

King of the Underworld Chapter 251 - 260

Chapter 251

Sephie

“But why though? She has all the money she could ever want from him. Her family as well. Didn’t Mando say she’s from a wealthy family? That doesn’t make sense,” I said.

They all thought for a moment, then Viktor stood up. “I have an idea,” he said.

“But I need a computer so we have to go downstairs.”

I jumped up from the couch. “Permission slips signed. We’re going on a field trip! Everybody make sure you grab your buddy’s hand and stay with the group.”

They were all still laughing at my caffeine-fueled absurdity when we walked off the elevator. The office was still busy, even

though it was getting to be later in the day. Adrik’s office door was closed, so I knew he was in a meeting. Stephen was waiting

outside his office and gave us all a curious look as we walked off the elevator.

I looked to Viktor. “I’ll go fill Stephen in. You guys go do whatever the hell it is you’re about to do,” I said. “Just don’t lose your

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buddy. I'm trusting you guys to be mature on this field trip. Remember, look with your eyes, not your hands," I said, pointing to my eyes and then to all of them.

They all shook their heads as they walked toward their desks. They each kept a desk on the floor. It made taking care of their individual responsibilities easier. Stephen's devilish grin greeted me. "Why do I have a feeling whatever you're about to tell me is going to make me very happy?"

"Because you're a vampire and you likely read my mind as I was walking over here. Get. Out. Of. My. Head," I said, smacking his shoulder with each word.

"What did you guys find?" he asked in Russian, since there were still plenty of people milling around the office.

It's

"Well, she's a coke addict, so there's that. Honestly, I don't feel as elated as I was hoping I was going to feel about that one. just sad, really." I looked down at the floor for a moment, thinking about how empty she was to turn to drugs to try and fill whatever void she was feeling in her life. Stephen cleared his throat quietly, snapping me back to reality. "Anyway, moving on. She also slipped her dealer a note with the money. We're trying to figure out what the hell it means, but we think she's planning on

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robbing Armando's house."

"Doesn't she come from money?" Stephen asked. His brow furrowed like it always did when he was deep in thought.

"That's the confusing part. Viktor said he had an idea, which is why we're taking a field trip down here. I'm not sure what he's thinking. We also might need to talk to Keith about this later. She was weirdly specific on locations. We think she's talking about Mando's house, but the guys said it's been a while since they were there and don't really remember the layout," I said.

Stephen's watch beeped once. He looked at it, then looked at me. "Meeting is almost over, but I'll be back."

"Does he have anything directly after this one? Can I surprise him?" I asked. Before he opened the door, he smiled at me. "That would be exactly what he needs today," he said quietly.

I moved a few steps away from the door, in case Adrik followed the person he was meeting with to the door. I waited until

Stephen walked out with the person and walked past me. I heard the door to Adrik's private bathroom open and close, so I knew

I could sneak into his office without him seeing me. I walked in quickly, shutting the door behind me and sat down in his chair as quietly as I could. For once, the chair didn't squeak. I propped my legs up on his desk and crossed my arms, waiting for him to

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come out of the bathroom.

I glanced at the few papers on his desk, as I heard the water in the sink come on. They were rough sketches, different variations on the same theme. I couldn't tell what it was, but my attention was directed at the door to the bathroom as I heard the water turn off.

He opened the door, not exactly paying attention. He looked completely lost in thought and somewhat stressed. His gaze lifted as he took steps toward his desk and landed on me. He stopped in his tracks, his wide smile across his face. He just pointed to me and then pointed to the floor in front of him.

I jumped out of his chair and ran to him, jumping into his arms and wrapping my legs around him. I couldn't help the squeal that came out when he caught me. He held me tightly, his face buried in my neck.

"You have no idea how much I needed this, solnishko," he said, inhaling deeply. I felt his body relax as I hugged him tighter, running my hand through the back of his hair.

"Anything wrong or just a long day?" I asked.

"Just a long day. I'm exhausted. I don't know how you have so much energy right now. I think you sucked all my energy out this morning," he said. I could feel his smile against my neck as he kissed my neck sweetly.

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“I’m on my third cup of coffee today. That’s how. It’s fake energy. I’m still not entirely sure what we did this morning, but it took a lot out of both of us, I think.”

“Worth it,” he said, leaning back to look at me. His handsome smile pulling at my chest.

“I could not agree more,” I said, unwrapping myself from him so he wouldn’t be forced to hold me up. “And also, I’ll go get you some coffee before your next meeting.”

He leaned down and kissed me, his hand on my cheek. His thumb rubbing across my cheek lightly as his lips were on mine. He could make my knees go weak with his kisses, and he did regularly. I think he enjoyed it. But the sweet, tender kisses almost always caught me off-guard and made my insides melt completely. I couldn’t help but moan quietly as I wrapped my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss.

“I just love you, Adrik,” I said. “Now, let me go get you coffee before your next meeting. How much time do I have?” I asked. He looked at his watch. “Ten minutes,” he said, laughing at me.

“I can do it in seven,” I said, turning to quickly walk out.

Misha was almost to Adrik’s office door when I opened the door. “Gazelle, I was just coming to get you. You need to see what we found,” he said.

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I grabbed his arm, pulling him with me. I knew Adrik wouldn't be happy about me going anywhere by myself, so since Misha was the closest one, he got nominated to come with me. I also still refused to keep track of a key fob to the elevator, so I needed one of the guys to operate it. "Um, where are we going?" he asked as we got on the elevator.

"To get more coffee before his next meeting. I'm on my third cup today and I'm still exhausted. He hasn't had any since this morning, so he's dying. I only have seven minutes to make this happen. Really, ten, but I'm an overachiever and I told him I could do it in seven," I said.

Misha just laughed at me. The doors opened and I practically ran into the penthouse. Luckily, Adrik had a top-of-the-line coffee machine that made it quickly, so I was hopeful I could make this happen. Misha filled me in on what they'd found as I waited.

"Viktor decided to look up Glana's family in Italy. I didn't even know he knew her family name, but I shouldn't be surprised. He knows everything. About everyone. Anyway, her family was wealthy," he said. He paused for a moment, a grin on his face.

"Was? As in past tense?"

He nodded. "They've hit hard times recently. Apparently Giana's father is not the businessman her grandfather was. It looks like

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bad investments, even more stupid investments, and generally wasteful spending have significantly depleted their fortune.”

“That explains why Giana needs a job,” I said. Misha looked at me, a confused look on his face. “Giana told me when her and Armando first got here that she needs this job. It was before I knew she came from a wealthy family, so I didn’t think anything of it.” I chewed on my bottom lip as I poured coffee into two thermoses. Might as well make it four cups of coffee today, since it looks like it’s going to be an extra long day. I finished making Adrik’s coffee just how he liked it, as well as mine and walked toward the door. Misha opened the door for me. We were both still deep in thought as we waited for the elevator.

Once on the elevator, with the doors closed, I said, “I wonder if she’s planning on robbing him for herself or for her family? It still doesn’t really make sense. I mean, all she would have to do is talk to Armando and tell him that her family is in trouble. He’s so stinking nice that he would help them. Why is she choosing to go this route?” “I’m not sure about that one, either. There’s probably more that we haven’t found yet,” Misha said.

“I’ll be over in a minute, once I drop this off,” I said, walking toward Adrik’s office. Misha walked back toward the other three guys.

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Stephen had just walked out of his office as I got to the door. “Shi t, is his meeting already here?” I asked.

Stephen laughed. “Yes, but he’s early. You can still go in, he won’t care.”

I sighed, thinking I took longer than seven minutes. “Hold this. I’ll be right back.” I handed my coffee to Stephen and walked. into the office.

Adrik smiled at me, looking at his watch. “Six and a half minutes,” he said in Russian.

“Really? I thought for sure I took longer since your meeting was already here,” I said, glancing at the man who had taken a seat.

in front of Adrik’s desk. Adrik stood up, walking to me. He gladly took the coffee from me, kissing my forehead. “Thank you, solnishko. You’re a lifesaver.” I grinned at him, excusing myself quickly so he could get on with his meeting.

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Chapter 252

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Two

Sephie

When I walked back outside, Stephen was waiting, my coffee still in hand.

“Can you come to Viktor’s desk or you have to wait here?”

“There’s no way I’m not coming. My watch will tell me when the meeting is almost over. Plus, the door is open, so I can see if they get done early.”

“You’re so efficient, Yoden,” I said as we walked to the rest of the guys.

“Somebody fill in Yoden while I shove more caffeine into my system,” I said, taking a drink of yet more coffee.

They filled in Stephen on everything we knew so far. Viktor had continued to dig while Misha and I were upstairs getting liquid energy for me and Adrik. “It looks like one of the deals her father made that lost him a substantial amount of money was with Armando,” Viktor said.

“Do you know what happened? Like why the deal went wrong?” I asked.

“No, I can’t tell from this. It’s in Italian, so we need you to translate,” he said, turning his laptop toward me. It was a news article from years ago, showing a picture of a much younger Armando, along with three other men. One of the men was Giana’s father.

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I didn't recognize the names of the other two, but one of the men looked vaguely familiar.

I scanned the article, loosely translating as I went. My poor tired brain was having trouble translating from Italian to English back to Russian. "Um, it says...development deal...housing...four investors...approval still pending...three investors backed out...

unknown reasons...final investor was Giana's father. It looks like he tried to fund the project all on his own and it fell through. He couldn't recover his money and lost a substantial amount."

"I would be willing to bet she's planning on robbing Armando to try and recoup some of the money her father lost in that deal.

Especially if what we're thinking about the artwork is true," Ivan said.

"Artwork?" Stephen asked.

"There was a line in the note she slipped her dealer about clean wills in three locations of the house. Sephie remembered his extensive art collection at his house in Italy. If he has the same here, she's likely giving them instructions on which pieces to take," Ivan said.

"Keith would know," Stephen said. "Armando is always done for the day well before Boss is. He'll be free once Boss is done and we can ask him."

"How many more meetings does he have today?" I asked.

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“Two more after this one is done.”

“He might need more coffee,” I said, mostly to myself.

“Are you two not sleeping at night?” Andrei asked, a devilish grin on his face.

“Wait, no. I don’t need to know.”

I laughed. “We are sleeping, thank you very much. It’s this weird shi t that’s happening with being able to feel each other’s emotions. I’m not complaining. It’s amazing. But it zapped us both this morning. Like completely.”

“One mystery at a time,” Ivan said. “But I can call the acupuncturist if you need her again.”

“We might,” I said thoughtfully. Stephen’s watch beeped, signaling the end of the meeting. I walked back to the office with him, hoping to take Adrik’s mind off everything in between his last few meetings of the day.

He looked even more stressed than he had earlier when I walked in his office this time. “Whoa. What happened in that meeting?”

I asked.

He smiled, relaxing slightly. “It’s okay, love. Just lots of details. It’s more difficult when I’m tired.”

I walked to his chair, leaning over his shoulder to put my coffee on his desk.

“Feeling your breasts on my shoulder does not hurt, though,” he said, cutting his eyes up at me.

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“I’ll just come in here between your meetings and put my boobies on your shoulder, then leave when your next meeting arrives.” I said, laughing. I stood behind him, rubbing his shoulders. He was tense. He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

“That feels amazing,” he said. I worked on getting his muscles to relax while he had a moment of peace. He opened his eyes, looking up at me, curious. “Why are you all down here? I didn’t expect to see you until I got done for the day,” he asked.

“As Ivan put it, we’re working on a mystery,” I said, chuckling at his expression. “They got interesting information on their afternoon excursion in the lobby. We’re trying to figure it all out, but you don’t need to worry about any of it until you’re done for the day.” I leaned down, pressing my lips to his gently. I heard the elevator doors ding, knowing his next meeting was arriving.

“Let me know if you need more coffee to get through your last two meetings. I’ll happily be your personal barista,” I said, grinning at him. He grabbed my hand, kissing the back of it. “What would I do without you,” he said wistfully as his next meeting walked into his office.

Viktor and Ivan kept trying to dig up information on Giana’s family while we waited on Adrik to finish his last meeting of the day. I

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turned to Stephen. "Give me 20 minutes after his last meeting is done and then have Keith come to the office. He has a very short fuse right now, so he needs at least a short break before we throw more shi t on the pile." Stephen nodded, smiling slightly.

As the last meeting ended, I walked into Adrik's office while Stephen escorted the man downstairs. I walked in quietly, closing the door behind me. He raised an eyebrow at me and sat back in his chair. I could feel his di rty thoughts.

"I asked them to give us 20 minutes. We both know that's not nearly enough time for what you're thinking about right now," I said.

"Don't shatter my dreams," he said, laughing at me. He stood up and met me halfway between his desk and the door. He pulled me to him. His hands were gentle, but firm, like he was fighting giving in to his true desires in that moment. I could feel the same intense need for him that I felt that morning. It came on just as suddenly, so I was sure it was him this time.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he buried his face in my neck once again. "I'm going to need soooooo much coffee, aren't I?" I asked him. He laughed quietly.

"I have been telling you I was addicted to you, so you shouldn't be surprised," he said. He stood up straight so he could look at

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me. His fingers resumed the everlasting battle with the curls around my face. He looked more relaxed as we stood there, “Fair point. I’m not complaining either, for the record. I love what’s happening. I don’t understand it, but I fu cking love it. And I fu cking love you,” I said. His handsome smile stretched across his face. He rested his hand against my cheek, looking at me for a moment before leaning down to kiss me. “You always know exactly what I need to hear, my love,” he said. I felt a strong pull In my chest as he smiled at me.

“Do you get like a pull in your chest when I smile at you?” I asked. He chuckled. “Every single time,” he said.

“That’s where that’s coming from,” I said, thinking out loud. I looked up at him once more, grinning. “I really had no clue of the effect I’ve had on you this whole time. Now that I can feel what you feel some of the time, it makes me admire your high levels of self-restraint. It’s really felt like this for you since the beginning?” I asked.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 253

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Three

Sephie

He nodded his head. "Since the first time I touched you, I've felt a pull back toward you every time we're apart. When you smile at me, I either feel that pull in my chest that I'm guessing you're feeling right now or it feels like my heart stops. When you're sad or upset, sometimes I feel that pull in my chest too. Sometimes it's stronger when you're upset, like my heart is demanding I destroy whatever is making you upset." His eyes got darker and I saw his jaw tense. I was suddenly hit with a wave of sadness.

He closed his eyes, preventing me from finding out why. He sighed. "It was especially bad after the ball, when we were on the plane and you wouldn't let anyone touch you. That pull toward you was so strong, because I just wanted to make you feel better and I couldn't. I also knew you were upset, on top of being hurt. It felt like there was a hole in my chest until you allowed me to touch you again." He opened his eyes and I saw the regret he still carried over that whole situation. I felt the tears welling in my eyes as I saw him struggling with the memory of what happened.

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“Adrik,” I said. I put both of my hands on either side of his face, so he would look at me. “You don’t need to keep carrying this guilt over what happened. It ultimately worked out for the best and I got a kickass scar out of it, to boot,” I said smiling. I was hoping to make him laugh, but he flinched at the memory of me being hurt. I stood on my toes kissing him gently. I sighed, taking a new approach. “I think it needed to happen the way it did, Adrik. If I hadn’t gotten hurt, I wouldn’t have remembered everything about my uncle and I would’ve kept a very big part of me locked away forever. Until we were on that plane, I would still regularly hear my uncle’s voice in my head. Like he was standing next to me, still telling me all the same things he used to scream at me when he was beating me. There was a very large part of me that was terrified he would find me again and kill me. Remember the first night I spent at the house? When I had a nightmare and started shaking so bad I couldn’t control myself?” I asked. He nodded. “That was a regular occurrence. I’ve had that same nightmare so many times I lost count. It just ended differently that night because of Anthony. Do you know how many times I’ve had that nightmare since the night of the ball?” He looked at me curiously, resuming all efforts to tame my curls. “Zero Limes. So, while you’re beating yourself up thinking that you put me

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through Hell, I'm eternally grateful to you for saving me from it. It was you, Adrik, that showed me the way out. If that night hadn't happened, I never would've gotten out." I could see the tears forming in his eyes as he listened to my words, While he felt a pull in his chest, I felt a fire building throughout my entire body. I felt that warmth building as he looked at me, looking at me with complete love in his eyes. Just to see what would happen, I concentrated on what I was feeling and then tried to push it to him.

I heard his breath hitch as his eyes widened and I knew he felt it. I grinned at him. "That's what it's been like for me since the beginning," I said.

"No wonder you're freezing when I'm not around," he said, his sexy smirk on his face.

"That struggle is ridiculously real," I said. We heard a soft knock on his office door. I stood on my toes again and pressed my lips to his. "That's Stephen, I'm sure. He's the only one with enough finesse to be able to knock that softly. You need to hear what we found out about our dearest Giana today." I walked to the office door to open it. Stephen was there, looking somewhat unsure about whether he should've disturbed us or not. I laughed. "It's good, Yoden. You guys can come in."

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He turned and motioned to all the guys to come to the office. I walked back to Adrik, who walked us both to one of the couches.

He pulled me into his lap and leaned me back against his chest. I crossed my legs in between his as he wrapped his arms around me.

Both Viktor and Ivan walked in with their laptops. "We need more translations, princess," Ivan said, handing me his computer.

Andrei and Misha walked in behind them.

Stephen said, "Keith will be here shortly. He said Armando had a late meeting, so he asked Keith to grab dinner for him and

Glana." I looked to Stephen, who had a knowing look on his face. "I agree.

Weird move." His phone beeped. He looked at the text, saying, "he's on his way."

It was barely one minute later that we heard the elevator doors ding to signal Keith's arrival. He walked into the office, looking slightly nervous. I'll give it to him. The last time he was summoned before all of us was slightly uncomfortable for him.

"Shut the door, Keith," Adrik said. I could feel that he was enjoying fucking with Keith's head and was not mad in the slightest. It

was all I could do to not laugh. I hugged his arms tighter around me.

"What's up?" Keith asked, sitting down in one of the chairs. He looked like he was trying to not be nervous. He was failing

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miserably.

“We did some investigating into Giana and her frequent excursions to the lobby unattended,” Ivan said. Keith looked surprised, but intrigued. He glanced around the room, looking at all of our faces. His face dropped slightly. “Why do I feel like this is so much worse than a drug problem?”

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 254

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Four

Sephie

“So, you really confirmed she’s buying drugs when she goes to the lobby?”

Keith asked. It was almost like he was expecting us to tell him his suspicions were false.

“She’s apparently got a nasty little coke habit,” Misha said. He held up the vial he picked off Giana earlier that day.

Keith’s eyes went wide. “That’s what fell out of her purse that day!” he said, pointing to the vial in Misha’s hand.

“If she’s buying that much coke twice a week, she’s got to be staying high almost constantly right now. It’s likely why we haven’t seen much of her. That kind of habit eventually gets difficult to hide.” Ivan said.

“I wonder if that explains her nervousness around you guys from the beginning. I’m positive she caught on to how observant we all are right away. She’s never liked being in the same room as all of us. Hell, she’s never really liked being around us much at all, unless there’s shopping involved,” I said.

“It’s easier to hide when shopping. She can be more animated without arousing suspicion,” Andrei said.

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“Have you noticed her having nosebleeds?” Ivan asked Keith.

“She’s had a couple lately. She blames the weather. She says she hates it when it gets cold,” Keith said.

“Have you seen Armando questioning her about anything? Not that he would do it in front of you, but I just wonder if he’s noticing any of this,” I asked Keith.

“I haven’t seen anything. Ever since they got into a fight about her basically accusing you of being an addict, which is really ironic now, they’ve had a strained relationship. I think they even slept in separate rooms this past weekend at least one night.. I’ve heard them arguing, but they’re always arguing in Italian so I can’t understand what they’re saying,” he said.

“It’s Italian. They could be confessing their love for each other and it would probably still sound like a heated argument,” Adrik said sarcastically.

“I’ve heard Armando arguing on the phone several times lately too. Again, always in Italian. There was one argument that got really heated, so I recorded part of it,” Keith pulled his phone out of his pocket. We all looked at him, somewhat surprised. “I don’t like not being able to understand what’s going on. I’m not being nosey, but if I’m supposed to be keeping this dude safe, then I need to know what’s going on,” he said.

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“Fair point,” I said. He found the recording on his phone and turned the volume all the way up. It wasn’t the best recording, so I couldn’t hear it well enough from across the office. He tossed his phone to me so I could put it closer to my ear. It was just Armando’s voice, so he wasn’t on speaker. Not that I could’ve understood the other person on this recording. I listened to it a couple of times to make sure I was hearing it correctly. “He’s talking in very vague terms. Saying things like ‘I’ll take care of it’ and ‘you have to give me time. At the end he says, ‘I told you that wasn’t going to work but you wouldn’t listen to me.’” ! tossed the phone back to Keith.

Adrik pulled me back against him again, hugging me tightly. He put his lips close to my ear, saying quietly, “if I haven’t told you how grateful I am to have you lately, just know I’m incredibly grateful to have you.” I felt my cheeks flush slightly. He left his cheek against mine for a few moments.

“What do we know of his business deals lately?” Ivan asked. “He could be talking about a business deal that isn’t working out the way it’s supposed to. I would like to stick with that option rather than the other option my mind came up with.”

“Do we want to know the other option?” Andrei asked.

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“If he’s really considering switching sides, that could explain the first two statements. The third could be in reference to either. the ball or the explosion in Italy. Or the failed kidnapping attempt,” Ivan said. He had a habit of rubbing his hand over his goatee when he would worry,

“I see why you’d prefer to stick with the first option,” Andrei said.

Adrik felt me tense at the mention of those three events. His hands found mine and he laced his fingers through mine, keeping my arms on top of his that were wrapped around my waist. “What else did you find out about Giana this afternoon? You guys have been down here all afternoon, it can’t be just that she’s the addict among us,” Adrik asked. I was both surprised and impressed that he was remaining as calm as he was right now. His fingers lightly played with mine, sending waves of warmth up my arms as we talked.

“She slipped a note to her dealer. We’re thinking it’s all in reference to Armando’s house, but none of us have been there recently,” Viktor said. He produced the note that I had translated earlier and handed it to Keith. “Can you make sense of any of that, in reference to his house?” he asked.

Keith studied the note. “Well, I’m sure you all know his safe is impossible. You have to have Armando to get into that thing, so

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that checks out.” He read the other three sentences and then read them again.

“Top of the stairs, third door on the right is Armando’s room.”

“Does he keep anything special in there or is he the special thing?” I asked.

“He has a second safe in there, but it’s just like the bigger one in his office. You have to have Armando to get into it,” Keith said.

He thought for a few minutes more, studying the note.

“Armando had some very pricey art on his walls in his house in Italy. Do you know if that’s the case here as well?” I asked.

I could see the light bulb turn on in Keith’s head. “That’s what that means.

Look, I don’t know art. I couldn’t tell you how much

these paintings are worth or even what the paintings are of, in a couple of cases, but he has the majority of paintings in these

rooms on the first floor. He has a few upstairs as well, all in his room. Maybe that’s why his room is specifically pointed out. It’s

really the only one with any kind of paintings in it upstairs.”

“It sounds like she’s planning an art heist,” Ivan said. “If she’s looking for maximum profit, that’s the way to go if you can’t access

the safe. But stolen art is very hard to sell. Given that her family used to be wealthy, she might have connections on how to move

it, but this seems well above her level of Intelligence.”

“Her family is no longer wealthy, then?” Adrik asked.

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“Viktor figured it out. It didn’t make sense that she was planning on robbing Armando if she came from a wealthy family. She has all the money she could want with Armando. Why would she be trying to rob him, if not for a larger reason? When she ‘apologized’ to me, it was clear that her family still controls her,” I said. “Her father has made some terrible business decisions since he took over from Giana’s grandfather. They’re virtually penniless now.” He pulled up the first article he found and walked over to show Adrik. “One of the biggest deals that cost him a substantial amount of money was with Armando.” Adrik looked at the picture for a moment. I could suddenly feel his anger rising quickly. He stood up and turned to look at him. He was still looking at the computer screen. He pointed to the man that looked vaguely familiar in the picture, then looked to me. “That’s who he was arguing with yesterday after the meeting,” I said. “What does this article say?” he asked me. “It was originally a huge business deal that they started before they got approval. Three investors pulled out, but it doesn’t give a reason why, and the last investor, Giana’s father, tried to fund the project on his own. He lost a ton of money. It also doesn’t give a reason why approval wasn’t granted either,” I said.

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“What about the other article you haven’t seen yet?” Ivan asked, pointing to his computer. I pulled that article up and scanned it.

“This one is about a fire that demolished an entire apartment building. Three people died in the fire. Firefighters were unable to put the fire out completely for three days. Um, gory details nobody wants to know about. Ah, Giana’s father owned the building,” I said.

“Could be insurance fraud,” Ivan said. “It’s an old scam.”

I searched for more articles about that building. Most were just reporting the incident, but I eventually found one that reported the ruling on the insurance claim. “I think you’re right, Super Squish. He filed an insurance claim, but they did an investigation and concluded the fire was deliberately set. According to this article, they never found who set the fire.”

“Sounds very similar to Armando’s exploding office building in Italy,” Stephen said.

“Do you think Armando was behind his own building exploding? Is he trying the same scam?” I asked. Stephen just shrugged.

his shoulders. “Follow-up question: did they have these kinds of insurance scams in the 1500s when you were just a wee vampire of 400 years?”

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 255

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Five

Sephie

“Technically, I was the insurance scam. Lots of villages burned trying to get rid of me. I have a strong dislike of fire because of it,”

Stephen said, completely straight-faced. We all laughed loudly. I started laughing even harder when I saw the look of confusion on Keith’s face. He was just staring at Stephen, his mouth open in complete shock.

“I love how you just have a ‘strong dislike’ of the thing that could kill you,” I said, still laughing.

“If you can’t find inner peace in 900 years, are you even trying?” Andrei said, which caused another round of laughter from all of us. I was laughing so hard I was crying by the time I finally gained control of myself.

“Shit, I needed that,” I said. “Okay, back to serious matters. Seriously, focus people.” I was making myself want to laugh again. I got up and handed Viktor’s computer back to him. “Can you please find out if Armando is also in financial trouble like you did Giana’s family?” I asked. I always felt compelled to be extra sweet when it came to asking Viktor for anything. I think it was the

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look on his face every time I did. He practically melted every time I asked him for anything. He got busy looking up information as I returned to Adrik's lap.

"So, let's just say, for the sake of argument, that Armando is having financial difficulty. He blows up his own office building for the insurance money. Why would he depend on us to stop everyone from showing up to that building that morning? He was the one that set that meeting at his building, with all his people there. We were the ones that stopped people from dying," Misha said.

"Well, when you say it like that, it makes no sense," I said.

"Unless that was also the plan all along. If he didn't show, but everyone else did..." Ivan said, trailing off.

"Assuming he hasn't found a way to alter his records, Armando is doing fine financially," Viktor said.

"Does he own that office building?" I asked. "I mean, I would assume so, but let's check just for fun."

Viktor started a new search as we all waited for the results. I leaned my head back, looking sideways at Adrik. "He hasn't said anything about the discussion he had yesterday after the meeting?"

"Not a word," he said. "He has until tomorrow to come clean before I confront him about it."

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“Sestrichka, you might be a genius,” Viktor said. He stood up, bringing me his computer. “Make sure I’m reading this correctly, but I think this says the owner of Armando’s office building is Giana’s father.” I looked at the screen, reading through everything listed. “You’re right, Viktor. He wasn’t the owner. That brings us back to insurance scam.”

“So, Giana’s own father tried to kill her?” Keith asked. “That’s some family drama.”

“Eh, maybe not. He likely knew she was habitually late. It’s also possible he knew Armando is habitually early. According to Giana’s story, the building exploded sometime between 8:00-8:15 that morning. Early enough that she wouldn’t be there. Late enough that he would,” I said. “But you are correct on the family drama.” “This likely explains why Armando hired her to begin with. He likely feels guilty about the business deal and wanted to help her out by giving her a job. You were right, Sephie. She probably wasn’t qualified in the slightest for the job but he hired her anyway,” Ivan said.

*Maybe they played on that guilt to get her closer to him,” Stephen said. “She’s been a plant all along.”

“I think the more pressing issue is whether Armando is loyal or if he’s playing both sides,” Adrik said. He looked to Keith. “Can

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you get more recordings of his conversations, especially when he's speaking Italian? He's more likely to slip up in front of you because he knows you can't understand him."

"Absolutely. He's planning on going back to his house in two days for the weekend again. It's easier to record him there. He also has more meetings there than he does here," Keith said.

"Can you get pictures of who he's meeting with?" Stephen asked.

"Between me and Chris, we should be able to," he said. "I can send it all to you nightly so I can delete it from my phone."

"Keith, you stay loyal to me and you'll have a job no matter what happens to Armando," Adrik said. "Chris, too. I reward those who stay loyal to me. You've seen the alternative firsthand, so I don't need to elaborate."

"Yes, sir," Keith said. He stood up to leave, understanding that he was free to do so. He shot a quick glance toward Stephen before he walked out of the office.

"What happens if Armando doesn't come clean by tomorrow?" Misha asked.

"I haven't decided yet. I also haven't decided how I want to tell him about this information about Giana. I would have assumed he would know about it by now. She's spending a hefty amount of money, with nothing to show for it," Adrik said.

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I laughed. “He’s not going to notice that. I saw his ex-girlfriend’s wardrobe. He doesn’t pay attention to the money spent by his girlfriends.”

“Maybe not in the way you’re thinking, love. But if she’s spending that much money each week, there should be new clothes showing up regularly. Or something showing up in exchange for the money. She can’t go buy clothes on top of spending that amount of money because it would be too obvious. That money has to be going somewhere,” Adrik said,

“Didn’t his first wife also have the same problem?” Viktor asked.

“Uh oh,” I said.

“Uh oh what?” they all asked at once.

“That means this is a pattern and Mando is the common denominator,” I said.

“You think he’s getting them hooked? Or they’re turning to it as an escape from him?” Ivan asked.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” I said.

“The other million-dollar question is what are we ordering for dinner? I’m starving.” Andrei asked.

I caught Andrei before they all left the penthouse after dinner was over and we’d thoroughly discussed all possibilities. “I promise to make your favorite meal tomorrow for suggesting we order takeout tonight. You saved me so much work and I love you for it,

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Bubba.”

He pulled me into a hug. “I know you’re tired, spider monkey. We’re all tired right now. Maybe I’ll see if Misha can order Boss back to the house this weekend. I think it does all of us good to go there now,” he said.

“Devious. I love it. I’ll allow it.” I announced as I hugged him tighter.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 256

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Six

Sephic

Once we were alone, I grabbed Adrik's hand and pulled him back to the bedroom. He was exhausted. He looked exhausted. He felt exhausted. I turned the hot water on in the bathtub. "I know you only ever take baths when I'm hurt, but I think you should make an exception tonight."

He pulled me tight against him. "I will gladly take one, as long as you join me."

"One of us has to make sure we don't fall asleep and drown in the tub."

Once the tub was full, I ordered him in. I also managed to talk him into letting me be the big spoon, which literally never

happened. "But I can't hold you if you're behind me, solnishko," he protested.

"I know. But I can hold you. You need a break, Adrik. Even if I couldn't feel what you feel now, it's written all over your face.

You're exhausted. Let me take care of you the same way you're always taking care of me," I said.

He cursed under his breath as he stepped into the tub, but he moved so I could get in behind him. I tried not to laugh at him, but I

couldn't help myself. "You're pretty adorable when you're tired and cranky," I said as I wrapped my legs around him. I leaned him

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back against me, letting him rest his head on my shoulder. My hands were running lightly over his muscles, trying to get them to relax. It took just a few minutes for him to take a deep breath and I felt him start to relax.

“Okay, so maybe you were right. This feels amazing,” he said.

“I know,” I said kissing his neck lightly.

He ended up relaxing so much that I really was worried he was going to fall asleep, so I had to keep talking to him to keep him.

awake. “I never got a chance to tell you my idea on how to contain your anger,” I said.

I felt him turn his head and look at me. “You didn’t tell me, you showed me.” I turned my head to look at him, surprised. “When

you put your hand on my shoulder while Vinny and Anna were in my office. I could feel what you were doing. It was almost clear

as day. I wanted to close my eyes to see if I could actually see what you were doing, but I didn’t because they were there. I tried

it tonight when we were talking about Giana and Armando. I’m thinking it worked, because I’m pretty sure you thought I was calm

that whole time,” he said. His smirk was undeniable on his face.

My mouth fell open. “I’m so impressed right now I don’t even have words to describe how impressed I am.” I thought back to

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earlier that evening when we were all in his office. I felt his anger just briefly, but not once after that. He really did learn how to control it so well that even I couldn't detect it. "I thought you were calm the whole time. I was actually a little worried about you, because I was sure you would be angry and then when you weren't, I thought there might be something wrong. Like maybe you were getting sick instead of just being exhausted," I said. He chuckled, grabbing my legs and wrapping them around his waist tighter. "I don't want to talk about it too much because I know I'll get mad again, but I'm livid over this whole Armando thing. I don't take betrayal well and Giana has already betrayed you, now with Armando..." he trailed off, not wanting to finish his thought. "What did we do this morning?" I asked quietly. He just laughed at me. The water was starting to cool, so he tapped my legs indicating he wanted to stand up. "I don't know exactly, but I don't ever want it to stop," he said as he turned toward me and extended his hand to help me stand up. As soon as I was standing, he leaned down and kissed me gently. "The kind of connection we have is something I never thought was possible, but always dreamed of. You understand me on a level that no other person has," He paused, pulling me

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tight against him. His blue eyes were searching mine for a moment, then he added, "I've been seriously thinking about getting rid of everyone. Armando included. With you by my side, I can run the entire city myself." As he said those words, I felt goosebumps rise over my entire body. I know my eyes went a little wide, which worried him, but I was surprised by the reaction, not his statement. I lifted my arm to show him the very clear sign that he was on the right path. The smile that spread across his face was enough to stop my heart this time. He reached down, picking me up and carrying me out of the tub. "You just proved my point," he said.

The following morning, I had an idea about how to get a little more information on Giana. I knew she'd been spending a lot of time with Ms. Jackson, not just using her as a cover story. When we came back from the gym, I asked Adrik if he'd be okay with Ms. Jackson coming to the penthouse so I could talk to her without the possibility of Giana showing up, "I'd be willing to bet Giana has made comments about Armando around Ms. Jackson. Because of Ms. Jackson's history, she knows when to keep her mouth shut, but she might tell me what's been said. She might not. She might feel closer to Giana at this point, but it's worth a try anyway," I said.

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“I don’t have a problem with her coming up here, as long as it’s just her and nobody else,” he said.

“Just her and just this once. I happen to love your love of privacy,” I said, grinning at him. He had just pulled his shirt on as we were talking, so I walked over and buttoned it up for him. I looked up at him, my own dirty thoughts racing through my head. “I’m doing this wrong.”

“You can fix it later,” he said, a devilish grin on his face.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 257

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Seven

Sephie

Viktor and Stephen were busy with their normal Master of the Schedule duties, as Adrik had another busy day. I recruited Misha, Ivan, and Andrei to help me get Ms. Jackson up to the penthouse, hopefully without Giana knowing. Since Glana used the excuse of having afternoon tea with Ms. Jackson, I wanted to have a chance to talk to her early enough in the day that she would be home should Giana stop by later.

Ivan and Andrei volunteered to go fetch her while Misha stayed in the penthouse with me. "I have to admit that I'm still angry with Ms. Jackson for setting up Giana's ambush of you," Misha said as we waited. "I know, my adorable Russian guardian. I'm hoping that she simply wasn't aware of what was going on when she set it up, but I do plan on asking. You know how quick she is, she might've caught on when you told me we didn't have to stay," I said. He laughed, shaking his head. "What?" I asked, "You always do that." "Do what?"

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“Give people the benefit of the doubt, second chances, third chances, 500 chances in the case of Max,” Misha said, rolling his eyes.

I thought for a moment. “I know I do. Sometimes I think it’s a fault, but I refuse to see how thinking the best of someone is a bad thing. It’s gotten me hurt and taken advantage of plenty of times in my life. You’d think I would’ve learned by now, but I just can’t help myself. I still see the good parts of people. Most people.”

The door to the penthouse opened and Ms. Jackson was escorted inside by Ivan and Andrei. “Child, you have fully realized your power if you’ve reached a point of summoning people to you now,” she said, laughing.

“She didn’t want to risk being ambushed again,” Misha said. He had an edge to his voice that wasn’t usually there, especially around her. He was definitely still angry with her. She picked up on it right away.

“I do owe you an apology for that. I had no idea there was an issue between you and Giana. She made it seem like she just wanted to spend time with you. As soon as you saw her, I knew there was an issue.” She looked right at Misha. “Then when you told her she didn’t need to stay, I figured out Giana must’ve done something. She put me right in the middle, which is not

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somewhere I like to be, but I was trying to make the best of it.” She looked between me and Misha. “I owe you both an apology.

Child, I wouldn’t have called you down there if I knew that was going to happen. And you, sir, you’re much too handsome to ever chastise like that. It nearly broke my heart.”

It did make me feel better that she was just as ambushed as we were that day, but Misha was still mad. Slightly less mad, but still mad. Didn’t detract from how adorable he was, though, so my working theory that he got away with murder as a child was still a good one.

“What happened after we left?” Andrei asked Ms. Jackson.

Ms. Jackson sighed. “I might’ve read that poor girl the riot act. I still don’t know exactly what happened, but I gather she accused Sephle of using drugs. Spend any amount of time around that child and It’s obvious she’s got giant demons in her past. Those kinds of demons only show up when there’s drugs involved or abuse and Sephle had both. Glana is a nice enough girl, but if I’m being honest, she’s an idi ot. She can’t see past her own nose. I don’t have a way to prove it, but I’d be willing to bet she accused Sephie of doing the exact thing she’s doing.”

We all looked at each other. Ms. Jackson, of course, noticed. “So, I’m right then? She’s the one on drugs?” she asked. Ivan

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nodded his head. "We got confirmation of it yesterday," he said.

"There would be a lot less drama in the world if people would just figure out that others will always accuse you of what they're afraid of you finding out they're doing." Ms. Jackson said. She thought for a moment, then looked to me. "I'm guessing there's more to it than just her killing herself slowly? I can't imagine you needing to summon me for just that."

I smiled at her. She really was a very sharp woman. "Has she talked to you much about Armando?"

"Little bits here and there. Their relationship hasn't been that great lately. She said he's been arguing with her a lot lately, but I'm guessing it has to do with her needing to apologize to Sephie. Armando, to his credit, has been trying to help her grow up. She did tell me that her father lost a substantial amount of money because of Armando. She said it happened years ago, but Armando still feels bad about it. It's why she got the job as his assistant. That girl can barely assist herself. She said she didn't even know how to use a computer when he hired her. He's taught her everything."

I looked to Ivan. Stephen was right. She's likely been a plant all along. Since Ms. Jackson could understand Russian, I couldn't say anything, so I chose to curse in Italian instead.

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“That reminds me, child. Since when do you know Italian?” she asked me.

“It’s not important,” Ivan said abruptly. Maybe Misha isn’t the only one still slightly angry with Ms. Jackson.

“What about her family? Does she talk about them at all?” I asked, trying to steer the conversation away from me.

“She’s mentioned them a few times, but never in a good light. She told me her family was wealthy, but they’re controlling. She said her father still tries to control her life, even though he’s in Italy and she’s here. Not much else that I can remember. She’s been unhappy since she got here. She wants to go back to Italy, but it also sounds like she was unhappy when she was in Italy,” she said.

“She’s going to be unhappy wherever she goes until she learns that she’s the one responsible for her own happiness,” I said.

“Are they making any plans to go back to Italy? Has she said?”

Ms. Jackson nodded her head. “She told me at the end of the month, that she would be gone for a few weeks. She said she finally talked him into taking her back to Italy. She apparently hates the cold and wants to go somewhere warmer.” We all exchanged glances. If she was planning on robbing Armando, that must be when she was planning on doing it.

“Do you spend much time with Armando?” I asked.

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“I do see him occasionally. We sometimes have dinner together with Mr. Turner,” she said.

“Do you get the impression he knows she’s on drugs?” I asked. I was still trying to figure out if Armando was choosing to ignore it or if he really was that stupid.

“If he doesn’t at least suspect it, then he might be the dumbest man I’ve ever known. Even Mr. Turner picked up on the fact that she was on drugs. The last two times we’ve had dinner, she’s been so high she can either barely function or she won’t shut up the whole time. There’s not a lot of in between with her. Mr. Turner said there’s a kid who’s a dealer that comes to his hotel frequently. He’s seen the kid in the lobby here a few times, but never with Giana, so he can’t say he’s her dealer.”

“He’s her dealer,” Ivan said.

“Ms. Jackson, I want you and Mr. Turner to be careful with Giana. This is much bigger than just a drug problem. I know you both know how to take care of yourselves, but a little distance between both Armando and Giana is probably a good thing right now. She’s been using you as cover to get away from her security guys, too,” I said. “I knew she did it once, but I didn’t know she was still doing that,” she said. She thought for a moment. “The perks of getting

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older mean I can fake an illness as much as I want and nobody will question it. I feel a cold coming on the next time they want to have dinner,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“If you hear of anything else that seems out of the ordinary when it comes to either one of them, will you tell me right away?” I asked. “I know you default to keeping your mouth shut, but this has the potential to be bad.”

“Of course, child. You know I’ll never turn down a reason to call one of your eye candies.”

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 258

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Eight

Adrik

I found my mind wandering during the afternoon's meetings. I slept great the night before, thanks to Sephie forcing me to take a bath with her before bed. I still couldn't get over her reaction to me telling her that I was thinking of getting rid of the other bosses and running things on my own.

It was something my father had tried when I was much younger. It was one of the reasons I had multiple attempts made on my life before the age of 10. My father eventually relented and divided the city between the six bosses that were now trying to usurp me. Relations had been mostly good throughout the years between my father and the other bosses. Then, when I took over, things had been quiet until this year. The city was thriving and the bosses were thriving, so it didn't make sense that they were trying to grab more power from me. Greed does strange things to people. My mind kept returning to the thought of running the entire city with Sephie by my side. I would finally realize what my father had tried to do so many years ago. And do it in a way that would 'save the people of the city, rather than sacrifice them as collateral

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damage.

My last meeting of the day was over. When Stephen returned to my office, I could tell by the look on his face that I was not going to like what he was about to tell me. “Boss, I just heard from Keith. Armando left early for his house, with Giana. Keith said he moved all his meetings there for tomorrow instead of staying here.”

I inhaled deeply. While it didn’t make me happy that he had chosen to not come clean with me, it did mean that we would get a chance to listen to more of his meetings, since Keith would have an easier time recording him at the house.

Viktor walked into the office. “Chen called. I told him Sephie would call him back in 5 minutes. Do you want to go upstairs or should have her come down here?”

“I’ll go up. I need a change of scenery. She promised Andrei she would cook his favorite meal tonight since he saved her from having to cook yesterday. She’s likely busy anyway,” I said. My stress from the day already starting to subside at the thought of having her in my arms.

Viktor’s smile made it clear he was happy about this news. He really did love it love it when Sephie cooked. We all did, but for some reason, it was an extra special treat for Viktor. “Apparently, I owe Andrei one,” Viktor said as we walked to the elevator. I

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raised an eyebrow at him. “Andrei’s favorite happens to be mine as well,” he said. He was practically drooling as he thought.

about it. We really had become quite spoiled with her cooking for us. Even takeout didn’t taste as good anymore.

As soon as we opened the door to the penthouse, we could smell her cooking. My stomach growled in anticipation. Viktor

laughed, as he’d heard it. “At least I’m not the only one overly excited about this,” he said as we walked in. Sephie saw us, her

eyes landing on me quickly. Her smile made the room even brighter. She had her hands full, so she couldn’t drop everything and

come to me the way I’d grown to adore. Instead, I went to her, standing behind her while she finished what she was doing. I

leaned down, pressing my cheek to her neck, my hands on her hips, kissing her lightly. She freed up one hand and pressed her

palm to my cheek for a moment before returning to what she was doing.

“Sestrichka, Chen called earlier. I told him you’d call him back in a few minutes. Can you talk now or should I tell him a few more minutes?” Viktor asked him.

“If someone can hold the phone for me, I can talk to him now. These raviolls aren’t going to stuff themselves, Papa Bear,” she

said smiling at him. He dialed the number, putting it on speaker, then handed me the phone to hold for her.

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“Yay, teamwork,” she said giggling as we waited for Chen to pick up.

“How did you call exactly 5 minutes later? Like were you guys Just fu cking with me and making me wait 5 minutes for no good reason?” Chen asked when he picked up the call.

Sophie laughed at him. “No, Chen. They had to find me. Sometimes I play hide and seek to keep them on their toes. You know, ongoing training and what not,” she said. We all laughed quietly.

“For real?” Chen asked. He clearly believed her.

“Oh, totally. I once climbed out one of the windows onto the ledge. Took them 6 hours to find me. Most peaceful day I’ve had in a long time,” she said. There was silence on the other end. She couldn’t contain her laughter any longer. “No, Chen. I’m only messing with you.”

“At this point, I put nothing past you,” he said.

“What do you have for me, my favorite French person?” she asked.

“I did hear from the people in Vito’s area of the city. They’re down to meet. They said name the place and time and they’ll be there. DJ finally got back to me. He apologized for the delay, but he said one of his kids has been really si ck. The people in charge in Sal’s area of the city are also down to meet. I don’t know if you guys want two separate meetings or you want to

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combine them, but let me know when and where. I'll make sure everyone knows," he said.

"You're such a professional public servant, Chen." She glanced at the guys, then tried to turn around far enough to look at me. I surprised her by kissing her cheek. I looked at Ivan, who was holding up one finger, as was Viktor. I nodded in agreement and looked to Misha, who confirmed meeting with everyone at once would be fine. Sephie saw everything and responded to Chen.

"We can meet with everyone at once. Same as last time, we'll get in touch about when and where. Thank you, once again, for being our go-between," Sephie said.

"You got it, my girl. Hey, I talked to Max last night. I stopped by the restaurant. He told me what happened. Well, most of it. I'm pretty sure his du mbass left out some important details. I don't know everything about your relationship with him, but you did the right thing. Sephie. You were always a way better friend to him than he was to you," he said.

It took her a second to respond, but she thanked him and the call ended. I handed Viktor his phone back, my hands once again moving to her hips. I felt her sigh quietly as she continued what she was doing. I kissed her neck, whispering "I love you" in her ear. She leaned her body back against me, leaning her head on mine.

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“It’s less likely that anyone will recognize civilians coming to meet with you. That’s a normal occurrence. Should we have them come here?” Viktor asked.

“If we do, it needs to be while Armando is gone, I want him left out of all plans for the time being, until we have a chance to find out more on him,” I said.

“Is he still leaving tomorrow?” Sephie asked.

“He left today. Keith let me know he had changed plans. He’s moved all his meetings tomorrow to his house,” Stephen said.

“Hmm. That’s weird,” she said.

“Did Ms. Jackson have any insight about Giana?” Viktor asked.

“Not much, but she did say she was just as ambushed as we were that day when Giana pretended to apologize to me. She’s also been suspecting that Giana’s been on something for a while now and she feels like Armando has to know. She said they’ve had dinner with her and Mr. Turner a few times and it was really obvious she was blitzed out of her mind,” she said.

“She also said Glana told her that they were planning on going to Italy at the end of the month,” Misha said. “So, either Armando is planning on leaving, or that’s when Giana is planning on robbing him. Or both, I don’t know yet.”

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“He’s really not doing himself any favors by leaving early and he’ll essentially be cutting himself off from any favor if he thinks going back to Italy right now is a good move,” I said. Sephie had come to a stopping point and wiped her hands. She turned to face me, smiling at me. “Have you talked to them. about what you told me last night yet?” she asked me quietly enough that only I could hear her. When she turned to look at me, I felt her warmth spread over my body. I leaned down, kissing her quickly. I stood up, still looking at her gorgeous smile. “I think you should,” she urged. She held her arm up in between us, showing me the goosebumps that were clearly visible. I kissed. her once more, overcome with just how much I loved her. I looked to the guys. “I’ve been thinking I should do away with all the bosses, Armando included, and run the city myself. With Sephie and you 5, I think it’s possible,” I said. They were silent for a few moments as they thought about what I’d just said. I was most curious about how Misha would react, honestly. As was Sephie. She turned to look at him so she could see his reaction. He had his faraway look in his eye, but then we all saw his upper body shudder as he shook off the reaction. Sephie laughed at him. “Same, Misha. Same,” she said.

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Ivan's sly smile spread across his face. "Trino called this one, you know." The other guys looked to him, curious as to what he was talking about. Sephie must've told him what Trino said when we were at his island house, because I don't remember mentioning it to anyone. I felt Sephie laugh quietly. Ivan said, "This was suggested when we were at Trino's island house. Trino said the city already had their rightful King and Queen and didn't need anything else. I happen to agree with him."

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 259

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Nine

Adrik

We set a meeting with the people organizing in the different areas of the city that we knew about so far. Since Armando was at

his house, I had everyone come to the building to make it easier. I regularly met with groups of people from all areas of the city,

so it wouldn't raise suspicion. It wasn't the same as having known drug dealers walk into the building to meet with me. After the

meeting, we had planned to go to the house. I knew the guys were just as stressed as I was. Being away from everything, if only

for the weekend, helped everyone relax to make it through the week.

The meeting went well and Sephie was happy with the people that showed up as well. "It's obvious the people love you. It's

always been obvious to me. You're so popular that I still can't believe I'd never heard of you before the night I first met you at the

restaurant. Not once did any of the other bosses mention you when they were meeting at the restaurant," she said. We were in

the backseat, on the way to the house.

"I do try to stay as anonymous as possible. The other bosses wouldn't necessarily need to mention me unless there was a

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problem. That's why I showed up that night," I said.

"Was it just Anthony's side hustle or was there something more?" she asked me, as curious as always.

"That and I was already hearing rumors of increased taxes in a few areas of town. Not as bad as it is now, even. Anthony made sure that conversation didn't happen, so the bosses took advantage and raised taxes on everyone quickly."

"At least the people are smart enough to know it wasn't you. Now they know they can count on you to help solve the issue, too."

She leaned her head on my shoulder. "You're a good King," she said wistfully. Our conversation on the way to the house made me start to wonder if Anthony had been put up to doing what he did that night at the restaurant specifically so I wouldn't call the other bosses out about raising taxes. They couldn't have known I would come to Sephie's defense. I'd never shown any favor to any woman in public, well, ever. At this point, I was starting to question everything and everyone around me.

Later that night, I brought it up to Sephie again. "How well did the other bosses know you, solnishko?"

"I think you'd have to ask them that question, but Armando is the only one I ever really spoke to. Even with him, it was rare. He

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asked me questions a few times about whether I had a boyfriend and things like that, but he made it seem like he was trying to set me up with one of his sons. He would always say ‘my son is about your age’ and then he’d tell me what his son did or was going to do about whatever we were talking about. I just let him talk, same as I do now,” she said. She thought for a minute, then added, “I got free help out of him when it would happen, so I never really minded. But I kept the details about my life to myself. I didn’t like the idea of him having more information about me than I wanted him to, regardless of whether he was nice to me or not.”

“Maybe he was trying to gauge your interest in him, not his son,” I said. I hadn’t given it much thought, but Armando was very affectionate toward Sephie, even from the very beginning.

Sephie looked at me and scrunched up her face. “Eww.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I never had to question her love for me. I would be more worried about her leaving me for one of the guys than I ever would about her leaving me for someone else. And I never worried about her leaving me for one of the guys.

“I mean, Armando is a nice-looking man. He takes care of himself much more than the other bosses. Those dudes have been

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letting their money attract women for years now. Armando still has some self-respect and tries to keep in shape. He looks good for his age, although now that I think about it, I really have no clue how old he is,” she said.

“He’s roughly ten years older than I am,” I said.

“That’s young to be a boss. I know how you became the world’s youngest boss, but how did he manage it? And how long has he been a boss?” she asked as she climbed into bed, waiting for me to turn the overhead light off.

“Armando was the underboss of the man he took over from. That man only had one daughter and she was never interested in anything related to business. He handed everything over to Armando when he became too ill to run things.” I stretched out on the bed, waiting for Sephie to lay across my chest.

“And has he done a better or worse job than that guy?” she asked, settling in. She rested her chin on my chest, so she could look at me.

“Mostly better. He’s made a few deals that have gone bad, as you know. Overall, he’s tried to win the favor of the people in his area. He’s quite generous, has a good relationship with the important people, and looks out for the people in his area.”

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“Did he become boss before or after you did?” she asked. I could see her mind trying to make a connection, but I wasn’t exactly sure where she was going with this line of thinking.

“Before. Until I took over, he was the youngest boss the city had ever seen,” I said. She chewed on her bottom lip, lost in thought. I stayed quiet, curious where her mind was going. I also loved watching her when she was deep in thought. It was almost as adorable as when she was confused about something.

“What if he’s been playing both sides this whole time?” she asked. She thought for a moment longer. “He always had a good relationship with the other bosses, from what I could tell at the meetings. He was always the one that would get everyone to come to an agreement when they’d argue over something. He would work the problem out. Eventually, the other bosses started to look at him for direction. Like they would defer to him, almost.” She sat up, crossing her legs, so she could fidget with her hands. I sat up farther as well, so I could see her better. “Let’s just pretend for a minute that he got it in his head that he was going to run the city, because the other bosses had been giving him more respect. Add in that he might’ve been trying to feel me out,” she shuddered at that thought. “Still gross, for the record,” she said, smiling at me. “You were gone for a few months prior to

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the night I met you. Maybe Mando started thinking he could run the city himself, without you. Then you come back and in one night, take the city back and take me from him. Remember that first night at his house in Italy? How weirdly thoughtful he was about trying to set me up with his son and how that didn't work out because I was meant for bigger and better things? And then again when we were at the restaurant after the meeting with the scummy lawyer?" she asked.

I nodded my head. "I let those go because I thought he was just being a creepy old dude. You guys made me all squishy inside talking about me anyway, but Mando's comments made me tense. It was just covered up by what you guys said about me.

Mando doesn't know me well enough to say things like that about me. He still doesn't. He might think he does. He might wish he does, but he doesn't. I would take a comment like that from Trino better than I would Armando. At least Trino is honest about his intentions." Her fingers were nervously picking at the waistband of my pajama pants. She had taken the drawstring, rolled it up, unrolled it, twisted it around her fingers, and now she'd moved on to the waistband as she talked.

I thought about what she'd just said. "I knew Armando had a good relationship with the other bosses, but I didn't realize they had

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put him in any kind of leadership position, if you will,” I said. “I did miss out on some very important details while we were gone trying to get Viktor back.” I ran my hand through my hair. That period of my life was one of the roughest times I’ve been through.

Trying to get Viktor out, without getting the rest of us caught was quite possibly the hardest thing we’ve ever done. I was more nervous walking into that meeting at the restaurant that night than I’d ever been. I’d been away for months. A lot can happen in that amount of time. Everything faded away when I walked in and saw Sephie staring at me.

I felt her fingers lightly running over my cheek and through my short facial hair. “Penny for your thoughts,” she said quietly.

I looked at her, smiling at me. Her hands had quieted and she was waiting for me to think through what was going through my mind, just as I had waited for her. It was one of the many things I loved about her. “I was thinking about being gone, trying to get Viktor out. It was a rough time. I rarely get worried about business, but I was nervous walking into that meeting that night at the restaurant. I’d been gone longer than I had wanted to be. I didn’t know what to expect. Then I walk in and find you staring at me,” I said, smiling at her. “Everything else seemed inconsequential from that point on.”

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The smile that spread across her face made my heart threaten to stop.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 260

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty

Adrik

Misha and Sephie left for a run the next morning while the rest of us went to the gym. Where Misha had dreaded having to run with Sephie in the beginning, he now looked forward to it. After the attack on them, they rarely went for a run in the city anymore.

They would use the treadmills in the gym, but they both said they hated it.

When we were at the house, though, they would be

gone for sometimes two hours. Sephie had told me that Misha was now

wanting to take the long route each time they went for a

run. It made her happy to not feel like she was killing him any longer.

I discussed what Sephie and I had talked about the night before with the other four guys while we were in the gym. "It should

surprise no one that Sephie made a great observation last night." The guys all stopped and turned toward me to hear what she'd

come up with this time. I laughed at their curious, but not surprised in the least expressions. "We were talking about Armando

and how well he and the other bosses knew Sephie before she met me. She said Armando was the only one that would ever talk

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to her like a person, but she always got the feeling he was trying to set her up with one of his sons, because he would mention he had a son her age frequently.”

“Yeah, I don’t think it was for his son. I think it was for him,” Ivan said.

“Sephie ended up saying the same thing last night, but I’m curious to hear how you came to that conclusion,” I said. Ivan never ceased to amaze me with his observation skills. They were almost as good as Sephie’s.

“I caught him looking at her a few times, but I don’t think I would’ve noticed had he not made a few comments about her when we were at his house in Italy. He doesn’t really know her, so they seemed very out of context. They came across as mostly harmless at the time and they would’ve been, had he known her better, but she told me that none of the bosses knew much, if anything about her. Including Armando. It just felt wrong, so I started paying attention. It’s calmed down somewhat since he and Giana got together, but much like her inability to not stare at Misha, he’s incapable of not staring at Sephie when he thinks no one is watching.”

I thought about his words for a minute. What Sephie had said last night was starting to make more sense. “That makes the rest of what she said last night seem more plausible,” I said.

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“What else has she known all along that none of us caught on to until she pointed it out?” Andrei asked.

I chuckled. “I wouldn’t say she’s known all along. She’s just seeing Armando in a bit of a different light with everything going on and remembering things in the past that seemed benign at the time that didn’t age well. She told me that the other bosses were starting to put Armando into a bit of a leadership role among them before I came back. She said Armando would help settle disputes and would get them all to agree, She’s also said all along that she never even knew of my existence until that night at the restaurant. She said she never heard the other bosses mention my name. Not once.”

“That’s why she calls you the Lord King Boss,” Viktor said, laughing. “She didn’t know who you were or what to call you when she found out you were coming to the meeting.”

“It’s authoritative,” I said, causing more laughter from everyone. I think they enjoyed the lighter side that Sephie had brought out in all of us, but especially me. I hardly ever joked about anything before Sephie, but now we could find the lighter side of just about anything. It was a welcome change.

*So, you think Armando is playing both sides to see which side will win? That way, If you lose, he can still keep favor with the

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other bosses?” Ivan asked.

“It’s entirely possible. Given that he didn’t come clean about his argument with his associate after the meeting on Monday, I’m rethinking his loyalties. You all know how well I take betrayal of any kind,” I said. “Sephie said last night, just to play Devil’s advocate, that Mando might’ve gotten it in his head that he could run the city while I was gone. If you add in that he might have been feeling Sephie out for himself instead of the story about his son like he said and her point was that I basically came back and in one night took it all away from him. He might be playing both sides out of spite.”

“Sephie didn’t give him any hope that he had a chance with her before she met you, did she?” Stephen asked. I could tell he was perplexed over Armando’s behavior, if this really was true.

“No. She said that thought was gross. Given the convulsions she has thinking about it, I believe her. She said he used to stay 1 after occasionally and would help her clean up after the other bosses had left. He would ask her questions about her life, like he was trying to find more information out about her. She said she never told him anything important and that she didn’t like the idea of him knowing things about her. We know how private she can be. I doubt he got anything useful out of her,” I said,

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“In all my 900 years, I’ll never understand people getting upset about losing things that don’t even belong to them in the first place,” Stephen said.

“You and me hoth. It’s still just a working theory about Armando, but it seems to be making more sense, the more I think about it.

We should hopefully be able to get some answers if Keith and Chris can record his meetings. He’s never taken his security seriously. I’m hoping that remains the case and they’re able to record him easily,” I said. “But, for now, I want Armando left out of everything.”

“We might be able to test his allegiance, Give him false information and see what he does with it,” Ivan said.

“I agree. We just need to be careful and time that right. We don’t want to scare him into hiding too soon if he finds out we’re on to him,” Viktor said.

“Agreed. We definitely need to time everything just right. I’m not doing anything without Misha and Sephie,” I said. I remembered something Ivan had said the night before, while Sephie was still cooking dinner and we were all standing in the kitchen together.

“You know who originally suggested that I do away with the other bosses?” I asked, looking at Ivan. He shook his head no.

“Armando.”

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“That kind of an idea comes up in conversation because you’ve already been thinking about it,” Ivan said, his hand running over his goatee.

Viktor did some digging on who the man was that we overheard arguing with Armando late morning. He had to rely on Sephie for translation, as many of the articles were in Italian, but he managed to find a few that were in English since he spent part of the year in the city. She was curled up next to him on the couch, so he could search for information and she could translate what he’d found.

“It appears he and Armando are related, but distantly. They’ve been business partners since Armando was much younger, however. I’ve found quite a few business deals going back decades,” Viktor said, “I can’t find any indication that he’s involved in the illegal side of Armando’s business. At least not directly. It doesn’t make sense that he would be urging him to switch sides if he’s not involved.”

“Do the other bosses make business deals with each other like you and Armando?” Sephie asked me. As soon as she said it, a lightbulb went off in Viktor’s head and he started down an entirely new rabbit hole, digging for more information.

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“Minor stuff, mostly. The other bosses tend to rely heavily on the illegal side of things. They have a few legitimate businesses set up, mostly mattress stores, but they’re mostly a front and a way to launder money. They don’t make very much money off of those businesses. Their wealth comes from the illegal side almost exclusively. Armando is the only boss other than me that invests in legitimate ventures,” I said.

“Maybe that’s why they’re getting greedy. I would think there’s a finite number of addicts in the city. That’s a fixed income supply.”

She was still reading an article that Viktor had given her to translate while she talked out loud. “Plus, a significant portion of your customer base dies every year. If you’re an idiot like Sal and push brawn on your customer base, then you’re going to lose more customers than you gain.” She looked up at me, a smirk on her face. “I don’t even know anything about

business and I know that’s a terrible model for trying to stay wealthy.”

“You do make a good point though, love,” I said. “It would explain why they’re getting greedy. The commissioner instituted a drug prevention program for at-risk youth last year. He talked to me before he started it. Most of the addicts in the city are adults, so taking the younger people out of the supply chain, if you will, shouldn’t have made a significant difference. Maybe it was more

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successful than the other bosses expected. I would expect nothing less than for them to not see that coming.”

“Commissioner 1, Bosses 0,” Sephie said, going back to translating for Viktor.

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