

Benefits 261

Chapter 261: Tricky Business

"Augustus, please stop this. Your being too edgy. Everything is going to be fine."

Augustus glared at his friend, "You are foolish if you think this is going to be so easy. I'm telling you that man she has by her side is definitely her guard not some lover. He was the one responsible for how I ended up in the ditch. And if he catches a whiff of our plan, I'm scared that I might end up in a coffin this time..."

The young man laughed out loud at that and shook his head, "You are thinking too much. Your falling into the ditch was merely an accident. And even if he is her guard, it makes no difference to us, Augustus. He cannot possibly reach here in this private room."

Augustus shook his head and suddenly felt very scared. At this moment, he remembered his own late mother's advice, "Don't trust him. If need be he will throw you to the wolves."

Augustus had always treated Alpin as a friend but tonight he had a feeling...

"Alpin... there has to be another way. I am not..."

"Stop being a chicken, Alpin. She's here. And she is alone. You're just nervous because you actually like her. Don't worry. After tonight, she will belong to you one way or the other."

Augustus wanted to refute that but before he could, the door to the private room opened and a young woman walked in. He watched as she walked over to Alpin and whispered something in his ear that caused the man's face to tighten with anger.

"What is it Alpin? Is something the matter?"

"Nothing, Augustus. Just calm down. She is being guided here. I'll be back in a moment. Here, have a drink to calm your nerves."

As Alpin handed Augustus the drink, Augustus failed to see the malice in his eyes. Taking the glass from him, he drank the liquid in one go as Alpin smiled, "That's better. Now go and sit on the couch and relax. We'll succeed soon."

Rubbing a hand over his face, Augustus nodded and went to sit on the corner of the L-shaped couch in the room. Alpin nodded and excused himself, "I'm going to go and welcome her now."

Augustus nodded and watched the man leave before spitting out the drink from his mouth into the small vase nearby. Gasping from holding his breath for long, Augustus' eyes glittered murderously! Dam* it! The man had spiked his drink as well. His mother had been right. To get his own goal, Alpin had not hesitated to use him.

He should never have agreed to the charade that Alpin had proposed of being that girl's fiancé. It was his own foolishness. Thankfully, his father had been careful and warned him that he would disown him if he involved himself with Nora and he'd decided to listen. He might not be the brightest bulb and he had his own faults but he knew how to protect himself.

Slowly, he clicked the emergency button on his phone to alert his security and made a beeline from the room. Let Alpin handle this on his own.

Nora hesitated as she stepped into the private room where she had been invited by the man. She did not have much hope of meeting the mastermind who has orchestrated everything almost causing her to lose Demetri. She expected the lackey who had come to her in the cafe to be here.

Unexpectedly, as she stepped into the room, she was welcomed by a younger man. He looked a few years older than her with a slightly chubby rounded face. His hair was slicked back, probably to make him look slimmer but it simply made him look smarmy.

Suddenly, she was overcome with the urge to touch that gelled-up hair and check if it was only gelled or glued together. Suppressing her giggle at the thought, she smiled slowly as she said, "So, you are my cousin?"

Alpin Junior smiled and quickly came over to hug her. As the man came close, Nora stiffened and quickly stepped back before his arms could wrap around her. The man sent her an offended look, "I'm just greeting you, cousin."

"I know. The truth is that I have a bad cold and I'm just worried that you might catch a cold too..."
Before the man could comment about it, Nora coughed and sneezed a few times, once again happy that she was so good in acting!

She watched the man step back in disgust as she grabbed a tissue and blew her nose noisily into it. The man cast an awkward look at her before gesturing for her to sit. She sat gingerly, coughing a few more times before she looked around eagerly, "Is no one else coming? I thought this was a family reunion of all the cousins..."

Alpin Junior looked at the disgusting woman. His father really wanted to use this girl to dethrone and get rid of the Sterling family. This girl was not even worthy of cleaning the floors of the Royal House of the Belkin family.

"Forgive me, cousin. I've had to trick you into coming here to help my good friend. Though I was looking forward to meet you, this time it is Augustus. He is my best friend you know. And he is totally madly in love with you. He's been going crazy because you have been avoiding him."

"But I..."

"No buts, cousin. I promised him that I would let him talk to you. He is in the room down the hall and very worried. Even if you do not want to marry him, at least talk to him. It will break his heart but at least he will have heard it from you. Don't ghost him. Please, cousin."

Nora raised an eyebrow at this. The man was really smart. They'd outfitted this entire room with cameras once the place had been decided and they knew he'd booked a private room. But she had not expected that he would instead use another room. This would get tricky...

Chapter 262: Sulking

Nora could not stop laughing at what had transpired today as she related the events of the evening to Evangeline over the phone. While her new sister laughed with her, she noticed from the corner of her eye, a certain someone seemed to not be in a good mood. Quickly finishing the conversation, she stared as Demetri sat, glaring at his laptop.

Slowly, trying to not make a sound, she circled around to his back. Without warning, she lunged forward, wrapping her arms around his neck from behind while her legs went around his waist. Demetri, caught off guard, stiffened for a moment before relaxing at her touch.

Quickly, she placed a kiss on his cheek as she placed her chin on his shoulder, "Why are you in such a foul mood? Did someone run away with your kitten?"

Demetri smiled and shook his head as he carried her towards the small dining room, "My kitten is right here with me. Who would dare to take her away from me?"

Nora giggled and placed a kiss on his neck this time, "Well, I meant the dog..."

"Demetri Junior and Kitten, both dogs now belong to Dora. Though I'm not too sure, I'm happy about it..."

Nora giggled at that and patted his shoulder with her hand, "Don't worry. Dora has already promised me that she is going to rename the two... So, what has put you in a mood?"

"What mood?", Demetri feigned ignorance.

"Are you seriously going to try that with me, husband?" Nora asked him with irony in her voice.

"Are you interrogating me, Kitten?"

"Do I need to? I don't have my handcuffs right now..." Nora answered with a grin.

"Are you giving me ideas, kitten?" Demetri questioned her as he shifted her and lowered her onto the couch before sitting down next to her and pulling her into his arms.

"And you are avoiding the topic. I know you now, Demetri Frost. There was a time when I couldn't read this face of yours but now you are an open book to me..."

"Really? And what am I thinking just now?" Demetri questioned her.

Nora stared at his impassive and slightly cold face and pouted, " Well, the problem is that the book is written in multiple languages and I cannot read right now. But stop shifting the topic and get back..."

"You mean about handcuffs? I can order some..."

Narrowing her eyes, Nora leaned forward and bit his arm, making his groan, " This kitten bites..."

Angry at his insistence to not share, Nora finally was angered and glared at him, " Fine. If you don't want to share, then I'll leave you alone! You can stew until you become soup!"

As she would have angrily stomped away, Demetri quickly pulled backwards so that she fell into his lap. Still angry and in no mood for his coaxing, she tried to get away from him, only to be pulled in closer.

Just as she was preparing to kick his instep, he sighed into her ear, "I'm scared Nora..."

She stilled, her anger cooling as fast as it had risen. Demetri was... scared? The man who was invincible in the eyes of the world? To her, Demetri could conquer the world without breaking a sweat, if he wished. Why would he be scared?

Concerned, she leaned back into his embrace and looked up at his face, asking softly, " Why?"

"Nora... we've had so little time together. And in that time, the number of times I've almost lost you... it makes me worry that my luck would run out someday and then I would lose you."

She looked into his eyes, seeing a depth of emotion she hadn't fully grasped until now. His fear resonated within her. When she'd first started to get away from Lara, her only hope had been to live peacefully. And yet, she'd never really achieved that.

Sometimes, she felt as if she was a magnet for trouble. And inadvertently, she had ended up dragging Demetri into her orbit. However, once she'd had this man to lean on, no difficulty had seemed too difficult to surmount.

And yet, at times like these, she would realize that her husband was just as vulnerable as her. Demetri was a protector by nature. Whether it had been his family, his business or her, the man was used to guarding what he called his own against outsiders. And yet, with her, he was forced to watch from the sidelines.

"I know you did not want me to go there today."

Demetri stiffened at her words. Of course, he did not want her to go. If it were up to him, Alpin Junior would already be dead so that the entire 'claim to the throne' drama could have ended.

"But everything turned out fine in the end today, did it not? And isn't there a saying that all's well that ends well?"

"The end is where we start from Nora..." Demetri murmured softly...

Nora looked up into his eyes and was startled by the depth of his emotions. Holding his face between her hands, she questioned him, "What do you mean?"

"It means there are repercussions to everything. I hate letting you use yourself as bait. But every time, I am not left with an option... And so we have to fight new people and start all over again. I want you all to myself, Nora, safe and healthy."

"And we will be. See, I don't think I'm going to have any more relatives crawling out of the woodwork. Once the problem here is settled, then we can leave here. We'll go to a little village and I'll open a bookshop there and you can be the gardener... that would be nice wouldn't it?"

Demetri smiled and held her close to his heart. It didn't matter where they went or what they did. What mattered to him was that his Nora stayed like this with him forever. Safe and smiling.

Demetri traced a gentle hand across Nora's cheek, savoring the warmth of her touch. "A bookshop and a garden sound like a perfect dream," he whispered, his gaze locked onto hers. Leaning down slowly, he rubbed his lips against hers, "I love you, Nora."

"And I love you." Nora answered, sealing the confession with a kiss...

Chapter 263: Lucifer's Angel

Evangeline chuckled as she concluded her phone call with Nora. Of all the outcomes that she had expected, this was not even in the top ten. First, Alpin had really plotted such a juvenile plot. Did he really think that he could drug two people and make them sleep together to create a scandal.

Maybe he could but not when the person involved was her sister. Evangeline sighed. When she'd learnt that Nora was her cousin, she had not been too pleased about having to fight someone else. And even when her father had repeatedly assured her that she would not be interested in the throne, she'd felt wary.

Who could have thought that instead of gaining a rival, she'd end up getting a sister in the mix. Nora was fun and playful while being strong at the same time. When she thought of how she'd faced so many challenges in her young life, she could not help but feel sympathetic towards her. In comparison, all those years of loneliness and over-protectiveness from her father that she had felt suppressed her, paled.

On the other hand, the only thing she felt envious of was her relationship with Demetri Frost. The man was intimidating and threatening at first glance. And yet she'd seen for herself the way he doted over her. Nora usually lit up like a Christmas tree whenever he entered the place.

"Why are you sighing so much? Are you missing me?"

Evangeline stiffened at the sudden intrusion and tried to get away from the man as she answered, "I missed you like I would miss a shoe bite!"

"Liar."

Lucien stepped back quickly before she could hit him and moved to sit opposite her, as he accused, "You are avoiding me."

"I did just call you a shoe bite, Lucifer. Do you think I would not avoid it? You know, as a princess, I can order someone to walk in my shoes and break them in for me so that I don't get shoe bite."

"Wow. I did not know that. But I'll remember this piece of information..."

Evangeline frowned, " Why?"

"So that when I get you shoes in the future, they are broken in, of course."

"Why would you get me shoes?" Evangeline asked with a frown.

"To bite you of course..."

Evangeline stared at his innocent-looking face before breaking out into laughter, " That is the oddest thing I've ever heard."

Lucien stared at her laughing face and shrugged. He was willing to say the most nonsensical things to make her smile.

As tears of merriment fell from her eyes, Evangeline could only shake her head, " Why are you here?"

"Its because I got free early today. The plan did not work..."

That caused her to laugh some more and she nodded, " Yes, I heard. Augustus ran away from the room where he was supposed to seduce Nora and then Alpin tried to force Nora to drink only for himself to receive a right hook from Nora and have his teeth fall out. I can't stop laughing at the scene. I wish I could have been there."

"I have a recording if you want to see it." Lucien held up a pen drive to show her and Evangeline realized that this man was too clever. Previously, he'd wiggled his way into her home and stayed late into the

night watching harmless movies. He'd even sat through the Princess Diary movie which usually made her cringe.

And tonight, he'd come prepared with something else. She weighed her options before she said, "You are lying. Nora told me that Belkin took her to another private room that was not rigged."

"Hmm. But it was rigged by him. And I am very good with my fingers..."

Evangeline blinked as she glanced at his long fingers and then at his strong wrist. How did their discussion about her distant cousin end up with her admiring him?

"I don't understand..."

"I hacked the surveillance camera and stole the video, baby. Now, you want to watch?"

Evangeline quickly nodded her head, forgetting that she planned to ask him to leave the pen drive and she'd watch later.

"Good, then let's watch it. It makes a good thirty minutes. I even edited and added the scene where Augustus did some great acting before running with his tail tucked between his legs."

About two hours later, Evangeline munched on the popcorn and wondered how the thirty minutes had spiralled into a few hours? Every time, she reminded herself that Lucien Frost was dangerous and yet, her brain could not seem to grasp the reality. The devious man had edited alright... so that when they were finished watching Alpin cursing and gathering his teeth off the floor, the video came to an end, only to be followed by a hooking sci-fi drama.

And now, the man had made himself totally at home in HER house, even going so far as to make popcorn in her kitchen. She'd not even known there was popcorn in there. As she stuffed the last bit of popcorn into her mouth, she looked down at her messy fingers and sighed. Now she'd need to go and get something to wipe her hands. And she did not want to miss the scene...

Before she could think of getting up, her hand was grabbed and one finger was licked clean by Lucien. Eyes wide, she stared at him but he simply tapped her nose and spoke, "You'll miss the landing of the spaceships. Concentrate."

Evangeline turned her head to the screen but she could definitely not concentrate. Not with the man's wicked tongue doing wicked things. No! Enough was enough! If she kept up with this, she might end up losing everything!

She wiggled on the couch, as if gathering her courage or maybe sanity, she wasn't sure, and pulled her hand out of his grasp. "Lucifer! That is enough! What do you want? Why can't you leave me alone? You've achieved your goal and found Demetri and Nora! Then why do you keep pestering me?"

Chapter 264: An Elephant in the Room

Once the credits started to roll around, Evangeline was already prepared to make a quick escape. "I'm too tired. I'll just turn in for the day. Since you invited yourself, you can see yourself off also. Good night."

Just as Evangeline was sure that she would make a successful escape, Lucien spoke, "Wait. I have something for you."

Evangeline paused, "I don't want anything other than to sleep so..."

However, even as she denied wanting anything, Lucien had already walked off, leaving her standing there confused.

Just as quickly as he'd gone, he returned, handing her something white and fluffy...

Confused, she looked down at the large stuffed elephant and then at him, "What is this?"

"It's an elephant, Evangeline." Lucien pointed out helpfully.

Evangeline glared at him, her patience towards him almost at an end, "I can see that, Mr. Obvious! I meant just why are you giving this elephant to me?"

"Because we need to address the elephant in the room. You are avoiding it. So here he is." Lucien grinned mischievously.

Evangeline was speechless. The man was totally..."You've got to be kidding me..."

"No, I'm not. I really need you to talk and stop avoiding the topic." Lucien pointed out.

"I don't want to talk about anything, Lucifer. What is past is in the past. Can't you get that through your thick head?"

Just as she would have stalked away, Lucien spoke, "An hour."

Stopping mid-step, she turned, "An Hour?"

"Hmm. An hour is what I need from you tonight, Angel. And if you are willing to give me that, I promise I will not bother you again."

Evangeline stood there unsure of how to react. She'd been avoiding any sort of talking with Lucien and yet, she'd already realized her folly. She couldn't escape him, no matter how much she tried...

"Can't we talk tomorrow?"

"Not really. I don't want to delay things longer."

"Fine. What is it?"

"Angel... we are engaged for the time being."

"My name is Evangeline! And we are not engaged. We are pretending to be engaged."

"Fine, we are pretending to be engaged. But that pretense needs us to be together in front of everyone and make public appearances. From tomorrow onwards, the negotiations for the resorts will start and at that time, we have to put on a united front. If you keep frowning at me, then it will not work."

"I know that. And don't worry. I won't frown at you in public. Now can I go?"

"No. I still have about fifty-six minutes with you, Angel"

Evangeline frowned at that. She should have argued for the time to be reduced. An hour was too much.

"Fine." She muttered through clenched teeth. "And my name is Evangeline."

Lucien clenched his hands. This girl had her walls too high and trying to talk his way through them wasn't going to work. He needed a sledge-hammer.

Narrowing his eyes, he walked close to her, observing the way she tried to lean back and even hugged the elephant tighter so that she would be able to maintain her distance from him.

Caging her in between the couch and himself, he leaned down and spoke, "Angel. I know your name very well. I'll make it a point to check that is correctly filled up when we apply for the marriage certificate."

"M m marriage certificate? What are you talking about?"

"Now, I have your attention. Good. Evangeline Sterling, listen carefully. You are my Angel. And I've told you before that I like you. But you do not believe me. So, from here on, I am going to make you believe that I like you and this is not some kind of a guilt trip or an attempt to assuage my conscience."

"As a matter of fact, I have nothing to feel ashamed of. I came there with the sole purpose of finding and using someone who had hurt my family. But when I found you, and realized you were not what it seemed, I did my best to not hurt you. The second thing you need to know is that this engagement might be pretend but that is only temporary. I don't intend to let it continue for long."

Evangeline, who had been considering believing that he might really like her, straightened and glared, "I know the engagement is not for long. You don't have to remind me! In fact, I can call it off right now."

Lucien stared at Evangeline before gently rapping her head, "Angel, what am I going to do with you. Listen to me carefully, this time. The engagement is not going to last long because I intend to let it culminate into a marriage! So, the end of the engagement is going to be us getting married. Do you still want to end it now? I can apply for the wedding license right away."

"You want to marry me?" Evangeline asked, only to blush a minute later, feeling extremely stupid. The truth was that she couldn't believe that Lucien would want to marry her. He'd been the person she had admired for so long. The prince she had hidden away in the depths of her heart, not daring to show him to anyone. She'd not even dared to dream of being with him.

"But we need love for marriage! And there is no love between us."

She wanted to say that he did not love her. Liking was a passive feeling. She did not know what he liked about her, but someday he might stop liking her. Where would that leave her then? She'd seen marriages like that where the man moved on and the girl was left with only the remains of a broken relationship.

"You are right. There is a lack of love between us. But I'll make you fall for me, Angel. So, my suggestion to you is stop fighting me at every turn and let me love you."

"What about you loving me? For a marriage to be successful, both of us need to be in love. One-sided love..." Evangeline blurted out.

Lucien smiled at that, and quickly pecked her cheek, "Of course, one-sided love is dangerous. It is why I'm going to try my best to make you fall for me. And while we still have about thirty minutes on the clock, I'm going to take a rain check."

Evangeline blinked as she watched Lucien walk away. What did he mean... From what she could understand... did he mean that he was already in love with her?

Chapter 265: A Confrontation

Alexander Sterling walked into his mother's mansion with an angered face. As he watched his mother walk into the room, followed by her trusted maid, he nodded to his own guards.

Quickly, the men let Queen Rosalind step through the door, before moving to block the maid's path.

The maid glared at the men before quickly calling out, "My lady."

Queen Rosalind turned around to see the guards blocking the door and then the maid who was being stopped outside. She was already not happy to be disturbed so late in the night. Annoyed, she turned to her son, "Alexander, what is the meaning of this?"

"I just need to talk to my mother alone? Can't I?"

"But, Prime minister, I am trusted by the Lady. And she needs me to take care of her. It is so cold..."

"I can take care of my mother." Alexander Sterling called out sharply before ordering his guards, "Escort the maid away from here. I don't want anyone within a hundred meters of this room."

Before the maid could scream or Queen Rosalind could say anything, the guards moved swiftly covering the maid's mouth to stop her from creating a ruckus.

Queen Rosalind was angered at this and walked over to the large throne- like chair in the room. Once she'd taken her place, she asked arrogantly, "What is the meaning of this? First you interrupt my sleep and then you manhandle my servants. Have you lost your mind, Alex?"

Instead of answering, Alexander picked up a stack of papers from the small coffee table and threw them in front of the Queen. "Me? I think you're the one who is not thinking straight, mother."

Queen Rosalind looked down at the papers before lifting her chin and staring at her son, "What about it? I've always acted in the best interest of our family and this country."

"This? This is in our best interest? This trash talk about Nora being characterless and sleeping with multiple men and even trying to seduce her cousin? This is in our family's best interest mother. You promised me after the last time, that you would let me handle the situation about Nora. Then why are you asking your dear maid to send such garbage to the media under your name?"

"I have not said any untruth! That girl is indeed being shameless. First, she is sleeping with the gardener. And then, did you know that tonight she went to meet Augustus tonight to push him to marry Evangeline? And then she tried to seduce Alpin! He called me himself and told me that he'd even succeeded in capturing everything on the video to expose her but that someone hacked the camera. And while all this is happening under your nose, what are you doing Alex? I can't stand idly by and watch you ruin everything I have worked for!"

Alex looked at his mother in disappointment as he rubbed a hand over his face, "I don't know what to say to you mother. You've made alliances, struck deals, and undermined the trust of those who have supported you. And in your blind ambition, you've forgotten the difference between right and wrong."

Queen Rosalind stood up regally as she stared at her son, "I have done what was necessary to secure a bright future for our family. Why do you not support me in this? I know you never had any interest in ruling but Evangeline is well trained to become the next ruler. Why must we let some beggar challenge her?"

"Because, Mother, your actions have consequences. You've hurt people, innocent people without regard. The woman you are calling a beggar? She also has the Sterling blood and the right to inherit the throne. But she has no interest in fighting Evangeline. In fact, she could have been the biggest support to her. However, in your blindness, you ended up hurting her. And you are continuing to do so. You've left me no choice, mother. I can't allow you to walk down this path."

Queen Rosalind felt a shiver of fear. She knew her son very well. He was usually not angered easily. But now, his tone was much like when her husband was angered. She clutched the shawl around her tighter and tried to hold onto her composure, "What are you threatening me with Alex? I am still the Queen of this country. And your mother. I hold considerable power..."

"Your power has already been seized by Banfi, mother! The man you seem to trust. You've forgotten that if Sterling family were to lose the throne, it would be their family..."

Queen Rosalind's eyes widened as she heard this and she refuted, "No! The Banfis have always supported the Sterlings. They would never covet what is not theirs."

Alexander's expression hardened. Taking out a USB, he handed it to his mother and spoke, "You will know the truth from this. And mother, I'm giving you a choice. Leave the country quietly tonight, and I will ensure you are provided for elsewhere. I'll let everyone know that you've gone for rest and recuperation. Or face house arrest, stripped of your titles and servants. You won't be able to meddle in the affairs of Estania anymore, either way."

Queen Rosalind's eyes narrowed, a mixture of anger and disbelief crossing her face. "You can't be serious. I am the Dowager Queen, your mother. You would treat me like a criminal? How can you do this?"

"I would treat anyone who threatens the stability of our country and the safety of our family as the enemy. The choice is yours, Mother. Leave peacefully or face the consequences of your actions. It is for your own protection."

"You don't understand, Alex! The sacrifices I've made..."

"No, Mother! You do not understand the sacrifices you are asking the others to make! And things are no longer in my control. You don't know who you've offended when you attacked Nora. I've barely been able to save the situation. If you continue down this path... the end will not be good. Leave mother, with your pride and dignity intact while your family and your people still love and respect you."

Chapter 266: Rise And Fall

"Crack!" The slap sounded in the room as Alpin Banfi stared at his son who's just returned after causing such a big loss.

"You fool! I asked you to seduce her and ruin her reputation. Instead, you did not just fail, you even caused my years of relationship with Augustus' father also to deteriorate. Why did you have to involve him? I warned you that it would be too dangerous!"

"Father, I wanted to prove myself to you. I never expected that girl to be dangerous! And you know I do not want to marry her. There is no guarantee that she will ascend or even that the public will like her! She has no class. She is sleeping with the gardener!"

Alpin Banfi glared at his son and wished to hit him across the face once more. "You fool! I would have made sure that she rose to the throne. And once the power was in my hands, you could have discarded

her without having to even look at her again! At least you had the good sense to delete the video evidence and contact the Queen."

"That is what I am saying! Father, Queen Rosalind is in your hands already. And we have enough evidence against her to blackmail her. Why can't we..."

"Junior! You fool! Do you think Queen Rosalind has been queen for so many years without doing anything? She might have been blinded by us but she would definitely have her own backup plans and ways to wiggle out. She's not as foolish as she'd like us to believe. All that evidence needs to be kept safe for future use. For now, the rumors about Eleanora have likely started to spread. Did you do what I asked you to?"

"Yes. Our contact at the Queen's mansion has already sent out the details of the Princess' sordid affair. I've also added details of her abandoning her fiancé at the altar that we received from our resources."

"Have you found out the details of who she was with after leaving with that boy?"

"Not yet. It's all shrouded in mystery. But we are working on it. Our immediate problem is Lucien Frost at the moment, though, Father."

Alpin Banfi shook his head. He's a businessman even if he is with that Evangeline. He won't suffer losses. Once our people start to create problems for them, they will simply abandon their plans and leave them in a lurch. Also, I've asked about. Even if he is genuinely in love with Evangeline, he is answerable to Demetri Frost and that man is known to be ruthless like a Demon. We need to concentrate on Eleanora who is the problematic factor. I had her brought here to be used for our benefit. But..."

Alpin Banfi Jr opened his mouth to say something when, "Sir Banfi! We have bad news."

As a servant rushed in Alpin Banfi's face tightened as a cold mask descended.

"Queen Rosalind has suffered a heart attack?" Banfi asked slowly.

"Yes Sir. It's all over the news."

Alpin Banfi waved the servant away and roared at Banfi Jr. "Why were we not informed of this when it happened? What is your person doing? She is closest to the queen and she should have informed you. Are we paying her to sleep?"

"I'll call her and ask..."

As Alpin Jr called the number repeatedly, no one answered until a person finally did," The woman you are calling has been imprisoned for treason. She tried to poison the queen. If you don't want to be implicated..."

As the ominous voice trailed off on the threat, Alpin Junior shivered in fear before repeating everything verbatim to his father.

Sir Banfi frowned as he heard this before laughing mirthlessly. Alpin junior looked at his father in confusion, wondering if he had lost his mind due to shock.

Finally, the man stopped and looked at his son," Sterling has changed his ways. First with the way he handled Evangeline's scandal and now with putting his own mother in the hospital. The one who handled things carefully and defensively has suddenly gone on attack. Something has changed."

"What do you mean, father?" Alpin Jr asked in confusion.

"You fool! What do I mean? Are you really my son? Alexander Sterling likes to avoid confrontation at every possible moment. Rather than attack someone and get rid of them, he would rather deflect an attack. It is why he has never vied for the position of a ruler. He knows he is not suitable. However, his faults have been covered first by the previous king and now by his daughter, whom Sterling has groomed carefully. The only reason we have been able to plot against them and continue to undermine Sterling's power is because of his own thinking. He'd rather have stability in Estania than create unrest by attacking us."

But now, such a man has suddenly changed his tactics. His weakness which was our biggest strength is gone. It can mean only one thing... Someone else is now the mastermind, directing things behind the scene."

"Junior, our dormant spy is still on Alexander Sterling's staff. Activate him. He should keep a close eye on everyone who meets Alexander and what that person is doing every moment of every day! I even want timings of what time he goes to the washroom! Understood?"

"Yes, of course, father. But how would that help us..."

"If a man suddenly has gained strength in his broken legs, those legs need to be broken again so that he remembers that he is not supposed to stand. Sterling has suddenly grown claws. Well, he will know the consequences soon enough."

Banfi smiled as he thought of what was about to transpire. So many years of waiting as they played this game of chess...It was good that the confrontation was going to come to a head. But what Sterling did not know was that he was too late...and he'd already lost much more than he guessed.

Chapter 267: Public Appearances

"Get out of here! This is what you have planned for our public appearances?" Evangeline looked at the list of 'outings' Lucien had planned and shook her head. She was never going to go to these places with him at any cost! He was planning to seduce her!

Private yacht, sporting events, exclusive couple retreats and even private performances. That was nothing if not an ideal list for someone trying to seduce a woman. He seemed to be sticking to his promise of getting her to fall for him.

Suddenly, she wanted to snatch her own list out of his hands feeling ashamed. How was she supposed to tell him that she'd already fallen for him and thus did not want to spend more quality time with him, endangering her own sanity. So, she'd worked hard through the night to think of things that a guy might hate and then made a list.

"You want to go shopping with me?" Lucien asked with a faint smile, already able to see through the list.

"What? I like shopping."

"Then I would love to go shopping with you. What do you want to buy? Shoes? Clothes? Accessories? I'm up for all. We can make a day out of it, purchase an entire wardrobe and we can even get matching couple outfits..."

Evangeline stared. She could not believe what she was hearing. In the days that they'd spent exploring the city together, she had not once seen him remotely interested in shopping. And now he looked excited about it as if he was her bff and this was a regular hobby for them! She hated shopping! So how could he be so excited for it?

"Don't you think shopping is boring?", she asked cautiously. "I thought all guys considered it the most excruciating form of torture in the world..."

Lucien nodded in agreement, "You are right. It can get boring if the partner is not right. Why would I not want to accompany my girl and watch her have fun doing something she enjoys? In fact, I'd love it if you could model dresses for me. And it will give me great pleasure in choosing some outfits for you..."

As Lucien's voice lowered suggestively, Evangeline shook her head. No wonder the man had agreed readily. He was once again pushing his own agenda. She'd need to avoid shopping in the future.

Thankfully, with Grandma's news, they'd gained a few more days before they would have to flaunt their strong relationship in public. What was she thinking proposing that they think up a plan to make their appearances together? Suddenly it seemed like the worst plan.

She looked as he continued to peruse the list seriously. What was wrong with this man!

Crossing her arms in front of her she glared at the man, determined to not let his charm affect her, "Lucifer! Just because you've promised to make me like you it does not mean that you have to pretend. I know for a fact that you do not like art and do not understand it! You told me that previously yourself! And yet, you are agreeing to go to an art exhibition."

Lucien placed down the list in his hand and smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corner, "So you do remember the things I told you. Is that why everything I hate or might hate is on the list here?"

Evangeline blushed! She'd already accepted that she was feeling ashamed. What was she supposed to do? He'd added everything that she might enjoy or like while she'd gone in the opposite direction. But she needed to make things difficult for him or else things might end badly.

Raising her chin, she replied, " Well, I enjoy these things and many of them are what I do regularly as part of my duties. So, just because we are engaged if I stop doing them, people might think something is fishy..."

"Hmm. I agree with that. But if you do nothing out of the blue, that would be fishy too. So, we will follow both our lists, ticking one thing off from each list in sequence."

"No! My list should suffice..."

"This is not up for discussion angel." Lucien finished off before walking around the table. Evangeline stiffened. Dam* it! This man was too quick! She was careful to have put the distance of a table between them and yet, he was suddenly walking around it before she could think of another way to escape...

"But..."

"No buts... until we are talking about your delightful but*..." Lucien told her making her glare at him. Haughtily, she raised her chin, intending to look down on him. Sadly, the effect was ruined as he towered over her. Lucien extended his hand and quickly caught hers, entwining their fingers together as he said, " Let's go now. We need to get to the hospital. Its already been a day since your grandmother is in the hospital."

Evangeline tried to tug her hand out of his grasp but that proved to be useless so she simply let him pull her along, " You know we can avoid going there. Daddy's already put out notice that she is not allowed to meet outsiders. She's already throwing a fit because of that."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate a visit from her favourite granddaughter."

Evangeline snorted, "Now you are exaggerating."

Lucien shook his head and added, "Also, avoiding the hospital might come back to bite you in the a**.. And we wouldn't want that... I'd rather keep it all to myself."

"My a** belongs to me, thank you very much!"

"Of course, it belongs to you. Otherwise, it would not be tempting. I want to take you on a ride...The way you looked on the bike, its given me a few fantasies... Will you play them out with me? I promise I'll play any fantasies you might have..."

Evangeline giggled at his hopeful expression even as she felt the urge to shake her head. He had a talent for making everything sound dirty and yet innocent...

Chapter 268: A Threat

"Mother! You are fooling no one in the family with your act. You know the doctors have already refused to collude with you. I've requested you already. This needs to stop right now! I've made the arrangements already. You're leaving tonight."

"I don't know what you are talking about Alex. I really am in a lot of pain. What has the doctor told you? Is it my heart again?" Queen Rosalind asked feebly.

Alexander sighed as he looked at his mother doing an award-winning performance and shook his head. His mother should have gone into acting.

"Cut the act, mother. There is nothing wrong with your heart. The doctors think it is perfectly fine. If you are in pain, at most it is due to your stomach acting up. So, be prepared."

Queen Rosalind raised her chin, setting her jaw, "I am not going to run away from my country like a thief! I've done so much for this place. I've dedicated my youth to the growth of Estania. Now when it is the time for me to enjoy the fruits of my labor, you want to exile me? I've already promised you that I will not concoct any more schemes. All I want to do is stay here and not in some foreign country away from my people. Is that too much to ask?"

"It is when you don't stop scheming. You promised me the last time as well, that you would stop your alliance with those people. But did you? No. You've become a puppet in their hands which makes it dangerous to Estania!"

"You are the one who has become a fool! I've already told you the Banfi's are our supporters. They would never covet and conspire for the throne."

"Then you can continue with that belief but you will not stay in Estania!"

"Call Alpin! I will ask him for an explanation about Nora's husband myself! All this time, you have not given me any evidence that Nora's husband was killed intentionally while Alpin has already confessed that he did not even know that Nora was married! Her husband's death and her memory loss were accidents. But you tell me! Isn't she already fighting for the throne with Evangeline? How can you side with an outsider like her?"

"Because he knows what is good for this country and his family, Grandmother," a quiet female voice spoke from the doorway." As Nora entered the hospital room, she looked at Queen Rosalind intently.

Ever since her memory had returned, she had been avoiding the Queen. Only because of her uncle. The man had doted over her like a father and she could not repay his kindness by attacking a woman whom he was trying to protect. But the woman seemed to not realize her precarious position.

Because of Queen Rosalind, she'd almost lost Demetri forever! He'd been shot twice and they'd been separated for so long. Queen Rosalind needed more than her uncle threatening her to persuade her to leave the country.

It was time to channel the Queen b*tch in her towards her dear grandmother. Her arrival had silenced the room and quickly she cast an assuring look to her uncle before turning back to Queen Rosalind.

Deliberately, she strolled towards the bed, watching the defiance in her grandmother's eyes.

"My husband was shot in the back was an accident? A fortunate one, wouldn't you say? Since that freed me to be married to the next person you or those Banfi's chose?" While the words were simple, the frigidness with which they were spoken was anything but. For the first time in her life, Queen Rosalind felt a shiver race up her spine.

Trying to not show her discomfort, she turned to her son and complained," Look at how this woman is threatening me. And you want to support her?"

Alexander Sterling had been stunned. He'd never have guessed that Nora could also emanate such an aura. It could have been Demetri Frost himself standing here at this moment. He still remembered when the man had first been revived. He'd create a wreck just looking for Nora even when he himself had been half dead.

"Nora... lets not make this more difficult..."

"No, uncle. My Grandmother needs to understand that some of her actions have repercussions..." Nora cut off Alexander Sterling before she turned back to the Queen, now looking down on the queen," Queen Rosalind, listen to me very carefully. The only reason you are alive until now is because Demetri survived despite your interference. And yet, you do not seem to grasp what you have done."

"You've become a pawn in the game that the Banfi's have set up. Your foolishness and stubbornness have harmed someone not even related all these ploys and is threatening the stability of this country. Have you even given it a thought what will happen if there is unrest and infighting among the people? It will give a chance to rebels and outside forces to finish off Estania and tear it apart piece by piece."

"No! I've ruled here with my husband for years. I understand politics..."

"You understand nothing!" Nora scoffed. "Let me make things clear for you. Alexander Sterling has been lenient towards you. I, however, will not be. One single wrong move, even a single breath in the wrong direction and I will personally come and torture you until you beg me for mercy."

As Nora's voice dripped with venom, Queen Rosalind shivered before shaking her head in denial," You... You can't do that." Turning to her son, she pointed at Nora, " Did you see that? She is threatening me so openly. What will she do with our gentle Evangeline? You! You upstart! You cannot do anything to me. I won't let you. I will..."

Before Queen Rosalind could make any threats, Nora leaned close to her ear and whispered," Would you like a demonstration? Watch."

Straightening up, Nora grabbed the fruit knife on the side table and quickly stabbed it downwards, making the Queen scream and even Alexander Sterling rush forward with worry.

A moment later, Nora looked down at the queen who was whimpering and said softly, "Oops. I'm sorry I missed, Grandmother. Next time I promise I won't."

With that, Nora left the room without a backward glance leaving Alexander Sterling standing there stunned.

It was a long time later that Queen Rosalind finally opened her eyes and saw the glinting blade of the knife, half stabbed into the mattress, right next to her leg... and shivered.

Chapter 269: A Realisation

"I want to see Alpin before I leave."

Alexander sighed. His mother had been sufficiently scared into silence by Nora's visit since this morning, not protesting a single arrangement that he explained. While on the one hand he felt relieved, on the other he could not help but worry that this was the calm before the storm.

"You cannot, mother. I believe I've already explained everything. Outside of here, everyone thinks that you've just had a minor heart scare and so leaving the country for rest and recuperation. Banfi has been told the same thing. Why won't you believe me, mother? He is too dangerous. If you..."

"Be quiet! I am not going to expose myself to him! I've been careful to protect myself in the past as well. But since I've agreed to all your arrangements, this is the least you can do! Just bring him here."

"Mother...", he warned but also hesitated, torn between his duty as a son and the potential danger of bringing Alpin Banfi into the picture. Despite his reservations, he reluctantly nodded and left the room to arrange Alpin's visit.

A short while later, Alpin Banfi was escorted into the room with a few guards. Quickly, he approached the queen with a concerned expression, "Aunt! How are you doing? We've been so worried about your health. We rushed over as soon as we heard the news but those doctors wouldn't let us stay! They have no consideration for the feelings of the family."

Alexander Sterling watched his cousin's performance and snorted. The man really could put up an act. He'd tried creating a ruckus in front of the media in the morning, only for them to be shooed away by the hospital security. And now, he was performing in front of his mother. It was like watching a show with star A-list actors.

"I'm doing alright Alpin. Please have a seat", Rosalind replied as she turned to Alexander, " Alex. Please leave us."

"Mother..."

"Minister Sterling, it's alright. Queen Rosalind is my aunt. I won't trouble her."

Both Banfi and Queen Rosalind stared at him and he could only sigh and walk out with a look of warning at his mother.

Once the door closed behind him, Queen Rosalind's demeanour turned stern, " Banfi. Answer me this. Did you or did you not know about Eleanora's husband?"

"Aunt, I've already..."

"Banfi! Tell me the truth. Because if you did have a hand in an attack on her husband then you need to know that the attack failed and the man survived."

Rosalind was sure that Banfi would breathe a sigh of relief. She remembered how he'd bitterly explained the process then. And how he had not expected the soldiers to not care about her husband and end up killing him.

Once Banfi proved himself, she would warn him that Nora's memory had returned and that he would need to be careful about her. There was also the entire stupi* plan that Alpin Junior had concocted of which Banfi would have to clean up the mess.

However, as she watched keenly, she noticed Banfi's expression falter. At that moment, she came to the horrible realization that her son had been right all along. She'd been hoodwinked.

Clenching her hands under the blanket, she felt remorse and guilt. All these years, she had never tried to take someone's life. She refused to fall that far in politics. And yet, at this age, she had unintentionally become a part of a murder plot. When she'd first heard the news about Nora's husband being involved, she'd consoled herself that it was an unfortunate accident. But now...

"Well, I think it's a pity that he did not die. That would create problems in the future. If Eleanora's memory returns before she is married to Augustus, then it would mean a disaster. You should have punished the person who failed to do their job correctly. If he'd attacked the man, he should have finished it."

Banfi stared at the ruthless queen before nervously clearing his throat, "What are you saying, aunt?"

Rosalind cast a meaningful glance his way before turning her head and looking away, "Nothing Banfi. I've invited you here for a personal reason, a favour."

"Of course, aunt. Your wish is my command." Rosalind looked at the man and suddenly realized how beady his eyes were. Was she really this blind in the past?

"Banfi, take care of my Evangeline in the future. My health is giving out."

Banfi leaned forward, in a show of feigned concern while Rosalind did not miss the flicker of excitement in his eyes. She felt overwhelmed suddenly. She'd really wronged Nora and the others under this man's instigation. As tears filled her eyes, she heard Banfi murmur, 'Aunt! You will recover soon. The doctors have assured me...'

"The doctors have been instructed to lie so as not to set panic. My time is limited Alpin. Promise me that you will always support Evangeline! You will take care of her. It is why I called you here. I do not trust my son."

"Of course, aunt! I will always support Evangeline! You don't even have to ask."

"Thank you, Banfi. I can go from this world peacefully."

"Don't say that, aunt! May you live a hundred years. I'll take your leave now. And I'll pray for you."

"Thank you."

As she watched Banfi leave, a cold look entered her eyes. She'd made a grave mistake in trusting that man. But he'd made an even bigger mistake by using her.

"Don't worry, Banfi. I will definitely live a hundred years. You, on the other hand..."

As Alexander entered the room, with a worried look on his face, she smiled sadly, "I've caused you enough worry, Alex. Don't worry. I've not said much to that man. I let myself be manipulated, blinded by ambition and misguided loyalty. I failed you and your father. I won't create more trouble for you. I hope you will come visit me when everything is settled."

Alexander Sterling nodded cautiously, wondering if his mother was putting on an act. She noticed this but this time, did not try to assure him and simply closed her eyes, "I have one final request. I'd like to visit your father's grave before leaving."

Chapter 270: Virtual Reality

"Get here asap!" As Nora clicked the send arrow on her phone's screen, she couldn't help but grin. The message sounded just right, she hoped. It was urgent and yet not screaming that she was in danger. She looked around one more time in satisfaction before getting everything ready.

Rubbing her hands in anticipation, she slumped on the couch and looked at the watch. Two minutes tops... As the clock ticked by, at just half past a minute, she could hear the sound of running footsteps.

Her door banged open at exactly two minutes and she quickly jumped up and screamed, "Surprise."

Demetri looked around wildly, not knowing what to expect but as his gaze fell to her grinning face and the dim lighting, his thundering heartbeat slowed down. With a smile, he leaned against the door and crossed his arms in front of his chest, "Surprise? Kitten, what is the occasion?"

"I'll tell you that later. Come here quickly."

As Demetri sauntered in, Nora was not satisfied with his slow speed and quickly covered the distance between them as she jumped into his arms, "Why are you channelling a tortoise suddenly? Move faster."

Demetri grinned and quickly stole a kiss from his wife, "Well, you are full of energy like a bunny. So I have to compensate that. What have you planned tonight, my dear kitten?"

Grinning, Nora had a wicked idea and quickly pushed Demetri backwards onto the couch. "I've planned a strip tease..."

She almost giggled at his eager expression. Breaking out into uncontrolled laughter, "You should look at yourself in the mirror! I never could have imagined that The Demon Frost would have a fantasy like that!"

Demetri put on a disappointed expression, realizing that a strip tease by his kitten was nowhere in his near future and quickly pulled her into his lap, "Well, when its you, I have all the fantasies. I'd even settle for a lap dance..."

Naughtily, Nora wiggled her bu** on his lap, teasing him before she quickly slid away, "I'll keep that request in mind for future reference. But tonight's program does not include my a** anywhere near your lap..."

"What a disappointment..." Demetri murmured even as he continued to gaze at his wife with a smitten look. Knowing his eyes were fixed on her and what they'd been discussing, she purposely bent over extra to pick up the things she'd hidden in a corner, wiggling her bottom some more, making him groan and threaten, "You better behave yourself or we might miss out on the surprise that you've planned."

Straightening quickly, she walked over to him with a large thing in her hand, quickly placed the virtual reality headsets over his eyes and ears, adjusting them to fit him better, "There. Now you won't be distracted by the real me. Wait a moment, let me wear mine and then..."

Demetri leaned back and watched, infected with her excitement. So, she wanted to try virtual games. He was up for it.

Unexpectedly, as a figure appeared on the screen, his eyes widened. Why did this person look so much like Nora? As he was about to ask, he felt her small hand slip into his as she leaned close to him and whispered, "Just watch."

Her voice was muffled by the headsets, but since that was what she wanted, he would watch. He watched the virtual Nora sitting on a beach alone, a picture of loneliness. Soon a great wave rose in the distance, threatening to drown her. Demetri almost screamed as he watched her turn towards the wave. She needed to run. It took him a moment to settle down, to remind himself that she wasn't really in danger and he leaned back as he watched the waves drown her.

As he dreaded seeing what happened next, he realized that the scene had changed. Instead of being drenched, she seemed to be in some kind of an underwater world, reading as she leaned against something. It was a merman that looked exactly like him. A smile appeared on his face as the words appeared below, "You found me and brought me into your world. Keeping me safe. I feared the waves and you made them my home, making me forget the fear."

The scene changed again, this time, the place looked similar to his house where they'd started living together. Nora appeared here again... this time looking for something... once again, she found him as he entered the house and she ran to him, found you..."

The scene changed once again, this time it was him (without a merman tail, thankfully) in a large green forest. He encountered her in a clearing, fighting wild animals. Quickly, he joined in, killing all the dangerous beings with one single powerful move. The animated Nora came to him and extended her hand, offering a partnership.

Next, they found themselves over a lake, fighting a large dragon that breathed fire. Both of them were separated by it but struggled to get to each other, vanquishing the dragon from both sides. And once they'd done it, they raced to each other...

The virtual scene changed again and this time, their avatars stood in an old castle, looking at an entire battle scene outside.

Every time the virtual scene changed, Nora shifted closer to Demetri until she reached the last scene. She could feel the tension in his body as he sat ram rod straight. It was the end when the virtual her

spoke quietly," Anything might try to separate us, we'll find our way back to each other... Together till the End."

Nora gently removed the virtual reality headsets off herself and Demetri, revealing a mix of emotions on Demetri's face. His eyes were filled with a mixture of awe, love, and a hint of vulnerability. As the real world blended back into focus, he turned to Nora, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"That was... incredible," Demetri whispered, his gaze lingering on her. "Thank you, kitten."

Nora grinned and softly kissed his lips, letting herself lean into embrace.