The problem wasn’t that someone had tried to kill him; the problem was that the someone who had noticed hadn’t been me.

I had known that someone would try to kill him, sooner or later, but I had really thought it would be later.

And I had thought it would be a staged hunting accident, or a knife plunged in his side in a crowded street, or his carriage careening off a cliff on a cold, dark night. At least, that’s how I would have done it, if I had been going to kill my husband. I hadn’t expected poison, but that just goes to show that for all I try, I don’t expect everything.

He didn’t drink it, of course. It was close, but he had barely one sip in his mouth before someone noticed and knocked the cup out of his hand, and he spat the mouthful of wine all over my new and favorite pale-gray dress.

The problem wasn’t that someone had tried to kill him; the problem was that the someone who noticed hadn’t been me.

He came to my study later that night, and looked at me calmly, assessingly, but with a hint of flinty anger in his eyes that I hadn’t seen since the demon left him. Of course, the anger then hadn’t been flinty and cold, but searing hot rage, but there was still a similarity there that I didn’t like all that much.

“Poison is a woman’s weapon,” he said to me, voice measured and stern.

“Yes,” I said, and waited.

He took a deep breath, and shut the door behind him. “Did you—“
“No,” I told him. “No, it wasn’t me.”

He laughed then, a small and utterly mirthless noise. “But then, you wouldn’t tell me if it had been.”

“No, of course not, but if I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead,” I said, brutally honest. “And besides, poison may be a woman’s weapon, but that doesn’t mean it would be mine.”

He nodded at me, then. “You have a point.”

I closed the ledger I had been poring over and stood up, crossing over to stand nearer to him, to look him straight in the eyes.

“Did you really think that it was me?”

“Not really,” he admitted, “but I thought it would be best to check.”

“Mirnatus,” I said, “do you trust me?”

He laughed again, no louder than before, but there was a hint of genuine humor in the sound this time. “Why, of course not!”

“Good,” I said, “because I don’t trust you either.”

“Oh, please,” he said dismissively, “of course you don’t. How could you? How could either of us ever trust the other?”

“I don’t know,” I said, and the words came out more genuine than I intended, frustration and sadness slipping into my voice.

“It would be nice, though, wouldn’t it?” he said, and his voice was almost—wistful. “To have a marriage based on mutual respect and trust. To have a marriage based on—love—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said. “Neither of us have ever had any hope of that.”

“But it would be nice, wouldn’t it?” he pressed me. “Wouldn’t it?”

“Of course,” I admitted. “But that doesn’t mean—”

“I know perfectly well what it doesn’t mean,” he cut me off. “Let me know if you figure out who has it in for me.”

“Everyone in this damned court has it in for you,” I snapped. “But if I had to guess, I would wager on one of the southern barons.”

“I thought so, too,” he said, “but it’s nice to have the confirmation,” and left.

Honestly, the whole matter had me more annoyed than anything else. He was my husband, yes, but that didn’t mean I liked him. Of course he didn’t like him; he was a spoiled, selfish, cruel little boy with a bad sense of humor and no ability to properly budget his own closet, let alone a nation.

But just because I wasn’t sure I wanted him didn’t mean that I wanted someone else to take him away from me. I’d gone toe to toe with a fire demon for him; I wasn’t prepared to let him go that easily because some Southern baron thought he could stage a coup.
I mean, a Southern baron! The foolishness! The audacity! It was absolutely unforgivable, is what it was. I had yet to execute anyone in my first few months as tsarina, but when we caught the assassin who’d tried to do this—well. I was prepared to do away with my unblemished record.

Because when I’d been standing there, in front of Chernobog, I had been so impossibly scared, but I had also been sure. I had been sure that it would work, because Mirnatius had been mine in the eyes of the law and the church and a magical contract, and maybe I hadn’t wanted him when I’d made the deal and I wasn’t sure I wanted him now, either, but he was mine anyway.

He was mine, and regardless of whether I wanted him I sure wasn’t going to let anyone else have him, least of all a horrible fire demon or a Southern baron—a Southern baron!—and that was that.

I’d known that someone would try to kill me, too. For Mirnatius, I’d assumed they would get creative. But for me, I’d always known it would be poison. It only seemed right; poison is a woman’s weapon, so they say, but what they mean is that it’s a coward’s weapon. I’m no coward, but it seemed appropriate nonetheless.

That’s why I was so surprised when someone stole through the crowd at the market and slid a knife into my side.

Well—they tried to, at least. My guards missed them but Mirnatius didn’t, and he was able to divert them enough so all I got was a long gash down my left arm and a bloody rip in my new and second-favorite medium-gray dress.

Wasteful.

It wasted more than silk, too; it wasted my time. I was rushed back to the palace and bandaged and treated—understandable—and then, when I had recovered from the shock and the pain and was quite ready to get up and go back to my day, Magreta wouldn’t allow me to.

He came into my room, after I’d spent hours staring pointlessly out the window, bored to tears, because not only would she not let me out of bed but Magreta wouldn’t bring me so much as a single ledger to go over. So I was honestly glad to see him, not due to any action on his part, but simply because I was glad for anything to do. I’d hated sitting around idly for my father, feeling useless and burdensome with no end in sight, and I didn’t like it significantly more now that I knew it was temporary.

“They tried to kill you,” Mirnatius said, and the flinty anger I’d seen in his eyes before was back but somehow even colder, even more rock-hard and calm and measured than before. It was frightening, and I liked it. “A group of idiotic, foolish, shortsighted, Southern barons—”

“I know,” I said, cutting him off. “Honestly, it’s just embarrassing.”

“But you’re all right,” he said, and it wasn’t a question, so I didn’t bother answering him.

“You could have just let me die, you know,” I told him instead. “It probably would have saved you a lot of trouble.”

He looked at me then, his mouth twisting at the corners, and said, “I can’t let you die, Irina. I owe you a debt.”

He did, of course, but plenty of men never pay their debts. There’s no reason he would be any different.
But then, he knew about debts, about deals, about someone else owning your life and your soul and your *everything*, and in some ways when I had killed Chernobog, he’d simply traded one creditor for another.

“I won’t collect it, you know,” I said, my voice softer than I intended.

“I know,” he said. “That’s why I don’t mind paying.”

“So you do trust me, after all,” I said.

He glared at me, but didn’t deny it. “Do *you* trust *me*?” he asked, instead.

“No,” I told him, “not completely. But I trust you more than I trust anyone else. Is that good enough for now?”

And that’s when Mirnatius did something very strange. He sat down on the end of my bed and leaned in, looking me straight in the eyes, and then he reached out a hand and tucked a stray wisp of hair back behind my ear.

His hand on the side of my face was warm, and dry, and gentle, and unexpected; and what was more unexpected was that I didn’t hate it, not at all. I wanted him to touch me more, to touch me with that caring purpose again, to—

“If you trust me the most, then that’s good enough for ever,” he said, and smiled.

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