned silence after they had witnessed Tatiana's ability of taking care of the general.

"I suppose she does not need us anymore," Siobhan mused mentally, keeping the conversation between the three of them. "It is clear that she can take care of herself."

"I will have to agree," Alexandra commiserated, a slight titter of laughter to her voice. "Nicholas will be most surprised."

"I do not think surprise will completely cover what Nicholas will be feeling once he finds out," Gabrielle commented, her mouth spreading into a smile.

* * * *

Nicholas lay in the rich red velvet of his coffin, smiling. He had seen the whole thing through his mind's eye, the ardor in his body pulsing to a new height. She had the strength of his Cleopatra as well as the beauty, but there was something more to her, almost as if she completed him far more than Cleopatra ever could have. Perhaps her newfound strength came from the mark he'd put on her, or maybe he'd unleashed

something inside of her, waiting for the perfect opportunity to come out.

His smile grew wide. Very soon, she would become his, body and soul, just as he wanted her to be.

Chapter Three

Tatiana slept far deeper than she had in a while. Dimly, she heard the soft tweets of the birds outside her window, lulling her from the depths of her slumber. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes to the bright rays of light flowing through the open curtains of the window. She sucked in a breath, throwing her arm over her eyes. It was far too bright to deal with right now.

"Aye, my lady," Mishka hailed as she came into the room, bearing a tray of food. "I see that ye are awake now."

"Ho-how did you know I was here?"

"You made quite a bit of noise when you came up the secret passage last night," the girl answered, setting the full silver tray down on the table near the bed, the soft clank of china rising through the air. "Ye must have had too much to drink."

Tatiana sat up, her head throbbing. No, she really did not drink much last night. She remembered riding to the tavern at the Empress' behest ... "Did my father hear me?"

Mishka shook her head as she spread the napkin on Tatiana's lap. "Nay, my lady, for he is with the Emperor at Peterhof."

She leaned against the pillows for a moment, staring outside at the bright light. Thankfully, Mishka had been here last night and no one else, or else her secret would have been exposed. Throughout the years, Mishka had proven her loyalty and had become Tatiana's most trusted servant, helping wherever possible with the cause. "When was the last time my father was here?"

Mishka pushed a stray strand of dark hair beneath her mobcap before picking up the tray. "Perhaps more than a month or so," she set the tray across Tatiana's lap. "Come, you must eat, for you look pale."

"I am always pale, Mishka," she retorted in a quick tone, her gaze drawn to the feast before her. Roasted meat, along with potato pancakes and eggs, rested on the plate in front of her hungry stare. Lightly toasted bread smeared with butter sat on the side, tempting her to taste it. For the first time in a while, she felt really hungry. "This looks wonderful." She looked at Mishka. "How did you know how hungry I would be?"

Mishka shrugged her thin, pale linen clad shoulders. "Something told me that you might be," she answered, wandering over to the large wardrobe. "I took the liberty of washing your uniform, my lady," she offered, opening the uniquely carved door and revealing the clothing. "It will be ready for you when you return."

"Much thanks, Mishka," she said, digging into her meal. "I will be going back later tonight."

"I thought so," Mishka answered, closing the door. "Is there nothing else I can do for you?"

"Nothing," she answered and spooned a large mound of the potato into her

mouth.

“Then I will take my leave of you,” Mishka said quickly. “If you have any need of me, please ring.”

With that her servant left the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

Tatiana stared at the door for a few moments, her gut instinct rising. Something was different about Mishka, the Empress’ words coming back to haunt her. *Trust no one.*

Mishka was not as friendly as she had once been. For as long as she could remember, she and Mishka had been almost like sisters, but now there was a thick rope of tension between them. It had nothing to do with the fact that she spent most of her time with the Empress, that much she knew. No, Mishka had changed since her last visit to the manor the previous spring, almost as if she were trying to distance herself from Tatiana.

Tatiana leaned back against the pillows. With all the political tensions going on, it was hard to tell who was friend and who was foe. No, her instincts were usually correct. Something in Mishka’s voice said that the girl could no longer be trusted.

She let out a long sigh. Loneliness was no stranger to her.

* * * *

“What did she say?” Alexei Demehkin questioned the servant as she left Tatiana’s room. His heart pounded against the interior wall of his chest, making his temples throb. If he could prove that Tatiana had committed treason, he would not only gain a high position in the government, but Tatiana, as well, the woman he had hungered for for what seemed an eternity.

“There was nothing she would reveal to me,” Mishka said, stroking the underside of his chin. “Given time, I think I will be able to provide the information you wish.”

“How did she arrive here? In what condition was she in?” He had seen her in the tavern, dressed in her soldier’s uniform. She had appeared pale and drawn, almost as if illness had gripped her in the forest during her ride.

“As well as can be expected, except that she is looking paler than normal,” Mishka purred, wetting her finger and sliding it in-between her abundant amount of cleavage. He knew what she wanted from him. It was what all women wanted. “I do not suspect she is ill.”

Alexei Demehkin leaned his blond head against the doorjamb, staring at the pitiful girl standing before him. She was nothing. How could the son of a Countess stoop so low as to take this thing into his bed? He scowled, his mind whirling on the possibilities. Perhaps if he did, the woman would be most eager to find out more information for him.

He cupped her chin, his thumb stroking her thick, dry lower lip. “What would it take for you to find out what she is up to and give me the information that I require?”

“Come to my room, and I will show you.”

* * * *

Ivan leaned back in his bed, staring at the sheer material covering the canopy of the bed, his mind whirling on the news. The Empress was gathering an army secretly, with the intention of wresting the throne from Emperor Peter. Like a viper waiting for the perfect moment to strike, Catherine sat at her palace at Tsarskoe Selo.

“What vexes you, my lord?” murmured the sleepy woman next to him.

“Get out of my bed,” he snarled. “I desire to be alone.”

“But my lord...”

The sound of his hand striking her flesh filled the air. “Leave me now, or you will get more of the same,” he ordered, nearly kicking the naked girl out of his bed.

Sobbing silently, she got off the bed and gathered her clothes, sneaking out the side door.

Ivan Gregorovich did not care about her, nor any one else for that matter. The only important thing to him right now was keeping the Emperor on the throne where he belonged and to rid Russia of that German upstart styling herself Empress. He smirked. Peter was such a puppet, easily manipulated and controlled. Through Peter, he could set so many policies in place that would benefit him greatly.

A knock at the door drew his thoughts away. “Enter,” he snapped, pulling the covers up higher. The girl had done nothing for him, despite the various humiliating acts he’d forced her to perform for his amusement.

“My lord,” said the elegantly dressed butler as he entered, bowing deep from the waist. “Count Demehkin is here to see you.”

His anger doubled. Demehkin was never to see him this early in the morning. “Send him in,” he barked as he buttoned up the last few buttons on his night-shirt.

The butler bowed and exited gracefully, the light click of his heels dying in the hallway, followed by Alexei’s quick footsteps. “My lord General,” he bowed as he entered, bowing low from the waist.

He knew that he was not in the best of condition at the moment, but he did not care too terribly much. Demehkin was inconveniencing *him*.

Demehkin entered the room, dressed in dark silk and matching cape, the bits of talc from his wig clinging to his shoulders. “My lord Gregorovich,” he said, his tone growing more condescending as he bowed. “How good it is of you to see me.”

“Make it quick, Demehkin,” he snapped, settling among the flrid pillows of the bed. “I have no patience for your ilk today.”

“But I think you will, my lord,” Alexei countered as he sauntered casually over to the damask-covered settee and sat down. “Considering the information I possess is priceless.”

His unruly brow rose, his curiosity piqued. “What sort of information?”

Alexei’s face became a mask of seriousness. “Before I divulge that to you, tell me what it would be worth to you?”

“It would all depend on how useful the information was to me.”

Alexei leaned forward, a smirk on his lips. “What if I told you that the information could possibly change the course of events in Russia and ensure the continued reign of Emperor Peter?”

Now his interest was piqued even higher. “What sort of compensation would you require?”

Alexei leaned back, grinning widely. “Something that I am sure you will be glad to rid yourself of.”

* * * *

Night fell around the house, blanketing the world with a pale, silvery glow. Clouds paraded over the sky in a lazy fashion, trying to drown out the half moon’s light. Stars were non-existent, making the night seem far eerier than it had been previously.

Tatiana straightened her hat on her head, making sure it was on steady and took a deep breath. She really did not want to go back to the tavern, but she no choice. She had to obtain the Empress’ reply from General Federov. No matter her personal fear in this, she had to complete her task so that future Russians would have a ruler they could follow, not some idiotic, ineffectual puppet controlled by men like her father. As much as she loved him, she knew that Father had always manipulated any situation to his advantage, letting nothing stand in her way.

Hot tears pricked the inside of her eyelids. If the Empress’ bid for the throne failed, she would most likely find herself at the end of an axe, or perhaps, face a firing squad for her treason. Father would see to that.

Silently, she mounted her horse, picking up the reins in her gloved hand. It was time to start on her journey. She had to be back at Tsarskoe Selo before sunrise.

* * * *

Several hours dragged by as the horse loped on the beaten-earth path before her, winding through the blackened shoots of trees comprising the forest. Dry twigs crunched under the hooves, every snap making her jump. Last night, she had not been as frightened as she was tonight, every hair on edge. Why was that?

Suddenly, Tatiana heard the galloping of hooves deep in the distance behind her, the speed so fast that one would think that the devil was on the rider’s heels. Quickly, she looked around and spied a small alcove in which she would hide herself and her horse. Maneuvering quietly, she buried herself among the ebony leaves and low-lying shrubs, waiting for the riders to pass her by.

Heavy thuds resounded through the forest, making her heart pound even harder, the pain in her temples growing as the anxiety stormed through her. Who was riding that hard this time of night? Was it someone following her?

Little by little, the sound came closer. She held her breath as the hoof-beats sounded to her left, coming ever closer....

Suddenly, the sound stopped, almost as if it was right in front of her. The pain in her chest grew as she continued to hold the air in place, refusing to let it go in case the sound gave her position away.

Through the tangle of branches, she could see the glint of metal shining in the night. Dimly, she could see could see the bright gold buttons of the Imperial Uniform.

“Place your hands where I can see them,” ordered a male voice behind her.

Her blood froze in her veins. "Who are you?" she questioned in a deep voice.

"It matters not," the voice ordered again. "Raise your hands where I can see them, or else I will be forced to start firing."

Shakily, Tatiana raised her hands in the air, her breathing heavy. "What do you want of me?"

"Everything," announced a different voice, more familiar than the first.

Tatiana sat silently for a moment, thinking of where she had heard that voice before. Was it at a ball, or perhaps at court? No, she had heard ... she whirled about in the saddle. "Alexei Demehkin?"

A shadow moved. "It is I, Tatiana," he answered slowly, his horse moving toward hers. "I always knew that the simple-minded guise was a ruse for your activities. You could never fool me."

"What do you mean, Alexei?" she said slowly, her fear abating a little. "I have fooled you and everyone until now, so that statement is...."

Her head recoiled from his vicious slap. "Do you not realize what sort of punishment you face for your activities? I could not even begin to tell you what the Emperor has in mind for traitors."

Tatiana felt the blood trickle down her lip, but she refused to cry. "Those would be more welcome alternatives than anything you can think of for me."

"How do you know what sort of alternatives I have planned for you?"

"I have seen how you have watched me throughout the years, Alexei," she snapped, anger replacing her fear. "You have hungered for me and have schemed to have me, no matter what. This is just your way of showing Father that I am nothing more than a pawn in the game of intrigue and completely innocent..." she stopped. Where had that knowledge come from? She had known about his hungering for her, but the notion that this was all a show for Father came from another place entirely.

Fury rippled across Alexei's once-handsome face. "How dare you be so impudent!" he snarled, grabbing her by the upper arm, pulling her toward him. "Once we are married, I care not if I must beat you every day, but you will learn to obey me."

Disgust filled her. "Marriage to you? Ha! I would kill myself first."

"That can be easily arranged, Tatiana," he warned, his hot breath inches away from her face, the noxious fumes making her sick. It was obvious Alexei had drowned his sorrows in drink tonight. "Remember, accidents can and do happen."

She wrested herself from his grip. "Let me go, Alexei!" she screamed.

"Not until I get what I came for," he snarled, jerking her from her horse onto his. The pommel of his saddle dug into her belly, but it was only for a moment, because Alexei dismounted his horse quickly, slinging her easily over his shoulder. "Give me a few moments, and I will be back," he said to the other man sitting on horseback. "When I am finished, there will be plenty left for the rest of you."

Newfound fear surged through her. He meant to ravage her and give her over to the others for entertainment! "Put me down, Alexei," she ordered, trying to keep the calmness in her voice despite the terror storming along her veins. "Listen to me. I will pay you whatever you wish if you let me go back to Tsarskoe Selo unharmed."

“What you have is worth far more than gold,” he snapped as he allowed her to slip from his shoulder to the ground. She landed in a soft patch of earth, staring into his wild eyes. “When I am through with you, you will wish for nothing but death.”

Tatiana backed up, her hands digging into the moist earth, the mud sticking to her body. “No, Alexei,” she said firmly. “The only one wishing for death is you.” Strength from an unknown source replaced the terror, warming her chilly limbs.

“She is quite correct,” agreed another male voice from her left.

Tatiana looked up to see Lord Wetherington standing near her, his pistol drawn. His black hair, free from constraint, flowed around his head in a blue-black halo, rippled with waves. A dark cloak covered his shoulders, swinging in the night wind. White satin clung to his upper body, highlighting his dusky skin. Black breeches clung to his powerful thighs, tapering into matching knee boots. He was dressed the same way as he had been the night outside of her window. Tatiana’s breath caught in her chest. He was utterly beautiful.

“Who are you, bastard?” Alexei slurred drunkenly. “Leave us, for this matter is between the lady and me.”

“It concerns me now,” Nicholas murmured, extending his hand to her. “I will not allow a woman to be harmed in my presence.”

Shakily she took his hand and got to her feet, the excitement of Nicholas coming to her rescue surging through her veins. “Much thanks, my lord,” she said quickly, moving to Nicholas’ side. “But our game has ended. Let us retire back to your country house.” Those sensual words left her mouth, their source unknown. Why was she insinuating that she was Lord Wetherington’s mistress?

Alexei was aghast, his slack jaw hanging wide open. “What do you mean? Your game has ended?”

She walked over to Nicholas, wrapping her arms around him. “If you must know, Alexei, I have been sharing Lord Wetherington’s bed while he is here.” Tatiana laid her head on his chest for a more full effect, her fingers stroking the bare, cold flesh of his chest. “So you see, this is all a game into which you have artfully played.”

His gaze switched to Nicholas. “How can this be? You have not been here....”

“I have been here longer than you would ever believe,” Nicholas stated in a firm voice as he planted a kiss on top of her head. “Now, if you will excuse us, we will retire to the safety of my home for far more engaging activities.” He lowered his pistol, aiming it toward Alexei’s midsection. “You may go now.”

“You are lying!” Alexei screeched into the night, raising his own weapon. “I know what is truly happening here, and I will not stand for it!”

Nicholas advanced on him, the tip of the weapon digging hard into Alexei’s belly. “You will not stand for what? Be gone before I decide to pull the trigger.”

Alexei backed off, his eyes filled with some sort of horrible fright. “You have not heard the last of me, Tatiana,” he warned in an evil tone. “You have not heard the last.”

With the speed of summer lightning, Alexei tumbled out of the brush and

down the small incline to where his men were waiting. She could hear the cursing of Alexei as he mounted his horse and sped away toward Peterhof.

Tatiana let out a sigh of relief. "Much thanks, Lord Wetherington, for saving me from Alexei," she said, her breathing hitching in her chest. "So now you know one of my secrets," she looked up at him, the fear surging through her heart. "Are you going to betray me?"

"That all depends," he murmured slowly as he advanced on her, his fingers tracing the edges of her jaw, sending wild spirals of desire soaring through her body.

"On what?" she said breathlessly, closing her eyes against the nearness of him.

"On you," his lips graced the edges of hers, light and feathery, just enough tease and tantalize.

"What must I do in order for you to keep my secret?" she whispered against his skin, the magic of his fingers awakening her flesh.

"The proper question would be, what desires and fantasies will you not fulfill?"

* * * *

Tatiana leaned her head against the cool wood of the Empress' door, the pounding of her heart only now beginning to slow. What was she to do? Nicholas' price for his silence was almost more than she could pay. Yet she found him exotically attractive, her skin burning wherever he touched her. Sexual thoughts filled her head from the moment she rose in the morning to the moment she lay her head down to sleep. Several times, she had caught her errant fingers touching her nipples just as she was drifting to sleep, making them hard, imagining it was Nicholas bringing them to life.

She closed her eyes, holding them tightly shut. Why was this so difficult? Most women of the Russian court who were her age already had many lovers, as well as children. What made her different?

Slight murmurings followed by loud gasps of ecstasy erupted from the Empress' room, jerking her out of her trance. Would it be that way with Nicholas?

Raising her hand, she knocked on the door, knowing she was going to interrupt the Empress from her lovemaking. Fortunately, the Empress had always instructed her to bring any news of the revolution, no matter what time it was or condition she was in.

"Who ever is behind that door had better have a very good reason to disturb me!" the Empress snarled, her breathing heavy.

"'Tis I, Your Majesty," she whispered quietly against the thick, gilded wood, the blood pumping hard in her veins. "I have brought you news."

"Give me a moment," she said. Low muffles and mumbles echoed on the other side of the door, sounding as though someone was departing.

She waited a moment more, and heard the snick of the key in the lock. A roll of the tumblers filled the air before falling in place, making her jump a little. Since her meeting with Nicholas, she could not get over the anxiety filling her.

The door opened, revealing the handsome Count Gregory Orlov standing

behind it, his dark hair tousled over his forehead, while his forearm rested casually against the door, holding it ajar. His shirt was open, revealing an impressively tanned and sculpted chest. "The Empress will see you now," he said quietly, his dark eyes traveling up and down her body.

Tatiana felt nothing. Normally, had a man stared at her like the Count had she would have shivered from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. This time was completely different. It seemed like the only time that she had felt that way was with Nicholas. "Much thanks, my lord," she said quietly, slipping past him into the room.

"Return in one hour," the Empress ordered, the smile on her face widening, the blush in her cheeks rising higher, "my Emperor of the Night."

Orlov bowed low and grabbed his coat and sword from a nearby chair. "As you wish my love," he blew a kiss to the Empress. "I will be counting the moments until I return."

Tatiana slid into a chair next to the bed, staring at the floor. It was not out of obeisance she did that, but jealousy. Would things be that way if she fulfilled all of Nicholas' desires?

Soft rustles echoed from the bed as the Empress shifted around, pulling the covers up higher. "Look at me, child." Tatiana jerked her head up. "What news did you bring me?"

"Plenty, Your Majesty, but there is another concern that I must voice to you as well."

"What is that?"

"I fear that it might take more than an hour to tell you."

"Fear not, for Gregory would wait all night for me if I bade him to. Now what is it that is vexing you?"

Tatiana swallowed the lump forming inside of her throat. It was perhaps best to start at the beginning.

Chapter Four

Alexei Demehkin was not just angry, he was furious. His plan for the impudent little wench had gone awry, especially with the presence of Lord Wetherington. Where had that bastard come from? No one knew exactly where they had been going, his men in particular. He wanted no spies in his midst. Yet somehow, Lord Wetherington knew.

The deep night peppered the air around them. The only sounds were the mild chattering of the men behind him as they wound their way through the forest toward the Peterhof Palace. He ignored it at first, but suddenly, the sound began to grate on his very soul.

Just as he was about to order them to be quiet, a figure appeared on the beaten road, almost as if by magic. Moonlight rained down from above, bathing the silvery creature in all sorts of light. Dark hair descended past the shoulders toward the exposed waist, indented like an hourglass. Why, it was a woman standing there!

Pushing his horse forward, Alexei was on the woman in no time. "Who are you?" he demanded as he pulled his horse to a halt, dismounting quickly.

"Someone who has the same goals as you do," she purred, stepping forward, the silvery material around her waist making a slight swish. Her dark hair was rich with an almost blue hue. Dusky skin, luscious and soft, enticed him, the flesh almost glowing with a golden tint. Matching eyes stared at him through a thick sweep of black lashes, almost if they were boring through his soul. A crown, rivaling that of the Empress, sat on her head, glittering with the most precious collection of gems. Quickly, he felt the beast of lust nipping at him.

"You still have not answered my question, woman," he snapped, drawing his pistol and pointing it at her.

"All in due time," she purred low and sensuously, her footsteps so quiet he could not even hear them. "You seek the hand of the maiden, Tatiana Gregorovich, do you not?"

His pistol started shaking as his fury mounted. Somehow, there was a spy among his entourage! "How do you come by this information?"

"As I have said before--" She began to circle him in a predatory motion, her fingers lightly touching his shoulders. "--all in due time." She halted in front of him. "My concern with the girl is Lord Wetherington."

Despite the chill of the night, sweat began to bead on his brow. "What is he to you?"

"Plenty," she remarked, stepping closer as the gleam in her eyes rose higher. "You see, Nicholas belongs to me, and I want him to return where he belongs. This girl will do nothing but be an utter nuisance in that regard, so I will need her out of the way." Her fingers touched his already hard manhood, stroking lightly. "I think you

are the right man for the task.”

Somewhere behind him, he heard light grunts from his men, as well as muffled movements, but he did not care. This woman was feeding the beast of desire in him. “Aye, that I am,” he murmured as the strange woman sank to her knees in the dirt, exposing his iron manhood to the wind. “It seems we are cut of the same cloth.” Instead of answering, her velvety tongue flicked at the head of his hardened rod, making him moan. “What sort of woman are you to do such an intimate act?”

Her mouth engulfed him, vital and alive, yet cold somehow. An undulating tongue drove that thought from his mind as the tight crevice enveloped him completely. Back and forth, she took him, releasing him as if to draw away, only to take him in deeper. Her practiced ministrations reminded him she was far better at that than a seasoned courtesan.

Suddenly, she let him go and rose to her feet, taking his hand. “Come with me and say nothing,” she ordered as she led him into the thicket of the woods.

Briefly, he wondered about his men witnessing the sexual spectacle the woman had performed, since they had long since lapsed into silence.

Following her blindly into the dense copse of trees, his heart pumped hard in his chest. This woman excited him far beyond anything he had ever known.

Slowly a clearing came into view where a stone lay, almost like tablet. Thick shafts of moonlight filtered through the trees, bathing the stone in a silvery glow. Numbly, he walked with her toward it. At the table, she urged him to lie down. He went to say something, but her finger at his lips silenced him.

She moved gracefully, the strange silky, gossamer material flowing around her body, entrancing him completely. She reminded him of the ballet dancer Maria Sh--

Suddenly, she leapt high into the air and floated slowly downward, landing with her feet on either side of his hips. Like a panther, she lowered herself down, her hands prowling up his chest. His excitement grew as he felt her moist slit rub against his member. “Do you still wish to know my name?” she purred, her long tongue flicking at his cheek.

“Of course, woman!” he screeched, his hands descending on her hips in order to maneuver her into position. He gripped hard and knew that he probably hurt her, but he did not care. The only thing that mattered was the solicitous satisfaction this woman offered.

She moved to his urging, allowing him to slip inside of her moist cavern where she held him tightly. “Are you certain you wish to know my name?” she purred, using practiced strokes.

Alexei felt as though he was about to explode with each motion. “Aye, that I do,” he breathed, “for I would like to make you my mistress.”

Suddenly, she threw back her head and let out a guttural laugh, utterly inhuman. “You would like me to be your mistress? I dare say that you will be my lover, willing to do anything I bid you.”

He froze in his spot, unable to move. “Who are you?”

She leaned down close to him, her breath hot and smelling of rotten flesh.

“Your worst nightmare.”

Without warning, her beautiful face changed into something hideous and unholy. Blackened skin comprised her face, her eyes turning a deep red, glowing as the very fires of hell. Rows of sharp teeth comprised her mouth, looking like newly sharpened swords.

Fear gripped his soul. “Wh-what are you?”

“Evil incarnate,” she murmured, engaging in her strokes as she held him helplessly captive inside of her.

Alexei could do nothing to stop his ravishment by her, the very creature that hailed from the only place she could have--Hell.

His manhood burned with her juices, the pain increasing with every movement she made. “Enough!” he cried once the pain reached an unbearable level, his frantic hands trying to push her from him.

She stopped and glared at him, the utter contempt and hatred pouring from her in reams. “Not until I have had enough,” she spat and shifted. Suddenly, he felt a sharp scrape on his skin, almost as if she had teeth in her privates.

Deeper she took him in, the pressure and pain becoming too much. “Get away from me, you fiend!” Alexei gripped her shoulders hard with all the fear rising inside of him, in one last attempt to push her backwards. She was as hard as stone to move.

Flinging herself, forward, she lay on top of him, her long nails digging into the flesh of his neck. “My name is not one you will forget so easily,” she offered, her fingers dipping to the trails of blood running down the sides of his neck. She opened her mouth, displaying the lethal row of teeth dripping with moisture. Before he could say anything, she descended on him and sank her teeth into him, exposing the vein in his neck. His pulse throbbed as she drank from him, and he had the dull realization that she was an Upir. There was nothing he could do to stop her. He was powerless against her dominance.

Slowly, his rapid heartbeat slowed down as his blood drained, barely pulsing anymore. Fear slipped away as water falling from a rock, flowing away from him.

She lifted her head from him, glaring at him with blood-laden lips and fiery eyes. “If I leave you now, you will die, and your desires will die with you. If I let you live, you must swear your allegiance to me forever and always.” She turned his head to face hers. “If you want to live, simply say my name--Zakara.”

Alexei stared at her, blinking hard, trying desperately to understand what she said. Did he want to die? No, surely not! There was too much to do....

“Think quickly, my dear Alexei, for your time is growing short.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling his life ebb slowly away before gaining what was rightfully his. Was this what he wanted? Opening his lids, he glared at her. “Za-ka-ra.”

* * * *

Tatiana wandered to her chamber, her heart beating hard inside of her chest as the decisions swirled around her head. Should she give herself to Nicholas? The

Empress' advice was to take Nicholas into her bed and find out what secrets she could about Peter's court from him. After all, the sacrifice of her innocence would be for the Empress and Russia. She could be awarded the highest honor....

No, that did not interest her in the slightest. She was being forced into this decision by both sides, something she loathed. Why did this have to happen to her? When she took a man into her bed, it would be when she chose, not when it was forced upon her.

Inside her chamber, she readied herself for bed, her thoughts comprised of nothing but Nicholas. He was certainly handsome enough, with that hidden sense of danger beneath his exterior drawing her like a moth to the flame. His hands were practiced, no doubt, able to extract the highest potential of emotion from her.

Taking a deep breath, she slid between the covers, laying her head down, the Empress' words resounding through her head.

Do you wish to remain a virgin forever?

No, Your Majesty, I do not....

Take that man into your bed if he so desires it. Please him in every way that matters. Bring me what useful information that you can.

But, Your Majesty....

Do not do this for me nor for yourself. Do it for Russia and secure its future.

Her loyalty to Russia was her downfall, and the Empress knew that. Tatiana punched the pillow. Why could she not have remained a quiet lady-in-waiting, not one of....

Tatiana felt those familiar tides of emotion rising, her privates starting to dully throb. In few moments, it would be a full-blown whirlwind of emotion. She had to somehow satisfy herself. Her fingers brushed against her nipples, feeling them harden under her touch. She shivered, as the thought of Nicholas entered her mind, her hips moving. What if she touched herself just as he had that night in the garden? Slipping her hands down her body, she lifted the edge of her nightdress and felt the softness of her flesh, the slimness of her belly. All she could do was imagine it was Nicholas' hands stroking her, bringing her to new heights....

Her private hair was soft and fleecy as she parted her wet lips, probing for the secret button to all of her desires. Slowly, her fingers manipulated the tiny nub, feeling it grow between her dampened fingertips. Naturally, her hips bucked in time with each stroke, encouraging her to slip inside of her moist cavern. Gasps of desire escaped her throat as her free hand clutched her pillow, her mouth burying itself in the deep softness to stifle her passionate moans.

Faster and faster she stroked herself, her hips rising frantically, almost as if her fingers had to offer what Nicholas did ... Her climax washed over her in a warm swell, the scent of her sexual satisfaction rising through the air. "Oh, Nicholas," she murmured, "where are you when I want you so badly?"

Suddenly, a wild gush of wind entered her room, the curtains blowing in a wild frenzy. She cowered in bed, her body jerking in response. What was that?

Before she could get out of bed and close the window, a dark figure appeared there, eclipsing the moon. Long, dark hair danced on the wind, gracing broad shoulders. Fear surged through her, prompting her to pull the covers up to her chin, her body trembling. "Who ... who are you?"

The figure said nothing as he strode to the bed, his blazing red eyes staring through her, straight to her soul. She wanted to scream, yet somehow, the scream remained strangled in her throat. He lowered himself to the bed. "I have been watching you, Tatiana," he said in a throaty whisper.

Her fear mounted as the anxiety pounded her veins. "Who are you?"

"Names are not important," he answered as his black-gloved fingers cupped her breast only partially covered by the sheet. "Touch yourself again."

Thoroughly embarrassed and frightened, she backed away from him on the bed. "Nay, I will not."

"You enjoy touching yourself, Tatiana," his voice was utterly enticing, "so do it again for me."

Slowly he removed the covers from her, his full lips spreading in a wide smile as the scent of her desire rose into the air. "Delicious," he murmured, taking her right hand and putting it between her legs. "Close your eyes and think of me inside of you as you touch yourself."

Unable to deny his command any longer, she parted her lips, her eyes never leaving his form. His eyes remained fixed on her movements, his breathing growing heavy. "I know 'tis you, Nicholas," she gasped as the tide of orgasm rose again.

He chuckled slightly in the darkness, the silky feeling of his gloved hand against her thigh exciting her even more. "Aye, 'tis me, Tatiana," he answered, moving her hand so that he could have better access. "Let me give you the pleasure you desperately desire."

Before she could say anything, she felt his arms slip under her hips and pull them upwards, his lips kissing the insides of her quivering thighs. Her thighs rested on his shoulders as his tongue burrowed between her swollen womanhood, probing for his prize. Nicholas found it quickly, manipulating the button with his expert tongue, sending her into wild spirals of ecstasy. She bucked against him, begging for a deeper penetration of his tongue, her juices flowing....

Suddenly the long-awaited orgasm arrived, leaving her utterly breathless. "Oh Nicholas!" she cried out into the darkness, her hands buried in his hair.

Nicholas kissed the inside of her thigh, his fingers still inside of her, touching deeply. "Was that not worth waiting for?"

"Aye, it was," she purred, pulling him close to her. "There is more worth waiting for, I would venture."

Nicholas' dark eyes shone with a deep sexual fire. "Aye, there is, but not tonight, Tatiana. When you wake up, all this will seem as though it was a dream."

She was confused. "How can it be a dream? You are here, and I am here, very much awake."

Nicholas withdrew from her and left the bed, wandering over to the window, leaning against it, looking like a dark angel in all his glory. "You are awake,

but tomorrow, you not remember it.”

“How can that be?”

“It is because I wish it,” he murmured and gestured for her to join him.

“Come to me. I wish to show you something.”

Tatiana slipped warily from the bed. “How did you get in here, Nicholas, without waking my servants?”

“I have my ways,” he answered as she joined him, his arm slipping around her waist. “I wish you to look out into the meadow just beyond your window.”

“What is it that you wish me to see?”

“The very reason I came here tonight.”

Tatiana’s heart pounded out of control as she peered outside. Black figures appeared out of thin air, with more appearing all the time, pacing anxiously back and forth as if they waited on something. “Who are they?”

“Those who would gladly feast on your soul if given half a chance.”

Nicholas spun her around to face him. “I did not come here tonight to seduce you, but to save you.” His lips spread into a wide smile. “I will admit the seduction was well worth it.”

As she looked down into the verdant meadow, the realization came full circle. “Who are you? What are you?” She backed away from him, holding her hands out before her. “Please leave now, Nicholas, and never see me again.”

He pushed away from the wall and advanced on her. “Come now, my dear, is that any way to be, especially after the pleasure I have already given you?”

Before she could reply, she found herself flat on her back on the bed with Nicholas poised over her, his weight holding her down. “Let me go,” she begged.

“Not yet,” he whispered as he pushed his hard bulge between her legs and started grinding against her, making her wetter than before. “Not until you admit you hunger to know what it ‘tis like to have me inside of you.”

“Nay, I do not...” She stopped as the pressure against her pleasure core increased, sending gasps of excitement out of her mouth.

“Aye, you do,” he insisted as he wrapped her weak legs around his waist. Getting up on his knees, he gripped her hips hard and ground against her again, the leather of his clothing exciting her to no end. “Say it.”

Unable to stand it any longer, Tatiana gave her answer. “Aye, I want you inside of me, Nicholas,” she cried, grabbing onto the bed hard.

“Then let me kiss you before I leave,” he said.

Nicholas lowered himself over her, taking possession of her lips. Her salty essence still clung to his lips, making her desire ride even higher. Just as she delved into the depths of the kiss, Nicholas’ lips slipped away from her mouth to her neck. Without warning, she felt a prick at the side of her neck that quickly transformed from pain to ecstasy, her hips moving.

“What are you doing to me, Nicholas?” she asked breathlessly, clinging to him tightly.

“Making you mine,” he answered as he continued to suckle her neck. “No one else will dare touch you because you belong to me.”

Normally, if any man had said that to her, she would have argued, but this time, it was the truth. She belonged to Nicholas just as he belonged to her.

Suddenly, Nicholas withdrew, his lips a bright red. "You belong to me, Tatiana, and no one will ever take you away from me, not even Zakara. I will kill anyone who touches you."

He got up from the bed, striding over to the window, looking out pensively.

Tatiana followed him on weakened limbs, touching him gently on the shoulder. "Why do you not spend the night with me? Must you go?"

Nicholas turned to look at her, the sexual fire still shining. "Only for a short while, then we will be together forever, I promise." He cupped her chin in his large hands. "If you have need of me, call out my name, and I will be there." Embracing her, he held on tightly. "I love you, Tatiana."

She held onto him, not really sure what to say to him. Just as she opened her mouth to say something, he silenced with a finger. "I do not wish for you to repeat those words back to me until you are certain they are true."

"But..."

"Not until then," he said, standing before the window. "Remember, call for me if you have need of me."

She watched helplessly as he turned into a thick black column of smoke drifting out of the room and becoming one with the night. How did he do that? What sort of creature was he?

Unexpectedly, she felt the room begin to spin, and the overwhelming feeling that she was going faint washed over her. On slow feet, she made to the bed where she succumbed to whatever ailed her.

* * * *

Nicholas flew over Zakara's minions, laughing to himself. They had no power over him or the others. He was older than most of them, his tolerance for the sun much greater because of that age. Zakara had to perform the sun spell on her minions in order to level the playing field. He and the others had already executed it on themselves, making them impervious to the sun as well.

"You should not have marked her a second time," Raphael warned. "It might tell her who we really are."

"Enough, Raphael," he snapped mentally. The last thing he needed was Raphael acting as his older brother. "I did not intend to, it just happened."

"It must not happen again, for you will turn her before she can make her choice."

"I will not let it," he growled low as he headed for his rented manor deep in the Russian forest. "Even though she tempts me greatly, I will not let her affect my judgment again."

Raphael's laughter echoed through his mind. "'Tis not easy when men are so enamored of the female form, is it?"

Somehow, even in the worst of his moods, Raphael had always managed to make him laugh. "Aye, 'tis true." Nicholas landed on the ground and slipped through

the secret passage to his underground tomb. “Why do you not join me in some conversation?”

“I thought you would never ask.”

* * * *

Tatiana awoke to the sound of birds chirping at her window. Languorously, she stretched, her mind replaying the dream of the night before. Her privates throbbed with the passion that Nicholas had evoked, awake for the second time in as many days. Why did she feel so different this morning? Everything seemed so familiar, yet so strange at the same time, almost as if she were out of her element....

The swift knocking at the door of her room drew her attention. Quickly, she drew the covers up. “Enter,” she bade.

Nina entered, her hair covered by a delicate lace mobcap. In her hands was a tray of food. “‘Tis time for your morning meal, my lady,” she chirped happily as she set the tray on a nearby table. “Oh, before I forget, this came for you.”

Tatiana stiffened as she drew herself into a sitting position, bunching the pillows behind her with Nina’s help. “Who delivered it?”

Nina handed it to her. “I know not, my lady,” she remarked. “It arrived by messenger this morning.”

She took it from the girl’s outstretched hand. Some sort of alien energy surged through it, almost as if the very paper itself was alive. Taking a shaking finger, she broke the seal, the red wax landing in her lap in a red shower.

My dearest Countess,

I have not forgotten my vow of silence, and I would hope that you have not forgotten your vow of payment. I will send my carriage for you at precisely the eighth hour of the evening. Please bring nothing but yourself, and tell no one where you are going, except that you will be home in the morning. Please do not change your mind, for it will cause me to change mine.

Your faithful servant,

Lord Wetherington.

Tatiana crumpled the message in her hand, holding it to her throbbing head. What was she to do? Nicholas’ silence was the key to her activities....

She looked up, pushing the tears back. No, she was not doing this just to keep him silent. He had given her a taste of what it was to be a woman, making her hunger for more.

Tatiana was doing this to please herself. She had not intended to stay a virgin forever, and with the right man to teach her passion, she could do anything she pleased. She snickered. Something told her that Nicholas would teach her more than passion.

* * * *

“Do you not understand, Nicholas, that she is in more danger than ever?” Raphael warned from his place in the dark room.

“I do understand, Raphael, but it must be her choice to become one of us.

I will not force it on her,” Nicholas answered in a clipped tone as he strode over to the fire and stood next to it, resting his hand on the mantle, staring deeply into the blaze. Errant flames licked the inside of the blackened hearth, rising higher. Bright oranges and reds mixed together to make a brilliant light.

“Then understand this,” Drake offered, piercing his thoughts, the legs of his chair scraping against the floor. “Zakara has broken the containment spell and is loose. As we speak, she is feeding the hunger in Alexei Demehkin....”

Nicholas whirled around, his fury rising. “She has turned Demehkin?”

Drake nodded his blond head. “Aye, she has, and she will use him to every advantage. She is prepared to give him what he wants if he gives her what she wants.”

His brow rose. “And that would be?”

“Tatiana for you.”

Nicholas’ hands clenched tightly, the edges of his nails digging into the soft flesh of his palms and drawing blood. “I will never let that bastard get anywhere near her.”

“He will try and get to her as quickly as he can. Once he has her, he will turn her as well. After that, he plans to devote himself to Zakara and destroy Tatiana.”

His fingers dug in deeper. “How did you come by the information?”

Drake stretched out lazily. “I have my sources,” he said, crossing his ankles at the edge of the table. “You will have to turn her, and soon, Nicholas, if you want to save her.”

He stood silent for a moment, mulling their words. Why must he take away her right to choose her own destiny in order to fulfill his own desires? His brows knitted together as he frowned. Raphael and Drake had made some valid points....

The door burst open at the end of the room, revealing the others. “Forgive us for being late,” Alexandra offered as she swept in, trailed by Gabrielle and Siobhan. “We had stopped for a bite to eat.”

“Actually, we were all leaving,” Raphael informed them as he rose from his chair, followed by Drake. “It seems that Nicholas is expecting a visitor very soon.”

Alexandra’s face lit up. “Tatiana?” Nicholas nodded. She clapped her hands together wildly. “Good! She suits you well, my dear brother.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“Much thanks,” he said, a touch irritated. The thought of turning her against her will weighed heavily on his mind. Why must he end her life in order to save it?

“Come, Raphael and Drake,” Gabrielle said and looped her hand through Drake’s arm. “The night awaits us.”

With that, their clothing disappeared in the blink of an eye, replaced by the soft black leather they all wore when hunting. Raphael turned with his dark eyes full of concern. “We will remain close by in the event you need us.”

“I think I will be able to handle Tatiana perfectly well on my own,” he growled as he slumped into the chair Drake had used earlier.

“You know perfectly well what I mean.”

“Zakara is going to do nothing tonight, because she is patient and will wait for her perfect opportunity.”

“Are you certain?”

“I shared her bed for a time, and I know what her thought processes are.”

“As we all did at one point or another,” Raphael offered, waving at the others to move on while he remained behind. “We made a pact never to leave each other in time of need....”

“I will be fine, my brother,” he laid a hand on Raphael’s soft leather-clad arm. “If I need you, I will summon you.”

“Do I have your word?”

“Aye.”

With that, Raphael disappeared into the dark of the night, out to hunt with the others.

They left Nicholas alone with his errant thoughts for company, the battle in his mind still raging on. He knew that in time, Tatiana would come to love him, but would it overcome the hate that she would feel once he forced her to become what he was?

The chiming clock took his attention away from the swirling eddy of thoughts in his mind. *One, two, three ...* each chime seemed to go on forever ... *five, six, seven ...* He took a deep breath. It was time to send the carriage for her.

The knot in his belly tightened. Once she was here, he would have to make the decision that would ultimately change their destiny forever.

Chapter Five

Ebony twilight covered the land, the smell of the night perfume rising through the air. Her heart pounded uneasily as the time wound down to the arrival of his carriage. Was this something she wanted to do?

Yes, she did. She was not doing this for the Empress or Russia. It was for herself. The time had finally come to seek her pleasure and not give any mind to what anyone else thought.

In the distance, she could hear the muffled hoof-beats on the beaten road, encouraging her heart to quicken. Despite her resolve, part of her was still frightened about the entire situation. What would it be like to be held by a man such as Nicholas? His dark eyes always seemed to bore deep within her soul, almost if he knew every secret she possessed. But he could not, could he? They barely knew each other.

Tatiana looked to her left at the sound of the approaching carriage. All in black, it was gilded with gold and hitched to four dark horses, and driven by an ebony-clad driver. Onyx ostrich feathers, strapped to the horses' heads, danced on the wind. Suddenly, she had a very strange thought. *That almost looks like a funeral coach*, she said to herself. Why would Nicholas have a carriage such as that?

The horse-drawn carriage halted in front of her door, the golden touches dully shining in the moonlight. Whinnies peppered the air, signaling the horses' desire to get moving again.

With a trembling hand, she pushed herself away from the window and walked over to her mirror, staring at her reflection. At that moment, her eyes conveyed a certain naïve innocence that the world always saw. Would that change after tonight? Most assuredly, it had to.

Pulling the cowl of her lavender cloak over her head, she left the chamber and headed toward the waiting carriage, her heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Tonight would be the beginning of a new life for her.

* * * *

Ivan Gregorovich gripped the hips of the servant girl, thrusting as savagely as possible, ignoring her cries of pain. She was here to serve him and serve him she would, in every way possible.

Pulling out of her, he viciously flipped her onto her back and buried himself in her backside, putting a hand over her mouth to stifle her screams.

Just as he was about to climax, there was a savage pounding at the door, disrupting his mood. "Go away!" he shouted and continued his efforts, almost reaching the pinnacle of his climax.

The pounding intensified, shaking the door. Ivan thrust his bulk several more times, finally reaching his goal. Collapsing on the girl, he strained to catch his breath. "Get ... out ... of ... here," he moaned. "Do not come back here until I send for

you.”

Whimpering, the servant slid out from under his girth and gathered her clothes heaped on the floor before exiting through the secret panel in the room, the blood from her backside running down her legs in thin, dark streaks.

Rolling over, Ivan lay on his back, his chest heaving, trying his best to ignore the urgent pounding. Why was it that the older he got, the less stamina he had?

Finally, he could ignore the noise no longer. Pulling himself up in bed, he drew the covers up to cover his sodden self. “Enter!” he shouted, waiting to see who disturbed him at this late hour. It had better be the Emperor himself, or whoever it was might find himself exiled to Siberia.

The door was flung open with a vicious force, revealing the man behind it. Alexei Demehkin stood there, his clothes torn and bloodied, his eyes containing a wild look. His blond hair, ragged and unkempt, hung over his eyes.

“What are you doing here, Demehkin?” he questioned, the fear rising from seeing Alexei’s normally pristine appearance ragged.

“I have come to see you,” Alexei answered, his voice more of a growl than a tone. “I have much to tell you.”

“Begone with you,” Ivan ordered, waving his hand dismissively. “Come back to me when you have arranged yourself. You look like the very devil.”

“Perhaps that is who I am,” he warned and advanced into the room and slammed the door behind him, the room shuddering with its force. “I have come to speak to you about the matter of Tatiana.”

His heart skipped a beat at the mention of his daughter. “What is it about Tatiana?”

Alexei advanced again, bringing with him a stench rivaling that of a hundred rotting bodies sitting in the noontime sun. “I fear she is conspiring with the whore at Tsarskoe Selo to overthrow the Emperor.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. “Not Tatiana,” he said, full of confidence as his one hand slipped beneath the pillow to find the hidden pistol. “She has not the wit, nor the ambition....”

“She has more wit than you can ever imagine,” Alexei assured him as he sank to a chair next to the bed. “She is right now on her way to bed Lord Wetherington so that she might gain useful information for the Empress.”

“You must be mistaken....”

“No, I am not,” Alexei offered. “Your daughter is going to whore herself out, all in the name of the Empress and Russia.”

Ivan sat there for a moment, his hand frozen on the pistol. Nay, Tatiana could not do something of this nature! She was a simple-minded girl whose entire ambition was to serve the Empress ... his hand clenched the pistol tightly. Tatiana was close to the Empress all the time, knowing every move made by the whore. It was entirely possible that she was betraying everything he had stood for. “What proof do you have of this?”

“I met her out on the road last night, meeting that dark English bastard, Lord Wetherington. It seems that your daughter has formed a dalliance with him,

possibly ruining your chances for a good post in the Emperor's new cabinet." Alexei leaned forward, his face grim. "Will you stand for that type of dishonor?"

Ivan fingered the metal latch on his pistol buried beneath the pillow, his fury rising. Tatiana had overstepped her bounds too far this time. He had thought he had raised a meek daughter, ready to do her husband's bidding when the time came. Instead, she was a rebellious whore ready to take into her bed any man she thought would advance her with the royal harlot. Still, he really had no proof except for Alexei's word. "Will you swear on your own life that this is true?" Alexei nodded, his once emerald-green eyes almost translucent. "What do you suggest that we do about this?"

"I have plenty of suggestions," Alexei offered, his glance drawn out the window. "I must make it quick, for I do not have much time."

* * * *

Tatiana stepped out of the carriage, the mask that she'd found inside in her hand. When she had gotten into the carriage, the guise lay on the seat with a short note telling her that she must wear it when she entered the manor.

With a trembling hand, she tied it around her eyes, the silk making a soft rustle against her skin. Black feathers decorated the top half of the mask, while diamonds encircled the delicately cut eyeholes.

Her nerves were raw as she took a step to the house. What was he going to be like? Would he stop if she desired him to? Or would he force himself on her if the desire took him?

Tatiana looked up to the huge manor. Tall gabled roofs loomed over her, imposing to say the least. The house was perhaps three stories tall, with quite an impressive number of windows. Red brick had turned gray in the moonlight, the trees dark and uninviting. The house gave her a chill that crawled up her spine, making her draw her cloak around her.

She looked at the door and took a deep breath, drawing her strength. It was time.

* * * *

Everything seemed dark and forbidding as the liveried butler led her up the stairway, accompanied by a large candelabrum, the golden glow leading the way. Portraits hung on the walls in the wide hallway as she followed the servant, most of them shadowy, unknown figures....

"Here is my lord's room," the butler said quietly, halting at the door. "He is waiting for you."

With that, the butler opened the door, revealing a large figure standing at the fireplace, his back to her. On trembling legs, she entered slowly. "I am here, Lord Wetherington," she stated in a quivering tone.

"Close the door," he ordered.

The butler quietly closed the door behind her. Suddenly, she heard the snick of the key in the lock. Tatiana jumped, her fear rising. She ran to the door and turned the knob. Her worst fear was realized. It was locked.

"It will remain locked, my dear, until you feel easy enough with me not to run away." He turned around. Tatiana's breath caught in her chest. Nicholas wore a

flowing white shirt, undone to his waist. His black hair flowed freely, the crown hampered by a bit of material. Ebony breeches covered his legs, tapering down into knee boots. He was beautiful beyond words. "As you can see, I wear a mask as well."

"Why all the need for the masks? Why not..."

"Get it all done and be over with it?" he chuckled lightly. "Most men do not have the understanding nor the capacity to enjoy a woman and bring her to pleasure."

"But that does not answer the questions of the masks."

"Aye, but it does," he answered slowly as he advanced, taking her hand and drawing her closer to the fire. "We know each other, but not well enough to strip all masks away. Perhaps tonight will change all of that."

Tatiana grew more frightened by the minute. "I ... I ... do not know what to do."

"I have extraordinary patience, my dear, and will show you everything you need to know," he assured her, his fingers untying the laces of her cloak and pushing it from her shoulders, allowing it to puddle at her feet. "This will be one night you will never forget."

His fingers went to the back of her gown, untying the laces there when she stopped him. "Will you make me one promise?"

"What is that?"

"If I ask you to cease, will you?"

"On my own life," he laughed softly. "I think that once I begin, you will beg me not to stop."

She trembled as he continued to unlace her dress. Was he going to be brutal with her?

Her overgown fell to the ground, leaving her undergown. That quickly followed suit, leaving her only in her underthings. "Turn to look at me," he commanded. Like a puppet, she followed his order and stared at him, drinking in his regal beauty. "I will not now, nor will ever hurt you, Tatiana," he murmured, his lips descending on hers. "Remember, from this moment on, everything I do is to protect you."

"Why?" she returned his hushed whisper. "You barely even know me."

"I have my reasons, one of which is love," he answered, his lips grazing the curve of her neck. "You are in the gravest of dangers, and I want to save you from them."

"What sort of danger?" she answered dreamily as he continued his intense tasting of her flesh.

"Do not concern yourself with it, my dear, at least, not tonight," he said, his fingers undoing the thin laces of her underpinnings. "Tonight we will be enjoying ourselves, and the rest of the world does not exist."

Strangely, her head emptied of any thoughts of danger, almost as if he banished those thoughts with just that command.

Nicholas' hands pushed the top of her underthings down, exposing her breasts to the air. His chilly hands caressed the stiffening buttons, while her lips explored the wonders of his full mouth. Her body was beginning to wake up, as if she had been in a slumber for her entire life. Each limb tingled, awakened to new sensations surging

through her.

"You are so beautiful, Tatiana," he said softly, his hands going to her hair, removing the carefully placed pins, one by one. Once free, silky strands of pale silver-blond curls cascaded down her back. "I am utterly entranced by you."

"As I am by you," she whispered as he sank lower, his hands bringing her breasts together in order to enjoy the ripening buds all the better. His expert tongue teased as he lightly sucked on them, the pressure on them maddening.

"Oh, Nicholas," she breathed, her hands running through the loose strands of his hair. "You do not know what you do to me."

He withdrew, kissing first one breast, then the other, making sure each one received full attention. "As you do to me," he said, rising to his full height, towering over her. "I have a game that I would like to play."

"What is that?" Her arms went to instinctively cover herself.

Quickly he held them down. "'Tis called 'Trust'."

"What do I have to do?"

"Merely stand here while I explore the wonders of your body."

"Where does the trust come in?"

"That I will not harm you," he answered, circling her lightly. "It will, however, require the removal of the rest of your clothes."

She felt that old fear rise again. "I do not think..."

"Of course you can play, my dear," he loosened the rest of her undergarments, pushing the clothes to the floor, allowing her to be completely naked. She quickly covered herself with her hands.

"None of that," he said, pulling her hands away. "Every time you do this, it will mean a bit of pain followed by pleasure."

She trembled. "What type of pain?"

"Cover yourself again and find out," he warned, his tone sensuous. Part of her was intrigued and tempted to do it again, but her better sense regained control.

"But..."

She felt the light slap of his hand on her backside, not enough to hurt, only to sting for a brief moment and cause excitement. "That was for asking too many questions," he said, moving in back of her. "It seems that I have left a red mark on your skin. That will simply not do," he noted in a mock regretful tone. "I will need to soothe that."

Before she could say anything, she felt a bit of warm oil on her ass cheek, his chilled fingers rubbing it in, moving in wide circles. "Does that not feel good?"

Tatiana tilted her head back against his shoulder, enjoying every moment of it. "Aye, that it does," she murmured, the moans nearly strangling in her throat. She wanted to let the moans of ecstasy out, but she did not want to appear too wanton.

Instead of answering, she felt a warm rush of oil, perfumed with lavender, falling down her body. Warm trickles danced down her scorching flesh in a slow fashion, enhancing her excitement.

Nicholas' expert hands worked their magic as well as the oil into her skin. Moans escaped her as he kneaded her breasts gently, the oil working into her skin.

Tipping her head back, she hungrily sought his lips, his hands continuing to work their magic on her skin. Her flesh felt as though it was on fire, the desire for him raging hotly inside.

Nicholas' fingers dipped lower, searching between her legs for the ultimate prize. He found her core quickly, his fingers bringing the tiny blossom to fruition, her nether lips quivering for his touch. Her legs trembled as he slipped inside of her, his strokes even and tender, encouraging her hips to move in time. If it had not been for his strong arms holding her up, she would have surely fallen.

Turning, she wound her arms around his neck and pulled him down toward her, hungry for his touch and his kiss. Nicholas responded, holding her body tight against his hard lines. His fingers dug hard into her buttocks, but she cared not. Her body was on fire, and Nicholas was the only man who could quench the growing flames.

His hardness pressed into her belly, indicating his desire. She pulled away, feeling herself completely besotted with raw sexual power. Taking the waistband of his breeches, she freed him from his confines, much to his surprise. He was large, his manhood hard and ready. "What are doing, Tatiana?" he whispered breathlessly as her delicate fingers caressed the tip.

She felt the moisture on her fingers, his scent rising through the air. "Is the game not called Trust?"

"Aye."

"Then you must trust me."

Tatiana sank to her knees, staring at his member. It was strong and healthy, ready to put life into her body if she so chose. Thankfully, today she had consulted the midwife on how to prevent pregnancy, so there was no chance of that. Perhaps in future, when she desired children, Nicholas would be the perfect man to sire them.

Instinctively, she bent her head and kissed the tip, encouraging more of the salty, sweet-scented liquid to come forth. Nicholas murmured with each kiss, his hands twining with her hair. "You are so beautiful, Tatiana," he moaned. "You do not know how much pleasure you bring to me."

"I can tell," she whispered against him, planting tiny kisses along his shaft. Suddenly, he pushed her away. "What is wrong, Nicholas?"

"I do not want to waste myself like this," he drew her to her feet and picked her up in his arms. "I can think of a better way."

Gently he laid her down on the bed and removed his clothing with lightning speed, everything falling into the floor in a heap. Once he was nude, he stood there for a moment, highlighted by the golden light of the fire. Sculpted muscles, almost as if they were made out of stone, glared at her. His wide shoulders, tapered down to a narrow, but strong waist. A dark triangle of dark curly hair rested in the apex of his legs, from which his member sprang. Strong legs, seemingly almost of solid iron, filled out the rest of his body.

Dark eyes stared at her from beneath the black mask. "I want to make love to you, Tatiana. Is that what you desire as well?"

"Aye, I desire you as much as you desire me." She held her arms

invitingly out to him. "Come to me."

Without further encouragement, he lay down on top of her, his lips tasting the flesh of her neck again. "Tonight your body belongs to me."

She said nothing as she gave herself up to the wanton abandonment produced by his hands. Swiftly, he searched out her apex, parting her lips yet again, diving in and bringing her pleasure beyond her wildest imaginations. Her hips arched, begging for more of him.

Nicholas withdrew and looked at her, his eyes glittering behind the ebony mask. "Are you ready for me?"

"I have been waiting for you all my life, Nicholas," she whispered, drawing his face close to hers.

"No pain," he assured her in a deep, breathy whisper and tasted her lips again, his hands intertwining with hers.

Tatiana had never felt so safe with any man before in her life, not even her father. It was almost as if her trust of him built up almost instantaneously, although she barely even knew him.

Taking this as an invitation, Nicholas urged her legs to wrap around his waist, his member nudging at her privates, begging for entry. Arching, she wanted him inside of her, as deeply as possible. With as much gentleness as he could summon, Nicholas entered her body, her delicate tissues parting. Strangely, she felt no pain, as he had promised, but she felt the tightness around his shaft, holding him like a vise. Her senses were blazing at the velvety feel of him inside of her, each thrust bringing her closer to paradise. She arched with each one, the moans of rapture escaping her and filling the room. Nicholas' strokes became swifter, more urgent, as they brought her higher and higher ... Suddenly, her body racked with shudders as a warm feeling of euphoria came over her. Nicholas followed her lead, his own ecstasy coming a moment later.

He collapsed on her and rolled to the side, taking her into his arms. "Did ... I ... hurt ... you?"

She lay there in her own cloud of sensation. "No, Nicholas ... you did not ... hurt ... me," she gasped, turning in his arms to face him. "In fact, you did much the opposite."

He kissed her forehead and removed the mask, tossing it to the side. "We do not need this anymore," he murmured, kissing the tip of her nose.

"No, we do not," she said, removing his mask as well, tossing it in the same general direction as hers, the silky feel of his skin under her fingers as she traced lazy patterns on his chest. "I never knew the first moment with a man could be this wonderful," she whispered, snuggling closer to him, her hair covering them like a blanket. "I always imagined that..."

"...It would be a completely frightening experience," he finished, wrapping his strong, dusky arms around her. "Most men do not have the slightest idea of how to make love, looking to only pleasure themselves and no one else. I believe--" His fingers drew lazy patterns up her hip, toward her belly. "--enjoyment should be on both sides, not just on one."

“At court, women content themselves with lovers who can advance their places, most of them uncouth men,” she confessed. “I have seen the bruises on the women....”

His finger at her lips silenced her litany. “No more talk of them,” he whispered into her ear. “I only want to speak of you now, my dear.”

“What is it you wish to know?”

“Everything.”

* * * *

Zakara waited patiently in her room at the inn, naked to the night air, for Alexei to return with news from the whore’s father. Now that the seed had been planted, perhaps the father would take care of the little vixen before she had to step in and do it herself. Why do it when you can get someone else to do it? That had always been her motto.

Two handsome, well-muscled men stood on either side, their heads covered by leather hoods and as naked as the day they were born. She never went anywhere without her playthings. Both of them stood at attention, ready to pleasure her at a moment’s notice. Unfortunately, the only thing she was interested in was hearing of Alexei’s meeting with the whore’s father.

Suddenly, a black blur appeared at her window. She turned to see Alexei, his golden hair disheveled, with blood covering his body. “You stopped for a bite to eat, I see,” she purred, her juices flowing suddenly. “What news do you have?” she questioned, snapping her fingers. The toy on the left moved over to the bed, within reach.

Alexei’s eyes shifted from her to her hand stroking the man’s hard member. “I think perhaps Count Gregorovich is convinced that his daughter is plotting against him.”

“Are you certain?” The room was getting entirely too hot as the excitement grew in her nether regions. Taking the shaft in her hand, she pulled her toy down to the bed, forcing his head between her legs. Hungrily and expertly, he lapped at her juices, the longed for velvety tongue easing her tensions. She noticed Alexei’s interest rising. “You like to see him doing this to me?” He nodded. “You would like to be inside of me again, would you not?”

“Aye, that I would,” he murmured, his hands rubbing his own growing shaft.

“Not yet,” she commanded, “You have not earned the right to waste your seed inside of me.” With rough hands, she pulled the man at her privates upwards, holding his hooded head in her hands. “Show him what it is like to make a woman moan with pleasure.” Zakara looked at the twin toy. “Make sure that he watches every moment of it.”

The twin nodded and strode over to Alexei, taking him in a tight grip. “Perhaps, if you take your lessons well, I will allow my minions to pleasure you in ways you never thought possible.” She moaned as she felt the minion’s thick, large shaft bury into her to the hilt, his strokes slow. “Oh, you do not know how this makes me feel,” she gasped, writhing in ecstasy as she looked up to Alexei. “Would you like to have a little

pleasure as well?"

His hips were bucking against her slave. "Aye, I would," he murmured.

She looked to the minion holding him. "Do what you like, but do not be gentle with him. He is but a horse that needs to be tamed."

Chapter Six

Tatiana awoke to the sound of thunder rolling through the morning sky. What time was it? Lazily, she looked to the mantle, searching for any sign of a clock, but there was none. Did Nicholas not have a clock here? At the thought of Nicholas, she rolled over to give him something to brighten his morning, but he was gone. Quickly, she touched the covers. His smell lingered in the air. Where had he gone ?

Looking to his nightstand, she spied an envelope with her name neatly written on it. Plucking it from the ornate wood, she opened it with trembling fingers.

*My dearest Tatiana,
Forgive me for having to leave you this morning, especially since you looked so radiantly beautiful as you slept, but there were urgent concerns that I had to attend to. Fear not, though, I will see you again tonight. As you will see, there is a box sitting on the settee...*

She stopped reading and glanced at the sofa. Just as the note had said, there was a box tied with red silken ribbon. Where had that come from? It was near the fireplace, and surely she would have seen it when she searched for the clock?

Tatiana looked back at the note.

*...with a red silk ribbon. Inside is a dress--a gift for you. Only it is not an ordinary dress. It is built for pleasure, and tonight is the night I will show you how it works. Be ready for me at the same time tonight. Stay at my home as long as you wish and instruct my servants as you will. I will return later, after my business has been conducted. When I get there, I will show you pleasures that you have never dreamed of.
Nicholas.*

Tatiana held the note to her breast, trying to make sense of it all. She had taken Nicholas into her bed, not only because she wished to, but because it was also important to the state of Russia. Any useful information he could offer would be extremely valuable. After their first encounter, she'd found herself spilling out the pieces of her life, but keeping her activities carefully guarded. Strangely, she continued to feel very safe and secure with him, a feeling she had never experienced with any man.

Tatiana moved to sit up, feeling the dull throb between her legs, reminding her of the gratifying encounter last night. It felt wonderful to finally know what it was to be a woman....

She happened to glance at her clothes and spotted a bit of yellow. What was that? Getting up, she strode over and picked it up, realizing with sickening horror what it was.

It was the small lemon cap that had been inside of her to prevent pregnancy.

She dropped it and gasped. There had been more than one encounter last night, so could that mean that ... No! She could not carry this man's child nor any other's. There was still too much work left to be done.

With tears pricking the inside of her eyelids, she gathered up her clothes and quickly dressed, her mind whirling. What was she to do if she became with child, especially with Nicholas' child? More than likely, he would want to marry her and take her back to England to raise the child. That was not what she wanted. She had to remain here to see the rightful ruler on the throne, no matter how long that took.

* * * *

Ivan waited for the Emperor to finish playing with his tin soldiers set up on a board, bantering back and forth while the ill-tempered, crude Countess Elizabeth Vorontsova looked on. He grimaced at the sight of her. She was ugly beyond reason. Her hair was the turning the color of mud, while pockmarks decorated her hideous face. There were instances, told through court gossip, when the Countess would often belch and expel gas at state dinners, if for no other reason than the Emperor's amusement. He would laugh uncontrollably and follow suit, much to the guests' dismay. What attracted the Emperor to her, he did not know.

"Your Grace, I need to speak to you," he broke in, hoping to distract the Emperor.

"Not now! Can you not see I am positioning my armies!" the Emperor cried in disgust, as his thin fingers hurriedly arranged the lead soldiers on the board. "If we mean to win this war, then we must close in this way," he bellowed to the Countess, who glared at him with a mix of awe and contempt. "Would you not agree, General Vorontsova?"

"Aye, we would," Elizabeth agreed, shooting Ivan a look that spoke of hatred and lust, her hands straightening the hem of her Prussian uniform.

Ivan felt literally sick. Here was his Emperor, a man who had no more mind than a child, sympathizing with the Prussians! He remembered one remark that Peter had made, referring to Frederick of Prussia as "my king and master." Peter's loyalty to Russia was definitely questionable, but it was better that he held the throne than that German whore claiming to be the Empress. At least Peter would be easier to control once Catherine was gone. "Your Majesty, I have news of the gravest importance," he insisted, pushing past the Countess. "You must listen to me."

Peter merely walked around the table, staring at the soldiers. "You have not given the password, so I shall not listen to you." He waved a hand. "See General Vorontsova if you need to deliver news."

His anger got the best of him. Gripping the Emperor's wrist, he jerked the spry little man toward him. "Do you not understand your kingdom is slipping from you? All you do is play with these--" His arm swept across the board viciously. The sound of lead hitting the stone floor rose through the air. "--while that German whore you took into your house is planning to take what is your birthright!"

"You do not know what you are saying," the Emperor growled, his eyes

blazing. "If I were you, I would take your hand away from me," he glanced at Ivan's hand around his wrist. "If you wish to keep it, that is."

With those words still hanging in the air, Countess Vorontsòva expelled a long blast of gas, laughing as she did so. Peter, forgetting completely what was at stake, followed suit, the room filling with the pungent odor. His laughter ricocheted around the room, mingling with hers.

By now, Ivan had had enough of this. Somehow, he had to make the Emperor understand the gravity of the situation, but he could never seem to get him alone. Countess Vorontsòva was always at his side, almost if she were part of him.

Bowing low to them both as they continued to expel gas and burp, he left the room and the degenerates to themselves. This was not working in the slightest. Peter, with his childlike mind, could never understand anything beyond the play board and his play soldiers.

Walking down the hall, he passed the portraits of former ministers who had once served the Emperors of Russia. Silently, he imagined his portrait hanging here as well, painted in rich, vivid colors by the greatest master painter in the world, Dimitrii Levitskii. Ah, Dimitrii would capture his regal side, showing the world who the real power was in Russia.

Dragging his gaze from the portraits, he stared straight ahead as he went down the long gallery, his mind only on one thing.

Tatiana.

Had the little vixen betrayed him and the Emperor, pretending she was simpleminded? Nay, she could not have....

* * * *

Tatiana paced her room restlessly, trying to dream up excuses why she could not see Lord Wetherington tonight, or any night for that matter. He was too much of a major distraction to her work, very detrimental to her soul.

She cast a nervous look to the gown spread over the chair. Made of the finest red silk, it was utterly beautiful to behold. Pearls decorated the neckline, accenting her pearl-tinted skin, while a beautiful necklace and earrings comprised of rubies accompanied it. Staring hard at the new accoutrements, she blinked quickly, hoping all these newfound feelings would go away as quickly as they had come. Her focus was clouded now, making it harder and harder to complete what she must.

"Ma'am?"

Tatiana whirled about on her heel. "What is it, Mishka?"

"This has just arrived for you," she held out an envelope with a wax seal stamped onto it.

"Who sent this to me?" she questioned, taking the dry paper between trembling fingers. Her better sense told her who it was, even before Mishka did.

"Lord Wetherington," Mishka explained, her face a mask of seriousness. "'Tis for your eyes and your eyes only."

Her fingers trembled as she took it. Did he want to tell her that she was nothing but a plaything to him, a ground to be conquered and abandoned? Slipping a finger under the wax seal, she broke it and unfolded the paper with a pounding heart.

*My dearest Tatiana,
I know that you are having second thoughts about meeting with me
tonight. Do not. I am not out to hurt you, as many around you are. I am not a hateful or
malicious man, so you must forget all of that. You must come with me tonight and wear
the dress that I have given you. I will take no refusal.
Be ready by the eighth chime of the clock.
Nicholas.*

Tatiana crumbled the letter and held it to her chest. Surely, he must be jesting! She could no more see him again than ... her thoughts stopped. As much as she tried to find a valid reason not to see him, she could barely find what that was.

“What is your answer to be, my lady?” Mishka questioned quietly.
Tears slipped from her eyes. “I know not.”

* * * *

Nicholas adjusted his cravat and stared at the empty frame that had once housed a mirror. He’d had it removed the day he took up residence, because it would be a dead giveaway to his identity, not to mention that it was useless. He snorted. There were some things about mortality he had always missed.

“Will you cease all that detestable preening, Nicholas?” Drake said in a lazy tone, as he toyed with the loose grapes on the table. “You are endlessly boring me with that.”

Nicholas fixed the queue holding back his glossy black hair. “My, are we not jealous that we have no one to seduce,” he mocked as he adjusted the hem of his waistcoat.

“I will find someone, never fear,” Drake said, straightening his almost seven-foot-tall frame in his chair. “Where are the girls?”

“They are keeping watch on Tatiana for me. Right now, she cannot decide if she wants to meet with me tonight or not. I think the girls will make her change her mind.” He spun around. “How do I look?”

“If I were a female, I would be groveling at your feet, but since I am not, I suppose you look fashionable,” Drake commented, throwing a grape in his direction.

Nicholas deflected it easily with his hand. “Enough play, Drake,” his gaze darted around the spacious room. “Where is Raphael?”

“He is following Alexei to see what the sick sot is up to,” Drake glanced to the clock as it chimed six o’clock. “He should return any moment.”

Before Nicholas could say anything, a dark blot covered the setting sun, the sound of beating wings filling the room. A black blur entered as they watched, filling a space near the window. It wavered for a moment before becoming the figure he had known for the last few years as Raphael.

“What is the news of Alexei?”

Raphael’s chest heaved quickly, the anxiety filling the air and alerting their vampiric senses. “Gentlemen, the situation is far more dire than we had thought.”

* * * *

Ivan sat in his drawing room in the palace, staring at the flame burning the tip of the candle. It danced and glowed, urging his thoughts to waver just as it did. Why would Tatiana betray her Emperor and country by consorting with that German whore who styled herself Empress? He knew for a fact that the child in Catherine's womb did not belong to the Emperor, because the Emperor had not been near her in months. He spent all his time with the repugnant Countess Vorontsova.

He sat back in his chair, his thick hand under his chin. Tonight would be the deciding factor. All he needed was proof that Tatiana was consorting with the Empress, as well as any other questionable persons, and he would condemn her. He would not allow her to destroy all that he had worked so hard to build.

All he needed tonight was correspondence from her maid, Mishka, a woman he had personally hired to keep him informed of all of Tatiana's comings and goings. He had been getting regular letters from Mishka, but there was nothing in them that would persuade him to bring Tatiana to trial on treason. Tonight, however, Mishka had promised him something that would take the factor of Tatiana out of his life forever.

He smirked. It was not that he did not love his daughter. She was his to control and use in his quest for power. If she was no longer useful to him and endangered everything, she had no place in his life.

Hollow knocks startled him, dragging him from the depths of thought. "Enter," he said quickly, waiting at the end of the large table.

A page entered, bearing a thick envelope for him. "This just arrived for you, my lord," the liveried boy announced, holding the bulky package tied with cord out to him.

He snatched it out of his hands, shooing him away quickly. The page bowed and left, closing the door behind him.

Thick, stubby fingers quickly unwrapped the package. Piles of letters fell out, the top marked with "Urgent" in neat ink.

With fastidious fingers, he ripped it open, his eyes perusing the page. His lips curled into a smile. Thankfully, he'd had enough foresight to install a woman of breeding and learning as Tatiana's maid. If he had not promised Micheline d'Arcenault--or Mishka, as he liked to call her--that she would become Countess Gregorovich, she might not have agreed to the plan. He laughed as he continued to read on. Tatiana thought she was very intelligent, running messages back and forth to Catherine's secret armies, as well as bedding Lord Wetherington in order to gather information. Very good. Perhaps his daughter was very resourceful indeed.

He picked up the next letter, his heart sinking quickly. The words on it ensured Tatiana's damnation.

* * * *

"Who are you?" the little waif at the door questioned, her face contorted in a mask of surprise.

All three of them, dressed in the garb of lowly peasant women, bowed at the same time. "We were sent by Lord Wetherington to help Lady Gregorovich ready herself for the evening ahead."

Anger stormed across the woman's face in wave. "We have no need of

you, for I am the lady's maid."

Alexandra was the first to pick up on the fact that the woman was not who she said she was. "What is your name?"

"Mishka."

Alexandra searched the very intelligent mind, knowing for certain this was no ordinary maid. She saw memories of a beautiful childhood in another place with a beautiful countryside ... France! Why, this woman was from France! How did she get here, and how did she perfect the Russian language and accent? "My lord sent us, and we have come such a long way. May we come in and rest before we return?"

She looked at all of them, her decision wavering. "Did you not come by carriage?"

"Nay, by foot," Siobhan replied, taking over where Alexandra left off. This woman's name was really Micheline d'Arcenault, and she was the daughter of a peasant woman in France. Tatiana's father had brought her here and educated her, with the promise of becoming Countess Gregorovich if she followed his orders without question.

"You may sit for a while, at least until I go and get my lady ready for the evening," she snapped and pointed to a stool and some logs near the fireplace. "You may sit there, but when I go upstairs to help my lady, you must go.

"Of course." Gabrielle picked up the thread. She had been sending letters to the Count, informing him of all her doings and had meant to condemn Tatiana in any way possible.

They came in, using their telepathy to communicate.

"Nicholas must know about this," Gabrielle announced. "They mean to kill her."

"That is why we are here, luv," Siobhan entered gently, her blue eyes darting about. "We will save her from these beasts."

"They will pay for this," Alexandra muttered low as she watched the sullen maid move around the kitchen, stoking the fire. "Namely her."

"All in due time," Siobhan warned. "She *will* have to be terminated."

"Let me be the one to do it," Alexandra requested. "I feel as though Nicholas is my brother, and I will do whatever is necessary to see him happy."

"Perhaps," said Siobhan, always the calmest of the three. "When the time is right."

The clock chimed six o'clock. Micheline turned to them, a scowl on her face. "All of you must go," she growled, shooing them from their places. "My lady is going to need help in getting ready for the evening."

"That is what we are here for," Alexandra chimed in happily, despite the desire to snap the thin neck like a twig.

"The only thing you will be doing is getting out of this house," Micheline snapped, trying to push them to the door.

Siobhan looked to Alexandra, a smile spreading across her face. "Now is the time, my dear. Feast as you will."

* * * *

Tatiana continued to pace, her thumb against her lip. Why did this decision have to be so hard? She was...

Knocks jolted her out of her thoughts. "Come in, Mishka," she said, sitting down on a nearby settee, her nervous hands intertwining with the folds of her gown.

Instead of Mishka entering the room, three strange women entered with baskets in their hands. "Who are you?" Their hair was hidden by mobcaps, so there was no way to tell their hair colors, except for their eyebrows. All three of them had the beautiful, milky complexion uncommon to women who worked outdoors. To her knowledge, no new servants had been employed recently.

"We were sent by Lord Wetherington to help you ready yourself for the evening," the one young woman with the red eyebrows offered.

"Where is Mishka?"

"She is, how do you say, under the weather?" volunteered the woman with the ebony brows.

"Why did she not send one of the other maids?"

All three shrugged their shoulders. "We know not, my lady, but we are your gift from Lord Wetherington. He will pay our wages, and we will work in your household," the one with the red brows said, bowing to her. "I am Gabrielle, at your service." She pointed to the woman with light eyebrows. "That is Siobhan, and the remaining one is Alexandra." Both curtsied at the introduction.

Tatiana was taken aback, frightened a bit. She was not used to people in her household that she did not know in advance would be there. "That is very kind of Lord Wetherington, but it is not necessary..."

"He will take no refusal," Alexandra answered. "Come, let us get you ready."

The moment Alexandra's hand descended on her shoulder, she got a flash of a mental picture. She was in the tavern, meeting General Federov and remembered being watched from the bar area. At the time, she had quickly glanced around and seen three women staring at her, much like the women here with her now ... She spun around, glaring at Alexandra. "Have I not met you before?"

She nodded. "'Tis possible. You may have met me at Lord Wetherington's home..."

Tatiana shook her head quickly. "Did you not work in a tavern? I distinctly remember you--" She looked at Gabrielle and Siobhan. "--and both of you. What is going on here?"

She felt Alexandra's soft touch on her shoulder. "Think no more of it, my dear," Alexandra whispered softly into her ear. "'Tis time to ready you for Lord Wetherington."

With those words melting in her ear, Tatiana felt all of her fear slip away as the tide during a full moon, as well as her apprehension about tonight. Suddenly, she felt as though she were on a cloud, supported by their wispieness. "Aye, I would like that," she answered as their fingers began to undo her laces. "Will he be pleased to see me?"

“More than you will ever imagine.”

Chapter Seven

Alexei felt stronger than he ever had in his mortal life. He was strong beyond all reason, handsome with seductive powers no woman could resist. He preyed on all the weak mortals, thinking of the world as his playground, if he so chose it.

"Is the mortal woman still what you wish?" Zakara murmured next to him as they lay together in her large casket entombed in the cold Russian mountains.

He thought for a moment, staring into the darkness of the ancient coffin. "Perhaps at one time, I wished for her, but now, she is not worthy to be at my side," he murmured, thinking of the power that he had hungered for in life was now his in death. There would be nothing standing in his way from this day onward. "You fit me better than she, a woman to rule with me..."

Her talon-like nails raked across his face, splitting the skin and allowing blood to flow. "You fool!" she snapped. "'Tis I who am the one who is ruling, the true Queen of the Vampires, ordained by my father, who is king of all that is unholy."

Alexei's skin repaired itself quickly, the one gift of his immortality that he utterly enjoyed. Taking a swift hand, he pinned her down, maneuvering himself on top of her, slipping inside easily. "You will be my Queen and listen to my commands, or else I will destroy you."

* * * *

Zakara stared deep into his eyes, reading every mortal thought the empty-headed sot contained. Aye, he still had the thoughts and desires of a mortal with an immortal's power and body. He was definitely not strong enough to become her consort, no matter what he thought. The pupil she had created was slowly turning into a monster. Perhaps it was best to come up with a way to rid herself of him. "You are right," she purred, her long tongue snaking out to lick his smooth chin. "Mayhap I am the horse to be tamed, and you are the right master for me," she bucked her hips, tightening her muscles to keep him captive inside of her. "You are the best choice for my consort."

She sensed his enjoyment at her movement, his hips slamming into her hard, just the way she liked it. "Aye, I see my little equine is beginning to learn."

"There is one thing you must do for me," she whispered, her legs wrapping hard around his waist, the sound of his breath sucking in filling the lurid air.

"What is that?"

"Kill Nicholas."

* * * *

Nicholas' dark carriage waited outside of the door, black and mysterious, matching the color of the night. Gingerly, she got into it, holding her breath. No longer did she feel as though she floated, it was more like she had come into herself and was normal.

"I am glad to see that you did not change your mind," Nicholas said as he

helped her into the carriage.

“How could I when you made it impossible for me to do so?” she answered a bit tartly, despite her anxiety, and settled next to him.

The carriage door slammed shut, making her jump. “Come, my dear, are you a bit anxious about being here with me?”

His fingers caressed the underside of her chin, sending shivers down her spine. “No, I am not,” she lied, the nervousness building inside of her like a tidal wave.

“Aye, I think you are....”

Before she could say anything, Nicholas swept her up into his arms and slid her over to his lap facing him. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“Something that I think you will enjoy.”

His lips touched hers, light and feathery. Tatiana’s womanhood throbbed with pure passion, her juices beginning to flow. Nicholas caressed her face, her neck and her arms, urging them around his neck. Before she could stop herself, her hips started to move against him.

Nicholas’ hands moved to her waist, oddly pushing against her. What was he doing? If he wanted to stop kissing her....

Suddenly, she felt a cool breeze against her bare bottom, the remnants of her dress on the floor. The only thing she had on was her hose and bodice. She pulled away, completely startled. “Why did you do that?”

Nicholas let out a small chuckle as his hand dipped between her legs, caressing her nether lips gently. “That is the magic of the dress, Tatiana. That is why I had it designed for you.”

Out of embarrassment, she tried to pull away, but his strong arm locked around her waist. “Let me go!” she demanded, trying to get away. “Everyone will be able to hear us!” Thankfully the windows were covered with a black cloth, so no one could see in.

“Nay, they will not.” His fingers dipped inside of her deeply, stroking her velvety flesh. “They work for me, and they hear nothing and see nothing,” he murmured against her neck, his lips burning a trail of hot kisses down her nape.

She moaned softly, arched her hips against his fingers. “Oh, Nicholas,” she said, moving in time with his strokes. “Do you realize what you do to me?”

“Aye, that is why I am doing it, Tatiana,” he whispered low. “I am only tempting you to be become mine in every way possible.”

She could not help but drown in the sweet sensations radiating from his hand. Briefly, she felt the swell of his breeches against her blossoming nub, driving her to utter madness. Reaching down, she slipped her hand beneath his waistband and felt his member, pulsing steady and strong. Clearly, he did not believe in wearing undergarments.

“Tatiana,” he murmured against her. “Taste me as I have tasted you.”

Moving from his lap, she knelt before him, springing his manhood from its confines. The silky shaft felt wonderful under her fingertips, nestled in the crisp hair. His scent perfumed the air, making her want him even more. Tenderly, she licked at the tip, the salty essence already present. Nicholas moaned, his hands burying deep into the

pile of silver-blond curls on top of her head. As she took him deeply into her mouth, she felt the strands of her hair fall around her shoulders as Nicholas freed them, his gasps of ecstasy filling the air. Her own excitement surged at the sound as she increased her hungry intensity.

Suddenly, Nicholas halted her motions. "Come back to me, Tatiana." He pulled her back to her feet amid the jerkiness of the ride and back to his lap. "This is how I want you."

She felt him slip into her already moist cavern, diving deeply inside of her. "This is how I want you, Nicholas," she murmured as his hands descended on her naked hips, urging her movements.

Tatiana felt full of sexual power again, arching her back as she took him deeper, her hips following his direction as she rode him, her natural instincts kicking in. Nicholas' hands left their position and cupped her breasts together, his tongue teasing the ripe buds.

"Oh, Nicholas!" she cried as the ecstasy washed over her. She no longer cared if the footman or the driver heard her. All that mattered was that she was with Nicholas. Everything else seemed like a dim memory.

Nicholas followed suit, shuddered in response, his own desire realized. "You are so beautiful, Tatiana," he murmured as she fell against him, her chest heaving. "Perhaps we can make this a permanent arrangement."

She looked up quickly, searching Nicholas' eyes for some sort of answer. "I am no man's mistress, Nicholas," she said, her hands cupping his face between them.

His lips curled into a smile. "That is not what I had in mind."

Reluctantly, she slid from his lap and gathered the remains of her gown from the floor. "Then what sort of arrangement do you have in mind?" she questioned as she struggled into her gown next to him.

"When I said permanent, I meant marriage," he offered as he tucked himself back into his breeches.

She fastened the last of the laces she could find and stared at the floor deep in the darkness. "Please, do not mistake my words, but I cannot marry you."

"Why not?"

Tatiana struggled for an answer. Aye, she did want to marry Nicholas, but the fact remained that Russia had an uncertain future. Without her loyalty and aid, it might well fall back into her father's and his henchmen's hands. "There are things I must accomplish first."

His hand clasped hers, strangely chilly. "As in?"

"I ... really ... cannot...."

"Is there another man?"

The question struck her like a stone to her belly. "Nay, there is not, but there are certain things that must be accomplished before I can tend to my own happiness."

His grip tightened. "What sort of things?"

Tatiana wavered for a moment, unsure if she could trust him. What if he was working for her father and seduced her just to get information? Nay, it could not be

that, for Lord Wetherington had more money than her father, and other than a few paltry possessions, her father had nothing to offer for Nicholas' compliance. "Things I should not involve you in."

"Try me."

She felt his overwhelming presence envelop her in a strange warmth, and suddenly, she felt more relaxed, almost if someone had given her a tonic that would force the truth out from her. "I cannot tell you here, Nicholas. May we go somewhere that is private?"

"I know where we can go." He tapped the roof of the carriage with a cane that she had never seen before. Where had that come from?

"Where are we going?"

"To my home?"

* * * *

Raphael, Drake, Gabrielle, Siobhan and Alexandra followed the carriage from the air, making sure nothing happened to the occupants inside of it.

"Thankfully, Zakara has kept herself away," Raphael offered telepathically. "I really did not relish defeating her or her henchmen tonight."

"I am more than willing to take on a fight tonight," Alexandra chimed in. "I cut my fangs on that little wench who was trying to condemn Tatiana."

"You have disposed of her, then?" Drake questioned.

"Only where the wild animals will find her," Alexandra said in a mocking tone. "Rest assured, when the other servants find her carcass, there will be nothing left but bare bones."

"Was that wise?"

"More than wise," Gabrielle agreed. "Mortals like that will not stop until they uncover everything. There is no telling how long it would have taken for her to figure out what we are."

"We need to rid ourselves of those mortals that would hurt us, Raphael," Siobhan said. "Surely you understand that, do you not?"

"I do understand that, but we must be very careful not to attract attention to ourselves, or else we would find ourselves...."

Suddenly, a small moving crowd on the ground drew Raphael's attention. They were dressed in black, moving in tandem with Nicholas' carriage toward the rented manor.

"It seems as though Zakara's rest is over," he told the others and dove toward the crowd, urging the others to follow suit.

* * * *

The carriage started to slow down, the cart swinging between the axles, almost as if the driver was trying to avoid something. She clutched onto Nicholas harder. "What is going on?"

"I know not," he answered tensely and tapped the roof of the carriage with his silver-tipped cane.

The vehicle ground to a halt. "No matter what you hear, I want you to stay here, and do not look out the window," he commanded as he rose from his seat.

“You leave for no reason.”

“But what is happening...?”

“Stay here.”

“Aye, if you say so,” she whispered.

Nicholas left her side quickly, exiting through the door and slamming it in his wake. It shook the carriage, encouraging the fear rising inside of her. What was happening outside?

* * * *

Nicholas’ anger rose to new heights as he faced the semi-circle of black-clad figures, led by the one and only Alexei Demehkin. His golden hair glinted silver in the moonlight, while his eyes glowed with pure evil. “I see we meet again, Lord Wetherington,” Alexei sneered as he executed a mock bow.

“You have only come to meet your death, Alexei,” he growled low, trying to keep the civility in his voice lest it prompted Tatiana to look out. “I see dear Zakara has made you one of us.”

“Aye, I am one of the immortals,” Alexei snapped, his body covered in the same ebony leather as the minions with him. “The world is now my playground, and I intend to rule every grain of sand within it.”

“If you think Zakara would allow you to rule instead of her, you are sadly mistaken, Alexei. She would rather see your body rotting on the ground than see that happen.” Nicholas paid no attention to the gathering minions behind Alexei, for he knew that his brethren were not far away.

The black circle slowly closed in around him, their hands rising, sounds of their nails clicking, peppering the hostile air. “‘Tis time to meet your death, Nicholas, as well as that wench you are hiding in the carriage. Once we are finished with you, I have great plans for her.”

“You will not touch her, even if I must spend every breath in my body to stop you”

“Come, I do not think it will be as bad as all that,” Alexei warned, his silver eyes darting around. “Kill him.”

The shadowy figures closed in quickly. Rising up in the air, he barely escaped their clutches, choosing to land on top of his carriage. Issuing a deep, guttural growl, he stood before them, his body taking on his hunting form, his ebony hair free. “Do you still dare to challenge me?”

* * * *

Tatiana felt the carriage rock back and forth as though something heavy had descended on the top, the heavy voices and issued threats hanging heavy in the air. Terror stormed along her veins, forcing her to stifle her screams with the back of her hand as she cowered in the corner. What was happening to Nicholas? Was the danger outside of the carriage killing him?

Before she could think anymore about it, the carriage door was ripped open, exposing the mysterious figures outside, their animalistic cries merging with the sounds of the night as they fought each other. One ebony arm snaked in and grabbed her, dragging her outside. She screamed for it to let her go, but her cries went unheard.

Bodies moved past her in a frenzied speed as the stranger dragged her to a safe haven far away from the melee that had erupted.

"Let me go!" she cried as she tried to wriggle from the strong grasp. "I must help Nicholas!"

"He does not need your help," warned a strangely familiar female voice. Turning, she stared straight into the eyes of the woman from her house named Gabrielle.

"Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Helping Nicholas," she said, gripping Tatiana hard by the shoulders, holding her back from the fighting.

"Who are you?" she whispered as the terror sang to new heights.

"I think I had better let Nicholas explain everything," Gabrielle told her, locking a strong, leather-clad arm around Tatiana's waist. "Do not struggle against me any longer, Tatiana, for it is useless. Besides, Nicholas would be very upset with me if something happened to you."

Tatiana ceased her protest and continued to watch the chaos ensuing in front of her, the tears of fear pricking her eyelids. Who were the people fighting so viciously with Nicholas?

"It will be made known to you very soon, Tatiana," Gabrielle whispered into her ear.

She stiffened as the terror stormed through her again. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Let us say, it is a gift," Gabrielle said softly.

Tatiana continued to watch, listening to the animal-like cries, the knot growing in her belly. When would this be all over?

Suddenly, a very familiar flash of blond hair swept through the dark crowd. She squinted, trying to get a better look at the strands' owner, when she realized it was Alexei Demehkin!

"Alexei!" she screamed through the thick dense cloud of night sounds.

He turned, his thin lips spreading into an evil smile. His once-pale eyes glowed with a depraved red tint, making him appear inhuman. She gasped. This was not the Alexei that she had known.

Without warning, Gabrielle jerked away from her, almost as if the lithe woman had been physically thrown away. She turned and searched for Gabrielle, but there was no sign of her.

Cold hands gripped her shoulders, the stink of rot and mold filling her nostrils. "We finally meet again, my dear," Alexei murmured maliciously in her ear.

Her belly churned at the smell. "So we have," she answered, trying to remain as calm as possible, her breathing labored.

"Do you know what sort of plans I have in mind for you, my dear, once I rid you of that pestilence?"

Tatiana spun around, forcing herself to look at him. Alexei's once-pink skin had turned an awful ashen color, almost as if he had been drained of every ounce of blood and had been dead for at least ten years. The once glorious golden hair was now almost the same color, though it looked somewhat life-like in the moonlight. His eyes

had sunk in, looking more malevolent than normal. "I can only surmise," she said, trying to keep her bile down where it belonged. "What has happened to you?"

"The most glorious thing I could have ever hoped for," his cold hands crept up her shoulders and cradled the shelf of her jaw, holding on painfully. "I thought perhaps you would have been the woman who ruled beside me, but I have found a much more favorable companion, so I have no need of you. However," he murmured maliciously as his gaze drifted down the low neckline of her gown, "I intend to enjoy you first."

Her fear suddenly faded, leaving her to feel powerful again. "If you think to take my innocence, I gave that gift to Nicholas--" She watched as his expression dropped. "--with the greatest of pleasure."

"You really are the whore I always knew you to be," he snapped, pulling her up by her neck as if he intended to tear her head from her shoulders. "Killing you will be an enjoyment."

"Not as much as killing you."

Alexei threw back his head and laughed with an unearthly howl. "Just how do you intend to do this?"

"With this." Tatiana drove her knee into his groin as hard as possible. Alexei let out an ear-shattering scream and rebounded away from her and fell to the ground, rolling around. This gave her the chance she needed. Spying a thick branch with a sharp end, she picked it up and drove it right into Alexei's chest.

More moans and growls emitted from his throat, each one sharper than the last. With sickening horror, she witnessed Alexei's ashen skin start to melt away from his bones, the steam rising through the air. Death and all the odors associated with it surrounded her like a thick blanket, making her sick.

Lurching over to the trees, she held onto one and let go the contents of her belly, shaking all the while. What did she just do? She had killed Alexei! Never in her life had she killed another human being! The farthest she had ever gotten was to threaten to kill someone.

Familiar hands held her head and locked around her waist. "There, there, 'tis all over," Nicholas' voice said softly.

She listened intently and heard nothing except the gentle murmur of voices around her. "What happened?"

"Something I never meant to happen," Nicholas mourned regretfully as he helped her to stand up. "It was my intention to tell you in time."

Tatiana moved into Nicholas' arms and wrapped her arms around his waist, feeling secure and protected. "What is it you wish to tell me?" Instinctively, she nuzzled her head against his chest, expecting to find the soft, albeit soiled fabric of his shirt. Instead, leather greeted her. She jerked away, staring at him. "Why are you dressed like this?" Her nervous gaze darted around to see Gabrielle, Siobhan and Alexandra standing to Nicholas' left, similarly dressed. To his right were two men she had never seen before. One was blond, the other dark like Nicholas. "Who or what are you?"

"We are not what you think, Tatiana," Nicholas offered as he advanced on

her. "I need to tell you everything."

Tatiana, her fear returning, held her hands out in front of her as she moved away from all of them. "Just stay where you are, Nicholas," she cried, her terror making her chest hurt. "I know that you are an Upir, as well as the rest of you. You wish to feast on me until there is nothing left."

"That is untrue, my dear, for if I had wanted to kill you, I would have done so already," Nicholas conjectured as he held out a hand. "Come with me, and I will explain everything."

"No," she said, backing up toward where the path was. If she could get a good footing, she might be able to outrun them. "Just let me returned unharmed, and I will tell no one about you."

"'Tis not that simple, Tatiana." He walked toward her. "Please do not make this any harder than it has to be."

"Please, let me live," she begged, not sure of what else she could do. She needed to live, as well as the hope of Russia rested on the fact that she did.

"I would take my own life rather than ever harm you, my love," Nicholas said, his voice full of exasperation. "'Tis time to end this. I command you to stop where you are."

Tatiana felt as though a strong force kept her rooted into her spot. The only thing she was able to do was speak and hear, nothing more. "How did you do that?"

"It is in the realm of my power," he assured her as he closed the distance between them and swept her into his powerful arms. "Now, 'tis time for us to be off."

Her nervous gaze darted around, looking for the coach and footmen. They were gone. "Where did the carriage go?"

"It was never here," he explained as he lifted them both in the air, followed by the other. "That is part of the glamour that I can portray."

Without warning, gusts of winds blew by her with lightning speed, everything going by in a blur. Her mind spun on what was happening, her heart barely able to keep up. Where were they taking her?

* * * *

What seemed like only moments might have been a span of perhaps an hour or so, when they arrived at Nicholas' manor house. The moon still hung high in the sky, showering the earth with a ghostly pall. Blackened trees stood guard around the house as if to hide it from prying eyes. As soon as they touched down, she heard what seemed to be a hundred wolves baying in the distance.

"How did you do that, Nicholas?" Her heart was pounding so hard against the inside of her chest, she thought that he surely must be hearing, or at least feeling it, since she was so close to him.

"That is also part of my power," he told her as he strode to the door. Just as he was about to step on the threshold, the door suddenly swung open, allowing them all to enter. To her horror, there was no one behind it.

"Is that also part of it, as well?" He nodded as he led them to the salon, brilliantly lit by the beams of moonlight coming through the windows.

Nicholas sat her down on the settee near the fireplace and snapped his

fingers. Orange flames erupted, licking up the sides of the blackened heart. "You can move now, if you promise not to run."

Desperate to be free, she agreed. "I promise."

"Then you are released."

Her arms and legs felt alive again, able to move. "Much thanks," she murmured, staring at the floor. The thoughts scrambled in her mind, one over the other, all coming together in one congealing mix of emotion.

"Gabrielle, would you get Tatiana a snifter of brandy?"

"As you wish," Gabrielle responded.

"What is it you want of me, Nicholas?" she said, the tears streaming down her face.

His finger gently lifted it up, forcing her to look deep into her eyes.

"What I want is you, Tatiana, forever."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I want you to be my wife."

Tatiana sat in stunned silence for a moment, unable to answer. If Nicholas was telling the truth about what he was, did he not understand what he was asking? She drained the contents of her glass in one swallow, feeling it burn all the way down.

Without asking, Gabrielle took the snifter from her hand, refilled it and returned it. Tatiana drained that as well. Just as Gabrielle was about to take it again, she looked to the fiery-haired woman. "Please, no more. I have had enough liquid courage for the moment."

"As you wish."

Tatiana turned to Nicholas. "How can you ask this of me? I know nothing of you. The only thing that I do know is that you are the son of a titled English lord...."

Nicholas stopped her with a finger to her lips. "That is only part of the story. There is more to tell."

She felt the strength begin to burn through her, encouraged by the brandy. "If I am to make a decision such as the one you are asking me, I will need to know everything."

Nicholas' mouth spread into a wide grin. "Then you shall know everything about us," his arm swept around the room, gesturing to the others. "My story will be the last to be told."

She leaned back, staring at him through skeptical eyes. "Then let the tales begin."

Chapter Eight

Gabrielle was the next-to-last to tell her story. "That is all there is for me," she announced and looked to Nicholas. "Now 'tis time for his tale."

Tatiana looked to Nicholas, watching the way the emotion traveled over his face. His fist pounded his open left palm as he leapt to his feet, pacing nervously through the room. "Do you know how old I am, Tatiana?"

She shook her head, questioning his interrogation. "I know not."

"Take a guess."

Tatiana studied him for a moment, looking for some telltale sign of it. "If I were to guess, I would say you were entering your third decade."

Nicholas stopped in front of the fireplace, the fire creating a glowing aura around him. "That is very kind of you, Tatiana. If I were only in the beginning of my third decade again," he said mournfully. "The truth is that I am actually thousands of years old."

Her eyes widened. "I do not believe this, Nicholas," she said, leaping from the settee. "Let me out of here."

"Not until you understand what is going on."

"You have gone to extensive lengths to make me believe your tale, but it was all in vain," she said, holding her head high. "There is nothing that you can do to make me accept what you are telling me."

"Oh, but I think there is." Nicholas advanced on her and took her right arm in a tight grip. "Come with me to see my past."

"No, I could not..."

"Aye, but you could," he tilted her head up to face his. "Look into my eyes."

"But..." she could not finish her words. Staring deeply into the dark orbs, she was transported to a new place, full of flashing light streaming past her, making her feel as light as a feather. Tatiana floated along, held by nothing at all. What sort of euphoria was this? It was completely different from the ecstasy she had felt as Nicholas' hands....

Just as she was about to expand her thought, Tatiana felt herself land on a hard surface. Where was she? All around her she could see ancient objects, tall statues carved out of some sort of black granite or marble. One of them had the body of a man and the head of a dog, topped with some sort of crown.

Before she could think about it more, a young woman came in and lit the pile of ashes in the statue's hands, kneeling at the base. The girl muttered a few unintelligible verses. Glossy black hair waved down to her waist, full of different-colored beads and precious stones. On her head was a diadem full of the same. The lithe figure was covered in a thin white fabric, accentuating her womanly figure. Who was

she?

Gauzy curtains fluttered in the dry, hot wind, making the flames waver. Tatiana blinked hard, trying to make sense of it all. Where in heaven's name was she?

The woman rose, nodded to the statue and drifted over to the opening leading out to the terrace. Tatiana looked around, trying to make sense of it all. Crudely drawn figures decorated the walls, most of them in obscure poses, impossible for any human to attain.

The mysterious figure stayed at the terrace, her delicate hands holding onto the stone railing as she stared to the world below. Curious, Tatiana moved toward the woman to find out what was going on. Suddenly, a noise to her left drew her attention. A man entered the room. His well-muscled chest was bare and deeply tanned, highlighted by the gold amulets on his thick arms. The lower half of his well-built body was swathed in the same silk-like material, falling just about mid-thigh. Dark hair trailed over his shoulders, coming to rest just below his shoulder blades. Black kohl surrounded his eyes, but that could not stop her from recognizing him.

It was Nicholas.

"Why did you light the flames of Anubis?" he questioned the woman, his voice amazingly clear and the language understandable.

"My Caesar is gone," the woman mourned without turning around. "They have burned him in Rome like a pile of rubbish."

Nicholas advanced upon the woman and stood with her, his arm around her waist. "My Cleopatra, forget about him. He is gone now. Anubis guided his spirit that night through the Tuat. He will be safe soon."

Tatiana sensed the love Nicholas bore for this woman called Cleopatra, yet she somehow did not care for it. She looked to Cleopatra. Aye, Cleopatra could only love men who could help her keep her throne. "It is of little comfort to me, Ngozi," she sighed. "My only hope is to gain Marc Antony's favor, and perhaps, Egypt can be realigned with Rome again."

Tatiana was taken aback. Was this really Nicholas?

"Why do you fight to be realigned with Rome?"

"Because Rome is our life-blood. They will buy our grain and other goods, affording us to build a greater Egypt. Once I am finished, the son of Caesar will sit upon my throne and rule both Egypt and Rome together, as befits a king."

Tatiana watched as Nicholas cringed. It was almost as if this woman thrust a spear into his heart. "Where is Cesarion?"

"He is well hidden and is being tutored in both Egyptian and Roman cultures. When the time is right, I shall bring him home to rule Egypt as I would have."

"Be careful, for there are many enemies who would pay a high price to find out his precise location."

"That is why only my most trusted emissary knows. He will take his own life before he would provide that information to anyone."

"My Queen," Nicholas started to say.

Her finger at his lips silenced him. "Say nothing else. Leave me, for I wish to be alone now."

As those words died in the air, the scene changed incredibly fast, the pictures around her flashing past her in a blur. Suddenly, she found herself in a temple of some sort. There were fires burning in some sort of clay lamps, as well as torches, almost as if someone would be entering any moment. Statues of the same deity she had seen previously decorated the room as well as the same sort of drawings that had been in Cleopatra's room. In one corner stood a large golden casket, cast to look like a human form. Was that a coffin for someone?

Inside of this chamber was a small boat. Filled with chests of gold and precious gems, the ship could only fit perhaps a handful of people.

To her left, she saw the glimmer of approaching light. Tatiana turned to see Cleopatra entering the room, followed by two women and a brigade of about ten men. She walked with her tear-stained face held high. Sadness filled the room, pulling Tatiana down with it, her own tears streaking down her cheeks.

In the middle of the room stood a granite-like slate, flat and smooth. Cleopatra walked up to it, touching it gingerly. "It is cold, just as I had always imagined it," she turned to the men behind her. "Close the tomb and leave Egypt before the Romans invade. You have been good men to me--always take comfort in that."

They bowed and left her, closing the heavy door behind them, sealing her in forever. The women with her seemed unfazed, as if this is what they had lived their entire lives for. "Bring me my basket of figs," she told the one woman and sat on the slab. "It is time for me to partake of those precious fruits."

"Please, my lady, do not eat them!" cried one woman, her hair plaited around her head in a tidy arrangement of rows. "I beg of you."

Cleopatra patted the woman in a motherly fashion. "Do not worry, my dear, there is room in the royal barge for all of us."

Tatiana sensed the deep sadness residing in Cleopatra. Antony was dead now, having falling on his own sword after discovering Octavian's forces were closing in on Alexandria. Death would be her only solution as well. If she had lived, Octavian would have thought it was his right to have her, body and soul, just as Julius Caesar had. No, she could never let that happen.

Tatiana watched helplessly as Cleopatra took the basket from one of the women and opened it. She could see something moving amongst the figs, almost gliding. It was a snake!

"No, do not do this!" she cried, but no one could hear her. These were but echoes of the past, being replayed for her.

Cleopatra put her hand in the basket, closing the lid. "I will be joining you across the river of death--" Her face grimaced in pain. "--my love."

The snake had bitten her, injecting its powerful poison. Cleopatra sat quietly for a few moments, the expressions of pain indicating the snake was biting her repeatedly.

Tatiana cried at the scene, knowing there was nothing she could do for the poor woman.

Cleopatra's eyes closed slowly as the poison worked its way through her veins, the basket falling to the floor.

Suddenly, a figure appeared out of the darkness, rushing to her side. “Oh, my love, what have you done?” questioned the figure.

The dim glow of the torches glowed on his face, showing it to be Nicholas who must have been waiting in the shadows, knowing she would come to her tomb. “I am going to be with my love,” she murmured, her lips barely moving. “I have failed Egypt, so it is better that I shame her no further.”

“I will not let you die,” Nicholas screamed, his voice ricocheting from the stone walls. “Come back to me, my precious love!”

“No, my beloved Ngozi. I cannot stay because you wish me to. The love I bear for you is ... not ... strong ... enough,” she gasped. “When I am gone, send ... for ... priests. I ... must ... make my ... my ... my...” With that, Cleopatra’s eyes rolled upward, indicating that life had left her body.

“No!” Nicholas screamed as he held her body close to his, rocking her gently. “You cannot be dead, my beloved one!”

The servants who had accompanied Cleopatra to her tomb were lifeless, as well, scattered at the base of the slab.

Tatiana’s sobs were uncontrollable now. She felt so sorry for Nicholas. He had lost his one true love.

Before she could think any further on it, the only remaining open window turned as black as the night, the sound of beating wings filling the air. What was happening?

Ebony blurs filled the room, floating around like a large storm cloud, hovering over the entire scene. Nicholas looked up, the fear in his eyes growing.

The cloud funneled down in a cone, whirling quickly until it started to slow down and take on a human form. From toes to head, it became that of a woman with long, black hair and dusky skin. Silvery material wrapped around her lower body, skimming the floor. Her upper body was covered in the same material, leaving her belly bare. A crown rested on her head, studded with precious jewels.

“Ngozi, Ngozi,” the woman said, gliding over to him. “That name does not suit you. I will have to consider giving you another one.”

“Wh-who ... are you?” he stammered, still holding onto the lifeless body of Cleopatra.

“Your redeemer,” she purred, her fingers trailing over his shoulders. “From this moment on, you will feel no fear.”

Nicholas’ face suddenly relaxed, as if the fear he had been feeling fled from him. “What do you want of me?”

“What I want is a consort worthy of me, my precious one,” she said staring down at him. “I am Zakara, Queen of the Night Creatures, and I have chosen you to be my prince.”

“Why me?”

“You possess all the qualities I seek,” Zakara continued on, swiping Cleopatra’s body from his arms and knocking it to the floor. “Come with me, and I will show you things you never thought possible.”

“I wish to stay here with my love,” he insisted, reaching down for her

body.

Zakara's hand grabbed him by throat. "Oh, no, my dear one, you will not be like her. You will live forever at my side, ruling beside me for all eternity."

"I refuse."

"It is much too late for a refusal," she said maliciously as she opened her mouth exposing rows of sharpened teeth. "As for your name, I have a new one for you. From this moment on, you will be known as Nicholas, King of the Undead."

Nicholas' hands clutched onto her wrist, trying to pry her hand from his throat. It was like iron. "Let ... go ... of me!" he gasped as her grip tightened.

"So be it," she murmured, her head descending. "You will be letting go of your mortal life. Be prepared to embrace your immortal one."

Silence filled the air as Zakara sank her teeth into Nicholas' neck, his hands frantically clawing at her....

The world zipped by in a quick blur, the colors melding into one, lights flashing and suddenly, Tatiana felt herself transported back into her own body, slamming back against the settee.

"Do you believe me now, Tatiana?"

His question hit her before she was actually ready for it. "I ... do ... not know what to say," she gasped, her chest heaving. "I do have one question, Nicholas. If I ask it, would you be willing to answer it honestly?" He nodded. "Do you wish me to become what you are?"

Nicholas looked to the others, one by one, silently communicating something to them. Without a word, all of them went to the window and left amid the beating of wings, a black blot against the silvery pall of the moon.

He sank down next to her once they were alone. "That is one decision you will have to make, my love. As for my wish, aye, I do wish for you to be with me for all eternity, to be my wife. I will not, however, force you into making a choice."

Tatiana leapt from her place, walking away from him, her hands wringing nervously. "How long will you give to decide?"

Nicholas' hands on her shoulders felt wonderful, soothing in an odd sort of way. "There is not much time, Tatiana. There are forces working against you that will stop at nothing to kill you."

"Why would they want to kill me?" she asked innocently, hoping he would know nothing of her activities.

"Because of your work with the forces to put the Empress on the throne as sole ruler and depose the Emperor," Nicholas offered, spinning her around to face him. The sexual light in his eyes was almost too much to bear.

"I am not," she lied. "I am merely..."

"...The Empress' messenger in such matters," he said coolly, pulling her against his hard line. "You were seen at the Black Horse Tavern dressed as a Captain. You threatened General Federov. I believe your exact words were, 'Let me go now, or I will castrate you with one shot of this pistol.' Am I correct?"

Her fear stormed through her veins. "Ho-how ... did you know that?"

"I have my spies, my dear. Do you not remember the barmaids who were

watching you?”

Desperately, Tatiana thought back to that that morning that seemed so far away, but was not, reliving the moment in her mind. Aye, that was it! Gabrielle, Siobhan and Alexandra had been the ones watching her from the bar, almost if they were waiting to help her in some way. “That is where I knew them from,” she said quickly, feeling Nicholas’ hands kneading her breasts gently, his lips on her flesh, lighting her sexual fire.

“I sent them there to protect you, Tatiana,” he murmured against her flesh. “Just as I plan to protect you for all eternity.”

Her legs threatened to buckle as his kiss deepened. “Oh, Nicholas, what are you doing to me?”

“Showing you what eternity would be like spent with me,” he whispered, turning her around to face him. “Your life would be beyond imagination.” His lips slid over hers, deliciously heady. The velvety tongue danced over the edges, begging for entry. Hungrily, she let him in, dancing in tune with his machinations, her body completely on fire.

Nicholas snapped his fingers, and her dress fell to her feet, leaving her to stand there in just her stockings. His hands gripped her backside hard, pulling her against the soft leather encasing his body. She was beyond hungry for him, her body crying out for him.

“You are delicious, my love,” he whispered against the softness of her lips. “I want to taste all of you.”

Just as she was about to open her mouth in protest, Nicholas lifted her up and put her on the settee, holding her legs apart as he knelt in front of her. “You are perfect in every way, Tatiana,” he whispered, her scent filling the air around him. “I could taste you for all eternity.”

Hungrily, he savored every drop of juice springing from her, an endless fountain of desire. Tatiana wrapped her legs around his neck, her hands buried in his long, black locks. “Oh, Nicholas!” she cried as the ecstasy rose higher, her hips rising to meet every stroke of his tongue as he delved deeper inside of her.

Just as she was about to climax, Nicholas pulled away, replacing his tongue with his manhood, his hands pinning her hands to her sides. He arched against her, driving deep inside of her. Tatiana could no longer contain herself. Freeing her wrists, she stroked his leather-clad body as he pumped into her, hard and strong, touching her deeply inside.

Still, he would not let her reach her heights. Holding her against him, he swept her from the couch and eased to the floor so that he was on his back, firmly inside of her.

Tatiana moved to her own natural rhythm, his hands on her hips, guiding her completely. Nicholas’ own ecstasy escaped his mouth, mingling with hers. Suddenly, the raw sexual power returned to her. Tatiana arched her back, using her newfound muscles, holding Nicholas tight inside of her. Sweeping her hair up, she let it fall like a white curtain, gracing the top of her thighs, driving Nicholas even more mad with desire.

“Faster,” he murmured, urging her movements.

“No,” she replied, leaning down close to his face. “I am your master now, and I will allow you to have pleasure when I deem fit.”

She slowed, pulling upwards until he was almost out, then took him back in deeply. Tatiana repeated this several times, refusing to let him reach his rapture. She knew that she was torturing him, but it was all part of the game.

Just as she took him in again, Nicholas urged her to turn around. She obliged, not sure what he wanted of her. Before she knew it, she was on her knees, with Nicholas behind her. His strokes were powerful, yet gentle, enough to elicit gasps of desire from her.

His fingers held onto her hips as he drove into her, touching some secret place that set her body to trembling with climatic results.

Finally, the torture was over, allowing her to have her moment of rapture. It washed over her sweeter than before, her knees weak with delight. Is this what love was all about?

Nicholas pulled out of her and leaned against her, stroking her shoulder. “This is what eternity would be like for us,” he murmured. “Making love for hours on end.”

“Aye, that we could,” she gasped, the trembling beginning to cease. “There is only one thing that I cannot bring myself to think about.”

“What is that?”

“The feasting on human blood.”

* * * *

The fire crackled on the hearth, licking up the sides of the blackened stone. Nicholas and Tatiana sat before it, leaning against the settee, his arms draped carefully across her bare shoulders. She had covered herself up mostly with the remains of her dress, keeping her shoulders free of material.

“We must feast on blood to survive, Tatiana, but rest assured, we take only what we need, nothing more. What we do is feed on the undesirables, not the innocents.”

“But that is still taking human life, Nicholas,” she conjectured as she snuggled closer. From the little time they had spent together, she knew that she was falling in love with him. Nicholas was gentle despite his brutal nature, forgoing his desire for blood while he was with her. He could be protective and nurturing, all the while being very commanding and protective.

“Aye, but at what cost? If a man intends to commit murder, would it not be like saving the life of the victim if I killed him before he could do it?”

Her brow lifted slightly. “I suppose, if that is the reasoning you choose.”

“That is not what I choose, Tatiana. That is the way of the world.”

She remained quiet for a moment, the thoughts still whirling inside of her head. How could she have not known he was an Upir? “How is it that I did not know who you were or what you were?”

“Because I kept you from doing so, until I was ready to tell you,” he said quietly, toying with the fingers in her lap.

“How so?”

"The things I do are in my power," he said, pulling his left arm over and exposing his wrist. "Such as this." His right hand contained a small dagger. Where it came from, she was not sure.

She watched as he laid the sparkling silver against his dusky flesh. Realizing what he meant to do, she clamped her hand on his. "No, Nicholas, do not do this!"

"I must to make you understand who and what I really am."

"I do understand! Please do not hurt yourself in this manner."

"It will be all right, Tatiana. Let me show you what I need to."

Still fearing for him, she released his hand. Drawing the dagger over his flesh, the skin parted, allowing a thick stream of blood to flow. It landed on the floor, forming a congealing puddle. Quickly, she tried to stop the bleeding by placing her hand over the wound, but he stopped her. "No, my dear. I want you to watch what happens."

She looked down. Suddenly, the blood stopped flowing, and the skin knitted itself back together, as if it had never been parted. "Is that part of your power, too?"

"Aye, that it is, Tatiana, and it could be yours, too, if you wish it to be."

She turned away, her thumb going to her lip. "Do you not realize what you are asking me?"

"Aye, I do."

Her mind whirled, a thick eddy of thoughts that refused to leave her. "I do not know, Nicholas, if I can give up everything I know to become something that is unholy."

"What is unholy about me? I have not sprung from demons. I was a mortal once, just as you are. I was born of a man and a woman who loved each other very much, just as you were."

Tatiana felt the tears come again. "Does this mean our children will be demons?"

Nicholas' sigh cut through the darkness. "There will be no children, Tatiana."

"What do you mean?"

"Being what I am, I cannot sire children on another vampire. If you decide to become one of us, you will not be able to bear them."

Tatiana let out a sigh of regret and relief. "There is no possibility?"

"None," he said mournfully. "It is the burden we have to bear."

She looked to the floor. She had been worried for the last week or so that she had been carrying Nicholas' child for her courses had failed to occur at their appointed time. "Then that settles it."

"Settles what?"

The time has come to tell him of her fears. "I had been worrying for a week or so now that I am carrying your child for my courses have failed to show. Now that I know what you have told me..."

Nicholas grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. "What did you say?"

“I said that my monthly has not come.” She paled. “What does this mean?”

“You could be bearing my child,” he said proudly, pulling her close to him.

She pushed him away. “No, Nicholas, you just said you could not sire a child.”

“I said that I could never sire a child on another vampire, but I never said anything about a mortal woman.”

Fear stormed through her. Was she carrying the child of the undead? “No, ‘tis not possible,” she choked, inching away from him. “Dear God in heaven, tell me this is not happening.”

“Do you love me?”

He asked that question before she was ready for it. “I ... I ... do not know,” she stammered, her heart pounding against the inside of her chest. Nicholas had saved her on more than one occasion, of that she was sure. If he had sent the female vampires to watch over her at the tavern, then he must have surely followed her during her journey. Since that night, she had had continual nightmares of creatures falling upon her. “Oh, Nicholas, what am I to do if I am pregnant with your child?”

“Become my wife,” he said softly, pulling her closer and kissing the tips of her fingers. “It is the only possible solution.”

She started sobbing. This was all too much for her. What was she to do?

Chapter Nine

Tatiana trembled in the Empress' presence, her mind elsewhere. Thankfully, this morning she had received the sign she had been waiting for. She was not carrying Nicholas' child, after all.

Despite the relief that she felt, her thoughts still whirled on Nicholas' words. *Become my wife. It is the only solution.* If only it were that simple!

"Tatiana!"

She jerked her head in the Empress' direction. "Yes, my lady?"

"Have you not been listening to a word I have said?" the Empress expressed in an irritated tone, her hands smoothing down the folds of her voluminous crimson gown that accommodated the growing child.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty, I was thinking of..."

"You were thinking of that swarthy Englishman," the Empress snapped as she busily scribbled out a quick note. "I want you to memorize this and burn it."

"To whom am I to give this message?"

"General Federov will be waiting in Petersburg at Madame Sousatksa's house of ill-repute. Dress as you did before and go in as if you are going to select a girl. Ask for Georgiana's room. Federov will be there waiting for you. Once you deliver your message, you will come back here. When you return, I have a new position for you."

Her dove-gray eyes widened. "What new position?"

"I will tell you when you return, Tatiana. For now--" The Empress rose from her writing desk and glided over to her, with note in hand. "--take this and memorize it. It is giving exact times that our army will be marching on Petersburg. Thankfully, my husband, with all his idiotic behavior, has alienated his army, thus making it easy for me to take over the throne." She turned to Tatiana, her blue eyes glowing with excitement. "As you wish, Your Majesty," Tatiana said gloomily as she tucked the letter into the open neckline of her gown. "I will commit it to memory tonight."

The Empress' hand swept under her chin and lifted her face. Concern drifted over the older woman's face. "Is there something amiss?"

"Wh-why do you say so, Your Majesty?" Tatiana knew she looked terrible. It came from the many nights of not being able to sleep because of Nicholas' proposal.

"You are very pale and drawn, my dear."

"I am always pale..."

"Not like this," the Empress continued, searching her face. "You have the pallor of burned ashes."

"I am well, Your Majesty, never fear," she said, consoling the monarch over her condition. "I will be able to perform as expected."

"That is not what concerns me, Tatiana. Is there something you are not telling me?"

Tatiana pulled away. "No, Your Majesty. 'Tis just that I am tired, and I need to study the message so that I can commit it to memory."

"Very well," commented the reticent Empress, "you may go to do what you need to do. If you at any time feel as though you cannot accomplish this, then I will find another who can."

She bowed her head. "Nyet, Your Majesty. I can do it."

"Then I will see you in the morning."

With her dismissal in hand, Tatiana left the Empress' room and glided with quick feet down to her own room, the parchment rubbing against her skin. Her thoughts whirled endlessly in her mind, coming together in a confusing mix. Was she going to be able to memorize every detail correctly? For the first time since she had begun, uncertainty had clouded her vision, making it hard for her to see. Why did love have to make it all so difficult?

* * * *

Tatiana slammed the door of her chamber and leaned against it, breathing heavily. This was a large undertaking....

"I hope that breathlessness is for me," Nicholas commented lazily.

She looked up to see Nicholas sitting at the window, his left leg crooked on the sill with his elbow resting on it. His black hair blew in the light breeze, his white shirt opened to the waist, revealing that deliciously tanned skin. Ebony breeches clung to his thighs, disappearing down into matching boots. "Ho-how did you get in?"

"I can get in anywhere I please," he said in a low and sensual voice. "And I do mean anywhere."

Her chest ached from the unshed tears. "Will you please leave me, Nicholas? I have so much to do, and there is little time...."

Before she could finish, he was at her side, his movements occurring in the blink of an eye. "I know, Tatiana. There is no need to hide your secrets from me, for I know them all," he murmured, taking her by the hand and leading her to the bed. "Come, let me ease those tensions."

It was all too much for her. She collapsed to the floor, her body shaking. "Not now, Nicholas," she sobbed. "Please leave me so that I can do what I must."

"That will never happen, my love," he said, sweeping her from the floor into his thick arms. "You have not been sleeping, have you?"

"I have been sleeping enough," she sniffed, nuzzling her face into the chilly nape of his neck.

"No you have not, and do not lie to me, for I can tell when you do," he replied, laying her in the bed. "You need rest."

His fingers quickly went to work on her lacings. "What are you doing?" She was quite prepared to let him take what he wanted despite her objections. What happened next shocked her.

"Removing your clothes so you will be more comfortable," he said with a smile. "If you are frightened that I will take you against your will, put that thought out of

your mind. I am merely putting you to bed for a while. You need the rest.”

“But I thought...”

“...I would take you against your will for my own selfish pleasure? Come, you must know me better than that, Tatiana,” he lightly scolded. “You must stop comparing me to mortal men, who have no regard to anyone else’s concerns but their own.”

Strangely, she felt enveloped in a warm blanket of security. His tenderness knew no bounds. “Why do you waste your time on my laces? I thought with your power, you would just take them away.”

He urged her up and removed her bodice, exposing her skin to the air. “This is the part I really enjoy and miss from my mortal days. Why hasten the experience?”

Her sobs subsided as Nicholas stripped her of the rest of her gown. Towering over her, he stared at her naked form. “You are one true beauty, Tatiana,” he murmured, his breeches straining. “However, tonight, I will be taking care of you, since you do spend all of your time taking care of others.” His black brow lifted. “Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“Then I will get you something. Is there anything you desire?” She shook her head. His full lips spread into a smile. “Let me surprise you, then.”

* * * *

Tatiana felt full after a delicious meal of meat and cheese, with a bit of bread and wine. “You are taking very good care of me, Nicholas,” she murmured as she nestled among the pillows, pulling her covers up to her neck. Her favorite silk dressing gown covered her, making her feel even warmer and relaxed. “I could not have asked for better.”

“Nor could I,” he replied and removed his shirt.

She shivered with delight, her nether lips quivering with anticipation, her tiredness completely gone. “Are you staying?”

“That goes without question,” he answered as he lowered his tall frame into a chair and removed his boots, setting them side-by-side like soldiers at attention. “I will be here with you while you sleep.” Nicholas slipped his breeches from his body, exposing his perfect maleness.

Tatiana licked her lips and closed her eyes, remembering what it was like to have his hands caress her skin and coax the fire from her veins. “Much thanks, Nicholas,” she stated as he slipped into bed next to her, his eager rod evident against her backside, her body moving. “You are a great comfort to me.”

Nicholas’ hand stroked her thigh lightly. “Are you still tired?”

She turned over to face him. “Not anymore.”

* * * *

Zakara let out a blood-curdling peal of laughter that rang out through the halls of her black dungeon of a lair. Alexei the thorn was dead, never to intrude on her power again. No man, mortal or immortal, would ever do that. This was her world to rule and conquer, made so by her own hand.

The air was acrid, smelling of musky death and desiccation. It had once housed royal prisoners walled up into various caves, never to see the light of day again. Their spirits stayed in this dank place, held there by her so that they could do her bidding. Perhaps it was time for them to do as she willed.

“What is it, my Queen, that vexes you so?”

It was the spirit of a young girl who had been caught sleeping with a former Empress. The outraged Emperor ordered the young girl walled in here alive for her punishment. Since then, the girl’s ghost, driven by a mad desire for revenge, was willing to do anything to exact it.

“Nothing vexes me, Eva. I am, in fact, the opposite. I am quite happy.”

Eva’s wispy face contorted into an expression of confusion. “I do not understand.”

Zakara stared at her hard. “One of my obstacles is now out of my way. Now all I must do is get the other one out of the way, and Nicholas will belong to me again as he should.”

“Ah, now I see,” Eva remarked in a thin, melancholic voice that resounded through the stone walls. “What is that other obstacle?”

Zakara laughed harder. “A simpleton wench who has Nicholas thinking that he wants to marry her.” Her smile faded. “The truth is that she is no simpleton. The wench plots with the pretend-Russian whore in order to secure the harlot’s unified rule of Russia. She is far more intelligent than I thought, and all my attempts to eradicate her have failed.”

“There must be a way to get rid of her?”

“Aye, there is,” Zakara announced, her glee beginning to return. “The simpleton is to deliver a letter to General Federov, giving times and locations for the whore’s armies to move in and take over the throne. She will memorize all the information and will then burn the letter. Now, what I wish for you to do is to take the letter before she burns it, then make sure it gets to Peterhof and into the hands of her father.”

“What will her father do?”

Her maniacal laughter returned again. “Do you not understand? I have planted a seed in her father’s mind as to her deception. All he needs is one more piece of evidence, and that will place her in front of the firing squad. Once she is dead, there will be no reclaiming her--” Her hands rubbed together in delight. “--and Nicholas will have no choice but to return to me.”

“When do you wish for me to leave?” Eva questioned in a hushed tone as she floated in the air, a blue haze surrounding her spirit. “There is nothing I wish more than to see the downfall of the Russian empire.”

“Do as I command, and you will see that and so much more,” Zakara promised. She placed a lazy leg over the arm of her throne, feeling the juices in her privates flowing. Perhaps it was time for a little diversion....

* * * *

“Nicholas!” screamed the name in his mind.

He awakened quickly, reaching for Tatiana. She was safely tucked against

him, her head on his shoulder. Smoothing down the pale curtain of waves, he felt himself stirring again. It never ceased to amaze him how even the simplest touch of her or perfume ignited his desire.

“What is wrong?” he questioned Raphael.

“We must gather, for Zakara’s power is growing. That is the only way we can halt her.”

He let out a quiet, but weary sigh. “How can I leave Tatiana? If I am not here, Zakara will attack her.”

“Nay, she will not, because she is preoccupied with something else.”

“What is that?”

“I have not been able to determine that,” Raphael stated in an exasperated tone. “She has blocked me at every turn.”

“Very well,” Nicholas conceded, slipping out from beneath Tatiana’s warm body and the cozy bed. “I will join you shortly.”

With that, silence entered his mind, telling him that Raphael went about the necessary steps to make their gathering fruitful.

It pained him to leave her, looking so innocent and fragile lying there, one slim leg sneaking out from beneath the covers. He hardened immediately, growing worse as his gaze traveled upward. Tatiana lay on her belly, her arm curled around her head, her face turned in his direction. The curve of her breast with a partial pink nipple peaking out made it all the more difficult to bear.

A low growl emitted from his throat as he willed his hunting clothes to appear. This had better be very quick because his senses tingled at the thought of leaving Tatiana alone. It would be the perfect opportunity to strike.

Nicholas strode over to the open window and stared out into the night, as the baying of the wolves blended into the darkness. Owls hunted, swooping through the sky in search of meals. The world below was cast in a ghostly gray, enhanced by the roundness of the moon. He took a deep breath. His instinct told him to stay, but something else altogether pulled him to go to Raphael. Perhaps this would be the time of their reckoning with her....

Tatiana stirred a bit, moving about, forcing the cover to expose more of her luscious body. He felt the iron grow in his privates. It was best to leave before he could not pull himself away.

Casting a gaze to the table next to Tatiana’s bed, he noticed its emptiness. It would never do for him to leave and not let her know what was happening. He blinked hard, conjuring up a letter conveying all the necessary words. Hopefully, he would be back before she had awakened, so that she would never have known he had left.

Turning back to the window, he leapt from it, becoming one with the night. Soon, he would return, and all would be right again.

* * * *

Nicholas entered their lair, walking through the dank tunnels. “Raphael?” he called out, the snap of the torches lighting as he walked past. “Where is everyone?”

He walked into the larger chamber of the cavern, searching through the darkness. A shape lingered near the darker part, huddled on a rock with its head bent.

“Raphael?”

The head jerked up. “Nicholas? What are you doing here?” He rose from his spot and strode over, closing the distance in several quick strides.

“You called me, remember?” Nicholas remarked slowly, as the realization dawned on him. “Wait a moment, it was not you, was it?”

“Dear God in heaven,” Raphael said slowly. “Zakara lured you away from Tatiana so that she could get the poor girl,” he snarled, his fingers closing around the miniature portrait in his hand, more than likely of his beloved Elizabeth. “I swear by all that is holy, Zakara will never lay a hand again on any else’s love....”

Nicholas did not bother to listen to the rest of Raphael’s words. He was already on his way back to Tatiana’s side. “Gather the others, for I will need all the strength I can get.”

* * * *

Tatiana awoke when she heard the sound of footsteps in her room. They were slow and methodical, almost calculated to a point. “Nicholas?” she questioned the darkness.

“Aye, ‘tis me, my beloved,” echoed his voice from the shadows. “Did you sleep well?”

She was a little unnerved by the fact she could not see him, but only could hear his footsteps as he walked around the bed. “Aye, that I did, especially with you at my side.”

He moved toward her side of the bed. “That is good, my dear,” she watched as he walked past the footboard, his fingers lightly touching the gauzy curtains covering the sides. “When you become one of us, you will have a long rest.”

His voice sounded strange, making her fear rise. “What are you speaking of, my love?”

“We vampires rest quite a bit,” he remarked as he wound his way to her side. Once he reached the window, he stood in front of it, the hazy moon casting an eerie glow around his form. “Are you prepared to become one of us?”

“I ... I ... still have not made a decision,” she stammered, pulling the covers up to her chin, hiding her nakedness. “I will need more time.”

“There is no more time, Tatiana. If you do not agree to become one of us, then I will take you by force. Is that what you wish for?”

She stared at the form hard, her fear reaching new levels. It was Nicholas’ body and his voice, but it was not him. “Why do you say such things? You had promised before...”

Nicholas was on her in a flash, pinning her frightened form to the bed. “I am not a patient man, Tatiana, and I have needs. If you do not wish to fulfill them, I will find another willing woman...”

“Then go find yourself one, Zakara.” That voice issued from the true Nicholas’ form by the window.

The figure in front of her spun around, suddenly changing form to that of a woman. Black hair, turned almost blue by the pale light, streamed down the back, nearly touched the feminine backside. Silver material encompassed the slender figure, fluttering

in the wind. Suddenly, the realization came to her. This was the creature that had attacked her in the woods not too long before! Terrified, she huddled into the bed, silently wishing Nicholas would come to her.

"It did not take you long to know that you had been tricked," the woman said in a low tone. "Your age is catching up with you."

"Not as much as yours is, Zakara."

Tatiana shuddered at the name, knowing that this was the Queen of the Upir who held her frozen in the forest. "Please let Nicholas alone. If 'tis me you wish for, then take me. Spare him," she begged from her bed, the strength for those words coming from an unknown source.

Zakara whirled around, her hellish eyes glowing red. "The only thing I want from you is your death, so say no more until I am finished."

Tatiana tried to speak again, but found her mouth would not move no matter how much she tried. Clawing at her lips, she could not open them. Blood flowed from where she had scratched them, dripping down her chin.

"You will pay for that, Zakara, one way or another."

Zakara's hellish laughter rebounded through the room. "You think you can best me?"

"Aye, that I can."

"Then show me what power you have."

Nicholas was silent for a moment, staring at Zakara. Suddenly, his eyes began to glow as though his soul was on fire, his mouth murmuring words in a strange language that she had never heard before, the air becoming thick.

"I have anticipated your move, Nicholas, and it will not work. Come, forget this harlot and return to me where you belong."

Nicholas stopped his words, continuing to stare at Zakara, his eyes still blazing. "I would lose my own life first."

"Then so be it," Zakara remarked as she strode over to him, a finger tracing his cheek. "We could have ruled the world, you and I. 'Tis a pity that I will have to now destroy you."

"Just as you have anticipated my spell, I have anticipated yours. Tell me, where is your grimoire?"

Zakara's voice dropped. "Where *is* my grimoire?"

"Well hidden and will remain that way if you do not leave here now."

Before she could answer, the sound of beating wings entered the room, accompanying the pervading blackness. Once inside, the thick ebony cloud divided into five columns which evolved into familiar human shapes, all of them dressed in the same onyx attire as Nicholas.

"Tell me where it is!" she shrieked, staring at all of them.

"Leave here, and you will find it," Nicholas warned, advancing on her. "This is your final warning."

Intense heat rolled from Zakara in waves, indicating her wrath. "You may have won this battle, Nicholas, but I will be victorious in the war, never fear," she promised, glaring at them all. "All of you will return to me one way or another, 'tis only

a matter of time, and I am a patient woman.” Zakara turned and stared at her. “‘Tis only a matter of time for you, too, my poppet.” Her full lips spread into an evil grin. “Only a matter of time.”

Her form melted into a thick onyx cloud, a slow, steady beating of leathery wings rising through the air. It lifted high, swirling around their heads, as her maniacal words filtered through the air. *Only a matter of time*, followed by her hellish laughter. With that, the bank of haze flew out the window, toward the east.

Tatiana’s mouth was finally free. “Nicholas!” she screamed, holding her arms out to him.

He was in them in an instant, rocking her back and forth, gently. “Shh, my little one,” he murmured, stroking her head.

“Why does she want to kill me so badly?” she sobbed, the tears staining her covers.

Nicholas sighed deeply. “She wants me to return to her side and be her King.”

“Why did you ever go to her, Nicholas?” That question fell from her lips, words she had never intended to say.

“Because she preyed upon my weakness, making me promises she never intended to keep,” Nicholas confessed as he held her tight. “I shared her bed for a time, but once the veil of evil was lifted from my eyes, I knew that I had to break away from her. The others felt the same as I did, so we formed our own ‘family’ of vampires, bound to be at each other’s side no matter what occurred.”

She looked up into his face. “Who is she? Is she some sort of demon?”

He shook his head. “No, my love. She was born in the very bowels of hell. Her mother was Adam’s first wife, Lilith, and her father is the Devil himself. Upon Zakara’s birth, God cursed her to hunger for living blood for eternity. In due time, she had created more vampires like herself, using her father’s tactics of deceit and trickery to get them.” He sighed. “I was one of her victims, but now God has given me a new chance to hope for the future.”

“What chance is that?”

“You.”

She trembled a bit against him, her arms winding around his neck. “Please stay with me tonight, Nicholas. I could not bear to be alone.”

“Your wish is my command, my love. I will never leave your side again.”

* * * *

Zakara leaned back in her throne, her breathing heavy. Her precious grimoire was safe now, hidden from anyone else’s prying eyes. As an extra precaution, she’d put a spell on it so that none of the others could trace it using their powers.

“Have you eradicated the obstacle, my Queen?” Eva questioned in a low tone as she hovered near.

“Not yet, but I will, never fear,” she answered, the anger in her so fearful that the chamber was getting hot from it. “Do you know where the letter is that you are to steal?”

“I do, my Queen, and will do so after the little harlot has memorized all of

the contents. I have also taken liberty of finding her father's chamber and where to precisely put it so that he will find it."

"You have served me well, Eva," she looked to the wispy form near her right elbow, her smile spreading. "Perhaps as a special treat, I will let you pleasure me tonight."

Eva touched her arm. "I could think of no better honor, my Queen."

Chapter Ten

"You cannot mean to do this, Tatiana," Nicholas said, his voice more than concerned. "It is far too dangerous for you."

"I know, Nicholas," she replied as she adjusted her hat on her head and straightened the hem of her uniform tunic. "But I must do this for the good of Russia."

Nicholas stood up from the bed and stormed over to her, grabbing her shoulders tightly. "No, Tatiana, you cannot do this, at least not without help."

"I have done well so far without your help, Nicholas," she murmured in a low tone.

"You will not go alone this time, Tatiana, no matter what you think. I will be beside you in this."

"I do not wish to mire you down in all the intrigue...."

Nicholas let out a throaty chuckle. "'Tis a bit late for that, my dear," he released her shoulders. "Perhaps I should dress the part as well." With a wave of his hand, Nicholas completely disappeared.

"Wh-where are you?" she questioned into the quietness of the air.

There was no answer. Suddenly, she felt pressure between her legs that turned into soft stroking, making her utterly wet with desire. "Right, here, Tatiana," he whispered low into her ear, the pressure between her legs intensifying.

She rocked for a moment with his strokes, losing herself in his ministrations, her body beginning to melt. "Please, Nicholas, this is difficult enough without you making it more so."

"True, my love," his hand caressed the side of her face gently, her skin burning from his touch. "I am only a breath away if you should need me."

Tatiana drew a deep breath, drawing on the strength Nicholas gave her. Would it be enough to get her through this?

* * * *

Ivan paced his chamber uneasily, his hands behind his back. What was he to do about Tatiana? After all she was his daughter, blood of his blood. How could he viciously destroy her?

It was beyond his control now. If only she had come to him and begged for mercy, he might have been able to do more for her, but since she'd taken matters into her own hands, he could do nothing.

Several sharp raps took him away from his thoughts. "Enter," he growled and stepped behind his desk, sitting down and pretending to be working on something important.

A page entered his room, bowing deeply. "The Emperor wishes to see you in a quarter of an hour, my lord."

"What does the Emperor wish to see me about?"

“He has not made that known to me, my lord, but he was adamant that he must see you.”

“Very well,” he sighed. “Tell his Majesty that he will see me at the appointed time.”

“Aye, my lord,” the page said quietly. He bowed and left, silently closing the gilded doors behind him.

Ivan stared down at the heap of paper sitting in front of him, all correspondence from Mishka. The papers related the dealings of Tatiana, as well as information on the strange Lord Wetherington who had apparently taken up residence in his house.

His fist pounded the table. How dare she turn his home into a brothel! Why, according to Mishka, it was frequent that Tatiana never left her chamber, parading her lover in front of everyone, making a mockery of his station. He growled. He would tolerate the insult no more. Ivan cupped his head in his hands, staring down at the papers. There were a few things he could use against Tatiana, but nothing solid. All of it was conjecture, even the paper he thought he could use against her. But if there were only something else....

Words, almost glowing, glared at him from a page near the bottom. Taking ginger hand, he grasped the edge of the dry parchment and pulled it out, staring it in disbelief.

It gave all the precise locations of Catherine’s armies!

Mingled in with it were the exact times they would strike and when. How fortunate! Just what he needed!

Dropping it from his fingers onto the pile, he leapt to his feet as fast as his thick body would allow and stormed across the room, jerking his greatcoat on. This was all the evidence he needed. A smirk curled the edges of his mouth. It was time to pay the Emperor a little visit.

* * * *

Tatiana rode through the quiet night, the only sounds accompanying her were the crack of twigs under the horse’s hooves. Nothing moved, not even the wolves who hunted in the night. It was almost as if the entire world had disappeared, leaving her alone.

“Ah, but you are not alone, my love,” Nicholas voiced soothed through her mind.

“How did you know that?” she said aloud, the knowledge that he hovered above her unseen, a warm comfort.

He chuckled deeply. “You forget that there is much within the realm of my power.”

“Forgive me,” she said mentally as the horse continued to lope forward through the thickened brush.

“There is nothing to forgive, my dear,” he murmured. “Once tonight is over, perhaps we can retire to my estate for more meaningful tasks.”

“I would like that,” she answered, keeping her eyes straight ahead. The turn to Petersburg was just about upon her. Distantly, she could see the slight glitter of

torches hanging in the street. Good, she was about there. The sooner she was finished with her task, the sooner she could be back in Nicholas' arms.

* * * *

Zakara followed the happy couple, keeping her location a secret from Nicholas, lest he realize she was there. Her temples throbbed with excitement because her plan was about to come to fruition, and Nicholas would be all hers again.

She watched as the wench turned onto the road leading to St. Petersburg. Good. The girl was falling neatly into her trap, and there was nothing she or Nicholas could do about it.

* * * *

"Much thanks, General Federov," she said, bowing low to him. "Her Majesty will undoubtedly be grateful for your help in this matter." She clicked her heels. "I will give her your message."

"Aye, that you will," he mumbled, his lecherous gaze traveling up her body, his lower lip constantly wet. "Are you sure that you would not like to spend the night with me? A great many women have never left my bed unsatisfied."

"I must decline your generous offer," she cringed as those words left her mouth. "But I must be getting back to the Empress and deliver your message." She turned to leave when his meaty hand gripped her upper arm, halting her retreat. "What are you doing?"

"Come now, my dear, let us not play this game anymore," General Federov slurred, trying to drag her to the stairs. "You know you wish to spend the night with me."

Tatiana glared at him. "Do you not remember what happened last time, General? If not, I can refresh your memory quite easily."

His grip loosened as he leaned close, his hot, sickening breath on her face. "It will not be long before you come to me, Tatiana," he whispered into her ear, her belly curling from the stench. "For it is common knowledge that you are not happy with your current lover."

"I have no lover."

"That is not what is being told at court," he continued, "if you must know."

"What is being said at court?" Normally, court gossip did not interest her in the slightest, but the stakes were different now. She was involved too far deeply into the revolution to have her activities revealed.

"That you take the foreigner into your bed in order to gather information for the Empress," he coughed and spat to the side, wiping his mouth with the edge of his sleeve. "If you can take someone of foreign blood into your bed, why not one of your own race?"

She wrested herself from his grip. "'Tis my concern who shares my bed and who does not, no one else's." Her eyes narrowed. "Are you finished?"

"Not by half, my dear," he backed away from her. "Not by half."

With those words hanging in the air, Tatiana stormed past the drunken men cavorting with all the whores in the tavern, leaving the sickly sweet stench of ale and

body odor behind her. No, this had to be the last time she was going to do this for the Empress. Enough was enough. It was time to live her life. The Empress would have to gain control of the throne without her.

Flipping a few coins to the waiting boy, she grabbed the reins of her horse and mounted it, riding toward the city entrance, her heart racing. Tonight, she would know the glory of Nicholas' arms and then, in the morning, implement her decision.

* * * *

Moonlight, casually hidden now and then by clouds, bathed the world in a ghostly light as it streamed down, casting an eerie glow with the slight fog developing.

"Nicholas, are you there?" she questioned mentally, her fear starting to rise. The ride to St. Petersburg had not been like this earlier tonight or any other night.

"Aye, my love, I am here," he murmured.

"Please come to me," she begged him. "I am frightened."

"There is nothing to be frightened about, Tatiana. Just take a left turn at the next bend, and you will be on your way to my house."

She breathed a sigh of relief. For the last hour or so, she thought she had been on the wrong road and would end up only God knew where. "Good. I am very weary and need some rest." Despite the excitement growing in her about a passionate night with Nicholas, exhaustion slipped into her bones like a thief in the night.

"If it is rest you need, then it is rest you shall have."

"Much thanks, Nicholas," she said, listening to the rustle of leaves as the wind blew through the trees. Dimly, she could hear another sound, almost like the snort of a horse. Tatiana gripped the reins of her horse tightly. Was someone else out here with her besides Nicholas? "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That noise."

"That is nothing," he reassured her. "Just the wind."

Despite his comfort, she was still afraid, the hair on the back of her neck rising. Something was not right. "No, 'tis not, Nicholas. Someone is out here with me."

Tatiana waited for an answer but the only thing greeting her was the semi-silence of the forest. "Nicholas?" she called out loud, hoping he would hear her that way.

Still nothing.

"Nicholas?" She shouted a bit louder. He should have heard her by now.

"Lord Wetherington is not here, Tatiana," a familiar voice called out from the thick brush of trees. The blood froze in her veins as she recognized it immediately.

"Father?" she called out, the terror storming along her veins, her hands locked onto the horse's reins.

"Aye, 'tis me," he answered, emerging from the dense thicket of trees, accompanied by at least fifty soldiers on horseback.

"Wh-what ... are you doing here?" she stammered in disbelief.

"The same could be asked of you, Tatiana," he growled low, his silver hair shining in the pale light. "Now, I ask you, what you are doing out here, and why are you dressed as a captain of the Imperial Regiment?"

She groped for a falsehood, but could come up with none. "I do not think

you wish to know.”

“I already know,” he slipped his hand inside of his coat and produced a yellow parchment. “You have been the Empress’ courier in matters of state and have been consorting with the enemy against the Emperor. What you have done is to commit high treason, Tatiana.”

Her gaze locked into the parchment, her lids growing wide in disbelief.

It was the very same letter the Empress had given her to memorize.

Tatiana’s blood turned cold. After she had committed the contents to memory, she had lain it down for a moment to pick up a glass. When she had gone to pick it up to throw it into the fire, it had been gone. Tatiana had searched her room frantically, desperately trying to find it. No one could have taken it, for she had been alone. Finally, she had to admit defeat. It was simply not there. “Wh-where ... did you get that?”

“It does not matter where it came from, Tatiana, all that matters is that this document tells me everything I need to know about your little ‘activities’.” He shifted in his saddle. “By the order of his Imperial Majesty, Emperor Peter III, I hereby arrest you on the charge of high treason against his Majesty as well as the Russian people.”

Tatiana’s spine stiffened as the fear, mixed with anger, stormed through her. “You cannot possibly mean this, Father.”

“Aye, I can and do, Tatiana.” He gestured for several soldiers to move forward. “Come with us quietly.”

“Nicholas!” she screamed out into the night as the rough iron shackles wrapped around her wrists courtesy of her father’s henchman. “Help me!”

“There is no one to help you, Tatiana,” Father sneered. “You should have come to me when the Empress approached you to help her. I could have prevented all of this.”

Tatiana resisted her arrest. “How could you do this to me, Father?”

Father pushed his horse forward and pulled to a halt beside her, his thick face twisted into a scowl. Saying nothing, he slapped her soundly across the face. “The question more appropriately is how could you do this to me? You duped and deceived me into believing that you were something you were not. Now you have possibly cost me my post, my title and everything I have worked so hard to achieve. Is my downfall something you wish to see?”

Suddenly, everything had become all too crystal clear. Her father, a man who she had always looked up to, was nothing more than a selfish pig, more worried about his political position and status than he ever was about her welfare. Endlessly, he had tried to push politically motivated marriages upon her, selecting this man and that, all the better to establish himself firmly in the Russian aristocracy. That was why he was so upset with every rejection! “So this is what this has become? A push for power?”

“Aye, Tatiana,” Father murmured, his hand caressing her swollen cheek. “Power is the only true thing that lasts.”

“What about Mother? Did you not love her?”

“I did once, but after I learned of her weaknesses, I quickly grew tired of them.” His thick brows furrowed as he took a deep breath. “I suppose it is time that I told

you the truth, my dear.”

She glared at him hard. “What truth?”

“The truth about your mother.”

The knot in her belly tightened further, turning to lead. “How did Mother die?”

“Oh, she did not die, my dear. She is alive and quite well, ensconced in a cloistered convent in Giverny that I sent her to soon after you were born.”

She had only one question. “Why?”

“Because she was not strong enough to be by my side. She was weak, simpleminded and a fool. After you had started exhibiting those same traits, I had given a thought of sending you to the same place, but I quickly dismissed the notion. As I can see, I made a major mistake in not sending you there.”

Tatiana spit into his face. “From this moment on, I will never consider you my father. You are dead to me now.”

Father’s lips curled into a vicious sneer. “‘Tis no matter for very soon, you will be dead to me.” He turned to his men. “Take her away.”

With her head held high, Tatiana allowed herself to be led away, her heart shattered. Two revelations had come to her tonight. The truth about her mother, as well as the fact that Nicholas was no where to be found. Where had he gone? Were those promises of protection and warmth just ruses to get her into his bed?

Tears threatened to flow but she held them back. She was not going to cry now or from this moment on. Nothing would weaken her again.

* * * *

Nicholas watched Tatiana ride from St. Petersburg to his manor home, the silver gleam of her hair as it rode on her back visible from his vantage point. He felt his body harden at the sight. She was so beautiful, and she was all his to behold. The thought of spending all eternity with her was something he treasured more than anything else...

Tatiana brought her horse to a halt in front of the door and dismounted, standing outside.

Gingerly, he swept down beside her and opened the door. “Allow me,” he murmured in a low tone and swept her into his arms.

She said nothing, merely giving a throaty laugh as she threw her head back, the tone not like her at all. Perhaps it was all the excitement in her about their impending lovemaking making her sound so strange.

His senses stirred, the hair on the back of his neck rising. Why did she seem so different? “I love you, Tatiana,” he whispered as he nuzzled her neck.

Still she said nothing, merely returning his embrace. Now he knew something was wrong. Tatiana never went this long without speaking. “You know, my dear, I was thinking of my proposal the other night and have come to a conclusion.” She stared at him through silent, wide eyes. “I have decided that it would be better for you to be my mistress than my wife. After all, you are foreign and would not fit in my world in England.” If this was not Tatiana, it would surely show at this moment. Tatiana would not stand for being any man’s mistress. She wanted it all or nothing, never any in-

between.

“Aye, that would be wonderful, Nicholas,” she purred against him, the heat from her body seemingly to have disappeared. Now he knew the truth.

He casually dropped her to the floor where she landed with a thud, a smile on his lips. This was not his beloved Tatiana.

She whirled around, glaring him with black, fathomless eyes. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I know you are not Tatiana, Zakara,” he said calmly despite the boiling of his blood in his veins. He should have known something was wrong when Tatiana had ducked into some trees to avoid a sound coming her way. She’d been in there too long, perhaps lured there by Zakara. When she had emerged, he’d foolishly assumed it was Tatiana. “Your little spell did not work.”

Tatiana’s silver hair suddenly turned as black as night, her skin the color of dark cinnamon. The clothes disappeared, turning silver in the moonlight, revealing Zakara’s slender figure. “It worked long enough for me to lure you away from her, Nicholas,” she snapped as she rose to her feet. “You have failed her.”

“Nay, I did not fail her,” Nicholas warned as he took her arm into a tight grip, making her wince. “Tell me where she is.”

Zakara shook her black head. “Forget her, Nicholas. Let us be together as we were long before that wench entered your life.”

His expression darkened. “I will never return to you, Zakara, nor will the others.”

“Oh, you will return, no matter how long it takes me to get you to.” A smirk covered her once lovely lips. “I have extraordinary patience when it comes to you all.”

His hold tightened. “Tell me where she is.”

Zakara’s expression turned deadly. “I will never tell you,” she sneered, her lips curling over her fangs. “Even if you try to use your powers, you will never find her before it’s too late.”

Before he could question her further, Zakara turned to a wisp of black smoke, slipping from his fingertips and flitting out the window to become one with the night.

His anger got the best of him. Taking a fist, he punched the wall, driving a large hole in it. In an effort to match that, he swiped all the delicate objects to the floor, where they shattered. Damn her! How dare she do this? Desperately, he let his mind search all over the whole of Russia, searching for her. More than likely, she was close, possibly in St. Petersburg, but he could not get a bead on her anywhere. There were so many places they could put her....

“We will find her,” Raphael answered telepathically. “I have the girls out searching, while Drake and I are questioning the guards throughout Peterhof Palace.”

“Much thanks,” Nicholas answered, snapping his fingers, allowing his hunting clothes to appear. “This is my battle, not yours. I will find her and save her.”

“We are a family, and we will do what we must for each other. Do not ever forget that. In the meantime, get to Peterhof so as soon as we find her, we can get

her the hell out of there.”

“Is she there?” He was already traveling, not wasting a moment. There was too much at stake to delay.

“All indications say that she is, but we are still uncertain. Come anyway when we do find her whereabouts.”

Nicholas needed no second hint. He was already there.

* * * *

Tatiana leaned against the cold stone wall of the cell, listening to the scratching sounds of the rats in the room with her. Damp, musty air circled around her, making her want to retch. She felt the grime on her skin, making her equally sick, not to mention the fact that her father had put her there.

Father.

That word had at one time meant something to her. All the time, growing up, she had always looked up to him as sort of a foundation or rock, something to steady herself upon during times of trouble. She sniffed. How blind she had been then! Father spent more time at court than he ever did with her, securing himself a place in the Russian aristocracy. Somehow she had not seen him for what he really was, especially when he tried to arrange political marriages for her. Always, she had found fault with every one, not realizing at the time that he had hoped she would marry at least one who could further his career. When she had refused them all, citing her simplemindedness as the cause, he had grown furious with her and sent her as a lady-in-waiting to the Empress. Even then, he was trying to secure his political future, she realized now.

Her feet shifted in the muck on the bottom of the dungeon floor. She could go and lie down on the straw-covered stone dais serving as her bed, instead of standing in filth, but she decided against it. There could be worse creatures hiding in that straw from the smell of it.

Oh, Nicholas, where are you? her mind cried out. He had not deserted her, of that she was sure. Normally, she trusted no one, but she did trust Nicholas for some reason. Tatiana sighed, her hands rubbing her shoulders for warmth as she paced around the room, the anxiety riding high in her veins. Would Nicholas save her from execution?

Chapter Eleven

The guard pushed her roughly into the room, the light blinding her eyes. Tatiana squinted, trying to adjust to the rudeness of it all. Hard iron clamped onto her wrists, biting into her flesh. So far, Nicholas had failed to show himself at all. She had been alone the entire night, contemplating what she was going to do next.

“Bring the prisoner forward,” instructed a male voice from the shadows.

Tatiana looked forward to see a long table with several figures seated behind it. She could not see their faces, but she could make out the faint edges of richly embroidered clothing.

A guard behind her propelled her forward with the end of his sword, the point digging hard into her back. Holding her head high, she stepped forward, the fear riding to new heights.

“Stop right there,” the voice ordered and rose from behind the table and skirted around it. He stepped into the morning light in all of his glory.

“Your Majesty,” she said, tipping her head to him.

“It has come to my attention that you are helping my wife in her quest for my throne. Is this true?”

She hesitated for a moment, not sure of what to say. “What type of help are you referring to, my lord?”

His childish face twisted into a menacing scowl. “You know perfectly well what type of help you are giving the German whore,” he spat out with contempt. “Here are some confessions from some of your cohorts in this matter.” He shook a fistful of parchments at them. “Are you telling me that they are lying?”

She was dumbfounded. There was no one in this but herself. “I do not know to whom you are referring, Your Majesty, but I have no conspirators. There was only me.”

The sting of his slap caught her before she was ready. Her head recoiled with the surprising strength of the strike, the corner of her mouth bursting open. “That is for your insolence,” he snarled and walked back to the table. “What do you think we should do with her, Count Gregorovich?”

Tatiana’s heart beat uneasily in her chest, waiting for her father’s words. “I am not sure, Your Grace, but further questioning is warranted.” Father rose from his place, the gold braid on his suit gleaming in the morning sun. “Tell us why you chose this path, Tatiana, and perhaps the Emperor will spare you a painful execution.”

Mingled with the fear was the growing hatred for her father, a man who had no place in her life. “What does it matter to you, Father? No matter what I say or do, I will be executed anyway, for I do not fit into your little ‘scheme’”

“Come, come, my dear, let us not think harshly about this matter.” Father advanced on her, his hands behind his back. “You have been watched quite closely for

some time, and I know everything that you are up to, including taking Lord Wetherington into your bed.”

Her eyes widened. She should have been more careful with the servants and whom she trusted. The Empress had warned her against this. “So what if I had, Father? Do you not take various women in your bed for pleasure?”

“That is different...”

“Just because you are a man, that makes it less of a crime? *Nyet*. I am a woman, and I will do what I please and with whom, and I care not who knows it.”

Father stepped forward, glaring at her hard. “You will not do as you please, Tatiana. You are a woman, and as such, will hold yourself above the station of a harlot.” He sneered. “I blame myself for sending you to be influenced by that German whore.”

“She is not a whore. She is a woman who merely knows what she wants.”

It was the Emperor’s turn to glare at her murderously. “Not a whore? Ha! My wife seems to get her pregnancies from somewhere, for I have not shared her bed in quite some time, especially of late.” His eyes became meaner. “I know she is with child now, is she not?”

“That is the Empress’ business, not mine....”

“Ah, but it is my business, little one,” he stormed back over to the table and picked up a long, rope-like instrument. Much to her horror, she could see it was a leather whip. “Now, I think it is time you told me everything about my business.”

* * * *

Tatiana felt her wounds seeping on her back, courtesy of the Emperor. She refused to cry, holding onto the hope that Nicholas would save her, though it had been almost two days since her capture. Where was he? Each hour without him threatened to diminish her hope, but she held on strongly. Thankfully, the Emperor had had his physician dress her wounds and allowed her to have a new shirt before returning her back to her prison. *Much thanks*, she thought sourly, *how kind of you*.

Tatiana lay on the straw, staring at the blackness above her, thinking of nothing but Nicholas. Where was he? Why hadn’t he found her yet?

“Because he is not looking the right place,” purred a strange female voice coming from the shadows.

Tatiana jerked up, wincing from the pain in her back. “Who are you?”

“Your worst nightmare, my dear.” The voice started moving toward her. “You see, I keep what I own, no matter what the cost may be.”

“Zakara,” she breathed heavily into the room, the air becoming thick with evil hostility.

“One and the same,” Zakara said, emerging from the shadows, the soft rustle of her gown rising through the air. “As you might have guessed, Nicholas is mine, chosen by me to be my king and rule beside me for all eternity.”

“He was duped by you, Zakara, nothing more. You took him when he was most vulnerable and made him yours. Now you are upset because he chooses another over you.” Tatiana suddenly felt the rush of cold air sweep over her and felt herself pushed down on the straw, the pieces of hay digging into her back and causing

indescribable pain.

“You think you have won him, but you have not,” Zakara’s breath was hot and putrid on her cheek, making her want to retch. “I should rip your throat out here and now, but since I like to play with my food before eating it. Perhaps you and I will have a little game.”

She struggled to get up, trying to push against Zakara’s incredible strength, but it was no use. Zakara was just too strong. “Do with me what you will, Zakara, but Nicholas will never come back to you.”

Zakara’s inhuman laughter ricocheted around the sparse chamber. “By the look of things, he will not be coming back to you, either. Tell me, if Nicholas cares for you so much, why is he not here?”

Those words stabbed her in the heart, making the knot in her belly twist worse. “I would rather he not be here than to have to deal with you,” she groaned, struggling under the tremendous pressure that Zakara exerted. “Are you going to kill me, or are you going to continue to toy with me?”

The face above hers twisted into a black mask, the skin darkening, the eyes glowing red. Zakara’s lips pulled away from her teeth, revealing a long set of moist fangs ready to tear through anything. “Perhaps I am not done with you yet, little one.” Zakara pulled away. “Nicholas will find you, and the one thing I want him to witness is your destruction.” She leapt to her feet in catlike fashion, waving her arms. “I am breaking the spell to protect you from his vision. When he attempts to rescue you from death ... that is when I will make my move.” She moved close to the small ventilation shaft that was Tatiana’s only air supply. “Until we meet again.”

With that, Zakara turned into a shaft of thick, black smoke, disappearing through the shaft to the outside world.

Tatiana sat up, rubbing her bruised arms and neck. What was going to happen to her? Did she want Nicholas to attempt to save her from the firing squad that would surely execute her?

Tears pricked at the back of her eyelids. As much as she loved her life, she loved Nicholas more. If her death could possibly mean freedom from Zakara for him, then so be it. She was ready to do it.

* * * *

Nicholas circled St. Petersburg, searching for Tatiana, followed by the others. Where in all that was holy was she? It was entirely possible that Zakara had hidden her from his sight....

Suddenly, as he flew over the Peterhof, he heard her voice cry out, “Nicholas!”

She was there!

Signaling to the others, he swooped down to the palace under the cover of night, flying through an open window, past a sleeping man. The hunger for blood gnawed at him like no other, but he ignored the pain. Tatiana was here, in this palace, and he was damn sure going to find her.

Completely invisible to others, he sped through the open corridors, past the servants and guards to the filthy dungeon. Dampness filled the air, mingled with the

smell of sour bodies and urine. He pushed it all from his mind as he searched for her in every cell he passed, finally spying her in the very last one. Turning himself to smoke, he slipped the crack between the floor and the door.

Tatiana was indeed there, curled in a childlike position on the pallet of straw, her knees drawn to her chest. Her sleep was fitful, full of dreams of death and destruction. Damn them!

From this distance, he could smell blood, the congealing wounds from the lash. *What have they done to her?*

He read her mind as he closed the distance between them, the memories making his anger rise to new heights.

"You will tell us everything," the Emperor commanded, the whip steady in his hand.

"I will tell you nothing," Tatiana said confidently, her terror rising. She was not going to give into their demands, no matter how much they abused her.

"Bring in the pillars," the Emperor commanded, snapping the whip quickly.

"You had better tell us everything, Tatiana, or else it will be so much worse," her father suggested. "I can help you, if you cooperate."

"I do not wish for your kind of help, Count Gregorovich," she said formally, refusing to acknowledge the fact that he had sired her. "I am no different than any other Russian citizen."

Count Gregorovich's face twisted into a menacing scowl. "So be it, then. I hope the Emperor tears the skin from your back."

She did not shed a tear as two heavy pillars were brought in, borne on the backs of two burly servants. Manacles attached to each pillar, the iron chains hanging low enough for her wrists to be captured.

"Clap her arms in irons," the Emperor ordered, "and strip her back. I want to see blood run."

Tatiana said nothing as her hands were raised above her, clasped in the old iron. Fear ran rampant through her, making her tremble.

"I am most certainly going to enjoy this," the Emperor sneered as a servant placed a knife between her shoulder blades and the material of her uniform shirt, ripping it down the back and exposing her back. "There is nothing like seeing flesh ripped open and bleeding."

The first strike caught her, making her bounce forward. She had bitten her lip, almost hard enough to draw blood, but she refused to give them the satisfaction of knowing they were hurting her.

Nicholas touched her, stroking her pale hair softly. "Forgive me, my love, for not saving you from such horror," he murmured. "I would have died rather than let you suffer like that."

Her eyes fluttered open. "Nicholas?" she questioned softly in a sleepy-toned voice.

"Aye, my little one, I am here," he said, pulling her into his arms. "Please forgive me...."

She rushed to his arms, wincing from the pain. "There is nothing to forgive, Nicholas. Zakara kept you from me, so that is why you did not know."

Nicholas pulled away, cupping her chin in his hands. The hatred for him because of his absence was simply not there. It was almost as if she had never given up hope. "Are you saying that you knew I would still come?"

"Aye, that I did," she stiffened in his embrace.

"I will make those animals pay for what they have done to you, my love," his hands traveled down her back, feeling the bumps of the forming scabs and scars underneath all of the bandages. "You cannot imagine what I have in store for them."

"I love you, Nicholas, but you must leave. Zakara will be back..."

He frowned. "Zakara has been here?"

Tatiana nodded. "She is bound and determined to see you back at her side. If you leave now, you can escape her..."

"'Tis not possible, Tatiana. I love you and nothing will ever separate you from me, not even Zakara," he promised, his thumbs caressing the soft planes of her cheeks.

* * * *

Tatiana could not believe he was actually here, right in front of her, holding her so tightly that she was almost breathless. "As I love you, Nicholas," she confessed, "but I do not want Zakara to hurt you anymore."

"She can never hurt me again," he said and urged her to turn around.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to see your wounds," Nicholas commanded.

Tatiana unbuttoned her shirt and quickly shrugged out of it. His fingers danced over the bandages for a minute and started removing them. Blood stuck to the cloth, making it extraordinarily painful for her. "Please stop, Nicholas," she begged. "It hurts too much."

He kissed her shoulder. "No pain," he whispered.

Suddenly, all the searing agony disappeared, making it easy for him to remove her bandages.

His hands shook as he took off the rest of the cloth. "Those pigs will suffer my vengeance, and it will not be pleasant."

"No, Nicholas..."

"This is my vengeance, Tatiana, so I will administer it how I see fit." His voice deepened to a growl. "But first, I will heal you."

Before she could say anything, Nicholas' lips traveled down her back, kissing the wounds left by the Emperor. She did not feel pain when he did this, but she did experience the tingling sensation as the flesh knitted itself back together, as if it had never been touched.

Her body was on fire from his touch, moistening at her womanhood. Gingerly, his tongue flicked at the wounds, encouraging them to heal. It was so intimate and erotic that she uttered gasps of desire. "Oh, Nicholas," she purred, her body rocking slightly with each movement.

Nicholas' fingertips caressed her bare arms, his lips returning to her neck.

"I want you now more than ever, my love, but there is much to do." He urged her back into her grubby shirt and spun her around. "I am going to take you out of here, but there is a matter I must take care of before we leave."

"What is that?"

"Your father."

* * * *

Ivan had a fitful sleep, haunted by the nightmare of his daughter being flogged by the Emperor. He should have stopped it, the guilt almost more than he could bear. But he could not have. It would have been a sign of weakness if he had. His daughter had betrayed the Emperor, not to mention the Russian people, in her bid to help the German harlot to the throne. She should have been more dutiful, instead of deceitful, and married a man of his choosing.

"She will be marrying a man of her own choosing," a menacing voice warned through the hazy cloud of his dream. Strangely, there was a smell to this apparition, almost as if death accompanied it.

"Not if I have anything to say of it," he murmured to the mysterious tones.

"You will have nothing to say of it."

This was getting to be entirely too much. Ivan opened his eyes, hoping to banish whatever gruesome nightmares plagued him. What he saw frightened him down to his soul.

A face hovered above him, the skin dark, with eyes glowing with all the fires of hell. Sharp fangs descended from the mouth, appearing lethal.

"Go away!" he commanded. "I wish to dream no more!"

"This not a dream, Ivan," the creature hissed. "It is time for retribution."

He pulled the covers up to his chin, shaking all the while. "Wh-who are you? What are you?"

"Your worst nightmare."

* * * *

Nicholas sank his teeth into the sweaty flesh of the old man's neck and sucked greedily at the blood from the open vein. Fear and terror stormed along those pathways as he drank, filling him with delight. How could a man who loved his daughter subject her to such torture?

Ivan struggled into his grasp, the resistance futile. Slowly, the old man's heart slowed down, signaling that death was coming for him soon.

Just as he was about to take the last possible drop, a scream echoed behind him. He jerked back to see a young girl standing there, a lamp in one hand, with her other covering her mouth. Damn! Now he had to get out of here and get Tatiana away from this place before they realized what happened. He had hoped this would go a little more smoothly than it had.

He looked to the girl sternly, his eyes still blazing. "Do not see me," he ordered.

She stood there, unblinking as he searched her mind. Good. She remembered nothing.

Nicholas flew from the room through the open window and down to the

dungeon at the speed of light. Flitting through the ventilation shaft, he found Tatiana sitting on her pallet, rocking a little.

“Is my father dead?” was the first question from her mouth.

“Aye,” he said, taking her hand and getting her to her feet. “Come, we must leave here,” he ordered. “The alarm has been raised.”

“We cannot...”

“Let me worry about how we are going to leave,” he said, kicking open the door to her cell. The heavy wood gave way and flew across the acrid hallway, landing to the side. Grabbing her hand, Nicholas took her through the dungeon to the main gate where a guard sat with his back against the jamb, his head lolling to the side in his sleep.

He pressed his finger to her lips to keep her silent and turned himself into smoke, disappearing to the other side.

* * * *

She could only hear a small gasp as Nicholas took care of the guard, her heart pounding in fear. What would happen if they were caught?

“We are not going to be captured,” Nicholas announced as he ripped that outer door from its hinges and tossed it easily aside. Taking her tiny hand into his, Nicholas pulled her along to safety. Outside, they found available horses and sped off into the night before anyone could raise the alarm.

* * * *

Nicholas urged her to stop at a small clearing in the woods. Moonlight streamed down from above, hampered now and then by passing clouds. It was enough light to see a small cave to her right.

“Why are we halting here?” she questioned as she slipped off the horse into his arms.

“Because this is my lair,” he told her as he set her down on her feet. “This is where I want you to become my wife, Tatiana.”

She walked away from him, her mind whirling. “Do you understand what you are asking me?”

“Aye, that I do.”

“I do not know if I can....”

His hands spun her around, forcing her look at him. “There is nothing left for you in this mortal world, Tatiana. With me, you will be able to have a new life, filled with endless possibilities.”

She took a deep breath, the answer right in front of her. “You are right, Nicholas, there is nothing left for me here. My mother, who I thought was dead all this time, is ensconced in a convent in France. I assume she is happy and would not want to see the intrusion of a daughter in her life.” Tears began to fall. “I will be your wife, Nicholas. But, before I totally commit to you, I must ask you one question.”

His fingers tilted her chin up. “What is that my love?”

“Is it painful?”

“Not for you, my beloved,” his lips swept down to hers, taking hers completely.

Tatiana quickly lost herself into the expertise of his kiss, her body swaying from his magic touch. He held her up as he had so many times before, her hands twining in his hair....

“Well, well, well, the prodigal lover has returned,” a female voice sneered.

Their kiss broke quickly, and they turned to see Zakara standing near them, a dark expression on her face.

“Leave us, Zakara,” Nicholas ordered, easing in front of Tatiana. “We want no more of your interference.”

Zakara glided toward them, the edges of her gossamer silver gown fluttering in the breeze. “As I told the wench before, I keep what I own, so come back with me and she will not have to suffer for your foolishness.”

“I will never return to you, Zakara. Are you that daft not to realize it?”

Her anger deepened. “I am not as daft as you are, Nicholas. Why did you share my bed the other day when you claim to ‘love’ her?”

Tatiana felt the pain in her heart at those words, but she refused to believe them. She would have to hear them from Nicholas himself.

“You are a deceiver, Zakara. I never shared your bed that day because I realized who you were. Why do you think I dumped you on the floor where you belonged?”

“Argh!” Zakara sailed at Nicholas, grabbing him by the throat. Tatiana was knocked over by the force. Looking up, she watched with horror as Zakara had him pinned against the tree with such force that the timber cracked.

“Someone help him!” she cried out into the blackness of the night.

Almost as if to answer her prayers, other figures melted out of the darkness. Unfortunately, they were the wrong answers.

Hungry hands gripped her, holding her tightly between them. “No!” she cried to Zakara. “Let him go, and you can have me!”

Zakara stopped, turning her mutated face around. “Are you saying that you are willing to die for him?”

“If that is the way it must be!” she screamed as she struggled between her captors.

Zakara let Nicholas fall to the ground. Tatiana felt her blood pool to her feet as dark woman flew toward her, the fangs visible and hungry-looking. “Prepare to die, whore.”

Just as Zakara was about to descend on her, an unseen force hit her, knocking her out of the way. Zakara landed against a tree, falling to the ground in a heap.

Her captors were knocked away by the same forces, freeing her from constraint. Nervously, her gaze darted around, searching for her rescuers, but they were not to be found.

“Come out all of you!” Zakara demanded as she rose into the air, the atmosphere bristling with the severity of her fury. “I know that you are all here!”

Tatiana searched the area around her, but there was nothing. Hurrying over to where Nicholas had fallen, she saw that he was gone as well, the ground only

slightly indented where he had been. Where did he go?

Her captors lay on the ground, their heads torn from their bodies as well as their hearts. "Nicholas!" she cried into the night.

"I am here, my love," he murmured, wrapping his arms around her. "The others will take care of Zakara."

Before she could respond, several dark figures appeared, all of them recognizable. Drake, Gabrielle, Alexandra, Siobhan and Raphael circled Zakara in the air, their words rising high in the air. Nicholas joined in their chant, as if to aid them.

Zakara writhed in agony as they continued their chanting, her hellish screams filling the air.

Unable to listen to any more, Tatiana covered her ears, but that did little to block out Zakara's inhuman cries.

Suddenly, Zakara's body began to whirl around faster and faster, until it was nothing but a moving blur. Their chants deepened as a thin ray of light emerged from Zakara's center, growing to the point where it engulfed her entire body, sucking her into its core. Once she was drawn in, the light closed, erasing her image forever.

Slowly, they descended to the ground. "We have only contained her in Hell for about a century, but that will be enough to keep her until we find a way to destroy her," Raphael announced as he strode toward them. "Is your woman all right?"

Nicholas kissed her cheek. "Aye, that she is, Raphael." He gazed at each and every one of them. "Much praise for that goes to all of you."

Gabrielle touched Nicholas' shoulder. "We are a family, Nicholas, and we will do whatever we have to do for each other." Her stare flicked to Tatiana. "We know that she will make you very happy."

"Aye, that she will," Nicholas spun her around in his arms. "Now if you will all excuse us, we have a little wedding to attend to."

"As you wish," Drake said. "We are all hungry, are we not?"

"That we are," Alexandra joined in. "If you have need of us, only call and we will be here."

With those words in the air, they left the clearing in search of food for the night.

"Why did they leave?"

"Because what we are about to do is a very intimate thing, and it is best if we consummate it alone." His smile warmed her heart. "Are you ready?"

"I have never been more ready in my life."

* * * *

Tatiana awoke at dusk, hungrier than she had ever been in her life. Was it because of her transformation? She reached for Nicholas who lay next to her in the spacious cavern, the bed they were lying on, soft and comfortable. Since she was a new vampire and not used to sleeping on the hard rocks in a cave, Nicholas had brought the bed from her home.

Sleepily, his arm circled her shoulders, pulling her close. "Is something amiss, my beloved wife?"

"I am hungry, husband," she said, liking the word on her lips. "What do

we have to do to quench it?”

“We need to go and hunt tonight,” he said warmly, pushing the stray strands of silver hair out of her face.

She sighed. The happiness that she had always longed for was finally here. “Before we do, can we do one thing?”

“What is that?”

“When the Emperor was whipping me, he was squealing with delight about the plan to capture the Empress off guard and send her to Siberia, where assassins are waiting to kill her.” Her finger stroked his cheek. “You know, it would be a perfect revenge for the Empress to capture him instead, would it not?”

He chuckled lightly. “Aye, that it would.”

Epilogue

Tatiana watched the Empress' coup of the throne with great delight. Peter had summoned Catherine to Mon Plaisir near the Peterhof Palace to celebrate his feast day. Little did Catherine know that Peter was actually at Oranienbaum, setting a trap for his wife.

Catherine, having been warned by Tatiana, sought the help of Gregory Orlov. After slipping her past her Holstein guards, Gregory had traveled with her to the Ismailovsky Regiment headquarters. Her black mourning dress had been covered in yellow dust from the road, her dark hair was a mess. Still, the soldiers had professed that she was their savior and sole monarch. The Ismailovsky regiment had belonged to her. After going to Semenovskiy Barracks, she had gained their trust and allegiance as well, and proclaimed herself as sole ruler of Russia.

Once accepted, Catherine had ridden into St. Petersburg in a gilded coach, the windows trimmed in red velvet curtains. The Russian people accepted her as their sole Empress, throwing flowers to carpet her path to the palace. Catherine was crowned with the coronet of Peter the Great. Her hair, styled in a regal fashion, held that long-awaited crown as she was anointed with the holy oil. Tatiana watched from the shadows of the palace reception room, her body covered in a dark cloak, the sun having no affect on her. Nicholas had seen to that. How fortunate Tatiana had been to witness this great event.

Peter, however, had not been so fortunate. After being forced to sign an order of abdication, he was taken to the village of Ropsha, where he was kept under heavy surveillance. Six months after Catherine had entered St. Petersburg triumphant from her coup, she had received news of Peter's death during a drunken brawl. Peter had become drunken and unruly, provoking Alexei Orlov to fight him. The fight ended with the Emperor's death.

Catherine did not shed a tear.

Neither did Tatiana.

THE END