If It's Foolish Love (Then Call Me A Fool)
by WinterSky101

Summary

The night that Irina banished Chernobog may have seemed like an ending, but in truth, it was the beginning of a new chapter.

Notes

This fic will, in part, be delving into some of Mirnatius's trauma, including trauma relating to non-consensual sex (i.e., Chernobog possessing him and using his body to drain people during sex). I will do my best to tag everything as it comes up, but if anyone thinks any additional tags are necessary, please tell me and I'll add them. If this sort of content may be triggering to you, please take care of yourself and be aware of what you're getting into.

The title comes from a line from the song "Fool" by Handsome Ghost; the full line is: "If it's foolish love that we're both guilty of / Then call me a fool."

See the end of the work for more notes
The ever-present coil of heat in my stomach was gone.

I hadn't realized before that it hurt. I'd always thought the constant burning ache was just part of being human. I thought everyone felt it. I didn't know, although it seemed foolish to admit it, that it was a consequence of having a demon made of fire nestling amongst my innards. But now Chernobog was gone, and so was the burning.

This was how I could have felt my whole life, if my mother hadn't sold me off to a demon before I was even born.

I didn't realize I was crying, not at first. Nor did I realize that I was still clinging to Irina's hands. Her ring was a cool band around my finger. Next to us, her nurse was sniveling, and a scullery-maid was trembling, but I only had eyes for Irina, the woman who had saved me, the woman who—

The woman who probably still wanted me dead, even if I didn't have a demon inside of me anymore. There was no reason to think her plans had changed. The knife was still coming. I wasn't foolish enough to believe otherwise.

I pulled my hands away. "Do we still have to fear the Staryk?"

"I don't know," Irina said. At least she was practical and able to focus on what was important. She wasn't just crying, like her useless nurse.

"Then you just got rid of our best weapon against him before we knew if we still needed it," I said acidly.

"I saved you," Irina shot back. "I saved our kingdom. Don't you dare—"

"I am still tsar," I said, making my voice cloyingly sweet. "Do not think to tell me what I can and cannot dare to do."

Irina stared at me, clearly furious, then she swallowed down her anger and clenched her jaw. "I think we all ought to rest," she said. "The past few days have been very long."

I nodded in agreement and tried to walk to the bed, but my legs gave out under me as soon as I tried to move them. Quick as a flash, Irina ducked under me to catch me before I fell, but I pulled away from her.

"I can walk."

Irina looked coolly disbelieving, but she let me struggle and turned to her nurse and the scullery-maid. "Both of you should get some rest," she said. "Magreta, can you help…" She looked at the scullery-maid for a moment. "What's your name?"

"Maria, Your Majesty," the scullery-maid whispered. "Your Majesty, what…"

"Magreta, can you tend to Maria?" Irina asked. "I'm sure she'll need someone to help calm her."

"Of course," Magreta said. She still looked terrified, to an extent that I found ridiculous. The danger was over, and she had hardly been in danger anyway. If anyone ought to be frightened, it would be me. I was the one who had been stripped of my only power and protection, and I was the
one who was married to a woman who had proven she would do anything if she thought it was in the best interests of the people.

And I was the one who was going to be left alone with her.

Magreta and Maria left the room, leaving me and Irina alone. I'd nearly made it to the bed by this point, but I paused and turned back around to face her.

"Are you going to kill me now?" I asked. "Finish what Chernobog couldn't do?"

Irina didn't look offended at the question, nor did she immediately respond with a protest. I appreciated her honesty. I was too tired to play around tonight.

"I'm not going to kill you," Irina said. "You should sleep."

"And will you sleep with me, wife?"

Irina didn't even flinch. "Goodnight, husband," she said, and then she was gone, and for the first time in my life, I was truly alone.

I woke up the next morning, and I was cold.

I had never really been cold before. Chernobog had always kept me warm. I knew that the Staryks had frozen the world, but that had never really affected me, not like it affected everyone else.

But there was no fire demon in my gut anymore, and sometime over the course of the night, the embers in the fireplace had gone from dying to dead. My bed had never had too many blankets on it, a fact which had mystified my servants, because in the past all they'd ever done was make me overheated. Now, though, I wished I had some of those furs I'd refused in the past.

I was curling up under the few covers I had, contemplating the wisdom of getting up to find more blankets, when Irina entered the room. "Are you awake?" she asked, looking to the bed.

"No," I muttered, completely unrepentant in my petulance.

"You need to get up," Irina commanded. She was good at commanding people, and most people seemed content to do what she wanted. I, however, didn't fall into that category, so I didn't move.

"We still have wedding festivities to attend," Irina continued. "Marrying Vassilia off to your cousin instead of you was insult enough already. If we skip the celebrations-"

"Didn't we celebrate enough yesterday?" I groaned, dragging myself into a sitting position. I was still sore, and I was cold, and I had no desire to perform for the court today. I wasn't quite sure how such a performance would go. My mother's contract with Chernobog had secured my position as tsar, but now that Chernobog was gone, I had no such safety. No one liked me, I knew that. How long would they accept me as tsar? How long before I was overthrown?

And if I were overthrown, which side would my wife be on?

The winning side, I knew that immediately. Irina would look over both sides and decide which one seemed more likely to come out victorious, and she would throw her lot over with them. Not too openly, I would guess, so she could change sides again if she had to, but I trusted that she would make a good choice in the first place. I just couldn't trust that the winning side would be mine.

"We need to be there for the celebrations," Irina said firmly. Then something softened in her face
slightly. It was an expression I had never seen before, not directed at me. Irina always looked at me with disdain, and this… This was strange.

"Are you still unwell?" she asked, sounding tentative for perhaps the first time since I'd met her. "From… what happened last night."

"When you traded Chernobog's ownership of me over to yourself?" I asked, hoping it would cut.

Irina flushed a little, and I knew it had. "I don't own you, husband."

"Then call me by my name."

Irina blinked. "What?"

"You always refer to me by what I am to you," I said. "Your lord, your husband. If you don't own me, call me by my name."

Irina seemed to take a moment to think about that, then she set her shoulders and said, firmly, "Mirmatius, get up and come downstairs for your cousin's wedding celebration."

I didn't think it was the first time I'd heard my name on her lips, although I was hard-pressed to recall when the last time had been. I wasn't sure if I liked it or not.

"Very well, wife-"

"Irina."

I raised an eyebrow.

"If I am to call you by your name," Irina continued, clearly still a little flustered, "then you should call me by mine."

I inclined my head a little, conceding the point. I'd do my best to make her regret it, but I'd concede for now.

"Very well, Irina. Give me a chance to dress, and I'll go downstairs for the stupid wedding celebrations."

Irina's lips were a thin line, and I had the definite feeling that she didn't appreciate me calling the wedding celebrations "stupid" - although they most certainly were, it wasn't like anyone was really happy about Vassilia and Ilias's marriage - but she inclined her head slightly and left the room. I looked around and groaned. The prospect of getting out of bed seemed an exhausting one, but the prospect of Irina coming back into my room and harassing me about it again was even worse, so I got up and staggered over to the wardrobe. I passed a scorch mark on the floor that I didn't let myself look at too closely, then I threw the wardrobe doors open.

A few servants entered the room as I looked through my clothes, obviously sent by Irina. "I want to wear something warm," I declared.

The servants looked at each other. "Warm, Your Majesty?" one of them repeated after a moment. He sounded confused. I supposed that made sense; I never dressed particularly warmly, and today was fairly temperate. Still, what cold there was felt bitter to me, given that I had never felt it before. Heat had always been my bane, not the Staryk's chill. I was still getting used to having that switched.
"Warm," I stated. "Now."

The servants scurried around like headless chickens for a few moments, trying frantically to find something that fit my qualifications, then they finally came out with clothes made of a thicker material than most of my clothes. They were warm enough to block out the chill, but not so warm that I felt hot. I didn't want to feel hot ever again.

"I'll need more blankets for my bed as well," I declared. "Have them brought up before tonight."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

I waved a hand, and the servants scurried off. As they left the room, Irina reentered. She wore her Staryk crown, but not her necklace. Her ring, I realized, was still around my finger.

"Why do you want blankets?" she asked. The curiosity in her voice sounded innocent enough, but I had learned better than to think my wife innocent.

"It turns out that removing a fire demon from one's body leaves one rather cold," I said bitterly. "I'll need new winter clothes made."

"You need to start rewearing your clothing," Irina said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? Do I?"

"The treasury can bear the strain, barely, but it shouldn't have to," Irina continued. "I don't know why you refuse to wear the same clothes more than once, but it's ridiculous. And now that you're married, you have the perfect reason to change your habits."

"So the world can think I let my wife rule me?"

"No, so the world can think that you've finally found some sense," Irina retorted. "New clothes every day are an outrageous expense."

As much as I hated to admit it, there wasn't really any reason I couldn't do as she was asking. I'd never worn my clothing more than once so no one would expect me to, and thus no one would be confused when certain pieces of clothing disappeared. Confusion would lead to curiosity, and that could lead to someone discovering the fiery death that so many of my clothes faced. Now, however, Chernobog couldn't burn my clothes anymore. I could wear them more than once.

But I wasn't about to just give in to Irina that easily.

"I'm the tsar," I said, my voice languid and lazy. "I can bear an outrageous expense."

"Are you really secure enough in your position to think that?" Irina countered.

Ah, here it was. "Should I have reason to believe otherwise?" I asked, keeping my voice as innocent as I could manage. "Is there something you know that I don't?"

"All I know are things that anyone with eyes should know," Irina said sharply. "You have angered half of your nobility, and the other half doesn't have much loyalty to you either. How do you expect to stay in power if you don't have anyone backing you?"

"And what happened to my most stalwart supporter?" I countered silkily. "I had protection, wife, until you decided your claim was stronger than any other's. Chernobog may have been many things, but he was no oathbreaker, and as long as he lived, I would have remained on the throne."
"You cannot be upset that I freed you from him," Irina said, sounding half shocked and half irritated. "I saw how Chernobog beat you. I saw what he did to you. You cannot be upset."

"I can be whatever I wish, Irina," I replied. "I am the tsar. If you wish to try to depose me, be my guest, but until then, do not think to control me."

Irina pressed her lips together. The shock on her face had given way to the irritation. "Come downstairs," she said. "It's time for breakfast. And do try to be pleasant."

"I will be as pleasant as I always am," I replied.

I had the feeling Irina was only barely able to keep from rolling her eyes.

When we got downstairs, we were both immediately swept up into the wedding celebrations. Ilias and Vassilia looked as pleased as they could be, given the circumstances. A large breakfast spread had been laid out, and now that Irina and I had arrived, people were able to begin eating. I took a lazy bite of oatmeal only to nearly spit it back out. I'd never realized that food could be so hot. Nothing had ever been hot to me before, nothing but Chernobog. For the first time, I understood why people blew on certain foods before eating them.

Irina, of course, made pleasant conversation with the people around her and promptly charmed everyone in sight. Even Prince Ulrich seemed unable to hate her, and she had stolen what he no doubt saw as his daughter's rightful place as tsarina. That lack of anger didn't seem to extend to me, but I was fairly certain that no one would be able to make a successful move against me until Irina wished it. Half the table probably did too; I'd never been much of a ruler, and my sudden, forced interest in ruling could easily be traced back to the moment she and I wedded. I thought back to my complaints earlier and supposed there wasn't much of a point in trying to keep up appearances that I was the one in charge in this relationship. If I allowed it to appear as if my clothing habits had changed because of her influence, I doubted anyone would be surprised.

"Husband," Irina said at my side, with an irritated inflection that made me think this wasn't the first time she'd tried to get my attention, "what on earth can you be thinking of that distracts you so?"

"Oh, what any man in my situation would think of," I replied easily, casting a lewd look in Irina's direction. There were a few titters from the people sitting around us, but Irina didn't seem particularly amused. I was probably the only person close enough to her to see how the muscles on either side of her mouth tightened. Well, it was of little matter to me; if she wanted to drag me out among the nobility, I would go, but I had made no promises to behave.

"My father is asking how long we intend to stay here," Irina said. "I'm certain you wish to return to the capital with haste, don't you?"

"Oh, with great haste," I replied, although in truth, it was all the same to me. I doubted being deposed by my own wife would be any more or less pleasant in the capital than here. I knew why Irina wanted to leave, though. Entertaining the tsar and his guests couldn't be cheap for her father, and Irina was always so concerned about money. I found it incredibly boring, but I was certain my financial advisors would love to speak with someone who actually gave a damn what they had to say.

"Perhaps tomorrow, then?" Irina asked. "Unless you have any other business to attend to here?"

"You know full well I do not," I replied. I hated playing these games for the court. We'd done what
we came here to do. Vassilia and Ilias were married, and our affair with the Staryk king was over, for better or for worse. There was no reason we had to stay any longer, and Irina knew it as well as I did.

"If you don't mind, I might take along a few servants from my father's household," Irina said. "I could use a few to attend me. I'm certain you have plenty in the capital, but I would like a few I know."

I wasn't so foolish as to be unable to see what she was talking about. She'd need to keep that scullery-maid close, to make sure she didn't tell anyone about what she saw. I imagined Irina didn't want news getting out that the tsar had been possessed by a demon, not until she'd popped out a few children and cemented her place as ruler.

Chernobog would have drank the maid dry and left me to dispose of the body. I had to say, while Irina's methods were riskier, I much preferred them.

"Take whatever servants you like," I told Irina dismissively. "It's nothing to me."

Irina didn't look thrilled with that answer, but she accepted it. Perhaps I'd been too dismissive towards the servants for her liking. Irina would be the sort to care deeply about that sort of thing. I'd never let myself get attached to anyone working in my household. If I showed any attachment to anyone, no matter how slight, Chernobog would jump on the opportunity to select that person as his newest victim. Ignoring the servants altogether was the safest option for them. I supposed I could change that now that Chernobog was gone, but I was certain Irina would care about the servants enough for the both of us.

Irina didn't try to provoke any more conversation with me throughout breakfast, which I was very grateful for. It wasn't that I disliked talking to her, it was just that I disliked talking to her in public. After all, everyone assumed I'd married her out of love, and it was probably in my best interests to let people keep thinking that. Which was fine - everyone found her astonishingly beautiful, so at least they thought I had good taste - but that meant that I had to be nice to her, at least when other people were around.

When breakfast finally finished, I planned to go back upstairs and sequester myself in my room, my duties be damned, but Irina had other plans. Of course she did. I could hardly breathe without my darling wife finding fault in it. "Mirnatius," she said quietly, "I thought you could ride with Ilias, and I could spend some time with Vassilia."

I looked at Irina in shock. "You want me to go out with Ilias? Do you really think that's going to improve their marriage?"

"If Ilias is unfaithful, he'll hardly be the first husband to be," Irina replied. "But I don't expect you'll encourage him there."

No, Irina just wanted me to use the fact that Ilias desperately wanted me as a way to control him. If I ever met anyone who tried to convince me that women were the fairer, more delicate, romantic sex, I would only need to introduce them to my wife to prove that they were entirely wrong.

"Fine," I huffed. "Ilias!"

It was pathetic, how quickly Ilias whirled around at the sound of my voice. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Come ride with me," I said, doing my best to ignore how Ilias's face lit up at the words. "I would speak with you on our recent marriages."
Even the reminder that Ilias had gotten married yesterday wasn't enough to dull the excitement on his face. "I would be honored, Your Majesty."

Irina had been speaking softly with Vassilia, and the two of them stood and left the table. I gestured to Ilias, who came to my side immediately.

"Do you like my coat?" Ilias asked, apparently too eager for my praise to let it happen naturally. "I had it made in your usual style. I thought you would approve of it."

I studied the coat in question. It looked like something I would wear, which had been Ilias's goal all along. "A handsome coat," I pronounced, watching Ilias beam at me in pleasure.

"I hoped you would like it."

"Is it suitable for riding?" I asked, striding towards the stables.

Ilias almost tripped over himself in his attempt to catch up. "It is, Your Majesty."

"Then let us ride."

"I would be honored to ride with you," Ilias said, with a bit too much emphasis on his words.

"I believe our wives are speaking together," I said, because it was probably prudent to remind Ilias that we were both, in fact, married. "I wonder what sort of discussions they could be having."

Hopefully not treasonous ones, but with Irina, I never knew.

"I wouldn't know what goes on in a woman's mind," Ilias said, clearly eager to drop that topic as soon as possible.

"No, I suppose not," I allowed as we reached the stables. Upon seeing us, a stablehand scrambled to his feet, bowing deeply. "Saddle our horses," I told him dismissively before turning back to Ilias.

"And is your wife to your liking?"

Ilias blinked. It was clear he hadn't expected this question, and he wasn't quite sure how to respond to it. He'd have to figure that out before too long. I wouldn't be the only person to ask him about his new wife, and if Ilias didn't want to offend her father as I had done, he'd have to make sure people thought that he at least cared for her, if not loved her.

"My wife is... lovely," Ilias said, although the words sounded almost more like a question than a statement. "She is very beautiful."

"She is," I replied. "You are a lucky man."

A tortured look flickered across Ilias's face, but he wrestled it down. Keeping his emotions from showing up on his face had never been something Ilias was good at, but it appeared he'd been trying to learn.

"I am," he said, although he sounded like he was forcing the words out.

Our horses were led forward to us, and I swung up onto mine. Behind me, Ilias did the same, then he followed me out of the stable and into the field behind it. I didn't think it was a good idea to enter the forest that lurked on the edge of the field, but there was plenty of space for us to ride before that would be a problem.

We'd only been riding for a minute before Ilias looked at me and burst out, "Mirnatius, I know
you're married, and I am too, but-" He looked so desperate I thought he might cry. "You must know what my feelings are."

For the first time, it occurred to me that now, I could take Ilias up on his eternal offer. Chernobog had always made it impossible before - there would be far too much drama if my cousin were the one who went missing after finding his way into the tsar's bed - but now Chernobog was gone. The lack of burning heat in my stomach was proof enough of that. There was no danger to it, not now.

Except for the fact that Irina would be furious.

"It is as you say," I said, and for a moment, Ilias's face lit up, until I continued with, "we are both married."

Now I was almost certain Ilias would cry, but he ducked his head quickly, so if any tears did fall, I couldn't see them. We rode in silence for a few minutes, during which time I thought a whole manner of insulting thoughts about my sweet, delightful, darling Irina. The chances that I would have ever taken Ilias up on his offer were slim, but as horrible as his poetry was, I didn't dislike him. I wouldn't have accepted his offer, but I wouldn't have thrown it back in his face either. I still didn't like doing it, but Irina had arranged matters so I had no other option. She was a ruthless woman. If that ruthlessness hadn't been aimed against me, perhaps I would have appreciated it, but as it was…

"Do you love her?" Ilias asked suddenly. He looked up at me with reddened eyes. "If you don't want- At least tell me you love her."

No, I wanted to say, I am not so foolish as to fall in love with my would-be executioner- But of course, I could not.

"Yes," I said, and I pretended the word didn't stick in my throat.
Chapter 2

The second Ilias and I returned from our riding trip, Ilias rushed away from me. He'd hardly spoken after I rejected him, and to be honest, I was beginning to wonder if he'd ever speak to me again. He wasn't angry, I didn't think, but he was desperately upset. Maybe his wife could be some consolation to him, but from my experience, wives were only good at making things worse.

I stormed up to my room, ignoring the servants who scurried out of my way as I passed. Irina had prevented me from being able to go up to my room after breakfast, and look what had happened. I doubted she'd let me spend the rest of the day sequestered, but I could at least squeeze out a few hours.

There were new blankets on the end of the bed when I entered. The servants moved quickly, it seemed. It looked like someone had tried to scrub away the scorch mark on the floor, but evidence of it still remained. Erasing Chernobog's mark wouldn't be so easy.

I threw myself into a chair and grabbed my sketchbook. I flipped past all the pictures of Irina that I had drawn, moving so quickly I almost tore the pages out. When I reached a blank page, I grabbed a pencil and began to draw.

It didn't take long for Chernobog to take shape on my paper. I'd only drawn him once before, and I'd been viciously beaten for it. Chernobog had had no desire for me to leave records of his presence. I'd left the drawing in my sketchbook, in a small act of defiance, but I'd never drawn him again.

But Chernobog was gone, and so were his chains.

The picture was almost enough for me to feel a phantom heat in my gut. I'd always been a good artist, and Chernobog was easy to draw. It was almost like he wanted to come through on the page, even though he'd been so angry when I drew him before. It was almost like he was... like he was calling to me--

I slammed the sketchbook shut, leaving the drawing unfinished. It had been too real. I'd nearly felt Chernobog's presence through the paper. I didn't think I could summon him like that, but I wasn't foolish enough to think that he was dead. Gone, yes, but not dead. Irina had successfully argued that her wifely claim was stronger than my mother's, but if I summoned Chernobog, no wifely claims would protect me.

I nearly threw the sketchbook in the fire - it was only a few pages away from being full anyway - but a thought stilled me. Chernobog was a demon of flame. Burning his image sounded more likely to call him than banish him. Instead, I shoved the sketchbook in the bottom of my bag and resolved to get a new one as soon as possible. I wouldn't be opening this one again.

Now that my usual distraction was forbidden to me, at least until I could get my hands on more paper, I had to come up with something else to do. I doubted I would have long before Irina showed up to drag me off to lunch, but I itched to do something. My fingers longed for a pencil, and part of me still wanted to finish the portrait of Chernobog, but I wouldn't allow myself to do it.

There were a few sheets of paper in the desk, which I eagerly put pencil to. The quality of the paper was less than what I was used to, but it would do in a pinch. Pushing all thoughts of Chernobog out of my mind, I began to sketch designs for the new winter clothes I'd need to have made. I'd redraw them later on nicer paper, of course, but the early sketches could be on rough paper if I had nothing
else.

I was filling up the last page when Irina came into the room. "I think my time with Vassilia went well," she declared. "How was your ride with Ilias?"

"Wonderful," I deadpanned. "He offered himself up to me, and I broke his heart."

Irina frowned. "Was he upset?"

"Of course he was upset," I snapped. "But he's been upset since you forced him to marry a woman he doesn't care for. No, he's been upset since Chernobog forced me to marry you. Either way, I think we can see the common thread."

Irina set her jaw. "I didn't ask to marry you."

"And I didn't want to marry you either, and yet here we are."

"Don't blame me for upsetting Ilias-"

"You were the one who arranged his marriage!" I spat. "You were the one who sent me out to ride with him this morning. What did you think would happen?"

Irina took a deep breath in through her nose, then let it out. "It was not my intention to upset your cousin," she said in a very careful voice. "And I apologize for doing so, especially since you clearly care about him."

"I-" I wondered if Irina had meant to blindside me with the comment. "I don't- What do you mean, I clearly care about him?"

"Well, you wouldn't be this angry with me for upsetting him if you didn't," Irina replied. "He's your cousin, so it's perfectly understandable, but considering how you treat everyone else, I admit I didn't expect it."

My first instinct was to tell Irina to shut up, because if I ever did find myself caring about someone, the safest thing to do was always to deny it and try to think about it as little as possible. Then I remembered that I'd always done that to protect people from Chernobog, and Chernobog was gone, so acknowledging the fact that I perhaps did care a bit about Ilias wouldn't be signing his death warrant.

"Don't make me do something like that again," I said instead.

"I didn't mean to make you do anything," Irina said. "I'm your wife, Mirnatius, not your owner."

A sudden rage burning in my stomach, feeling far too much like Chernobog for comfort. I threw up my hand, where Irina's silver ring still sat on my finger. It was eternally cool, never warming with the heat of my body, and I hated it.

"Is this not a sign of your ownership, my lady?" I spat. "A wife's right comes before a mother's, and my mother signed her rights to me away. You've driven away Chernobog, so now you can have me all to yourself."

Perhaps I was fooling myself - I most likely was - but Irina looked almost startled at the tirade. "I don't own you," she told me again, but I scoffed loudly enough to cover her next words, and I turned towards the door.
"I'm sure skipping lunch will be a deathly insult to the happy couple, won't it, wife?"

Irina didn't answer for a moment, but I refused to turn back and look at her. "You should come down for lunch," she finally said, "but if you don't want to, you can stay up here, and I'll have something sent up."

Of course now she would offer that, when I was fairly certain I would go mad if I spent one more second alone in this room. "You'll have to try harder than that to get rid of me," I said, and I marched out of the room.

A moment later, Irina followed.

Ilias hardly looked at me for the rest of the day, even though Irina made sure that we attended all of the wedding celebrations. He hardly looked at her either, and the one time she tried to talk to him, I thought he might burst into tears. It was no surprise, really. The poor fool thought I loved Irina in the way I would never love him, not knowing that actually loving Irina would make me the biggest fool of all. Allowing myself to care for her would only make the eventual knife to the back hurt all the more.

The day seemed to last forever, and even when everyone finally returned to their rooms, I knew it wasn't over for me yet. After all, Irina and I shared a room and - ostensibly - a bed, and while I doubted she'd actually want to sleep with me if she could help it, she'd need to come back to our room to avoid suspicion. She wouldn't stay there, of course. She never did, except for the one night we were surrounded by servants and had to keep up appearances. Even then, she'd done whatever she could to keep from touching me. Since there were no servants surrounding us tonight, however, she would probably stay in our room just long enough to allay suspicion, and then leave. Maybe she'd disappear off to the Staryk lands, or maybe she'd just go off with her obnoxious nurse, but she wasn't likely to stay in my presence for a second longer than she had to.

Except, of course, for the fact that my wife just loved to surprise me.

"There is something we need to discuss," Irina said the second the door to the bedroom closed and we were left alone.

"What?" I demanded. I was in no mood to play games, not tonight. There were only so many clashes with my darling tsarina I could withstand in one day, especially after what had happened the night before. My body felt cold and strange and fragile, and I had had no time to acclimate to the new sensations. I would readily agree that it was making me more irritable than usual, although it didn't take much to make me irritable towards my wife.

Irina pressed her lips together, looking uncomfortable. For a moment, I felt a vicious delight that something had unnerved her, then it occurred to me that anything we needed to discuss that unnerved her enough to show it would probably be discomfiting to me as well. Ah, well. I would take my triumphs where I could.

"We will need," Irina said, her voice careful, "an heir."

"An heir."

"To stabilize our rule."

"Our rule?"

Irina blinked. "Yes, our rule. Who else's rule would our child stabilize?"
Her rule, that I had no part in, but of course she knew that as well as I did. "The child doesn't need to be ours," I said. "You have your handsome guard."

"He disappeared last night when the Staryk king did. I believe he was killed in the escape."

"I'm certain you could find someone else."

"I will not," Irina said firmly. "The child must be ours. There can be no question of their legitimacy."

I scowled at her. "And will you fulfill the usual quota of an heir and a spare before doing away with me, or will you just wait until the first quickens in your womb?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'd wait until the child is at least born," I added. "Your place as regent will be much more stable with an actual prince."

"I don't intend to 'do away' with you at all," Irina retorted.

I scoffed loudly. "And am I supposed to believe that? After you threw me at the Staryk king, hoping we'd rip each other to shreds and solve two of your problems at once? You've only rid yourself of one so far. Your second is still here."

"Chernobog was the problem, not you."

"And without him protecting me, it'll be all the easier to slip a blade between my ribs."

"I don't intend to put a blade between anyone's ribs," Irina snapped. "Is that why you think I got rid of Chernobog? To make it easier for me to kill you?"

"Oh, I'm sure you also did it to protect Lithvas or some other nonsense, but even you can't deny that weakening me plays into your ambitions quite well."

"My ambitions?" Irina repeated, sounding offended. "And what are my ambitions?"

"Don't pretend not to be ambitious. You have the best interests of the people at heart, I'm sure, but no woman without ambition would throw herself in the path of the tsar like you did, wearing jewelry you clearly intended to use to enchant me."

"I never wanted-"

"You never wanted to marry me, so you've said. But even if that is the case, you've certainly done quite a bit in your time as tsarina, more than an unambitious woman would manage."

"Even if I do have ambitions," Irina said, pronouncing the word like it disgusted her, "that doesn't mean they are against you."

"On the contrary, I'm the only person between you and total control over the throne. You'll need a child first, of course, but regency of an infant is practically being the ruler in your own right. Unfortunately, a regency won't be necessary unless the previous tsar is dead, so..." I spread my hands out, favoring Irina with a bitter smile. "You're not nearly as subtle as you think you are, my dear."

"And you're not nearly as clever as you think you are, husband," Irina retorted. "I have no desire to kill you. I never have. If I thought on your death before, it was because I thought it would be
necessary to rid Lithvas of Chernobog. Seeing as it wasn't…"

And abruptly, I was furious. "Just admit it," I hissed, my voice low and angry. It sounded almost like Chernobog had sounded when he took over my voice to express his anger, and for half a heartbeat, I was almost frightened of myself. But that was foolish, so I shoved the feeling away. I couldn't be so pathetic as to be afraid of my own voice. "You wanted me dead," I accused Irina, "you still want me dead, you will want me dead until the moment I obligingly keel over-"

"I wanted you dead," Irina interrupted sharply. "I planned to call for the same chains that bound your mother and burn you just like she burned. But that was when you had a demon inside of you, a demon that wanted to devour the entire country. You didn't ask for any of this, Mirnatius. I am not in the habit of punishing people for things they had no control over."

Somehow, being cast as the powerless victim was almost as cutting as Irina thinking I'd bargained my own soul away. "And if I had asked for it?" I asked. "If I had bargained with Chernobog myself, and bought my throne with that promise?"

"You would never have done that," Irina said. "Anyone who looks at you can tell you have no desire to rule."

"But you do."

"I have been called upon to rule," Irina said simply. "And if I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it well."

It occurred to me, not for the first time, that if circumstances were different, perhaps I would like Irina. She could be obnoxious, yes, but obnoxious in a way I could appreciate. Or, at least, obnoxious in a way I would have been able to appreciate if her obnoxiousness hadn't been directed mostly at me. I could have even withstood the obnoxiousness, if it weren't paired with her clear desire - no matter whether she admitted it or not - to have me killed. Irina was no Chernobog, but she was as ruthless as he was, and I was at her mercy. I'd lived my entire life with a demon in my gut. I knew what it meant to be at the mercy of someone like that.

Irina sighed. "Tonight clearly isn't the night for us to start trying for an heir," she said. "But we will need to do it eventually."

I considered refusing. After all, giving Irina the heir she wanted would only shorten my life, considering I doubted I would live long past the birth. But on the other hand, if I held out against her, her desire for a legitimate child might waver, and then I'd be stuck in the exact same position. And clearly an heir wasn't necessary for her plans, because she'd planned to kill me before without one. No, a refusal probably wouldn't change her plans very much.

But I refused anyway.

"Irina, Irina, Irina," I cooed, "how many times do I have to tell you? I am the tsar, and I take orders from no one."

There was a flash of fury on Irina's face, then it went hard. I had the feeling I'd goaded her past her normal limits, and I had to admit, I was a little curious to see what would happen.

"You took orders from a demon for the past twenty years," Irina said, and the curiosity was drowned out by a wave of fury. "I shouldn't think it would be so difficult to accept a suggestion from your wife."

And then, before I could say anything else, she strode out of the room, leaving me and my
impotent fury alone to stew.
Chapter 3

We left for the capital the next morning, as Irina had planned. The scullery-maid, whose name I'd forgotten, had joined our entourage and had, I was fairly certain, been promoted to the tsarina's personal maid. It was quite the promotion, and all she had to do to earn it was dump a bucket of sand on a fire demon. I wondered what the girl thought of it.

I didn't have a chance to ask her that, of course. I spent the trip in the sleigh with Irina, which was as uncomfortable as could be expected. I didn't have anything to draw with, since I hadn't had a chance to replace my old sketchbook, so I ended up slouching and trying to get some rest. Thankfully, Irina kept her mouth shut and let me fail to sleep in silence.

Finally, we got to the boyar's house where we'd be staying the night, and after a quick and tense dinner, Irina and I went upstairs to the room we'd be sharing for the night. I scanned it quickly, and soon realized that, while there was a sizable bed, there was no mirror.

"You need a mirror to go into the Staryk lands, don't you?" I asked. I only had fuzzy memories of how Irina had gotten Chernobog to the Staryk kingdom, since I hadn't really been present for it, but I was fairly certain a mirror was involved.

"I wasn't planning on going to the Staryk lands tonight," Irina said. "I don't think it's a good idea to go back, not after I let Chernobog in."

She probably had a point. "Then where do you intend to sleep?" I asked. "Surely someone will notice if you sneak off to your nurse's room."

"I don't intend to sneak off anywhere," Irina said, raising her chin. "I'm sleeping here."

"Then where do you intend for me to sleep?"

"Mirmatius, stop being a child."

So she intended for us to share the bed, then. "Do you intend to try for an heir tonight?" I asked sarcastically.

"Honestly, all I intend to do is sleep," Irina replied irritably. Servants had already helped both of us into our sleeping clothes, so Irina had nothing to stop her from stomping over to the bed and crawling under the covers. "Blow out the candle before you come to bed."

I rolled my eyes, but I blew out the candle, then I went over to the bed and lay down on my side. It wasn't the first time we'd shared a bed, but... I wasn't used to having other people in my bed with me. Oh, Chernobog had brought people to bed before, so he could drain them dry, but I'd never been fully aware that he had done it until I woke to find a corpse next to me. I knew that Irina had gotten rid of Chernobog, and yet as I closed my eyes, a part of me was still certain that I would wake to find that Irina had gone stiff and cold during the night.

Sleep caught me unawares. For a long time, I lay in the bed, trying to relax, and then-

- I was in the moneylender's house, my body burning with Chernobog's fire, the Staryk king in front of me. My body was broken, and every time I swallowed I could taste blood in my throat, but Chernobog hurled me forward again and again and again.

The Staryk king ducked away every time I tried to grab him, until he finally grabbed me. Steam
rose around us as my fire began to melt the king's hands, then he hurled me into the fireplace. "Stay where you are, Chernobog!" he commanded. "By your name I command you!"

Chernobog screamed in fury inside my mind, yelling at me to get up, get up, but I couldn't. The binding only kept Chernobog in the fire, but without Chernobog, there was no way I could move my broken body. I could hardly move a muscle without blinding pain. I would not be able to move alone. I would lie in this fireplace-

And I would never die.

Chernobog would devour me for all eternity, screaming in fury for the Staryk king, and suddenly I would rather be fighting rather than just lying here, burning and fading but never dying. I tried to move, but I couldn't, I was too broken, I was going to stay here forever, I was-

"Mirnatius, wake up!"

I jerked upright with a ragged gasp, my body still aching with phantom blows from a fight long over. There were no marks on me, but I still felt them, every spot where the Staryk king had broken me.

"Mirnatius," said a cautious voice, the same voice that had woken me, and I whipped my head around, eyes wide but hardly seeing, and found myself nose-to-nose with my wife.

"Irina," I whispered breathlessly. "Irina-

"You were dreaming," Irina said in a slow, calm voice that was at odds with the almost fearful look in her eyes. "It was just a dream."

Just a dream. Yes, because Irina had come to me, broken in the fireplace, and helped me up. She had saved me from that fate…

…Just as surely as she had been the only reason I faced it in the first place, thanks to her deals with a whole manner of monsters.

"It was just a dream," I repeated, my voice rough.

Irina was still looking at me, and I realized her hand was on my arm. I shook it off, pulling away.

"I'm fine," I said sharply. "Go back to sleep."

"Mirnatius-"

"I'm fine," I said sharply. "Go back to sleep."

Irina looked at me for another long moment. I wanted her eyes off me, no matter what it took. For a moment, I thought I would be willing to claw them out with my bare fingers. Then she turned away and settled back on the bed, under the covers.

"Goodnight, then."

"Sweet dreams," I replied bitterly.

Irina didn't flinch. I wasn't sure if she was asleep already, or if she was just ignoring me. I figured either one was possible. If she were sleeping, I envied the ability. My heart was still pounding, and my body still rang with the Staryk king's blows, and I knew that sleep would be beyond me that night.
We reached Koron the next day, and the second we got to the castle, I marched upstairs to my room. I was certain Irina wanted me to meet with my advisors or something else equally inane, but I was exhausted and cold, a sensation that was still strange to me, and all I wanted to do was curl up under a pile of furs and sleep.

My room was cold when I entered. I had never had temperature as a consideration when I designed it, knocking down walls to make it bigger and bigger and bigger. I wanted the space, and Chernobog demanded it for his tantrums. The bigger the room, the more likely he was to constrain his anger to merely one place. When I was in smaller rooms, there were times when he would destroy an entire wing of a building.

I wouldn't need the space now, but after the fight I'd had to put up to design the room in the first place, I had no plans to change it, even if it was cold. There were furs on my bed, and I wondered if they were intended for my wife or if news had already spread among the servants of my request back in Vysnia. Either way, they suited my plans. Not bothering to change out of my clothes, I lay down on the bed and dragged the furs over me. They were warm, but not too warm. I didn't want to be hot, not like I'd been with Chernobog inside me. Just being warm was fine.

I was just getting to be warm and comfortable enough that I thought I might be able to drift off into sleep when Irina entered the room. Immediately, I tucked my head under the furs as well, hoping Irina might not notice me among the pile. It was childish, but if it would keep me from being noticed-

"Mirnatius, I know you're under there."

Ah, well. So much for that. I pulled my head out from under the covers and glared at Irina. "And?"

"Your advisors wish to meet with us," Irina said. So I was right, Irina wanted me to get right to work on ruling the kingdom I'd never asked for. "We should go now."

"You can go if you want," I said, laying my head back down on the bed. "I'm staying here."

"Mirnatius-"

"They don't really want me there anyway," I said. "They just chatter amongst themselves and panic until I calm them down." I wouldn't be able to do that anymore, but neither of us mentioned it. "I never actually listen to them. They're dreadfully boring. You might find them kindred spirits."

Irina gave me a disdainful look. "We can delay it until tomorrow, if you wish to tell them you're tired from the trip."

"Or you can go alone," I countered. "The old fools will be thrilled to have someone there who listens to them."

"You'd leave the ruling of your kingdom up to me?" Irina asked dubiously.

"I wasn't aware I'd have a choice in the matter," I replied bitterly. "You'll be overthrowing me soon enough, I'm sure. I might as well get in the habit of letting you do everything."

Irina pressed her lips together, looking irritated, but she didn't try to protest that she was going to overthrow me. I appreciated the honesty in our relationship.

"Very well," she said. "I will go to this meeting alone, to meet your advisors and introduce myself. But you need to attend the next one."
"Irina, darling, how many-"

"Yes, yes, you're the tsar and you don't need to do anything," Irina interrupted, her voice sharp. "But being tsar isn't just a privilege. It's a duty. You need to take care of your country and your people. It's what it means to be a ruler."

"Then take it," I replied. "I never wanted this. You seem to have a strong enough sense of duty for both of us, so I'm sure you can manage on your own."

Irina looked at me, sighed deeply, and marched out of the room. I curled up under the furs again and closed my eyes, but the sleep I'd almost reached before was gone. Instead, thoughts of Irina swirled in my head. To be entirely honest, I knew she had a point. There were things a tsar had to do, and I hadn't done most of them. In the past, I'd counted on Chernobog's aid to pull me through, but Chernobog was gone. I wasn't upset to have lost him, but it did make some things more complicated.

So perhaps I'd have to attend a few meetings after all. Or, no, I would have Irina attend the meetings, and then she could tell me what happened during them. I couldn't stand any of my advisors, and I definitely didn't want to sit with them for hours and let them tell me all the things I was doing wrong. Irina could sit through that, and then she could tell me what was important afterwards. Once she did, I could take whatever action was necessary. It would undoubtedly please my advisors, and perhaps it would even sate Irina for a while. Living with Chernobog, I'd learned quite a few tricks to keep the monster satiated and distracted. If I could figure out what tricks to use for Irina, perhaps I would be able to live long enough to see the birth of my children. Perhaps, if I were lucky, I'd even live long enough to see some of their childhood.

So that was that. I'd step up a bit, like Irina wanted me to, and hopefully get her off my back in the process. And I would agree to her clothing suggestion as well. She was right, there was no longer a reason for me not to rewear my clothes, and perhaps if I was less wasteful, I would be able to win some of her favor. I wasn't hopeful for too much, but moving slowly was still moving. I knew my favor would run out someday, but perhaps I could push that off. Perhaps I could live a few more years.

So when Irina returned to our room, I was sitting at the desk, looking over some of the reports I'd been given by my advisors and, when I was certain I couldn't read another word, taking breaks to see if any of my current clothing could be refitted to be warmer for the winter. "How was the meeting?" I asked as she entered. "As dull as ever?"

"We didn't discuss much," Irina replied. "Mostly, your advisors introduced themselves to me and told me a few of their concerns."

I turned around in the chair. "Well? What are the old fools worried about this time?"

Irina frowned at me. "You want me to tell you what happened in the meeting?"

I scowled. "I thought you wanted me to take a more active role in running the kingdom. If you don't, I'll gladly go back to ignoring everything my advisors say."

Irina's expression turned almost cautious. "If you're trying to play with me, I'm too tired for it tonight."

"I'm not trying to play with you," I retorted, crossing my arms tightly. "If you don't actually want me to start ruling, then just say so. I suppose it'll probably be easier for you to take over everything yourself from the beginning, so you won't have to pick up new tasks after you seize the throne."
Irina exhaled sharply through her nose, clearly irritated. "If I tell you what your advisors said, will you listen to me?"

I swept an exaggerated bow. "I will listen to whatever you have to say, my tsarina."

Irina sat down on the end of the bed, still watching me warily. "Well, one thing we discussed was the state of your treasury."

"And?" I asked, leaning back in my chair. "What is the state of my treasury?"

"It's manageable, but we'll need to keep an eye on it," Irina said. "If you start re-rewearing clothes, that'll help."

I swept an arm out towards the closet. "I looked through my clothes to see what could be refitted for winter clothes. I'll get rid of things once they grow too worn, of course, but as long as my clothes are fine, I suppose I can wear them more than once."

If anything, that only made Irina look more suspicious. "I thought I was going to have to fight you on that."

"Isn't this a pleasant surprise, then?"

Irina still looked like she was expecting me to take back what I'd said any moment, or perhaps explode on her, but after a moment, she continued. "Your advisors are also concerned about our foreign relations."

"Ah, our relationships with our nearby princes, I suppose?"

"With Prince Ulrich and Prince Casimir, yes."

"I thought you were going to deal with Ulrich," I said, narrowing my eyes. "You were going to make Vassilia your chief lady-in-waiting."

"And I did," Irina replied. "She'll be arriving in a few days. What did you think I was talking to her about while you rode with Ilias?"

"Perhaps I thought you were breaking her heart, as you instructed me to break Ilias's," I retorted. "I don't know that it'll be enough, though," Irina said, ignoring me completely. "And your advisors agree. It doesn't seem particularly likely that Ulrich and Casimir will ally themselves at the moment, not without something to bind them together, but neither of them are very fond of you. Either one might make a move."

"And what are we supposed to do to stop them?" I asked. "More marriages?"

"I don't suppose you have another pretty cousin for us to marry off to Casimir?" Irina asked, sounding like she was only half joking.

I shrugged. "Maybe. I don't keep track of my aunts' children. Isn't Casimir a lech?"

"He's a prince," Irina replied. "His wife will be well taken care of."

So he was. Well, there were worse things to marry.

"Did my advisors have any ideas on what to do?" I asked. "Or were they as useless as usual?"
"Casimir is the bigger threat at the moment," Irina said. "Ulrich feels you've slighted him by marrying me instead of Vassilia, but marrying Vassilia to your cousin should stay his hand for a while, at least. But Casimir has nothing to stop him from moving against us."

I noted the plural pronoun with a raised eyebrow. "So? What are we to do about it? Because so far, I think my suggestion of marriage is the only one anyone's brought up."

"Some of your advisors suggested we call Casimir here," Irina said. "To speak to him, and make sure he renews his vow of fealty. You could present me to him as your wife."

"Wouldn't that just give him a better opportunity to stab me in the back?" I asked.

It was refreshing, I thought, to think about someone other than my wife assassinating me.

"It might, which is why I told your advisors not to call for him until I'd spoken to you about the plan."

"Ah, so I get to have a say in this?"

"You're the tsar," Irina said. "I don't have the authority to invite someone here without at least your knowledge, and I certainly can't invite a political opponent without your approval."

"Do you think it'll be dangerous to invite him?" I asked, studying Irina's face. She was far more politically savvy than I was. I didn't know that I could trust that she would tell me the truth, but I could trust that she would know the answer.

"It could be," she replied, sounding honest. "But it could also forestall future danger if we could hold him to a vow of fealty. It's a risk, but it might be one worth taking."

"In my position, would you invite him?"

Irina thought for a moment. "I would," she finally said. "I'd increase security during his visit, and I'd never go anywhere with him alone, but I would invite him."

I waved a hand. "Then send the invitation."

"You trust me?" Irina asked, sounding surprised.

I scoffed. "Not at all. But I won't have a prayer when you choose to overthrow me, no matter what, and you have a better idea of how to rule a country than I do."

"You could learn."

"It seems a lot of effort when I'll probably only have a few years to use what I learn."

Irina pressed her lips together. "Fine," she said shortly. "I'll have an invitation sent to Prince Casimir."

"And what about Prince Ulrich?" I asked. "Or should we deal with Casimir first?"

"We should deal with Casimir first," Irina said. "Ulrich isn't happy, but Vassilia's wedding seemed to pacify him. Casimir is the more immediate threat, so he's the one we need to focus on now."

"Is there any threat from Vassilia?" I asked. "Making her your chief lady-in-waiting gives her ample opportunity to kill either of us. Would her father use her as a weapon?"
Irina looked surprised at the insight. I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes. I'd never given my own safety much thought before, secure in the knowledge that Chernobog would not allow anyone else to hurt me, but now that it was a concern, I was determined to pick things up quickly.

"I think it's a risk worth taking," Irina said. "Vassilia doesn't seem the type to get her hands dirty. We can't trust her, of course, but I don't think she'll kill us herself."

"I bow to your superior wisdom," I said, giving my wife a courtly and very sarcastic bow. "Now, if we've finished discussing immanent security threats to Lithvas, I'd like to sleep."

"I think we've covered the most important points," Irina said. "We can discuss the rest in the morning."

I nodded and headed towards the bed. Halfway there, I paused and turned. "Where do you intend to sleep?"

"With Magreta, I suppose," Irina said, although she didn't sound very enthusiastic. "Although I hate to steal her bed."

"You could stay here, if you wished," I offered. "The bed is more than big enough."

Irina frowned a little, staring at me. "What are you planning?"

So perhaps offering the bed had been taking things a step too far. "I don't know what you're talking about," I scoffed. "If you don't want to sleep here, then don't. Go with your nurse, or sleep on the floor, for all I care."

Irina studied me for another moment, looking like she was trying to figure out exactly how I worked, then she looked away. I wondered if she'd found what she was looking for.

"I'll sleep with Magreta tonight," she said. "But I should start sleeping with you before anyone notices I don't."

"You know where the bed is," I said, and to emphasize the point, I climbed into it. "If you're leaving, blow out the candle."

"Goodnight, Mirnatius," Irina said, blowing out the candle as she left the room.

I couldn't be sure that I'd made positive progress that night, but I was fairly certain I hadn't made things worse. And as time went on, I could make myself more and more appealing for Irina, until, hopefully, the thought of sticking a knife in my back seemed unappealing. Irina's main concern was Lithvas, so I'd need to make sure that I only did things that were in its best interests. If that meant leaving most of the ruling to her, then I would leave most of the ruling to her.

Irina was just another demon, and I'd already survived one that was much worse. Irina was smarter than Chernobog, but she was also softer. She'd said she didn't want to kill me, and I had the feeling she was telling the truth. That wouldn't stop her if she felt she had to, of course, but if she was unsure, hopefully it would stay her hand.

All I had to do was keep her unsure for as long as I could. And then, when she finally regained her surety… Well, hopefully she would choose a quick method to end things. If I was going to be assassinated by my own wife, I would rather it didn't hurt too much.

Perhaps I was a fool to think I could delay it at all, but if it was foolishness, it was a foolishness I was going to indulge. Hoping had never done me any good with Chernobog, but perhaps it would
with Irina.
A few days passed in the sort of uneasy balance that Irina and I were beginning to make. Irina went to another meeting with my advisors, and when she got back, I had her tell me what they'd discussed so I could give my input. We sent an invitation out to Prince Casimir to visit in two months' time, and when Vassilia and Ilias arrived, we greeted them as a unified front. Our situation was far from perfect, of course, but it grew marginally better.

And then Irina started bringing up an heir again.

"We need to start sleeping in the same bed, at the very least," she stated. "The servants are bound to figure it out before too long if we keep sleeping apart. And we will need an heir, and soon."

"And you still refuse to use another for your stud purposes?" I asked. "There are certainly more than enough Tatar soldiers in my army."

"The child must be legitimate," Irina said firmly. After a moment, she added, "I don't understand why you're so against the idea. Don't men all enjoy having sex?"

To be entirely honest, I wasn't sure why I was so against the idea either. It wasn't like it would be a lot of work, at least not on my part, and it was supposed to be enjoyable. Of course, I didn't know for sure, because Chernobog had never left me in charge when he drew people to bed. The only times I'd ever had sex, I'd been little more than a distant passenger in my own body, with Chernobog controlling my every move. I'd hardly been aware of the event, only aware that it had happened when I woke up the next morning beside a corpse.

Perhaps that was why I didn't like the idea of sleeping with Irina. I knew Chernobog was gone, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he would burst out of my chest again at any time, blazing through my skin and devouring everything in his path. I'd already slept beside Irina, and she'd survived every time, but taking things a step further… Well, that had always been Chernobog's favorite time to strike, right when our bedmate was full of arousal that would turn so quickly to fear.

"When do you want to do it?" I asked anyway, because surviving Irina was more important than avoiding Chernobog's now-imaginary threats.

"I'll consult my calendar for the best days," Irina said, because of course she would. I bit down on the urge to laugh, knowing that it would probably grow hysterical. I'd already broken down into tears in front of my wife once before, and I had no desire to repeat the experience. Showing weakness in front of Irina was foolish, and I had to stop doing it.

"Well," I said in the most mocking tone I could manage, hoping that cruelty would mask any tremble in my voice, "when you schedule a date, do let me know."

Irina's lips went thin in the way that meant she was annoyed. "We should sleep in the same bed
every night, though."

"I can think of no one I would sleep with," I replied. I knew I was irritating Irina, and I knew that was exactly the thing I'd told myself to stop doing, but I couldn't help it. She'd thrown me off balance with all her talk of having an heir, of having sex, and I needed to do something to throw her off balance as well. In reality, being accommodating probably would have done an even better job at that, but I was too shaken to be agreeable. Being cutting was much easier.

With a huff, Irina pulled off her dressing gown and threw it over the chair. Her nightgown underneath was far plainer than a tsarina's nightgown should be, but I knew how to pick my battles, at least sometimes, and that was far from the most important battle to pick.

"Do you have a preference as to which side?" Irina asked, marching over to the bed.

"Whichever side you're not on," I replied in a cloyingly sweet voice.

Irina threw the covers back and climbed into bed. After fiddling with the pillows a bit, she pulled the blankets back over herself and looked at me expectantly.

"Well? Are you coming to bed or not?"

I didn't want to, but I forced my feet to move forwards until I reached the bed. I crawled in beside Irina, very careful not to touch her, and I lay down on my side, facing away from her. Perhaps, if I lay like this, I could pretend that we weren't sharing a bed at all.

"Goodnight, Mirnatius," Irina said from behind me.

It was petty, but I refused to say goodnight back. I heard Irina sigh, and then she blew out the candle and the room went dark.

It was strange, I thought, how sounds seemed so much louder in the dark. Without anything else to focus on, all I could hear was the sound of Irina's steady breathing next to me. It wasn't quite steady enough for her to be asleep yet, I didn't think, but it was slowing, and I thought she would probably be asleep before too long. I envied her the ability to sleep so easily. I couldn't stop thinking about her breathing beside me, and I couldn't stop thinking about how, if Chernobog were here, that breathing would stop sometime before the morning, and that made me press both hands to my stomach, feeling for a heat that wasn't there. I knew I wouldn't feel it - every second without the heat was a second I knew Chernobog was gone, in such a visceral way I didn't think I could ever forget - but I didn't trust that it wouldn't come back. Chernobog had never left me before, but that only made me more certain that he couldn't be gone for good. He would come back, I was suddenly sure, and as I listened to Irina's breathing in the darkness, I couldn't help but think that perhaps he would be back tonight. Perhaps he would be back when Irina was in my bed, next to me, foolishly unaware that the danger she'd previously escaped still lay just around the corner, and he would drink her dry like he'd always wanted, and I would wake to a silent corpse in my bed that didn't breathe at all.

Irina's breathing had finally slowed to a rhythm that was steady and slow enough that I was fairly certain she was asleep, so I grabbed my pillows and crept out of the bed, heading to the settee. It wasn't quite big enough for me to lie down on it comfortably, and I knew that, if Chernobog returned, the distance wouldn't do much to protect Irina, but…

I stopped myself before I could lie down on the settee, clenching the pillows so tightly I could feel the pressure of my fingers against my palms through them. I was being a fool. Lying on the settee wouldn't save Irina if Chernobog returned. And if he did, would it really be so bad if he drank her
at all? That would rescue me from her, at least. I didn't want her dead, not by my hand, and the thought of her dying by Chernobog's made me feel faintly ill, but if Chernobog returned, I wouldn't be able to do anything to save her anyway.

I turned away from the settee and returned to the bed, placing the pillows back down. Irina let out a quiet sigh in her sleep as I settled back into bed, and then she rolled over and curled herself around my body, her front pressed against my back.

She would hate it, I knew, if she were awake.

She was so close I could feel her heartbeat against my back.

I stayed where I was, and when I finally fell asleep, it was to the steady lullaby of Irina's heartbeat and breathing.

According to Irina's calendar, the best days for us to try for an heir were in a little under a week, so I had some time before I had to try having sex with her. I wondered if she was looking to the day with as much trepidation as I was. I was certain she didn't like the idea of sleeping with me. The idea of having an heir, yes, but the actual mechanics that led up to it? If not for her determination that the heir be a legitimate one, I was certain she would have jumped on the closest Tatar to avoid having to sleep with me.

Honestly, that idea sounded appealing to me as well, but if Irina was still insistent on the two of us finally consummating our marriage, I doubted there was any way I could avoid it.

The next couple of days seemed to go by very quickly. Our days passed much the same as ever, with Irina attending meetings and me only performing whatever duties I couldn't pass off to her. Ilias left to go attend to his new estate, leaving Vassilia at court with Irina. I wondered how much of his urgency to leave came from wanting to get away from me and my beautiful wife, and I quickly decided I didn't want to know. If I wanted a chance at being able to successfully sleep with Irina, I thought it was probably best that I spent as little time as possible thinking about how much I disliked her.

And then, finally, the night came.

"Well," Irina said as we both stared at the bed. "If you're ready."

"Will you tell me to bounce the bed this time?" I asked mockingly.

Irina refused to rise to the bait. "The bed will probably bounce this way too," she said, taking off her dressing gown and approaching the bed. "Come on."

"What happened to waiting until I'm ready?" I muttered under my breath, but I had the uneasy feeling that I would never really be ready, so perhaps it was a good thing that Irina was forcing me to act. She was right, we did need an heir, and sex was supposed to be enjoyable, so…

I sat down on the bed next to Irina. "Is there any specific way you want to do this?" I asked dryly. "Do we need to involve romance, or do you want to try doing it upside-down, or-"

"I imagine we'll do it the traditional way," Irina interrupted. "How would you even do this upside-down?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but some of the kitchen maids say it helps bring about a son," I replied. "Are you certain you don't want to try?"
"Certain," Irina replied. I could see the bob of her throat as she swallowed. "Are you… ready?"

No, not at all, but I would make myself ready, if that's what it took. "You should undress."

Irina set her jaw, and for a moment, I thought she would argue, but then she pulled her nightgown off, leaving her naked on the bed. I couldn't help the spark of… shall we say, *attentiveness* in my stomach. Irina's face wasn't particularly interesting, but unclothed, she was was well-formed and not unattractive. The sight of her naked body wasn't enough to create more than a spark, but I knew that a spark could be fanned into a flame if I did it right.

"Lie back," I said, pulling off my own clothes. I saw her eyes twitch down for half a second, then focus resolutely on my shoulder. Slowly, she did as I told her and lay down on her back. I crawled over her and looked down…

And did nothing.

"Do you need some sort of assistance?" Irina asked.

"No, damn you," I snapped. There was nothing *she* could do, after all. It was a wonder I could feel any arousal with her hideous face in front of me. That was the problem, I was certain; that Irina wasn't nearly pretty enough to attract me, not like the other people I had bedded.

The other people who, as faint memories that weren't really mine told me, had laid back, just like this, and looked up at me with bright eyes before Chernobog let his own inhuman brightness shine through mine…

I threw myself off Irina quickly, my breaths heaving in my chest. "Mirnatius?" Irina asked, sitting up and putting a hand on my shoulder. I batted it away immediately.

"Don't touch me."

Irina didn't move any closer, but I could still feel her hovering behind me. "Could you *move*?" I hissed, pulling away as much as I could without falling off the bed.

"Will you explain to me what's wrong?" Irina asked.

I scoffed. "So you can have another of my weaknesses to hold over my head? How foolish do you think I am?"

"I don't hold any of your weaknesses over your head," Irina countered. "Mirnatius-"

"I've never… done this," I bit out. "Chernobog was always in charge before, and he always-" Bile rose in my throat and cut off the rest of the sentence, but Irina's sharp intake of breath told me that my always-clever wife had figured it out anyway.

"Do you remember?" she asked quietly.

"What sort of question is that?" I snapped. "It wasn't me in charge, but it was still my body. I remember." I remembered it in the same way I remembered dreams, half forgotten and half lost and altogether shrouded in mist, and yet the feeling remained, unable to be shaken off. My body remembered its position, even though Chernobog had positioned it, and when I lay over Irina…

"We don't have to do anything tonight, if you don't want to," Irina said in a voice so gentle it felt like a punch to the gut. I wanted to throttle her, to take her pity and shove it down her throat. I wasn't *weak*. I didn't need her to *coddle* me.
"Are you sure you don't want to find some handsome soldier?" I asked, making my voice as sharp as it could be. "I'm sure you could find one who looked enough like me that no one would suspect the child wasn't mine. You could even pretend that he was me, if you're so upset about breaking your wedding vows. Surely it's not still a sin if your husband tells you to sleep with another man, is it?"

"I'm not finding a soldier," Irina replied. "We'll work through this together."

"There's nothing to work through, damn it," I retorted. "I'm not doing this. Not with you."

"Mirnatius-"

I grabbed my clothes off the floor pulled them on, then I stormed over to the door. "Mirnatius," Irina called again, but I ignored her and threw the door open.

"I'm going to get some air. Don't wait up for me."

I slammed the door shut before Irina could say anything in response.

There was still tension on my skin, like part of me was expecting Irina to lay underneath me again, eyes wide and... had there been a spark of arousal in her gaze, when she looked up at me? Was that why she didn't want to find a soldier of her own? I wasn't foolish enough to believe she'd fallen in love with me, but it was possible she was attracted to me. Many women were, after all, and so were many men. She wouldn't be the first, and I doubted she would be the last.

Sex was always the first thing on everyone's mind, and I just wanted it off my own.

The cold night air hit me like a slap when I finally threw open a set of doors and stepped outside. I started to shiver immediately, crossing my arms tightly over my chest. I'd put my clothes back on, yes, but they were thin and couldn't really block the chill. I was still cold.

I should have gone back inside, I should have returned to my room, I should have done my duty and put an heir in Irina's womb, but I stayed outside instead, despite the cold, and shivered while I refused to think about the memories of Chernobog that still lingered far too close to the surface. I would need to wrestle the memories down, and perhaps, if I hid them away well enough, I'd even be able to sleep with Irina without them strangling me.

I'd need to pretend I was with someone else, of course - Irina's body wasn't nearly handsome enough to arouse me - but that was manageable. Perhaps I could even talk Irina into bringing someone else into our bed, although I was certain she wouldn't like the risk of little bastards running around. Truth be told, I didn't like the idea all that much either, but I would have to do something. Irina was right, we needed an heir, and if she insisted that I had to be the father, then we had to figure out a way for that to work.

I would figure out a way for it to work.

Irina let the topic of an heir drop after that, although we still slept in the same bed every night. I knew it would have to come up again eventually, but I was glad of the reprieve.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a reprieve for anything else. Casimir's visit was fast approaching, getting closer with every week that passed, so we had to plan that, and my advisors were still frantically worried about anything and everything, and they were difficult to appease. I'd mostly put Irina in charge of that, but my help was still required occasionally. I even had to attend one of the meetings with the advisors, although I only paid attention to perhaps half of it. For the first time, I almost
missed Chernobog, although the feeling was fleeting. He could have dealt with the advisors quickly, but the price he would have exacted would have been far too high.

"Your advisors would have more faith in you if they thought you listened to them," Irina said as we left that meeting and I tried not to yawn too widely.

"I have you to listen to them," I dismissed. "They don't need me."

"You're their tsar."

I shrugged. "And you're their tsarina. Can't you take over some of the ruling?"

"It's not traditional," Irina warned.

I couldn't help but scoff. "And what about us is traditional?"

Irina rolled her eyes. "I'm going to spend some time with my ladies-in-waiting. Do you have anything to do or do you wish to join me?"

"I have a fitting with my tailor for a new coat," I replied. "And before you complain, it's for Casimir's visit. You'll need a new dress for that as well."

Irina didn't look like she necessarily agreed with that, but it was a topic I would stand firm on. Rewearing clothes on usual days was one thing, but for important events like Casimir's visit, we needed to wear new, special clothes. I didn't have the apparently-intuitive knowledge of ruling that Irina seemed to have, but I knew how to make a good appearance, and clothes were a big part of that. If we were going to meet with Casimir as his liege lords, we needed to dress the part.

"Very well," Irina said, although she didn't sound like she liked the thought. "Will you come fetch me for dinner?"

"You can't read a clock?"

Irina pressed her lips together. "Some of my ladies have mentioned that we don't seem to spend much time together outside of meals and nights," she remarked. "And given that we're supposed to have married for love…"

"Fine, I'll fetch you for dinner." I knew as well as Irina that it was in our best interests to keep up the impression that we had indeed married for love. Being thought of as foolish and impetuous was better than being thought of as a witch or a demon's plaything.

"I'll see you then," Irina replied, giving me a small curtsey. Without another word, she headed towards the parlor where she spent time with her ladies-in-waiting, and I headed back to our room, where my tailor would be waiting. I'd need to find a tailor for Irina as well. My personal tailor was a specialist when it came to men's clothing, but I'd need a specialist in women's clothing for Irina. Only the best would do for the tsarina, of course, so I had to find the best.

The fitting went quickly, as they always did, and I asked my tailor for a list of recommendations for Irina. When he left and I was alone again, I paced back and forth a bit before throwing myself on the bed and staring up at the ceiling.

Perhaps Irina had given me a reprieve when it came to conceiving an heir, but it was still necessary. We needed to do something, and quickly. Anyone who believed we'd married for love wouldn't believe that the marriage had remained unconsummated for so long, which meant that the longer it took for Irina to become pregnant, the more rumors would fly around about infertility. I
hadn't heard any whispers about Irina yet, but I'd heard it happen with some of the other nobility. According to most of the useless nobles I was forced to surround myself with, the main duty of wives was to create heirs, and those who were unable to perform said duty were useless.

I wondered what they'd think of a wife who could bargain with demons without breaking a sweat. Given the temperament of most of the nobles, I was fairly certain they'd be terrified.

The longer I stared up at the ceiling, the more impossible the situation seemed. Irina and I hadn't tried for a child again, not since that first time almost a month ago, but I knew in my bones that the second I positioned myself on top of her, I would feel the same rush of horror, the same sickening certainty that Chernobog was going to drain her any second. There was nothing I could think of to prevent that.

Unless…

Lowering myself onto Irina wasn't an option, but perhaps allowing her to lower herself onto me was.

Chernobog had always wanted to be the one on top, the one with control of the situation. I shared that desire, and the thought of letting Irina be in control of the whole encounter wasn't particularly palatable, but it would be different from before, and perhaps it would be different enough that I could get through it.

After all, we had to try something.

I'd bring up the topic with Irina that night, I decided, and see what she thought of it. I imagined she'd consent to trying it out, at least. She was the one who wanted an heir, and if this would get her one, I had the feeling she'd be willing to do things in a bit of an unconventional manner.

I sat up and smoothed down my jacket. It was almost time for me to go find Irina and face her ladies-in-waiting. They were insufferable gossips, every one, and a great many of them enjoyed flirting with me, even though they were all supposed to be my wife's confidants. I knew that, if I had an affair with one of them, I wouldn't be the first king to sleep with one of his wife's ladies, but Irina wouldn't be happy, and until I could be sure that memories of Chernobog wouldn't choke me at the worst moment, I didn't think it was a good idea to try to sleep with anyone. The last thing I needed was rumors of my impotence cropping up.

I checked the clock again, made sure my outfit was impeccable in the mirror, and headed out of the room to Irina's parlor. At least the story that I was madly in love with Irina meant that I wasn't really expected to respond to any of the ladies' advances. Men who were happily and newly married didn't have affairs. I was one of the two, at least, so it seemed good enough advice for me as well.

A servant announced me when I arrived at my wife's parlor, and I heard immediate whispers as I entered. I ignored all of the tittering ladies and headed straight to Irina, bowing and kissing her hand.

"Hello, my lady."

"Hello, my lord," Irina replied, wearing a smile she only ever directed at me if we were being watched. "Tell me, is it time to dine?"

"You are as clever as you are beautiful," I replied, which was a lie; Irina had far more wits than looks. Lie or not, it only increased the titters behind me, which I hoped was a good thing.
"You flatter me," Irina said demurely, casting her eyes downwards. I tucked a finger under her chin and tipped her head up, then I pressed a small, chaste kiss to the corner of her lips.

"I speak nothing but the truth," I said in a voice that was just loud enough to carry. The whispers behind us reached a fever pitch.

"We must go to dinner, my lord," Irina said softly.

"I will go wherever my lady takes me," I said, taking a step back to let Irina stand. She let me take her arm, and as we began to walk, I bent to her ear and hissed, "Do you think we put on enough of a show for your ladies?"

Irina giggled as if I'd said something hilarious. "Of course!" she replied brightly.

Well, at least that was settled. If only dealing with my advisors could be so easy.

Dinner passed quickly, and I was certain it did so at least in part because I longed for it to be slow. I didn't want to tell Irina about my idea. I was abruptly certain that it was a horrible one, and it would result in nothing good. My paranoia rose, convincing me that it would be no different from our other attempt.

My paranoia was foolish, and I refused to cower before it.

"I may have a way we could make an heir," I told Irina when we were finally alone in our room after dinner. "It's unconventional, but it might work."

"As long as the child would be legitimate, I'm willing to go about it in unconventional ways," Irina replied. "What's your plan?"

My words tried to catch in my throat, but I shoved them out anyway. "Chernobog always positioned my body on top. I may be able to avoid the memories longer if I weren't above you."

Irina's eyebrows shot upwards. "Are you suggesting that I go… on top?"

I scowled. "If you don't want to do it-"

"Do you truly think we might be able to create an heir that way?" Irina interrupted.

"It's as good an idea as any."

Irina seemed to think it over for a moment, then she nodded sharply. "Very well. We'll try it. You ought to lie down on the bed, I suppose."

I shucked off my clothes as I approached the bed, so I was completely naked when I reached it. I lay down among the pillows, staring up at the ceiling. I'd often stared at this ceiling to avoid thinking too hard about Chernobog raining blows on my body. If I could use it to manage that, I was certain I could use it to manage sex.

"Alright," Irina said. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her pull off her nightgown. "Are you prepared?"

"As I'll ever be," I replied, staring up at the ceiling.

Slowly, Irina crawled up onto the bed, positioning herself above me. I should have felt trapped, and I did, a bit, but I'd been trapped by Irina for quite a while now. Being trapped by her physically was nothing in comparison to being trapped by her in every other way. In a way, this seemed like the
natural progression of things.

"Are you ready?" Irina asked as her hair fell over her shoulder and onto my chest.

"Stop asking that," I said, avoiding her eyes and staring past her at the ceiling.

"Mirnatius-"

"Just get it over with."

Irina nodded, and she did as I asked.

It was quick enough, and I managed to keep calm until the moment Irina said, "I think that's enough," and rolled off me. Immediately, without so much as a conscious thought directing my motions, I threw myself away from her and off the bed in general.

"Mirnatius?" Irina asked with something I could almost fool myself into thinking was concern in her voice.

"Sleep in another bed tonight," I said, not looking up.

"Mir."

"Get out."

There was silence for a moment, then I heard the noise of Irina gathering up her things and getting back into her nightgown. A moment later, the door opened and shut, leaving me alone.

I was crying, I realized. I didn't know why. I'd done it. I'd succeeded. I'd managed to sleep with Irina, and hopefully I'd managed to put a baby inside her. There was no reason to cry. And yet, I was so full of tension, and this seemed to be the way my body had decided to let it out.

I was glad I'd gotten rid of Irina before she could see.

After a few minutes, I crawled up into the bed and curled up there, my breaths shuddering in my chest as I continued to cry. Finally, though, the tears melted away into exhaustion, and, still naked and curled up under a pile of sheets, I finally fell asleep.
Chapter 5

Irina woke me the next morning with a gentle hand to the shoulder that still made me startle so much I almost fell off the bed again. "You need to get up," she said, ignoring my reaction out of something I was sure wasn't kindness. "We have a meeting to attend."

"Attend without me," I muttered, curling back up under the sheets. I was certain I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep, not now, but the warmth was comforting.

"You have to come with me," Irina urged. "It's a meeting to discuss our plans for Prince Casimir's visit. You have to be there."

"Damn you," I hissed, but I did get up. Irina immediately averted her eyes when she realized I was naked, as if she hadn't been pressed up against my naked body the night before. I hadn't realized how much of a prude she was.

"Get dressed and meet me outside," Irina said. "We can-"

"Doesn't it make more sense for you to wait in here?" I asked. "If people see you outside the room, they'll wonder why. And considering that we're madly in love, there would be no reason for you to leave to give me my privacy."

"Are you telling me to stay here while you get dressed?" Irina demanded.

I shrugged. "I'm telling you that a devoted, loving wife would have no reason to leave."

Irina looked at me, her lips pressed together, then she crossed over to the settee and sat. "Fine. Dress yourself quickly, we need to be at the meeting in half an hour."

"I'm the tsar," I replied, heading to my closet. "The meeting doesn't begin until I say it does."

"Your advisors may disagree."

"My advisors love to disagree on everything. It's their favorite activity. It doesn't make them right."

Irina's lips twitched. "Regardless. Get dressed."

"As my lady commands," I replied, offering Irina an absurd bow before turning back to the closet and selecting clothes.

We were late to the meeting, but only by a few minutes. Irina told me to apologize, but I refused. The advisors were meant to advise me. Their schedules should revolve around mine. It made no sense for mine to revolve around theirs.

"We must discuss the arrival of Prince Casimir," one of my advisors declared. I was fairly certain I'd known his name at some point, but equally certain that nothing could cause me to remember it. All of my advisors looked fairly similar, and they all had equally boring, droning voices, so it was practically impossible to tell them apart.

Although, to be entirely fair, I didn't try particularly hard.

"The prince will be here in less than a month," the advisor continued. "Lithvas must present a strong front when he arrives."
"How do you suggest we do that?" Irina asked.

I stopped listening about halfway through my advisor's answer. He kept talking about the guards we'd have to have parading around and the increased security we'd require. "We need extravagance," I said, cutting through whatever nonsense he was spewing.

"Your Majesty?" the advisor asked tentatively.

"Prince Casimir will be looking for signs of weakness," I said. "And the military isn't the only place where a country can be weak. We need things to be extravagant, but casually so. He must not be able to see that we're being more extravagant than usual. We need to look as if we have money to spare."

"Can we afford that?" Irina asked, which I thought was showed a rather fundamental misunderstanding of what I was saying.

"We can, for a limited time," an advisor told her.

"Then I think we ought to do it," Irina said. "Do the rest of you agree?"

The advisors looked at each other. Even someone who cared as little about politics as I did could see that Irina had worded that carefully and effectively. Asking what the others thought of the decision would have invited debate, but asking if they agreed encouraged them to say yes. To do otherwise would be openly disagreeing with the tsar, and although I was sure many of my advisors often disagreed with my choices, they rarely said the actual words.

"The idea is sound," one of them finally said. "We'll need to take care of our finances, but we should make sure it doesn't look like we're doing so."

"Is the state of our finances truly so dire?" I asked. Irina had mentioned financial concerns, but they hadn't sounded this serious.

"Our finances will be alright if we take careful care of them," the same advisor told me. "But we cannot afford to be careless."

"Can we afford to look careless?" Irina asked.

"Yes," another advisor said, "so long as we do not overdo it."

"Well, that's settled, then," I said. "What else do we need to discuss?"

The advisors looked at each other again, this time appearing a bit nervous. "Well," one finally said, "there are some who are wondering about an… heir."

"We've been married less than two months," I said, arching an eyebrow. "How quickly are we expected to move?"

Inside, my chest had gone cold. I'd thought I could avoid all talk of heirs for at least the rest of the day, but apparently, I'd been mistaken.

"Of course, it is early yet," another advisor continued. "But the people are watching the tsarina closely for any signs, and the fact that she has not yet shown any…"

"The people are watching for signs, or you are?"

There was no response.
"I assure you," Irina said, "we are not remiss in our duties on this front."

The advisors all avoided meeting our eyes. "Of course," the one who'd brought up the topic finally said. "It was remiss of me to bring it up."

"Not at all," Irina replied, but her voice was just frosty enough that it belied the forgiveness in her words.

My wife really was a master of politics. She would be exceptional when she was able to rule on her own. If only I would be able to see it.

"Is there anything else we need to discuss?" Irina asked. I knew no one would say anything. Even I could tell that, after what the last advisor had said, Irina wasn't really asking.

"Nothing particularly important, Your Majesty," an advisor said, inclining his head deeply. "We can end the meeting now, if you wish."

Irina stood, causing all of the advisors to leap to their feet. I stood as well, but not anywhere near as quickly as they did.

"The tsar and I will go have breakfast," Irina said. She turned to me and added, "If you wish it?"

"Of course I do," I replied. It wasn't even entirely a lie. I was hungry, and I did want to have breakfast. I didn't necessarily want to have it with Irina, but I didn't have much of a choice.

The advisors all bowed deeply as we left the room, Irina on my arm. "Shall we have breakfast sent up to our room?" Irina asked as we walked.

"Why?" I asked suspiciously. If Irina wanted us to have breakfast in private, there had to be something she wished to discuss that we couldn't discuss in public.

"I had thought we might discuss Casimir's upcoming visit," Irina said. At my look, she added, "And perhaps last night, if you wish."

I most certainly did not wish, but I wouldn't be able to avoid the conversation forever. "Fine. We'll have breakfast in our room."

A massive spread was sent for the second we reached our room. For once, Irina didn't protest my tendency towards extravagance. Perhaps she was hungry herself.

"You did well in the meeting," she offered.

"Am I a child, to be praised for good behavior?" I retorted.

Irina refused to rise to my bait. "Your advice was sound. As little as I like your spendthrift qualities, being frugal during Casimir's visit will raise eyebrows."

"Honestly, Irina, we're the tsar and tsarina of an entire country," I said. "What's the point of having that power if you can't be a little extravagant about it?"

Irina's brow furrowed immediately, just as I knew it would. "The point is to use that power to help your people. And I know you're just trying to get a rise out of me."

"It worked," I replied, sprawling over the settee.

Irina sat down primly on the edge of the bed. "We're not enemies, Mirnatius. We're in this
together."
I scoffed. "We are most definitely not."
"Mirnatius-"
"The only reason you've been supporting me at all is so the kingdom you inherit after my death is a stable one," I snapped. "Don't forget, wife, you already admitted that you'd planned my execution."
"I planned to execute the demon inside you," Irina retorted. "There is no demon there now, so there's nothing to execute. I don't want to kill you. What will it take for you to understand that?"

No matter how many times Irina tried to insist she had no plans to kill me, I refused to let my guard down. In the early days with Chernobog, I'd discovered the foolishness of that. I'd let myself begin to relax between beatings, allowed myself to think that perhaps the danger had passed, and it had only made the next beating sting more. If I allowed myself to think that Irina wasn't going to kill me, it would only worsen the eventual knife.

Our breakfast was delivered then, saving me from having to reply. Irina was silent as the food was laid out on the table, the meal so sumptuous it almost made the table bow under its weight.

"Thank you," Irina murmured as a servant bowed and handed her a plate. I took my plate without a word.

"Will you require anything else, Your Majesties?" one of the servants asked.

"No," I replied curtly. "You're dismissed."

The servants all bowed and left. I could practically see Irina swallow the rebuke she desperately wanted to give voice to, but apparently she had decided to pick her battles. It wasn't a move I'd expected from her, but if it gave me any short reprieve, I would be glad of it.

Irina began to put food on her plate. "Can we discuss last night?" she asked after a moment. "Or would you rather not?"

"You've never given a damn about my feelings before," I retorted, spearing a berry with my fork and eating it. "Why start now?"

"Mirnatius-"

"What do you want to talk about?"

Irina pressed her lips together, and for a second I thought she wouldn't speak at all, but then she said, "We have two weeks until my monthly courses are due. If I miss them, then perhaps last night resulted in a pregnancy, but if I don't, then we'll have to try again next month."

"Is that your plan, then?" I asked. "To sleep together once a month until you finally get the result you want?"

"Unless you have a better plan," Irina retorted.

I didn't and she knew it. I scowled at her, but it didn't seem to do much.

"So," Irina continued, "if we need to try again next month, I want to know what I can do to make it easier for you."
I barely kept myself from gaping at her. "You want to know what?"

"It's clear that sleeping together is difficult for you," Irina said. "I'm not sure what the problem exactly is, but if I can do anything to help, I want to do it."

There was a catch. There had to be. "Why?"

Irina blinked as if this were a strange question. "Because if we have to do this, I want to make it as painless and easy as possible."

And since when have you ever given a damn about things being painless for me? I wanted to accuse, my mind flying back to the fight against the Staryk king, but I wrestled the words down my throat. If Irina was offering me kindness, I would be foolish to cast it aside without first checking what sort of strings were attached. Some kindnesses were worth the strings.

"So?" Irina asked. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I assume finding a handsome soldier to take my place isn't an option?" I asked.

"The child must-"

"Be legitimate, I know." I sighed. In truth, I had no idea what to do to make sex less of a trial. Letting Irina go on top of me instead of the inverse had helped, yes, but not much. I needed the least reminders of Chernobog possible, and there were only so many we could avoid before the act of sex became unrecognizable.

"You'll need to stay on top," I finally said. "Other than that..." I shrugged. "Unless you know someone who can wipe memories, I haven't a clue what we could do."

To my surprise, Irina didn't look irritated with me. "Could we try to build positive associations?" she asked. "I know... past experience has given you negative ones, but perhaps we could bury those with better ones."

I scoffed involuntarily, almost choking on the bite of toast I'd just taken. "You think anything you do can erase Chernobog?"

"I got rid of him, didn't I?" Irina countered.

"If it were that easy then we wouldn't be having this discussion, now would we?"

"So what can I do?" Irina asked. "There must be something."

"You don't need to worry so much," I said sharply. "I'll lie back and let you mount me. I've already proven I can do it. And we'll keep trying until you end up with an heir in your womb."

"But if there's anything I can do to make it less unpleasant-"


Irina pursed her lips, but she dropped the subject. I had no doubt she would bring it back up again someday, but at least I would have a respite.

"You'll need to have a fitting sometime soon," I said after a few moments of silence. "For the new dress you'll wear when Casimir arrives."

"Is that really necessary?" Irina asked. "Couldn't I just wear something I already have? Casimir
hasn't seen me as tsarina yet, so he wouldn't know what dresses are new."

"No, but other people will," I replied. "If you rewear something when we greet Casimir, word will spread, and he'll find out."

"Why would word spread?" Irina scoffed. "Surely no one would care enough about my clothes to discuss them."

I arched an eyebrow. "You're the tsarina. I assure you, there will be a great many people who care enough about your clothes to discuss them, especially when it comes to the clothes you wear to greet a prince. You need a new dress."

Irina sighed. "Nothing too extravagant."

"I thought we were going for extravagance during Casimir's visit," I countered. "You even agreed that it was a good idea."

"I don't like wearing extravagant dresses," Irina said. "They're unnecessary and wasteful."

"For someone who captures so much attention with her beauty," I said, making sure the derision on the last word was clear, "you have little idea of how much clothes matter, do you?"

"Clothes don't matter," Irina protested.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. I'd thought that Irina was a master of politics, but here was a place where I could beat her. Apparently, after I was gone, she'd have our children dressed in rags.

"Clothes matter very much. Do you think people would have paid me half the attention they did if I hadn't dressed nicely? If you want to take a role, you must dress for it." I gesture at my clothes. "If you saw me on the street, would you ever be able to mistake me for anything but the tsar?"

"So this is all about your ego," Irina said dryly. "I should have known."

"If you are the tsarina, you must look like it," I said. "No one would take a ruler in rags seriously."

"If they had good things to say-"

"No one would listen," I interrupted. "Trust me on this one."

I'd never asked Irina to trust me on anything before.

"Very well," she said, which almost shocked me into silence. "I'll have a fitting, and you can help design the dress. But try not to make it too ridiculous."

I nodded distractedly, already starting to design the dress in my head. I could make Irina something that was elegant but not extravagant. Even a relatively simple design could be made in a way that showed how much money had been spent on it, and that was what we needed. When Casimir looked at me and Irina, he needed to see casual expense. If making sure he saw that was my only job - and it did seem to be - then I would make sure I did it well.

After all, Irina would have no reason to keep me around if I couldn't do a simple thing like that, and I needed to make sure that Irina had reason to keep me around for as long as possible.

"We'll need to be sure to sleep in the same bed during Casimir's whole visit," Irina said, jerking me back to the conversation at hand. "And we'll need to put up an act of being in love. If Casimir senses any tension between us, he'll pounce."
"I suppose avoiding each other won't help?" I asked.

"We can avoid each other as much as possible without being obvious, if you wish," Irina replied. "But we need to be careful that no one realizes what we're doing. Casimir and his staff will be against us, and we can't be certain that he won't be able to turn some of our staff. We need to be prepared for anything."

"Will he be able to turn you?" I asked.

There was silence for a moment.

"What do you mean?" Irina finally asked, her voice very careful.

"What would Casimir have to promise to turn you against me?" I asked. "If he promised you would be protected? If he promised to marry you next?"

There was the tiniest hint of a flinch, which as as good as an admission of guilt. "You would kill me to marry him?" I demanded.

"I considered it," Irina said, head held high and no hint of apology on her face. "When you were still controlled by Chernobog. If I had had to execute you, I would have arranged my marriage to Casimir once you were dead."

"Is this why you encouraged me to invite him, wife?" I demanded, voice low and hissing. "So you could do what you didn't have the chance to do before?"

"You know as well as I what Casimir is," Irina retorted. "He is not foolish or cruel, but he is a lech, and he is far too fond of drink. And he is old enough to be my father."

"Apparently none of that stopped you before," I retorted.

"All that I do, all of my plans, are to protect Lithvas," Irina said, sounding far too self-righteous about it.

"Yes, yes, that's all you give a damn about," I replied. "But you cannot tell me that some of your plans aren't to protect yourself. Lithvas does not need you on the throne. It survived for centuries without you."

"I was chosen for the throne," Irina said. "Perhaps I was chosen by a demon, and perhaps it was by virtue of the Staryk silver I wore, but I was still chosen, and I accepted the sacred duty of ruling and protecting our land. I will not abandon it, whether it needs me or not."

"You're disgustingly righteous," I grumbled. "You were never meant to rule Lithvas. You weren't chosen because of your cunning or your ability to protect a nation, you were chosen because Chernobog wanted to drink you dry. Lithvas never came into it."

"That may be," Irina said, sounding annoyingly placid, "but Lithvas is important to me, and I will do what I can to protect it. I will do what is in its best interests. And now, my marrying Casimir is not in Lithvas's best interests. Your death is not in Lithvas's best interests. I believe in your ability to help me rule our kingdom. I believe that you can help me protect Lithvas."

I don't give a damn about Lithvas, I wanted to say, but if Irina didn't think I could protect her precious kingdom, she would have no reason to keep me alive any longer. She'd already admitted to her previous plans to have me killed and, apparently, for her to marry Prince Casimir. I didn't need to give her any reason to put those plans into action.
"I will do whatever my beloved tsarina desires," I said instead, sardonic but not disagreeing. "I doubt Casimir would say the same."

For a moment, I thought Irina was going to say something, although I had no idea what to expect, but she didn't speak. She merely returned to her breakfast and began to eat.

"We will be ready for Casimir when he arrives," she said after a few moments. "We will present a united front, and there will be no weaknesses for him to exploit. Lithvas will stay strong through this."

"Of course it will," I replied, and I was shocked to find that I was being sincere when I added, "it has you to guide it."

The date of Casimir's visit crept ever closer. My clothes were fitted and finished weeks in advance, and I designed an elegant white dress for Irina, one that would accent her Staryk silver and was, as promised, expensive but not ridiculous. It complimented my clothes as well, although they didn't exactly match. I'd never liked it when husbands and wives wore matching clothes, but I'd made sure nothing about our outfits would clash. I'd even removed a few of the more obviously ostentatious bits from my clothes to keep them more in line with Irina's. If she could stop moving for long enough to have her fittings, I was certain we'd make a perfect pair.

And then, one night about a week before Casimir was due to arrive, Irina stepped into our room in her nightgown and said, "I seem to have missed my monthly courses."

I blinked. My mouth had gone dry, and I couldn't think of a single intelligent thing to say. "Are you certain?"

"Not yet," Irina said. "They're about a week late, but irregular cycles during times of stress are not unheard of. It would be foolish to make an announcement before I've missed my cycles for at least two months, if not three. But…" She let her hands fall over her stomach. "I may be with child."

The idea, after I had a moment to think about it, was terrifying, and for many reasons. Not only did the birth of our child mean that Irina would have ever fewer reasons to keep me alive, but the birth of our child would make me a father. It wasn't a role I'd ever thought to cast myself in. I'd never expected to father a child. I'd never much wanted one, and given my own parental examples, I'd never thought myself to be particularly qualified to have one. My father had never spared a moment for me, and my mother had sold me to a demon before I was even born. Neither had been particularly good guides.

"Mirnatius?" Irina asked. "We must say nothing of this to anyone until I am more certain. And we must be especially careful around Prince Casimir. He cannot know."

"Of course," I agreed without really hearing what I'd agreed to. A child. I was to be a father. Of course I'd known that was the goal - what other reason would Irina and I have for our urgency in sleeping together? - but knowing what goal we were working towards and actually reaching that goal were very different things. Of course, we hadn't truly reached the goal until the child was born, and even then, there were many dangers that a royal child would face, so we'd need at least one spare, but even still, a child. My child could be quickening in Irina's womb.

I could only hope that whatever child I had was given a better life than I had been.

"Mirnatius," Irina said, sounding irritated. "Are you listening to me?"

"No," I replied honestly, knowing it would only irritate her more and doing it in part for that very
reason. Whenever Irina was able to strike me off balance like this, my immediate instinct was to do the same to her. I didn't think anything I could say would induce the same shock she'd caused, but I could do my best.

Irina's lips tightened. "I said, we need not try for a child again for some time. We'll need to wait a few months to confirm that I'm pregnant, and if I am, we won't need to worry about it until after the baby is born."

"And then we make the spare," I said.

Irina's irritation managed to grow even more. "You will not call any child of ours a spare."

"I didn't coin the expression," I defended. "It's the truth of the matter, though, isn't it? We have one child to be our heir, and a second to make sure that we have another heir if anything happens to the first." I scoffed. "It's not like you actually want a child, do you?" Irina was perhaps one of the least maternal people I'd ever met. I couldn't imagine her wanting a child.

"A child is the best way for us to secure our rule," Irina said, which was an answer in and of itself.

I grinned humorlessly. "And may I tell our child that we conceived them for no reason other than to secure our rule?"

"I doubt you want a child any more than I do," Irina retorted, but to my surprise, I realized that wasn't true. The thought of a child terrified me, but underneath that, I liked it. Part of me, however foolish, wanted to be a father. I wanted to guide a child through life and make sure they had a better time of it than I ever did.

It was unfortunate that I was unlikely to live long enough to do it.

"How long until you're certain?" I asked, gesturing vaguely at her stomach as if there could be any doubt as to what I meant.

"If I am pregnant, I'll begin to show symptoms soon," Irina said. "But losing the child in the early months is not uncommon, so it's best to wait until at least three months to make an announcement."

"But you'll be certain before that," I said. "If you miss your courses again next month, we'll know."

"We will," Irina agreed. "And we probably ought to tell our advisors a fair while before we make a public announcement. If I miss my courses again next month, I'll tell them."

"It'll give us a reprieve from them asking about a child," I said. "How long do you think it'll last until they start harassing us about a second?"

"I suppose it depends on whether we have a boy or girl," Irina replied.

"I could change the laws so a daughter could inherit the throne on her own," I said without thinking, then I blinked in surprise. I hadn't meant to say that. The idea had occurred to me, yes, but I hadn't meant to voice it yet.

"Could you?" Irina asked, sounding a bit skeptical. "Would the people agree to that?"

"I think it's fairly obvious that you're the one ruling the kingdom at the moment," I retorted. "The people would have no reason to object to a future tsarina in charge when they have one right now that everyone seems to love."
"I may be doing most of the work of ruling, but the bloodline still flows through you," Irina replied. "We live in a world where a person's father means more to their status than their mother does. I don't know if you can change that."

"If I can't change backwards traditions, then what's the point of being tsar in the first place?" I retorted. "Once you tell our advisors you're pregnant, I'll bring up the topic."

Irina gave me a calculating look, and I wondered if she was going to fight me on this, of all things. Wouldn't she like the thought of me allowing a tsarina to rule on her own? It seemed like the sort of thing she would approve of.

"Very well," she finally said. "But I'm not certain our advisors will agree to it."

"I'll make them agree," I muttered, although we both knew I didn't have that power anymore. If Irina hadn't banished Chernobog, if I still had his power, then the negotiations would be far simpler.

Then again, if Irina hadn't banished Chernobog, I wasn't entirely certain we would have ever had this conversation.

"Do you want me to sleep somewhere else tonight?" Irina offered.

I frowned. That was usually an offer Irina only made when we'd fought, and even then it was rare. "Why?"

"I've given you a lot to think about, I'm sure," Irina said. "And we'll have to sleep in the same bed every night while Casimir is here, so if you wanted to sleep alone until then, I would understand."

I scowled. "If I won't have any choice once Casimir arrives, I might as well get used to it now."

"If you wish," Irina said, shrugging out of her dressing gown and climbing into bed. I followed her, settling onto my side of the bed. It was more than large enough for both of us, which was the only reason I didn't mind sharing it. If I stayed on my side and Irina stayed on hers, we never even needed to touch.

"Goodnight, Mirnatius," Irina said before blowing out the candle on her side of the bed. I didn't say anything before blowing out mine.

A child. We were going to have a child. I hadn't even seen it yet, didn't even know for certain that the child existed, but I knew that I was going to do everything in my power to make sure that our baby had a better childhood than I did. I'd almost given up on being angry with my mother for her bargain with Chernobog - being angry didn't change anything, after all - but at the thought of it, rage welled up in my stomach. If anyone suggested doing anything like that to the child Irina was potentially carrying in her womb, I would rip them limb from limb.

I could only hope that I lived long enough to protect our child from at least some dangers, before Irina removed me from the equation.
The day before Casimir was set to arrive, the entire castle was in upheaval. I watched from the sidelines, refusing to get involved. Irina, of course, was in the thick of it, directing servants and planning meals. I was fairly certain none of that was actually her responsibility, but I knew better than to suggest that to her. I'd only get another lecture about duty and responsibility and what it means to be the tsar, and I wasn't in the mood. Besides, with how busy Irina was insistent upon keeping herself, she wouldn't have the time.

And then, of course, the final day ended, and a new day dawned, and Casimir arrived.

He looked mostly as I remembered him: a fat, middle-aged man who was clearly trying to cling to some handsomeness he'd had as a youth. He couldn't seem to quite keep his grip on it. I knew that both Irina and I looked as devastatingly beautiful as I could manage, and I was glad of it. If Casimir appreciated beauty - and it seemed he did - then we would be beautiful enough that he'd have to appreciate us.

"Prince Casimir," I declared as he reached us and bowed. "We are glad that you have arrived unharmed."

"We hope your trip went smoothly," Irina added serenely.

"My trip went as smoothly as could be expected," Casimir said. He straightened, and as I looked him over, I couldn't quite believe that Irina had intended on marrying him. The man was at least as old as her father, and his appearance had little to no appeal. Of course, though, Irina wouldn't marry based on appearance. Irina only judged people based on how useful they could be to Lithvas. If Casimir had agreed to marry the grieving, widowed tsarina after my death, I imagined he would be very useful indeed. I knew Casimir had had no part in Irina's planning, but I couldn't help but feel a certain sort of vicious superiority over him. Irina had chosen to stay married to me. She could have had me executed, she could have betrayed me to my court, and instead she put a ring on my finger and bound me tighter than any laws could. She chose me over Casimir, and although it didn't seem like much when I saw Casimir, I knew what it meant.

"You may go refresh yourself, of course," I said. "And then we shall meet for lunch."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Casimir said. He bowed again, then his servants flocked around him and brought him away.

"He's uglier than I remember," I said the second he was out of earshot.

"Mirnatius!" Irina hissed reproachfully.

I rolled my eyes and reclined on my throne. "Aren't you glad you allowed yourself to be talked into a lovely new dress? It's becoming, and Casimir could hardly take his eyes off you. I believe your plan would still work, if it had to."

"It won't," Irina said. "And I've already thanked you for the dress."

She had, but it had been distracted and in passing. I huffed, trying not to sound too petulant. Designing Irina's dress had been one of the only things she'd allowed me to do in preparation of Casimir's visit, so I'd poured a fair amount of work into it. A bit of appreciation would have been nice.
"It is a beautiful dress," Irina said after a moment. "And it's elegant without being ostentatious, just like I asked. You did well in designing it. Thank you."

I felt the urge to preen under the praise and immediately buried it as deeply as I could. "It is a beautiful dress, isn't it?" I said instead. "I truly have a masterful eye."

We were still in public, so Irina didn't roll her eyes, but I could tell she wanted to. "Indeed."

"And what did we think of Casimir?" I asked. "He didn't seem thrilled to be here."

"Of course not," Irina replied. "A fair amount of your lords have probably been planning ways to overthrow you for quite some time, and I doubt they're pleased to see you putting effort into leading. It'll make it much harder for them."

"I'm not the one putting effort into leading," I retorted.

"You're attending meetings with your advisors," Irina said. "You designed me a dress that was specifically intended to impress a visiting prince. You and I discuss matters of state nearly every night. You're putting more effort into leading than you want to admit."

"You're dragging me into it," I snapped, although I knew it wasn't quite true. Irina had tried to drag me into ruling, but I'd rebuked her at every turn, and I'd steadfastly ignored every attempt she made to get my attention. If she was dragging me now, it was because I was allowing myself to be dragged.

It was to keep her from killing me for as long as possible, I told myself, but part of me was beginning to wonder if that was the entire reason.

"Well," Irina said diplomatically, "no matter who is behind the effort, the outcome is still the same. You're strengthening your base, Mirnatius, and Casimir doesn't like to see it."

"Well, that's too bad for Casimir, isn't it?" I said.

"And good for us," Irina replied. "Although we'd be able to strengthen our base even more if we could create a real alliance with Casimir."

"No," I stated flatly, almost before Irina had a chance to finish speaking. "He's not trustworthy."

"Perhaps not," Irina agreed, "but we don't need an alliance based on trust."

"So I can have another ally who would stab me in the back at the first opportunity?" I asked. "One of you is quite enough, my tsarina."

Irina drew in a long breath through her nose. "Must we do this now?"

"You were the one who suggested making an alliance with someone who would overthrow me if given half the chance," I retorted. "Which side would you take, wife?"

"I ought to go check that lunch will be ready," Irina said. "Kiss me before I leave. We have to play at being in love."

"Your favorite game, I'm sure," I said, kissing Irina's cheek sweetly. Any passerby would think the look she gave me in response was that of a loving wife, but I could see the slight shadow of irritation in her eyes. I wasn't sure why she was irritated with me when she was the one who had brought up foolish alliances, but apparently she'd only wanted to talk about the possibility of
having one with Casimir, not discuss one that we already had.

Well, I decided, if Irina was going to check on lunch, I had better go refresh myself and prepare for it. Casimir was a fat old man, so it wouldn't be hard to outshine him, but I had to make sure there was no doubt into anyone's mind as to who looked more the part of a tsar. I was sure there were people who would prefer to have Casimir on the throne, but I'd have to take his strengths and use them against him. Yes, he was experienced, but he was also old. Yes, he'd be able to lead us more effectively in a war, but he'd also been notoriously glory-seeking as a soldier, and such a tsar would lead Lithvas into wars we had no business being in. It was the sort of calculus that Irina excelled at, although I flattered myself to think that I wasn't bad at it either. Chernobog had made sure I didn't have to worry too much about it before, but now that he was gone, I'd need to brush up on my skills. It wouldn't do to let Irina be in charge of everything. It wasn't like I could trust her to act in my best interests, not forever.

I freshened up in my room, then I went down to the dining hall to meet with Irina. She was speaking with a servant, but to my surprise, when she noticed me she dismissed her and hurried to my side.

"Casimir brought two more attendants than he said he would," she told me, her voice sharp with annoyance.

"Do we not have space for them?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. "The palace is rather large."

"We have space, but their rooms aren't prepared," Irina replied. She looked at me, and I could see an idea forming on her face. "Could you oversee the preparation? I still have matters to attend to before lunch."

"Can't the servants manage it on their own?" I asked, my voice very nearly a whine. "That's what we pay them for, after all."

"The servants will do the work, but I'd feel better if someone were overseeing them," Irina said. "I would do it myself, but…"

"But you're already overseeing everything else," I grumbled. "Fine. I'll do it."

"Thank you," Irina said, looking relieved. I wasn't quite sure why she was relieved at the thought of me overseeing something. I'd have thought that would be as stressful to her as the work not being overseen at all. But perhaps Irina had decided to put some faith in me. It was a foolish thought, of course - I didn't give a damn about politics, and I certainly wouldn't be changing any of my behavior for its sake - but for now, perhaps I could do as she asked. After all, it wouldn't do to irritate my darling wife too much when we were entertaining the man she'd considered marrying after the tragic accident I was due to have. I wouldn't want to give her any ideas.

On Irina's orders, I led a troupe of servants up to two rooms that were in the same hall as the rooms for Casimir's other attendants. The servants descended upon the rooms like a swarm, freshening linens and lighting fires. I watched them, and when I grew bored with that, I studied my nails and waited for them to be done. It didn't take too long, and after I gave the rooms a cursory examination as Irina had told me too, I headed back down to the dining hall to bring her the news.

"Is everything settled?" she asked me when I arrived. "Please tell me everything is settled."

"Everything is settled," I told her. "Is something wrong?"

"We simply need to rearrange some of the seating arrangements, due to the extra attendants," Irina
said. She looked frazzled, and I pulled her hands away from her gown before she could crease it in
her fists. I held her hands for a moment, then I realized what I was doing and dropped them like
they'd burned me.

"You've planned everything exhaustively," I told Irina. "Surely your plans can be a little flexible."

"I'm trying," Irina snapped. "We've got the rooms settled, and I've rearranged the seats, but it's still
not quite right. Casimir did this on purpose, I'm certain. He wanted to catch us off guard."

That sounded like the sort of petty behavior nobles loved to engage in, so Irina was probably
correct. "Well, he was foolish if he thought that would be enough to catch us off guard," I said.
"We've already settled the most important things, and you can change the rest of our plans after
lunch. As long as we've got lunch and living arrangements ready, we can deal with everything else
later."

Irina eyed me with a hint of suspicion. "You're right," she said slowly. She didn't say anything else,
but I had the feeling the words Why are you helping? were on the tip of her tongue. To be entirely
fair, I had been wondering the same thing myself, but of course, I had to be careful while Casimir
was here. I needed to make sure that Irina saw that I was still the best choice for Lithvas, at least
for the moment. If she potentially had my child in her womb, that only made my position all the
more precarious. Once Irina had her precious heir, she wouldn't need me anymore. I was walking a
narrow tightrope, and I needed to keep my balance.

"How long until lunch?" I asked, hoping to distract Irina so she wouldn't think too much about my
potential motives. "I'm famished."

"I'll send up a servant to fetch Casimir," Irina replied. She eyed me, then added, "Thank you for
your help."

"Anything for Lithvas," I replied, and I hoped I sounded sarcastic enough that Irina couldn't hear
the slight ring of truth in the words.

The first day of Casimir's visit seemed to drag on interminably, but finally, night fell and Irina and
I retreated to our bedroom. "I think things went well," Irina said as we climbed into bed. "The
additional attendants complicated matters, but we were able to manage that fairly well. We'll need
to make continuing changes to our arrangements for the rest of the visit, but that shouldn't be too
difficult."

"Marvelous," I grumbled, pulling the covers up to my neck. "Shall we stop talking and sleep?"

"There's one thing I wish to discuss first," Irina said, sounding a little hesitant.

I groaned and rolled over onto my back. "Spit it out, then."

"We need to increase our acting."

I looked over at Irina. "Would it kill you to speak plainly for once?"

"We're not acting enough like we're in love," Irina said bluntly. "I'm not sure that Casimir has
bought our act. We need to improve it."

"And how would you suggest we do that?" I retorted. I didn't think I was going to like Irina's
suggestion.
"You might kiss me, in public," Irina offered. "And you might come up with a pet name or two to use."

"And what might you do?" I asked. "You've given me suggestions, but there are none there for you."

"What do you think I ought to do?" Irina asked, and she actually sounded like she wanted my opinion on the matter, which was novel. Normally, such a question would be purely rhetorical, and any answer would only irritate her.

"You might be a little more physically affectionate," I said after a moment of thought. "You hardly touch me."

"You never seemed to like my touch," Irina replied, which wasn't the protest I'd expected. "You go stiff every time I touch you. You tend to go stiff every time anyone touches you."

Was that true? I'd hardly noticed it. People rarely touched me. Even the servants who dressed me normally only brought me my clothes and allowed me to put them on myself. I'd always thought it was because I was tsar, but if I truly did flinch away from touch, perhaps people had noticed and ceased touching me.

If I did go stiff at another's touch, I knew why. It had been years since someone had touched me without the intent to hurt. In fact, I could hardly remember the last time it had occurred. I suppose Irina's touch when she put her ring on my finger could count, although of course she still did have the intention to kill me, so perhaps it didn't. She hadn't harmed me at that moment, at least. Most other people who touched me did.

"Perhaps physical affection would be a bad idea, in that case," I allowed. "But if I initiate affection, you ought to return it."

"I can do that," Irina agreed. "Is there anything else I ought to do?"

I was almost tempted to tell Irina to fawn over me, to simper and agree with every word I spoke. I doubted she'd do it, but her reaction to the suggestion would likely be amusing. I restrained myself, however. If Casimir unraveled the truth behind our marriage, I would be the one put on a pyre for it. Convincing him that we were truly in love was in my best interests. If Irina was willing to play along, I would need to take advantage of that.

"You might look upon me with more fondness," I said. "I can see irritation in your eyes whenever you look at me. Casimir may or may not be able to perceive it, but even if he can't see that you're annoyed, you don't look particularly fond."

I half-expected Irina to retort with some remark about how the best way to ensure that would be for me to be less irritating, but to my surprise, no comment of the sort followed. "I can be more patient," Irina offered. "And I can try to appear more affectionate."

"Do you think that'll be enough to convince Casimir?" I asked.

"Hopefully," Irina said. "If not, we can always come up with more ideas."

"Very well," I said. "Is that it for tonight, then?"

"There's only one more matter," Irina said.

"Of course there's more," I groaned. "What is it now?"
"If we are to kiss in public," Irina said cautiously, "I don't think we ought to have our first kiss before Casimir."

"Are you asking me to kiss you?" I asked dryly.

"We must be practiced," Irina countered, stubbornness in her voice. "If we kiss clumsily after being married for months, people will wonder."

"Ah, yes, practiced kissing. So very romantic."

Irina flushed. "Well, the kissing shouldn't appear practiced, but it mustn't be inexperienced."

"Have you ever kissed anyone before, wife?" I asked.

The darkening flush on Irina's cheeks was answer enough. "I kissed you once."

"Hardly," I scoffed. I only barely remembered the kiss she was mentioning, and if it had been a true kiss, I knew that wouldn't be the case. "So you're the one who needs practice, then."

"Have you kissed anyone before?" Irina retorted.

I had, although I'd been trying not to think about that. All of my kisses had been at Chernobog's urging, and sometimes under his control. None of them had ended well.

"Of course I have," I dismissed. "Not all of us are sheltered as you."

Irina raised her chin a little. "Sheltered or not, whether you have kissed other people is inconsequential. We haven't kissed."

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you want to kiss me."

"I want to do what is necessary to convince Casimir. I would think that you would too."

"Fine," I spat, sitting up. "Shall we do it now?"

Irina sat up as well, looking at me cautiously. "Do you wish to?"

"We must convince Casimir, after all," I replied. "Kiss me. Or shall I kiss you?"

"You ought to kiss me," Irina said, leaning in towards me just a little bit. "You'll be expected to initiate kisses, not me."

"Very well," I said, and I leaned forward and pressed my lips to Irina's.

The contact was… Well, not unpleasant, exactly, but not particularly pleasant either. Irina was very still against me, and while I'd had only little experience with kissing, I knew that wasn't right. Carefully, I began to move my lips against hers, hoping she would begin to move in the same rhythm. After a moment, Irina matched my movements, and for an instant, we were kissing in a way that I thought could fool anyone watching.

Then Irina pulled away, her eyes wide and her cheeks pink. "I think that's enough for the moment," she said in a breathless voice.

"We've only kissed once," I countered. "And if we're meant to kiss as often as a couple like us should, you shouldn't react like this after a simple kiss."
Irina looked at me for a moment, then she relented. "Fine. We'll try again."

I leaned forward and kissed Irina again, gently moving my lips against hers. She matched my rhythm much more quickly this time, moving in concert with me as I deepened the kiss. I curled a hand around the back of her head gently, cupping it in my palm and gently tilting her head to the side so I could kiss her even deeper. Irina let out a quiet gasp against my lips, and the noise zipped through my body like a shock, dragging me back to the present. This wasn't real. This could never be real. Kissing Irina could only ever be a distraction to make it easier for her to slip a knife between my ribs.

I pulled away after that, looking at Irina and trying to keep my face as cold and as impassive as I could. "Well?" I said, making sure my voice was perfectly steady. "Was that adequate?"

Irina blinked a few times, then she focused on me. "That was…" She swallowed, then started again. "That ought to fool anyone who watches."

"Good," I said, then I lay down and curled up on my side, facing away from Irina. "Blow out the candle, would you?"

I waited for a few moments, expecting Irina to say something, but all she did was lean over and blow out the candle on her bedside table, then she lay down next to me in silence. I could feel her presence near me, scant inches away, and while the bed had always seemed big enough before, it didn't anymore. Of course, tonight was also a night when we absolutely could not sleep apart.

I closed my eyes, resolutely ignored the soft sound of Irina's breathing, and did my best not to think about how my lips still felt a little tender from our kiss.
Chapter 7

The second day of Casimir's visit went better than the first. Now that Casimir's additional attendants weren't a surprise, Irina was able to plan around them so flawlessly that it hardly seemed like they'd been an inconvenience at all. We were all on guard against the assassination attempt we suspected was coming, but as long as Irina was watching out for it, I didn't think I had much to worry about. Irina would be the one to kill me, I was fairly certain. No one else would be able to steal that honor from her. Casimir could try, but I didn't think he'd succeed.

It wasn't until the third day that we began speaking of politics. When I said "we," of course, I meant mostly Irina, although I was forced to be there for the conversation. Irina didn't say much of substance, so I didn't either. Casimir made some requests, Irina responded with some platitudes, and when I was called upon to speak, I said the most indecisive, inconclusive thing I could think of in that moment. Some remarks went over better than others, but none of them seemed too terrible. I had the feeling that the worst thing I could do in this situation was to make any promises of any kind, so I made sure to do no such thing.

"Shall we retire for a while before dinner?" Irina asked, reaching for my hand. I took it and gave it a gentle but visible squeeze. We'd been careful to add such little demonstrations of physical affection into our day-to-day life, to keep Casimir from wondering too much about our relationship. I'd only kissed Irina twice since our kiss in the bedroom, and they'd both been smaller, shorter affairs. I wondered if she were avoiding a deeper kiss as much as I was.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Casimir agreed, inclining his head. "I hope to speak again soon, though."

"Perhaps tomorrow," I said, because the thought of speaking with Casimir again today was too exhausting to consider. "After all, we need not rush. Your visit will be long enough to discuss all matters in due course."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Casimir repeated, although he didn't seem to like my suggestion as much as he'd liked Irina's. Irina didn't seem bothered by my words, though, and that was what I cared about.

"Until dinner, Your Highness," Irina said, standing. Both Casimir and I stood with her, and only then did I realize we were still holding hands. The contact had grown very near to comfortable. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

"Until dinner, Your Majesties," Casimir said, kissing Irina's free hand and bowing to me before he left the room. Irina looked at me, and although Casimir was gone, I raised our joined hands to my lips and kissed her knuckles for the entertainment of attendants who were still following him out.

"Shall we retire?" I asked, trying to make the words sound just sultry enough to provoke curiosity. Of course, we would do nothing of the sort - if I knew Irina, she was going to make me discuss politics with her - but it wouldn't hurt to make people wonder.

"We shall," Irina replied, smiling at me as if she actually wanted to spend time together. I knew better, of course, but hopefully the others in the room wouldn't.

Irina and I retreated to our room, where I immediately dropped her hand and barely resisted the urge to rub at mine until the ghost of her touch was gone. "What did you think of Casimir's questions?" Irina asked, immediately all business.
"He's clearly trying to probe around for weaknesses," I replied, lounging in one of the chairs. "I get the feeling he's not sure whether he wants to kill us or ally with us."

"I feel the same way," Irina agreed. "I believe Casimir is trying to determine whether we're worthy allies or not. Whether or not we want to create an alliance with him, we need to convince him that we are, because otherwise I don't believe he'll hesitate to move against us."

"Do you still think we should ally with him?" I asked. I didn't, but if Irina wanted to, I was perfectly aware that I probably wouldn't have too much of a say in the matter.

"I'm uncertain," Irina replied. "He'd never be a trustworthy ally, of course. We'd always have to keep an eye on him. But what's the saying, keep your friends close and your enemies closer? I'd rather have him nearby where we could keep an eye on him."

"Just so long as you don't actually trust him," I replied. "I wouldn't think you'd be so foolish, of course, but one can never be certain."

"Tell me," Irina said, and the lack of malice in her voice was the only reason I didn't bristle at the words, "do you believe that trusting anyone is foolish, or merely people who seem likely to betray you?"

"I have never met anyone who I was convinced would not betray me," I replied flatly. "The two options are one and the same. Trusting people only makes it easier for them to inevitably stick a knife in your back."

"Do you think I will put a knife in your back?" Irina asked.

I offered her a thin smile. "Irina, my dear, I know you will."

"Will you ever trust me when I say I won't?"

"I'm not that foolish."

"No, merely that paranoid."

"My paranoia, as you call it, has kept me alive," I retorted. "Not everyone is to be trusted, Irina. In fact, practically no one is. And people who have admitted to plans to execute me most certainly are not."

"How many times must I explain to you, I wanted Chernobog dead, not you! I have no reason to kill you, Mirnatius! Not now that the demon is gone!"

"And yet, removing him has made me much easier to kill,. I do not believe in coincidence."

"We live in a world of demons and monsters, and you do not believe in coincidence?"

"Not when it aids an attempt on my life."

"Mirnatius," Irina said in a voice that was so gentle it made me want to scream, "can't you see I freed you from Chernobog as an act of mercy?"

"And when else have you ever offered me mercy, wife?"

"Given what you expect of me, would not every day you spend alive be an act of mercy?"

"Ah, but you need me," I countered. "Until you're certain you have an heir quickening in your
womb, you need me. Until your rule is firm and unchallenged, you need me. When you no longer do, then leaving me alive would be an act of mercy."

"Then we will have to wait until I no longer need you," Irina said, "and then I will prove that I do not want you dead."

They were pretty words, but of course I didn't believe them. So long as Irina kept spouting those sentiments, however, this conversation could go nowhere, so I sighed and said, "Shall we return to talk of Casimir? After all, he seems a far more immanent threat."

"As you wish," Irina said, and I had the feeling she was as relieved to drop the topic as I was. "I believe he wishes to alter some of our trade agreements in his favor. We must look over them to make sure any alterations we make will be mutually beneficial."

"I'm certain my advisors can tell you about the agreements," I told her. "The skinny one with the hideous mustache mentioned them last time we met, didn't he?"

Irina's mouth twisted a bit in disapproval, but I thought I saw amusement in her eyes. "His name is Lord Alric," she told me. "And yes, he should know the agreements."

"I don't know any of their names," I dismissed. "I can barely stand to listen to those idiots, I certainly can't keep their names straight."

"Your advisors are important in the running of Lithvas," Irina scolded. There was no amusement on her face anymore. "You ought to do them the basic respect of knowing their names."

"You know their names, that's good enough," I dismissed. "If I had it my way, I'd get rid of all of them anyway. I don't trust a single one."

"You don't trust anyone," Irina countered. "Although I will admit, some of your advisors are more trustworthy than others."

"Too many of them worked with my father, or preferred my brother," I said. Too many of them blame me for their deaths, I didn't say. Irina was surely clever enough to hear the unspoken words. Anyway, it's not as if those advisors were entirely wrong. I hadn't intended to kill my father and brother, but they had been killed for my sake, whether I'd wanted them dead or not.

"We can replace the untrustworthy advisors with ones who are loyal to us," Irina offered. "I assume there are some you wish to keep?"

"We can go over that later," I dismissed. "We don't want to change advisors while we're in the middle of a diplomatic visit, do we?"

"No, most likely not," Irina agreed. "As for Casimir, I do believe he's bought our act of being in love, but we'll have to keep it up. A single slip might be enough to tip him off. He's an intelligent man, and a suspicious one. If we do anything to indicate that there's more to our marriage than meets the eye..."

"Then I get the stake," I finished. "Don't worry, I have a vested interest in making sure Casimir doesn't have me executed."

"At least he's only to stay for another week," Irina sighed. "At first, I thought that was perhaps not enough time, but now that Casimir's arrived, I can't wait for the end to arrive."

The sentiment was a surprisingly vulnerable one for Irina to be sharing with me. Normally, she
tried to show as little of the strain of ruling as she could. Although, she'd been doing that a bit less recently, showing me a bit more. I wondered if it was a ploy. Perhaps Irina thought showing some weakness would be enough to make me underestimate her. If she did, she was sorely mistaken. I knew exactly how strong she was, and I'd already made the mistake of dismissing her as nothing but a foolish girl. I would never make that mistake again.

"I believe I said from the beginning that we oughtn't make the visit too long," I drawled. "Didn't I say we ought to only have him here for a week instead of ten days?"

"You only said that because you didn't wish to entertain," Irina countered.

"And do you wish to entertain Casimir any longer?"

Irina deflated a little. "Perhaps not. We must, of course, but he is exhausting."

"Will we need to deal with Ulrich once we're done with Casimir?" I asked. "Or can he wait?"

"I believe he can wait, although not forever," Irina replied. "Vassilia seems content enough with her position, and I haven't heard any rumblings from Ulrich recently. And if I am truly with child, then we'll have other matters to deal with."

"You still haven't had your courses?" I asked. I knew the answer was no, of course; Irina would have told me if she had. Still, the idea that a child - our child - could be quickening in Irina's womb was one that I couldn't quite get used to.

"No," Irina said. "They're over two weeks late at this point, although it's still possible that this is due to stress and not a child. My next courses would be due in about a fortnight, so if I miss those as well, we'll be certain enough to tell our advisors."

"Very well," I replied. "And if you're not with child, you'll mount me again two weeks later?"

It was clear from the look on Irina's face that she didn't like my wording, but she nodded once. "If I'm not with child, we'll try again."

Tell me, wife, I wanted to say, do you have as little desire to do this as I do, or do you enjoy it when we have sex? I didn't speak the words aloud, of course. Now was not the time. Still, I couldn't help a bit of curiosity. Did Irina get any enjoyment from it? And why did that matter to me? It wouldn't change my enjoyment. Knowing that Irina derived pleasure from the actions wouldn't stop me from remembering how Chernobog loved to take advantage of that. It was useless even to think about, so I pushed the thought from my mind.

"And how long do you intend to wait between children?" I asked instead. "Shall we begin trying for our second immediately after you pop out the first?"

"We'll wait at least a few months," Irina replied. "And then we can begin trying for the second child."

"Something to look forward to," I said dryly.

Irina hesitated a moment. "Mirmatius-"

"Shall we ready ourselves for dinner?" I asked, suddenly certain I didn't want to hear whatever Irina was going to say. "Casimir will expect a certain level of elegance, after all. Do you think you can manage it?"
Irina's lips thinned. "You needn't always lash out when you don't like what I'm saying. You could merely ask to change the topic."

"But where's the fun in that?" I countered, heading to the washroom, and I closed the door before Irina could respond. That was, after all, the only way I ever seemed to get the last word.

Casimir's visit seemed to drag on interminably. By the seventh day, I was wishing I'd pushed harder to limit the visit to a single week, and I was fairly certain Irina was too. Ten days hadn't seemed that much longer when she'd proposed it, and it was better than the two week visit she'd originally been intending, so I hadn't put up too much of a fight when she'd offered the compromise. Now, I wished I had.

"Tsar Mirnatius," Casimir said, cornering me after lunch. I looked over at him with a raised eyebrow. "I would like to speak with you."

"Have we not spoken every day for the past week?" I asked, wondering where Irina had gotten off to. Whatever Casimir wanted to discuss should probably be shared with her.

"We have, but never alone," Casimir said. The words sent a warning thrill up my spine.

"What do you wish to discuss that cannot be spoken of in front of others?" I asked. Nothing good, I was certain.

"Rumors have reached me," Casimir began, "that the relationship between you and the tsarina may not be quite as harmonious as it appears."

Damn it. "And where would those rumors have come from?"

"Various sources," Casimir replied vaguely. "You would, of course, not be the only man to have fallen for a pretty face only to find her to be... incompatible."

"Certainly," I replied, keeping my voice as noncommittal as possible.

"And if you have found yourself in this situation," Casimir added, "there are ways around it."

Was Casimir attempting to give me advice on how to be unfaithful to my wife? "Are there?"

"Of course, especially for a tsar. There are... arrangements that can be made."

Oh. Casimir was attempting to give me advice on how to assassinate my wife.

"Well," I said, unable to keep myself from wondering at the irony - if anyone needed advice on assassinating their spouse, it was Irina - even as I spoke, "I'm afraid your advice is unnecessary. The tsarina and I are very happy together, and I have no need to make any other arrangements."

"Are you certain?" Casimir asked mildly. "I would not judge you if things were a bit more... tumultuous."

"I am glad to hear that," I replied. "But there is no need for concern. The tsarina and I are, as I said, very happy."

"Of course, but if-"

"Prince Casimir," I said, making my voice as cold as possible, "perhaps you have forgotten, but I am the tsar, and this is the tsarina we are discussing. I cannot fathom why you would keep offering
"Your advice on our marriage when I've made myself clear in saying it is unwanted."

Casimir made a face like he'd swallowed a lemon, but he bowed. "Of course, Your Majesty. I forgot my place."

"See that you do not do so again," I said, and then I swept off.

I knew what I should have done next. I should have gone to Irina and told her what Casimir said. He was clearly trying to undermine not only our marriage but also the stability of our very rule. Everyone could see that Irina had quickly become a major player in the governing of Lithvas, and without her, I would likely sink into the same apathy I had previously directed towards ruling. For people like Casimir, who clearly wanted Lithvas for their own, such a thing would be a major boon. If Casimir was making moves against us, as unsuccessful as they may have been, I should have told Irina.

But if I told Irina that Casimir had offered to help me assassinate her, what reason would she have to think that I had truly told him no? I'd planned to let Chernobog drink her dry before. Just as she clearly had no qualms about assassinating me, I'd never given her reason to believe that I would have any qualms in doing the same. If I told Irina about what Casimir said, would she not see me as a threat?

And if I were a threat, would it not make the most sense to eliminate me?

And did I have any qualms about assassinating her?

It would be poor repayment for what she'd done for me. Irina had saved me from a lifetime as a demon's plaything. To then do exactly what that demon wanted and kill her seemed unfair. Life wasn't fair, of course, but that was no excuse for willfully being unjust.

But considering that Irina wanted to kill me, would I truly be in the wrong if I killed her first?

No, I finally decided, no, I would not lay a single finger on Irina, nor would I hire someone else to do anything to her, not if she had my child in her womb. Whatever Irina had done or would do, the child was innocent. I would not sacrifice an infant merely to rid myself of a future threat. I would not touch her.

But still, I wouldn't tell her what Casimir had said either. I didn't need to give her any more ammunition against me.

"Mirnatius," Irina said as I entered our room. "Where were you?"

"Speaking with Casimir," I replied. I had learned some tricks about lying in all the lies I had told to hide Chernobog, and I knew it was always best to stick as close to the truth as possible. It made it less likely for your lies to be called out. I wouldn't tell Irina what Casimir and I had spoken of, of course, but it would be fairly easy for her to discover that I'd been speaking with him, and I didn't want her to wonder about my reason for lying.

"Speaking with Casimir?" Irina repeated, sounding alarmed. "About what?"

"Oh, nothing of importance," I replied breezily. "I believe he was trying to determine how much of the governing of Lithvas goes through me, and how much goes through you. That's why he wanted to speak to me away from you."

"And what impression do you think you gave?"
"As faint a one as possible, I would hope. I left fairly quickly. His insinuations began to grow insulting, so I reminded him of his place and left him there."

"And you believe he was testing you?" Irina asked.

"I believe he wanted to see if eliminating you would incapacitate me," I replied, which was very nearly honest. "After all, your appearance seems to have caused him some problems, so he wants to know if your disappearance would solve them."

"You think Casimir wishes to eliminate me?"

*No, I think Casimir wishes for me to eliminate you.* "It seemed like it, but you're the expert in politics. Perhaps he'll pull you aside for a secret chat next."

"If he wishes to eliminate me, perhaps not."

"Oh, don't take it so personally. I'm certain Casimir would love to eliminate me as well."

Irina rolled her eyes. "Do you think he'll make a move now?"

"I believe he's still testing the waters. And making an attempt on our lives during his visit would be risky. It would be far too easy to trace back to him."

"Yes, but he'd also be in the perfect position for a coup," Irina countered. "He'd be right here, ready to swoop in and take power."

"Casimir is a former general, and his military career was always based on hitting things as hard as he could until they toppled over," I dismissed. "He was never much one for strategy. I'm surprised he's being so subtle now. When Casimir makes a move, I believe we'll see it coming."

Irina looked at me with a hint of what I could almost fool myself into thinking was admiration. "You're good at reading people."

"I'm good at estimating monsters," I corrected. "I lived with a demon for years. I can recognize other ones."

"Perhaps," Irina agreed, "but you also seem to have the tendency to see demons where none exist."

"Demons are everywhere," I replied, "but that's besides the point. Do you want to do something about Casimir?"

"He's leaving in three days," Irina said after a moment. "Should we act as if nothing's amiss? If you don't think he's going to act quite yet, I don't think we should take action against him yet either."

"Do you trust me, then?" I asked.

"Of course I do."

"Of course?"

"Not all of us are so quick to distrust, Mirmatus."

*No, I didn't say, but some of us are much quicker to lie.*

"Very well," I said aloud. "I don't think Casimir will move himself, not quite yet. If you're secure in that assumption, then we needn't move either."
"Then we won't," Irina stated. "We'll just have to get through the next few days, and this will be behind us."

"Three days left," I agreed. "Then we'll be back to only having to deal with the normal inanity of ruling."

Irina's lips twitched into what was almost a smile. "Almost a respite."

"Almost," I agreed, because after dealing with Casimir, dealing with only Irina would feel almost like a holiday. As difficult as my situation was, matters could, I supposed, be worse.
Chapter 8

When the last day of Casimir's visit arrived, Irina and I breathed a collective sigh of relief. Irina had allowed me to pick out finery for the occasion, although she'd insisted on only altering old clothing and not having new things made. I didn't tell her that the alterations cost almost as much as new clothes would have. I understood the power of appearances, even if she didn't, and having clothes that fit the part of tsar and tsarina were important.

Breakfast was more of an affair than it usually was. Irina and I sat together, with Casimir on Irina's other side. The space beside him where his wife would have sat was empty. Perhaps I ought to check if I had any cousins I could marry off to him. It had worked well enough with Vassilia and Ilias, and I was fairly certain one of my aunts was despairing over a daughter that was nearly old enough to be an old maid. Perhaps she would be happy enough to be married off to an old washed-up lech, given that he was rich and a prince. I wasn't foolish enough to think that would entirely solve our problems, but it might mitigate them, and at this point, it seemed like the best we could do was to keep putting things off until we finally pushed them so far away they would never arrive.

"Prince Casimir," Irina said when the meal was finally finished, offering Casimir a porcelain smile, "we hope you enjoyed your visit here."

"It was very enjoyable, Your Majesty," Casimir replied, inclining his head. "I was glad to have the chance to visit the capital."

"Yes, Koron is lovely, isn't it?" I drawled. "The tsarina and I are very lucky to live in such a beautiful place, are we not, my love?"

"So very lucky indeed," Irina agreed, giving me a soppy look. After my discussion with Casimir, I'd warned her that we ought to step our acting up a bit, although I'd intended to do so without making it so obvious. I couldn't imagine that anyone who saw it could think that the look on Irina's face was sincere.

"Perhaps I shall visit again," Casimir offered. "But only if it would suit Your Majesties, of course."

Another visit most certainly would not suit Our Majesties, but I knew better than to say that. At least this way, Casimir sounded like he planned to visit us with warning and permission. That sort of visit would be awful, but it would be better than one that began with his army breaking down the doors.

"We would be happy to have you," I agreed. "But now you must be anxious to return home, are you not?"

"It can be so difficult to leave home," Irina added. "I still miss Vsynia, despite all that I have here in Koron."

"Your home is a lovely place, Your Majesty," Casimir agreed. "And I have the greatest respect for your father."

"I know my father shares that same respect," Irina replied in an even tone. I wasn't sure I liked it. I wasn't sure I liked the thought of Irina's father and Casimir being friendly either. I had the feeling that the duke would gladly overthrow me for his daughter, and if he had some sort of alliance with Casimir - or, even worse, alliances with both Casimir and Ulrich - I would have no chance. If this was the way Irina intended to do away with me, I had to admit, it was rather neat. It would be very
simple for her to play all of us off each other, and if she was able to weaken everyone else enough, perhaps she wouldn't even have to remarry when she took the throne in our future child's stead.

Irina shot me a sideways look. I realized belatedly that she'd probably expected me to say something into the silence that followed her words, but before I could come up with some response, she turned to Casimir and stated, "Did you find everything here to your liking, Prince Casimir? I hope you and your attendants were all satisfied by our hospitality."

"We were most satisfied," Casimir replied. He seemed almost irritated to admit it, and of course both Irina and I knew why. His gambit with the extra attendants had failed, and we were forcing him to admit it. I was a bit surprised by the petty gesture from Irina, but the look on her face showed no amusement at Casimir's admittance. Of course, she was too good an actress to show the feelings on her face, but I'd thought to at least see a glimpse in her eyes. I didn't, but I saw something that looked almost smug instead. That, I supposed, was more like her.

"We're glad to hear it," I said. "The tsarina and I are always glad to see other people appreciating our beloved Lithvas."

Irina shot me a sharp look, but the expression melted off her face before anyone else could see it. "We will not delay you any longer, Prince Casimir. We hope your journey home is a peaceful one."

Casimir bowed deeply, then he left the room, and within the hour he was gone. The entire palace seemed to relax as the gates closed behind him. I knew, of course, that Irina and I would still have to be careful - we had no way of knowing if Casimir had managed to turn any of our servants into his informants - but Casimir's leaving felt like a breath of fresh air through the entire city. I was glad to see him gone, and I didn't think I was the only one.

"Well," Irina stated as we returned to our room, "I think everything went as well as we could have expected."

"I agree," I said, although memories of the conversation Casimir and I had had kept popping into my head. Perhaps I ought to have told Irina about it after all. If she knew that Casimir did clearly want her dead, she could defend herself against him. I still wasn't sure he would act directly, but if she knew-

But if she knew that Casimir thought I could be his weapon, then would it not make the most sense to remove that weapon from the equation?

"I still do think we ought to do more, though," Irina said, frowning. "Casimir is by no means placated."

"I believe I might have another cousin of marriageable age," I offered. "Do you think the same trick would work twice?"

"I worry that it might only strengthen Casimir's claim to the throne," Irina admitted. "He thinks he ought to seize it, and if his wife were the tsar's cousin…"

"Couldn't we say the same thing of Ilias and Vassilia?" I asked. Then a thought dawned on me, a thought I couldn't believe I'd never had before, and I accused, "Or did you marry the two of them for exactly that reason?"

"I arranged that marriage to placate Ulrich," Irina retorted, but she said it with just enough defensiveness that I thought I might have hit on something. "And we needed to prevent Ulrich from
marrying Vassilia off to Casimir."

"Indeed, but that wasn't the only reason for your actions, was it?" I asked. "What did you promise the two of them? Did you say they'd claim the throne after I died? Or," I continued, thinking about Irina's insistence on an heir, "did you promise that their children would rule Lithvas someday, after I was assassinated?"

"I do not plan to assassinate you!" Irina protested, which I knew well was just an attempt to distract me. Something I'd said had hit its mark, and given the way Irina had only burst out with a protest after I asked about children, I had a feeling I knew what it was.

"So you planned to put Ilias and Vassilia's child on the throne," I said. "And how exactly were you planning on getting a child from them in the first place? Vassilia isn't quite Ilias's type."

"Mirmatius-"

"And how much is your father involved in your plans?" I added. "How much treason did the two of you plan together? Should I wait for a knife in the back from that quarter as well? Perhaps I ought to avoid Vsynia for a while?"

"No one is going to put a knife in your back!" Irina cried. "At least, not anyone you should be able to trust!"

"I trust no one, you know that."

"Because you're too paranoid for your own good. You can trust me. And my father would make no move against the tsar, even if you weren't his daughter's husband."

"Oh, am I supposed to believe that? After your father bought all of that Staryk silver and pushed you in my path? How long have the two of you been planning this?"

"What do you even think we're planning? To have you murdered and marry me off to someone like Casimir? To put another couple's child on the throne of Lithvas? Do you really think I'd want to do any of that if I had any other choice?"

"And what other choice do you have?"

"You!" Irina cried. "I choose you, Mirmatius. I want to rule by your side, with you as my tsar. I want this. Why is this so difficult for you to understand?"

"Because no one has ever chosen me before," I retorted, feeling the words fight their way through my suddenly-tight throat. "My own mother didn't want me. My father would have cast me aside without a second thought. Everyone preferred my brother. No one has ever wanted me, and-"

And I can't believe that I'm wanted now.

I wasn't. I knew it. If Irina did want me at all, it was only temporarily, until she could solidify her rule. The only reason I was still alive was because Irina needed a child from me. Once that duty of mine was fulfilled, she would have no need of me anymore, and Irina was ruthlessly practical, and she would never want anything she didn't need. Once I became useless, I knew my time would be up.

"Mirmatius," Irina said in the achingly gentle tone that she always used when I showed any hint of vulnerability in front of her, the tone that always made me want to silence her by any means possible, "I want you. I'm sorry that no one ever has before, and to be unwanted by one's own
parents is a terrible thing that no one should ever have to live with, but you are wanted now. I promise you that. I swear it to you on my mother's grave."

I wondered if Irina's mother hadn't wanted her either. I couldn't think of any other reason she would swear to a lie on her grave. Then again, I supposed, it wasn't quite a lie; Irina had said I was wanted now, and I knew that as well as she did. I was wanted to help her produce an heir. Afterwards… Well. Irina hadn't said anything about afterwards.

She truly was a master of politics. I suppose that could be a consolation to me, that when I died, Lithvas would be in good hands.

It was a cold comfort.

"Don't we have a meeting to attend?" I asked. "You insisted that we ought to meet with our advisors after Casimir left. We wouldn't want to make them wait, now, would we?"

Irina looked for a moment like she wanted to say something else, but in the end, she just swallowed and nodded. "Very well. Shall we?"

I swept out of the room without waiting for Irina. I could hear her footsteps to my side and half a step behind me the whole way, but I never turned around to look at her. Not even when I could feel her eyes on me.

By the time we reached the room with our advisors, I was actually looking forward to the meeting for what had to be the first time in my life. The advisors were mind-numbingly boring, of course, but at least they would provide a buffer between myself and Irina. And at the moment, the two things I could think of that I needed the most were a buffer and a distraction. Perhaps, if I were lucky, the meeting might even provide both.

"Your Majesties," called the advisor with the horrible mustache, whose name I knew Irina had told me recently but I hadn't bothered to remember, as we walked in. "We weren't expecting your arrival yet."

"Is everything prepared for the meeting?" Irina asked, sitting down in her seat. I sat next to her, leaning on the arm of the chair and hopefully not looking quite as bored as I felt.

Some of the advisors looked at each other in a way that immediately made a warning bell chime in the back of my mind. I straightened up a little and resolved to pay a bit more attention in this meeting than I usually did. I'd told Irina that I didn't trust all of my advisors, and it was true; too many of them were my father's men. But I'd thought, perhaps, that a few of them weren't actively conspiring against me. The fact that they'd all been in here, though, speaking about something they clearly didn't want myself or Irina to know about, made me wonder about that. Perhaps we'd have to wipe out all of our advisors and begin again from scratch. It wouldn't be an easy task, but I was certain Irina was up to it.

"Everything is prepared," the advisor with the mustache replied. "Shall we begin?"

"Yes, Lord Alric, we shall," Irina stated, folding her hands elegantly in her lap. Alric, that was his name. I'd have to keep an eye on him. He'd been one of the advisors to share an almost-guilty look, and he seemed to have appointed himself their mouthpiece. I had the feeling he was one of the advisors that ought to be removed, but I also had the feeling that removing him wouldn't be easy.

"We were discussing Prince Casimir's visit when you arrived," Alric said. "It was our opinion that it went rather well. Do Your Majesties agree?"
"We do," Irina replied. "Although we'll need to look over the proposed changes to our trade agreements, once Casimir sends them. I believe some of them might be to Lithvas's detriment."

"Of course," Alric agreed. "I will personally look over the changes. Unless, of course, Your Majesties would like to look them over yourselves?"

"Why don't we all look them over?" I drawled. "That way, we won't miss anything."

The look Irina shot me was curious, but I was focused more on Alric. He didn't visibly react to what I said, but I had the feeling he knew it was an accusation. Perhaps I'd played my hand a bit early, but perhaps knowing that I knew would dissuade him from doing anything. It was a gamble, but one I was willing to take.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Alric agreed.

"The three of us can meet and look over them once they arrive," Irina stated smoothly. I didn't think she quite knew why I'd volunteered to look over the changes, but at least she was going along with it. Perhaps she thought I was finally showing the interest in ruling that she'd so desperately wanted me to show. I supposed I was, in a way, but that interest only went so far also to make sure my advisors didn't run my country into the ground on behalf of an enemy prince. I had no proof that Alric was working with Casimir, of course, but I had a suspicion, and even if it were wrong, I was almost certain that Alric was up to something.

"Of course." Alric bowed slightly. "Whenever is most convenient for Your Majesties."

"How is our treasury, Lord Rothbury?" Irina asked another one of the advisors.

"Well enough," the advisor - Rothbury, apparently - replied. "The visit did not tax it as much as we had feared. And the milder weather seems to have aided the economy. Money is flowing more regularly now."

Irina nodded. "And Lord Naltis, how is the food situation? Bettering itself, I would hope?"

Things continued in such a vein, with Irina speaking to each of the advisors in turn about whatever subjects they seemed to be experts in. I watched each of them as they spoke. A few seemed obviously guilty, while some of the others seemed to be acting entirely normally. Of course, I couldn't be certain that meant they weren't party to whatever conspiracy the others were planning; they could simply be good actors, or it could be that they'd been planning this conspiracy for so long that they'd put aside any guilt they felt over it. Still, at least it was a start for myself and Irina. We could discuss matters after the meeting was over.

Then I remembered our discussion before the meeting, and I began to second-guess the wisdom in telling my wife, who was clearly only biding her time before she would betray me, the identities of other traitors in our midst.

It was certainly a gamble. Perhaps Irina would use the information to improve her own coup. The support of the former tsar's advisors would undoubtedly be a good thing for a widowed tsarina. On the other hand, if the advisors were working against Lithvas, I couldn't see Irina ever joining them. For all her faults, and they were many, she did care about the country. There was also a chance, of course, that telling Irina would actually make her less likely to betray me. I knew she would do it eventually, but perhaps I could put it off for a while by being useful. I'd tried it before, and it seemed to be working so far. If I proved again that I could be helpful, perhaps Irina would let me live a while longer. After all, that was all people really wanted: usefulness.
Only a fool would hang onto something that was useless.

So I would tell her, then, and hope for the best. The potential benefits outweighed the potential risks. Irina was going to kill me eventually; if she ended up doing it with the help of my advisors, that would be of little concern to me if I were already dead. And if this helped preserve my life a little while longer… Well. When it came to Casimir and Ulrich, I was fairly certain we were just trying to push things off for as long as possible, until they'd been pushed off so far they were no longer a concern. Perhaps, just perhaps, I could manage something similar with Irina. The chances were slim, of course, but perhaps there was a glimmer of hope. Perhaps it wouldn't be foolish to believe it.

Then again, perhaps the knife was already on its way. I'd just have to wait and find out.
Irina, as it turned out, shared some of my concerns regarding our advisors. She hadn't noted all of the things I had, and I wasn't sure she agreed with all the conclusions I'd drawn, but she did agree that the situation would need looking into, and soon. If our advisors were planning something, we had to stop them before their plan came to fruition.

We'd have to start small, however, or so Irina said; apparently, dismissing at least half our advisors without warning or any further plan was a bad idea. I could understand that, even if I wasn't entirely sure that keeping them on wasn't a worse idea, so I allowed Irina to take the lead in slowly weeding out the advisors. Unless we had proof of treason, we didn't want to make any accusations, but we could look for that proof and start weakening the position of some of the advisors we trusted the least. I'd insisted that Lord Alric be one of those advisors; I didn't trust him a single bit.

And then one night, about a week into that, Irina told me that she had missed her courses for the second month in a row.

"They could still be late," she allowed, "but it seems unlikely. I've also been experiencing some nausea, which is common in the early stages of pregnancy."

"So you're with child," I said, forcing myself to believe the words as I spoke them. They still seemed strange and abstract, but the concept was no such thing, not anymore. Irina had a child in her womb. Irina had my child in her womb. We were going to be parents.

This was going to be an unmitigated disaster.

"I believe so, yes," Irina said. "Now comes the question of who to tell."

"We shouldn't tell the advisors," I said immediately. "We can't trust them."

"We still have no proof that they're not trustworthy," Irina countered. "And we'll need to announce it eventually. We should probably make an announcement next month, if the pregnancy seems to be continuing properly. And we should probably call in a physician soon, which someone is bound to notice."

"You want to tell a group of people who have unknown plans against us that you're going to be vulnerable for the next few months?" I demanded. "I never took you for a fool, Irina."

"You most certainly did, when we first met," Irina argued, her lips twitching into what looked almost like the smallest of smiles. "And I don't intend to allow myself to be particularly vulnerable."

"You will be," I protested. "You're carrying a child. Even you cannot continued unaffected."

"I don't intend to continue unaffected," Irina replied. "But I do intend to keep fulfilling my duties until such a time that I'm incapable of doing so."

"And that's when the knife will fall," I said with absolute certainty. I'd lived with Chernobog long enough to know that.

"What would you have me do?" Irina asked with a huff. "I agree that many of your advisors seem untrustworthy, but we cannot keep this a secret."
"At least call in a physician first," I urged. "To tell you if you're with child or not. But one you trust."

"I'll send for my old physician, back in Vysnia," Irina says. "I trust him to be discreet. And Magreta can attend to me as well."

"How long will it take for your physician to arrive?"

"Four days, give or take? Perhaps five?" Irina shrugs. "It takes two days to travel from here to there, and I imagine the man will need a day to gather his things."

I nodded. That gave us a week, or nearly, before Irina and I had to have this argument again. We would have it again, I was sure of it. Irina wasn't one to give up so easily, but neither was I. We truly were a horrible match in that regard.

"Then call for him," I said, "and we will learn whether we need to worry about this at all."

"If I'm not with child, we'll only have another worry to concern ourselves with," Irina remarked.

"Yes, but by the time we actually get you with child, perhaps we won't have a group of treacherous advisors to share the news with," I countered acidly.

"We'll deal with them," Irina said, sounding far less concerned than I thought she ought to be. "But I don't believe any of them will make a move quite yet."

"I'm not sure I agree," I replied. "What else would they have been talking about when we went to the meeting last week?"

"They could have been discussing a whole manner of things," Irina replied, irritation in her voice. She'd made a few such comments about my incessant paranoia in regards to the quickly hushed-up conversation, but I couldn't help but think it was important. Perhaps Irina was right and it wasn't, but even if that turned out to be the case, I'd never admit it to her.

"A whole manner of things they didn't want us to hear?" I countered. "It was suspicious, Irina, even you have to admit that."

"Some of your advisors have done suspicious things," Irina says diplomatically. "And we will get to the bottom of it, I swear to you. But at the moment, I think we ought to focus on the child. We can't move too quickly against your advisors anyway."

"I still don't see why not," I muttered.

"Mirmatius-"

"Fine, very well, we'll focus on the child," I huffed. "What do you want to discuss?"

"I don't know that there's much to discus at this moment," Irina replied. "I'll send for my physician, and then when we know for certain, we'll decide what to announce and whom to announce it to."

"And what do you intend to do when the child is born?" I asked. "I'm sure you'll want to return to your duties quickly, so do you intend to hire a nurse? You'll need a wet nurse, at the very least."

"I had thought to have Magreta care for the child," Irina replied. "She cared for me very well."

"Have you discussed the idea with her?" I asked. Frowning a little, I added, "How much do you discuss with her?"
"I trust Magreta," Irina replied, which meant she told her everything. "And she is very fond of the idea of caring for my child."

"She's growing old," I cautioned. "You might want to pick someone a bit younger and more able."

"Magreta is perfectly able," Irina retorted. "And I would trust her with my life. I won't entrust the care of my child to anyone I don't have complete faith in."

"Do you intend to keep me away from the child, then?" I asked dryly.

"I hadn't thought you'd want to spend much time with the child at all," Irina replied.

She was wrong. I wasn't quite sure why I wanted to spend time with a baby, but I did. Perhaps it was some paternal instinct to protect my child, although my father had certainly never felt such a thing. Whatever the source, the feeling was surprisingly strong.

"And if I do?" I countered. "Will I be allowed? Or do you intend to shape the new tsar without outside influence?"

"The child will be yours as much as mine," Irina replied. "Of course you can spend time with them."

"Perhaps we can do the opposite of a normal couple, and you can run things while I care for the children," I said dryly. I was joking, but as the words came out, I realized I didn't think they were truly that ridiculous. Irina rolled her eyes at them, though, so perhaps she did.

"Do you still intend to try to change the laws to allow a daughter to be your heir?" she asked.

"Why not?" I replied. "You're a better ruler than I am, so perhaps any daughter we have would be better than any son."

"Your advisors probably won't allow it," Irina warned.

"Well then, it's a good thing that I intend to clear them out, isn't it?"

"You can't merely dismiss anyone who doesn't agree with you," Irina scolded.

"I know that. If I could, I would have dismissed you already."

Irina rolled her eyes.

"But," I continued, "as you somehow seem to keep forgetting, I am the tsar, which means I don't really need my advisors' approval on such things. If I want to name my daughter my heir, I can do that, and they can all go to hell."

"Perhaps this is why none of your advisors seem particularly fond of you," Irina said, her voice dry.

"And perhaps a tsar shouldn't have to pander to a group of fools," I retorted. "You included, of course, my dear."

Irina rolled her eyes again. That was the third time in a very short period; I was clearly irritating her. I tried not too feel too triumphant about that.

"Shall we go to bed?" she asked. "Given that it seems nothing of importance will come from this conversation?"
"Whatever you wish, my tsarina," I replied, giving Irina a sarcastic bow. "Although, perhaps we ought to check with our advisors first?"

Irina huffed and climbed into bed. I followed her, facing away from her and knowing that behind me, she was facing away as well. She always did.

"Goodnight, Mirnatius," she said, blowing out the candle, and as usual, I didn't reply. I never did. I thought I heard Irina sigh, then she settled down into her pillow and apparently went to sleep.

I didn't fall asleep that quickly, of course. Irina's ability to fall asleep so quickly was not one I shared. Some nights, I hardly slept at all, and often I lay awake for hours. It was the worst when there was something on my mind, and between the impending betrayal from my advisors and the chid in Irina's womb, I had a lot to think about. I wasn't sure I would be sleeping at all that night.

Then I heard Irina roll over, and a moment later, she draped an arm over my waist.

"Excuse me," I said coldly, the weight of her arm uncomfortable and oppressive, "but what do you think you're doing?"

Irina's only response was a soft, satisfied sigh, and I realized she was asleep. She'd rolled over in her sleep and draped herself over me, and it was taking every scrap of willpower I had not to shove her off the bed in response.

I shifted slightly, but all that did was make Irina snuggle closer to me. I still couldn't quite believe she was doing this, and I knew she'd be horrified to know it, but apparently her sleeping self wouldn't be easily dissuaded. I could wake her up, I supposed, and that would make her pull away, but I didn't want to wake her. That would mean we'd have to talk, and I was done talking to Irina for the night. Perhaps I could figure out a way to wake her without her realizing I'd done it, then I could fake sleep to avoid a conversation, but Irina had proven adept at telling when I was faking sleep, so I couldn't be sure that would work. No, the best solution would be to get her to move in her sleep.

Or, I supposed, I could figure out a way to ignore her touch and sleep with it.

It wasn't that bad, actually. I'd disliked it at first, but now that I'd grown a bit more used to the contact, I found it was almost a little nice. Irina was surprisingly warm, and having her body pressed against my back kept the cold night air from reaching it. She wasn't too warm, though, so I didn't think I'd grow overheated. And the contact was different enough from any encounters I'd had with Chernobog that it didn't provoke any memory-induced panic. Chernobog may have invited people into my bed, but he'd never allowed any cuddling, and what Irina was doing was very close to cuddling. No one had ever cuddled me before, not that I could think of, and so Irina's gentle touch was a new experience. The closest experience I'd ever had to this had also been with Irina, weeks ago, when she lay with her body pressed against mine. She hadn't been quite this close, and she hadn't draped herself over me, but the contact hadn't been entirely unpleasant then, and it wasn't entirely unpleasant now.

Tentatively, I closed my eyes, trying to breathe slowly and regularly until I fell asleep. It didn't work quickly, but insomnia had always plagued me, so I didn't think too much of it at first. I just kept breathing and trying, breathing and trying, and just when I'd been lying awake for so long that I thought perhaps I wouldn't get a wink of rest all night, I fell asleep.

My dreams were strangely pleasant that night, but when I woke, I didn't remember them at all.
Irina's physician arrived five days later, as expected. The man seemed knowledgable enough, and Irina clearly trusted him. To say that was good enough for me would have been an exaggeration, but I trusted that Irina wouldn't do anything too foolish. After all, the future of her beloved Lithvas was at stake.

While Irina was meeting with her physician, I had a meeting with Lord Alric. The timing was imperfect, and I didn't think either Irina or I liked it, but there was no way to reschedule it without giving Alric too much information, so there was no other choice. Irina, I was fairly certain, was worried I would burst right out and say something to Alric that would inform him of my suspicions, but she needn't have been. Just because I frequently accused her of wanting to assassinate me didn't mean I would do the same with everyone else. Irina had made her plans so absurdly obvious that to pretend I didn't see them coming would be ridiculous. Alric, on the other hand, had been subtle enough that I could let him think he'd gone unnoticed, and then he'd think he had the benefit of surprise without actually having it. I didn't know how much of Irina's concern came from wanting to keep any advantages we could over Alric, and how much came from her not believing that he was as much of a danger as I found him to be. Either way, though, she'd tried nearly as hard as I had to figure out a way to move the meeting without raising suspicions. There was no way to do it, though, so I'd have to meet with Alric alone.

I was growing rather tired of spending so much time alone with people who would love nothing more than to slip a sword between my ribs.

"Your Majesty!" Alric said when I reached our meeting place. "You're early. And where is the tsarina?"

"The tsarina had another matter to attend to," I replied. "Are you prepared already, or shall I wait for you to ready yourself?"

"We can begin," Alric said, standing next to his chair until I sat down. I took a bit of pleasure in doing so slowly. "Although, Your Majesty, would you not wish to postpone the meeting until the tsarina's matter is attended to?"

"I am the tsar, Lord Alric," I replied, my voice a little frosty. "I can assure you, I am perfectly capable of attending a meeting without my wife's aid."

"Yes, of course," Alric replied, nodding. "I apologize, Your Majesty, I shouldn't have implied otherwise."

"No, you shouldn't have," I agreed. "Now, shall we begin?"

"Of course." Alric pulled out a sheaf of papers, settling them in front of me. "These are the details on the trade agreements that you asked to see. Shall we go over them together?"

"I ought to read them over first," I replied, picking up the first paper and scanning it. The trade agreements with Casimir seemed ordinary enough, although there were a few things that made my brow furrow. I wondered if I'd been involved in coming up with these plans at all, or if they'd been passed under my father's rule. Given the visible age of the papers, I would guess the latter.

"Well," I said after a few minutes, settling the papers down, "shall we look at Casimir's proposed changes?"

"Of course," Alric agreed, handing over another sheaf of papers. "I believe most of his changes will be easy enough to implement, if we decide to do so."
I began to skim the paper, then I frowned, went back to the beginning, and began reading it more carefully. Perhaps Alric was right and the changes would be easy to implement, but I didn't think any of them would do Lithvas any good at all. There were a few that we could perhaps accept, given that we made a few changes, but many of them were completely ridiculous.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" I asked, looking up at Alric. "How can Casimir expect us to pass these? Lithvas would end up bankrupted within the year."

Alric blinked, looking startled. "Your Majesty?"

"Have you read over these?" I asked, gesturing at the paper. "None of these changes will benefit Lithvas at all. Every single one of them would alter the deal in Casimir's favor. Exactly how foolish does he think we are?"

And how foolish are you, to speak like you support this when you're about to give it to me to read?

"I believe some of them will be good for us," Alric protested. "A few of Casimir's changes will be mutually beneficial."

"Perhaps," I allowed, "but hardly any. And there are some issues with the original trade agreement that aren't addressed."

Alric was barely able to keep from gaping. "Issues with the original agreement? You found some, Your Majesty?"

Clearly, without Irina present, Alric had expected me to simply pick up the papers, look at them briefly, and then agree to anything he said. He was a bigger fool than I thought. There was a time when I might have done that, yes, but it was always best to plan for the worst case scenario. On the occasions when it didn't come to pass, nothing else would seem particularly difficult.

"I did," I replied. "And I must say, I'm rather surprised that you didn't find them. Isn't that your job?"

"Well, Your Majesty-"

"And I'm stunned you didn't see the problems with Casimir's changes immediately," I added. "Someone who didn't know better might think you were deliberately trying to sabotage Lithvas."

"I would never, Your Majesty!"

I could agree that Alric's base motivation probably wasn't to destroy his country. He probably wanted to save it as much as Irina did. He just thought the way to save it was by giving it to Casimir. I had to hope that Irina didn't decide he was right.

I looked down at the trade agreement. "We'll need to make some changes," I said, looking up at Alric. "But on my terms, not Casimir's."

Alric nodded, and he seemed about to say something else when a servant scurried up to my side. "I have a message for you, from the tsarina," she told me, and I realized this was the girl who'd dumped the bucket of sand on Chernobog. "She needs to see you immediately."

"Then of course I will attend to her," I replied, standing. "We'll finish this another time."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Alric said, bowing. "I hope all is well with the tsarina."
I could only think of one reason that Irina would call for me with such urgency, and it was a good one. Of course, there were almost certainly a dozen bad reasons that simply hadn't occurred to me, but I wasn't about to share any of this information with Alric. I didn't even bother responding to him; I simply followed the servant girl to Irina's room, then dismissed her before I went inside.

"I'm with child," Irina burst out the second the door shut behind me. "The physician looked me over, and he confirmed it. We're going to have a baby."

I stared at Irina for a moment, unable to think of a intelligent single thing to say. "We- You're certain?"

"Completely," Irina replied. She was practically glowing in excitement. "I'm about two months along. And the physician thinks I seem healthy so far. He's going to stay here, to monitor the pregnancy."

"Yes, good," I agreed absently, not entirely certain what I was agreeing to. Irina was pregnant. Of course, we'd been aiming for that goal all along, but actually reaching it was another matter entirely. Irina was carrying our child. Irina was going to give birth to our child in seven months. I was going to be a father in less than a year. I couldn't quite wrap my mind around the concept.

"We ought to tell our advisors soon," Irina added. "We won't be able to hide it for long."

*That* snapped me out of my daze. "Absolutely not."

"Mirmatius-"

"I was the one who just finished a meeting with Lord Alric, not you. He's clearly in league with Casimir. The changes to the trade agreement that he tried to push me to implement were ridiculous. There wasn't a single one that wasn't tipped in Casimir's favor. They'd have bankrupted Lithvas if I'd agreed."

"I hope you didn't?" Irina said, her gaze and voice sharpening a bit.

"Of course not," I dismissed. "But Alric wanted me to. Either he's egregiously incompetent or he's a traitor. Either way, I want him gone."

"We may be able to dismiss him, but-"

"How much more proof do you need?" I demanded. "We are the tsar and tsarina. We don't need to justify our actions to anyone. If I want Alric dismissed, I will dismiss him, and anyone who disagrees can go to hell."

"Did you say anything to Alric that indicated that you suspect him?"

I thought back over the conversation. "Perhaps."

Irina sighed. "The reason I want to wait to dismiss Alric," she explained, "is I want to find out whom he's working with. He's not going to overthrow us on his own, and even with Casimir's help, he'll still need support from within Lithvas."

"So we get rid of all of our advisors and appoint new ones."

"We don't know if Alric is in league with all of our advisors," Irina countered. "And we don't know if his allies are limited to that group. He could be allied with other nobles, and if we dismiss him now, they'll go to ground and we'll never find them. But if we wait, we can root them all out at
The plan *did* make sense, I had to admit. There was one problem, though. "And what if Alric makes his move before we're able to identify his allies?"

Irina offered me a wry smile. "We merely have to hope he doesn't."

"And if he does?" I insisted. "Hoping will do us no good against an assassination attempt."

"What do you want me to say, Mirnatius?" Irina asked. "I cannot prepare for every eventuality. I can do my best, but you cannot expect the impossible from me."

*You've already done the impossible,* I wanted to protest. *You freed me from Chernobog. That should not have been possible. What's one more miracle?*

I didn't say it, of course. If Irina was unwilling to act on my behalf, I would be unlikely to convince her otherwise. I'd simply have to be on alert for any assassination attempts, and as useless as it was, I would have to hope they wouldn't occur.

"And do you still intend to tell your advisors that you are with child?" I demanded. "Even when they're clearly trying to betray you?"

"We cannot keep it a secret," Irina countered. "I will announce it at our next meeting."

I sighed. "Fine. On your own head be it."

It wouldn't be, and I knew it. If it fell on anyone's head, it would fall on mine. I'd just have to hope it didn't fall at all.
"If we have no other matters to discuss," Irina stated as the meeting with our advisors drew to a close, "I have something I wish to announce."

Under the table, I clenched my fists. I'd have to play the happy father-to-be once Irina gave the news, of course, and it wouldn't entirely be a lie, but I still didn't want her to announce it at all. I didn't trust any of our advisors at all, and telling them of a future weakness - and a future vulnerability - seemed foolish to me. But Irina had insisted, and I'd never once won a fight with her, so of course I hadn't stood a chance.

"I believe we've discussed everything," Alric said, looking at the other advisors. "What news do you have, Your Majesty?"

Irina smiled serenely and placed her hands over her stomach. "God has blessed me with a child. I am carrying the heir to the throne of Lithvas."

The advisors all looked at each other with wide eyes. "Are you certain, Your Majesty?" one of them asked.

"I had my physician examine me, and he confirmed it," Irina said. "I'm two months along, so we can expect the heir to be born in seven months."

"And we shall pray for his safe arrival," Alric said.

Irritation surged in me, and I figured if Irina was going to be foolish, I could afford to be foolish as well. "Or hers."

Immediately, all eyes were on me. I noticed Irina's smile go a bit rigid next to me, but I'd told her that I would make this announcement when she made hers, so she should have seen it coming.

"But Your Majesty," one of the advisors said tentatively, "a daughter cannot inherit."

"Not at the moment, no," I agreed. "But I intend to change that. I will have my firstborn child, male or female, be my heir and heir to the throne of Lithvas."

"But-" Another advisor looked at me in shock and poorly-concealed horror. "You intend for us to be led by a tsarina?"

"And what do you have against tsarinas?" I retorted icily, laying a hand on Irina's.

"Nothing, of course," the advisor replied, frantically backpedaling, "but does a woman really have the proper disposition to rule a country?"

I looked to Irina, who was of course doing exactly that. "I have found women to be extremely capable in most areas."

"Shall we perhaps take the time to think the proposal over?" Alric asked. "We can discuss whether or not it is viable."

I looked over my advisors with a cold glare. "I believe you were all mistaken. You seem to think I was asking your permission to allow a daughter to inherit. I was not. I am the tsar, and the identity of the person who takes the throne after me is my decision. If the child my tsarina is carrying is a
boy, then he shall become tsar one day, but if it is a girl, she will be tsarina."

The room was silent. Irina let out a sigh that was barely distinguishable from an exhale, then she stood. Quickly, the rest of the room scrambled to stand with her.

"I believe we ought to continue this discussion during our next meeting," she declared. "Our time has run out, and I am certain there are other things you all must be doing. We can discuss this matter more fully when we have the time for it."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Alric replied, bowing deeply.

"Whatever my tsarina desires," I added, taking Irina's hand and brushing a kiss against the back of it.

The meeting dispersed, and Irina barely waited until we got back to our rooms before she whirled on me. "Have you forgotten that you no longer play host a fire demon who will bend people to your will?" she hissed. "You cannot simply make demands like that. Ruling requires collaboration."

"If ruling requires collaboration, why am I the only tsar?" I retorted. "Those men are my subordinates. If we disagree on something, I have every right to use my authority to overpower them."

"No, you do not!" Irina cried. "And you might have mentioned this foolish plan to me before you set it into motion!"

"I did," I retorted irritably. "I told you that I was going to bring the matter up when you announced your pregnancy."

"You didn't tell me that you were going to announce it and give your advisors no chance to do what they are meant to do and advise you!"

I thought I'd made that rather clear, but perhaps Irina had thought it was merely exaggerating. "They're all fools and traitors anyway! And you heard them, not a single one would support me. They all think a woman is too weak to take the throne in her own right. You can't honestly tell me that you agree with them."

"Of course I don't," Irina retorted, "but that doesn't mean we shouldn't work with them. Think about this, Mirnatius. If you want to put a daughter on the throne, we'll need to convince people she's strong enough to be there. If we don't, then she'll be assassinated the second she's crowned."

"Can't people just use their eyes?" I retorted. "You're the one ruling now, and you're more than strong enough to hold the throne."

Irina shook her head, still looking annoyed. "We should have waited until after the child was born to make any announcement. If the child is a boy, we won't have to worry about any of this anyway."

"And what if we do have a son, and then he has a daughter?" I retorted. "Would you have her passed over?"

"We cannot change the world overnight, Mirnatius!" Irina cried. "If you wish to work towards this, we can make it a goal, but it will take time."

Irina was irritating, but she was most likely correct. "Fine. But we will make this a goal."
"I don't disagree with your desire," Irina replied. "I just want to make sure it works out properly."

"I imagine you'll want to wait to push it, however," I said.

"I simply believe we should focus on more urgent matters first," Irina replied. "If you're right and our advisors are going to make a move during my pregnancy, we'll need to be sure we're on guard, and we'll need to work on weeding all the traitors out."

I couldn't disagree with that point. "Fine. How exactly do you plan to weed the traitors out? We'll need to do something to make them show themselves."

"Honestly, I'm not quite sure," Irina replied. "Do you have any ideas?"

"If we arrest one, we might be able to tell who the others are based on who panics," I offered. "And we might be able to get names out of whoever we arrest."

Irina frowned. "Perhaps," she allowed, "but perhaps that'll simply make all the others go to ground, and we'll never find them."

"If it scares them into lying low, isn't that good enough for now?" I countered. "They'll still be here, but at least they won't be acting against us."

"But they'll be in the perfect spot to do so, if they decide it's safe," Irina replied. "I'd rather try to arrest as many at once as possible."

"So we start collecting names," I said. "Alric should be at the top of the list. And most of the other advisors as well."

"I agree," Irina said. "And we'll have to take a look at the rest of the nobility too. Alric seems like he may be in league with Casimir, but we don't know if they're actually working together or if Alric just supports his claim. And we'll need to see if Ulrich is involved at all."

"Do your ladies-in-waiting know about the pregnancy?" I asked. "Because Ulrich will know the second Vassilia does, if he doesn't know already." I frowned a little. "And did you tell your father when you sent for your physician?"

"I didn't tell my father," Irina replied. "I wouldn't entrust such secrets to a letter anyone could open. But you wouldn't have anything to fear if I had."

"Have you told your ladies-in-waiting?" I asked, unwilling to get into that argument again.

"No," Irina replied, "but they may be able to tell before too long. I've had some nausea, and I assume I'll start to show in a month or so."

My eyes flickered down to Irina's stomach. It was still flat, and I assumed we'd be able to hide her increasing waistline for a short time, but depending on how large she grew, we might not be able to hide it for too long.

"So we need to be prepared for the world to know within the month," I said. "Assuming rumors don't spread before that."

"I assume rumors will spread," Irina said. "But yes, we should announce the pregnancy before too long. There's still a risk of losing the child at this point, but the physician didn't think it was too high."
"And once we make the announcement, we'll need to immediately increase security," I added. "I'm
certain our enemies will want to take advantage of any weakness."

"So we increase security," Irina agreed. "But we'll also need to be on guard ourselves. The attack
may very well come from our own people, and increased security may not be able to stand between
us and them."

"Shall we hire bodyguards?" I asked dryly. "To stand by our sides, taste our food before we do, and
stand between us and any knives that may come?"

There was a flicker of a smile on Irina's face. "Perhaps, but I don't know that it'll come to that.
We'll have to see."

"Once the child is born, we ought to have a guard assigned to them," I said. "An infant is far too
easy to kill, and I don't intend to let anyone touch our child."

"I agree," Irina said, her face growing solemn. "Our child will need to be heavily guarded. There
are too many people who would attempt to kill them to weaken our power."

That was my fault, I realized. I'd been a terrible tsar, and I'd practically invited people to conspire
against me. And now, there was a chance those conspirators were going to take their anger with me
out on my yet-unborn child. My child, who would always be an easier target than me, who would
have to rule the country I left them. My child, who would have to bear my legacy after I was gone.

I'd need to make sure to leave them a good one.

"But for now," Irina added, "we must focus on surviving ourselves. We won't be able to do
anything for our child if we're both dead."

"We won't have a child if you die before they're born," I agreed. "So? Shall we hire more guards
tomorrow? Perhaps they'll dissuade people from even trying to move against us."

"We can hope," Irina said. "And we must also hope there's no corruption among the guards we
already have."

"We need to figure out the best way to root out corruption," I said. "Sooner or later, we'll need to
take action, and as you said, we ought to arrest as many traitors at once as possible."

"Perhaps we can lay a few traps?" Irina suggested. "Although I'm not entirely sure how we can do
that without some risk."

"We may have to accept the risk," I replied. "We're in enough danger as it is already. Taking a few
risks to minimize that may be what's required."

"Perhaps," Irina allowed. "But if we can figure out something else to do that doesn't put anyone at
risk, that would be better."

"Of course," I agreed, "but we may not be able to."

"We should focus on one thing at a time," Irina declared. "First, we ought to hire more guards.
After we're a bit more secure, we can focus on attempting to root out the corruption around us."

"As you say," I replied, inclining my head sarcastically. "And once we're secure and no longer
surrounded by traitors, we will discuss changing the laws regarding inheritance."
"Of course," Irina replied. "I don't wish to fight you on this point, Mirnatius. I agree that a daughter should be able to inherit. I just want to make sure our child, male or female, lives long enough for that to be a consideration."

So did I, and I was willing to do whatever it took to be sure that would come to pass.

Hiring extra guards turned out to be a fairly simple process, although, of course, we had no way of knowing for certain that the men we were hiring wouldn't put a sword through our chests as quickly as they would put their swords up to defend us. I could only hope that Irina's Staryk crown was enough to sway them. I still wore the ring, of course, and she told me the necklace had been sacrificed to chain up the Staryk king, but the crown alone seemed to be enough to ensorcel most people who gazed upon its radiance. I still wasn't quite sure how that worked, nor did I understand why I was still immune to it when I no longer had a demon in my body, but those were concerns for a far-off day, when we were safe and secure enough to wonder about petty marvels. I wasn't entirely certain such a day would ever arrive.

None of our advisors had made any moves yet, and neither Irina nor I heard anyone spreading rumors of her pregnancy. It had only been a few days since we'd told our advisors, of course, so there was still quite a bit of time for both things to happen. I had no doubt they would. The rumors, at least, would be mostly harmless. The important thing to worry about was how our traitorous advisors would take advantage of our current situation. After all, if they wished to install another tsar in my place, it would be far simpler to do before I had an heir. Irina's announcement gave them seven months to act.

I sighed and looked down at the trade agreement I was supposed to be reworking. Irina had been interested in the report of my meeting with Alric, and apparently the fact that he was almost definitely a traitor didn't mean I was spared the trial of having to go over the trade agreements as I said I would. I thought we had more important things to focus on than potential changes to our trade agreements with Casimir, but Irina had insisted that we still needed to deal with the minutiae of ruling, and we obviously couldn't pass these things off to advisors who would sooner see us deposed and beheaded. Unfortunately, that left me to deal with the trade agreements while Irina twittered with her ladies-in-waiting and made sure there was no unfavorable gossip going around that we didn't already know about.

I sighed again and twirled my pencil in my hand absentmindedly. I'd been given copies of both the original trade agreement and Casimir's proposed changes to annotate as I pleased, and both papers were now covered in scrawled notes. The paper with Casimir's asinine changes was more heavily annotated, of course, but the original agreement had a fair amount of notes added to it as well. My father clearly hadn't put too much thought into the agreement when he passed it. Of course, it was equally possible he'd never seen the paper at all. He'd been in the habit of allowing his advisors to do most of the actual business of ruling. When I had the power to bewitch them into acting in my best interests, I had done the same, but now that that power was gone - and now that I was married to someone who would undoubtedly refuse to do any such thing - I had to actually put in work. It was exhausting.

I looked at the paper again, then up at the clock. I was supposed to fetch Irina soon for dinner, as another one of our little shows of romance. They were annoying, but I'd begun to wonder if perhaps we ought to perform them more often. Casimir had to have heard the rumors about potential unhappiness in our marriage from someone.

I still hadn't told Irina about the offer Casimir had made. I was beginning to seriously think that I ought to, but the proper moment never seemed to arise. That was, I knew, a somewhat ridiculous
thought; when could possibly be the proper moment to tell your wife that a visiting prince offered
to help you assassinate her? Still, she ought to know that Casimir was making overtures. If he was
mentioning the idea to me, I had to assume he'd been thinking about it for a while. I didn't know if
he'd lined up another would-be assassin yet, but if he hadn't, I assumed he would before too long. If
he wanted Irina dead, I didn't think my unwillingness to do the deed myself would stop him for
very long.

I would tell her tonight, I decided. After dinner, after we returned to our rooms, I would tell her
what Casimir had said to me and let her puzzle out what to do next. She was far better at that sort
of thing than I was, after all. I would tell Irina, and she would know what to do.

I jotted down a few more notes on the trade agreement, doodled an idea for a christening cap in the
corner, and finally threw down the pencil when it was time to fetch Irina. Time had seemed to pass
excruciatingly slowly while I was waiting for dinner to free me from the dull financials, but now
that I wanted to dinner to last as long as possible, to put off talking to Irina, I was certain it would
fly by in an instant.

Well, there was nothing to be done about it, so I got up, smoothed my coat down, and headed out of
the bedroom to Irina. Her ladies all looked up at me when I entered the room, of course, and I
heard immediate whispers of gossip. I thought I saw Vassilia looking at me out of the corner of my
eye, but when I looked again, she was bent over her embroidery. Given that everyone else had
looked up, that was as good as a confirmation that she had indeed been staring. I would mention
that to Irina later. Perhaps it was completely innocent, but given who Vassilia's father was, I didn't
want to take any chances.

"My lord," Irina said, looking up at me with a small smile. "Is it time to dine?"

"Nearly," I replied, bowing in front of Irina and kissing her hand. "And I found myself unable to
live without your beauty for a moment longer."

The ladies-in-waiting tittered behind me, as they always did when they watched Irina and me
interact. Irina smiled up at me sweetly, taking my arm as she stood. I took her hand and twined our
fingers together, then the two of us swept out of the room looking every inch a besotted tsar and
tsarina. The illusion, I'd found, was not particularly difficult to maintain, and with time, I'd grown
to dislike it less and less. It could still be irritating, but smiling at Irina and conversing with her
lovingly was no longer the hardship it had been before.

We walked together to the dining hall, where dinner had already been set out. Servants pulled our
chairs out for us, and I kept holding onto Irina's hand until she was seated. There were no guests at
dinner, so Irina and I sat alone at our high table, food and drink in front of us. I reached for a carafe
of wine and offered it to Irina, pouring her a glass when she smiled and nodded. I filled my own
glass a bit higher than hers. After all, I would need some liquid courage if I was to admit to Irina
that I had been told about a plan, however bare-boned, to assassinate her. I didn't think she would
be happy, especially given how long I'd kept it from her.

"And how was your afternoon, my lord?" Irina asked, serving herself some food. "I missed you
keenly after we parted."

"And I you," I replied, which wasn't even a lie. Given how miserable looking over the trade
agreement had been, Irina's presence would have lit up my entire afternoon by comparison. "But I
believe my afternoon was productive. And yours?"

"I passed it pleasantly enough," Irina replied. "My ladies had some gossip to share. Did you know
that Casimir gifted a jeweled bracelet to one of the serving girls? Apparently, she attended to him
Had I know that Casimir had accosted one of our maids, I would have put a stop to it. "I didn't," I replied. "Did you discuss anything else? Did Vassilia have any news from her husband? Or her father?"

"Not that she mentioned," Irina replied, her brows furrowing slightly. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I merely thought I saw her eyeing me strangely, and I wondered if she perhaps knew something I did not. Perhaps it was a trick of the light."

It wasn't, and the look in Irina's eyes made it clear that she understood that. "Perhaps," she replied anyway, because we couldn't speak entirely openly while we were out at dinner. "I can speak to her tomorrow."

"If you wish," I replied, lifting my wineglass and taking a sip. The second the wine hit my tongue, I tasted a bitter flavor, and my mouth began to go numb.

I was no stranger to assassination attempts. Of course I wasn't. I was a widely disliked ruler, and there had never been a shortage of people who wanted me dead. But before, Chernobog had protected me from such things. There had been multiple times where I'd ingested poison, and he'd burned it from my body the second it hit my tongue.

This time, Chernobog was not there to do it.

The wineglass fell from my hand and shattered against the floor, splashing blood-red wine everywhere. Irina let out a shriek, jerking backwards. Her eyes flew up to mine, wide and... dare I say panicked? Perhaps they were, or perhaps I was misreading things. I didn't have much time to think about it, because almost as quickly as I dropped the wineglass, my vision blurred, and I felt myself crumple to the floor.

The world went dark before I hit the ground.
Chapter 11

Most of the next four days - for I later found out that was how long I was unconscious - was a featureless blur to me. I had faint flickers of awareness, but nothing much. I remembered someone bathing my forehead with a cool cloth, and someone holding my hand, and I remembered something being forced down my throat that made me vomit until I was spitting out blood. The emetic did its job, however, and whatever poison had entered my system left it.

There was another memory, although it was so faint and, frankly, so absurd that it was probably just a creation of my fevered brain. I thought I remembered Irina sitting by my bedside, one of my hands gripped between hers, my knuckles pressed to her lips. She was mumbling something, and although I didn't remember the words, I remembered the desperate cadence to her voice. She was begging, and she was clinging to me like I might disappear if she let go.

But of course, that couldn't have really happened. It must have been a dream.

When I finally woke up properly, it was to Irina sitting next to me in an armchair that had been dragged up to the bed. She was dozing, so I took advantage of the moment to try to recall what had happened. The last thing I recalled was going to dinner, and then…

And then…

And then I took a sip from my wineglass, and drank a mouthful of poison.

I didn't remember much of anything coherent after that, so to find out what had happened, I would have to wake Irina. For a moment, though, I hesitated. Could I trust her? Had she been the one to poison me in the first place? If I woke her now, would she be glad to see me alive, or would she press a pillow to my face and smother me to death?

Perhaps it was foolish of me, but I didn't think she would. If she'd wanted to smother me, she could have done so while I was unconscious. To wait would be foolish, and Irina was no fool. And as for whether or not the poison had been hers… Well, what difference would it really make? She would hardly admit to it. I would just have to bear not knowing.

I wasn't quite sure why, but I didn't think it was hers anyway.

When I opened my mouth to speak, only a thin rasp came out, but it was enough to wake Irina. "Mirnatius!" she gasped when she saw my eyes were open. "Oh, thank the Lord. We were beginning to fear you would never wake."

"We?" I croaked out.

Irina poured a cup of water from the pitcher next to my bed and lifted my head to pour it into my mouth. "My physician has been attending to you for the past four days," she explained. "We were able to expel the poison from your body, but he was afraid we might have been too late. You were very weak."

"Do we have any idea who was behind it?" I asked.

Irina sighed. "We haven't found anyone yet, but I have my suspicions. But I've been more focused on you than on finding the would-be assassins."

That was foolish, but it sent a strange warm feeling to my chest. I wasn't quite sure what the feeling
meant, but it was pleasant.

"Have there been any further attempts?" I asked. Surely, while I was recuperating and still weak would have been the best time for another assassination attempt.

"No," Irina replied fiercely. "I've had guards outside the room at all times, and I've never left your side. No one but the physician has been able to enter the room. No one has tried to hurt you."

The ferociousness of Irina's response surprised me, but I didn't say anything about it. I still felt weak and exhausted, and the thought of getting in an argument wasn't one I could stomach at the moment. Even the discussion we were having was almost beyond me; it was difficult to even keep my eyes open.

"You can go back to sleep, if you're tired," Irina said, apparently seeing my weariness on my face. "I will make sure no one comes in."

The thought was tempting, I wouldn't deny that, but I shook my head. "Who do you suspect?"

"Given the timing, I have to wonder if it might have been orchestrated by one of our advisors," Irina replied. "Perhaps with Casimir's knowledge, or perhaps on his behalf without his awareness. Or it may have been someone associated with Ulrich, but I think Casimir might be more likely. Of course, there are others it could have been as well, but I think someone associated with one of the princes is most likely."

I hummed in agreement, my eyes drifting closed again. I wanted to keep them open, I wanted to keep talking, but they were so heavy…

"Go to sleep, Mirnatius," Irina said in a gentle voice. "We'll speak more when you wake next."

I allowed my eyes to close and slipped into slumber almost immediately. Just as I was on the edge of it, I thought I felt lips against my forehead, but I was so close to sleep that it must have simply been a dream.

The next time I woke, there was a man bending over me. I wanted to pull away, but I was so weak I could barely move at all. All I could manage was a sharp hiss, but I'd hardly had time to let it out before Irina appeared in my field of view.

"It's alright, Mirnatius!" she told me, reaching for my hand. "This is my physician. He saved your life."

"Your Majesty," the man said, taking a step back and bowing. "I'm glad to see you awake."

"Doctor Nikolai has been working tirelessly to tend to you," Irina added.

I could pick up on a cue when I heard one, even though I didn't always choose to care. "I suppose I owe you my thanks, then," I rasped.

Silently, Irina filled a glass with water for me and helped me to drink it. "It will be some time before you are fully recovered," the physician said as I drank. "But I expect you will be well enough to leave this bed within a few days."

"Are you hungry?" Irina asked me. "I've made sure the kitchens have had broth ready for the past few days, so you would have some when you woke."
"Food would be a good idea," the physician agreed. "You need to work on regaining your strength. I'm afraid the poison has left you very weak."

"Then I shall eat," I replied. I did feel hungry, after all, and I had the feeling that I'd only feel hungrier once the first spoonful of broth hit my tongue.

"I'll send for the broth," Irina replied, leaving the room in a flurry of skirts. While she was gone, I watched the physician pack up his things, never taking my eyes off him.

"You're the physician Irina sent for, from Vysnia?" I asked after a long moment.

"Indeed, Your Majesty."

"The one who examined her to see if she is with child?"

"The very same."

"The baby. It's healthy?"

"Both the tsarina and the baby are in perfect health," the physician told me. "The tsarina has been stressed, of course, but I don't believe it's been enough to impact their health."

"And you will be staying until the child is born?"

"If Your Majesty wishes."

"I do," I replied. Irina trusted the man, and I had to admit that he seemed a more than competent physician. "And whatever you require to treat the tsarina and the baby will be provided. Anything you need. Price is no object."

"You are too gracious, Your Majesty," the physician replied. "The tsarina is lucky to have such a loving husband."

Of course he would assume it was for Irina. It was partially for her - after all, I wouldn't want to see her weakened or killed by something that could have been prevented by throwing a bit of money around - but it was mostly for the child. I'd been born shackled to a demon, which was perhaps the worst disadvantage I could think of. I wanted to make sure my child was born with every advantage they could possibly have.

"The broth should be here in a minute," Irina stated as she reentered the room. "Thank you so much, Doctor Nikolai."

"Of course, Your Majesty," the physician replied with a bow. "All should be well, but if anything worrying happens, send a servant for me and I will come immediately." He looked over at me. "But I do not anticipate that will be required. You should be out of the danger now, Your Majesty."

"I'm glad to hear it," I replied. "Thank you."

My thanks was clearly more of a dismissal than Irina's had been, but I needed to talk to Irina alone. Yes, she seemed to trust her physician, and yes, he'd clearly done good work in saving my life, but that didn't mean I wanted to discuss sensitive matters in front of him. And speculating on who had made an attempt on my life was a very sensitive matter indeed.

The physician bowed and left, and almost before the door shut entirely behind him, there was another knock. Irina went to the door, opening it and standing in such a way that whoever was
outside wouldn't be able to see much of anything within. "Thank you, Maria," I heard her say, and then she ducked back into the room, holding a tray with a bowl of broth. The servant pulled the door shut, and Irina brought the tray over to me, setting it down on the table by the bed.

"How much do the people know?" I asked, trying to push myself into a sitting position.

"Everyone knows you were poisoned, unfortunately," Irina replied, helping me up. "There was quite an upset at dinner when you collapsed. There are rumors that you're dead, but I've done all I can to dispel them."

"You didn't let that servant see me, though," I countered. "Wouldn't it dispel rumors best if people saw me alive?"

"Perhaps," Irina replied, "but no one besides myself and Doctor Nikolai knows your current condition. I worry that, if word got back to the would-be assassins of how weak you are…"

"So you believe them unlikely to mount another attempt at the moment, so long as they don't know for certain that it's even required," I said. "But should they discover my current weakness, you believe they would?"

"I fear it would be seen as a good time to strike," Irina replied. "It would be seen as a weakness to be taken advantage of. When you're well enough to leave the bed, we'll make a public appearance and show everyone that their tsar is still very much alive, but until then…"

"Until then, I hide away," I replied. "I suppose there's not much else I can do anyway, given that I can't leave the bed."

"You came very close to death," Irina replied, and if I wasn't mistaken, her voice very nearly wobbled. "I'm glad to know you'll be leaving the bed at all."

"And who do you think it was who brought me so close to death?" I asked. "Before, you said you thought it might have been one of the princes?"

"Well, I believe it may have been done on their behalf," Irina replied. "With or without their knowledge, I cannot be certain, at least not yet."

"Casimir has supporters within our court, we know that much," I said. "And Ulrich has his daughter at your side, who is in a perfect position for such a strike."

"You mentioned that Vassilia looked at you oddly earlier than night," Irina said. "Of course, that could have been unrelated, but she may also have known something."

"And, of course, there are our advisors," I added. "We know they're a traitorous lot. It wouldn't surprise me to hear that one of them stooped to attempted assassination."

"Nor would it surprise me," Irina agreed. "And considering the attempt occurred only a few days after we announced my pregnancy, the timing seems suspect."

"You may have a point," I agreed. "Although they may have just spread a few rumors."

"I didn't hear any rumors," Irina disagreed. "And I've made a few inquiries, and there don't seem to be any around."

"It certainly would be quite a coincidence," I said dryly.
"I thought you didn't believe in coincidences?" Irina countered.

"I don't." Our advisors were involved, I was certain of it. Proving that they had done it would be a separate matter.

"You should eat," Irina said, picking up the bowl of broth. "I'll tell you everything I've discovered while you do."

"Fine," I said, reaching for the bowl. Holding it proved too much for my meager strength, however, and even the spoon alone shook in my hand. Silently, Irina took the spoon from my hand and guided it to my mouth. Being spoon-fed like an infant was humiliating, but it seemed I had no other choice.

"The poison was a rare one," Irina said as she fed me. "It wouldn't be easy for someone to get, not here. Unfortunately, there aren't any shops in Koron that sell it, so we won't be able to easily track it. As for how it got all the way to our table, I have to assume either a server or someone in the kitchen was bribed. I imagine someone in the kitchen would be able to sneak the poison in more easily. Seeing as we have a great many people working in our kitchens, however, it won't be easy to track down the person without more information."

"See if you can't get other people to turn on them," I suggested between spoonfuls of broth. "Go down to the kitchen with a few guards and take whoever looks the most nervous. If they're not the person who did it, and they might be, they'll probably be the most likely to tell you who that person is."

"Perhaps," Irina agreed, which was a more positive response than I'd been expecting to get. She fed me another spoonful of broth, and I heard her scrape the bottom of the bowl. The bowl had been small, but I would rather eat slowly than eat too much and lose the food a few minutes later. Given how fragile my stomach felt, I had the feeling that was more than possible.

"If we can find one person," I said, pausing to let Irina feed me more broth, "then we might be able to unravel the entire plot to find the others."

"That's what I'm hoping for," Irina replied. "We need to hope that whoever planned this wasn't so clever as to split up the information so no one person had it all."

"If they did, then we track the information down one person at a time," I replied. "We find one person, they lead us to someone else, and we continue on like that until we get everyone."

"We will find who did this, no matter what it takes," Irina swore. "They will not get away with it."

"They didn't really get away with much," I countered. "I'm still alive, after all."

"They made an attempt on the lives of the tsar and the tsarina," Irina countered. "That is not something that can go unpunished."

I blinked. Something in my mind had shifted, had fallen out of balance, and my thoughts were stuck on it. "Wait. What?"

"Well, of course we can't leave it unpunished!" Irina cried, setting the now-empty bowl to the side. "We."

"No, no," I dismissed, "not that. You said an attempt was made on both our lives."

"Yes, indeed," Irina replied, frowning. "What of it?"
"I thought the poison had been put in my cup."

"The poison was in the carafe of wine that was put on our table," Irina corrected. "You poured some out for both of us, remember? I was about take a sip when you dropped your glass and collapsed."

I stared at Irina. There was a strange feeling happening in my chest, something I'd never felt before. "You mean to tell me," I said, in a voice that was low and dangerous and hardly sounded like my own at all, "that whoever nearly killed me also tried to kill you?"

"Indeed," Irina said, looking confused.

"And, if it were one of our advisors, they also wanted to kill our child."

"That's part of the reason why the timing seems so coincidental," Irina replied. "Killing us before we have an heir makes things much easier." She eyed me worriedly. "Are you feeling alright?"

No, I was not feeling alright, because someone had tried to kill Irina, and I was furious.

When I first married Irina, I knew there were ways I could have gotten rid of her. I didn't need Casimir's thinly-veiled insinuations to tell me that. There were ways for tsars to do away with unwanted wives, after all. I could have had small, slowly-increasing doses of poison slipped into Irina's food, weakening her until she sickened and died. I could have staged her death as an accident and played the grieving widower for as long as it took to allay suspicion. If I'd wanted to, I could have freed myself from her.

But I didn't. I came up with a whole manner of excuses. I told myself it was because she was so popular, and if her death were even the slightest bit suspicious, there could have been uproar. After we suspected her pregnancy, I told myself it was for the sake of the child. When I was being a bit more honest with myself, I admitted that I owed Irina my freedom, and I wouldn't repay that debt by killing her.

But now, feeling the overwhelming rage that swept through me, utterly decimating any sense of balance I'd ever had, I wondered if part of me had loved her even then.

Because I loved her now, despite everything I'd done to prevent myself, despite the utter foolishness of it. My wife had nearly died, and I realized I didn't want to live without her.

"We will find the people who tried to kill us," I said, my voice trembling with rage. "We will find them, and we will make an example of them. And we will make sure that no one tries to succeed where they failed."

Irina looked at me oddly. Perhaps she was wondering where my sudden fury had come from. I wasn't quite sure of that myself. All I knew was that it was sudden and all-encompassing, and I knew that it was demanding the blood of the people who had tried to kill Irina.

"We will find them," Irina finally stated. "And they will never hurt anyone again."

They would never hurt anyone again, and I would do my best to make sure that no one ever hurt the woman I loved.
Chapter 12

The doctor's estimate proved accurate, and three days after I first awoke, I was deemed well enough to leave my bed. Almost immediately, I was dressed in my customary finery and brought out alongside Irina to be paraded before the people. I live, I wanted to say to everyone I saw. I live, and if you were part of the conspiracy to kill me and my wife, I will make sure you regret it.

The rage I'd felt when I found out that Irina was also a target of the assassins had abated slightly, but not entirely. I didn't think it would fully abate until the assassins' heads were on spikes before me. The shock I'd felt at realizing I loved her had faded as well, much more quickly. I still wasn't quite sure when I'd fallen in love with her, but I had the feeling it was a while back. The sensation seemed too familiar to be new.

"I have a meeting with our advisors in a few minutes," Irina told me when we finally retired to our rooms. "You can stay here. It shouldn't be long."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "If you're meeting with our advisors, I want to be there."

"It'll be perfectly safe," Irina protested. "I'll have two guards with me at all times. And I doubt they'd make a move in broad daylight anyway."

"I want to be there," I repeated. "I want to see their faces when they see mine." I wondered if the guilt would be easy to find.

"Are you sure you're not too tired?" Irina asked worriedly. "Doctor Nikolai said you shouldn't overexert yourself."

"I'll be walking to another room, and then I'll just be sitting," I countered. "It won't be much exertion at all."

"Very well," Irina finally agreed. "I'll do my best to make the meeting quick."

"Not too quick," I countered. "I'll need time to observe."

"Observe?"

I shrugged. "If one of our advisors was behind the plot to kill us, seeing me might make them slip up."

"Perhaps," Irina allowed. "But you could see them later."

"Earlier will be better," I replied. "Come, let's go."

Together, followed by two guards, we went down to the usual room where we met with our advisors. A fair amount of them looked at me with wide eyes, but my eyes sought Alric. He'd been part of the conspiracy, I was certain of it. Perhaps he'd even been the head of it. It wouldn't surprise me. Either way, I was certain he'd been involved, and I hoped his face would prove his guilt.

It took me a moment to find him in the group. He was towards the back, and when my eyes met his, he lowered them immediately. He certainly didn't seem pleased to see me alive, but he didn't
seem particularly shocked either. It seemed he'd heard that I was alive and believed it.

From the look on his face, though, I didn't think he was very happy about it.

"Your Majesty!" one of my advisors gushed. "I'm certain I speak for all of us when I tell you how glad we are to see you well."

"Indeed," another advisor added. "The Lord's grace must shine on you, Your Majesty."

"Has anyone made any progress in discovering who was behind the attempt to kill my husband and myself?" Irina asked sharply.

"There seems to be no trace of the assassins," Alric said, leaning forward in his seat. "The poison is difficult to trace, and we've had no luck in discovering who slipped it into the wine."

I shot Irina a sideways look. She must have suspected our advisors more than she let on, because I knew for a fact that she had made some progress there. One of our guards had done as I suggested and spoken with a few of the kitchen staff, and we had the names of three people who had been acting suspiciously. We still didn't know if they were the ones who had put the poison in the wine, but it was certainly something.

Something, it seemed, Alric didn't know about.

"We will keep looking," Irina said, her voice firm. "And we will find and punish those responsible."

"Of course, Your Majesty," an advisor immediately reassured us. "We will all look as hard as we can."

"I'm sure you will," Irina replied dryly. "Now, do we know if news of what happened here has reached other courts? Do Casimir and Ulrich know?"

"I would assume they both do," an advisor admitted. "Rumors spread fast, Your Majesty."

"Well," I said, speaking for the first time since entering the room, "we'll simply have to make sure that the rumors of my full recovery spread just as quickly."

"Of course, Your Majesty," one of the advisors said as he somehow managed to bow without standing up. "We will make sure everyone knows of it."

The meeting dragged on a bit longer, then a third guard slipped into the room and murmured something in Irina's ear. "We'll have to postpone the rest of this discussion, gentlemen," she said, standing gracefully. I stood alongside her, and all of our advisors scrambled to their feet as well. "The tsar and I have other matters to attend to."

I didn't know what those matters were, but I wasn't about to admit that, especially if they were providing us with an escape from the meeting. I knew I'd insisted on attending, but I was still bored. It had only taken me a minute or so to read the flickers of guilt on a few advisors' faces, and after that, I'd just been stuck listening to them talk.

Irina swept out of the room and I swept off behind her, following her back up to our rooms without speaking a word. Irina was silent, and I had the feeling that whatever matters we had to attend to, they were best attended in private.

"Well?" I asked the second we reached our room. "What was that about?"
"While we were in the meeting, I had a set of guards search the rooms of all of our advisors," Irina said. "Apparently, they found something."

"What did they find?" I demanded.

Irina flicked her wrist, and the third guard who'd arrived in the meeting room stepped forward. "We found this, in Lord Alric's room," he said, holding out a letter.

Irina scanned it quickly, then she thrust it at me. It was a letter to Casimir, telling him that the throne of Lithvas was free for the taking. I suppose he hadn't wanted to send it until he was sure I was dead. "Look at the date," Irina told me, and my eyes flickered up to it.

The letter had been written the day before I was poisoned.

"Does he realize this is as good as an admission?" I asked, looking up from the letter.

"He's a fool and an attempted murderer," Irina said sharply. "And he will be punished. Do we have an executioner?"

I felt my eyebrows twitch upwards. "Not that I know of."

"We need to make an example of Alric," Irina said. "And we need to remove him as a threat. Permanently."

I sat down in a chair, crossing my legs and trying to hide the fact that I'd sat because I didn't think I could stand another moment without my legs giving out. "That's not what I'd expected of you, to be honest."

"This plot almost killed you," Irina said, and if I wasn't mistaken, her voice was shaking. "You lay in that bed for four days, and I had no way of knowing if you would ever wake. I am going to do whatever it takes to make sure that this never happens again."

Her words, I realized, were rather similar to what mine had been when I first realized I was in love with Irina. But Irina, of course, couldn't be in love with me. That would be foolishness.

More foolish than you being in love with her? a snide voice in my head asked, but I ignored it and focused on the matter at hand again.

"So you intend to have Alric arrested?"

"Immediately," Irina said. "Then we'll drag every scrap of information about his accomplices out of him, and then we'll give him a punishment that befits his crime."

I wondered for a moment what that punishment would be, then I decided it didn't matter. "Maybe you should focus on the kitchen aides first," I suggested. "If one of them names Alric, it'll only cement his guilt. But only if they name him before it becomes common knowledge that he's been arrested." To be honest, I was surprised Irina hadn't come up with that idea herself. It was, in my opinion, very similar to the idea she'd had about waiting to make any moves on our advisors until we knew their whole network.

Perhaps Irina was thinking along the same lines, because she looked torn. "We need to remove Alric from the equation," she protested. "Before, we waited, and it only gave him a chance to nearly kill you. I cannot allow that to happen again."

"But the point still remains from last time," I countered. "We'll both be safer if we get rid of Alric
and his entire network. The more people we can find, and the more proof we have of their guilt, the better it'll be."

Irina bit her bottom lip. "I'll wait a day," she finally declared. "And after that, we will arrest Alric."

"I won't stop you," I replied, putting my hands up in surrender. "I've wanted to arrest him since the beginning." I folded the letter and handed it back to her. "Did the guards find anything else in any of the rooms?"

Irina looked up at the guard who had given us the letter. "We didn't find anything of note, Your Majesty," he said. "Is there anyone else specific that you wish us to look into?"

"A few of the advisors looked guilty," I said.

Irina sighed, and the sound almost seemed fond. "And I suppose you have no idea what their names are?"

"I have you for that," I replied. "They were the one with the hideous little goatee, the one with the curly hair, and the old one who always looks to me for confirmation whenever you say anything."

A small smile tugged at the corner of Irina's lips. "Naltis, Vasiliev, and Fedoruk."

"I'll take your word for it."

"We'll keep an eye on them, then," Irina said. She looked up at the guard before us. "Go and tell the others to keep a close watch on Lords Alric, Naltis, Vasiliev, and Fedoruk."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the man said, bowing deeply as he left the room.

"So this is why you wanted to have the meeting," I said, once the door closed behind him. "To search our advisors' rooms while they were busy."

"It seemed expedient," Irina replied. "I trust you don't disapprove?"

"The opposite," I replied. "Especially given the proof we've found."

"It will be enough to make Alric hang," Irina said, sounding like she was rather fond of the idea. "After what he nearly did to you-"

"He did try to kill you as well," I replied. "In case you've forgotten." I certainly hadn't.

"He nearly succeeded with you," Irina countered. "You nearly died, Mironatus. I will not forgive that."

It was strange, I reflected, that each of us seemed more concerned about the attempt on the other's life than the ones on our own. Of course, I wasn't pleased that Alric was behind the mouthful of poison I'd swallowed, but the fact that he'd intended the same poison for Irina and our unborn child made me more furious than any attempt on my own life could. On the other hand, Irina seemed to hardly care about the fact that she could have been as close to death as I was if she'd taken a single sip from her wineglass. It was a strange phenomenon, and not one that I wanted to examine too closely. I had only just accepted that I was in love with Irina. I didn't think I could stomach any more massive realizations, not quite yet.

"Well," I said, "soon, he'll be dead, and we won't have to worry about him anymore."

"We'll be safe," Irina said. "Or, at least, safer, for a time."
"We will be," I agreed, and only after I'd said the words did it occur to me, for the first time in
days, that perhaps there was another assassination attempt against me still looming on the horizon.
How long would it be before Irina was the one slipping poison into my cup?

Except…

It was foolish of me, of course, but I didn't want to think of that. I'd never particularly liked to
dwell on the idea, of course, but now, I shied away from it even more. Perhaps it was because I
realized I loved Irina, but I knew love didn't automatically mean trust. And I still wasn't sure that I
really did trust her, but…

Well, part of me wanted to.

"Mirnatius?" Irina asked gently, in a tone that made me think it wasn't the first time she'd said my
name. "Do you think perhaps you ought to go back to bed? Doctor Nikolai told us not to overdo it."

"Yes, perhaps," I agreed, a bit distractedly. "Wake me if we have any developments with Alric or
any of the others."

"Of course," Irina agreed. For a moment, I thought she was going to say something else, then she
did something that startled me even more; she came over to me and brushed a gentle kiss across my
forehead.

"Sleep well," she told me, and she left the room with the touch of her lips still burning on my skin.

When pressed, one of our suspected kitchen aides spilled the whole story; he'd been hired by Alric
to slip the poison into our wine, and as far as he knew, Alric was working at Casimir's behest. We
didn't have explicit proof that Casimir had actually organized the whole thing, so we didn't have
enough evidence to actually take any action against him, but both Irina and I hoped he would think
twice before moving against us in the future.

We had more than enough evidence to take action against Alric, though.

"I should have told you this before," I told Irina as we looked through a recently-arrested Alric's
correspondence for any solid proof of Casimir's knowing involvement, "but when Casimir visited,
he made certain… insinuations. He didn't say anything openly, but I believe he was trying to figure
out whether I would be willing to make a move against you."

"Casimir suggested that you assassinate me?" Irina demanded sharply.

"Not in as many words, but that was clearly his intention, yes."

"And what did you say to him?"

I scoffed. "That he was speaking about the tsarina of Lithvas, and he ought to have more care what
he said." I eyed Irina curiously. "Did you think I would agree to it?"

"Not at all," Irina replied, and I was fairly certain she was telling the truth. "You're a good man,
Mirnatius. You wouldn't do something like that."

The simple faith shook me, although I quickly schooled my expression to hide that. "Of course
not," I agreed. A month ago, I would have added some flippant half-joke about how Irina was the
one who was planning on murdering their spouse, but this time I didn't. I wondered if Irina could
hear its absence as clearly as I could.
"Well," Irina said, setting down a letter, "I have no doubt that Casimir organized this whole thing, but unfortunately, I can't find anything that proves that. He could easily argue that Alric did this on his behalf without his knowledge."

"At least he won't have an agent here, once Alric is dealt with," I replied. "When will we sentence him?"

"Once we have all the evidence organized, I think," Irina replied. "He's under heavy guard at the moment. And we're still keeping an eye on the other advisors you mentioned, although we haven't found any proof of their involvement."

"I'd think that this would be seen as reason enough to prompt some change among our advisors," I remarked. "We could say we only want advisors we can trust."

"You don't trust anyone," Irina replied, although she said it in an almost teasing voice.

"Advisors you trust, then," I corrected. "That's the best we'll get."

"You'd trust me to make those decisions?"

"I'd vet them, of course."

A slight smile twitched at the corner of Irina's mouth. "Of course."

"But I can trust you to do what's best for Lithvas," I added. "It has thrived under your leadership."

"Under our leadership," Irina corrected. "I may have had to drag you into ruling, but you've done a rather good job of it."

"I am rather splendid, aren't I?" I preened, and Irina laughed. I supposed I ought to think it sounded like bells or wind-chimes or something else suitably romantic, but it didn't. It just sounded like a laugh, and that meant Irina was pleased, and that meant more me to than any bells or wind-chimes ever could.

Apparently, love had turned me into a fool. Although, I supposed, I'd always been something of a fool, so perhaps I couldn't blame love for it after all.

Irina looked at the stack of letters we still had left to go through. "I don't think I can look at another sheet of paper without losing my mind," she declared, looking over at me. "Shall we go to bed and finish this tomorrow?"

"I thought you'd never ask," I replied dryly, setting down the letter I'd been nominally perusing. Irina went over to the bed and crawled under the covers, and I followed her over, stopping only to blow out the candle.

"Goodnight, Mirnatius," Irina said, curling up on her side.

Slowly, I curled up next to her, not quite touching, but so close I could feel the warmth of her skin. "Goodnight, Irina."

For a long, long time, the room was silent. I listened to Irina's breathing and focused on slowing my own, but I couldn't sleep quite yet, and judging by the continued irregularity of Irina's breaths, neither could she. Neither of us spoke a word into the darkness, though; we merely lay side by side in an expectant silence.
It was a comfortable silence, though, and I realized that being with Irina in general had become comfortable. I enjoyed spending time with her, and I looked forward to doing so in the future. I wanted a future with her, a future with children and companionship and perhaps even love. I didn't think we would ever fit perfectly together - I was too damaged, and Irina was too sharp - but we didn't have to fit perfectly. We only had to fit, and so we did.

It wasn't a love for the poets, perhaps, but it was a love for us, and that was all that mattered.

I was the one who broke the silence, speaking quietly into the night. "When you say you're not going to have me executed so you can rule in your own right, do you really mean it?"

Irina's hand sought mine, and I let her take it. "Yes, I do."

Perhaps I should have squeezed her hand, something to let her know I was there, but the mere touch was enough for me. I had the feeling that Irina, who had noticed how I flinched away from contact before I even did, understood that.

"I think," I said slowly, "that I believe you. Is that foolish of me?"

It wasn't quite an I love you, but I was fairly certain both Irina and I knew what it meant.

Irina did squeeze my hand, just lightly. I could only barely see her face, her profile illuminated by nothing but the faintest sheen of moonlight, but I could see that she was smiling.

"No," she said, "it's not," and I believed that too.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end! I want to thank everyone who's read this fic, whether you've been reading along as I've posted the chapters or you're finding this years after it was completed. You guys are the best, and I love you all.

End Notes

My writing tumblr is here, if you're interested.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!