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Chapter 451

Adrik

I was concerned about Sephie and the Wonder Twins. They'd been very quiet both on the way back to the penthouse and since we'd been back. Sephie refused to show me what they'd all seen. Stephen, to his credit, seemed to be handling it better than those three.

Sephie managed to learn a new trick, where she shut me out completely. I could barely feel her and I couldn't see anything in her head. I couldn't even talk to her.

"Okay, I won't look. I promise. Just please stop whatever it is you're doing to shut me out," I said to her as we were all in the kitchen. She still wouldn't look at me, but she at least let me feel what she was feeling again.

"How did you do that, princess? You've never been able to turn everything else off before," Ivan asked.

"She doesn't want you knowing what we saw," Andrei said. Even he looked incredibly troubled. Misha hadn't said a word in over an hour either. It was likely a record for him.

"I'm not being a s*it. You don't need to see any of it. Trust me," she said. She looked at Andrei, asking, "what was your idea at the hotel again? We need help getting rid of this. I'm not gonna be able to handle this for very long and you two aren't either."

I could feel her anxiety slowly increasing, but I could also feel all of her emotions were just completely out of control. She was

fighting hard to keep it as contained as possible, but this was not a battle she would be able to keep up for very long. I pulled her to me, surprised to feel her body shaking. I looked at Andrei, hoping he had a solution for this.

“Please tell me you figured out a solution. We just got rid of the shaking and now it’s back,” I said, my hands rubbing her back lightly, trying to help keep her calm.

Andrei glanced at Viktor, then to Stephen. “I think Viktor is here to help us as much as he is to help other people. If we’re going to be a witness to all the atrocities in the world, we’re going to need help. I think Stephen can help us get rid of it, Viktor can help us heal from it and make sure we’re not vulnerable. I think Stephen gets the worst of it out of all of us, especially if we dump everything on him to get rid of, so I think Viktor needs to concentrate on him first.”

“How did you help Misha get rid of his anger, Stephen? What do you do with it if you don’t send it back to the person?” Ivan asked.

Stephen laughed quietly. “It’s a bit of a process, but I think I can get faster at it. You might think I’m crazy if I explain it in detail.”

“Try us,” I said.

He looked at me, somewhat skeptically, but started to explain. “Emotions are just energy, right? Some of the time, when we struggle with emotions, it’s because they’re stuck in our body. This is why acupuncture works so well, especially for Sephie. It opens all the channels so her emotions can flow freely. It’s what helped her master her control. If your emotions are flowing, you’re feeling them the way you should be feeling them. They’re meant to come and go, not stay. We’re all so used to being

stuck, whether it's in anger, sadness, trauma, whatever, that we feel Sephie and we're suddenly overwhelmed because her emotions are doing what ours should be. Once again, she's showing us what we should be doing, instead of what we are doing. She lets her emotions flow through her like water. Just like any body of water, you want to keep it moving. When it stagnates, that's where the issues come in. When I took Misha's anger, it wasn't as much about removing the anger altogether. It was more about removing what was blocking it so it could flow through him once more." He paused, looking at all of us like he was unsure if he should continue. He inhaled deeply, deciding to continue. "There's a little more to this level up than any of us realized. I'm not sure if it's ever going to work with anyone else outside this room, but I just had to touch Misha to figure out why he was struggling with his anger toward Giana. Remove that, everything flows again." Sephie, who had her head leaned against my chest, stood up and turned toward Stephen. "Misha saw the younger version of himself that was quick to judge people in Giana and it irritated him." She immediately looked at Misha, apologizing. "Sometimes I can't control my mouth."

He grinned at her. "It's okay, gazelle. You're 100% right. Stephen didn't even have to tell me anything when it happened.

Whatever he did, I had the

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"I think I have a theory on that one, too. And I think Andrei is correct in that this is where Viktor comes in for all of us. Because of the subject matter that none of us were expecting today, you three instinctively tried to protect yourselves and Sephie tried to protect everyone since we're all connected to her. Essentially, you shut yourselves down to try and feel safe. It's completely

understandable and it's a completely normal response. I lived that way for years, to be quite honest, I think you're still shut down, still trying to protect yourselves which is why you feel like s*it and why Sephie doesn't want us to feel her and doesn't want anyone in her head right now. The dam needs to be broken, if you will. Then Viktor can repair what was damaged today. I also think before we do this again, you three need a tune up from him before we go. I think that'll help next time," Stephen said.

"What about you, though? Did you see everything we gave you today?" Sephie asked.

"I did. I see it each time, but I also think I can recognize that it's not mine: It might be easier for me since I'm already concentrating on sending everything back to the person. I don't get stuck like you three have. I think that's where the problem lies," Stephen said.

"I think Viktor should fix you anyway," Sephie said. "You're not going to be everyone's dumping grounds."

Viktor, who had been quiet until this point finally spoke up. "I think Stephen and Andrei are both right. If you're going to be seeing the worst side of humanity all the time, you're going to need help. Just like it doesn't make sense that Stephen would break half the world's population, I don't think it makes sense for me to go around fixing half the world's population either. I don't like people that much. I think you guys are there for the heavy lifting. I'm there to make sure you're in top shape to do the heavy lifting."

Sephie and Stephen looked at each other, then both looked at Viktor. "You still have your own issues that you need Stephen's help with, too. If you help us, he helps you," Sephie said, sternly. She was starting to feel grumpy the longer she carried around whatever it was she got from Battista's associate today.

Thankfully, Viktor didn't protest.

"Good. Let's do this now, then. I'm not happy that she feels like she wants to shut me out. Someone make that go away before I get angry," I said, pulling her against me once more.

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Stephen stood in front of me and Sephie. I could feel she was still unsure about letting him help her. She wouldn't look at him for a few moments. Finally, he said, "I promise it won't affect me, Seph. I think Viktor can help me get rid of it, in the off chance that it does.*

"Let him try, love. Anything is better than what you're feeling right now. We all know this isn't you. We would all like you to come back," I said.

She finally turned toward Stephen. "What do you need me to do?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just give me your hands. I'll do the rest," he said.

She timidly held her hands in front of her for him to take. He smiled at her.

"Promise it won't hurt," he said, as he took her hands in his.

It didn't look like anything was happening, but we could all feel what she was feeling. As soon as Stephen grabbed her hands, I could feel the intense pressure. She'd never struggled so much to control her emotions, but Stephen was right. It was because she was trying to contain them, not control them. In trying to prevent them from flowing through her to us, she stopped everything and that was more than any one person should ever try to contain. I could see the small smile on Stephen's face as he found what he was looking for. Gradually, the pressure decreased, like a pressure release valve being slowly opened.

We could feel her emotions come at us like a tidal wave. One right after the other hit us, wave after wave, crashing into us. But

as soon as the emotions hit us, they were gone. What was left was the normal connection I had with her. I could feel everything she was feeling like normal. Stephen said something to her, but I was too busy trying to look in her head to hear it.

“You’re not shutting me out anymore,” I said to her, almost giddy that I could talk to her again. I could hear her laughing in her head, but she looked like she was talking to Stephen and watching him move to Andrei. “Don’t ever do that again,” I said, probably more seriously than I meant to given her reaction.

She turned toward me, her eyes black, and told me, “I will do it again if it means protecting you from seeing what I had to witness today. There are things in life that no one should ever have to see.” She crossed her arms across her chest, her anger preventing her from coming any closer to me. I wasn’t quite sure, but I could almost swear that even her demon was angry with me at the moment. Something felt different.

Ivan chuckled, having witnessed our silent exchange. He could feel Sephie’s anger and knew I’d likely said something to bring it out. “Stephen fixed her. She’s all s*icy and s*it again,” Ivan said.

Misha clapped his hands, rubbing his palms together. “Extra-sp*cy Sephie is my favorite!”

I finally gave in and pulled her to me, whether she wanted me to or not. I didn’t like being cut off from her. As soon as my arms were around her, she silently said, “I hated cutting you off as much as you hated being cut off, but you still didn’t need to feel any of that. Or worse, see it. We’re going to need a warning from Battista next time.”

I could feel a wave of sadness from her. She still had her arms crossed in front of her, so I unfolded them and put her arms

around my waist so I could hold her closer. I felt her body start to relax the longer she was in my arms. "I love you, Sephie." She sighed, holding me tighter, hiding her face in my chest as I watched Stephen help Misha and Andrei the same way he helped her.

After Stephen was done with Misha, it was Viktor's turn. Misha asked, "can you fix all of us at one time? Is there like a limit on how much you can do at once?"

"I don't think there's a limit. It's not really me doing it anyway. Kostya does it. He just uses me when he does," Viktor said.

"Does it zap you when he uses you though?" Misha asked.

"Not the same way, I don't think. It doesn't last nearly as long. I might be tired for twenty minutes, then I feel fine," he said.

"How do I sign up for that," Misha said under his breath.

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"Can Kostya fix you again after Stephen helps you?" Andrei asked. "Is there a limit to how many times a person can be fixed? I'm looking at you, Misha," he said, trying not to laugh.

"As far as I know, there's not a limit. Your aura is a part of you. It's an extension of your energy field. As long as you're alive, your aura will be there and will be repairable to some extent. I think you can reach a point where it's past the point of saving. Like, I'm sure I would've been useless for that guy today," Viktor said.

"Do you want to see what Andrei saw? His aura was almost non-existent," Sephie said. Viktor hesitated. She turned toward him, moving slightly away from me. "Andrei only sees auras. It's Ivan that sees demons. I haven't shown Andrei what Ivan saw yet.

You won't see anything you don't want to see," she said. "He can show you, even. Misha can help him, the same way he helped

me.”

Viktor was more agreeable to Andrei showing him than Sephie. He really was terrified of our demons. Andrei, however, was much more skeptical that he could show Viktor what he sees than Sephie was. She laughed quietly at him. “You can show him, Bubba. It’s the same as with everyone else, it just takes a little longer. You need to concentrate a little harder. Do you want a snack first?” she asked, grinning at him.

“I hate you,” Andrei said, walking to Viktor. He couldn’t hide his smile as he walked past her.

“Not me. I love you,” Misha said, wrapping his arms around her and picking her up quickly before joining Andrei and Viktor. Misha was needed for Sephie to show Viktor before, so it was very likely he was also going to be needed for Andrei.

Andrei tried for a few minutes, but couldn’t get it through to Viktor. Misha grabbed his hand, giving him the extra boost he needed. It was almost immediate, once Misha helped, that Viktor saw what Andrei could see that afternoon. While they were sharing it with Viktor, Sephie motioned for Stephen to come to her. She grabbed his hand, showing him the same thing that Viktor was seeing. She shared it with me and Ivan at the same time she showed Stephen. There was barely anything to look at.

What faint outline we could see was dim and greyish in color, with very dark spots s*attered throughout.

“Yeah, someone like him is going to get no benefit from me,” Viktor said. He looked at Sephie like he was slightly unsure.

“Honestly, I’m not sure how much I can help you, Sephie. I don’t know how it works with your demon.” His tone was definitely lacking the normal softness he had when speaking to her.

I immediately felt her irritation. I knew it wasn't her irritation this time. I knew it was her demon. As odd as it seemed to say, we were beginning to be able to tell the difference.

"Does he know that Kostya fixed you once already, love?" I asked her.

"No. And I'm not going to tell him," she said, grumpily. I had to cough to keep from laughing out loud at her response.

"I think you should still try. I think Andrei and Stephen's theory of you being here to help us as much as anyone else makes sense. It wouldn't be reasonable for you to be here and not be able to help the three of us," I said. He could tell by my tone that there was going to be no arguing with me.

Viktor simply nodded once, then walked over to Sephie. It was irritating to my demon that Viktor had seemingly rejected it, but it was irritating to me that he seemed like he was still struggling to be around her and that he seemed like he preferred to be disconnected from the rest of us. I wasn't sure how to handle it from him..

We all watched as he placed his hand on her shoulder. In much the same way as it happened when Misha first showed him his gift, we watched a little white light come down from somewhere above us all and land in his hand. He touched Sephie once more, lighting her up. The one hole that we could see when Viktor first touched her filled itself in, making her shine brighter than before.

I could feel her relief as he was helping her. She finally felt calm again. Really, truly calm. Ivan caught my eye while we watched.

"Did his reluctance pi*s you off as much as it did me?" he asked.

"Don't ask s*upid questions."

"Thought so. Stephen needs to help him get over his aversion to our demons or it's going to get ugly and I'm not sure it's going to be us that starts it."

“I could not agree more. He’s next after he fixes Andrei and Misha. I’ll hold him down if I have to.”

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Adrik

Once Viktor was done with Sephie, she came back to me while he moved on to help Misha and Andrei. Her heart stopping smile was once again across her face, making the room a little brighter and the rest of us lighter for seeing it.

She looked at me, squinting her eyes as she tucked herself into my side. She glanced over at Ivan as well, analyzing him for a moment.

“Why are you two pi*sed off?” she asked both of us.

“Viktor’s reluctance to help you,” Ivan said.

“We’re going to make sure that he lets Stephen help him before he leaves tonight, He’s going to have to get over his aversion to us sooner or later,” I said.

“Or it’s not going to be pretty, is it?” she asked.

“Not one bit,” Ivan said.

Sephie was quiet for a moment. She caught Stephen’s eye, motioning him over to us while Viktor was working on the Wonder Twins.

“I have on idea,” she said to us, then she said the same thing out loud to Stephen. She let us watch as she put our conversation into pictures, sending it to Stephen as she held his hand. He understood immediately.

“I just need to touch him to do it,” Stephen said quietly: “I do think he’s scared of you three especially, so maybe let me try to talk him into it. We all noticed his reluctance to help you. It wasn’t just you three.” As Viktor finished with Misha and Andrei, they both looked much lighter, just as Sephie did. Everything was returning to normal

after our afternoon with Battista. Everyone was back to calm as well. The only emotion we could feel other than the peaceful calm was from me and Ivan and our irritation with Viktor.

Stephen looked at Viktor, asking, “are you ready for your turn now, Viktor?” Viktor hesitated, which made both Ivan and I struggle to restrain ourselves.

“You two either look at the floor or keep your eyes closed. That’s not going to help him,” Sephie told us, very firmly. “I can feel your frustration. I understand it, but it’s not helping right now.”

We both exhaled, trying to keep ourselves calm. Andrei and Misha picked up on something going on, feeling our frustration through Sephie. They both joined in with Stephen, trying to help convince Viktor.

“Viktor, you know you’ve been uncomfortable around Sephie since her eyes started going dark. Don’t think we all haven’t noticed you avoiding her,” Andrei said.

“We also know it’s not her that makes you uncomfortable. Why wouldn’t you want help to feel comfortable around her again?” Misha asked.

“You let Kostya help you with your overwhelming sadness, but this fear that you have because of your time in Syria is going to become just as overwhelming to you if you don’t address it. Trust me, man. I know what it’s like to live with more trauma than you can carry. The slightest thing becomes completely overwhelming. Let me help you feel better,” Stephen said. As he was talking,

he was slowly taking steps toward Viktor. As he said the last sentence, he casually reached out and touched Viktor's arm.

It was all he needed to start the process.

"That little s*it," Sephie said to me and Ivan. She was clearly impressed that he'd managed to sneak it in.

Ivan was laughing in his head. "I should've known he'd do this. Stephen's stealth is unparalleled. Can't believe I doubted him."

Andrei caught Sephie's eye from across the room. He was clearly enjoying the fact that Stephen had managed to sneak it in as well. The two of them

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had a silent conversation. Afterward, she shared it with us.

"Bubba says he's glad Stephen did this. He didn't think Viktor was going to let him. He might've snooped while Viktor was helping Misha earlier. He said the aversion to us was even bigger than any of us knew. I'm wondering if this is going to p*ss him off now,"

Sephie said. She glanced up at me, revealing her swirling eyes. The white was clearly mixed in with the other colors. She was starting to worry.

When Stephen was done, Viktor looked better for a moment. Before the anger came out. "WHAT THE F*CK, MAN! You don't do that to someone unless they're willing," he all but screamed at Stephen. It immediately sent me and Ivan into offense mode. We both took steps toward Viktor, My anger was quickly rising. I'm sure Ivan's was too. Sephie caught both of us before we could move any closer to Viktor. One hand on my chest, one hand on Ivan's chest.

"WAIT. Before you two do something that will damage this relationship further than it already is," she said. We could hear the

urgency in her voice. We could also feel her starting to panic, which didn't help either of us calm down. She looked up at both of us, her eyes were black, but we could see the white swirling behind it. We could also clearly see the tears threatening to fall.

I backed off. Ivan did too, once he saw me move back slightly. Sephie turned toward Viktor, but she was looking at the floor for a moment. I knew she was trying to get her eyes to change back. When she looked up at him, we were all hit with a wave of her sadness. This was tearing her up inside.

"Viktor, would you have let Stephen help you if he didn't sneak up on you?" she asked. He didn't answer her at first. He looked like he was too angry to answer her. "You don't have to answer. I know you weren't going to." She paused for a moment, trying to keep herself together, but we could all feel the turmoil she was in. She was finally letting herself really feel the pain of him avoiding her, the pain of him rejecting us, his discomfort being around us. "You're allowed to feel however you want to feel about us now that you know everything, Viktor. I won't stop you, I won't even judge you. I understand it's a lot to deal with. What hurts me, though, is that you would rather hold on to the pain you've been carrying around for years than to get help with it so you can feel good again. You're choosing pain over us. And it's not even that I'm hurt that you would choose pain over me, because I've been in your life for a very short amount of time. But the fact that you would choose pain over these five men who've been through so much with you is a little much for me to bear."

She didn't wait for him to respond to her. She turned and walked back to the bedroom, closing the door behind her. We could all feel her fall apart as soon as she was alone. I knew Viktor wasn't as connected to her as the rest of us, but I found myself

wishing he was at this moment so he could feel the pain she was in over this.

“Go to her. We’ll sort this out,” Ivan said. “Do whatever you need to do to make her happy again. I don’t know how long I can stand her feeling like this without killing him.”

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Sephie

I left Viktor still seething, along with the rest of them. I just needed a break after everything today. I didn't even do that much today. Stephen did the majority of it. I still found myself feeling exhausted. I'd been fighting coming to terms with Viktor avoiding me for so long and I just didn't have the strength to do so any longer. Apparently Stephen was more talented than he thought. I wasn't able to hold this back any longer after he helped me get rid of everything from earlier in the day.

Once I closed the bedroom door behind me, I fell apart. I felt guilty for doing so, knowing they were all going to feel it. There wasn't anything I could do about it either. If I tried to keep it from them, it made it worse. They were condemned to feel everything

I was feeling from now on and I didn't know how to fix that.

I was sitting on the bed, hugging my knees to my chest, my forehead resting on my arms when I heard Adrik quietly come in the bedroom. He didn't say anything, he just climbed on the bed behind me, wrapping his arms and legs around me. His hands lightly ran over my arms and legs, trying to offer comfort where he could. Instead of staying curled up in a ball, I turned toward him, climbing into his lap. My arms and legs now wrapped around him; I could feel the pull in my chest from him. His hands ran lightly through my hair and over my back as he held onto me while I worked to get control of myself.

After letting me cry for several minutes, he finally asked, "I know you're upset about Viktor, but there's something else now isn't

there?" I nodded my head against his shoulder, without picking my head up. I felt his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me far enough away that he could look at me. He didn't need me to answer. He was good enough now that he could find the answer on his own. He looked pained when he found what he was looking for, but then a small smile appeared on his face. "You seem to have forgotten how upset I was at not being able to feel you this afternoon.* I did forget. He was angry with me for figuring out a way to shut him out completely. As far as he was concerned, my reason for doing so didn't matter. I couldn't help the small smile that gradually stretched across my face as I remembered his reaction to not being able to feel me.

"I'm not the only one that feels that way, Sephie. Given the chance to be connected to you or not connected to you, they're all going to pick you. Every single time," he said.

"Maybe not all of them," I said, once again thinking about Viktor.

He took a deep breath. I could feel his frustration at the situation as well. "I would've said he would come around, but after what just happened, I'm honestly not sure anymore."

I let my fingers trace the outline of his face, running through his ever-present stubble. He closed his eyes, leaning into my touch.

"Maybe he needs time to realize how much better he feels after Stephen helped him? I don't know either. I never expected this to happen. It's not just you and Ivan, though. It's all of them. They're all irritated with Viktor. I'm not sure if it's making everything worse or not. Maybe he does feel like he's being singled out," I said.

"I don't know either. What I do know, however," he said as he cupped my face with both of his hands, pressing his lips to mine.

"Is that I'm starting to tell the difference between you and your demon. It also was very angry with me earlier today when I told

you to never shut me out again.” He had a boyish grin on his face as he watched the surprise on my face.

“Really?”

“Really. I started noticing it when we were at the hotel. We all did, I think. But then when you got mad at me, it was like you were doubly mad. It was your anger, plus some,” he said.

I was quiet for a moment, mulling over what he’d just told me. “What if by acknowledging them we’re strengthening the connection even more? It seems like each time we do, something new like that happens. Mine tried to save me, all of ours tried to warn us. Maybe they want to talk to us,” I said.

“So now I have to deal with Ivan in my head, as well as my demon?” he said, faking inconvenience.

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I giggled. “You’re going to have a fanel of voices in your head.”

His handsome smile stretched across his face. “I’m happy to see your smile. You’re lighter again. When you’re not thinking about Viktor. Stephen really did help you. So did Viktor. The difference was obvious.”

“Maybe he just needs Kostya to fix him again and he’ll feel better too,” I said.

“What happened after I left? I haven’t heard any commotion. I guess they aren’t fighting out there.”

“Ivan told me to come back here. He said he wouldn’t be able to stand you feeling the way you were when you left for very long,” he said. I looked down, trying to keep the guilty feeling from growing too strong. I felt his fingers lift my chin so I would meet his gaze once more. “He just wants you to feel better. He would’ve said the same thing even if he couldn’t feel you. It was very obvious that you were upset.” He leaned forward, his lips against mine. He pulled back so he could look me in the eyes again,

searching for the thoughts that were running through my head. He pulled me to him, holding me tightly. “We’ll figure this out.

Promise.”

We sat in silence for a while, before his curiosity got the best of him. “You and Andrei can talk to each other almost as easily as you talk to me and Ivan now, can’t you?”

I nodded my head against his shoulder again. “It’s easier the more we do it. I still don’t know how he communicates with Misha. I haven’t tried it with him yet. I’m experimenting with Stephen. I think he’s the most difficult right now. I need to be touching him to get information to him.”

“But he’s incredibly observant. I think half the time he already knows whatever it is we need to tell him,” Adrik said. “I never knew that guy had this much going on in his head all these years.”

I sighed. “Like I told him, I’m just glad he finally decided to show everyone how incredibly smart he is. I wish Viktor would pay attention and see how much better Stephen has been since he got rid of everything from his past he’s been carrying around.” I groaned in frustration, falling backward so I was laying on the bed, my legs still wrapped around Adrik.

“I like where this is going,” he said, his s*xy smirk on his face when I squinted my eyes at him. I covered my eyes with my arm, trying to get my brain to just stop for a minute. He took the opportunity to lift my shirt as high as he could get it without making me move so his hands could roam over my breasts and stomach. I had to admit, it was helping me relax. “Can you ask your dad or Kostya what to do, solnishko?”

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Sephie

“I would, if they came to me. I’ve never been the one that’s in control of when they show up or not. It’s always a surprise to me,” I said. Adrik’s hands were still roaming over my stomach, up to my breasts, then back to my hips. I was beginning to think it was the equivalent of when my hands needed to fidget. I could feel him trying to come up with answers as I laid there. “I’m not sure how much they’ll be able to tell me, either. They’re not supposed to interfere.” “Maybe Misha can find answers, then,” he said, “Do you even know the questions? Because I don’t,” I said, my arms still covering my eyes.

“I think the biggest question is what to do about Viktor. I would’ve thought that he would come around by now, but he’s still clearly hesitating. I feel like there’s something we need to be doing to fix this that we’re not doing,” he said. I could hear the frustration in his voice as he tried to come up with answers.

“Maybe this one isn’t on us to fix,” I said, peeking at him from under my arms. It was starting to make more sense in my head.

“Maybe this is what he needs to go through to realize his full potential. The rest of us have had to deal with big things to be able to handle our gifts, Viktor sk*pped that part, because Kostya showed him before he was ready. What if this is him completing those levels he s**ipped?”

His hands had stopped, one on either side of my rib cage as he thought about what I’d just said. I still had my arms over my

eyes, but I could somewhat see him from underneath my arms. He leaned forward, pulling my arms away from my face. He pulled me back to a sitting position, his handsome smile on his face. I could feel the pull in my chest that was from him as he looked at me for a few moments. He placed one hand on my cheek, kissing me softly while his thumb rubbed gently on my cheek. "The way your mind works sometimes makes me think that nothing is impossible with you," he said.

"This one wasn't just me. I would've never thought that if you hadn't said what you said first."

His smile got bigger. "Teamwork makes the m*therf*ckin' dream work." I couldn't help but laugh. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his. This man. I loved him so completely.

"We should tell Ivan before someone gets hurt, though," he said, his arms holding me just as tightly.

"Fair point," I said.

"Has anyone died yet?" I asked Ivan.

"Negative, princess. We sent him to his apartment. And by we, I mean Andrei. That kid is really becoming the voice of reason lately."

"He has a bit of an unfair advantage that he readily exploits and I'm here for it. He likely knew it wouldn't have been productive to try and talk to Viktor anymore tonight. Are you guys still in the penthouse?"

"Yeah, we could all feel your mood get lighter. We were hoping you'd come back out at some point."

Adrik had heard our exchange. He smirked at me, saying, "see, told you. They prefer to be connected to you, solnishko. You're not holding them back from anything."

I sighed as I stood up to leave the bedroom, still thinking about everything that was happening. Adrik surprised me by picking me up, causing me to squeal. I laughed, holding onto his shoulders as he carried me back out to the kitchen, where the guys were waiting.

When we walked into the kitchen, Adrik announced, "Sephie figured it out." I could hear each of them exhale loudly. "Oh thank G*d," they all said. "Is it something that's going to be resolved quickly? Because I'm willing to ask Vitaliy if we can trade Viktor for Ilya at this point," Misha said.

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"That I do not know, my adorable Russian guardian," I said as Adrik deposited me on the counter, across from everyone. He stood in front of me, in between my legs. He was facing away from me, so he could look at the guys while we talked. I wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my head on his shoulder, much like he enjoyed doing with me. "But I do think it's going to be resolved at some point now, which is more than I could say an hour ago."

"What do you think it is?" Andrei asked.

"You ask like you haven't already snooped through her head to find the answer," Misha said laughing.

Andrei laughed too, but disagreed. "No, she can feel me when I do. I'd get caught with her. You? Not so much."

"That hurts me, Andrei. I'm very sensitive," Misha said, his hand over his heart.

"Are you two nerds done?" I asked, smiling at both of them. It made me happy to see them trying to lighten the mood, picking at each other like two brothers.

Misha cleared his throat. "Yes, teacher. Done. Continue, please."

"We all had to go through something big to realize the full potential of our gifts. It was different for each of us, but it was always something very difficult to deal with. Once we dealt with whatever it was, we starting unlocking levels," Adrik said, his hand running lightly back and forth across my arms that were wrapped around him as he talked.

"Viktor kind of sk*pped that because Kostya revealed his gift early. I think it needed to happen when it did, especially for Ilya's sake, so I'm not blaming Kostya for anything here. But Viktor sk*pped a very important part. I think he's having to go through it now. It's just harder for all of us to take because to us, having his gift means everything should be grand already. He essentially did it backward from the rest of us," I said.

"So once he deals with what happened tonight, he should be good?" Misha asked.

"I can't say for sure, but that's what I'm thinking," I said.

"I still don't quite understand why he had such issue with Stephen helping him," Misha said, his normal happy personality suddenly turning darker.

"When you've been carrying around that much trauma and keeping it locked away, you almost start to identify with it. You become the trauma. You identify as the trauma. I think if Viktor could've realized that he isn't his past when Kostya first got rid of all the grief he was carrying around, he wouldn't have had to go through this. Instead, he's having to peel back the layers of his trauma and go through them one by one," Stephen said.

"Let's hope that Kostya helps him again, then. He was better for a few days, but anything to do with your demons makes him

pi*sy, which makes me pi*sy and I don't even know why. I hate being p*ssy," Misha said. It was obvious that he was completely frustrated.

Adrik laughed. "It's not you that's pi*sy, Misha. The same thing happens with us." I watched as Misha tried to understand what Adrik had just said. Instead of saying anything more, he switched his eyes to black, which switched mine and Ivan's as well.

"Shut up," Misha said, completely surprised.

"Your demons are the ones that are pis*y?" Andrei asked.

"They're pi*sy, they're hurt because they feel like Viktor rejected them, and they're also trying to help more. And Sephie's was just as mad at me today as she was when I told her to never shut me out again. Yours are likely picking up on everything from ours, which is why you're p*ssy but don't know why," Adrik said.

Misha thought for a moment, then looked up at us. "I just have one question, Does my demon also like pancakes?"

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Chapter 456

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Sephle

Adrik decided to go to Viktor's apartment and talk to him while we all waited upstairs. Next to Ivan, Viktor was the closest to

Adrik. We all knew Viktor did better with difficult situations away from everyone, so Adrik thought it might go better if it was just

him. None of us could argue with that line of thinking, so we waited.

"If nothing else, maybe he'll give him a few more days off. I think forcing him to slow down will help him deal. Apparently, I'm not

the only thing he's been avoiding." I said as Adrik left the apartment.

"None of us understand why he's been avoiding you, spider monkey," Andrei said. "We've all noticed it for months now, but none

of us understand it. Even knowing that you're the one that's helped us all figure everything out. It still doesn't make sense."

I caught myself thinking back to my earlier worry about keeping them from living their own lives. "You're worried about

something else beside Viktor, aren't you, princess?" Ivan asked me. He could tell by my expression that the answer was yes.

"Wanna talk about it now or later?"

"Later."

He simply nodded his head and let the subject drop, helping to steer the conversation to other subjects. He looked at Andrei,

asking, "have you tried communicating with Boss the same way you do Sephie?"

Andrei looked shocked at the implication, which made everyone laugh. "I think Ivan means that since he and I can communicate so easily, it should also be fairly easy for you to do so as well," I said.

“Oh. No, I haven’t tried. I haven’t even thought about it, if I’m being honest. But now that you say that out loud, I would think there should be a way. right? I’m still trying to figure out how to make it work with Stephen. It seems like there still has to be contact with him to get anything through,” Andrei said.

“How do you make it work with Misha?” I asked him.

“It’s kind of changed now. When we first started doing it, I could like project images into his head. He can ask me whatever or tell me whatever and I’ll get it easily, but I had to respond to him in images at first. Now it’s getting easier the more we do it. I can respond to him with words now and he gets it,” Andrei said.

As Andrei was explaining how he communicated with Misha, I tried to push a memory of us running at the house, just to see if he could see it. Misha’s grin stretched across his face as he’d seen it. Once I knew he’d seen it, I could hear him tell me “I miss it too” as a response. He quickly followed it with, “try words, too. I think Andrei unlocked it for me, so you should have an easier time.”

“I’ve been thinking that you should order Adrik to the house again. I think we all need it again already,” I said to Misha.

“I fully support this plan,” he said, grinning at me. The other three had figured out that he and I just discovered we could communicate.

I looked at Andrei, then to Ivan. “It should work on you two, too. I mean, I would think so, since Ivan can talk to both me and Adrik. If Andrei’s like me, then it should work, right?” I asked.

I could see Andrei trying to push his thoughts to Ivan. Ivan’s sly grin spread slowly across his face as he heard Andrei in his head. Once they had a conversation, we all looked at Stephen. “Now we just have to figure out how to start with you and then

you'll be able to do it too."

We were still experimenting with Stephen when Adrik came back to the penthouse. So far, we still needed to be able to touch Stephen for him to get the message, but he was able to do it with everyone and do so quickly. One touch and whatever information he needed was downloaded to him instantly. We were laughing because I'd come up with a really long explanation for some incredibly ridiculous thing, just to have as much material as possible. He touched my hand and got it all instantly like I'd said it to him out loud.

"Do I even want to know what you guys are doing?" Adrik asked as he walked back into the kitchen. He looked highly amused to see us all laughing.

"We're trying to figure out how to communicate with Stephen. So far, we have to be touching him to get the information to him, but I just went on this really long rant over nothing and he got it instantly when he touched my hand," I said, still laughing. "And we also figured out how to talk to

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Misha and Andrei. Ivan can do it now too, which means so can you."

Adrik looked surprised, but impressed. We quickly explained how to do it with both Andrei and then Misha. It worked right away for both of them. Even they were surprised it worked so quickly with Adrik. He tried our system with Stephen as well, getting immediate results.

"I think the more we practice at this, the easier it will become all around," Ivan said. His mood turned somewhat serious as he asked what the rest of us didn't want to ask, "How did it go?"

Adrik sighed. "I think Sephie is right. I think he's done everything backward from us, which is why we're having a harder time with it. He knows he's been an a*shole. He just doesn't know how to stop it yet. The time in Syria did a number on him. We all know that, but we all thought he was handling it. In reality, he just shoved it to the back of his mind and never thought about it again. When we first met Sephie, she was a welcome distraction from it. But then she started helping everyone else deal with their own trauma, plus revealing everything she's been through. It was so fresh for him that he didn't want to go through it all again. So he started avoiding. Everything."

"What about Stephen helping him tonight, though? Did that do anything for him?" I asked.

"I think so. He's finally feeling everything that's he's been locking away. I suspect he's feeling like you did when Stephen helped you. It was like wa crashing into all of us as everything opened back up for you. But once we felt the emotion, it was gone right away. I don't think it's leaving as quickly with Viktor as it did with you, but at least it's moving now," he said.

"Does that mean Stephen needs to do it again?" Misha asked.

We all turned to Stephen, not sure of the answer. He looked somewhat surprised. "Bold of you all to assume I'd have that answer," he said. "But I can give my best guess. It was much easier with Seph, Andrei, and Misha today because the blocks were fresh. Meaning they were weak. The longer you try and bottle up something, the stronger the block gets. Viktor's been holding all of that in for quite a while, so the block is strong. I might've only cracked it, so to speak. Things are moving, but he might also be able to repair the dam, if you will. We should be able to tell in the next few days if it stuck or not. I'm not above

sneaking it in on him again if that's what it takes."

"You don't need him mad at you like that again, though. That's not fair to you," I said.

"Eh, he never stays mad for very long. I don't think he was even mad at me. He was just mad at knowing now he's gotta feel it," Stephen said.

"That's exactly why he's mad. He told me so," Adrik said.

"So what did you tell him?" Ivan asked.

"I gave him a couple more days to get a handle on everything. I don't like being without him, but we can manage. He wants to deal with everything on his own, so he's got the chance to do so. I told him not to waste the opportunity," Adrik said.

I found myself feeling slightly relieved that I'd get another break from him, but I was also upset that I would feel that way about Viktor.

"Don't worry, spider monkey. We'll get this figured out and things will go back to normal," Andrei said, in an effort to comfort me.

I looked at him, loving him for being so thoughtful. "Normal is relative anyway, Bubba."

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Chapter 457

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Sephie

Since we'd decided to attend the fundraiser for the hospital so Adrik could have a chance to see the mayor, as well as the DA, as well as the police commissioner in one place, in one evening, that meant I had to buy yet another dress. Which meant I was forced to go shopping.

My only consolation was that I had to take at least three guys with me. Shopping for a formal dress with three giant men in tow was enough comic relief that I found myself enjoying the process. Ivan looked angry at all the dresses, Andrei looked slightly uncomfortable like he was going to get yelled at for accidentally touching one of them, and Misha was busy picking out the ugliest dresses he could find to see if he could talk me into trying them on. He would hold up the most hideous dress he laid his eyes on and would say loudly, "I really feel like this is the one. We can stop looking." He was my f*ckery twin and I loved him for it.

The poor girl working in the dress shop was completely overwhelmed with those three. She didn't know whether to be terrified or amused. Finally, she mustered the courage to approach me and ask me what I was looking for.

"You see, that's the problem. I don't even know," I said to her. I noticed her nervously watching the three guys. I tried not to laugh at her. "Don't mind them. They look scary, but they're quite nice."

She tried to believe me, but it was definitely a struggle. We discussed what event I needed the dress for, what I liked, and what colors I preferred. I explained what it was for and that I needed to have my back covered. I left the rest up to her. She set off among the racks of dresses, picking several for me to try.

She might've been trying to get us out of the store faster because she was terrified, but she managed to help me find the perfect dress in under ten minutes. Because it was still cold outside, she pulled a dress with long sleeves. My back was completely covered, but it had a plunging neckline that I was sure Adrik would both love and hate. I had to admit, my boobs looked amazing

in the dress, so I decided the gamble on his level of hatred for the showing this much skin was one I should take. Between my cleavage and the slit in the skirt, it had plenty of sex appeal while not showing off everything. Instead of black this time, I went with a deep blue. Might as well make as many details as possible different from the last time I had to wear a formal dress.

I was busy looking at myself in the changing room, when I heard all three guys basically demanding that I show them. "We know you like this one, so you have to show us," Misha said, in Russian.

"I had no idea you three would be so interested in such girly things," I said, walking out to show them.

"Princess, this one might be better than the last one and the last one was pretty perfect," Ivan said.

I pointed to my cleavage. "Too much? Think it'll pi*s him off?"

Andrei chuckled. "You would only p*ss him off by showing your whole boob. Which you're not. You'll be fine."

"You saw Vanessa. You're still leaps and bounds more tastefully dressed, even with that amount of cleavage," Ivan said.

Misha walked closer. He had a curious look on his face. "I know you're going to wear your contacts that night, but make your eyes turn blue right now. I want to see something," he said quietly.

I thought about how much I loved Adrik and saw Misha's grin. He turned to Ivan and Andrei and motioned them over. "It's virtually the same color," he said, pointing to my eyes and the dress. Andrei and Ivan walked over to see for themselves, both agreeing with Misha.

"Sold!" I said, knowing that Adrik would love it just for that reason alone.

"Also, it doesn't hurt that this one fits me perfectly already and needs no alterations. This was meant to be. Wrap it up. Let's get the hell out of here," I said, walking back to the

changing room. I could hear them all laughing at me as I changed back into my clothes.

A quick trip to get shoes, which was admittedly less painful, and we were on our way back to the penthouse. On the elevator up, they were giving me a hard time about hating shopping. I knew they just enjoyed teasing me about it. I knew they loved the fact that I hated shopping because it meant they didn't have to go with me. "Guys have it much easier, especially when it comes to formal events. Your biggest dilemma is whether to wear a vest or a cu*merbund, tie or bow tie. You saw what women put themselves through. For no apparent reason other than they hate being comfortable," I said.

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"Don't be grumpy, gazelle," Misha'said, trying not to laugh. "We secretly love your hatred for shopping"

As the elevator doors dinged to announce our arrival, Ivan quickly asked, "are we sworn to secrecy again this time about your dress?"

"Nope. You can even show him what it looks like. Pretty much everything that happened last time should not happen this time.

Just to be safe," I said.

Ivan smiled at me, but I could feel them all flinch as they thought about the last time I had to wear a formal dress. "Don't worry, princess. It will be much different this time. I doubt Boss will let go of you the entire night. If he has to, then one of us will be there with you the whole time. He didn't say anything else when I looked at him skeptically. He just held his pinky up in front of him. I

grinned at him as I grabbed his pinky with mine. Andres and Misha waited in the elevator with us, each of them making a promise, solidified by their own pinky swear, that they wouldn't leave me alone the entire night.

"I love you guys," I said, completing the pinky swears with all of them. Andrei stepped in front of me and Misha was there to pick me up so I could wrap my arms and legs around Andrei. He happily carried me to Adrik's office so I could ignore everyone looking at me.

"You do know that everyone will be looking at you at that fundraiser, right?" Andrei asked quietly as we walked from the elevator to the office.

"Don't remind me. I haven't figured out how I'm going to handle that yet," I said.

"We'll protect you," Andrei said, squeezing my legs as we walked into Adrik's office.

He looked up as we walked in, his handsome smile stretching across his face as he saw Andrei carrying me. Andrei stopped and set me down so I could go to Adrik, who stood up to come to me. "You're not cursing, so I take that as a good sign that you found something quickly," he said, his lips finding mine.

"I did find something and it was relatively painless, so no cursing. Yet," I said, grinning at him.

"Am I to be kept in the dark this time as well?" he asked. He was clearly curious as to what I found.

"Nope. Ivan can show you, even. They all saw it. I'm actually kind of nervous that you'll be mad so maybe you should see it because I might have to get a different one if you veto this one," I said.

He looked at Ivan, raising his eyebrow. I could tell those two were having a silent conversation, as I could feel Adrik bristle at the thought of being mad over the dress I chose. Adrik looked at what Ivan showed him, turning back to me. I could feel his desire for me come on very strongly. He did laugh softly at me. "I do love that you're worried about my opinion, but you're so incredibly tasteful and classy that I don't think it's possible for you! to make me angry with your wardrobe choices. It's perfect, solnishko."

"Don't say that. I'm going to take it as a challenge and try to prove you wrong." I said, grinning at him. He pressed his lips to mine.

"Somehow, I think I will win that bet," he said, smiling against my lips.

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Chapter 458

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Sephie

The fundraiser was at Battista's hotel. He was once again back in the city, so he was also going to be in attendance. Vitaliy had somehow managed to allow himself to be talked into coming as well. It made me feel slightly more comfortable knowing his guys would be there as well. I was trying to stay calm, but it was proving difficult. I once again enlisted the help of Ms. Jackson for my hair and makeup. She enjoyed it so much that she asked me to please go to more formal functions so she could do it more often.

"I didn't realize how much I missed this part of being a spy, child," she said as she was working on my hair.

"You enjoy all this work?" I asked.

"It's not work if you enjoy it, now is it?" she said, smiling at me. "Part of being a spy is pretending you're someone else. Looking the part is most of that. It became a bit of a game, I guess. A dangerous game, but a game nonetheless."

She told more stories about her time as a spy as she put the finishing touches on me. Just as she had helped me get into the dress and put my shoes on, there was a knock on her door. "That'll be the guys. Probably all of them again because they couldn't decide who should come get me," I said to her. I knew it was all of them, but I needed it to sound like I guessed.

"Oh my. It's been too long since I've laid my eyes on this many handsome men in tuxedos," she said as she opened her door.

I laughed. "This is really why you want me to go to more formal functions. So you can see them all dressed up."

She turned to look at me. "Do not ruin my dreams," she said very seriously.

“We’re still waiting on an invite to Bingo, Ms. Jackson,” Ivan said, winking at her.

Ms. Jackson blushed as I walked toward the door. “Thank you, Ms. Jackson, for once again making me look marvelous,” I said, leaning down to give her a hug.

“Child, if you haven’t figured out by now that I’m just highlighting your best traits, then I don’t know how to help you understand,” she said, smiling at me. “Now, get out of here so I can watch these fine gentlemen walk down the hallway.”

We all laughed as I slid my arm through Ivan’s as we walked to the elevator. Once the doors closed behind us, Misha said, “I’m beginning to think she only thinks of me as a piece of meat.” He paused, then added, “I’m strangely fine with that.”

Vitaliy had come to the penthouse and was waiting with Adrik for us to come upstairs. They were all standing near the door when we walked in. They all stopped and turned to us as we walked in. My eyes landed on Adrik immediately and I tried to focus on him, leaving everyone else out of the picture.

He’d already seen the dress, but seeing it in person made it better for him. I’d left my contacts out specifically so I could show him that the dress matched my eyes when they turned blue for him. As I got closer and he could see my eyes were blue, it was obvious that he’d made the connection.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, his desire very evident. “I thought the last dress was perfect, but this one might be even better. I loved the black, but this one might be my favorite. It’s a perfect match,” he said quietly, his lips next to my ear.

“That might’ve been the selling point,” I said. He brushed his facial hair lightly against my cheek, sending goosebumps over my

body. "I need to put my contacts in and then we can leave," I said as I kissed his cheek. I had already forgotten that I had lipstick on so I had to wipe the smudge off his cheek before going to put my contacts in.

When I came back, Vitally caught me before I made it back to Adrik.

"Sladkaya, I've been telling my son that you're absolutely perfect for him for a while now, but you keep finding new ways to confirm that. You're absolutely stunning, Sephie." He surprised me by pulling out a silver necklace from his pocket. "This was Lena's. It was her favorite. She asked me to give it to you," he said quietly. He didn't give me time to object, he simply moved behind me so that he could put it on. It was a simple diamond pendant that rested perfectly in that spot where my collarbones met. "She had a timeless classic style, much like you, sladkaya. She was not one for ostentatious jewelry, but she loved this necklace. She wants you to have it now."

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"You did not get the memo that you're not supposed to make me cry when I'm wearing makeup, Vitaliy," I said as I hugged him.

"But thank you. I love it. I love you. And I love her. Not in any specific order." He laughed, hugging me tightly.

Adrik walked over to see. When I showed him what Vitaliy had given me, he looked surprised. "I remember that necklace," he said. "I used to stare at it. The way the light caught the diamond used to fascinate me when I was little."

"Your mother rarely took it off. She told me that she wanted Sephie to have it now," Vitaliy said quietly.

Adrik smiled. "It's perfect."

The guys kept themselves tightly packed around me and Adrik as we walked to the front door of the hotel. They could all feel my nervousness at having people looking at me. As long as Adrik's arm was around me, I managed to stay calm. He had promised several times on the way there that he would not leave my side the entire evening.

"We don't have to stay long. Once I have a chance to talk to the mayor and everyone can see him and the DA, we can leave. I would much rather spend the evening getting you out of that dress anyway," he told me on the way to the hotel.

"I fully support this," I said, pushing my warmth to him before we got out of the vehicles.

Once we walked inside, I tried to keep my nervousness to a minimum. I failed miserably. But luckily, the guys were all there to offer support, as well as hide me as much as possible.

"People always stare at beautiful women, gazelle," Misha reminded me as we walked into the ballroom. Thankfully, it was a different ballroom from last time so it didn't immediately bring back horrible memories of that night.

"Misha's right. You're also probably the youngest woman here. All the other women are going to look at you because they're old.

And jealous," Andrei said.

I laughed at that. "Bubba, you're not allowed to hang around Misha as much. He's a bad influence on you."

"Am I a bad influence or has he finally learned to speak the truth?" Misha asked, cutting his eyes over at me.

Adrik laughed quietly. "I think you're both right. Sephie is gorgeous. Other women are not."

"The mayor is here," Ivan said, pointing to the side of the ballroom where a small group of people were standing and talking. "I

haven't seen the DA yet. Or Henry."

As the guys were searching the ballroom to try and find the DA and Henry, Dr. Williams caught sight of us. He smiled as he walked over to us, focusing on me. "Sephie, it's good to see you again. You look much better than the last time I saw you," he said, quickly letting his eyes scan up and down my body.

"I mean, less colorful. That's for sure. But it's undecided as to whether that's better or not. It's so...boring," I said, retuning his smile.

He laughed. "I take it you've healed well? Everything is still good?" he asked. "It is, Doc. You do good work," I said.

He looked at Adrik. "It's good to see you here as well. You're almost singlehandedly responsible for most of the hospital's budget.

We should be giving you an award or something," he said to Adrik. I felt him squeeze me just a little tighter.

"Not necessary. I prefer to remain as anonymous as possible anyway," Adrik said. "It's plenty worth it after you saved Ivan and then Sephie."

"Well, just know it's much appreciated," Dr. Williams said. He excused himself to go talk to someone else, leaving us alone once more.

I looked at Adrik, smiling. "You're so popular," I said, placing my hand against his cheek.

"You're so beautiful," he said, pressing his lips to mine. He pressed his forehead to mine for a moment, his arm still securely around my waist. I knew

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Adrik

Before we could make it across the ballroom to talk to the mayor, I was stopped at least twenty times by different people wanting to speak to me. I could feel Sephie's delight at me having to be polite and courteous to that marry people. They were all people I'd either helped out or done some kind of business with. Most of the time, when anyone would approach me in public, it was to thank me for something I'd done for them. Tonight was no different.

Surprisingly, Vinny and Anna were among those who stopped us on our way to the mayor.

"Vinny!" Sephie said when she saw him. She couldn't hide her excitement to see him. Or his wife. She loved both of them. "I was not expecting you two to be here, but I'm so glad you are."

"Since the hospital has taken such good care of my father, we try to give back whenever possible," Vinny said. "Now that I'm opening a second restaurant, thanks to you sir, we can increase that."

I smiled at Vinny. He really was a very good man. "That's what it's all about, Vinny. When business owners thrive, the community thrives."

"We can't thank you enough for the second location, sir," Anna said. "It really has been a dream of ours for several years now.

You've brought that to life."

"Just be glad that we're not living in that building. Your profits would be cut considerably by me having a sandwich for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," Sephie said, patting her partially exposed stomach.

Vinny raised his eyebrow looking at her skeptically, “you could use more sandwiches if you ask me, bella.” Just to be a brat, she pushed her stomach out like she had a belly, telling Vinny that’s what she looked like after eating one of his sandwiches. It made me happy to see her finally relaxing while we were here. It helped the rest of us relax as well. The guys stayed close, giving us enough room to talk to people, but not enough that Sephie couldn’t easily see every single one of them.

Before we could even finish our conversation with Vinny and Anna, someone else had approached me wanting a moment to talk.

I was beginning to feel like Vitaliy when he first came back to the city. Everyone wanted to talk to me. This is why I don’t come to these functions.

We’d made it halfway to the mayor, but no further as it seemed like every single person at the function wanted to speak to me.

“Boss, it appears that the mayor is also trying to make it to you, but he’s having the same issue. People are stopping him to talk to him before he can make it over,” Ivan said quietly.

“Let him come to you. I don’t know why, but that needs to happen.” Sephie told both me and Ivan.

“That should be easy. I can’t even finish one conversation before the next person is already waiting. I’m going to be here all night,” I said, somewhat frustrated.

I felt Sephie push her warmth to me; she cut Ivan off from the conversation before saying, “but you look so smashingly handsome doing it. I wouldn’t mind watching that for a little longer.”

I was in the middle of a conversation with someone who was thanking me for helping their family in their time of need. I glanced over at Sephie, who was standing a step away from me. Her eyes were normal, because of her contacts, but her dress matched

her eyes when they changed to blue almost perfectly, giving her the appearance of radiating love for me.

“You’re not allowed to wear a dress in any color other than that one ever again,” I told her as I continued with my conversation. I could hear her laughing in my head as she smiled and pretended to be interested in the conversation along with me. She took the step closer to me that meant I could slide my arm around her waist, holding her close to my side while we talked to a seemingly endless stream of people.

I caught sight of Battista during one of my many conversations. He approached Ivan, saying something quietly to him. Ivan responded, then Battista walked toward Vitaliy. My father’s men were spread out more throughout the ballroom than my guys. I’d explained the situation to Vitaliy while we were waiting for Sephie to come upstairs from getting help getting ready. He knew how nervous we all were to be here tonight, so his guys were basically running backup for us so my guys could concentrate on Sephie and only Sephie.

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“Your mother warned me that this was going to be difficult for all of you, but she didn’t go into details,” he’d told me as we discussed it. “Whatever you need from us to make sure slatkaya is comfortable this time will happen That was the end of the discussion as far as Vitaliy was concerned. It made me happy that he was so willing to protect her, just like the rest of us.

“Boss, Battista figured out what’s happening with you trying to get to the mayor. He’s going to bring him over shortly, but he did say he and Vitaliy were betting on who was going to make the most progress between now and then. Apparently it’s somewhat of

a race that they're watching from the sidelines," Ivan told me.

"Slowest race ever," Sephie responded. She was still tucked into my side, happy to stay close to me. She would catch one of the guy's eyes and make funny face now and then. She had conversations with all of them, probably trying to make them laugh as they remained close by. I felt her getting antsy next to me at one point and turned to look at her. "I have to pee. I drink water when I'm nervous and I was nervous all afternoon," she told me. She had a guilty look on her face like she'd definitely done something wrong that I couldn't resist. I laughed, leaning down to kiss her quickly.

"Ivan, she needs an escort to the bathroom. Take Andrei too," I told him. I looked at her, smiling up at me, "try to behave yourself this time."

She slid her arm through Ivan's, glancing back at me as they walked away.

"Never!" she said as she turned away from me.

She stopped to briefly talk to Battista and Vitaliy before they continued on to the restroom. I counted down the seconds in my head before she returned, I tried to appear like I was listening to the person standing in front of me, but I kept glancing in the direction they'd just walked, waiting for them to return.

When I saw her again, my breath caught. She had no idea how beautiful she was. Every head turned to watch her as she walked past, Ivan and Andrei were trying to keep her distracted as they walked back to me, to help keep her from worrying over everyone watching her. She was laughing with them as they walked, her arm through Ivan's again. She looked absolutely gorgeous as she walked across the ballroom and every single person there noticed, except one. Sephie still had no clue how

mesmerizing she was. I loved that about her.

Her smile widened as she made it back to me. She reached up and kissed Ivan's cheek, thanking him and Andrei for the escort, then stepped back to me. I couldn't help myself, I put my hand on her cheek, gently pulling her to me and kissed her.

Passionately. In front of everyone. I didn't care. In fact, I might've liked it. I'd just seen the looks on every single man's face in this place, as well as the women. I'd never been more proud that she was mine.

"I wasn't even gone that long. I beat my previous record, evert. But you clearly missed me," she said as I finally got myself under control. She was smiling at me, though. I could feel her warmth, as well. I knew her eyes were matching her dress.

"I clearly love you," I told her as I greeted the next person who wanted to speak to me.

King of the Underworld

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 460

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Sephie

I really had to hand it to the guys. They were so attentive to my needs this time. They were struggling just as much as I was about being here. They were all trying to hide it, but I could tell every single one of them was just as nervous as I was. It seemed to help them deal with that when they could be closer to me, just as it helped me. I wasn't going to complain.

Adrik kept me close. He did have to let go of me a few times when greeting people, but for the most part, he kept one arm around me while he shook hands with literally every person in attendance. It meant I could feel what he felt when he touched people. It was fascinating.

Most people here were overwhelmingly good. When Adrik would shake their hand, it was a momentary feeling of joy. There were a few, however, that had some darkness behind them, but nothing that made any of us worry. Only once did I feel Ivan's bubble go up. Strangely, it was for one of the hospital administrators who had stopped to speak to Adrik. He had very soft hands and an even softer handshake. The kind of handshake that gave you the creeps right away.

I happily stayed blissfully cut off from that conversation while it happened. I took the opportunity to ask Ivan if he could see anything. He showed me what he saw when he looked at the administrator. He wasn't completely consumed by his demon, but it had a very tight hold of the man. The demon itself was clearly defined. The man was older, with a slightly bent over posture, like

he'd spent hours pouring over balance sheets. Once I saw what Ivan saw, I wondered if it wasn't the weight of the demon on his back that was causing his poor posture.

I turned my head away from Adrik and the administrator, making eye contact with Stephen as I pretended to cough. I cut my eyes toward the administrator, which meant Stephen was to find the opportunity to speak in front of him to see if we could scare the demon away. He stepped closer to us, to get a sense of the conversation that Adrik was having and interjected a question at the perfect moment.

We all watched as the man suddenly had a coughing attack, almost like he was choking. Ivan still had his bubble up around me, but he was still showing me what he could see. The demon was making a last-ditch effort to get inside, trying to get away from Stephen, which is what was causing the man to cough. His body was trying to reject it.

Stephen was standing just on the other side of Adrik, slightly behind him. I held my hand out to Stephen, who readily took it. He could then see what Ivan was seeing. He spoke a second time and even went to help the man. As soon as Stephen touched the man, Ivan could see the demon just vanish. Stephen's eyes went a little wide, but he kept himself under control. Once the man stopped coughing, Stephen returned to stand just behind Adrik once more.

This time, he grabbed my hand, showing me what had just happened. When he touched the man, he could feel the rage from the demon, who actually spoke to him. I could clearly hear it say, "you'll never get all of us." Then, it laughed as it was vanishing.

I got chills as I watched what Stephen had seen. Adrik and Ivan both felt it immediately and I was hit with a wave of fiery anger

from both of them. I didn't mean to laugh, but I did. It caused everyone to look at me. It appeared that I was laughing at this man having a coughing attack in front of me.

I cleared my throat, looking at the man. "Sorry. I laugh when I'm nervous," I told him, hoping that was enough of an explanation to grant me some grace and make me not look like a giant a*shole.

The administrator surprised me by laughing with me. "It's okay. That came out of nowhere, but I actually feel much better now," he said, excusing himself as he grabbed someone who was walking by.

The guys took the opportunity to close in on me and Adrik, cutting anyone else off for just a moment. I quickly shared what we'd

just witnessed with both Andrei and Misha as Ivan shared it with Adrik.

"That was different," Adrik said. "He's the only one so far tonight. Honestly, I was expecting more."

Battista took the opportunity of us being mostly alone to walk to the mayor. He interrupted the conversation the mayor was having and pulled him toward us. It was good to be ridiculously wealthy, apparently.

Before they could make it all the way to us, Adrik made sure I was okay.

"You're okay now? I felt you get cold."

"I'm okay. You and Ivan are really quick now. It wasn't like it was with Ilya this time. I just got the chills when I heard it speak to

Stephen, but I appreciate the heat boost. I'll never turn that down," I said, smiling up at him.

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He smiled softly at me, pressing his lips to mine once again just before the mayor walked up. The guys stepped back enough that Battista and the mayor could talk to Adrik, but made it so no one else could approach them and interrupt the conversation

we'd been trying to make happen for hours
now.

Adrik's hand was around my waist as he shook hands with the mayor. I felt a moment of joy when Adrik touched him and nothing else. Ivan shared what he saw. The mayor still had a dark form over him, but it couldn't gain a hold of him. It was still trying. It would move when the mayor moved, but it wasn't completely attached yet. I discreetly offered Stephen my hand so he could see what Ivan was seeing and so he'd know what to do. He once again stepped closer, paying attention to the conversation, waiting for the perfect time to interject.

Adrik and the mayor had spoken before, but they tried to keep their interactions limited. It was obvious that Battista had also spoken to the mayor before, as those two were familiar with each other. There was a level of comfort between them that only happened when you'd had several conversations with a person.

Doug, the mayor, told Adrik quietly, "I've been speaking with my district attorney. We're really working hard to find something definitive on the doctor so we can charge him. Honestly, I don't want you to turn him over to us until I know we have something that will stick. He's wreaked havoc on this city for a very long time. If we can't get the justice system to take care of him, then you need to."

"I might have what you're looking for," Adrik told him. "We've come across some records from the boss that paid him to create brawn in the first * place. They're quite detailed. Before I turn them over to your DA, I'd like to meet him, however."

Doug looked momentarily surprised, which made me tense, but he followed it with, "I just assumed you'd met him before." He

looked around the room, adding, “he’s here somewhere, but if you don’t get a chance to meet him tonight, I’ll arrange a meeting.

Somehow. I’m fairly certain that Henry is having me followed,” he said so quietly that we almost missed it.

“What does your DA think about Henry?” Stephen asked. Doug looked surprised that Stephen spoke, but when he saw that Adrik was waiting for an answer, he continued with the conversation. As he did, Ivan shared what he was seeing once again. Just like with the hospital administrator, the demon that looked like a dark cloud just behind the mayor was frantic to get in.

Doug answered, “he’s ready to charge him. If you have more information on him, I would love it.” He barely got his sentence out and he, too, started coughing uncontrollably. Almost violently. Once again, Stephen reached out and touched the mayor’s arm, asking if he was okay or if he needed help. When he did, Ivan could see the dark cloud behind the mayor disappear.

“That’s twice now that someone has coughed uncontrollably in front of us. People are going to start wondering what the hell we’re doing, “I told Ivan.

“Saving lives is sometimes messy business, princess,” Ivan said. He glanced at me, giving me a wink

Stephen let go of the mayor, returning to his spot just behind Adrik. He discreetly grabbed my hand, passing on the information he’d gotten when he touched the mayor. Unlike the administrator, who’s demon was starting to attach firmly, the mayor’s demon was barely hanging on. I wasn’t sure if that had something to do with the fact that the first one could speak, but the second one made no sounds when it vanished.

Andrei, who had been quietly watching everything pushed what he could see to me. It was clear that the mayor had holes in his

aura. He needed Viktor. The only problem was, we weren't sure how to get him to agree to it and we couldn't do it here, in front of everyone. We weren't sure if Kostya could hide himself and hide the effects of what he was doing when he and Viktor fixed someone. For us, it was visibly obvious. We weren't sure we could do it discreetly yet, so we didn't want to take that chance.

Viktor, to his credit, had somewhat come around since Stephen had forcibly helped him. He did, however, seem completely relieved to know that he was mostly off the h**k for his special services tonight when we discussed it prior to coming to the hotel.

This time, I didn't get the feeling from him that he was avoiding us. It was more that he was overwhelmed with making sure we, mostly me, would be safe while we were at the event. Knowing he would somehow need to also use his gift while we were there was too much for him to handle.

We would figure out a way to help the mayor at a later date. We'd bought him some time tonight, but he was still vulnerable.