

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 471

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Sephie

I slid my arm through Viktor's as we walked around the pool. I stopped to inspect the rose bushes at the edge of the gardens as we passed, noticing the tiniest of little buds starting to appear. It was a sign of warmer days ahead, which made me quite happy to see.

"I'm going to be counting down the days to when I can stop wearing a coat outside now," I said as we continued toward the woods,

Viktor laughed quietly. "You would struggle to live in Russia during the winter," he said.

"You are not wrong there. I wouldn't have survived, I would've frozen to death. I know it. I was not cut out to be that hardy," I said.

He squeezed his arm around my hand. "I think you're more Russian than you give yourself credit for, Sephie. You've survived more than most people I know. You're hardier than you think," he said, looking down at me. The look of pride on his face was unmistakable. I couldn't help but grin at him.

We walked in comfortable silence for a while, before my curiosity got the better of me. "How does Ilya like working for Vitaliy?"

A wide smile stretched across his face. "He's very happy. He gets along well with the other guys, even though they're much older than he is. Aleksei is catching up his training, which makes them both happy. Ilya is happy to learn more, Aleksei is happy to teach more. Vitaliy is happy to be rid of his little flowers."

"And once again, we saved the world," I said, wistfully. "So how likely do you think it is that he'll call the girl from the fundraiser last night?" I asked. I tried to sound innocent, but he knew this was likely going to make an appearance on the whiteboard.

"He'll call. Ilya struggles to be single. I think it's the baby in him. I'm not that way. Sasha is not that way. I think Ilya likes having someone to fuss over him," he said.

"As long as he reciprocates," I said. "Nobody likes a selfish dude."

"Oh, he does. I think that was part of the problem with the last girl. The one that almost broke him. He kept giving, thinking it would fix everything. She kept taking," he said.

"My offer still stands. I'll happily kick her ass," I said,

"I don't think you need to worry about her. You have enough to worry about without fighting Ilya's battles for him, too. He got away from her. That's

what matters."

I scoffed. "You're so reasonable. It's soooo boring." I said as dramatically as possible, getting a belly laugh out of him.

"I think both Ilya and Sasha would agree with you on that one. I've always been the serious one," he said. We came out of the woods and walked to my favorite spot by the lake.

"I can believe that. You're the oldest and always have been. Makes sense that you'd naturally fall into the father figure role for everyone. You're so good at it. You've had plenty of practice. Remind me to thank Ilya for being irresponsible when you were kids," I said, grinning at him.

He laughed. "It probably has something to do with it. It doesn't explain how you're so good at taking care of all of us, though. You were an only child. Aren't only children supposed to be spoiled and bratty?"

"I fail to see why you phrased that like a question, Papa Bear. Have you met me? Have you not seen how I refuse to use my own legs to walk as much as possible? Are you unsure of what spoiled and bratty really mean? It's a translation problem, isn't it?"

He reached out and pushed me over gently. "I know what it means. Maybe you are a little bratty, but I would not call you spoiled. You're so thoughtful is what I mean. Even when I was being an asshole, you were more concerned with how it affected the other guys than you were with how it affected you. Even though I know you're struggling with it more than they are."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to think of how I wanted to respond. I was surprised he actually admitted he was an asshole.

"You have more history

with them than you do me. I'm your boss's girlfriend. They're your brothers. I'm also the reason things got so weird. Literally. From the very beginning. It's all because of me. If you need someone to be mad at, it should be me. They haven't done anything wrong."

He reached over and pulled my left hand out of my pocket. "You're more than his girlfriend, Sephie," he said. He held my hand up to look at the ring "And you're more than that to the rest of us, too. This should be a constant reminder to you of that fact."

I stayed quiet, looking at my ring, but still thinking about how I'd been the catalyst for their lives to change so completely.

"You're still worried that me asking to have my demon taken away was a rejection of you in some way. It wasn't. It's not gone forever, either," he said. He looked out at the lake, watching the reflection of the clouds in the water. He inhaled deeply, then continued. "I have always been the serious one. Always responsible. I've always made sure everyone is taken care of. It's just how I am. My mother used to worry about me when I was younger. She was worried I would eventually decide that I'd missed out on my childhood because I never was a normal kid. I never got into the normal troublesome situations that kids do when they're young. I took school seriously, I took the military seriously, I took my marriage seriously. This decision wasn't any different, with one exception." He looked over at me. I could see him struggling to keep it together long enough to finish his thought. "This time, I chose me. I don't want anymore responsibility. What I have already is plenty. I'm not ready to be able to take on thoughts and feelings of everyone else too. I just went about it in the most as asshole way possible and for that, I'm very sorry."

I scooted over closer to him, not only because I was slightly cold sitting there, but so I could lean against him. "I know you've struggled with everything extra that's been happening for a while. It was always your choice as to what would happen. I respect that. Everyone else respects that, as well. The biggest issue is we know you're not comfortable around us. It's like a constant reminder for the rest of us that you chose a different path. I don't care that you did. You did what was right for you and I respect the choice you made. I just want you to feel comfortable around us again. I can barely contain my emotions on a good day, which means I can barely contain when my eyes change. Now you have to look at Ivan and Adrik too. I don't want to be the reason you're having PTSD flashbacks because I can't keep it together. I've already condemned the rest of them to always having to endure whatever it is I feel at any given time. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable around me, or any of us, as well."

"You haven't condemned anyone, Sephie. They love that they're so connected to you. Seriously. They talk about it all the time," he said, smiling sweetly at me. "And honestly, what you did last night at the fundraiser for that girl made me realize what a complete asshole I've been this whole time. I was so focused on the demon that I forgot you're still you. You're so incredibly good that you even convinced a demon to help you be even better." He paused, looking at me very seriously. "That's exactly the reason why I'm not ready yet. I still focus on the bad too much. There was too much of a chance that my demon would've won."

"You're still incredibly reasonable, for the record. I think that's a very mature decision to make. I can tell you that I don't think it would've happened, but I also don't live in your head. I support your decision. I always have. It will happen when you're ready. Or maybe not at all. It's always going to be your choice. In every lifetime," I said. "And as for the girl last night, I know what she's going through. She just needs someone to believe her. You guys were that for me. Maybe Ilya can help her with that, too."

He put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer and kissing the top of my head. "You do so much for everyone else without a second thought. I'm so sorry I doubted you."

"You had your reasons. I just want you to feel comfortable again. For your sake, just as much as ours. Did Kostya fix you again?" I asked.

"He did. What Stephen did helped tremendously. I was going to ask him to do it again, actually. As much as I didn't want it to happen the first time, I do recognize how helpful it was. I don't think it got everything the first time, though. You were right, too. I was choosing pain over all of you. I see that now," he said, squeezing my shoulders.

"You've been carrying it around for so long that it's become a part of you. It can be scary to let it go. We all knew you weren't really mad, for the record. You were scared. It's okay to be scared, but I want you to try and remember that you don't have to face it alone. We're all here for you and we

all love you."

He didn't say anything, he just held me a little tighter, leaning his head on mine. I heard his breath catch a few times and I knew he was trying to hold back the tears. Even with as irritated with him as I'd been, I still wanted things to go back to normal between all of us. I could learn to deal with him not being as connected as the rest of the guys, as long as we could find ways to make him feel more comfortable around all of us. We needed each

other.