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Chapter 421

Ivan

I didn't ask about anything serious while we were at the lake. I figured if he wanted to talk about it, he would talk about it. It took until we got back to the house for him to bring it up.

"Sephie's mad at me for avoiding her, isn't she?" he asked.

"Not mad. She's hurt. Maybe worried you're scared of her. But she also knows that you've been avoiding whatever it is you're dealing with more than her."

He nodded, sighing. "It's not her. I need to make sure she knows that. I've been suspecting whatever weird thing was going to happen to me would either involve my wife or child for a while now. I've been having dreams about them both very often lately."

He looked at me, his eyes were clearly troubled.

"What kind of dreams?"

"Some are good, some aren't so good. Since they were killed, I've regularly had dreams where it's like my life if they hadn't died.

They're both still alive. Those are almost harder to take than the ones where I relive her death seeing the kid grow up is sometimes too much," he said. He was struggling to keep the tears in his eyes from falling.

"It's his kid trying to give Viktor back what he lost," I heard Adrik say in my head, "Sorry, man. I was about to check on him and heard Viktor in your head."

I appreciate the assist,” I said, trying not to outwardly laugh.

“Viktor, your kid is forever linked to you now. Whatever karma that little soul teared by dying the way it did, it must’ve been a lot, because that soul is forever grateful to you now. It’s trying to thank you. The dreams are a way of trying to give you back what you lost,” I said.

“His kid has also agreed to not come back so it can stay and help Viktor. Can’t reisenber if we told him that already or not,” Adrik said.

“Now that all this has happened with all of us, your kid has made the decision to not come back, specifically so it can always be there to help you.”

Viktor inhaled deeply. “I know. He told me last night.” He looked at me, almost like he wasn’t sure if I’d believe him. “We were going to name him Konstantin if he was a boy. We were both hoping for a boy. We never found out if he was a boy or girl before they died, but he’s always a boy in my dreams. I can still hear my wife calling him Kostya as she would rub her belly guess he decided to keep the name.”

As Viktor was talking, I felt Sephie’s sadness coming on strongly. I couldn’t feel her in my head, so I wasn’t sure she was listening in with Boss, but I could feel her sadness.

Viktor continued. “He came to me last night in a dream. He told me everything. It was like you and I talking right now. Everything was so clear. He also told me Ilya needed my help, just like Misha showed me. He said it was him showing me, not Misha. He knew I’d been avoiding Sephie, too, so he used Andrei, Misha, and Sephie to force me to realize my gift.”

“He’s still focusing on the tragedy more than the good that’s going to come out of,” Adrik said. “I don’t know if you can feel the sadness, but it’s not Sephie. It’s him. Her eyes are amber, but this is not her sadness.”

“Viktor, I think you’re still focusing on the tragedy more than you’re thinking about all the good that’s going to come from this.

Your gift is what you do anyway. It’s just to a new level. You always make sure everyone has everything they need, that we’re all taken care of, and you do it without most of us realizing it most of the time.

Your gift really isn’t that different. You’re just making sure their souls are taken care of, instead of just their bodies. I can see if Sephie and Misha can show you what I see when I see demons trying to get in and what it looks like once they’ve gained access. It’s not pretty. It’s not something that anyone should have to endure. You’re making sure that doesn’t happen.”

He was quiet for a few minutes, before finally saying, “I’ve been focusing on the tragedy for so long that I don’t know how to stop.” He got up, without another word, and walked to his room.

“When is his brother coming? Sephie showed me what Misha showed Viktor. It’s going to take that happening before he comes to terms with everything.” Adrik asked.

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“We just talked about it earlier. He’s coming next week. He seemed like he was better when we were of the lake. We talked about his brothers and he seemed like he was slightly better.”

“It’s going to take time, Ivan. I was going to ask if we should come to the house to, but I think it’s better that he’s there with you.”

“Yeah, I agree, even though I feel like I have no idea how to help him

“I think he just needs time and reassurance. It appears you have help from multiple angles, so hopefully between all of us, we

can get him through this.”

“I think he needs a few more days. You’re still okay without us?”

“Yeah, you guys can stay through the weekend. We’ll manage.”

“He did say he needs to make sure that Sephie knows it’s not her he’s been avoid. He asked if she was mad at him earlier.”

“She’s not mad. She’s more hurt than anything. She’s also worried he’s scared of her.

“That’s what I told him too. At some point, he’ll make that right again.”

“It’ll all work out. This is all a bit much for all of us to deal with. It’s understandable.”

“If you guys come up with any insight on what to say to him again, let me know can use all the help I can get right now.

Viktor stayed in his room most of the day. This was going to be a long few days....

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Chapter 422

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Adrik

I looked at Sephie’s amber eyes as she stood in front of me. She’d just heard the last bit of the conversation between Ivan and

Viktor, as well as me and Ivan. I knew she felt Viktor’s sadness. It was very different than anything ever felt from her. I didn’t

realize he was struggling with it as much as he clearly has been for the last few years. Even Sephie was struggling to get a handle on it.

“I didn’t realize he was struggling this much with everything,” she said quietly

“None of us did. I think we know now why he always kept so busy. I can feel his sadness through you. I can also feel that you’re

struggling to deal with it, the same as him,” I said, pulling her closer to me.

She rested her head on my chest. “Yeah, this is a lot.” She folded her arms up in front of her, pressing her body even closer to mine. “I feel really cold.”

“Come. We’ll go upstairs and get one of my sweatshirts for you and I’ll make you something warm to drink.”

“Your meetings are done for the day?” she asked, following me out of my office. I nodded, my heart threatening to stop at the smile that stretched across her face. “Good.”

We met Stephen in the elevator. “We’re going upstairs. She’s cold,” I said, as Sophie went back to the same position she was just in before we left my office.

He chuckled. “Seems like as good of an excuse as any to leave the office.”

“Where are the Wonder Twins?” I asked. Sephie giggled against my chest. She still found it funny that I used her nickname for Misha and Andrei.

“They’re on a quick errand, but they should be back shortly,” Stephen said. He cut his eyes at Sephie, who wasn’t looking at him, then looked at me. with a small smile. I knew they were planning something, I just wasn’t sure what yet. “I’ll tell them to come upstairs when they get back,” he said. pulling out his phone..

We had just walked out from grabbing one of my sweatshirts for her when Andrei and Misha walked in. They were each carrying a box, each had giant grins on their faces.

“Spider monkey, we got you something,” Andrei said as he walked to the kitch. He set the box down on the counter, then slid it over toward her. Her face brightened for the first time since we’d overheard Viktor talking to Ivan. The heavy sadness that was

attached to her lifted for a moment. She opened the box and her heart-stopping smile stretched across her face. “I don’t know the first thing about baking, but we found a baker that makes lemon sugar cookies,” he said.

“We also got a box of orange, since you and Boss are basically the same person now. We figured you’d want to experiment and see if lemon is still your favorite, now that you know orange is his,” Misha said as he set his box on the counter, sliding it toward me.

“You guys are the best,” she said, as she went to Andrei, then to Misha. As she looked up at Misha after hugging him, he was clearly confused. “Gaze you feel happy right now. Why are your eyes amber?”

“They’re still amber?” I asked, walking toward her to see.

“Why are you sad, Seph?” Stephen asked.

“It’s not hers, is it?” Andrei asked.

She looked at him, a small smile on her face. “Bubba’s right.”

“How did you know?” Misha asked Andrei.

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“It feels different.” Andrei said. Stephen got quiet, like he was trying to see if he could feel a difference. He looked at Andrei, then to me. “It’s colder. No wonder you needed a sweatshirt,” Stephen said.

“That’s why Adrik and Andrei picked up on it so quickly. They’re always warm. They noticed the difference. You and Misha tend to be cooler so it wasn’t so obvious,” she said. Misha had been doing his own checking as they talked. He finally felt the difference as well.

“Yeah, I don’t know if I would’ve noticed that if I hadn’t been looking for it. Misha said. “Where’s it coming from if it’s not you?”

“Viktor,” I said. I looked at Sephie, having a silent conversation about whether we should tell them about our newest trick. She smiled at me, leaving the decision completely up to me.

“Your connection to him is already that strong?” Misha asked.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” I said.

“It has something to do with you being able to talk to Ivan without words, deesn’t it?” Stephen asked.

I was surprised, just as Sephie was. “You know?” she asked.

He nodded. “He came up with answers that he couldn’t have known without talking to you. He also has a special connection to Sephie that the rest of

us don’t have, so it makes sense he’d be able to do so, just like Boss can. The three of you share a few special things.”

“Really? You can talk to him the same way you can talk to Sephie?” Misha asked.

I nodded. “It only just started happening, but yeah. I went to check on Viktor earlier and we overheard a conversation between him and Ivan. That’s when her eyes changed. She can feel his sadness.”

“What else can you do? Stephen said there were a few things,” Misha asked. Sephie couldn’t keep her grin from her face. “I think you should show them. They’re going to find out eventually.”

I chuckled, closing my eyes. When I opened them, I looked at Sephie first. Her eyes switched to black immediately when she saw mine, which confirmed that mine were also black.

“HOLY SH IT! You can do it now too??” both Misha and Andrei said.

“So can Ivan,” Stephen said. “Are you guys considering adding adult diapers to your wardrobe right about now? Because I did, when they first showed me.”

“Solid life choice,” Andrei said, still completely astonished.

“But how? Do your eyes change the same way hers do now, too?” Misha asked
“I think that’s going to remain true for her only. But the reason hers turn black
is because her demon is stepping forward when it
happens. Same for me and Ivan,” I said.

“But I don’t feel nauseous when it happens. I’ve never felt nauseous when her
eyes have gone black. It usually makes me happy
because I know there’s about to be some f u ckery afoot,” Misha said, grinning
at Sephie.

“You wouldn’t feel nauseous with us, my adorable Russian guardian,” she said,
Miding her arm around his waist. “Our demons
work for us.”

Misha’s eyes went wide as he looked between me and Sephie. “You just
unlocked a new life goal for me,” he said quietly.

“Me too,” Andrei said.

As always, Stephen offered the comic relief in the most serious way possible
Tokay, so we all agree to learn how to do this now.

Vlad is going to be ecstatic when he hears about this, but we’re going to need
to step up the training. Mehmed’s Janissaries are
no joke and when they see our black eyes,

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they’re going to be scared, which will make them fight harder. We might need
to increase the number of impalings happening,
just to keep the fear working for us, rather than against us.”

Sephie laughed, walking to Stephen. “I love you, Yoden. Please never stop
being you.”

“Can’t stop, won’t stop,” he said, hugging her tightly, an uncharacteristic smile
across his face.

“Who wants cookies?” she asked. She had a wide smile on her face, but I could
still feel the heavy sadness from earlier
surrounding her. It was starting

to worry me that she couldn't get rid of it, even though she was doing what she does best and smiling through it.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 423

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Adrik

Ivan and Viktor stayed at the house for the rest of the week and through the weekend. Viktor's youngest brother, Ilya, was supposed to arrive Monday evening, so they came back late Monday morning. Sephie and I had talked to him periodically over the weekend, but it seemed like Viktor still wasn't completely ready to fully accept everything happening.

Sephie was wary about being around Viktor now, too. She was worried she was going to make something worse for him. Ivan

had said Viktor had talked some over the weekend, but he was mostly staying quiet. When Ivan told us they were on their way

back, Sephie took the Wonder Twins upstairs to the penthouse.

"I have an idea for an experiment anyway," she said, her sweet smile on her face.

She was using it as an excuse to not be around

when Viktor got back. The heavy sadness that was from Viktor was still with her. She'd been quiet for most of the

weekend. The guys all tried their best to cheer her up, but they could feel her struggling against it as well. None of us knew how to get rid of it.

"What experiment now, love?" I asked her, curious.

"You'll see," she said, grinning at me. For a brief moment, the sadness lifted.

Her eyes had stayed amber for almost the entire

weekend. They would change briefly now and then, but even her eyes weren't changing like normal, as emotions were constantly

changing, which meant her eyes were constantly changing. But right now, it felt like the overwhelming sadness was the dominant

emotion and was overriding all other emotions. It was

starting to worry me.

I stuck my head out of my office door, motioning for Andrei and Misha to come to the office, instead of her having to go to them.

Since I'd learned she was self-conscious about people looking at her, I tried to make sure I was with her as often as possible or

that she didn't have to walk across the floor very often. I'd started paying attention to the people in the office as they watched

her, as well. Most were fascinated by her, but she was still dealing with everything from being taken so it still felt negative to her.

"Take her upstairs," I said as they walked in. I watched as they looked at each other, seemingly having a silent conversation

between the two of them. Misha clearly won whatever contest they were having. He walked to Sephie, schatting down in front of

her while Andrei walked behind her and picked her up so she could wrap her arms and legs around Misha.

She giggled as Misha bounced her higher. "I know I can jump again, but not gonna lie, I prefer to be picked up like the princess I

am," she said, hugging Misha's neck a little tighter.

"It's easy when you're still too skinny," Andrei said, grinning at her.

She glanced back at me, a devious grin on her face. "Bubba said I can eat more cookies, so I'm going upstairs to eat more cookies."

I just laughed as they walked out of the office as Stephen walked in with my next meeting. While she hadn't been in my life for an

entire year yet, I almost couldn't remember my life before her.

I could feel her have moments of happiness, as I'm sure she was laughing and joking with Misha and Andrei during my meeting.

Once that meeting left, I had a few minutes before the next meeting arrived that I was planning on using to catch up on some

paperwork. As I got started, I figured out her experiment.

She was at her piano, but I could hear her just as well as if I was in the same room as her. “This makes paperwork so much more enjoyable, solnishko,”

“It works?”

“It does. I can hear you just as well as if I were in the same room.” I could hear her soft laugh as she continued to play while I continued to look through boring reports.

Ivan walked in my office without Viktor. “He’ll be down in a minute.

Aleksander called when we got here. I guess he talked to Ilya before he left to come here. It might be worse than we thought from what it sounded like,” he said.

“That doesn’t sound good. When does he get here?” I asked.

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Ivan looked at his watch. “Not for a few more hours. Viktor still has to leave stupid early to make it to the airport since he’s flying commercial. I hate that airport,” he said, a clear look of disgust on his face.

“It is very peopley there,” I said in agreement..

“Where’s the princess?” Ivan asked.

I could still hear her playing in my head. “She’s upstairs,” I said, as I shared a bet impromptu concert with Ivan.

“That’s impressive,” he said. “Did she just figure out she could do that?”

I glanced toward the open door, expecting Viktor to walk in at any point. “She worried about being around Viktor. She was looking for excuses to go upstairs to try and give him space.”

Ivan nodded in understanding. “He’s some better. I’m hoping seeing Ilya will help him. She’s still sad, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, it’s starting to worry me. She can’t get rid of it. Her eyes have stayed amber the entire time you two have been gone. The

Wonder Twins and Stephen have tried their best to keep her distracted and find ways to make her laugh, but it's always shortlived. The sadness is becoming oppressive. I don't know how Viktor has handled it if he's been walking around with that for this long."

Before Ivan could respond, Viktor walked in. He did look better after his short time away, but it was obvious he was still struggling to come to terms with everything.

"Everything okay, man?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah, Sasha is worried about Ilya too. He talked to him before his flight. He said he hasn't ever heard him like that. I guess the girl he thought he was in love with really did a number on his head," Viktor said.

"Hopefully some time away from it all can help him clear his head," I said.

"Give him a job, if he wants it. We could use the extra help."

Viktor chuckled. "Ivan said the same thing. I'm waiting to see how bad he is before I offer him a job, to be honest."

"Fair. Totally fair," Ivan said.

"Where's Sephie?" Viktor asked.

"She's upstairs with the Wonder Twins. She wanted playing time while it was quiet," I said.

I almost expected him to want to go upstairs then, but he stayed quiet.

"He's totally still avoiding her," Ivan thought.

"Agreed."

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Chapter 424

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Sephie

My experiment helped me channel some of the sadness I'd been feeling from Viktor, but it still didn't get rid of it completely. I

knew this kind of sadness. I'd felt it when my mom died, but even then, I had an easier time getting over it than this. It was like a cloud was following me everywhere I went. I'd have moments where I felt a little better, but the sadness would always return.

Along with the cold. I hadn't been this cold since I was in the hospital after (in and I were taken. I was quickly becoming

convinced I was incapable of feeling warm any longer. I doubled up on my warmest clothes, which helped, but not enough.

Andrei was happy to be on heater duty anytime I needed him, but even that isn't enough. They'd all tried their best over the weekend to help cheer me up as best they could and I loved them for it. The moments where I got a reprieve were great, but very short-lived.

Ivan walked into the penthouse after I was done playing. I was making yet another cup of coffee when I saw him. "Squish!" I said, immediately running to him.

He caught me mid-air and held me off the floor in a bear hug. "Princess, I missed you."

"I missed you, Squish. Life isn't the same without you here," I said, hugging him a little tighter. His grip on me tightened as well, popping my back in the process. I groaned in relief. "Apparently you're my chiropractor now, too," said, laughing.

When he set me down, Misha asked, "how's Viktor?"

Ivan sighed. “Not as good as I’d like. He won’t talk very much about it either so trying to figure out how best to help him is next to impossible. You guys have felt her sadness all weekend, too?” he asked, looking between Andre and Misha.

“Yeah. Stephen can feel it too. We’ve been trying to find ways to help cheer her up, but nothing lasts very long,” Andrei said.

“Her eyes have stayed amber almost the entire time, too. I think I’ve only seen them change the one time when Boss showed us his demon eyes,” Misha said. Even Misha sounded more somber than usual. I think it was beginning to affect everyone.

“They know we can do this now, too, by the way,” I thought. “Stephen actually figured it out before we told them. He’s wicked smart.”

Ivan chuckled, but looked at me curiously. “Yours change when you see ours change, but did you feel anything different when it happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did it give you relief from the overwhelming sadness you’ve been carrying around?” he asked.

“Um, I don’t exactly remember. I might have. I get moments of relief, but they’re just moments right now. I don’t remember ever feeling this way before,” I said. “And I don’t know how to get rid of it. Nothing I’ve tried has worked for very long.”

Ivan was always good for solutions. He thought for a minute, then looked to Andrei. “You haven’t seen anything weird around her, have you?”

“No, but she’s dimmer than she normally is,” he said.

I set about starting to make dinner as they discussed possible solutions to our latest unexplainable problem. The fact that Viktor

kept himself constantly occupied for so many years was starting to make more sense. Distractions definitely helped, but it was only a temporary solution.

Adrik and Stephen eventually came upstairs, along with Vitaliy and Aleksei. We were all waiting on Viktor to come back with his brother. When they finally walked in, both of them looked like they'd had the world's toughest conversation on the way back from the airport.

Even though things were awkward with Viktor, I was still relieved to see him and greeted him like normal. "Papa Bear!" I said as I went to hug his neck. His brother was somewhat surprised when Viktor wrapped his giant arms around me and picked me up like normal.

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"Sestrichka, this is Iva," Viktor said, motioning to his younger brother. He smiled warmly at me, finally putting it together. "You must be Sephie," he said, extending his hand to me. "I've heard quite a bit about you."

"It it was good, then he was just being modest. It it was bad, then he was lying" I said, taking his hand. As soon as my palm came into contact with his, much like with Stephen, I was hit with very specific memories from Ilya all at once. These memories revolved around a woman. I could see the evolution of their relationship, I could also see the subtle manipulations that Liter turned into all-out mental abuse, along with the heartbreak and trauma during the breakup. To say she did a number on him was an understatement. But more than that, I could feel he was struggling against his own darkness. And he was losing. I suddenly felt like someone had thrown me into a wall and I was gasping for air.

I must've done something weird, or zoned out, because I suddenly had Adrik and Ivan beside me. I'd put my contacts in before he got there, hoping to not completely scare the poor kid, so I knew it wasn't that. I could feel Andrei, Misha, and Stephen on guard behind me, as well.

Ilya took a step back from me, his eyes the size of saucers, and Viktor stepped in front of him, like he was protecting his little brother from us.

"Viktor, calm down. I can explain what just happened to her and why they reacted that way," Andrei said, quickly rushing to my side as well.

I was having a hard time focusing, between the overwhelming sadness from Viktor and now the darkness from Ilya. It felt a little like I was drowning. I reached for whoever was beside me and felt Adrik's arm go around my waist and Ivan's hand caught mine.

"You're freezing, Sephie," Adrik thought.

"I can't...Ft...anger," was all I could manage to get out. My body was starting to shake, but I think this time it was legitimate shivering instead of my weird response to trauma. I was getting colder by the second..

"Nun, she needs our anger," I heard Adrik say in my head. As soon as he said that, I could feel them both sending me their anger. They were both holding back. It wasn't enough.

"More. All of it." I told them.

I got hit with a wave of fire. It was so intense that it almost took my breath away, but it helped clear my mind and it pushed the darkness completely back. I could feel my own body again. I realized Adrik was basically holding me up. I stood up on my own, looking between him and Ivan.

"Better," I said.

While Andrei had told Viktor he could explain, he was distracted by feeling yah and Adrik's anger through me. He was somewhat stunned into silence. Everyone knew something was happening, they just didn't know what yet.

"Somebody better explain something in the next 30 seconds or we're out of here," Viktor said, his deep voice booming. I'd never heard Viktor angry, but he was clearly angry right now. It almost surprised me to hear him angry

"She got hit with all your brother's pain and darkness that he's been carrying around since his breakup when she shook his hand.

She's also been carrying around your years of sadness that you never dealt with all weekend long. It was too much for her.

When Boss and Ivan felt her start to falter, they got protective," Andrei said.

He paused for a moment, looking at Ilya. "You know there's more to it, but I don't know how detailed you want me to get right now."

"He knows enough. You can speak freely," Viktor said. Anger was still prevalent in his tone..

"Her demon tried to save her when she got hit with Ilya's darkness. She's just wearing her contacts, so you couldn't see her eyes

go black. Anytime her demon steps forward, it makes theirs do the same. Oh, by the way, they can do it too," Andrei said,

sharply. It was almost like Andrei was angry that Viktor was angry.

Viktor cursed under his breath. "When were you going to tell me that you can do that now too?" he asked, looking between Ivan

and Adrik. He was clearly frustrated with both of them.

"Check your tone, Viktor. We just found out this weekend. You were already dealing with enough without one more thing on top

of it," Andrei said. When Viktor first spoke, Misha and Stephen had quietly stepped behind me. Andrei put himself in between

Viktor and me as they were talking.

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I squeezed Ivan's hand, letting it go so I could put my hand on Andrei's back. I didn't have to say anything, he just moved enough to the side so that I could see Viktor, who was still trying to get a handle on everything and was still more angry than anything. I glanced past him at Ilya, who was simply a rollercoaster of emotion.

"Viktor, none of this really matters right now. What does matter is that Ilya is struggling even more than you know and you have the tools to fix that," I said, flatly. "Both Andrei and Ivan can see it. I can feel it. But you can fix it with that, I turned to walk back to the kitchen. Everyone but Viktor and Ilya followed me.

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Chapter 425

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Sephir

Viktor and Ilva quietly left the penthouse without a word to anyone else. We were quiet for a few moments, when Andrei finally broke the silence. He looked to Misha, saying, "I think you should confirm, but he'll be back. He just needs time."

Misha got his faraway look in his eye for a moment, then looked at Andrei and nodded his head.

room. As I walked down the hallway, I could feel the tears welling up

"At least it means I can take these contacts out," I said, walking back to the in my eyes. I walked a little faster, trying to avoid having to fish floating contacts out of my eyes.

I splashed water on my face, trying to get a handle on myself. I glanced in the mirror, noticing my eyes were swirling. At least

they're not amber anymore. As I patted my face with the towel, I did notice that I didn't feel the overwhelming sadness anymore

that I'd been feeling for days now. Maybe they burned it off

Everyone had concern written very prominently across their faces when I wafend back out. While I was still worried about Viktor

and Ilya, I was also enjoying not feeling like I was overcome with sadness,

"I think you guys sharing your anger with me burned off the sadness. I actually feel much better now," I said, smiling at Adrik and

Ivan.

It caused Stephen and Misha to laugh. "I didn't even know a human could get that angry without legitimately exploding and

you're like, 'right. I feel much better now,'" Misha said, laughing.

Vitaliy, always curious, simply said, "explain"

“When she got hit with whatever that was from Elya, she faltered and went kor rold. She’s insanely sensitive to cold. It was starting to consume her, to the point she was losing control. She managed to tell me and Ivan that she needed our anger.

Clearly, we were holding back because she then asked for all of it,” Adrik said, smiling at me.

“Because we can feel what she feels, we all felt their anger through her. It’s w said.

Andrei couldn’t give an explanation to Viktor right away,” Stephen

“How did she tell you? I didn’t hear her speak,” Vitaliy said.

“Yeah, so about that. She doesn’t need to with me and Boss atrymore,” Ivan sud.

Vitaliy looked to me, surprised. “This is true?”

“It’s true. It’s been happening with Adrik for a long time, just not with words how I can talk to Ivan too. It even worked when he was gone this weekend,” I said.

“That’s useful,” he said.

“You do feel better now, spider monkey. Your eyes are normal again, instead of amber, too,” Andrei said. I glanced around quickly to make sure no one would see, then tapped my temple so he would look in my head. I silently thanked him for not only being a buffer between me and Viktor, but for also jumping in so quickly with an explanation. He was the voice of reason in a velitile situation and I might’ve loved him a little more for it.

He gave me a wink and his handsome smile.

As we were clearing up from dinner, Vitaly finally asked what everyone had been wondering, but didn’t want to ask. “What if

Viktor decides not to come back? I know you say he will, but he’s still free to make his own decisions. Maybe he decides this is too much for him.”

I sighed. "I have thought about that. I glanced at all the guys. "I kind of unwittingly bound all of them to me, but I haven't with Viktor yet. They're all still free to leave at any point, but I also bound our souls together, so they're kind of stuck with me now until that agreement changes. I never did that with Viktor."

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"What do you mean, Seph?" Steplfen asked.

"Did she pinky swear with you?" Misha asked, grinning. "Because she did with me and it's one I plan to honor," he said, winking at me,

Stephen laughed. "I actually feel much better that I'm not the only one who took that so seriously."

"I thought it was how I helped you all discover your gifts, but then I never got a chance to do it with Viktor and now he knows his gift. I'm not sure what that means, honestly," I said, chewing on my lip.

Adrik walked to me, a small smile on his lips as he watched my eyes for a moment. "I missed seeing them change. They were amber for too long," he said, pressing his lips gently to mine. He pulled me against him as he spoke to Vitaliy. "I'm actually surprised Viktor is reacting this way to everything. He's always been the voice of reason for me."

"This is a high percentage of unreasonable occurrences, though. Everyone has their limit," I said. "Maybe we just passed his."

Maybe it was all out of order so it's more chaotic with him. I don't know. I don't have the answers."

"It wasn't your fault he found out the way he did, princess. It was Kostya. Held Viktor he used you and the Wonder Twins to make it happen," Ivan said. I looked to him, completely confused.

“She came in after that part of the conversation,” Adrik said.

“Viktor told me that his kid came to him in a dream the first night we were gone. He said he’s dreamed of his wife and kid regularly ever since they were killed. They were going to name the kid Konstantin and apparently the kid decided to keep the name. He knew that Viktor has been avoiding you, so he used Misha and Andrei to create the situation where Viktor could see his gift. It was his doing. You didn’t do anything wrong, princess,” Ivan said, his tone softening at the end.

I looked at Andrei. “That must be why I asked you to snoop in the journalist’s head. That’s what started everything and gave me the idea of how to figure out Viktor’s gift in the first place.”

“See? Always a reason,” he said, winking at me again.

Adrik sighed. “If Viktor decides this is too much, then we’ll deal with it when it happens. Until then, I don’t think it’s worth obsessing over.”

It was three days before anyone saw Viktor again. He completely disappeared the night Ilya came to the penthouse. No one could reach him. He didn’t tell anyone where he was going. He didn’t tell anyone that he was okay. He just vanished.

The guys knew he was back the third night, only because they saw light under his door when they all went back to their apartments for the evening. They were all so irritated with him that they left him alone. If he wanted silence, they would give him silence.

Ivan did let us know that he was back. “There’s a light on in his apartment. We could all see it under his door, but no one went to check on him. No idea if Ilya is still with him or not.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Ivan. I’m still not sure how I’m going to handle thine,” Adrik responded.

“Yeah, I don’t envy you on that one,” Ivan said.

Adrik sighed, clearly stressed about what to do with Viktor. On one hand, well knew he was struggling. On the other hand, he essentially deserted his duties, which he’d done before. Again, for good reason, but this was now a pattern.

He had climbed into bed first while he waited for me to finish up. He was rubbing his face in his hands when I climbed on top of him, straddling him.

“I think it’s on him,” I said, quietly. “He’s either going to accept everything that’s happened or he’s not. If he does, then we can figure out what to do. If he doesn’t, then he’s free to leave. This is a lot and I understand that. But not begging anybody to stay ever again.”

“I still think he’ll stay, but he needs to decide. He can’t keep running away from the decision. Once he decides, then the outcome will be much easier to determine,” he said, pulling me to him. I rested my head on his shoulder while he wrapped his arms around me, always grateful for the moments of

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peace that I so readily found in his arms.

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Chapter 426

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Sephle

Viktor and Ilya were both in the kitchen the next morning when Adrik and I walked out. The rest of the guys hadn't made it upstairs yet. I caught myself wondering if that was on purpose or just a coincidence.

Viktor stood up, taking a step toward Adrik. "Boss, I need to apologize. I didn't know what to do, so I ran. I was worried about Ilya too. I wanted to get him away from everything until..." he trailed off, like he didn't want to finish the thought.

Adrik, in his usual silent way, didn't respond right away. Even though Viktor knew his tactic, it was still effective. He continued talking. "I also owe you an apology, Sephie. I've been avoiding you because I knew you'd force me to deal with things I wasn't prepared to deal with. Turns out I didn't need to worry about you," he said, trying to smile at me.

I looked at him for a few moments. He still looked troubled, but he looked better. I glanced at Ilya, who looked nervous, but he actually looked much better than the first time I saw him. He caught me looking at him, but he looked away quickly, almost like he was embarrassed. I looked back to Viktor, asking, "you fixed him, didn't you?" Viktor's cheeks flushed, but he nodded his head.

"Good. It would've killed him." I looked at Ilya. "If you'd like to give me the name of the girl, I'll happily kick her ass for you. And

I'm going to say this, even though you're probably going to think I'm crazy at first, but she wasn't entirely human. Consider yourself lucky you got away from her when you did." His eyes went wide as he glanced to Viktor.

Viktor just laughed. “She could probably tell you your life story after she shook your hand the other night. I didn’t tell her anything.”

Ilya looked at me again, saying, “I feel bad for the way we met last time. I didn’t mean to cause any problems.”

You shouldn’t feel bad. You needed it to happen, so it did,” I said, leaning against the counter after putting the coffee on.

Adrik walked to me, pulling me against him. “You’re going to have to decide, Viktor. You can’t keep running from the decision,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“I know, Boss. No more running. I promise. I saw what it did for Ilya,” Viktor said.

“You’ve technically seen it twice now. The question is, do you believe it now?” asked.

Viktor chuckled. “I do.”

“Have you talked to the guys yet? You know they’re irritated with you. Mostly because you lost your temper with Sephie,” Adrik asked.

Viktor looked at me, obviously remorseful. “I know. I talked to them this morning before we came up here. They’re giving us time before they come up. I’m sorry I got angry, Sephie. I didn’t understand that you’d felt everything that Ilya was feeling. I just saw Boss and Ivan’s eyes and freaked out. when they locked in on Ilya.”

“I mean, you wouldn’t have stood a chance against those two. No offense, Ily I’m sure you can hold your own. Just not in that situation,” I said. “I understand.”

I felt Adrik sigh. “I need to know that you’re all the way in on this, Viktor. Whatever this is. If you want out, that’s fine. You’re free to go and no hard feelings. But if you stay, then you’re all in.”

I watched Viktor before he answered. There was still doubt there, but it was less than what it had been. I could still feel the sadness he'd been carrying around since his wife and child were killed though. "Don't answer, Viktor. You're not allowed to make a decision yet," I said. He looked at me, surprised. "I need you to ask Kostya to fix you the same way you fixed Ilya before you decide. The sadness and the grief that you've been carrying around for years have become so integrated in who you are that you almost don't know life without them now. You can't make important decisions when everything is clouded by grief. I felt what you've been dealing with. I had to go to very extreme measures to be able to get rid of it. Ivan met not be able to see anything on you, but that doesn't mean it's not there. You have a cloud you need to be rid of before you can decide and we all know there's only one soul that can fix that." Viktor was quiet for a moment Adrik said, "she's right. From the morning after you left with Ivan until the night she met Ilya, her eyes stayed amber and we could all feel the sadness from you through her. She couldn't shake it. She feels everything intensely, but she also has remarkable control. She

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couldn't shake this. She'd get moments of relief, but they were just moments. You need to be rid of that too. It's okay to let go. You don't love them any less by moving on with your life. I think that's what Kostya has been trying to help you with all along." Ilya stood up, walking to Viktor. He quietly put his hand on Viktor's shoulder. "They're right, you know." He glanced to me and Adrik, trying to silently tell us he would take care of it. "Come on. I'll be there the whole time," he said as he pushed Viktor toward the door.

Once I heard the door close behind them, I said, “it’s going to take a few more days. Apparently, that’s why they were gone. Ilya was out for almost two days after Viktor fixed him. I don’t know if everyone reacts that way, but somehow I think Viktor is going to need some extra sleep.”

“How did you know?” Adrik asked.

“I could still feel his sadness. He tries to push it to the background, which is why I didn’t pick up on it all the time before. But now that I knew what to look for, I could still feel it. He’s learned ways to contain it, if you will, but it’s still there and just as strong.”

Adrik pulled me closer, kissing my temple. “We don’t always realize how lucky we are to have you.”

The other four guys walked into the penthouse, looking very concerned when they didn’t see Viktor and Ilya there. I couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t worry. We talked to them. I made Viktor fix himself before he makes a decision on whether he stays or goes.

Apparently, that’s why they were gone for so long. It knocked Ilya out for a couple of days. I expect the same to happen to Viktor, so nobody panic if we don’t see them for a few more days.”

“He told you that?” Misha asked.

“No. I might’ve snooped in Ilya’s head when no one was paying attention,” I said, grinning at him.

“Devious. I’ll allow it.”

We didn’t see Viktor or Ilya the next morning when everyone came upstairs for breakfast. We were all hoping it meant he was recovering.

“Princess, I’ve been thinking,” Ivan said, as we were cleaning up.

“Me too, but I still don’t quite know how we’re going to get our hands on that many pancakes or if red pandas even like

pancakes,” I said. There was silence as they all tried to figure out just what the fuck I was talking about. I just grinned at them as I watched their confusion.

“I’m so glad you’re back to normal now, gazelle,” Misha said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

I looked to Ivan, who still looked somewhat confused, but mostly amused.

“What have you been thinking about, Squish?”

“I think there’s a way to keep what happened with Ilya from ever happening again,” he said.

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Chapter 427

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Sephle

“Please explain. Don’t worry about the pancakes, either. We’ll figure the logistics out later,” I said, grinning at him.

“Yeah, I’m still not even completely clear on exactly what happened with Ilya, so if you could enlighten me a little more on that, that’d be great. But, Seph, I’ve got ideas for mass production of pancakes. We’ll talk later,” Stephen said, completely straightfaced and putting his hand up to the side of his face like a phone indicating he’d call me.

Once Ivan finished laughing, he said, “you’ve always said Boss is your sword and I’m your shield. I don’t think getting hit with Ilya’s memories and thoughts were what was too much. I think it was the cold that came with it. Combined with Viktor’s sadness, that was more than you could handle. I think there’s a way that I can keep that from happening again.”

Adrik walked to me, sliding his arm around my waist. “That’s why it’s always felt like Ivan’s anger is facing outward from you. So something like that can’t get to you,” he said, understanding where Ivan was going.

“Also why he puts me in a bubble, I bet,” I said. I looked to Stephen. “I’m still trying to figure out how you shared everything with me when I touched your arm. But at least I know you were trying to share everything with me. I’m not sure Ilya was trying to share everything with me. If it just randomly happened because I touched him, that’s going to make me never want to touch anyone outside this room ever again.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world,” Adrik said, smirking at me.

“Did you get everything from Ilya like you did with me?” Stephen asked.

“No, it was specific to the breakup he just went through and the relationship he had with that chick. She was really abusive to him the entire time, but it started out subtle. She wore him down over time with little manipulationis, but then it just turned into outright abuse at the end. He loved her. He started to believe all the horrible things she was saying to him and about him,” I said, thinking back to everything I’d seen and felt when I touched Ilya. I suddenly felt both Adrik and Ivan get angry. I looked up at both of them seeing their black eyes. “What was that for?” I asked, surprised.

“The sadness and darkness from those two that you couldn’t get rid of was creeping back. You said we burned it off last time, but apparently we didn’t get rid of it completely,” Ivan said.

“You guys noticed it before I did,” I said, quietly.

“Are you sure, princess? Your eyes went black when we felt it,” Ivan said.

“They did?”

“I saw your eyes go black, then Boss’s eyes changed without even needing to see yours,” Misha, who was across from us, said.

“It’s your demon trying to save you, spider monkey. It did it the other night, too,” Andrei said. “I can’t tell if it just knows that getting angry is the cure or if it’s asking Boss and Ivan for help, though.”

“How do you know that?” Ivan asked.

Andrei shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I just know. But I think that’s what happened the other night. She started to struggle with everything she got from Ilya, her demon took over, and you two immediately went on offense without really knowing why.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, trying to come up with answers when I wasn’t even really sure of the question.

“Well, we do know that Sephie can handle insane amounts of anger. In fact, I think it makes her thrive. It would somewhat make sense that the opposite of that would be more crippling for her,” Stephen said.

“I don’t know. She’s so adept at handling her own emotions that I’m still surprised she struggled to get rid of Viktor’s sadness. I think it was the combination of both. It still feels like it’s the combination,” Adrik said.

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“You can still feel it?” I asked.

“Not right now, but when you were talking about Ilya, I could. It’s very cold. It has something to do with the cold, which is why I think Ivan’s idea of him being able to stop it next time makes so much sense for you. If his anger is facing outward, it’s burning whatever is coming toward you,” he said.

“And Boss is there for anything that gets past me,” Ivan said.

“Did you notice anything on Ilya, Ivan?” Stephen asked. I could see him starting to try to connect things in his mind. Ivan shook his head no. Stephen looked to Andrei, asking him the same question.

“He was hurting, but I couldn’t see anything. When they came back, I could see his aura, but it was still dim,” Andrei said.

“What are you thinking, Yoden? Does it have to do with red pandas or pancakes?” I asked, trying to keep a straight face.

“Still pancakes, but now I’m also wondering if red pandas even like pancakes. We should really find that out before we move forward with pancake production.”

I couldn’t hold my laugh in any longer. “I f u c k i n g love you,” I said.

“I’m still working on my theory. What do you know about the girl Ilya just broke up with? Other than her abuse toward him?

Anything?” Stephen asked.

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“Not much, other than I’d happily kick her a ss,” I said. I was thinking back over what I’d gotten from Ilya, chewing on my lip

again. When I looked up, they were all looking at me, slightly amused. I could see Ivan's black eyes, but this time I didn't feel his anger, nor did I feel Adrik's. I turned to look at Adrik, whose eyes were also black.

"Did I do that again?" I asked, confused.

"Yours went black when you were thinking about the chick Ilya broke up with! You told him that she wasn't entirely human. Your demon confirms it,"

Adrik said.

"When did you tell him that?" Misha asked.

"The morning after they got back. She was trying to make Viktor see how serious the situation was. She said it would've killed Ilya if he hadn't fixed him. Ilya was apologetic, but Sephie offered to kick her ass, then told him she wasn't exactly human and that he was lucky to get away from her."

Adrik said.

"I was trying to be somewhat overdramatic at that moment, to be fair," I said..

"Okay, dramatics aside, what if there was like a lingering effect from that chick still on Ilya. Like whatever demon that chick had was trying to break Ilya down enough that it could either jump to him or another demon could get into him. Ivan can't see it because it's not actually a demon, but we all felt the oppressive sadness from Viktor that Sephie couldn't shake. What if it was the same sort of thing on Ilya? It just follows him around, wearing him down little by little until he's finally weak enough that another demon can get in?" Stephen said.

"If I've learned anything from all this, it's that there's a reason for literally everything. Even knowing whether red pandas do, in fact, like pancakes. There's a reason that Sephie got that cloud from Viktor and it looks like it was so we could figure out what

happened to Ilya since neither Ivan nor I could see anything on him,” Andrei said, grinning at me.

“Do we know what happens when someone’s demon takes over completely and their soul either gets ejected or it dies? Does the demon stick with that body or does it jump to another one? Does it need a soul to work the body?” Stephen asked, looking at me.

“Why are you looking at me when you ask those difficult questions? I’m still working on the simple math problem of red pandas and pancakes. You jumped all the way to quantum physics,” I said.

“If one soul on one side of the universe gets ejected, does that mean a red panila on the other side of the universe also eats pancakes at the same time?” Misha asked, thoughtfully.

Adrik turned me to face him, trying to hide his smile. “You did this,” he said, pointing to Stephen and Misha.

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Chapter 428

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Sephte

It was three more days before anyone saw Viktor again. After the second day Ian and I started to get worried about him, so we decided to go check. The guys knew that Viktor was at least in his apartment this time. They could see the light under the door at night, Adrik sent Andrei and Misha with us as well.

“I think he’s fine now,” I said, teasing Adrik about being overprotective of me. Viktor liked him. It shouldn’t be an issue this time.”

“I don’t care. You’re still not allowed to touch him and you’re taking all three of them,” he said, very firmly. “Or else you wait until my meetings are done and Ivan and I will go with you. But you’re still not allowed to touch him. He had the slightest hint of a smile creeping up one side of his mouth as he laid down his ground rules.

“You’re very cranky,” I said, walking to him. Ivan was waiting just outside the door, along with the Wonder Twins. “It makes me want to f u ck it out of you,” I thought as I made my eyes go black. His immediately changed to black in response and I was hit with his intense desire for me.

“You do not play fair, solnishko,” he responded. He groaned quietly as he pulled me to him, kissing me deeply. I heard the elevator doors signal the arrival of his next meeting. I pulled back so I could look at his eyes. They were still black. I quickly thought about how much I loved him, trying to make mine change to blue. For the first time, I saw his change from black to normal blue. The black slowly faded into the background as the blue mixed in and slowly took over once more. He raised his

eyebrow, noticing my look of wonderment.

“I just saw yours change for the first time. Now I understand why you like watch it so much,” I told him. He pressed his lips gently to mine as Stephen walked in with his next meeting.

He said, in Russian, “I love you, solnishko. Come back when you’re done.”

“How could I refuse?” I responded, in Russian. I walked out of his office, grabbing Stephen’s arm on the way out.

“You guys look like you’re about to get into trouble,” he said, still speaking Russian. Everyone preferred Russian during the day in the office. It kept everyone else from looking too closely at me. They knew they wouldn’t be able to understand anything they were saying, so they largely ignored the guys. People still stared a little too much for my liking whenever I was with them, but I was trying to get over my aversion to the attention.

The guys, in their usual protective way, did what they do best and kept me as out of sight as possible from everyone else.

“We’re going to check on Viktor,” I said. “He wouldn’t let me go with just Ivan I’m also not allowed to touch Ilya.” I pointed to Ivan, then Andrei, and finally Misha. “So, it’s on you three to make sure I don’t touch him. I make no promises I’ll be able to control myself.”

Stephen laughed quietly, but he agreed with Adrik. “Until we know for sure what really happened, I think that’s sage advice, Seph. I don’t think you should touch him either.”

Ivan’s giant arms wrapped around me, trapping my arms to my sides. “Okay, ncess. We’ve got it covered. Let’s go.” He started walking us toward the elevator, making me laugh.

I knocked quietly on Viktor’s door. Ilya opened the door soon after, surprised to see us all standing there. He looked even better

than the last time I'd seen him. The first time I saw him, he looked much older than his actual age this time, he looked younger.

Much healthier and much more vibrant. He smiled warmly when he saw us and immediately stepped back from the doc, motioning us inside.

"Viktor's still sleeping, but please come in," he said.

"Has he been asleep this whole time?" I asked.

Ilya nodded. "I was out for two days straight. I kind of expect Viktor to sleep nger. He's been carrying around so much grief for so many years that I think it might take him longer. We've been trying to get him to move past this for so many years and he wouldn't do it." He looked straight at me. "We didn't know we just needed to give him orders," he said, smiling.

"I did not give him orders," I said, crossing my arms across my chest.

1/3

"No, that tracks, gazelle. I believe you gave him orders," Misha said, grinding I glared at Misha for a moment, before turning back to Ilya. "How you? You look much better than the last time I saw you"

"I feel much better. You were right when you told Vitya that it would've killed. I came here to say goodbye," he said. As soon as he said the words,

sat a low level for now I could feel his anger, but I immediately felt Ivan's bubble go up around

"You take my hearing away when you put your bubble up, so you have to let me hear this way," I told Ivan. He nodded discreetly, but kept his focus on

Ilya

everything you felt. That's what happened when I shook your hand. I quite a lot. Maybe more than most. Between the grief and

“Ilya, I saw everything she did to you, everything she said to you, and I also don’t know how much Viktor has told you about me, about us, but I can hang
ling what you’ve been carrying around, it almost broke me. I don’t
overwhelming sadness that your brother has been carrying
around and then
said, I wild still see Ilya clearly, but I could only hear what Ivan heard while
his break easily. What you were dealing with would’ve
broken anyone,” bubble was up around me. Ilya was struggling with his
memories. I put my hals in my pockets because the urge
to comfort him was growing stronger. I glanced to Andrei, tapping my temple,
then cutting my eyes toward Hya. He understood
immediately.

“You have to stop blaming yourself, man. What you were dealing with wasn’t
st any chick,” Andrei said after a quick snoop in
Ilya’s head. “The more you keep blaming yourself, the more you think about
how bad you got, the easier it will be for all that to
come back to you. You’ll end up like Viktor You’ll carry that pain around for so
long that you don’t know how to live witjut it,” he
said.

“I can’t say we’ve all been there, but we all do things we regret at some poin
Learn from it. Never let it happen again. And count
yourself lucky you got away from this one. I didn’t see everything Sephie saw,
but I saw what you looked like before Viktor fixed
you. You got a second chance, man, Don’t waste it,” Misha said.

Ilya was chewing on his thumb nail as we talked, looking at the floor. He was
geniet for a few minutes, then he looked up at all of
us. A small smile crept across his face. “I can see why Vitya is so fond of all of
you. I think he jaks about you guys more than he
talks about me and Sasha. You’ve all been very good for him.”

On the elevator back to Adrik's office, I asked Ivan if he felt anything before put his bubble up.

"You didn't?" he asked me..

"No. I assume there was more darkness, but he said quite possibly the saddest sentence ever spoken and I immediately felt your bubble, but nothing else. I'm either assuming that he's got nerves of steel now or neither of ours went black during that conversation, too. He never reacted if they did," I said.

"Ivan cuts you off from us, too," Misha said. "I could feel you when we first go there, but then nothing until we left. I didn't realize it was him until just now."

"Same for me," Andrei said.

I looked to Ivan. "I wonder if you can adjust it next time?"

He thought for a minute. "I'm sure there's a way. I just have to figure it out."

"But we do know it worked. I didn't feel anything overwhelming from Ilya this time. I could tell he was still struggling when he'd think about it, but I felt nothing. Overall, I think he's much better than the last time I saw him," aid.

Before the doors to the elevator opened, Andrei stood in front of me as Misha picked me up so I could hitch a ride. "I did notice you had to put your hands in your pockets, gazelle. I was ready to smack your hand away, just in case," he said, laughing.

"You have no idea how difficult that was for me," I said, dramatically.

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Chapter 429

429

Sephie

Stephen walked out of Adrik's office with his last meeting of the day just as we were walking up. He said quietly, in Russian, "I'll be right back. Don't start without me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I answered, giving him a wink while still on Andrei's back.

Adrik was smiling when he saw me still hitching a ride on Andrei. "How did it go?" he asked. He visibly relaxed when he saw me smile at him.

"I almost had to karate chop her hands away to keep her from touching Ilya, but she managed to control herself," Misha said, pretending to slice through the air. Adrik looked at me, his eyebrow raised, like he was deciding whether to be angry or amused. I hopped down from Andrei's back and went to him.

"What? He's still struggling when he has to talk about everything. I got the urge to comfort him," I said. Adrik decided on angry, as his eyes switched to black. "I didn't do it," I said emphatically, as I wrapped my arms around his waist, unable to keep from laughing at his overprotective side.

Stephen walked back in a few moments later. He stopped briefly when he saw Adrik's eyes, looking back to the office that was still full of people. He didn't say a word, he just closed the door behind him. When he turned back to face us, he said, "villagers. I'm still a little jumpy about villagers."

“We’ve confiscated the pitchforks. This is a pitchfork free zone. We should be fine, Yoden,” I said, smiling at him. My eyes switched to green, which made Adrik’s eyes go back to normal. Ivan’s too. He didn’t even know why his were changing, they were just there for support.

“I take it Viktor is still sleeping?” Adrik asked.

“Yeah, he’s been out this whole time. Ilya thought he might need longer than he did even,” Andrei said.

“And you said Ilya is still struggling?” Adrik asked, pulling me with him to one of the couches.

“Only when he talks about it, I think. He looks much better overall,” I said.

“Sephie was right, though, when she said it would’ve killed him if Viktor had fixed him. He told us he came here to say goodbye to Viktor,” Misha said. We heard Stephen curse under his breath.

This time, I felt the darkness creeping back in before I felt Adrik and Ivan send me their anger. It still surprised the Wonder Twins and Stephen, who all three looked at me when they felt it. I did get some enjoyment out of the looks on their faces as they tried to understand how I could operate with those levels of anger.

“See? Now I’m glad I closed the door. Could you imagine needing a signature for your expense report and walking in on that?”

Stephen said pointing. to me, Adrik, and Ivan. I giggled as I pulled Adrik’s arms around me tighter.

Adrik looked to Ivan, “did that happen when you were with Ilya?”

“It started, but my idea worked. She didn’t feel anything from him. I cut her a from the Wonder Twins too, though. And apparently, I also cut her hearing off, but now she can listen through my head, which seemed perfectly formal to me at the time, but now sounds weird to say out loud.” Ivan said.

“Normal is relative anyway, Squish,” I said, grinning at him.

“It happened when Ilya told Sephie she was right and that he came to say goodbye, Same as just now,” Andrei said.

“That must be how the demons are getting in. It wears you down so much that you feel completely hopeless,” Stephen said.

“I think you might be right, Yoden. I do think he’s much better now, but I also think he’s still at risk of having it come back. Can you see if he shakes it off for good, Misha?” I asked.

He got his faraway look in his eye as he was checking possible outcomes. He looked back to me, saying, “he looks fine eventually. I think it’ll just take time.”

“I think he needs to hear what you and Bubba said to him about a million more times, too,” I said. I looked between the two of them, grinning. “It must be such a burden to be so incredibly handsome and so wise at the same time.”

“I mean, some days, yes. Most days, no,” Andrei said, cutting his eyes over at me.

I could feel Adrik’s chest vibrate as he laughed quietly. He looked back at Ivan, asking, “did you mean to cut her off from those two or it just happened that way?”

“It’s always been that way. You’re the only one he’s never cut me off from,” I said. “But I think he might be able to adjust it next time. We should go check on him again tomorrow. We can experiment.” Ivan’s devious grin spread across his face as he agreed.

The next day was a weekend day, so all of us went to check on Ilya and Viktor. Adrik wanted to see for himself how well Ivan’s bubble worked. “I guess I’ll see if that poor kid really does have nerves of steel now or if our eyes just didn’t change yesterday,” I said as we walked to Viktor’s door.

Ilya was happy to see us all again. He was even happier to see the food I brought him. "Vitya won't shut up about your cooking.

It's a good thing our mother isn't here. She'd be jealous," he said, his warm smile on his face.

"He does look better than the last time we saw him," Adrik thought as he watched Ilya.

"I'm assuming Viktor is still dead to the world?" I asked.

"He woke up for a few minutes last night. He looked better, but he went right back to sleep and hasn't woken up since," he said.

I felt Adrik's arm around my waist, pulling me gently, but firmly, against him saw Ivan catch his eye, too. "And how are you, Ilya?

You look better than the last time I saw you," he said.

Ilya smiled, but we could all see the struggle still behind his eyes. I felt Adrik grip on me get tighter and felt Ivan's bubble go up immediately before Ilya even had a chance to answer.

"I'll be your interpreter for the duration of this visit," Ivan said to both me and Adrik. We could hear him laughing in his head, but his face was completely serious and he kept his focus on Ilya.

Ilya looked at Adrik, surprise was evident on his face. He took a step back, which let me know that our eyes had likely changed.

Andrei glanced at us, noticing it too. "Don't be worried, Ilya. You still have something hanging around you. They can feel it. That's going to keep happening until you finally get rid of it. It's not directed at you. It's directed at whatever is trying to break you down," he said.

"It's still alarming," Ilya said, fear evident in his voice.

"Alarming is a nice way to put it, yes," Stephen said, stepping closer to Ilya.

But if you consider that they're trying to help you by figuring out what the hell it is that's hanging around you, then it's much easier to stomach. They just have unique methods." We all

laughed at Stephen's explanation, but it was Andrei who looked between Stephen and Ilya, with wide eyes.

"Is this the first time you've spoken in front of Ilya?" he asked Stephen..

"I think so, yes," Stephen said, looking very confused.

Andrei looked back to me and Adrik, then to Ivan. "Boss, I think Stephen just literally made whatever it was leave. Ivan," he said, indicating for Ivan to lower his bubble. "You both are really quick at catching it, so she'll be fine if it comes back, but I want to see if she can feel the difference now."

I felt Ivan's bubble slowly retracting. Adrik kept a firm hold on my waist. I could feel both of them smoldering, just in case. I looked at Andrei, nodding once to let him know Ivan had removed his bubble. He then looked at Ilya and said, "Ilya, tell us again how you are since the last time Boss has seen you."

This time, it was still evident that he was carrying things he was going to have to continue to work on, but the darkness was gone. Ilya hadn't even

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spoken yet, but I could tell he felt it too. "You can tell too, can't you? That heavy darkness that has been following you is gone now?" I asked him.

His eyes were as wide as they could possibly be as he looked at all of us. He stood up a little straighter, like he felt lighter. "I feel...better," he said, like he still wasn't quite sure. We watched as he took internal inventory of his body, then a wide smile stretched across his face. "Yeah. Definitely better."

*Your mind didn't immediately jump to your breakup this time. You thought about you for the first time since anyone has asked you that question,"

Andrei said.

*Keep it that way, man. Whatever it was that was on you can still come back, but you have to let it. You're in charge again. Which means you're in charge of your own thoughts, too. Thinking about what just happened to you in any other context than trying to learn from it and heal from it will roll out the red carpet for it to come back," Misha said.

Ilya's wide smile spread across his face as he thanked all of us. We all watched as his light grew even brighter in front of us.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 430

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Adrik

As we walked back into the penthouse, Vitaliy and Aleksei greeted us. With each day that passed, I grew more surprised that my father was still in the city. He'd never stayed more than three days since handing everything over to me. It was close to two months that he'd been here this time.

"You all look like something just happened," Vitaliy said as we walked in. Sephie glanced at him, then at me. "I see where your observation skills come from," she said, her sweet smile across her face.

"We just went to check on Viktor again. As it turns out, Stephen's mere presence was enough to make whatever has been on him leave."

"Not his presence, spider monkey. He was here the other night. It was when he spoke," Andrei corrected her.

"I know. But it sounds way more dramatic my way, so I'm sticking with that," she said, grinning at him.

"You had the same thing happen again that happened the other night, sladakay?" Vitaliy asked.

She shook her head no. "Nope, Ivan puts up a bubble around me. It couldn't in again. Both he and Adrik also feel it faster than I do now, so they burn it off right away."

"But Stephen made it leave?" he asked.

"Yeah, apparently I'm not warm and fuzzy enough for whatever was on him. I was just trying to be helpful, but it was not appreciated," Stephen said, trying to come across as offended. We could all see his sly smile turning up one corner of his mouth though.

Vitaliy chuckled. I said, “we have been told that now that Stephen has his gift, the fear is going to increase from any demons we encounter. I’m still not convinced it was actually a demon that was on him, because Ivan couldn’t see anything, but whatever it clearly knew who Stephen was. As soon as he spoke to Ilya, it left.”

“How do you know?” Vitaliy asked.

“I could feel it,” Andrei said. “I can’t feel it the same way Sephie does, but I knew it was there. As soon as Stephen started talking, it changed. It was like it got scared and then it was suddenly not there anymore.”

I caught Sephie smiling at Andrei as he talked. It was obvious that she was proud of him and was enjoying watching him evolve and get better with his gift. He was quickly becoming much more confident. He stepped in right away the first night Ilya was here to help diffuse what could’ve been a very volatile situation. He also stood up to Viktor when his anger got the best of him. I’d never seen Andrei stand up to any of the other guys that way before. It was nice to see. He was stepping into his own.

“What about when Ivan put his bubble up this time? Did he cut her off from you two this time too?” I asked.

“It wasn’t the same as last time,” Misha said. “Last time, he cut her completely off. Like I couldn’t feel anything. This time, I could feel her, it just wasn’t as strong as it usually is.”

“Same for me,” Andrei said.

“Since I didn’t experience the complete cutoff, I’m just going to agree here. Honestly, I didn’t notice either way. I’m still trying to figure out the pancake paradox,” Stephen said.

“What did you do differently, Squish?” Sephie asked, grinning at Stephen.

“Mostly just tried to include them in the bubble this time. I don’t think they were all the way in, since they could hear everything

going on like normal. Or else it doesn't affect their hearing the way it does yours," Ivan said.

"Does it affect your hearing as well?" Vitaliy asked me.

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I nodded. "It's harder to hear anything outside the bubble. I can still hear Ivan I can still hear Sephie. Everything else is very m uff

led. We can both hear through Ivan now though, so it doesn't matter," I said.

Stephen suddenly inhaled. "Because that's how Sephie prefers to read people. She has other ways, but her preferred method is

to hear them speak. Ivan hides that, making her look like a normal human once again. Did your eyes change the first time you

went to see Ilya?" Stephen asked Sephie.

"I don't think so. He didn't react to them that time, if they did," Sephie said.

"I don't think they did. The darkness from Ilya wasn't as strong the first time.

She didn't even feel it that time. I'm still trying to

figure out how I felt it before she did, to be honest," Ivan said.

"It was a threat to her. Makes sense you'd pick up on it quickly after that very first time when she couldn't handle it," Stephen

said. "Andrei, if you could feel it, did you notice anything different once Ivan put his bubble around Sephie? Either time?"

"It backed off the first time. The second time, you made it leave soon after," Andrei said.

"And then a red panda on the other side of the universe got its pancake,"

Misha said, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

We all laughed, but Vitaliy just looked at Misha like he was quite possibly the dumbest person he'd ever met. Vitaliy looked back

at me, a questioning look on his face. "Your men should not be sampling the product, son," he said seriously, which only served

to make us laugh harder.

“Vitaliy, if you haven’t figured out by now, most of the dumb s hit we all say originated with me. It’s my fault. Misha’s still clean as a whistle,” Sephie said, trying to gain control, but still having fits of laughter. Vitaliy still didn’t look as amused as the rest of us, instead choosing to steer the conversation to more serious matters. “And what of Armando? What are you doing with him?”

We all straightened up at the mention of Armando, the mood now as serious as Vitaliy. “He’s still alive. Stephen is going to break him eventually.” I said.

“Why not kill him?” Vitaliy asked. He hadn’t been present for the conversations about Stephen’s gift and the ultimate outcome for the souls he would save by using it.

Sephie inhaled deeply. She crossed her arms across her chest and looked at Vitaliy, now without a trace of the humor and joy that were visible just a moment ago. “Because if Adrik kills him, that soul never learns the lesson it was trying to avoid by taking in the demon in the first place. It comes back, makes the same mistakes all over and more innocent people die in the next go around. If Stephen breaks him, that soul is locked in his body, with the demon, neither of them having control and both of them being tortured in ways we couldn’t fathom until Armando’s body dies.

Armando is young. He’s healthy. His body is going to live a very long life, meaning that so will endure a lifetime of torture and will never forget that lesson.”

Vitaliy was looking down at his hands as she explained the reason to him. When he looked up at her, he looked surprised.

Misha, who was standing in between them, could see her eyes and understood the meaning behind his look. “Purple means

universal truth. That's the latest color to appear. No one wants to argue with the Universe, so Armando is up to Stephen to take care of," he said.

"When does this happen?" Vitaliy asked, still staring at Sephie's eyes. She looked at Stephen, who looked back at her wide-eyed for a moment before regaining his expert control of his facial expressions. "You're absolutely right. I am feeling haughty after seeing Ilya. Vlad is making progress with customs. He'll be here soon. I'm going to need to show him my portfolio. I'm ready when you are." Sephie laughed, then looked at me. "You're okay with Stephen breaking him she asked silently.

"Not really, but I won't stop it. Like Misha said, I'll argue with you. I'm not arguing with the Universe." I responded.

"Yoden, what do you think you need from me to make it happen?" Sephie asked Stephen.

"Bold of you to assume I'd know that answer," he said.

King of the Underworld