

ACT III: THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Chapter 12: "Come what may" Part 1

The hallway seemed longer than he remembered.

Stolas didn't know when he'd started to walk, he just found himself moving, each step a slow unfurling of limbs disconnected from intention. His talons clicked softly on the marble, but to him it seemed as if the sound came from someone else's body. The silence of the club felt cavernous, swallowing every echo into a velvet-lined void, while the walls shimmered faintly in low lighting, casting shadows that curved and bled into one another.

He felt like he was watching himself from above, as if his soul had suddenly decided to abandon his body, leaving behind just a shell made of flesh and tattered silk.

Because that was exactly how he felt, completely hollow inside. *Maybe it's better off this way.* Better feel nothing than face the storm brewing inside his chest.

Blitzø's face was still tethered in his mind. That split second of denial, wild and desperate, flickering in those crimson eyes, a match trying to stay lit in the middle of a blizzard. Stolas had seen the disbelief, how Blitzø's chest rose and fell too fast, his lips twitching, trying to carve any sound out of the silence.

But all that remained was pain. The kind that made a creature fold into itself just to survive.

It was etched in the way Blitzø's shoulders sagged, how his voice cracked when he tried to shout and couldn't. In how his hands trembled at his sides, lost, like they didn't know what to do now that Stolas wasn't reaching back.

He'd heard him whisper "*Wait.*"

And in that moment, the weight of the world had landed squarely on Stolas's chest. He'd nearly broken down. Nearly forgot the reason *why* he was doing all of that just to grab him and say, "*It was a lie. Of course I love you. How could I not? Don't listen to me, just look at me, please, please, please—*"

But he hadn't.

He'd walked away and let Blitzø believe it had meant nothing. That he didn't love him.

Save him, he kept telling himself. But dragging a knife through his own heart would have hurt less.

Because Blitzø had looked at him like he was watching the last thing he ever trusted dissolve in front of him. Like Stolas had carved out his ribs and left nothing to hold him up.

And now... now that silence still echoed behind Stolas's ribs, hollow and heavy. And all that remained was to finish what he'd started. Fulfill his role. Pay the price.

Make it worth something.

"Ozzie's room is two doors down," he reminded himself under his breath, the words small and breathless in the air. He turned the corner, nearly colliding with the demon himself. Ozzie stepped back, startled. His gaze swept over Stolas and his expression changed instantly.

"Oh, birdy babe..." he said, voice low, rough with guilt.

Stolas blinked up at him.

"I'm fine," he murmured. His voice sounded like it was being dragged through gravel.

"You're not," Ozzie replied gently. He reached toward him, then stopped himself short. "You need to rest. You need—"

"I just need to change," Stolas interrupted, fingers curling into the tattered lace suit still clinging to his body. He let the fabric fall back against him, releasing a slow breath. "I need to finish this. It's already begun. I can't stop now."

There was a long pause. Ozzie looked at him like he was made of glass, like one wrong move would make him shatter. Then he nodded.

"Come on in," he said quietly, stepping aside. "I think I have something for you to wear."

He let Ozzie softly guide him into his quarters.



Stolas didn't say much after Ozzie helped him change.

The suit he wore now was simpler, something meant to disappear in shadows rather than catch the light. Ozzie had offered to walk him to the guest suite, but Stolas declined. He didn't trust himself not to turn around and run, back to that apartment, where the shattered pieces of his heart still lay scattered on the floor.

So he kept moving, one foot after the other, even though it felt as if the next step might unravel him.

The hallway leading to the guest rooms stretched before him, quiet and dim. Candles flickered gently along the walls, casting elongated silhouettes across velvet carpet. He barely noticed when he reached the door. The guest suite was slightly ajar. He didn't bother to knock.

Vassago was inside, seated in a deep armchair near the bar cart, a glass of something amber and expensive resting in one hand, untouched. He sat in silence, back straight, but there was a weight to the stillness. A faint crease had carved itself between his brows.

Disappointment. Maybe even regret. When the door eased open, he stirred slightly, lifting his head, startled.

“Stolas,” he said, setting the drink down. “I didn’t expect—”

“I’m sorry,” Stolas blurted out. He crossed the room in swift, graceful steps stopping before him. “I didn’t mean to upset you earlier. I didn’t mean to make you feel betrayed. I was wrong, and if—if you’re still willing, I...”

His hands trembled slightly as they reached for the lapel of Vassago’s robe. There was no seduction in the gesture, only urgency, raw and trembling. A frantic need to make this right, to convince Vassago of a desire he had room to feel. Because if Vassago turned him down now, if he walked away, everything would’ve been for nothing. And Stolas couldn’t afford that.

“I want to be with you,” Stolas said. “Please. Let me show you. I can—”

Vassago stood, catching his wrists gently. He looked...pained.

“Stolas,” he said, quiet but firm. “Stop.”

Stolas blinked up at him, confused.

“I wasn’t—” he started again, too fast, too breathless. “I’m not asking for much. You’ve been kind, and I—if this is the least I can do for you, if you just let me, I—”

“Stolas.”

The owl froze.

Vassago’s voice softened. “I’m not angry at you. I never was”.



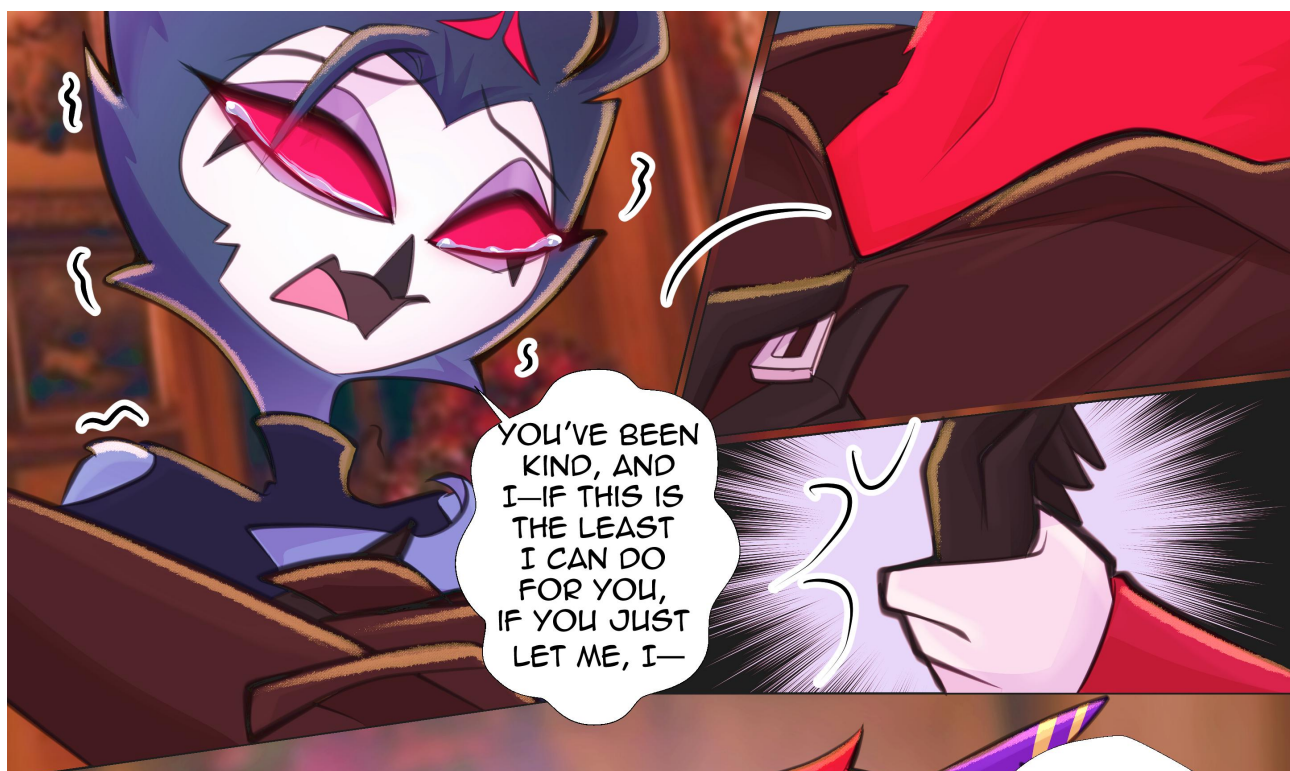
STOLAS,
I DIDN'T
EXPECT—

I WAS
WRONG,
AND IF—IF
YOU'RE STILL
WILLING, I...

I'M
SORRY.

I DIDN'T
MEAN TO
UPSET YOU
EARLIER. I DIDN'T
MEAN TO MAKE
YOU FEEL
BETRAYED.

I WANT TO
BE WITH YOU.
PLEASE. LET
ME SHOW
YOU. I CAN—



Stolas stared at him, confusion shifting across his face.

Vassago exhaled, slow and steady before speaking again “I saw it. On the balcony. The way you looked at him... and the way he looked back.” His smile barely flickered, but it didn’t quite make it to his eyes. “It hit me all at once. How long I’ve been pretending not to see it. How blind I was to what was right in front of me.” His voice tightened, quiet with shame. “And how cruel it was to ask you to give yourself to me when your heart already belonged to someone else.”

Stolas opened his mouth and closed it again, words falling away before they could form.

“I just... needed time,” Vassago said, stepping closer, his tone softening “To sit with the fact that I let myself believe a story that was never mine. I wasn’t angry at you, Stolas. I was angry at myself. For making you feel like you had to lie. Like you had to choose.” He knelt, meeting Stolas’s gaze with quiet conviction. “You owe me nothing. Not your body. Not your loyalty. And certainly not your guilt.”

Stolas felt how those words broke something inside of him.

The gentleness. The clarity. That kindness he didn’t deserve.

Stolas’s knees gave out beneath him, and he sank to the floor, feathers trembling, his breath catching like it might never find rhythm again. It felt as if something inside him had finally started to come undone. Stolas’s breath hitched, until the quiet stutter of it collapsed into sobbing.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped, his voice warping beneath the weight of it. “I’m sorry I led you on. I made you believe—” He broke off with a strangled sound, shaking his head violently. “I thought I could do it. I thought I could pretend. But *I can’t*. I just... I can’t anymore.” The words spilled out in fragments. His shoulders curled in, as though he could keep himself together that way.

Vassago moved without hesitation. He knelt beside him, steady hands reaching with slow intention, one at the small of Stolas’s back, the other cradling his arm, grounding him. Stolas’s feathers twitched violently against his body, ruffled in erratic waves. His breaths came sharp and shallow.

“You’re okay,” Vassago murmured. “Breathe with me. Just breathe, Stolas. In... and out.”

But Stolas shook his head “I don’t deserve this,” he choked. “I don’t deserve your kindness. I lied to you. I used you. I’m a monster—”

“Stop,” Vassago said, firmly. His hand tightened ever so slightly where it rested, thumb tracing a slow circle against the base of Stolas’s spine. “You are not a monster. You are not heartless. You are one of the most worthy demons I know.”

Stolas’s breath hitched.

"You are brave," Vassago continued, voice low, full of something steady and warm. "You've held yourself together through things most beings wouldn't survive. You've given more than you had to give, again and again. And still, somehow, you are still able to love."

Stolas bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

"You deserve everything." Vassago waited, letting the weight of the moment settle before speaking again. "Tell me how I can help you," he said.

Stolas didn't answer right away. He let out a sigh, trying to slow down his breathing. His hands fisted against the floor as if he could hold the room still.

"You can't." he said, his voice cracking at the edges as he looked up to the prince.

Vassago's eyes darkened with sudden clarity. "It has something to do with Marquis Andrealphus, isn't it?" he asked. His voice had an icy edge that made Stolas shiver. He just nodded.

Vassago didn't speak for a long time. He simply sat beside Stolas, steady as a pillar, letting silence settle like dust around them. But then, quietly, he asked the question that had been slowly threading its way to the surface.

Why?

Stolas didn't answer right away. His gaze was fixed somewhere beyond the room, past the stone and silk of their surroundings before speaking again.

And then he started to tell his story, unraveling the threads that had held his reality together, picking apart the sutures of a wound that was nowhere near healing.

He told Vassago about the blood contract. About how his life had been chosen for him long before he was old enough to understand what it meant. How the weight of that bond had eroded him, piece by piece, with every look of disappointment, every misstep, every time Stella had touched him like he was an object carved for her convenience, not a creature born for breath and choice. The years had leached the color from his world, until even the stars above the palace felt like distant, dying things.

And Andrealphus, who had found a crack in the bond and spilled himself through it like poison. Who knew exactly where to press, how to twist the magic just enough to make Stolas feel it deep in his marrow. What hell truly meant.

There were things he couldn't say. Things he'd buried so deep even his own voice wouldn't dare to dig them up. The nights he'd been told to smile. To entertain. To let hands linger where his spirit recoiled. How Andrealphus had offered him like wine at a banquet, blind to the way Stolas died a little more with every passing evening.

And then Blitzø happened.

Or maybe Blitzø had always been there. A childhood spark tucked away in some quiet corner of his heart, something small but bright enough to burn through even the darkest night.

By the time his voice gave out, there was nothing left but silence between them.

Vassago hadn't moved. His hands were still, clasped loosely in his lap, but his fingers had gone white at the knuckles. His jaw was set in stone. His eyes shimmering with something cold.

Stolas jumped, startled, when the prince suddenly rose to his full height, eyes burning with quiet conviction. He looked down at Stolas.

"We're going to break your chains," he said, determination edged in his voice.

Stolas's breath caught. His eyes widened, shimmering with something close to hope. For a moment, he couldn't speak.

Vassago placed a hand on his shoulder. Steady and grounding.

And for the first time in a long time Stolas didn't feel alone.



The stage lights buzzed faintly overhead. A warm, artificial glow spilled across the velvet floor, catching the dust in the air like glitter. Fizzarolli stood dead center, arms loosely at his sides, eyes fixed on the edge of the stage like Blitzø might materialize from the shadows if he just stared hard enough.

He didn't.

He hadn't been there *for days*.

They were deep into rehearsals now, and it was getting harder and harder to pretend things weren't falling apart. Ozzie had asked Fizz to step in as the main lead temporarily. "*Just until he comes back*," he'd said. Like Blitzø was out buying cigarettes and not disappearing into whatever black hole he called grief. Fizz had tried to keep the show running. He said the lines. He played the part. But every cue felt like a missed step, every scene missing the weight of Blitzø's presence.

And then today's scene hit.

He stood across from Stolas under the full weight of the overhead lights, both of them framed in silence. The owl prince delivered the final line of the scene with a voice that barely held itself together.

"If loving you means losing you... then I will walk into that darkness gladly. Because you deserve a life that isn't shackled to mine."

And Fizz nearly flinched.

It wasn't the line that shook him. It was how Stolas said it. Like the words were burning him on the way out. Like he wasn't acting at all. Stolas blinked slowly. His lips trembling slightly. For a split second, his face cracked and his eyes welled.

Fizz stepped forward instinctively. "Hey, you good?"

But Stolas shook his head and excused himself in a whisper, practically fleeing the stage.

Fizz watched him go, his stomach knotting. He'd seen that look before.

That night.

Fizz had just left Stolas in Blitzø's apartment, trembling and barely coherent, his clothes in tatters from whatever the fuck Andrealphus had tried to do to him. He'd left in a rush with the excuse of grabbing something for Stolas to wear. But he'd seen the look Blitzø gave the owl, and Fizz had felt like he was standing on the edge of a world he didn't belong to.

Despite knowing Blitzø his whole life, knowing every messy, fucked-up detail of him, in that moment, he hadn't recognized him. He'd never seen Blitzø like that. The way his whole being had orbited around Stolas. The way he'd held him like the trembling weight in his arms was the only thing keeping the universe from cracking open. There had been a silence between them. A gravity. Like the kind of stillness that only exists between those who understand each other without words.

Fizz knew what that was. He'd lived that kind of intimacy. The kind that changed you.

That was why he'd backed away, quietly. Let them have the moment. Let them try to hold together the pieces of what Andrealphus had nearly shattered.

He went straight to Stolas's suite, picked out a couple of simple garments the owl could change into, and was making his way back with the bundle of clothes in hand when he found Ozzie pacing just outside the dressing rooms, looking like he was about to collapse.

"Ozzie?" Fizz asked, alarm rising sharp and quick in his chest. "What happened?"

Ozzie turned to him, looking like he wasn't really there. "Andrealphus just left," he rasped.

Fizz's heart dropped. "What? What did he want? Did he—did he say something about—?"

"He wants me to kill him," Ozzie cut in, voice trembling.

Fizz felt the air leave his lungs. "*Stolas?*".

Ozzie shook his head. "No. Blitzø. He's ordered me to kill Blitzø."

The world tilted. *No, no, it can't be.*

“No. No, Ozzie, that’s—You can’t. You wouldn’t—”

“I don’t have a choice,” Ozzie said, broken and desperate. “The bond...he pushed the order through it. The magic’s in me now, Fizz. It’ll happen if I get too close. If he steps outside, if he crosses the wrong threshold. I won’t even know it’s happening.”

Fizz stumbled forward. “Then I have to go back. I have to warn them—”

“No!” Ozzie’s arms locked around him, pulling him back in a crushing hold. Fizz gasped as Ozzie clung to him like a lifeline, his breath hitching. “Please. I’ll fix it. I’ll fix it, *I swear*. But you have to stay here. You have to let me try.”

Fizz felt the tears before he even registered them. Ozzie’s, warm against the back of his neck. His own followed a heartbeat later, hot and sharp.

“Ozzie—”

“If Andrealphus finds out you know, if he sees you near them, he’ll come for you too. Please, Fizz. I need to know you’re safe. That you’re here when I get back. Just... *please*.”

Fizz wanted to scream. Wanted to claw his way back through the hallway, find Blitzø, find Stolas, grab them both and run until the whole damn world turned to ash behind them. But he saw the look in Ozzie’s eyes, the fear, the heartbreak. And deep down, he understood.

Fizz stared at him. “How are you going to—?” he started, but the words died on his tongue.

Because he knew.

He saw it in Ozzie’s face. The sorrow. And in that moment, Fizz knew that whatever he’d witnessed in that apartment, that small, fragile universe built between Blitzø and Stolas, it wasn’t going to survive this.

Ozzie didn’t say anything else. He just turned and walked away.

And when he did, it felt like something cracked open in Fizz’s chest.

He slid down the wall, knees to his chest, clutching the robe like it could shield him from the truth. Because he couldn’t stop it. Because he’d let it happen.

And now, all he could do was sit in the dark... and wait for everything to fall apart.

Fizz exhaled sharply, snapping back to reality. The memory burned like bile, scorching everything in its wake. But it was already done, and now they all had to deal with the consequences. The guilt.

Fizz wiped his face, trying to pull himself together. He approached Loona, who was leaning against the side curtain with her arms crossed and a look on her face like she’d gone five rounds with her own guilt.

"He's still not answering?" he asked quietly.

Loona didn't look at him right away. Then finally, she muttered, "I've never seen him like this, Fizz."

Fizz's tail curled.

"I mean it. He won't talk to me. He hasn't even come home. He's been crashing in the same shitty bar *for three days*."

"Which one?" he asked.

She hesitated. "Down the block. The one that smells like sour beer and piss."

He touched her shoulder, gently. "I'll talk to him."

The bar was a pit. A gutter with neon signage.

Blitzø had his chin jammed into one hand, the other clutching a half-empty glass of whatever bottom-shelf crap he'd poured himself, something that tasted more like bleach than booze. His horns were pounding like someone was playing drums inside his skull. Every breath felt scraped its way out of his chest. The whole world looked smeared, as if someone had taken a wet rag to the edges of reality, and honestly? He didn't care enough to clean it up.

The bartender hadn't even bothered to ask his name, which was fine by him. Blitzø wasn't exactly in the mood to remember it himself.

"Blitzø ."

The voice cut through the muck, slow and heavy.

He squinted, looking up to see a multicolor figure with glowing limbs hovering above him. *Fizz*. Of course it had to be Fizz. Because nothing in this fucking life let him just *rot in peace*.

"Fuck off," he slurred.

Fizz climbed up onto the stool beside him. "You look like shit."

Blitzø let out a humorless snort, eyes still fixed on his glass. "Yeah? Well you look like a blow-up doll that lost a fight with a cheese grater, so I guess we're even."

Fizz scowled, jaw tightening, but he didn't rise to the bait. He just stayed there beside him, quiet. For a while, neither of them spoke, the only sound was the buzzing of the light bar

overhead. Something sticky clung to the counter under Blitzø's elbow, making the sleeve of his jacket wet. He didn't fucking care.

"Loona's worried. Everyone's worried. I'm worried." Fizz said, finally

Blitzø scoffed. "Well don't be. I'm great. *Thriving*. Living the dream in a piss-stained dive bar, drinking antifreeze and contemplating a career in interpretive fuck-you dancing."

Fizz exhaled through his nose. "You're not okay."

"No shit."

"Then come home."

That got a laugh. Bitter and sharp, broken around the edges. Blitzø shoved his glass away and turned toward him, eyes wild and glassy.

"I'm not going back to that place. I'm not walking back into that stage, into that fucking world where he looks at me like I'm some *goddamn joke* he got bored of!"

Fizz's throat worked. He hesitated, just for a second. "He didn't mean it."

"You weren't there."

And just like that, the air snapped cold between them.

Fizz didn't respond. Because what could he say? That Stolas had done it to protect him? That he'd seen how the owl was falling apart day by day? That Blitzø wouldn't believe him anyway?

Blitzø stood abruptly, stumbling a little as the bar stool screeched back. "Go back to your sparkly stage and your fucking rooster and your golden spotlight. I'm done."

Fizz stood too, slowly. His voice dropped low.

"Then be done. But don't burn what's left of yourself just to prove you can."

Blitzø said nothing. His jaw worked silently, fists curling and uncurling like he didn't know who he wanted to hit more, Fizz, Stolas, or himself.

Fizz didn't wait for an answer. He turned to leave. "You know where we are. When you're ready to stop running."

He left.

And Blitzø stayed, long after the door swung shut behind him.

The cheap barlight flickered overhead, buzzing like it was struggling to stay alive. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a feather. Soft. Black. Tipped in blue-violet that shimmered like a bruise.

He stared at it for a long, long time. Then he lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, and fed the feather to the flame.

He watched it curl, smoke coiling into the air like the last breath of something holy and broken.

Then he left.

By morning, he'd sold everything he owned to a pawn shop down the block. His jacket. His guns. His watch. Even the photo of him and Fizz, back when life had felt like something that might actually last.

He didn't ask how much they gave him.

He just took the cash and walked back to the club.