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Chapter 381

Sephie

“I don’t know about that, but I do know that your sisters were very wrong about you,” I said, putting Stephen to work washing a few dishes I’d dirtied.

“On some level, I know that too. There’s...” he started to say, but he didn’t finish. He was quiet for long enough that I knew he wasn’t going to finish.

“I know there’s more, Stephen. You don’t ever have to tell me. I know you’re struggling, but I won’t pry and I won’t fish. You know the best way to conquer your demons, Voden?” He shook his head no. He was still facing away from me, his shoulders slightly slumped. I knew this was difficult for him. “It’s to stop fighting them and make friends with them. They have no power over you that way. The more you try to ignore the monster you’re trying to keep locked away, the bigger and stronger it grows. You have to make friends with it before it consumes you.”

I went back to what I was doing, not wanting to force him to talk anymore than he wanted to. I heard him turn the water in the sink off, then he dried his hands, tossing the towel back on the counter. I felt his hand on my arm as he gently turned me around, then he pulled me against him so tightly, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to breathe. I heard him sniffle a few times. I kept my arms around him just as tightly and would do so for as long as he needed.

“I’ll be right here the whole time, Stephen. You don’t have to face it alone.” I thought there was no way he could hold me any tighter, but I was wrong. I was so wrong. I knew he was struggling, but I didn’t

realize it was this much. I heard him inhale sharply, like he was choking back sobs and my heart just hurt for him.

“I love you, Yoden. And as much as whatever you went through sucked and still sucks, it made you into my absolute favorite vampire of all time. Without you, no one would know what enabling is,” I said, trying to sound serious, but unable to hide my smile.

He laughed and his grip on me loosened. He wiped his eyes before he let me go completely. “I didn’t realize how much I needed that, Seph. I still don’t understand how you do it, but please never stop.”

“Can’t stop, won’t stop,” I said, grinning at him, which made him laugh again. Now come here, I could use extra hands for this part.”

Stephen’s phone beeped while we were waiting for the cookies to come out of the oven. “Henry will be here tonight. Viktor said Boss wants you at the meeting, so whatever we’re doing needs to be finished by 6.”

“He’s very bossy today,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest.

Stephen pretended that he was typing a reply to Viktor. “Sephie says you’re not the boss of her and you can suck it. Send.”

I laughed. “Even with your lightning fast vampire thumbs, I could see you weren’t even touching the screen. He’s always so sweet about ordering dinner when I need a break, but I seriously think it makes him grumpy when I don’t cook.”

“Um, I thought that one was obvious, Seph. Everyone knows he hates it when you don’t cook. He’s just so nice that he’ll never admit it.”

The timer for the oven went off. “He’ll be happy when he sees whatever we’re doing completed by 6, then,” I said, pulling the

cookies out of the oven. “The question is, though, should we take one to him before the meeting or make him wait until we’re done for the day to come back up here and find them?”

“Option 3, I think,” he said.

“What’s option 3?”

“I think you should put them in his apartment. We never lock our doors. We don’t need to. But I think he’s gonna need a minute and it’ll be better if we’re not watching him.”

“Yoden, you’re so incredibly smart. That’s perfect, I would’ve tortured the poor man,” I said. I glanced at the clock on the oven.

“Okay, so now we have to hurry slightly to get whatever we’re doing done and down to his apartment and back to the office by 6.

Oh my God, the pressure!” I said, dramatically.

Stephen laughed, shaking his head at me. He joined in the dramatics though, taking an extra baking sheet and fanning the cookies so they’d cool faster, which made me laugh.

“You’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others,” I said.

Stephen and I finished up Viktor’s favorite cookies, then snuck downstairs to deliver them to his apartment and made it to the office with five minutes to spare. Everyone else was already in the office, waiting on us, but also still waiting on Henry to arrive.

Just as we walked in, Viktor’s phone beeped, signaling that Henry was in the lobby. He walked out right after we walked in.

“What have you two been up to?” Adrik asked. I could tell he was amused that I’d disappeared with Stephen and not one of the others.

“Strategic planning. Vlad’s army is going to be magnificent,” I said.

Stephen surprised us all by laughing loudly. I could get him to laugh when it was just the two of us, but he rarely laughed loudly

in front of the group. It made me happy to see. “Seph has a mind for logistics. He was only defending Wallachia before, but now he can finally see the complete destruction. of the Ottoman Empire. I can’t wait to tell him. Those Turks totally have it coming.”

Everyone laughed at his answer. Several of the guys looked surprised at how relaxed Stephen looked. They all caught my eye at one point, giving me small, knowing smiles.

“You shouldn’t fight sleeping in for so long next time, princess. You look much better tonight. Andrei does too. He’s prettier,” Ivan said.

“He is a pretty, pretty princess, Squish. You’re absolutely correct. I think we both needed it,” I said. I heard the doors to the elevator ding, so I got up from Adrik’s lap after kissing him quickly. He still had a very amused expression on his face.

Viktor walked in with Henry and the mood turned more serious in an instant. Everyone went into boss mode.

Adrik extended his hand to Henry as he walked to his desk. They shook hands before Henry sat down in front of Adrik’s desk. He glanced back to me, smiling. “Sephie, you’re looking much better than the last time I saw you.”

“I mean, that depends. Sometimes I want to be colorful,” I said, referring to the heavy bruising I’d had the last time. “But life is much better with two arms again.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. He looked at Adrik. “What do you have for me this time?”

“Your police chiefs. How well do you know them?” Adrik asked. He was now very serious. There was no trace of the amusement that was evident not two minutes ago.

“Well, before you asked me that question, I would have said very well. Now that you’ve asked me that question, I’m wondering if

that's the correct answer," Henry said, a look of worry on his face.

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Sephie

“We have it on very good authority that two of your police chiefs are loyal to the mayor,” Adrik said. We both saw Henry’s face fall.

“Do you know which ones?” he asked.

Adrik nodded his head. Ivan got up and put two files down on Adrik’s desk in front of Henry. “They both met with the mayor. After you met with all of them to discuss taking down the mayor. We only have confirmation on these two, but I wouldn’t trust any of them at this point,” Adrik said. Henry looked stunned. “How much have you told them about the mayor? Or about Ricardo?”

“Nothing about Ricardo. I’m sitting on that one. I’ve been after that guy so long that I don’t want to risk messing it up. But they have everything I have on the mayor so far,” Henry said.

Adrik looked to Viktor, saying in Russian, “we definitely need to hurry that journalist up.”

Viktor responded, still in Russian, saying, “I contacted him earlier. I’ll check when this is over to see if he responded.”

Adrik nodded, then looked back to Henry. “We’re working to gather more information on the mayor, but it takes time. Until we get more on him, be very careful what you tell the other police chiefs.”

“Agreed. Let me know when you get something definitive on the mayor. Until then, I don’t think we should do this again,” Henry said. He suddenly looked worried, like he was nervous. I glanced to Andrei, who caught it as well. We both focused back on Henry, trying to figure out the reason for his nervousness.

“We have other places we can meet the next time, if you’re nervous about coming here,” Adrik said. He had also picked up on his nervousness.

They conversed for a short time more, while I quietly studied Henry. The first time we’d met with him, I got the feeling that he was a good man, trying to do the right thing. This time, something had changed about him and I wasn’t sure what it was, but I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Henry stood up to leave, once again shaking Adrik’s hand. When he did, I saw Adrik stiffen ever so slightly. That’s new. I glanced to Andrei, who clearly had seen something as well. Stephen’s phone beeped as Viktor was walking Henry back to the elevator.

“Dinner’s here. Be right back,” he said, jogging out of the office to catch the elevator.

Once we heard the doors close, I walked to Adrik. “What happened when you shook his hand before he left?”

“Did you feel it?” he asked.

I shook my head no. “I didn’t feel anything, but I saw you tense. It’s different. You don’t do that.”

Ivan chuckled. “Vitaliy is also a Game Master, it seems,” he said.

I remembered. Adrik was like Vitaliy. “That escalated quickly,” I said, raising my eyebrow at him.

“Did you feel it when he first came into the office?” Ivan asked.

Andrei spoke up, “something changed while he was in here. He made some decision while he was here and something changed.

I couldn’t figure out what it was, though.”

“It’s something to do with power. He wants it. He doesn’t like it that Adrik has it. But we should wait for Stephen. Somehow I think he’s going to have Insight into this,” I said.

It didn't take Jung and Viktor and Stephen returned. We were all waiting for them at the elevator, so we could go to the penthouse, where we knew we could speak freely. When the doors opened and we were all standing there, Viktor and Stephen both looked surprised.

"You guys that hungry?" Stephen asked.

I laughed. "No, we just need to be in the penthouse to finish the discussion we started. And we needed your insight and Viktor's sleuthing skills. We were saving time."

"I just really feel like Vlad is going to make you his Director of Operations. Logistics, efficiency, systems, you've got it all handled.

His army is going to run like a well-oiled machine because of you," Stephen said.

"Dammit, I was really hoping for Supreme Leader, but Director of Operations does have a nice ring to it. I'm not opposed to working my way up through his organization."

"Okay, somebody catch us up," Stephen said as we started dinner.

"Boss felt something different when he shook Henry's hand at the end. He didn't feel it when he walked in. Andrei said something changed while Henry was in the office, like he made a decision while he was in there and things are different now," Ivan said.

"I couldn't get as many details as I wanted from him, but I think we can fill in more in a bit with Misha. What I did get, however, was that it was related to power. Henry wants it. He doesn't like that Adrik already has it." I looked to Adrik. "Do you remember when we first met with him – how uncomfortable he got when you first told him you were getting rid of the other bosses?"

He nodded his head. "You made the comment he thought that was too much power for one man. He was worried I was going to become a tyrant."

I started to speak, but Ivan said, “he wants to be the tyrant.”

“He got it in his head last time that he could replace the mayor and he would run the city. When Boss knew more than him this time, it pissed him off. I bet he made a decision to come after Boss now. I don’t think he’s stupid enough to try it right away, but if we keep the plan of trying to get him into the mayor’s seat, he’ll do it then,” Stephen said.

Adrik looked to Misha. “Do you think you can find out? We’ve never tried to find a specific answer before.”

“I’d be happy to try. Sephie and Andrei help make things clearer. It’s different almost every time it happens,” Misha said.

I looked at Andrei. “I could clearly see your thoughts the last time we did it. Did it happen for you too?”

“You could? What was I thinking about?” Andrei asked.

I started laughing and almost couldn’t stop myself. It took me a few minutes to answer. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten about this.

“We were looking for Martin, so you were thinking about him. And a cheeseburger. Not necessarily in that order, either,” I said, still trying to contain my laughter.

“That seems completely accurate,” Andrei said.

“He wasn’t holding back. He was just focusing on cheeseburgers instead,” Misha said, laughing. “That’s why it wasn’t as clear with just him.”

“To be fair, I spend a lot of time thinking about cheeseburgers, too,” Viktor said, his deep belly laugh filling the penthouse.

“I mean, who doesn’t love a good cheeseburger?” Andrei said. His cheeks were flushed, but he was laughing just as much as everyone else.

“New rule: we can only look for people after Andrei’s belly is full. For best results,” Adrik said, which caused another round of

laughter from everyone.

Vitaliy and Aleksel walked into the penthouse as we were still laughing about Andrei's random thoughts. Vitally was surprised to see us all laughing so heartily. "You guys must've gotten very good news today," he said, a small smile on his face as he watched us all try to gain control of ourselves.

"The opposite, really. But one of Sephie's many gifts is giving us a reason to laugh for a few minutes. It's always perfect timing and it's always much needed, Adrik said, his wide smile stretching across his face as he looked at me. I felt the pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me. I answered by sending my warmth back to him, loving the wink he gave me when he felt it

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Adrik

“Have you ever had someone feel different to you from the beginning of a conversation to the end?” I asked Vitaliy.

He nodded. “It happens more than you’d think. People make decisions in haste and their entire existence changes in the course of a few minutes. Why? Did it happen to you already?” I nodded. He cursed under his breath. “It took me years to get that detailed. It took you 24 hours of finding out you were like me.”

I nodded toward Sephie. “I have a feeling she has something to do with it. Something changed in the course of a meeting tonight. Because I can feel what she feels, I felt the shift when she picked up on it. It made me pay closer attention. I didn’t feel anything at the beginning of the meeting, but I definitely did at the end.”

“Did you feel what he feels, sladkaya?” Vitaliy asked Sephie.

“No, I didn’t feel anything, but I noticed he tensed slightly when he shook his hand. He doesn’t do that. Ever,” she said. “Both Andrei and I picked up on the change in him during the meeting, but neither one of us could get a definite answer on what caused it. We’re going to see if Misha can find the answer after dinner. Andrei works best on a full stomach,” she said, winking at him. He grinned at her as he took another bite of food,

“You can do that?” Vitaliy asked Misha.

Misha just shrugged his shoulders. “We’ve never gone looking for the answer to that specific of a question before. We’ve only looked for people and then pieced together the information we can see when we find them, but when I use both Sephie and

Andrei, I can hear conversations. I doubt this guy will be speaking Spanish, so we should be able to understand his conversations.”

“Who is this guy?**”

“Henry, the police commissioner. We found out from Sephie’s old neighbor that the mayor wants Henry out, but Henry is also working on a plan with the police chiefs to get the mayor out. Only, two police chiefs met with the mayor three days after they met with Henry. One is from Armando’s area, the other is from Niko’s area. We’ve been working on solid proof that the mayor is in either Sal or Ricardo’s pocket,” Ivan said.

“But we also think Henry decided that he can run the city. Sephie picked up on something the first time we met with him. He was very uncomfortable when Boss told him he was getting rid of all the bosses. She said she thought it was because he was worried Boss would become a tyrant. We think he changed his mind tonight and now he wants to be the tyrant,” Stephen said.

“We’re hoping Misha can confirm that,” I said.

Vitaliy looked stunned for a moment, then looked at Sephie. “How did you know this before?”

“I saw the subtle change in his demeanor when Adrik told him he was getting rid of the bosses. I don’t go fishing through people’s heads unless I have a reason. When I saw his demeanor change, I took a peek. He was going through possibilities of how to rein in Adrik once he was in power. It was almost comical what he was thinking about. I imagine it’s what the city would look like if Sal or Lorenzo had taken over, but not Adrik,” she said.

“Was he thinking specifically about Sal or Lorenzo? Can you remember, Seph?” Stephen asked.

She thought for a few minutes, but ultimately shook her head no. “That was during my Sleeping Beauty era. I don’t remember as much as I should,” she said. “Why? What are you thinking?”

“If that’s where his mind went when thinking about Boss having power, then that’s a good indication that he knows Sal or Lorenzo better than he knows Boss. Everyone knows the peace Boss brought to the city. The entire population is richer because of him.

No offense, Vitaliy, but the city has prospered since he took over. It doesn’t make sense that Henry would be worried about Adrik being in power. He doesn’t want the city to continue to prosper? He hates making more money than he’s ever made before?

That doesn’t make sense. Unless he knows Sal or Lorenzo or even one of the other bosses better than Boss and knows the kind of tyrant they actually would be,” Stephen said.

“What are your plans for this Henry?” Vitaliy asked.

“We were going to help him defeat the mayor in the next election, but that might be off the table depending on what Misha can find. He has

everything we have on Ricardo, but he can also use that to come after Boss instead, should he choose to. We have the same guy that gave us all the information on Ricardo looking for something on the mayor, we just haven’t heard back from him yet,”

Ivan said.

As he said that, Viktor pulled his phone out of his pocket. He looked at it for a few seconds, obviously reading something, then said, “we did hear back from him. He’s got something, but he said it’s not enough. He said he’s looking for more and will get back to me as soon as possible.”

It was always hard to read my father, but he clearly looked proud as he listened to us tell him everything we knew. More so on

how we knew it. He looked to me, after listening to everyone and said, “your mother was right. You’re going to realize everything I couldn’t and more.” He was thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “this information you have on Ricardo, what is it?”

“It frames him as being the one running the city behind the scenes. It makes him look like he’s Boss. The guy that got us the information is very thorough, just not thorough enough to find Boss. Or you,” Viktor said. “Originally, we handed it over to Henry, thinking the mayor was a stand-up guy since he’s the one that appointed Henry, but Sephie caught on that the mayor was questionable during that meeting too. Henry said he can’t prove it, but he’s been looking into the mayor for a while now. We started helping him, feeding him information that we could find, but now that’s compromised because he shared it with the police chiefs that are loyal to the mayor, apparently.”

“And what of the information on Ricardo? Did he share that too?” Vitaliy asked.

“No. Or at least he said he hasn’t. We can’t be sure,” Ivan said.

Vitaliy thought for a few minutes. He looked at Aleksei, saying “we need to meet with Battista again before he leaves.” Aleksei

simply nodded, then walked away as he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Vitaliy looked back at me. “Battista likes politics. He knows the right people in da mn near every city in the world. Sephie impressed him: at the first meeting. He will gladly help you find all the information you never knew you needed on the mayor.”

“I thought you said his English was shi t?” Sephie asked.

Vitaliy grinned at her. “It is shi t, but he still speaks it when he has to.

Knowing he doesn’t have to with you was incentive for him to make extra effort. He can be fickle. After your performance at lunch, he’ll bend over backwards to help you. Everything

happens the way it's supposed to, slatkaya. Sometimes you have to trust the process," he said, winking at her.

"You're like a really grumpy evil genius," she said quietly, her eyes slightly wide in appreciation at his scheming.

Vitaliy looked at her, not knowing whether to laugh along with everyone else or be mad at her. In the end, he couldn't contain his laughter and ended up laughing along with everyone else, as she walked to him, sliding her arm around his shoulders. I watched my father laugh harder than I'd ever seen him laugh and relish in the affection he got from her as a result of doing so.

She was still showing everyone around her the best parts of themselves.

Adrik

“I think it’s worth taking another look at Henry, no matter what Misha can find tonight,” I said. “Something feels very off with him now. Like we missed something last time, I don’t like surprises.”

“I’ll see what I can start to find in the morning,” Viktor said.

Sephie stood up, extending her hands to both Misha and Andrei. They readily stood up and took her hands, walking a short

distance away from the kitchen. She looked back over her shoulder, asking,

“who has it that he wants to be the evil overlord of

the city?” She waited for a few of us to raise our hands. Then she asked, “who has it that Henry’s the one in Sal’s pocket instead

of the mayor?” She put her own hand up, along with me.

“Oh, that’s not fair. I change my bet,” Misha said.

“I could be wrong, my adorable Russian guardian. It’s happened before,” she said, grinning at him.

“Yeah, like once. Seven years ago before you knew us,” he said. He just shook his head and grabbed her hand. “Let’s see what

we can find,” he said, getting that faraway look in his eye.

Vitaliy was extremely curious to watch what was happening, even though it didn’t look like much. They all looked like they were

in a trance when it happened, but once they saw something, it was obvious.

They were watching something in front of them that

the rest of us couldn’t see. I could still feel what Sephie was feeling when she was watching the movie, but I couldn’t see what

she was seeing.

It took them a few minutes, but we heard Misha say, “got him.” He squeezed both Sephie and Andrei’s hands harder, which

always meant he had found what they were looking for, Vitaliy looked to me, his eyebrow raised. I walked closer to him, so I could be quiet, not wanting to interrupt anything.

“Misha sees a movie playing in front of him, basically. When Sephie touches him, she can see it too. We recently learned Andrei can do it as well, since he’s like her. They both give Misha extra clarity. He would only get snapshots before Sephie started helping him,” I said.

“They discovered this when the Colombian was under attack?” he asked. I nodded my head. “That’s a useful skill,” he said, going back to watching them, patiently waiting for the results.

I could feel Sephie’s anger rise the longer they watched, so I knew something was happening. Vitaliy picked up on both me and Ivan focusing on her. “She’s feeling something, isn’t she?” he asked.

“I can feel her anger. It likely means Sal is involved,” I said.

Ivan moved closer, so he could speak quietly as well. “Her anger feels different for different situations. Whenever Sal’s name is brought into the picture, it feels like she’s going to burn the world to get to him. She’s still dealing with being taken by him and Armando. It’s a lot for her to process,” he said.

Vitaliy scoffed. “She has good reason to be that angry. Sal is evil. It sounds like he’s only gotten more so over the years. His son was no better. She has every reason to hate that entire family.”

Misha, Sephie, and Andrei watched the movie only they could see for much longer than they usually did. Sephie’s anger levels stayed high the entire time, so I was almost positive Sal’s name had come up in the conversation somehow. We finally saw Misha relax and look down at Sephie. He looked concerned, but slightly amused.

“Gazelle, you feel like you’re going to explode. Like, for real, for real.

Spontaneous human combustion is a real thing. You need to be careful,” he said.

“I’m guessing that Sal is involved somehow?” I asked.

She turned to look at me, her anger still clearly visible, but she was also surprised. “How did you know?” she asked, walking to me.

“Your anger feels different when he’s involved, princess,” Ivan said.

When she walked to me, Vitaliy extended his hand to her. “Come, I want to feel,” he said, motioning for her to give him her hand.

I tried to shake my head discreetly, warning him that was not a good idea.

He definitely wasn’t ready to feel her anger when it was this high, but he insisted.

Ivan just laughed. “You better be ready, Vitaliy.”

She reluctantly placed her hand in his. His eyes went wide, his cheeks flushed, and his breathing immediately sped up. He

dropped her hand, almost like it had burned him. Her eyes went wide in response, looking apologetic. She was suddenly scared

she’d hurt him. She tried to hide herself behind me. Ivan, Andrei, and Misha all felt her panic and quietly moved to surround her.

“It’s okay, princess. You didn’t hurt him. He just wasn’t ready for it,” Ivan said quietly. His voice was soft, like he was trying to

coax her out of her panic. She turned to him, burying her face in his chest while I kept an eye on Vitaliy to make sure he really

was okay. His giant arms engulfed her, making her look tiny standing in front of him.

“I told you the level you felt before was nothing. This isn’t even the highest it’s been,” I said, smirking at my father.

Vitaliy took a few moments to get his wits about him again. He was stunned, literally and figuratively. Finally, he shook his head,

asking, “how does she contain all of that?”

Ivan laughed, his arms still protectively around her. “Told you. It’s enough to cripple all of us and she walks around like it’s completely normal.”

Misha, ever the instigator, said, “you should really pay attention when people try to warn you, Vitaliy.”

We heard Sephie quietly laugh, but she kept her face hidden in Ivan’s chest. I could feel the fear slowly subsiding, but it always took longer than other emotions. She still really struggled with controlling it. We were quiet for a few moments, when Stephen broke the silence.

“Seph has been hiding all of this for a very long time. She’s only showing it to everyone now because she knows we can protect her. She’s become a master at covering up the fact that she’s different for fear of what will happen if someone finds out. That’s how she walks around like it’s a normal Tuesday,” he said. “That’s also why her fear is harder to control, for the record. She’s scared for all of us more than she’s scared for herself.”

I watched Andrei’s eyes glaze over as I knew he was confirming what Stephen had just said. He was quiet for a minute, then he looked at me, nodding once. Stephen had nailed it.

We heard Sephie sigh, then she said, “I told you your first instinct was always right, Yoden. Bubba confirms it.” Her face was still hidden in Ivan’s chest, so she didn’t see Andrei double-checking what Stephen had said. “You should listen to it more. You’ve been right multiple times tonight,” she said, finally turning to look at us once again. She smiled sweetly at Stephen. Whatever they had discussed this afternoon was clearly working.

“You’re getting better at that, princess. You didn’t see him checking,” Ivan said. He kept his arms around her shoulders in a bear

hug as she stayed leaning against him, just turned toward us instead of hiding. She shrugged her shoulders. "I can say the same for you two," she said, looking up at Ivan and then looking at me. "You were right. Sal is involved."

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Chapter 385

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Adrik

“What could you guys see?” I asked Misha.

“Once again, it was different. It was like someone was scrolling through the movie to find the right scene to answer our question.

Once we found it, we heard Henry on the phone. We didn’t hear the other side of the conversation, but he addressed Sal by

name. He was in the middle of a park, at night, so he spoke freely,” Misha said.

“It’s Henry that’s in Sal’s pocket. The mayor might be also; they didn’t speak about him, but Henry has been getting money from

Sal. They were extra sneaky with how he got it, so no one ever caught on.

From what I could gather, he’s been paid mostly in cash, so no one can trace it,” Sephie said.

“What’s their plan?” Ivan asked.

Misha laughed. “It’s funny, but it’s not. We gave them the plan. Sal is backing Henry to get the mayor position. Once there, he’s coming for Boss.”

“He never gave specifics, but he said he has enough information to put Boss away for a long time. It’s going to be his first major move as mayor,” Andrei said.

It was my anger that rose very quickly. Sephie felt it, walking quickly to me.

She knew immediately that I was struggling against

it, livid at yet another betrayal. “Close your eyes, Bubba,” she said, right before her lips crashed to mine. She kissed me with

such passion; my anger subsided so quickly, I didn’t even hear the laughter from her warning to Andrei. There was just her lips

on mine, her desire for me growing with each second. I felt her knees start to go and pulled her to me tightly, holding her up as

she deepened the kiss even more. I felt myself finally under control and she broke the kiss. She looked up at me, her desire still very evident to no one but me, and she smiled sweetly at me. “Better,” she said, turning around to lean back against me as she kept my arms wrapped around her.

When she turned to face everyone else, Vitaliy was understandably surprised at what he’d just witnessed. “It’s his kill switch,” she said. I could hear the smile when she spoke. “He has a harder time controlling his anger when it reaches nuclear levels. That makes it go away. Sorry for the impromptu show,” she said.

Vitaliy nodded once, giving me a smirk, then asked, “do you know what Sal is planning on doing while he waits for Henry to be elected? That’s not until next year, correct?”

“They didn’t discuss that part, but I’m sure he’s thinking he can lay low until then,” Andrei said.

I looked at Misha. “How many times can you do this before you get zapped or you zap her?”

“I’ve got a couple more in me tonight, for sure. I think with Andrei, too, it helps keep her from getting zapped. As long as he stops holding back,” Misha said, adding air quotes for hilarity.

“I think it’s worth checking on Sal to see what we can find out with him. Or Ricardo. Or both, if you have enough energy for that tonight,” I said. “I also think we need to check into the mayor even more than we have.”

“It’s entirely possible that Henry has been framing the mayor this whole time, making it look like he’s the one getting money from Sal, when really it’s been Henry. Or Henry is fabricating what he has on the mayor to deflect attention away from himself. Most people are easily distracted. If we’re busy looking into the mayor, we’re not going to look into Henry. I’m starting to think he thinks

he's smarter than us, which really pisses me off," Stephen said.

"Like normal pissed off or you want to destroy his mind so completely that he no longer wishes to exist pissed off?" Sephie asked.

Stephen chuckled. "Not to the latter option. Yet."

"Noted." She looked back at Misha and Andrel. "Ready to find Sal? Bubba, do you want a snack first?" she asked, unable to hide her smile as she teased him.

"Shut up and come here," he said, still standing with Misha. He was smiling at her as he extended his hand to her. Misha did the same. Before they started looking for Sal, she asked, "do you have a specific question you want answered for Sal? That seemed to work last time."

"See if you can find out if Sal is working with the mayor. Maybe we can eliminate two birds with one stone, Ivan said.

"At your service," she said, giving him a curtsy before they started trying to find Sal.

Once they were quiet, Vitaliy looked to me and Ivan. "You both can feel all of her anger when she's like that?"

We both nodded. "I'm guessing it works differently for us than it did for you. She shares her control with us when she shares her anger," I said. "She's the one that taught me how to get mine under control. She can kill the bloodlust in me instantly with one look."

Vitaliy's eyes went wide. Viktor overheard our conversation, moving closer so we could stay quiet. "It's true. I didn't believe it when I saw it happen the first time, but she's done it many times now. When we got to her and Ivan, Boss was about to kill

Armando, but Sephie's lung collapsed and she was having trouble breathing. Me, Andrei, and Misha were downstairs in the building. Ivan called us to try and get Boss off Armando so we could get her to the hospital. But she just walked over to him and said she needed him before we could make it upstairs. He stopped instantly and picked her up. He was in a complete rage when we got to that building. Between him and Stephen, the rest of us didn't have to do anything. She stopped it with one touch and three words, though," Viktor said.

"It becomes more and more obvious that she was made for you, the more I learn about her," Vitaliy said, looking at me.

"They were made for each other. He brings out things in her that no one else can, just like she does for him. Their connection is other-worldly," Stephen said.

We saw Misha move and knew that the movie was over. This time, I didn't feel Sephie's anger at all while they were watching the movie. We all looked toward them, expectantly.

"I think we watched the same conversation, just from the other side this time, Misha said. "But at least Sal was speaking English so me and Andrei could understand him as well."

"Stephen was right. Henry is on the take, not the mayor. He's framing the mayor so we'd look at him. Sal made a comment about not being able to get to the mayor. He was angry about it. He's also angry with Henry. It looked like he's just angry in general, really," Andrei said, smiling.

"He and Lorenzo were close. He's not going to take his death lightly," Vitaliy said.

"I still find it interesting that he's grieving more for his brother than he is his own son," Sephie said. "I've not heard him mention Anthony's name one time in any conversation."

Stephen suddenly inhaled. “What if Anthony wasn’t really his kid? Didn’t Andy say something like he would’ve believed Anthony belonged to Massimo more than he would Sal?”

“Why would Sal steal Massimo’s kid though? Isn’t that a little extreme, even for Sal?” Misha said.

Stephen was thoughtful for a minute, trying to make the connection. Sephie, in her quiet way, walked to him, taking his hand while he was deep in thought. He glanced down at her. It was obvious he was fighting more than making a connection. She smiled up at him, saying something quietly so only he could hear. He nodded once. She was still for a few seconds, then said,

“what if Sal was trying to hurt Massimo the same way Massimo hurt Dario? I don’t know how Massimo was about women, but judging by the rest of them, they probably have plenty of children they may or may not know about. What if Sal found out Anthony was Massimo’s and took him before Massimo found out? Talk about a ‘f**k you.’”

“Dario might know. I definitely think the story of Dario and Sal hating each other all these years was really Sal and Massimo hating each other,” Ivan said.

“We can talk to him again. I don’t mind Armando knowing we have Dario now. He might not even be lucid enough to recognize him at this point,” I said.

“I’m surprised you’ve let him live this long.” Vitally said.

“I’ve never wanted someone to suffer as much as I want him to suffer. I’m going to drag it out as long as possible. I’ll get him

medical care, even. He's not allowed to die until I say he can die," I said.

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Chapter 386

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Adrik

Once Sephie and I were alone that night, I asked her what had happened with Stephen, both while they had disappeared during the afternoon and what happened when he looked like he was struggling earlier.

She exhaled loudly. "Ugh. So, I want to kill his sisters now. I got him to open up a little bit this afternoon. We were making Viktor's favorite cookies by the way. He gets very grumpy when I haven't cooked in a few days and it shows," she said, laughing quietly.

"Why do you want to kill his sisters? I didn't even know he had sisters. He never talks about them," I said.

"For good reason. His sisters were always mean to him growing up. Much more than normal sibling bickering mean. He told me that's why it took him so long to warm up to me. He was waiting for me to turn mean too," she said. She'd taken her contacts out already and I watched her eyes change to the amber brown that meant she was sad. She climbed on top of me, straddling my lap.

"There's more to the story, but I wasn't going to make him tell me. He really struggled even just with that. That's what happened in the kitchen earlier. When Misha questioned him, it made him insecure. Stephen doesn't like me in his head, but I asked him if I could look tonight. I told him I knew he'd made the connection already, but he was frozen by his insecurities. I was right. It was easy to find, but he was over-analyzing because he was worried he was wrong." She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes still golden amber. I could feel how upset she was, but it was different. She was upset

for him. She looked at me, her fingers tracing lightly over my facial hair. “I told him this afternoon that he should always trust his first instinct. He’s so smart, but he doesn’t believe how smart he is. He’s so freaking hilarious too, I love him a little more each time he makes a joke about Vlad in front of Vitaliy,” she said, leaning her head on my shoulder in a fit of giggles. I laughed with her. It was quickly becoming one of my favorite things as well. My father was convinced that Vlad was a living person at this point. I certainly wasn’t going to tell him any different.

While we were still laughing, my phone beeped on the nightstand. Sephie sat up so I could check it. It was a message from Viktor.

Tell Sephie thank you and I love her. She knows why.

I showed her the message. “The cookies?” I asked.

She nodded. “He told me his wife used to make these cookies for him when they first got married. He said he couldn’t get enough of them. I almost didn’t try to make them, because they’re not going to be the same. She was the secret ingredient. But he’s been so grumpy since I haven’t cooked the past few days that I decided to give it a try. It gave me a reason to kidnap Stephen, so I think it worked out. I think those two are slower about figuring out how they’re special because I don’t spend as much time with them.”

“You can kidnap whoever you like, solnishko. They all know what to do. One of the other ones will step in to take care of things,” I said, twirling one of her curls around my finger.

“I might start stealing Stephen a little more often. Viktor is going to be more difficult. I need your help with him. He enjoys his job too much. He’s very good at it, don’t get me wrong, but he doesn’t like to leave his regular duties.”

“He would if it meant spending time with you. They would all much rather spend time with you than anything else they have to do.”

“Viktor always grabs one of the other guys when I try to steal him, though. He was also the most unnerved about my eyes changing. I might scare him now,” she said.

I laughed. “You don’t scare him, love. You don’t scare any of them. Viktor loves you just as much as the rest of them.”

She squinted her eyes at me like she didn’t believe me, but she didn’t argue further.

“What about Andrei? You said earlier that he had levels you didn’t even know about? What happened?” I asked.

She husked at me, wide-eyed. “That kid can see auras and he never told anyone.”

I laughed at her response. “Explain.”

“He didn’t call it an aura. He said there’s a glow to certain people. He sees it on the acupuncturist. I didn’t tell you, but she works with my dad. And probably your m om, now that I think about it. She told me. Andrei and I were talking about my reaction to their shock at seeing my eyes when we woke up today. He said I was the reason he can do what he can do now and that’s when I told him he was the youngest and that nobody expected him to figure it out in this lifetime. He asked me how I knew. I didn’t say anything about the acupuncturist and he said it was her. He can see a different “glow” about her than the rest of us.” She moved to get off my lap, stretching her back and lying down next to me. “Of course, I was curious to know if he saw it on anyone else.

He said he sees it now on Ivan, since the first kidnapping attempt when he almost died. He didn’t notice it on him before that

happened, but that makes sense. He also sees it on you and me. But he doesn't see it all the time on us, where he does on the acupuncturist. He said he doesn't walk around looking at glowing people all day, either. It must only come up sometimes for him, but he said he's seen it since he was a kid."

I thought for a minute. "What if it's the opposite of what Ivan can see? Ivan sees the evil, Andrei sees the good. That might be why it's not around us all the time. We're both, but the acupuncturist is only good."

"That would make sense. I want to talk to him about it more. It's best to ease into those conversations with him right now. He's still a little overwhelmed with everything. He's handling it well, but it's a lot for him," she said.

"It really cuts into his cheeseburger thoughts," I said. Sephie's laughter was music to my ears, effectively making me forget the stress of the day.

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Chapter 387

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Sephie

The next afternoon, we were all on our way to the hotel where Mr. Turner worked to meet with Battista once again. “You’re sure that woman won’t be with him this time,” I had asked Vitaliy as we were leaving.

He chuckled. “No, she will no longer be an issue, *sladkaya*.”

“Um, do I want to know what that means?”

“Battista told me he got into an argument with her over her behavior at the last meeting. He told her she embarrassed him and he refused to do business with such an inconsiderate person. She threatened to destroy him, which was what he was wanting to happen. It will be her that is destroyed. He just needed a reason,” Vitaliy said. “Remind me to stay on his good side,” I said.

Vitaliy laughed loudly. “You never have to worry about that. Battista is a smart man. He knows there’s something about you that’s different. He knows of my ability. He suspects it in Adrik. He’s almost certain you have something that can prove to be very beneficial to him, should he ever need it. He will keep you close, *sladkaya*.”

“I mean, no pressure.”

We walked to the front door of the hotel, again like modern-day royalty with so many heavily armed guards. Mr. Turner was happy to see us as always, “Miss Sephie, I’m so happy I get to see you again so soon,” he said as I stepped away from everyone to give him a hug.

“How are things today, Mr. Turner? Good? Uneventful?”

“It’s a fine day, Miss Sephie. A fine day. Made better since I get to see you,” he said. His grandfatherly smile stretched across his

face.

“You’re my favorite, Mr. Turner,” I said, as he opened the door for us to walk inside. This time, Vitaliy wasn’t surprised at me talking to Mr. Turner, but he did have a small smile across his face as we walked inside. I stepped closer to him and said quietly, “you’re being a cheeseball, old man. Tighten up before Battista sees you.” I was not prepared for the laughter that came out of that man as we were walking to the restaurant. The guys were all shocked, but most of all, Adrik was completely taken aback at his father losing his composure in public. I just shrugged my shoulders and tucked myself into Adrik’s side as we continued on our way. The guys silently closed in around us to keep me as out of sight as possible.

Battista was waiting on us in an empty restaurant, but this time, only the male associate that was with him before was present.

No woman to be found. I found myself completely relieved that she would not be there, more for Ivan’s sake than anything else.

Battista greeted Vitaliy and Adrik warmly. This time, Adrik didn’t let go of me when he went to greet him. Battista’s attention quickly shifted to me. He took my hand, turning it over to kiss the back of it, just like he’d done before. “Sephie, I still cannot thank you enough. You have no idea what a gift you’ve given me,” he said to me in Italian.

“Well, if I knew you took this much pleasure in destroying deserving people, I wouldn’t have waited so long to expose her. Next time, give me warning that’s what you want. I’ll make it quick. You won’t have to wait,” I responded. Both Vitaliy and Battista laughed, exchanging a quick glance between each other.

Battista motioned toward the tables. "Come, let us discuss business," he said. As we walked to the table, Adrik searched my eyes, wanting a translation. He laughed quietly when he found his answer. He pulled the chair out for me, leaning down to kiss my cheek after I sat down.

After everyone was seated, Battista spoke English. He spoke it quite well. I wasn't sure whether I should be irritated with Vically or impressed. "So. You're looking for information on the mayor as well as the police commissioner?" he asked Adrik.

Adrik nodded his head. "We think the commissioner is framing the mayor so he can get rid of him and take his spot. We thought the mayor was in Sal's pocket, but now it looks like the commissioner is the one in his pocket. He has quite a bit of information on Ricardo, too. Enough to put him away for a very long time. He could use that information against me, however. That's what we think he's planning on doing. We're trying to figure out if the mayor is an ally."

"If the mayor is an ally, he will help get rid of Ricardo, then?" Battista asked. "Possibly, yes. The information is there, but he's going to need help since his police commissioner is dirty. It's likely most of the police chiefs are too. We don't even know about the DA yet. But aside from all that, the information is good against Ricardo. It makes it look like he's the one that's been running the city behind the scenes. Which ironically is what he's been trying to do for years, apparently," Adrik said.

"And what if the mayor is dirty, along with everyone else?" Battista asked.

Then Ricardo dies, along with Sal," I said flatly..

Battista looked at me for a moment, his hand on his chin. He looked at Vitaliy and said in Italian, "I really like her." He looked

back at Adrik, saying, "I will get you the information you need on the mayor. I can look into the rest of them as well. I've heard very little about Sal and Ricardo since they've been in Italy. It's almost like they're hiding. Niko and Vito are still with them. I do know that for sure." He sighed. "There are very influential people around the world that would be willing to help you get rid of Ricardo De Luca. He's greatly disliked by very powerful people. They'll have no problems also getting rid of anyone that's aligned with him if they know he's going down for sure."

"I have no problems erasing Sal from history. I have a feeling that Ricardo has been behind much of what Sal has done recently, which means I have. no problems with also erasing him from history," Adrik said, his anger clearly visible.

Battista raised an eyebrow, curious as to what Adrik was referring to. He looked between Adrik and Vitaliy. "Sal kidnapped her and was going to sell her," Vitaliy said. It surprised me that he said it in Italian. Battista looked to me, asking in Italian if that was true. I nodded my head. Battista was silent for a moment. He looked to Adrik. "Whatever you need to make this happen, I will help you. Ricardo must be stopped."

I caught Vitaliy smirking at me. He just winked at me when he saw me look at him.

In the parking garage underneath Adrik's building, Vitaliy placed my arm through his as we walked to the elevator. "Battista's help comes with a price. He'll eventually confirm his suspicions that there is something special about you. He's going to ask for your help at some point in the future."

"Please tell him that I can't move anything with my mind so moving Disney's Animal Kingdom to Italy is completely out of the question. I don't care how much he loves okapi. I'm not doing it," I said.

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Chapter 388

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Sephie

Vitaliy and Aleksei came with us to the penthouse once we returned from meeting with Battista. Vitaliy declared he was sick of meeting with people he hadn't seen in years. "There is a reason I haven't seen them in years," he said, grumpily.

Adrik couldn't hide his smile as he looked at me. I think it still surprised him to see this side of his father, but the more he saw it, the more he was enjoying it. It made me happy to see him finally comfortable around his father. I knew he'd spent much of his life feeling intimidated by Vitaliy and worried that he would end up just like him. Now, he was starting to see that wasn't necessarily all bad. Vitaliy had some very good parts to him. He just struggled to show the people he cared about.

"Vitaliy, I think it's time to maybe consider that you are a warm and fuzzy guy. Despite what you think," Stephen said, placing his hand on Vitaliy's shoulder. We could always count on Stephen to be as sarcastic as possible while delivering a heartfelt message.

Vitaliy cut his eyes over at Stephen as they both laughed. It made my heart so happy to see both of them laughing.

As I made dinner, with everyone's help, Vitaliy and Aleksei both relaxed and talked more than they had previously. They both seemed to genuinely enjoy our company. They entertained us with stories from the days when Vitaliy ruled the city. He gave us funny anecdotes about the current bosses, as well as the bosses before them. Apparently, Vitaliy had a habit of causing his own chaos between the bosses, just for fun. He finally admitted that he would

interfere with the bosses” plans, but make it look like it was one of the other bosses that did it. He liked to keep them fighting among themselves so they would leave him alone.

“Clearly, that’s not a lesson I ever learned. I thought keeping the order between them would mean peace in the city,” Adrik said, shaking his head at his father’s antics.

“Eh, it did mean peace. But there’s something about humans that need adversity in order to be happy. If you make conditions too good for too long, people forget what had is. The good starts to feel less good. Sometimes you need bad to remember what good really is,” Vitaliy said.

The guys looked at me. I stopped what I was doing and smiled at them all “He speaks no lies.”

Viktor caught me to the side of the kitchen while everyone else was deep in discussion after dinner. He gently caught my arm, pulling me toward him. He didn’t say a word, he just pulled me to him, wrapping his massive arms around me. I knew he was thanking me for baking him a treat and giving him a reminder of the good times of his past.

“She was the secret ingredient, but so are you, sestrichka. I won’t say no to those anytime you want to make them,” he said softly.

“I’ll happily take suggestions for improvements next time, if you want to give them,” I said, my arms still wrapped around his neck.

He loosened his hold on me, standing up straighter once more. “They were perfect, Sephie. They were exactly what I needed.”

He kissed my cheek. before stepping away to join the conversation once more. Stephen caught my eye as Viktor was walking away from me. winked in appreciation for his help in making it happen.

Even though Vitally complained about being in the city, he still stayed for several more days. He kept himself busy during the day. We rarely saw him, but he almost always made it back so he and Aleksei could eat dinner with us each night.

“You know you can tell your other guys they can come up too, I can make more food,” I said one night.

Vitaliy and Aleksei looked at each other and laughed. “The two new guys don’t want to. I need the other two to keep an eye on them. I don’t trust them when they’re on their own in a new place,” Vitaliy said.

“Unexpected side effect of teaching them manners,” Aleksei said.

“If you don’t trust them, then why do they work for you?” I asked.

“It’s hard to find good people these days. They’re better than nothing. For now,” Vitaliy said.

Viktor spoke up. “We’re still working on getting guys for Trina. I can help you find guys to replace them while you’re here, if you like,” he said.

Aleksei thought for a minute, looking to Vitaliy as he said, “might be worth a look. If we can find better replacements, we can get rid of the little flowers.”

“You can send them to Turkey. The Ottomans are going to need as much help as they can get soon,” Stephen said, completely straight-faced, like it was the honest truth.

Both Vitaliy and Aleksei were shocked, looking to Stephen like he knew something the rest of us didn’t. We all tried to hold in the laughter, but we couldn’t make it happen. Vitaliy and Aleksei knew something was off, but still had no clue that Vlad wasn’t a real, live person and Turkey was safe.

For now.

Later that evening, once the guys had gone back to their apartments downstairs and Vitaliy and Aleksei had retired to their rooms on the other side of the penthouse, I caught Adrik watching me as I undressed for bed. He was leaning against the door to the closet, his sexy smirk on his face.

I watched him, watching me, for a few moments then said, “you don’t know whether to be really happy with me or mad at me right now, do you?”

He laughed. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. I’m finding myself enjoying spending time with my father. He’s completely different than the man I’ve known my entire life. But I’d also prefer to have the place to ourselves once more. You’re terrible at staying quiet,” he said, cutting his eyes at me.

“You only have yourself to blame for that one,” I said, pulling my shirt over my head, standing in front of him in only my underwear.

“Who said it was a bad thing?” he asked as he walked to me. He ran his hand lightly up my arm to the back of my shoulder as he took another step, now standing behind me. He lightly ran his hand over my back, unhooking my bra. Both hands pushed the straps off my shoulders, causing it to fall to the floor.

I felt his hot breath against my skin as he left gentle kisses across the top of one shoulder, then the other. I could feel his body heat as he moved closer to me, but just far enough away that I couldn’t feel his skin on mine yet. His warm hands roamed from my shoulders around to my breasts. He was slow, deliberate in his touch. I could feel his desire, but I could also feel he was trying to contain it.

I knew he was worried about me being able to catch my breath. He was also worried about me staying quiet while we had

guests.

His hands massaged my breasts, then slowly traveled down my stomach. He still kept his distance from me. I made a move to lean back against him, but he moved as well. He was enjoying torturing me. He ran his hands over my hips, then back around to my ass. I felt his lips on my shoulder once more.

I was starting to breathe harder the longer he kept up his slow torture. Finally, he pulled me back against him. I moaned softly, finally able to feel his warmth against me. He wrapped one arm around my waist, holding me against him. The other ran up in between my breasts to my neck. His touch still soft and slow, he tilted my head to the side giving him full access to my neck. He left a trail of kisses down my neck. I gasped when I felt his teeth graze my neck just above my collarbone.

The hand that was around my waist, moved down my stomach, into my soaking wet panties. When his fingers felt my wetness, he groaned quietly. I pushed my hips back into him, leaning my head back on his shoulder. His lips were on my neck once more, his free hand on one of my breasts.

I felt both hands on my hips as he slid my panties down my legs to the floor. His hands slowly running back up my legs. I felt his teeth bite my ass. He laughed as I squealed, jumping away from him. "You know what trying to get away from me does to me," he said, pulling me back to him.

Sephie

When he pulled me to him, he turned me to face him. His hands continued to roam slowly over my body, but now I could do the same to his. I could feel his hardness pressed against my stomach. My hands roamed over his chest, his shoulders, down his arms. He grabbed my hands in his, moving my arms behind my back. He held both my arms in one of his hands while the other hand moved to my neck, once again tilting my head to give him full access.

His grip on my arms was soft, but I didn't like having my arms restricted. I pulled them out of his grip, but he caught them and put them back, holding me a little tighter. His lips went back to my neck. I tried to concentrate on his lips, but all I could think about was having my hands tied behind my back while Armando beat me. I tried to pull my arms free once more, but his grip tightened.

I whimpered, my panic fully setting in.

He felt it immediately. "Sephie, what's wrong? Why are you panicking?" he asked. He loosened his grip and I ripped my arms free, hugging my chest. His arms were around me instantly, his voice soft in my ear, telling me that I was safe. I was with him. No one was going to hurt me.

"My arms. I don't like having them behind me. I don't like having them restricted since..." I didn't need to finish. He knew.

"Sephie. Sephie, I'm so sorry. I didn't think..." he said, holding me tightly.

"It's okay. I'm okay. Just not behind me like that."

He put his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me far enough away from him that he could look me in the eyes. The look in his

eyes told me my eyes were likely still white. He searched my eyes for a moment, then I saw the look of confusion on his face.

“Why are you sad?” he asked as I closed my eyes, trying to get a handle on my emotions.

I stayed quiet for a moment, not sure how to answer his question. I felt so out of control lately. I couldn’t get a handle on my fear.

Little things would make me panic that never bothered me before. My eyes were doing their own thing. I still worried that the guys were all scared of me because of them. Now I completely killed the mood because of something silly. I knew he wasn’t going to hurt me when he was holding my arms. But I couldn’t fight off the fear of feeling that vulnerable again.

I felt his fingers under my chin, gently lifting my face. “Sephie, look at me. Please,” he said. His voice was soft, but urgent.

I opened my eyes, letting him search. It only took him a moment. He pulled me close again, hugging me tightly. “You’ve been through so much. I can’t believe you’re beating yourself up for struggling with processing everything. This was my fault, Sephie. I didn’t think about you not wanting to have your arms behind you. You have a very good reason for not wanting that, I should’ve known.”

“It’s okay. I’m okay,” I said quietly, my face in his chest.

“It’s not and you’re not, love. Not all the way. You’re dealing with so much just on your own. Not even considering how you’re helping everyone around you all the time.”

“I want to help them. I don’t want them to be scared.”

Of me, I wanted to add, but didn’t.

He pulled me away from him to look at me again. He searched for a few minutes, but didn’t respond right away. He picked up his

shirt that he had left out for me, holding it out for me. He quietly buttoned it up after I slid my arms through the sleeves. Then he rolled up the too-long sleeves. He reached down, taking my hand and pulled me toward the bedroom with him. He climbed into bed first, then pulled me into his lap so I was straddling him. He looked at me for a few minutes, his hands in their usual battle with my curls before he finally broke the silence.

“Sephle, I don’t know what to say to make you believe that we’re not scared of you. The things that are happening are strange.

It’s a lot to take in. But all of it is made so much easier because we all have you to help us through it. If this were happening without you, we would all be admitted to the psych ward. You’re what’s kept us sane through all of this.” He pulled me down, pressing his lips gently to mine for a moment before he continued. “I’m worried that we’re depending on you too much, without giving you what you need in return.”

n’t think that’s true. You’re all becoming experts at feeling my shifts in mood. Even Stephen, who can’t feel what I feel can read toe now, apparently. I think you’re putting too much pressure on yourself and the guys,” I said. He raised an eyebrow at me. “I’ve been through some shi t,

Adrik. Even without the past I have, just what has happened since I’ve met you has been a lot. Most of it I’m dealing with and trying to move past, but there’s going to be times when something triggers bad memories and feelings. That’s unavoidable. Only this time I have you and I have the guys to help me through it when it happens.”

He had a small smile on his face as he looked at me. “You always do that,” he said quietly.

“Do what?”

“End up making me feel better when I’m trying to make you feel better.”

I ran my fingers lightly over his stubble, loving the feel of it against my fingertips. “You do an excellent job of taking care of me.

It’s not your fault I’m high maintenance,” I said, smirking at him.

He laughed loudly. “You’re the most low-maintenance woman I’ve ever met in my entire life. But it makes me love you even more than I thought possible.”

I leaned down, putting my head on his shoulder as he ran his hands over my back. I sighed, loving just being close to him. “I love you, Adrik. Always and forever.”

I woke up at some point in the middle of the night to noises coming from the kitchen. I quietly got out of bed and grabbed a pair of leggings before walking out of the bedroom. Vitaliy was in the kitchen rummaging through the cabinets, clearly looking for something.

“Can’t sleep and you’re looking for something to help you with that?” I asked. I didn’t mean to startle him, but I did.

“Sladkaya, what are you doing up? You should be in bed,” he said, almost firmly. Like it was an order.

“I could say the same for you. Don’t you need more sleep as you get older?” I asked innocently. He squinted his eyes at me as I walked to the cabinet where we kept the tea. I pulled out my favorite tea that helped me sleep. “Don’t be grumpy or you’ll get none of this and you’ll be awake the rest of the night, having no one to blame but yourself.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I didn’t know how much I would miss having someone who was never afraid of me.”

“I think you’ve done an excellent job of showing your warm and fuzzy side just since I’ve known you. You’ll have even more

friends soon,” I said, filling the electric kettle and turning it on. He scoffed, but then he smiled at me. He looked at me for a few moments. I couldn’t be sure, but it looked like there were tears welling up in his eyes. “You’ve given me a second chance with my son. I wasn’t the best father to him the first time around.

Maybe I can make up for that, even if it’s just a little bit,” he said.

I looked at him as we waited for the water to boil. “I think you’re being too hard on yourself again, Vitaliy. You did the best you could with what you had at the time. There’s a part of him that understands now where your pain came from and he knows he would’ve been in the same shape you were if the roles were reversed. I can’t imagine how difficult it must’ve been for you to lose your soulmate but have to be reminded of that loss every single time you looked into your son’s eyes.”

His eyes got wide. “You’ve seen a picture of Lena?”

I smiled at him. “I’ve seen Lena. We had a talk when we were still in Panama. I told you she still watches over you,” I said, looking at him sternly as I poured the hot water into two mugs.

“How is this possible?”

the logistics are somewhat complicated. She’s the person to ask that question to, but she made it happen. She

always knew I was

was coming for Adrik, but she never realized the role I would play in your life as well.” 1

know is th

1. But the important thing for to know is that the is nights when you can’t sleep, you should try talking to her. She’s y

He sat in silence, mostly stunned at what I’d just told him. I could see his emotions clearly on his face. His cold, tough exterior

completely non- existent as he sat in front of me. I suddenly didn't feel like tea anymore. He was still staring at the counter as I walked quietly back to the bedroom.

Halfway down the hallway to the bedroom, I was met by Adrik, leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. He'd been listening to our conversation. He didn't say anything, he just wrapped his arms around me, burying his face in my neck.

Adrik

It took me a few days, but I finally managed to talk to my father without Sephie around. I had to enlist the help of all the guys to keep her busy while I had a conversation with him. I wanted to make sure she didn't overhear what I was going to ask him.

"How did you propose to my mother?" I asked him after he walked into my office, closing the door behind him at my request. I'd even asked that Aleksei not be present. He was slightly worried.

He exhaled, the relief visible on his face. He got a sly smile across his face. "I was wondering when you were going to think of this. I was worried you would wait too long."

"I've been thinking about it since right after I met her. I didn't want to scare her by asking her too soon. I've had the ring made for months now. I was going to ask her before she and Ivan were taken. After, she was so hurt that it didn't make sense to ask her then. Now, she's dealing with finally being forced to feel her fear and she's insecure for the first time in her life, I think. I want her to know without a doubt that I'm not going anywhere. Or that the guys aren't either. She's worried they're all afraid of her now."

He scoffed. "How could they be afraid of her?"

"I don't know, but that's what she's worried about. She spends so much time taking care of everyone else, sometimes she forgets to take care of herself. She has six of us that she expertly takes care of, but we have one of her and I feel like we fail miserably most of the time. I want to do something special for her to try and help make up for that."

“That’s women, son. That’s what they do. Your mother was much the same. Aleksei will tell you. She had a similar bond with him and a few of my men, but not as strong as what Sephie has. My men were not the same. Your mother was not the same. But it was similar enough.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “I see why you love her. I haven’t met a woman like her, including your mother. When you have a woman like that by your side, you become unstoppable. Everyone worries about men when it comes to business, when it comes to war, politics, all of it. Men are in charge. But it’s the women that hold the world together. She’s what will hold you and your men together so that you can rule this city the way it should be ran. For the benefit of the people, not only those few in charge. That’s what I could never make happen, but you will. With her.”

I ended up talking with my father for a few hours. He told me more about my mother in those few hours than he had in 30 years. I knew it was all because of Sephie. She made me see him completely differently than I had when I was growing up. She helped me understand why he did the things he did. I had a new perspective on why he was the way he was when I was a kid. She was right. I would’ve been the same as him, had the roles been reversed and I had lost her.

Viktor finally stuck his head in the office. “It’s getting difficult to keep her from coming down here. She’s starting to get worried about you,” he said, a small smile on his face.

Vitaliy stood up. “Come. We mustn’t make her worry.”

It took a few more days to make the plans, with the help of the guys, but we were on our way to the house that weekend and Sephie was none-the wiser. She just thought I wanted a couple nights to ourselves. Which I did, but there was more to it.

I needed her to know, without a doubt that I wasn't going anywhere and that I was never going to send her away from me for any reason ever again. I was tired of waiting for the perfect moment to ask her, so I made my own perfect moment.

The guys did a great job of acting completely normal and coming up with a reason to not go to the house until after dinner. Once there, they all pretended to be very tired and went straight to their rooms, leaving me and Sephie to go upstairs on our own.

She walked into the bedroom, immediately surprised by the candles and the roses that filled the room. She walked a few steps into the room, taking it all in before she turned back to me, I was nervous. I never get nervous. I took the ring out of my pocket as quietly as possible, got down on one knee and asked her to marry me.

I didn't finish her thought when she turned toward me. Her hand went up to cover her mouth.

Speechless, It didn't happen often

I also couldn't stay on my knee for very long. It meant I couldn't have my hands on her. Unacceptable. I stood up, grinning at my inability to keep my hands off of her. I pulled her to me. She, of course, immediately picked up on my amusement. "I like this better, too," she said quietly, as I took her hand and slid the ring on her finger. "Sephie, I've known I was in love with you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. But with each day that passes, you've proven that the love I have for you knows no depths or no bounds. I fall more in love with you each and every day and I want to keep falling in love with you every single day for the rest of this life. And the next. Will you...

She cut me off. She pressed her lips to mine before I could finish. "Don't ask stupid questions," she said, smiling against my lips.

I couldn't help but laugh as I kissed her back. I felt the warmth spread over my entire body, warmer than usual even, and I knew her answer was yes. But that didn't mean that I didn't want to hear her say it. I leaned my head back to look at her, about to ask her if that meant yes.

She smiled her wide smile at me. "Of course I will. I want you to be stuck with me too," she said, her arms around my neck. Her eyes were the deepest depth of the ocean blue when she said it, making it mean that much more to me. I wrapped my arms around her, picking her up off the floor, hugging her to me for a few moments. I felt her let go with one arm, as she looked at the ring on her hand as I held her. "Holy shi t, I'm gonna have to have Bubba's help to build muscles big enough to carry this thing around all day long." I laughed. God, I love her.

"I wanted it to be very obvious to anyone and everyone that you belong to me, solnishko."

"Message received," she said, hugging my neck tightly once more.