

King of the Underworld Chapter 341- 350

Chapter 341

Adrik

When Andrei and Sephie both said that Martin had been speaking to Sal on the phone, my anger hit levels I'd never experienced before. It was so sudden that it almost surprised me. Sephie felt it, of course, immediately putting her hands on my chest, which quieted the rage building inside me enough that I could at least think.

This meant that every single person, save Trino, had betrayed me. While I trusted Trino, at this point, it would not surprise me if he betrayed me as well. It appeared that we could trust no one. My mind was racing, trying to connect all the pieces to this evergrowing puzzle.

"...Everything is now connected nicely," Sephie said. I knew her mind could connect pieces sometimes faster than mine could.

She was also able to keep her wits about her when she was angry, where that was something I still struggled with. My anger overtook everything, but I could feel her helping me with it. I could feel her cool, calming presence keeping my fire from becoming an inferno. But just barely. I knew she was also enjoying feeling my anger, as it was feeding hers. She still had plenty of unresolved emotions from being taken, so the fact that Sal was now once again front and center in this little drama made her look forward to watching his demise just as much as I was.

She was rarely scared by my anger. Only once or twice had it caught her off-guard. She knew it was never directed at her, so she was usually able to handle it without being intimidated by it. But it was surprising to feel just how much she enjoyed feeling it

sometimes. She almost craved it in certain situations. When we got to her in that room with Armando, I knew she was in pain.

There was no mistaking she was in pain, given how terrible she looked. She was a bloody bruised mess. I couldn't feel her pain yet, but I could feel her relief that I was there, followed closely by her hunger for my anger. She knew I was ready to kill Armando, but I could clearly feel that she craved it just as much as I did in that moment.

Sephie was so pure and so innocent that it was almost unexpected from her. I didn't think much of it at the time, because I didn't think much about anything except ending Armando at the time. But looking back, I was surprised to feel just how much she enjoyed seeing my bloodlust completely out of control. How much she wanted it unleashed.

I'd spent so much time worrying that she would look at me differently once she saw that side of me. I was so worried that she would be scared by it and would leave me that I'd spent so much energy trying to control that side of me. When I walked to her to put my jacket around her, she looked at me with every ounce of love she possessed in her body and soul. I knew, without a doubt, that had she not been in excruciating pain, I would've been able to feel her warmth spread to me as she watched me walk to her. She saw my demon on full display in that moment and she loved him with everything she had. What's more, she was able to control it with just a touch.

I knew she was almost tired of hearing me tell her how amazing she is, but it's the truth. Just when I think I can't love her any more than I already do, she finds a new way to make my heart grow larger for her. Stephen had told me after we got her back

that he was thinking about her when setting up to provide cover to all of us when we were at the brawn warehouse. He said, “if ever there was unconditional love, Sephie was it.” He was right. She loved all of us, no matter what. But she loved me with her entire soul. She had lifetimes of love built up. It was the only explanation for how she could still see so much good in the world given all the evil she’d witnessed firsthand. She was love.

“What were they talking about?” Viktor asked, snapping me back to the present moment.

“I could only hear Martin’s side of the conversation. He spoke to Giana on speaker phone, but he was in a different location when he talked to Sal. The fast forward button got hit, so I don’t think this conversation has actually taken place yet,” Sephie said. She paused. I could feel her trying to get control of her emotions once more. I could feel the fear from a few days ago returning.

It never seemed to matter what level my anger was at, as soon as I felt her losing any bit of control of her emotions, my anger disappeared and there was only her. The pull in my chest was so strong that I couldn’t ignore it. I pulled her tight against me, turning her to face me. “Talk to me, solnishko. What are you feeling?” I asked, my lips next to her ear. She looked up at me. Her eyes were changing again as I watched, going from the almost black that meant she was angry to the light blue, almost white that meant she was afraid. She held my gaze as she said, “Sal is using Giana as payment to Martin for help in overthrowing Trino. Martin wants in on the human trafficking side of Sal’s business, as well.”

I heard everyone cursing, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Sephie. I could feel her fear, but it wasn’t at the level when her eyes had

first changed to a completely new color. It seemed like she could make them dark at will now, which likely meant she would be able to figure out how to turn them white at will soon. I caught myself thinking about how impressed I constantly found myself with her. She was always so hard on herself and constantly joked about how out of control her emotions are, but I could feel exactly what she felt now. She wasn't out of control at all. She just feels everything at a magnified level from everyone else. She was always in complete control of the turbulent ocean inside her. She clicked her tongue at me. "I know what you're thinking, but it looks like you're smiling at the thought of Giana being passed around like the prize at Bingo." I couldn't help the laugh that escaped at being caught. I glanced at the guys, who were admittedly confused. Sephie didn't take her eyes off me, she just said, "totally accountable for that," as she raised her hand. I watched as her eyes changed from the almost white to all green. "Does Giana know she's basically just a trophy to her godfather?" Stephen asked. Sephie sighed. Her eyes were slowly returning to their normal color as she tried to calm down. I could feel her trying to push her anger to the surface, knowing she would be able to keep her eyes dark that way. "I don't get the impression that she does, but I need to talk to her to be able to answer that more definitively," she said. She still hadn't taken her eyes off mine I think she was waiting for me to give her the all-clear that she could look at the guys again. I had to admit that I was enjoying her looking at me and wasn't planning on giving her the okay anytime soon. Have to say I'm thankful that my eyes don't change colors when I'm being a shit.

“Now I wonder if she’s using Martin or if she really has some kind of feelings for him,” Andrei said.

“I have no love for her, but it doesn’t seem fair that she’s passed around like that. Even for her,” Misha said. “I get the feeling that she was placed with Armando. I don’t think it was as much her choice as she led us to believe. Now she’s being placed with Martin.”

“But now it begs the question of do we tell her we know and see how much she knows. What the f**k do we do with her now?”

Ivan said, clearly getting frustrated.

“And not that it needs to be said out loud, but it needs to be said out loud. How disgusting is Sal to be passing his goddaughter around like she’s not a human being?” Stephen said. “It makes me want to punch Armando for using her like he did. Giana is obnoxious, but nobody deserves to be treated like that.”

“At least we know where she is right now. I’m a little more worried about Trino, Martin is clearly moving against him. Trino either needs to get out of there or he needs to get rid of everyone around him and he needs to do it today,” Sephie said. She saw the smirk on my face that usually accompanied her demon eyes. I couldn’t help myself when her eyes went dark. I didn’t understand why they turned me on so much, but I had a hard time controlling myself anytime I saw her demon eyes. I just wanted to f**k her. She stood on her toes and kissed me passionately, but quickly, catching me completely off guard. “You can. Later,” she said in my ear as she turned back to face the guys. She leaned her body against mine, which was appreciated until I calmed down. “Should Trino come here? Is he safe in Colombia right now? He can’t trust his guys and he definitely can’t trust Martin. There’s

also the matter of the Mexicans that are going to get bolder. Where else can he go that he's going to be safe?" Ivan said, thinking out loud.

"Should we go get him?" Stephen asked.

Chapter 342

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-Two

Adrik

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I still had my arms around Sephie, with my chin resting on her shoulder while I texted him, instead of calling. She craned her neck to look at me, questioning why I didn't call him. "He needs to be alone, where no one can overhear him. He'll call me from a burner phone. He knows what to do when I text him that," I said. She reached up, placing her palm against my cheek, her other arm on top of mine.

Ever since she'd told me that she was terrified of being apart from me, we'd somehow gotten even closer. I'd been addicted to her for months now, but it was to a new level now. And I could tell that she couldn't get enough of me now, too. When she said that she tended to get seriously injured when she was apart from me, it hit me like a ton of bricks. She was completely right. Both times, at the ball and when she was taken, I had sent her away in an effort to keep her safe. Both times ended horribly for her and almost cost her life. I was trying to keep her safe, thinking she would be safe when she was away from me. I felt like I had brought danger into her life and wanted to protect her from it. But it was clear to me now that I was the only thing that could protect her. She would continue to get hurt if I kept sending her away, regardless of my intention. She belonged at my side. No matter what.

I had to admit that I felt better about keeping her with me now that I knew she loved my demon as much as she did me. Part of the reason I sent her away both times was out of worry that she'd see that side of me and not be able to handle it. She inevitably

saw it both times, just not for the reason I expected. Her love for me never wavered. Even from the beginning when I basically kidnapped her to try and keep her safe from Anthony. I wanted her close to me even then and I barely knew her. The stronger my love for her grew, the more worried I became that I would do something to cause her to leave. It was my fear of losing her that caused me to almost lose her. Twice. It was painfully obvious to me now that I always needed her by my side. She made it clear every single day that she was perfect for that spot.

It only took Trino a few minutes before he called me back. I put it on speaker, as the guys moved closer so they could hear easier. I still had my arms around Sephie as I answered his call. "Trino, you're not going to like this."

He sighed heavily. "Just once, Jefe. Just once I want you to make me call you like this and you give me good news. Then my life will be complete. What do you have for me? How bad is it?"

"It's worse than we thought, Trino," I said.

"Trino, can you get out of Colombia on your own? Or do we need to come get you? You can't trust anyone. That's how bad it is," Sephie said.

"Miha, are you serious?"

"It's bad, Trino. Martin is actively plotting against you with Sal. We don't know the exact details of his plan with Sal, yet. He's also made a move against me up here, as he has guys operating in the city without my permission. We do know they're not your guys, so that's your one consolation. He's been promised Giana as payment for helping Sal overthrow you. Then there's the matter of your security guys. I wouldn't trust any of them if I were you. I don't know if you have other guards you can trust, but I

think it's best if you leave immediately until we can get security figured out for you. Is there somewhere safe you can get to until we can get to you? Can you get out of Colombia on your own?" I asked. We had to wait on Trino to stop cursing before he could respond. He started to speak, then ended up cursing again. He finally regained composure and said tensely, "I have a place in the country, close to Panama. No one knows about it, so they won't know how to find me there."

"You're sure no one knows about it?" I asked.

"I bought it for my parents. Everyone thinks they're dead, but they've been quietly living out their days up there. No one knows about it. You're the first person I've told. I'll send you the information. I can get there and I'll be safe. I can make it to Panama, but any farther will be difficult without them finding me," Trino said. I could hear the worry in his voice as the gravity of the situation settled in.

"I have old friends in Panama. Get to your parents' place and they'll come for you. You'll be safe with them. You have my word, Trino."

He was silent for a moment, like he didn't know what to say. "You're sure about this, Jefe?" he asked. He was having trouble believing that everyone had turned against him as well.

"I'm sure about this. We have messages between Giana and Martin. He's planning on getting her away from the building so he can grab her. He's already had his guys take everything from Armando's house. Literally everything. He's promised Giana that he'll take her somewhere in South America to keep her safe. We thought he was just pussy whipped at first, but then we found out he's talking to Sal and that Giana is payment for his help in moving against you. We still don't know the plans of Sal and

Ricardo, but they clearly involve you as well. Given that the Mexicans have already made

one attempt on your life, I think you're safer out of Colombia. We can get you a security team that will remain loyal to you no

matter what. They might have to learn Spanish, but that can be arranged." I

paused, inhaling deeply. "Trino, you're the only one

that's remained loyal to me through all of this. I know that's why they're

moving against you now and I apologize for that, but I

promise I will end this and make everything right once again."

"Jefe, no apologies needed. You're apparently the only one that's remained loyal to me, so it turns out we're in the same boat,"

he said. We heard him cursing again, like he was losing control of his temper

as he thought about the ramifications of everything

I'd just told him.

"Trino, I know you know, but I need to say this again. You cannot trust

anyone you have around you right now. Martin is gleefully

betraying you for some crazy a ss pus sy and your guys are looking for an

excuse to turn against you. I know you're pi ssed right

now and I'm pi ssed for you, but I need you to control your temper long

enough that you get to safety. Once you hang up with us,

I need you to get in the nearest vehicle and get the f**k out of there. Not a

word to anybody. Understand?" Sephje said. Her tone

was halfway between threatening and pleading. We heard him exhale once

more, but he was still silent. "Trino, I'll kick your

motherf**king a ss from here to next week if you don't do what I just said,"

Sephie said. This time, her tone was dripping with

anger. I tensed, instinctively. We all knew that tone,

Trino did too, apparently. He chuckled. "Okay, okay, Miha. I promise. Dios

mio, I don't think I've met anyone that has a bigger

temper than I do."

“You’re go ddamn right. Now stop wasting f**king time,” she said, still angry. Trino cursed in Spanish, but agreed with her. He ended the call and promptly sent the location of his parents’ place. I told him to

let me know when he made it there or if he got into trouble on the way.

I looked to Misha. “Is he going to make it out in time?” Sephie walked to Misha, grabbing his hand as Misha searched for Trino.

Andrei walked to Sephie’s side, taking her other hand in his. We saw Misha’s eyes go wide, which meant he was watching Trino.

He squeezed Sephie’s hand. They watched for a few moments, then the movie ended and they were back to the present moment.

“And?” Ivan asked, anxiously.

“Unless he changes his mind at the last minute, he’s going to make it out,” Sephie said, wiping her eyes. Even Andrei and Misha looked troubled with what they’d just seen.

“He’s going to make it just in time to say goodbye to his mother,” Andrei said, having to turn away from us to get a handle on his own emotions.

“Apparently, she’s been si ck and she wouldn’t let his father contact Trino because she didn’t want to worry him. She took a turn this morning. His father thought she would pull through like she’d done before, but she’s not going to make it. Trino will get there in time to spend the last couple of hours with her,” Misha said as tears fell down his face.

“Everything happens for a reason,” Sephie said quietly, still wiping tears from her cheeks. We all stood in shocked silence for a few minutes.

“What do we do with Giana?” Viktor asked. “Do we know when she’s going to fake an illness? What do I tell my guys to do? Leave her here or take her to the hospital?”

Surprisingly, it was Andrei that answered. “I think I can find out if she knows she’s being used if I talk to her. If she’s aware she’s being passed around by Sal and she’s willingly going along with the plan, that’s one thing. But if she thinks that Martin is saving her when he’s really claiming his prize, that’s an entirely different situation. It doesn’t make sense that she would throw herself at him when we were on the island. Either she knew he was the next target or she was hoping he could save her and she didn’t have a better option.”

Sephie studied him for a moment. “You want to try talking to her by yourself, Bubba? You’re sure about that?” she asked.

Chapter 343

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-Three

Adrik

“We all ha te her, but oddly enough, most of my ha te for her died with Tori. I can’t explain it, but I’m pretty apathetic toward Giana since the night I killed Tori. I think I’m the only one that can objectively talk to her and find out what she knows. Everyone else is still carrying heavy anger toward her. Rightfully so, don’t get me wrong. Not judging anybody else here. I just can’t say the same now,” he said.

Sephie and I both looked at Misha, expecting to get confirmation. We could see the look of disgust on his face. “You’re not getting anything from me on her. Sorry,” he said.

Sephie laughed. “Bubba’s right. Misha’s clearly not over her yet.”

“I’m not saying she deserves to be passed around like she has been, but she still deserves most of what she gets,” Misha said.

“I rest my case,” Andrei said, crossing his arms across his chest. I looked at my watch. It was still early enough that he could go talk to her. I looked at him and Viktor. “Go. See what you can find out,” I said. They both nodded once, leaving the penthouse.

“Before they get back, who’s got her knowing what’s been happening all along? Show of hands,” Stephen said, raising his hand.

Ivan and Misha also raised their hands. Stephen looked at me and Sephie, asking, “so, you two think she’s just a pawn, then?”

I’m so

“She might’ve known part of the plan. Like I’m sure she knew she was supposed to try and get close to me. Which, sidebar, I have to say grateful to not be a normal girl. If I would’ve had to listen to her divulge details about her and Armando’s s*x life, I

might've stabbed myself in the eye. But I don't think she knew she was being 'given' to Armando and I don't think she knows she's being "given' to Martin either," Sephie said.

"I agree with Sephie. I think she only knew minimal details. I don't think she realizes she's been a pawn this entire time. I think she thinks she has more control over her destiny than she actually does," I said. "The bigger question is what we do with her, especially if she hasn't known she's been a pawn. It'll be easy if she's known all along, but I'm at a loss on what to do with her if she hasn't."

"Normal people don't have to deal with these kinds of questions," Sephie said under her breath. She looked at me, grinning. Her eyes were clearly all green. She recognized the look on my face. She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, they were normal once again. She was already beginning to get a handle on their new tricks. The only one that seemed to still catch her off guard was when she felt fear. She'd always struggled to control that emotion when she felt it, but I had a feeling it was because she never really let herself feel it.

When you're fighting for your life, you can't let the fear take over. She'd gotten so good at ignoring her fear in order to get through whatever was happening to her that now she didn't know what to do with the fear when it would come up for her. That's likely why it was such a strong reaction and why it changed her eyes to a completely different color. She had years of fear bottled up inside, waiting to be expressed.

It seemed silly to think about, but it made me happy that she finally felt safe enough to be able to feel her fear. While I never wanted her to fear anything, I wanted her to know she was safe enough to feel anything she needed to feel. That included fear,

as odd as that seemed. She was safe.

She quietly walked back to me, noticing me lost in my thoughts once more.

She wrapped her arms around my waist, smiling sweetly at me. "I know what you're thinking again," she said. As she looked at me, I saw her eyes turn completely blue. The normal deepest depth of the ocean blue that was always present when her eyes were normal. The same blue that meant she was thinking about how much she loved me. I stood there, completely lost in her gaze for a few moments. I brushed a few curls from her face, feeling completely overwhelmed with just how much she meant to me.

While everything around us seemed to be completely falling apart, I had never been more sure about her. About our relationship.

About her feelings for me. Or about my feelings for her. She was my anchor in the chaos. I knew, without a doubt, that she would be by my side through every single thing I had to endure. Until my last breath.

She grinned at me. "Plus infinity. Plus one," she said, pressing her lips gently to mine. Of course, she read my mind. I wrapped my arms around her, picking her up off the floor. She smiled against my lips. "I love you," she said quietly, giggling softly.

"I love you, Sephie. More than I ever thought possible," I said, as I set her down. Andrei and Viktor walked back into the penthouse. It was difficult to read their expressions.

"What's the verdict?" Ivan asked.

Andret sighed. "I don't think she knows she's been used this whole time. It's actually kind of sad."

"How do you know for sure?" Stephen asked.

"I didn't want her to know that we know about Martin, but I figured Armando was fair game, I also figured it would be fun to f**k

up their plans just a bit, so I told her Armando was dead. I asked her where she wanted us to send her,” he said. “She did get emotional about Armando. She hasn’t asked about him, but at least to me, it looked like a genuine response.”

“She might’ve been worried for her own fate more than sorry about Armando, but there was emotion there, at the very least,”

Viktor said.

“Once she got over that, she got excited. She asked us to send her back to Italy and she wanted to know how soon she could leave. She started talking about seeing her family again and how excited she was to be going back,” Andrei said.

“Given that she switches to Italian when she gets excited, I recorded her so Sephie could tell us what she said,” Viktor said, pulling his phone from his pocket. He started the recording so we could all hear, handing the phone to Sephie so she could replay anything she needed to hear again.

We could hear her get emotional after Andrei lied to her about Armando.

Then we heard her excitement when he asked where she wanted to go. She started speaking quickly, half in English, half in Italian before she switched completely to Italian. Sephie

stopped the recording. “She’s saying that she’s going to Italy and that Martin can meet her there, although she never says his

name. She calls him ‘mio amato. Um, it’s like saying “my beloved,” she said.

“Unless she has someone else she’s sending risqué texts to, I’m going to assume she’s talking about Martin.” She started the recording again, listening to the last bit of the conversation. “She’s saying how happy she is that no one is going to get hurt and once he comes to Italy they can disappear from there. F**k, she actually thinks he’s gonna save her,” she said.

I could feel Sephie's fear coming on strongly again, although I couldn't figure out why. I reached for her, just as she looked up at me revealing her almost white eyes again. Ivan was standing next to me. He moved closer to her, almost like he wanted to protect her, and caught a glimpse, but she quickly looked at him and shook her head no, discreetly. He looked away immediately as she buried her face in my shoulder. I suspected that Ivan was beginning to be able to feel her fear, even at lower levels as well, as she didn't give any outward signs of anything being wrong, but I could feel she was inwardly in complete turmoil. She kept her face hidden against my shoulder, but said, "what if she finds out and refuses to go to Martin? What if they sell her to teach her a lesson?"

Chapter 344

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-Four

Adrik

“We won’t let that happen, princess. I don’t know what to do with her, but it’s clear she doesn’t need to go back to Italy and she doesn’t need to go to South America either. I think we’re going to have to tell her what’s going on,” Ivan said, his voice had the soft tone that I only ever heard him use with her.

“We may not like her, but that’s f**ked up,” Stephen said. “Surely we can come up with an option to give her a fresh start on life.

Away from her family. They give new meaning to dysfunctional.”

Viktor’s phone beeped. Sephie just held it out for someone to grab, without moving her face from my shoulder and neck. Viktor took it, looking at the message. “She’s telling Martin. They’re all going to think Armando is dead by tonight,” he said, somewhat amused.

“I mean, is it a lie though?” Andrei asked. “He’s not dead, yet.”

We waited for Martin to respond to her text, but there was nothing. I saw Andrei’s eyes glaze over, which meant he was getting more information than the rest of us. I waited for him to snap back to reality, my arms still holding Sephie tightly. She kept her face hidden against my neck and shoulder so they couldn’t see her eyes as she worked to calm down. The guys noticed Andrei’s look, so they all turned to look at him expectantly. Ivan glanced back at me, a questioning look on his face with a slight nod toward Sephie, silently asking about her while everyone else was distracted. I mouthed “talk later to him, which satisfied his curiosity for the time being.

Andrei joined us in the present once again, surprised to see us all staring at him, waiting for news. “I still have to work on being

subtle. Clearly,” he said.

“What do you know now that none of us know yet?” Viktor asked.

“They know Trino is gone. That’s why he’s not responding to Giana’s text yet. They’re searching for Trino. She’s not going to be happy that he ignores her. She’s liable to explode on him when he does finally respond,” he said.

Stephen looked at Misha, asking, “you’re sure that Trino made it out safely though? They’re not going to find him? He had a good head start, but there’s no telling who is working with Martin at this point.” He was obviously worried about Trino being on his own.

Misha nodded his head. “He took one of his vehicles when he left, but the vehicle at his parents’ house was not the same one.

He’s changing vehicles along the way to lose them. Trino is smart. He’ll make it.”

Viktor’s phone beeped again. “She’s worried now that he’s not answering. She wants to know when he can come to Italy to get her, so she knows when to tell us to send her there.”

I felt Sephie sigh as she thought about the possibilities of Giana going back to Italy. “These people are f**king evil,” she said quietly.

“How long until Trino makes it to his parents’ house?” Ivan asked.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, showing him the location that Trino sent me. He studied it for a few minutes, calculating the time it would take to make it there, best case. “We still have a couple hours to wait,” he finally said.

Andrei walked to the kitchen, saying, “I’ll make the coffee.”

Sephie sighed, but finally looked up at me, silently asking if it was okay to look at everyone else. I smiled sweetly at her, still lost

in her once again normal eyes. Even normal, her eyes were still gorgeous and unique. She smiled at me, then turned toward the guys. "I need something to do. I'll make the cookies," she said, following Andrei to the kitchen. We all followed her toward the kitchen. Misha was clearly excited about this development in his life. He was practically bouncing as he walked next to her. "I love you so much right now, gazelle," he said, throwing his arm around her shoulders.

Before she got started on her latest kitchen project, I walked up behind her, my arms around her waist. She leaned back against me as she pulled bowls from one of the cabinets. "How long are you going to be occupied, love?" I asked, kissing her neck gently.

"About an hour. Do you need to go downstairs?" she asked, curious.

"No, but I need to make a few calls and I need to discuss what Ivan saw earlier with him," I said quietly. She immediately understood. "Go. I'll keep everyone distracted," she said, hugging my arms before I stepped away.

I caught Ivan's eye, motioning for him to follow me to one of the spare rooms. The other four glanced at us, but said nothing as Sephie was starting a conversation with them to get everyone's mind off of the drama at hand.

As we walked into the room, Ivan shut the door behind him. "I need to call Panama and we should discuss what you saw earlier.

I have a feeling you're starting to feel more of her emotions, so it's only a matter of time before you find out," I said.

He nodded his head. "It started a day or two ago when she finally let herself feel the fear she's been ignoring. F**k me, I don't know how she stays so calm when it happens. She jokes about being out of control emotionally, but if I felt things as strongly as

she does, I'd need to be admitted to an asylum."

"You're not wrong there," I said. "She's the opposite of out of control."

"I'm guessing her eyes turn almost white when she's scared?" Ivan asked.

"They do. That's not all they do now, either, but it's definitely the most obvious. It's actually scarier than her demon eyes, if I'm being honest. We haven't told anyone because of me. I first saw it happen the first time we had s*x again after she's been hurt for so long. I've missed her so much this time that I was enjoying having a piece of her all to myself," I said.

"Nobody faults you for that. It's necessary. You've also been very generous in allowing all of us ample time with her while she was healing so that we could deal with what happened better than after the ball. They all noticed and they're all very appreciative," Ivan said.

"I understand you guys need her too. But I felt myself getting slightly jealous, so I wanted to keep this between us for now. I'm starting to think it won't be much longer though and one of them is going to see it, much like you did tonight. She's trying hard to control it, but she doesn't always know when it's happening. She can make them go dark at will and she's starting to be able to control a few other colors, but the white that's brought on by her fear is almost out of control for her. It feels like she doesn't know what to do with the fear when she feels it. She almost had a complete meltdown the first time it happened. All because she was terrified to be apart from me," I said. "She started shaking as bad as she ever has and she casually mentioned that she tends to get hurt very badly when she and I are apart. It almost knocked the wind out of me it hit me so hard."

Ivan looked at me, his eyes going wider the more he thought about it. "She's absolutely right. I never put that together. I know

why you separated yourself from her, both times, but both times ended very badly for her. That's justified terror."

"I agree. And I'm never going to be apart from her again because of it. In fact, I've decided to give her the ring before this whole mess is taken care of. She knows I love her, but she needs to know that she's stuck with me," I said, smiling at the thought.

"Somehow I don't think she'll mind," he said. "What other colors are her eyes turning, if you don't mind me asking? You can tell me to suck it, for the record."

I inhaled. "I don't mind you knowing. I would've put money on you being the first one to see it anyway, because of your special relationship with her. So far, they turn black when she's angry, almost white when she's afraid, completely green when she's being sarcastic, and they turn deep blue when she thinks about me and how much she loves me. She calls them her mood ring eyes now. She also said she might need to get contacts. She's worried about scaring all my business associates away if she can't get control of it," I said, laughing.

"She makes a solid point," Ivan said, laughing with me. "I won't tell the others about it until you do and I'll try to keep an eye on her when you're not around to make sure they're not changing without her knowing it."

"Sometimes she knows when it happens, but she said she feels like they're going rogue. The more times it happens, the more control she's getting over it, but you know how she is. Sometimes she's unexpectedly hit with very strong feelings. After what happened with Trino's guys, I feel the need to protect her from everyone else. You guys I'm not worried about. I'm just being selfish for now."

"Be selfish as long as you want. No one is going to argue," he said.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, searching through the saved numbers trying to find one specific number. "I need to call

Panama," I said as I scrolled through the list of contacts.

"What old friends do you have in Panama?" Ivan asked.

"My father.

**The second book has been combined with this one. If you click through to

Chapter 345

chapter 345, that is the first chapter of the second book. There is no longer a need to go to the separate book. The second book is also not complete yet, but will be soon. Apologies for the confusion, this was not my decision to make.

Sephie

As Adrik and Ivan were walking away from the kitchen, I asked everyone's input on the type of cookie I should be making. I had no idea they would all have such strong feelings on what kind of cookie they needed, but it turned into quite a spirited debate.

"I just feel like regular chocolate chip cookies are classic. Timeless, really," Misha said. "Like me."

"But they're boring. And overdone. And sometimes you get one that makes you wish you hadn't taken a bite of cookie," Stephen said, which made Viktor laugh. His deep belly laugh filled the kitchen."

"Shortbread is the way to go. It might seem plain, but nothing made with that much butter can ever be bad," Andrei said. "And you can also put frosting on them. Win-win."

"I don't know, I agree with both of you, but I feel like Andrei makes a very valid argument with the frosting," I said, laughing at Misha's indignant expression when he found out I agreed more with Andrei.

"You can put frosting on chocolate chip cookies, too," he said.

"Feels like overkill that way," Viktor said.

"I agree with Viktor," I said, walking to the pantry for something. "What about you, Papa Bear? I feel like you're a peanut butter guy. Simple, hardy, dependable, goes well with milk." I could hear his deep laugh as I walked in the pantry.

"You're right. It is my favorite. My wife used to make peanut butter cookies that she would dip in chocolate. It's a miracle I didn't

gain 50 pounds the first year we were married. I think I talked her into making those cookies at least once a week,” Viktor said.

He was smiling as he fondly remembered that period of his life.

“That sounds amazing, if I’m being honest,” I said, measuring out ingredients for the still to be determined cookies.

“They were. I don’t think there was anything special about them. It was just a peanut butter cookie, dipped in chocolate, but I couldn’t get enough of them,” he said.

“I’ll see if I can recreate them, if you like. But it might not be the same. The chef is always the secret ingredient,” I said.

Viktor smiled his sweet smile at me. “I will never turn down anything you make for me, sestrichka.”

I winked at Viktor, then turned to Stephen. I studied him for a minute, then said, “shì t, yours is a chocolate cookie, isn’t it?”

He laughed. “Why is that a bad thing?”

“Because they’re actually the hardest to master. It sounds so simple, but you can f**k up a chocolate cookie faster than anything else. Of course that would be your favorite. They’re so deceptively complicated, but when it’s right, it’s divine. Not unlike you,” I said.

“I never would have guessed that talking about our favorite types of cookie would leave me so vulnerably diagnosed, but here we are,” Stephen said, laughing.

“What about you, spider monkey?” Andrei asked.

“Guers.”

Andrei thought for a moment, squinting his eyes as he tried to analyze me.

“Sugar cookie?” he asked like he wasn’t sure.

“You’re not wrong, but you’re not completely right either. Keep going, Bubba,” I said.

He thought for a minute more, then I saw him get the answer. "Lemon sugar cookie," he said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

I nodded, unable to hide my amusement at his boyishly handsome smile. "But why, though?" I asked. I didn't think I would stump him with my question, but I did. It was actually Stephen that answered.

"Because it's simple, sweet, with a hint of tangy. Not unlike you," he said, smiling at me.

"Yoden for the win," I said.

"I had the simple part, but it would've taken me longer to get the rest," Andrei said, laughing. "Stephen might be as good as me at reading minds."

"What about Ivan? What are your best guesses for his favorite?" Misha asked. Stephen and I both looked at each other, grinning. "Biscotti," we both said at the same time.

"Is that even a cookie?" Misha asked.

"It's why it's perfect. Is Ivan even a real person?" Stephen asked, laughing. It just so happened that Ivan and Adrik walked back in right as he said that which caused more laughter from everyone. Stephen apologized when he saw Ivan.

"Don't apologize. I ask myself that question almost daily," Ivan said, laughing with us. "What on earth are you guys discussing?"

"We've been debating what everyone's favorite cookie is and what it says about them," Andrei said, laughing loudly when he saw the look on Ivan and Adrik's faces. "It's actually pretty enlightening," he said, defending our debate. Adrik just laughed, shaking his head.

He walked to me, wrapping his arms around my waist as he stood behind me. I had my hands full, so he rested his chin on my

shoulder, watching what I was doing, happy to be near me. “I love you and your randomness,” he said, still chuckling.

“Bubba wasn’t lying. It’s been very enlightening.” I said, still laughing.

“What’s your favorite cookie, Ivan?” Misha asked.

“I don’t really like cookies that much. Or any kind of sweets. I never had it as a kid, so I don’t think I ever developed a taste for sweet things. But I’ll eat an entire package of biscotti if it’s in front of me,” he said, smiling.

“You heard them say that, didn’t you?” Andrei and Misha both said at the same time.

“Heard who say what?” Ivan asked.

“Stephen and Sephie said that was your favorite cookie before you two came back to the kitchen. That’s when I asked if it was even a cookie and Stephen asked if you were actually a real person,” Misha said, now even more amused with the conversation than he was before..

“I enjoy the f**kery as much as you do, Misha, but I did not hear them this time. I just heard Stephen ask if I was real. Still undecided, for the record,” Ivan said.

Adrik had moved to lean against the counter beside me, his arms folded across his chest. He was watching everyone, laughing at our silliness, enjoying a moment of peace before what we all knew was coming.

“Ok, what about Boss? Who can guess his favorite?” Misha asked. He was not going to let this conversation die yet and I loved him for it.

I glanced at Adrik, searching his eyes for a moment to find the answer. I smiled when I found it.

“Nope. Nope. Sephie’s not allowed to answer. She’s clearly cheating. Andrei can’t answer either. They have a clear advantage,”

Misha said.

“You’re very bossy when it comes to cookies, my adorable Russian guardian.”

I watched Ivan and Viktor look at each other, then Viktor said, “it’s probably exactly the same one as Sephie. Maybe with a flavor

twist, but he

probably likes it because he knew as a 5-year-old that it was her favorite so he made it his too.”

I couldn’t contain my laughter. Neither could Adrik. “What’s her favorite, then?” Adrik asked.

“Lemon sugar cookie,” Misha said. “Was Viktor right?”

Adrik laughed. “He was. He was also right about the flavor twist. I like orange better. And they have been my favorite since I was

5. One of my father’s chefs used to make them for me regularly when he found out I liked them.”

“Why didn’t I think of that,” Misha said, shaking his head.

“If nothing else, we’re having the important conversations here. We’re changing the world right now, boys,” I said, laughing, I suspected my eyes would turn green, so I looked at Adrik when I said it. I recognized the look on his face, so I closed my eyes briefly, trying to switch them back to normal.

“As much as I’ve enjoyed this conversation, I also want to know what old friends you have in Panama,” Viktor said, looking at Adrik.

“My father,” he said. “I just called him.”

“I thought he was in Europe?” Viktor said.

“He was during the summer. He likes to migrate south for the winter,” Adrik said.

“So, his guys are going after Trino?” Stephen asked.

Adrik nodded his head. “I told him Trino would be there tonight, but he needed a day or two before they got him out, given the

situation with his m om. He said he would send a team tonight to make sure Trino stayed safe, but they wouldn't make contact for a couple days."

"Does your father know Trino?" I asked, curious.

"He does. Trino was making a name for himself before I took over for my father. Trino made his move shortly after I took over, partly because we had already worked out a deal for after he took over. The guy he took power from was hated by pretty much everyone. It was in my best interest to support Trino. My father saw it coming a few years before Trino got the idea, although he wasn't sure if it would be Trino or another guy that was similarly positioned as Trino," Adrik said.

"What happened to that guy?"

"He still runs part of Trino's business. He decided he didn't want to be in charge when it came down to it, but he said he'd support Trino in taking over the previous guy," he said.

"What happens after Vitaliy's guys get Trino out of Colombia?" Viktor asked.

"We're going to go fetch him," Adrik said. He looked to me as he said it. I could tell he was uncertain about whether I'd be able to make the trip. Or would want to make the trip.

"Everyone is going to fetch him?" I asked. I knew the answer, but I wanted to toy with him.

Chapter 346

Sephte

“Everyone is going to fetch him?” I asked. I knew the answer, but I wanted to toy with him.

“As long as you think you can make that trip, solnishko,” Adrik said, hesitantly. “But i would like you to meet my father.” He looked almost shy about his request. I could feel his uncertainty.

“Of course I’ll go. I would like to meet him as well,” I said, unable to string him along any longer. He relaxed as soon as I said I would go.

“We need to figure out security for Trino,” Ivan said. “He shouldn’t use any of his guys he has now going forward. It wouldn’t surprise me if they were all loyal to Martin now.”

“What about Chris or Keith?” I asked. “You guys have been training them still, right?”

“That might work,” Viktor said. “They’ve progressed in their training. You’d be proud of them.”

“You might have too many guys volunteer once they find out they’ll be spending their time in Colombia. I would imagine the winters there are much easier than the winters here,” I said.

Viktor laughed. “Most of our guys are from Eastern Europe or Russia. The winters here are mild, sestrichka. They all love it here.”

“Valid point. I do not know what winters are like in Russia. I’m also fairly positive I do not want to know what winters are like in Russia,” I said, pulling the cookies out of the oven. Misha was overly excited since I ended up going with chocolate chips, since that was the easiest solution for the evening’s bake. Andrei got up to make a fresh pot of coffee to go with the cookies. After

pulling the cookies from the oven, I leaned against the counter, watching everyone again, enjoying the moment of peace. I loved that they had a place where they could talk about stupid things like types of cookies and just forget about everything we were facing at the moment. I knew how stressed everyone was. I was fairly certain a couple of them were having trouble sleeping.

They were constantly on edge and tense. But they got a few hours to forget about it all and just be friends. It was quickly becoming one of my favorite things.

The kitchen grew quiet as everyone enjoyed warm cookies and coffee. We heard Adrik's phone beep. Then we heard Viktor's phone beep.

"You first," I said, looking at Adrik.

He glanced at the message. "Trino is safe. He said to tell you that you already know how much he needs to thank you for making him leave tonight."

I felt the tears welling up in my eyes as I thought about his situation. I knew how heartbroken he would be to lose his mother, but

I also knew how much peace it would bring him to know he got to see her one last time. I wiped the tears from my eyes as Adrik

walked to me, pulling me to him. I saw the look of surprise on his face as he held my gaze. I raised my eyebrow, trying to figure

out what they were doing now. "They're golden brown now. Almost amber," he whispered, as he held me against him tightly.

Viktor's phone beeped again. And again. And again. "Is that her or him?"

Ivan asked, trying not to laugh.

Viktor looked at his phone. "It's both. He finally got back to her and she responded. Andrei was right. She's not happy he waited so long to respond."

"What did he say about her going to Italy?" Misha asked.

“He’s not happy about us sending her anywhere. He says he’s still going to come get her,” Viktor said.

I stood up straighter, looking at Andrei, then looking at Misha. Finally, I looked at Ivan. “Is that fishy to you guys?” I asked.

“Very,” Ivan said.

“What do you want to bet that Martin getting Giana as payment is contingent on something specific happening here?” Stephen said.

“She’s not happy with that plan,” Viktor said. He got up to hand me his phone. “She must be cussing him out again, because I can’t imagine this is a

1/2

situation that calls for dirty talk.”

“Maybe it is and we’re just so old now that we have no clue,” I said. I read through her texts. She could definitely type faster in Italian than she could in English. She sent five more lengthy texts in a matter of seconds. “Oh, she’s definitely cussing him out.

She wants to know why he’s being stubborn. Lots of creative name calling, though. I’ll give her that. She says that if he comes here to get her, then there’s a chance she’ll die. If she goes to Italy, she’ll be safe. More name calling. More regret over sleeping with him. More threats of her trying to escape on her own. She also says she might escape and disappear on her own. She doesn’t need him. More name calling.” I looked up at all of their amused faces. “She’s very creative on the name calling. I didn’t expect that. It’s like her

Viktor’s phone was silent for a few moments, then Martin responded. I looked at the texts. He responded in Italian. “Well, that’s surprising. He’s responding in Italian,” I said, reading through his texts. I suddenly felt very sick to my stomach. “Oh my God...

he's threatening her." I quickly handed the phone to Adrik then I ran to the nearest bathrooms, hoping to make it in time. Luckily, most of the contents of my stomach had already been digested, but I did puke up the cookie I ate. Not gonna lie, one of the more pleasant puking experiences I'd had in my life.

I felt Adrik's warm hands on my back. "Talk to me, love. What happened?" He ran his hand lightly over my back until I was sure I was done. When I stood

1. he handed me a towel. I went to the sink to wash my mouth out and splashed water on my face as well. I groaned as I wiped my face.

"I don't even like her but I'm scared for her. Martin is very much like Anthony, it seems. He turned evil on her quick. He told her that she belonged to him and he would decide what happened, not her. He said if she ever spoke to him like that again, he would arrange for her to be kidnapped and sold as a slave. It was her choice. She could either do what she was told or be sold off," I said.

Adrik looked at me thoughtfully. "While I don't like any of that, why did it make you vomit? You know we won't let that happen asked, turning me around to face him.

TO

her, right?" he

I looked up at him, not really knowing how to answer. I leaned against the bathroom sink, my hands fidgeting with the buttons on his shirt. I thought a few minutes, still not sure of the answer. He gently lifted my chin, so I would look at him. He calmly searched my eyes, looking for the answer that I couldn't articulate. I saw the recognition on his face when he found what he was looking

for.

for:

Chapter 347

Sephie

“You have been in similar situations to her, solnishko. The fear you’re feeling now is the fear you wouldn’t let yourself feel when you were in them. You’ve seen true evil like Martin before, but you couldn’t let yourself respond to it before. You can now.

Everything that’s happening to Giana right now is reminding you of something in your past that you’ve survived, but you never let yourself be scared for you so you’re scared for her,” he said. “Stephen was right. It’s important that you let yourself be afraid.

You’ve been keeping it locked away for too long. Just like he’s been feeding his monster, your fear has been growing, too. I can feel how out of control it is when it comes up. I know you don’t know what to do with it. Ivan can feel it too. You’re so in control of all your other emotions, but the fear takes you by surprise every single time. I think that’s why your eyes change to a completely different color when you’re afraid. You have to let yourself feel it. It’s okay to feel it. That’s the only way you can learn how to control it.”

“It feels like it’s trying to take over every time and I start to panic. For the first few months after my uncle started beating me, I remember being terrified. I panicked, I didn’t know what to do, so I did nothing. The beatings lasted forever. Because I did nothing. Eventually something snapped and I stopped feeling anything when it would happen. No fear, just pain. I learned I could live with pain, but I never learned I could live with fear. I don’t know what to do with it,” I said.

“Fear can be useful, but mostly it’s just a reminder,” he said.

“Of what?”

“That you’re alive,” he said. He chuckled when I stayed silent, not knowing what to say. “We’ll talk about it more later. They’re going to be worried about you,” he said, taking my hand and leading me out of the bathroom.

Do

we want to know what he said to her?” Ivan asked when we walked back to the kitchen..

“Martin and Anthony are very similar,” Adrik said. “He threatened to sell Giana if she disobeyed him. Did she respond?”

“Yeah, but she’s responded in Italian. It’s much shorter than her earlier texts, though. And that was the end of the conversation,”

Viktor said. I walked to him, holding my hand out to read the text, but he hesitated before handing his phone to me. “You don’t have to read it, Sephie.”

“No, it’ll help me figure out her next move if I see how she responded. If she immediately cowers to him and grovels, then it’s going to make our job much harder. I’m worried she’ll think she brought it on herself and that he’s still the only one that can save her. I don’t know how much damage Armando did to her brain while she was with him. She might not be salvageable,” I said.

He handed me his phone. I read through the text, sighing. “She’s gonna be problematic.” I scrolled back through Martin’s text to

her, so I could read it. to the guys. “He told her ‘you belong to me now and you will do what you’re told or I will arrange your

kidnapping. Keep disrespecting me and I’ll sell you as a slave.” I thought before that it was fishy that he wouldn’t want her to go

to Italy. Now I don’t know if it’s just some weird power move on his part or if there is a contingency on him getting her or if he’s

just completely lost his grip on reality.” I scrolled back down to Giana’s response. “She apologizes and says she loves him and

that she'll do what she's told."

"Is she just saying that to placate him, though?" Stephen asked.

"Possible," Andrei said.

Viktor's phone beeped, but it was a new message, not one between Giana and Martin. I handed his phone back to him. "That's a new message, I don't want to be nosey."

He looked at the new message, surprised. "She's texting someone else," he said. He handed the phone back to me. "Whoever it is, she's texting in Italian still."

I looked at her newest message. "She's telling this person that this is her new number."

"I kind of doubt she'd be texting her family," Stephen said. "A friend, maybe?" The response came in. "Looks like you're right, Yoden. This person says they haven't talked to her in forever. Asking how she is, says they miss her, and where is she. So maybe not the closest friend?"

1/2

Giana replied fairly quickly. "She tells this person she needs their help. She asks where this person is. Spain. Giana says she can get to Spain, but she needs help hiding from her family. She says she's done with them and that they went back on their promise. She says she thought she'd found a way out, but it's worse than her family. She needs to disappear."

"I wonder what her family promised her? Had to be to get her to take the job with Armando," Ivan said.

"This person says they can hide her, but she needs to pay her own way. Oh. Well, then. She says that won't be a problem, she can support them both. She just needs help to hide and she needs help getting new identification cards." I looked up at them.

"So there we go. We get her new ID and send her to Spain. I bet she has access to Armando's accounts. As long as no one else

does, she should be set for a while, if she lives smartly.”

Viktor and Ivan looked at each other. “We can get her new ID in a day or two. What else does she need?”

“She’s got plenty of clothes. She’s also likely got plenty of money to buy new ones. She can leave everything here if she wants to travel light. Are you going to put her on a commercial flight or a private plane?” I asked.

“Commercial. We’ll be using the plane to get Trino,” Adrik said.

“So, ticket. New ID with a new name. Ride to the airport and she’s off to start her new life. No one will be able to find her.”

Viktor’s phone beeped again. “She asks where in Spain. Okay, she’s going to Madrid. Giana says she’ll be there in a few days.

So, better get started on that new passport right away, boys,” I said, handing Viktor his phone back.

“That’ll be good. One less thing to have to worry about here and I can pull the guards off her for other things. I had to put extra guys on her because of her tantrums and her tendency to sneak off,” Viktor said. He was very obviously still annoyed about it.

“I share in your annoyance, but it does not detract from how once again you guys are going the extra mile to make sure somebody we all hate is safe,” I said. “It’s like you guys are good or something.”

Three days later, a bag was dropped off at Giana’s apartment in the morning. In it, she found a new ID, new passport, a ticket to Madrid, a little bit of cash, and a new cell phone with a note to leave her old one as it was compromised. The new cell phone was still in the sealed box, to prove that it was, not compromised. The note also told her a taxi would be waiting for her at a specific time and wished her well.

Ivan watched on the monitors as she left the building and got into the taxi that was waiting to take her to the airport. Once she was safely in the taxi, he gave Viktor word that she was taken care of and we were free to leave for Panama. Ivan met us in the parking garage as we left for the private airport. I had to admit that I felt incredible relief to know that Giana had a chance at a fresh start. She had texted her friend a few more times over the course of the previous few days and given her friend more details. The friend seemed genuinely distraught for Giana and promised she would be safe. Her friend had said she was thinking of moving again soon and that Giana could come with her, so it would be even more difficult to find her. It appeared that Giana would get a second chance.

Chapter 348

Sephte

Adrik and I took over one of the couches on the plane. We hadn't slept very much the night before, but neither one of us could fully take the blame. I think I woke him up just as many times as he woke me up. I laid down in between him and the back of the couch once we were in the air while he used his coat as a blanket for me. It was also cover so he could slide his hands under my shirt and down my pants, wanting no barrier between his hands and my body. We really couldn't get enough of each other.

Fortunately, the flight was long enough that we both got a nap in so we were both feeling better once we landed. Only now we were both nervous for me to meet Adrik's father. He was nervous because his father could be a very gruff man and he was worried he would say something that would offend me. I was worried that his father would find some reason to not like me. We were both acting like children worrying over nothing, but neither one of us could stop.

Vitaliy's men were waiting for us at the small air strip when we landed. We still had a short drive to get to Vitaliy's ranch once we left the airport. The guys knew a couple of Vitaliy's men that came to get us, but a couple were new. One man walked up to Adrik, as soon as we were off the plane. He was much older than Adrik, as well as all the guys, but he still looked lethal despite his age. He wasn't nearly as tall as Adrik, but he was built like a house. I caught myself wondering how difficult it was for him to walk through doorways when he was so wide. He had grey, almost white hair and his clean-shaven face clearly showed a few scars.

Adrik smiled when he saw the man. "Aleksei. It's good to see you again, my friend," he said as he opened his arms for Aleksei.

They embraced each other, talking quietly, and laughing like old friends.

Adrik stepped away from him and held his hand out to

me. I stepped closer to Adrik as he put his arm around my waist and held me against him. I caught Aleksei's surprise when he saw Adrik do so.

"Sephie, this is Aleksei. He's been working for my father as long as I've been alive. Aleksei, this is Sephie," he said. It was

evident that it was somewhat of a surprise that I was there, but Aleksei was a gentleman and didn't make a big deal out of it. I

extended my hand to him, telling him it was nice to meet him and trying to give him my warmest smile. I could see the tough exterior crack slightly when I smiled at him.

"Sephie is a very unusual name," he said as he was carefully studying me.

"Aleksei probably isn't that common around here either. Should we fascinate the locals later?" I asked. I thought Viktor had the

best loud laugh I'd ever heard, but Aleksei's laugh was a very close second.

His laugh shook his body. He looked at Adrik, saying

in Russian, "I've never known you to bring a woman around your father.

Smart choice to wait until you found this one. He's going

to love her." Adrik smiled at me, knowing that I would want to respond.

"If that's all it takes for him to love me, you gentlemen need to get out more,"

I replied. When he heard me speak Russian, his

eyes went wide. Ivori had walked up beside us during this exchange, laughing at Aleksei's response to me knowing Russian.

"You'll come to understand very quickly that she's one of a kind," Ivan said, grinning down at me.

The exchange with Aleksei at the airport helped to calm my nerves a little more. Apparently, it completely disarmed him as well.

He talked almost the entire way to the ranch. He asked questions about the city, but he asked questions about people and places in the city. He didn't want to know about the bosses and the larger problem. It was obvious that he missed specific things about the city, as well as specific people. He asked about a specific restaurant that I had never heard about and said he desperately missed this one particular dish he used to order there. Ivan, who was in the front seat beside Aleksei, asked him what the dish was. When Aleksei answered, I already knew Ivan's plan to endear me to them even more.

I said to Ivan quietly, "okay, but don't come complaining to me when they start visiting too much." Aleksei was still talking so he didn't hear me. Ivan had to cough to keep from laughing.

Adrik pulled me closer, whispering in my ear, "you don't have to do anything while we're down here, love."

"I know I don't, but I want them to like me," I said.

"You don't have to do anything more than be yourself and that will happen," he said, kissing my temple.

Vitaliy's ranch was secluded. I would've missed the driveway, as it didn't look like an entrance to anything from the main road. As

we drove along the driveway, there were steep mountains in the distance.

Plant life was lush, making everything so green that it almost hurt your eyes. Compared to the hibernation of everything back home for the winter, Panama was bursting with life. Adrik caught my look of wonderment as I took in the landscape. "I see now why your father likes to migrate in the winter," I said.

We pulled up to an expansive house. It reminded me of Trino's island house.

There was only one floor, but the house seemingly went on forever. "I'm definitely getting lost later," I mumbled to myself as we stood outside while the guys grabbed our bags from

the vehicles. Andrei had walked up beside me, so he heard me. “You and me both,” he said, taking in the house.

Aleksei showed us to our rooms, then waited to take us further into the house to Vitaliy. We walked through a few rooms, finally reaching the back of the house. I could see Trino sitting at a table with an older man, who I assumed to be Vitaliy. His hair was still mostly dark like Adrik’s, but he also had prominent grey throughout. He was clean shaven. Even sitting, I could tell he was a much larger man than Trino. Trino nodded in our direction, which caused Vitaliy to look toward us. The resemblance between him and Adrik was very strong, but Adrik had a softness to his expression that Vitaliy lacked. Vitaliy was hardened. It was the first thing I noticed about him. It was likely the first thing he wanted you to notice about him.

When Vitaliy looked in our direction, I felt Adrik stiffen beside me. His posture was always good, but he made sure it was perfect.

It made me want to stand up a little straighter too. Vitaliy and Trino both stood up and walked toward us. Vitaliy was tall, but not as tall as Adrik. He opened his arms for Adrik as we got closer. “My son,” he said. Although I know he meant it warmly, it was anything but. I caught myself wondering if he was capable of it. Adrik embraced his father. The embrace he shared with Aleksei

was more genuine than what I was witnessing between him and his father.

When Adrik stepped away from me, the guys instinctively stepped closer, almost surrounding me. I was used to them being protective of me, but I was confused as to why they would be so now. Adrik spoke to his father briefly, thanking him for getting Trino. I caught Trino’s eye as they talked, knowing Trino wouldn’t be able to understand what they were saying, since they were

speaking Russian. I raised an eyebrow at him, wanting to know how he was holding up. He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. I nodded to him when he looked back up at me.

Vitaliy's attention shifted to me, asking Adrik who I was. I was starting to understand that Adrik hadn't told his father I would be with them. Adrik, who very rarely got nervous, looked at me, then back to his father. He said in English, "this is Sephie. My future wife." He extended his hand to me, the guys made room for me to walk to him. I was a little shocked that he had called me his future wife, but tried to play it cool. We'd talked about it before. He'd just never actually called me that before. I knew I wasn't going anywhere and I knew he wasn't going anywhere, but it felt different to put a label on it.

Adrik slid his arm around my waist, pulling me into his side. Much like Aleksei, I could see the surprise on Vitaliy's face as he witnessed Adrik's affection toward me. I extended my hand to Vitaliy, saying, "nice to meet you, sir." As soon as my hand made contact with his, his eyes went wide. He cursed under his breath, looking between me and Adrik. He quickly gained control, but it was obvious to me and Adrik that something had just happened. I didn't know what though.

Vitaliy, in an effort to distract from his reaction, said in English, "Sephie is quite an unusual name. Is it short for something?"

I nodded my head. "Persephone." Once more, his eyes went wide and the surprise on his face was evident for everyone to see.

He stood, silent, for a moment, then he looked to me once more. He extended his hand to me once again, saying in Russian, "he's been waiting for you for a long time."

“I know. I was waiting for him, too,” I said. Vitaliy’s face was shocked when I responded in Russian, but we all watched as a very sly smile spread across his face. I heard the collective gasp from the guys behind me. I’m guessing this is the first time this man has smiled in public.

Vitaliy still had a hold of my hand as he looked at me, smiling. His face was still as hardened as ever, but he was obviously pleased. He pulled me toward him, pulling my arm through his. “Come, walk with an old man,” he said as he turned away from everyone. The guys all started to follow, but he put his hand up, almost barking at them. “She’s safe with me. You stay.” He stopped, looking right at Adrik. “You too. We can’t talk about you if you tag along,” he said matter-of-factly. I could feel Adrik’s anger at his father giving him an order, but he was also worried about me being apart from him.

Chapter 349

Sephte

He had reason to worry. Trying to control my eyes from changing color at a whim was proving to be more difficult than I thought.

Luckily, my future husband happened to be very wealthy and could get things made in a very short amount of time. In the few

days it took to get Giana's new ID and passport sorted out, he had someone make me a custom pair of contacts that matched

my normal eyes. They were almost an exact match to my normal eye color.

The guy had made the contacts from a picture of my

eyes. I was still getting used to wearing them, but at least I didn't need to

worry about anyone seeing anything I didn't want them

to see. Ivan was still the only one that knew about it aside from Adrik.

I smiled at Adrik. "I'll be fine. You guys aren't going to listen anyway. You'll be able to see if I need you," I said in Russian, looking

from him to the guys, who were clearly not happy with being ordered to stay.

Adrik's father or not, they didn't like the idea of me

being apart from them in new surroundings. Vitaliy laughed, which caught

everyone by surprise. He turned away from everyone,

shaking his head, leaving them all in stunned silence.

Once we were far enough away from everyone that he couldn't be heard, he took a deep breath. He placed his hand over mine,

which was still holding his arm lightly. "His mother knew you would be coming. I wish she could've met you," he said. I glanced at

him. He was deep in thought, but his face softened at the mention of Adrik's mother. I knew she had died when Adrik was very

young. He could barely remember her. His father never had another wife, nor did he father any other children after she passed

away. He would have girlfriends here and there, but Adrik said he was never very serious about any of them. His father wouldn't

speaking too much about his mother, so Adrik felt like she was almost a stranger to him. He could barely remember what she looked like. He said when he was younger, he would ask some of his father's men questions about his mother. He got the sense that they all thought fondly of her. Once he got older, he stopped thinking about her.

I got the very clear sense that he felt about her the way Adrik felt about me. I said quietly, "you'll see her again, you know. And you'll fall over again." He walked quietly for a few steps, then I heard him snuffle.

Tin love all

"You're not like normal women. I can feel it. You're different than everyone else except Adrik. He's special too."

Normally, I would've kept my mouth shut about the guys, but something compelled me to tell him everything. I looked into his eyes and I knew he'd been waiting to hear everything I was going to tell him.

"You're right about both of us, but not about everyone else. We're not the only ones who are special," I said.

He laughed again, patting my hand. "You've just made his mother a very happy woman. She told me Adrik would find people that were special like him and he would realize all the dreams I had when I ruled the city. And more."

"You should've listened to her," I said, grinning up at him. It made him laugh again.

He looked down at me thoughtfully. "She was very much like you. Most people are scared of me. I like it that way. She never was, though. She saw through it right away. Just as you have. Even Adrik struggles with seeing through it. He thinks I'm a cold man. He's right, but it prevents him from seeing the love I have for him. That's my one regret. I wanted to be softer to him, but I

never figured out bow.”

“He knows on some level that you love him. He also understands that you needed to make him tough in order to survive this world. He respects you. You might make him nervous, which is somewhat hilarious for me since he never gets nervous about anything, but he respects you. I know him well enough to know that not many people get his respect.”

He chuckled as we continued walking. “How long did it take him to tell you his name?” he asked. He looked down at me when he asked the question. He was clearly curious.

“Um, I think like twenty minutes, tops, from the first time I saw him. Maybe less,” I said, smiling at the memory.

“You are a special, special girl,” he said wistfully. We walked in silence for a while longer while he quietly thought as he kept my arm intertwined with his, his opposite hand on top of mine. I knew he was thinking of Adrik’s mother, I just wasn’t sure I should bring it up. I guess we’ll see how much he likes direct women...

“You were angry after your wife died, weren’t you?” I asked.

“Very much so. I still am some days,” he said.

“She helped you control your anger, didn’t she?”

He looked down at me, a small smile on his face once again. “Like no one has ever been able to before or since,” he said.

“You and your son are not as dissimilar as you think, Vitaliy,” I said. “You just take different approaches.” He looked slightly confused. “Your anger is chaotic, especially after your wife died. You lost your ability to contain it. It made you a very effective leader, but it also increased the chaos more than was needed at times. Adrik is the same, but he saw the collateral damage of

your anger so he fights against that. His anger is more calculated, but when unleashed, it's just as destructive. I'm guessing it's a trait he got from you. I'm also guessing you saw it in him when he was young, which is why you trained him to be your personal assassin from a young age."

"I fear sometimes that my anger became his anger. He never knew the reason for my anger. He barely remembers his mother." I could feel the sadness he had when thinking of how much different Adrik would be had his mother not died.

"I don't think you should feel sad about him not knowing his mother. Well, it is sad, but it also made him into the man I love today.

Our lives, they've been connected from the beginning. Everything that happened, got us to right here where we are today. For that, I'm incredibly grateful. You should be too. Your son is an incredible man, a fierce leader, and has a heart bigger than anyone I know. He's an amazing man. Whether you feel responsible for that or not, you still had a very big hand in it."

Vitaliy had stopped walking and was surveying the green fields ahead of us. I glanced behind us to see the guys within sight of us. He didn't take his eyes from the scenery around us, he just asked, "they're behind us, aren't they?" He did have a small grin on his face.

"It's my fault. They're very protective of me. They only agreed to let me leave alone because it's you. They get nervous in new situations," I said.

He waved his hand in front of him. "Ah, they're very good at their jobs. I don't fault them for it. I just enjoy giving them shit whenever I can." He looked at me with a devious grin on his face. "They should be protective of you, dear. This world," he said,

taking a deep breath, “is dangerous. The likelihood that you’ll be used to get to Adrik is very high.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I know, Vitally. Trust me, I know. They’ve been training me until recently when I got hurt and had to stop until I finish healing. I know exactly the world I’m walking into. Ask the guys later how many times I’ve kicked their asses.”

“I’m very much looking forward to that conversation.”

“You can ask Trino, too. He saw me and Misha sparring once. He still hasn’t recovered,” I said, laughing.

Vitaliy looked at me like a man who was remembering things he hadn’t let himself think of in years. “Come, we should go back.

You’ve given an old man a treat. I won’t keep you any longer,” he said, patting my hand. “I want to hear stories about you from my son now.” He looked down at me, winking.

“I’m a stone-cold weirdo, Vitaliy. Don’t let him tell you any different,” I said as we turned back toward the house. Even from this distance, I could see the relief on the guys’ faces as we turned to go back. As we got closer, I made Vitaliy laugh loudly at something absurd that came out of my mouth. Even Aleksei was surprised when we walked back to them.

Vitaliy walked us back to Adrik. He took my hand from his arm, thanking me once more for being kind to an old man. He placed my hand in Adrik’s, saying, “you and I have much to discuss, son.”

Chapter 350

Sephle

Adrik looked between me and Vitaliy, completely surprised and maybe slightly worried. I smiled at him. “Don’t worry, he just wants to hear stories about what a ba dass I am,” I said, smirking at Adrik. He immediately relaxed, laughing at me.

“We can help with that, too,” Viktor said.

“Good. I want to hear everything. She needs time with the Colombian anyway. He needs her,” Vitaliy said in Russian as he walked toward the house, expecting everyone to follow him. Adrik looked torn between following his father and staying with me.

I put my hands on his chest. “Go. You’ll be glad you did. He’s right, too. I want to talk to Trino. I have a feeling there’s something he needs said.”

Aleksei had noticed Adrik’s hesitancy to leave me. “Go, I will stay with her and the Colombian. I’ll bring her to you when they’re done. I know where he’s going,” he said, nodding his head toward Vitaliy. Adrik glanced at me once more, kissing me gently, then followed his father. The guys looked torn between following Adrik and staying with me. “You can go, too. I’ll be okay. He wasn’t kidding. He really does want to hear stories about me. I promised him glory. You guys better deliver and make me sound way f**king better than I am. I’m talking mythological proportions, fellas.

Fables. Epic poetry. Urban legends. All of it.”

Every single one of them gave me their best smiles as they followed Adrik. Aleksei looked at me as they were leaving, his eyebrow raised. “You are very special. He hasn’t smiled in years, much less laughed. I’m not sure how you managed it, but thank you. He needed that.” He didn’t wait for me to respond. He walked a short distance from me and Trino, giving us privacy.

“I’ve really gotta learn Russian if I’m going to keep hanging out with you people,” Trino said cheekily.

“You know, I’ve thought the same about learning Spanish,” I said, laughing.

We stood in mostly comfortable silence for a few moments, then I asked. “You were able to see her?”

“Si, Miha. I spent the last few hours with her. She was still lucid enough when I got there that she knew who I was. My father said she’d been in and out most of the day, but she recognized him right before I got there. She told him I was coming, even.” He laughed. “He didn’t believe her. He thought she was hallucinating again, then I showed up ten minutes later.”

“Trino. I’m so sorry, but I’m so thankful you got to see her. I didn’t know about your mother until I’d already told you to leave,” I said, reaching out and putting my hand on his arm.

“Miha, I don’t know how to ever thank you. I thought I was in debt to you before for giving me closure about Mateo, but now this.

My mother was stubborn. She wouldn’t let my father tell me. She said I was a busy man and she didn’t want to bother me.” His voice cracked as he struggled to finish the sentence.

“She did what mothers do, Trino. They sacrifice for their children. Willingly. I’m fairly sure she would tell you she’d do it again, too.”

He laughed, trying to keep the tears that were threatening to fall from doing so. “It’s weird. My entire world is falling apart and I can’t stop thinking about how grateful I am that it happened so I could see her one last time.”

“Everything happens the way it’s supposed to, Trino. We might not be able to see it at the time, but there’s a reason for

everything. It's our job to figure out the reason. This one just happens to be obvious."

Trino sighed. "Thank you, Miha. I still don't know how you know everything you do, but I'm forever in your debt and I will always stay loyal to Jefe because of you."

"You would've stayed loyal to him without me, Trino. I'm just extra incentive," I said, laughing. I put my arm through his, walking us toward Aleksei. "Come on, you can add to the stories about me that they're all telling. I'll be your translator."

Aleksei nodded to both of us. "Follow me," he said in his thick Russian accent.

We wound our way through the house to a study at the opposite end of the house. "I'm never going to find my way out of here," I said, mostly to myself as we walked into the room. Adrik's eyes landed on me immediately when we walked into the room, almost like he was expecting us to walk in at that moment. Trino patted my hand that was still holding his arm, releasing my arm so I could go to Adrik.

"You have very impressive stories about you, sladkaya," Vitaliy said in Russian, watching as Adrik pulled me next to him on the couch.

"Depends on your definition of impressive, I think," I said, smiling at him.

"But I did tell them I promised you glory. I hope they didn't disappoint."

Vitaliy laughed. "They did anything but."

"Can we speak English for Trino? He has stories of my glory as well I don't want to leave him out," I said in English. Vitaliy laughed for the second time in as many minutes.

"Since you're all here now, tell me what's happening. I've heard little pieces here and there from some of my contacts I still keep

in touch with, but I'm guessing it's gotten much worse," Vitaliy said. We spent the next few hours filling in some of the details of everything that had happened since I met Adrik. Vitaliy was not surprised that Lorenzo and Salvadori were big players behind the coup. "You know I banished Lorenzo just as a 'f**k you' to Salvadori, right?" The disgust was apparent. "I don't think I've ever met a more disgusting human than Salvadori."

"Armando might actually get that title now," Stephen said.

"Explain," Vitaliy said, clearly curious. We hadn't gone into explicit detail about Armando's betrayal and Vitaliy didn't know yet that Ivan and I were taken. When he heard all the details of what had happened, he was clearly angry, but surprisingly, it was somewhat directed at me. "You said you got hurt and couldn't train. You never said anything about almost dying at the hands of Armando!" he said, his voice quite loud. Adrik's hold on me got a little tighter. I could feel his anger, but I squeezed his leg to let him know I was okay.

I looked at Vitaliy, as calmly as I could, and said, "because I knew this would be your reaction and I preferred to have them closer to me when it happened."

He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it without saying a word. I heard Adrik cough quietly and I knew he was trying not to laugh. I glanced at Ivan, who was also struggling not to laugh.

"She didn't tell you how badly she was hurt either," Trino said. "I saw her soon after. It was bad."

"I mean, it wasn't ideal, but I'm still here," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"And what of Armando?" Vitaliy asked.

"Oh, he's wishing he took her advice, pretty much on a daily basis," Ivan said.

"What advice?"

The guys all couldn't hold in their laughter any longer. None of them could keep it together long enough to answer, so it fell to me to do so.

"There were a few minutes between when they got to the building and when they actually made it up to me and Ivan. Armando knew they were in the building and made a call to his security guys, who had already left and wouldn't take his call. I might have told him his best option was to go to the roof and jump. Otherwise he was going to experience a very slow, painful death," I said.

"He didn't take me up on the offer, so he almost died that day and a few times since that day."

Adrik looked at his father. "I want him to suffer for what he did to her," he said.

"As well you should. What was the end game of taking her? To get to you?" Vitaliy asked.

"That and they were trying to sell me. I still don't know if it was Sal's idea or Armando's idea to do so, but Armando seemed to think I was going to solve a lot of his problems once I was sold. When he realized I wouldn't fetch top dollar, that's when he lost it and the beating began," I said.

Vitaliy cursed under his breath. "By what standards did they decide that you wouldn't get top dollar?"

I sighed. "I have scars covering my back, Vitaliy. Armando didn't know about them. I keep them covered. My stomach and legs were also heavily bruised from when they grabbed me, and Ivan. They had to slam me into a parked car to subdue me. When he saw the bruises and the scars, he lost it. I might've also provoked his anger by being a shi t. I have a problem controlling my mouth."

“The scars. What are they from?” he asked. I could tell he was curious, but he was very serious, like he was already planning on destroying whatever it was that gave me the scars.

“Her uncle almost killed her, Ivan said, so I wouldn’t have to.

We watched as Vitaliy’s anger rose to the surface. “And what of him?” he asked. He was gripping the arms of his chair so hard that his knuckles were white.

“I killed him.” I said.

My answer took Vitaliy by surprise. I heard Aleksei cursing behind me as well. Vitaliy thought for a moment, then said, “I see I was wrong to worry about you, sladkaya. You were made for this world.”

Misha snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Called it.”