

Chapter 9:

Blitzø didn't know when pretending stopped feeling like pretending.

The scene was hitting its climax, the final act, lights low, tension thick. Stolas stood a few paces from him, feathers mussed from their frantic escape, eyes shining with something that wasn't in the script. It had been there for a while.

They were cornered now. Script said Stolas' character had broken free from his family's gilded cage, and Blitzø? He'd helped him burn the whole damn thing down. But now the walls were closing back in, footsteps echoing through the imaginary halls. The hunters were coming, led by Fizz, and Blitzø could practically hear the breath between the beats of the drama.

"They'll kill you," Stolas whispered, his voice trembling.

"Let them try," Blitzø snapped back, stepping in front of him without thinking. *"I won't let them take you. Not again."*

This wasn't real. It wasn't supposed to be real. And yet Blitzø had a strange sense of certainty, as if it were a scene he had already experienced. A feeling of familiarity was stirring inside him.

"Then let me go. You have to survive this." Stolas said in a whisper

And Blitzø felt the script fall out of his head.

His own voice came out hoarse. *"You think I'm gonna let you walk back into that hell for me? You think I'm just gonna—"* he broke off, swallowing hard. *"I love you, alright? I love you, you smug, stubborn feather-duster of a bastard. I—"*

"Boom, baby!" Fizz's voice cut through the tension like a slap, and Blitzø flinched instinctively. The imp stepped into the scene with a gun cocked and sharp grin across his face. *"Is this the part where I kill the mood... or just the moron?"*

Asmodeus burst into laughter off-stage. *"Cut! Cut! Holy hells, the drama! The pain! The sheer rawness, darling, I'm gonna combust!"*

Applause. Lights up. Reality crashing back in like cold water. Blitzø stepped back, trying to blink the haze out of his head. His heart was still beating too fast.

It was just a scene. Just a damn scene.

He made himself exhale as everyone scattered. Scripts were tossed onto chairs, someone handed out bottles of water, probably Millie. Fizz winked at him before disappearing, and Blitzø let his knees bend a little, hands braced on them. He had to force the air into his lungs, as if suddenly his ribs were too tight for them.

"A final word before we wrap up!" Asmodeus gathered them all like a proud mother hen, smile wide and sparkling. *"Alright, darlings, we're close. Opening night is around the corner and that energy was the chef's kiss. Keep that fire, that tension, that heartbreak! Remember, we're making art!"*

Everyone cheered around him, but Blitzø barely heard him. His eyes had already found Stolas again.

He was over by Vassago. Too close for comfort. For *his* comfort, at least.

Vassago was smiling, polished, all gilded beak and gold-rimmed charm. And Stolas was smiling back. Laughing at something. Pretty and polite and... distant. Like he was somewhere Blitzø couldn't reach. It still killed him *every fucking time*.

His jaw clenched. *It was fine, it was part of the ruse, to look interested, to look like he enjoyed the attention. That's all it was.*

Then Stolas glanced over his shoulder. Just for a second. Just for *him*.

That smile changed, becoming softer, almost sad. His pupils flickered to life for a second, glowing and full of warmth, the kind that made Blitzø's ribs feel too small for his chest. But then the owl turned back to Vassago, and Blitzø felt the cold settle back in his gut.

He had the stupidest urge to stand up, walk over there, and claw Vassago's beak off his face. Instead, he sat there, chewing on the inside of his cheek and feeling the bitter taste of his own blood in his tongue..

"Hey," came Millie's soft voice, a hand on his shoulder. She didn't say much, didn't need to. Just that quiet kind of comfort he hadn't realized he was craving. Moxxie stood behind her, looking concerned. Loona too, arms crossed, gaze flicking between Blitzø and the door like she was ready to start throwing punches on command.

Millie gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze, "Did I ever tell you you're dramatic as hell, boss?"

Blitzø snorted, the sound halfway bitter. "Takes one to know one."

They laughed, light and low, and he leaned into the moment, letting it soften the edges.

But still, as Stolas disappeared from view, his feathers brushing close to Vassago's side, Blitzø's eyes lingered on the spot he'd left behind.

And all he could think was that he should've said it for real.

Not just on stage.



The lights of the club were dimmed. Only the faint glow of emergency bulbs pulsed gently above the entrance. The show had ended hours ago, but Stolas had only just returned, dragged away for a private dinner by Vassago. He hadn't been able to refuse.

He let out a slow breath, the kind that felt like it scraped bone on the way out, reverberating off the exposed pipes snaking across the ceiling. Every day, the weight of pretending grew heavier. Smiling for Vassago. Bowing to expectations. Performing for a life that wasn't his. It was eroding him, little by little, from the inside out.

His talons made a soft creak against the worn wood floor as he slipped into his room and activated the hidden latch behind a curtain, heart fluttering with anticipation and guilt all at once. A low hiss of movement. A soft click. Then, the door eased open.

Candlelight flickered to life, casting soft halos across the room's velvet and shadows.

There he was.

Blitzø.

He was curled up on his bed, almost dwarfed between the pillows. Arms wrapped around a small, worn out shape. The horse plushie. The one Blitzø had given him when they were children. It was pressed tightly against Blitzø's chest, and Stolas's breath hitched in his throat. Something about that image made his heart ache with too much softness. Too much *everything*. Blitzø opened one eye when he heard the door, then groaned as he sat up, clutching the toy a little tighter.

"Okay, yeah, you caught me," he muttered. "Don't start. It calms me down, alright?"

Stolas stepped closer, a smile curling at the edge of his mouth. "I wasn't going to laugh," he said gently. "It's quite a sweet scene."

Blitzø blushed faintly, then smirked. "*Sweet?* I'm dangerous and edgy. Don't ruin my brand."

The door clicked shut behind Stolas as he stepped in, chuckling under his breath. He sat at the edge of the bed, letting his cape slide from his shoulders. Blitzø watched him the whole time, his eyes glowing softly in the dark.

"How was dinner?" Blitzø asked after a moment in a low voice.

"Fancy," Stolas murmured. "Over a lake. Crystal chandeliers. Live string quartet. The whole ridiculous song and dance."

Blitzø gave a quiet grunt. "Bet he loved that."

"And the food was pretentious," he added, lifting his chin. "Some poor trout drowned in dill foam, balancing on a single asparagus like it was trying to ascend to the heavens. Honestly, foam, Blitzø. Who *does* that?"

Blitzø barked a laugh. "Oh no. The prince has suffered a culinary tragedy. We gotta alert the press."

"I'm serious!" Stolas said, mock-indignant, letting himself slump further into the mattress. "One more course and I'd have flung myself into the lake for the sweet mercy of drowning."

Blitzø rolled his eyes and shoved the plushie toward him. "Here, drama queen. You clearly need it more than I do."

Stolas blinked, then let out a breath of laughter as he took it. "An offering? How noble."

"It's damage control," Blitzø muttered. "Before you give a eulogy about your tortured palate."

Stolas laughed, warm and easy, and brought the plushie to his face. He inhaled. It smelled like Blitzø, smoke and something wild, something home. He didn't speak. Just clutched the toy and then let himself fall sideways into Blitzø's warmth, burying his face in his shoulder.

Blitzø stiffened, just for a beat. Then melted. His arm came around him, solid and sure, and his lips brushed the crown of Stolas's head. Fingers wove gently into his feathers, slow and soothing.

"I missed you tonight," Stolas whispered. "I always miss you."

Blitzø didn't speak. Just ran his fingers through the plumage at the base of his skull.

Stolas closed his eyes. "He kissed my hand. Called me beautiful." He breathed in. "And all I could think about was you. How you would've called my cloak ridiculous and stolen my dessert."

Blitzø chuckled, voice curling against his temple. "I'd have had *you* for dessert," he muttered, eyes gleaming with mischief.

Stolas giggled, that sound half-laced with affection and exhaustion, and nuzzled closer, wrapping his arms around Blitzø's middle. He could feel the beat of his heart, strong and steady, beneath the fabric. He wanted to tear it away. To get closer. But something in him faltered. His smile faded, just slightly, a candle flickering under a sudden draft.

"Blitzø..." he whispered. "Do you ever think about what comes after all this? When it's over?" his voice cracked.

Blitzø's hand paused in his feathers. Stolas turned his face, just enough to see him — to see those red eyes, glowing like coals, burning with something he didn't dare name.

"I'm scared." he whispered, voice brittle.

Blitzø leaned in, pressing their foreheads together.

"Don't think about after," he said roughly. "Don't think about anything. Just feel. Right now. We're still here."

And then he kissed him.

It felt like gravity. Like starlight folding into itself, a confession in motion. Stolas melted, clinging to him and pulling him closer. The plushie slipped from his fingers and tumbled to the floor as Blitzø pushed him gently down into the bed, their mouths still tangled. His hands found the buttons on Stolas's shirt, working them loose as Stolas's fingers slid to his waist, unfastening his belt with slow, deliberate care.

They undressed each other in silence. Stolas ran his hands down the length of Blitzø's back, memorizing a song written in bone and muscle. Their mouths met again, and again, growing bolder, deeper, until it felt like breathing.

And then they moved together.

Like a waltz, a slow-burning symphony only their bodies could hear. Stolas's breath hitched as Blitzø guided him through it, each movement a promise, each touch a vow whispered against skin. It felt like floating among stars, like tracing constellations across flesh and fire.

And when it was done, when the rhythm slowed and all that remained was breath and sweat and the echo of heartbeats, Stolas curled into Blitzø's arms and closed his eyes. The fear was still there. But for now, held in the arms of the only person who made him feel whole.

Outside, the club slept.

And they clung to one another, trying to keep the world at bay just a little longer.



The hallway stretched long and dim, lit only by sleepy sconces and the distant echo of nightclub music bleeding through velvet walls. Stolas walked slowly, arms behind his back, talons tapping a satisfied rhythm into the marble floor. His posture was regal, as always. His bones, however, felt like jelly.

Every inch of him *ached* in a delicious way. The space between his legs still tingled from Blitzø's relentless attention the night before.

Satan, *Blitzø*.

The last few weeks had been... indulgent. *Obscene*, honestly. They'd been sneaking around like Lust Ring fugitives with a kink for public indecency. And Blitzø seemed to take it as a personal challenge to see how many surfaces in the club could double as sex furniture. Stolas wasn't sure if they were being subtle or if the entire staff was just politely ignoring the feather trails. Probably the latter. Fizz had caught them once in a prop closet — Stolas half-wrapped in a corset, Blitzø already on his knees. The imp hadn't even flinched.

"You two are gonna get crushed by a sandbag one of these days," Fizz had muttered, sipping a soda as he walked away.

But there had been gentler moments too. Quiet touches. Blitzø had taken to kissing his throat before every forced "date" with Vassago, biting down just enough to leave a mark — always in the same place, just beneath the collarbone. It had become a ritual. A wordless claim.

Stolas touched the spot now through the fabric of his embroidered coat, still tender. The ghost of Blitzø's mouth lingered there, curled like a secret beneath his skin.

He was smiling like an idiot when he turned the corner and saw Ozzie.

"Ozzie!" he called, lifting one arm in a cheerful wave, mid-strut.

Then he saw his friend's face and something dropped in his stomach.

His frame was tense, jaw set. His eyes widened when he saw Stolas.

"Ozzie? Is everything—"

"Shh," Ozzie hissed, sweeping toward him. He grabbed his arm, tight enough to send alarm straight through Stolas's chest. "You need to get out of here. Now. Before they see you."

"They?" Stolas echoed, a chill starting to build in his spine. "Who—?"

Ozzie glanced behind him, already speaking fast. "They are here, Andrealphus. And Stella. They showed up ten minutes ago. No warning."

Stolas's stomach dropped.

"What do you mean *here*?" he whispered.

"I mean it's bad," Ozzie said. "Andre gave me a month to get Vassago to invest. That deadline's up. We haven't closed the deal with Vassago, and he's noticed. He knows something's off."

Stolas's heart kicked against his ribs, feathers tightening along his arms.

"Ozzie—"

"Stooo-las~, " came that silken, poisonous voice from behind.

He turned. Slowly.

Andrealphus stood at the end of the hallway, icy robes gleaming like frost under the low lights. Stella was beside him, draped in pink silk and tulle, her brand sneer already carved into her face.

"Well," she said, eyeing Stolas like a stain on the floor. "Isn't this a charming little reunion. How's your performance? Still spreading your legs for applause?"

Ozzie moved to stand between them instinctively, but Andrealphus lifted one hand.

"Go," he said, soft and sharp as glass. "This isn't for you."

Ozzie's jaw clenched. His eyes flicked to Stolas. Stolas just nodded, squeezing his arm as he walked towards the siblings.

The moment the door to his office opened, Andrealphus gestured for Stolas to follow. "After you."

The door closed with a soft click behind him, but to Stolas, it sounded as a cell slamming shut. The quiet in the room pressed against his skin, making his feathers stand on end.

His mind raced.

Andrealphus *knew*? Or at the very least he suspected something, that much was clear from Ozzie's face. He had even brought Stella, and that could only mean one thing—he was planning to use the influence of the bond on him. Stolas swallowed hard, forcing himself to stand tall in front of the desk. Andrealphus sat just opposite him, silent, composed. Watching.

Stolas didn't like the look on his eyes.

Had he seen him with Blitzø? He'd tried to be careful, always maintaining a polite distance during rehearsals. He hadn't dared risk too much, though Blitzø hadn't made it easy, flashing him smirks, his gaze burning through every line they delivered.

Maybe it had been the marks. Maybe one of the bites was more visible than he thought. He resisted the urge to touch the hickey still blooming at his throat. He took a deep breath, trying to focus, when Stella stepped in front of him.

Her grin was pure poison.

"Oh, how the mighty have fallen," she said, circling him slowly. "Bedding imps. Sneaking around like some desperate gutter whore. It's almost impressive how low you've sunk."

Stolas stayed still. Silent. His jaw ached from the pressure of holding it shut.

"Do you even know how pathetic you look?" she continued, voice dripping with glee. "It used to be obscene, but at least it was entertaining to see. Now it's just boring. I was almost disappointed. Then again, you were pitiful even when we got married. Couldn't even gather the will to fuck *me* properly. I'm so glad I got rid of you."

Stolas didn't move. He wanted to disappear into thin air.

She narrowed her eyes. "Nothing to say? Poor thing. Maybe I should help you remember your place."

Her hand lifted.

It struck instantly. That cursed thread of ancient magic twisted at the base of his spine and pulled, sharp and raw. His knees buckled. He dropped with a choked gasp, forced downward by power that scraped through memories, through wounds that had never closed.

"Look at you," she whispered, triumphant. "Still mine in all the ways that matter."

"Enough," Andrealphus said, sudden and sharp. It cut through the air like a whip.

Stella turned, clearly irritated. "What? I'm just—"

"I would like to ask you to leave us alone, dear sister," he said with a syrupy calm that didn't hide the glint of steel beneath. "I would like to have a few words with our dear Stolas in private".

She tossed her feathers with a bratty scoff. "Fine. Have your little drama. He was always good for that." Then, turning to Stolas with a sneer, she added, "Enjoy your latest performance."

And she left, the door hissing shut behind her.

The frost in Andrealphus's gaze returned the moment she was gone. He didn't speak right away, letting the silence close in around them.

"Well, well, my dear brother-in-law. It's been a long time since we've had time to talk, hasn't it?" he commented with a sharp smile. "How's life going for you, are you enjoying your little moment in the spotlight?"

Stolas blinked, caught off guard by the sudden question.

"I... yes. I've been well."

Andrealphus hummed, pouring some wine into a cup. He didn't deign offer any to Stolas "I heard you've been very busy. Out with Vassago quite often, aren't you?"

Stolas straightened his spine. "Yes. Things are going well. He's been receptive."

"*Receptive?*" Andrealphus echoed, voice still deceptively calm. "Then why, after all these weeks, has he not invested? Why haven't I seen his signature on any contract, Stolas?"

Stolas swallowed, trying to control the tremor in his voice "I—I don't know. He hasn't said. Perhaps he's cautious—"

"Because I think I know what's really going on," Andrealphus cut in. He rose with slow elegance, setting his glass on the desk. The temperature in the room dropped several degrees as he moved, circling the desk and passing near Stolas. The chill that radiated from him wrapped around Stolas like a noose of frost, sending a shiver down his spine. He didn't turn, but he could feel Andrealphus stop just behind him.

"You've done this before. Many times. You were *made* for this. You've always been good at spreading your legs, Stolas. You know how to make yourself desirable." he grimaced at that. "So why would this time be any different, hm?"

"Vassago isn't like the others, he's not just looking for something casual, he wants—" but Stolas couldn't finish. In one swift motion, Andrealphus turned him, gripping his chin, painfully.

"No, *you* are the problem." he hissed.

Stolas opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Andrealphus leaned in.

"You've let yourself get sloppy. Soft. You think I don't know why? You've been letting that filthy little imp fuck you any way he wanted, haven't you. You *reek* of him. That's why Vassago won't bite. He smells the *cheapness* on you."

He stepped closer still, the sharp point of his beak almost piercing the skin at his neck.

"You think I don't feel it? The way your whole body reacts when I get near you? You've always been easy to read. Always squirmed under pressure. I see it in your eyes."

Stolas was trembling. There was heat beneath the cold, a charged tension that made it almost impossible to breathe. Something in Andrealphus's nearness scraped along his skin like phantom claws, dragging over his body, making his feathers crawl. It wasn't just hate in his voice, there was something darker pulsing underneath. Stolas felt it, noticed it in the way his breath brushed too close to his skin, inhaling over his neck. It made his stomach turn. Stolas's breath caught. He tried not to recoil, but something wilted inside him when he saw Andrealphus's eyes flicked down, lingering a second too long on his throat, just over the place Blitzø had bit him.

He stepped back finally, shoving him to the floor, as if the proximity sickened him.

"You're no more than a street whore" he spat.

He turned away, wiping his hand over his tunic, sitting in front of him again. Stolas didn't move, he just stayed there, lying on the floor, eyes vacantly looking at nothing.

"You will go to dinner with Vassago. You will fuck him. You will do your job, or I will drag you out of this club and auction you off to the lowest pit in Wrath. And you will test in your own skin what Hell really is."

Stolas couldn't move, his mind was almost completely disconnected from his body.

I can't do this, I can't. Please stop it, go away, go away, go away...

The tears came with no warning, blurring his vision. They slipped past his lashes before he even realized they were there, quiet and hot against his skin. Carving down his cheeks with aching inevitability. He felt the sharp noise of something fracturing inside of him.

He thought of Blitzø.

Of his voice. His crooked grin. That infuriating laugh that always made Stolas's chest flutter. The way he said his name like it was a secret worth keeping. The feeling of his kiss. How he held him like no one else ever had. Like he mattered.

Stolas clung to that image, but it crumbled in a million pieces. He saw Blitzø looking at him with disgust. Distant and cold. He imagined him pulling away from him, lips curled in revulsion, that spark of something between them crushed under the weight of what Stolas was about to do.

And that was when the sob hit him, silent and sharp as broken glass in his throat.

He sank into himself, trembling, his body quaking. He felt used. *Filthy*. A thing passed between hands, not nearly close to be good enough for Blitzø. He felt cracked open. Defenseless.

So completely and utterly *alone*.

Andrealphus watched, a cold smile tugging at his lips

"Awww, don't cry. This is what you wanted, isn't it?" he said coldly "Your freedom. It's right there. All you have to do is this one last thing."

Stolas didn't look at him. He couldn't.

Because he knew it was a lie.

Andrealphus would never give him freedom. Stolas had always known, deep in his bones. He would keep shifting the terms, keep tightening the leash, keep dangling the illusion of release just out of reach until there was nothing left of Stolas to bind. Nothing left to break.

But he had no other choice.

Andre turned, adjusting his cuffs with that insufferable composure.

"Well, I've truly enjoyed our little chat, dear brother. I'm sure I'll be hearing excellent news from you very soon." He flicked his feathered shawl over one shoulder as he passed, not even sparing Stolas a glance. "Have a nice day, Stolas."

And he was gone.

Stolas remained on the floor, struggling to remember how to breathe, how to *move*. He stared at the door, then down at the marble beneath him, the chill of it pressing into his bones. His world, once again, was in pieces and he was lost with no way out, no certainty of what would happen.

Only the inevitability of what came next.



Blitzø flopped back onto Stolas's bed, one leg dangling off the side, surrounded by a chaotic mess of old paperback novels. Most of them were dog-eared, creased to hell, and reeked faintly of incense and old cigars, flea market gold. He'd picked them up earlier that day, snatching a whole stack for barely a handful of bucks. Trashy romance poses, cheesy taglines, and covers painted like bad Renaissance fanart. Pure bliss.

He held one up now, squinting at the muscled demon pirate on the front.

"Okay, so hear me out," he muttered aloud to no one, flipping it over to read the blurb. *"Cursed sea prince falls for the cabin boy who doesn't know he's actually heir to the Siren Court?"* Stolas is gonna eat this shit up."

There was a low thrumming under Blitzø's ribs. That weird fluttering feeling that made his fingers itch to fidget and his voice want to hum. It was stupid. He felt stupid. But he also couldn't stop grinning. The last few months had been a fucking roller coaster, steep drops, sharp turns, and dizzying highs that left him breathless. It was chaos. It was risky.

But it had been so fucking worth it.

He'd always joked about living in a B-list romance opera, but for once? He didn't want to change a damn thing. For the first time in his life, Blitzø didn't feel like running. He felt... alive. Like the world had been black-and-white until now and suddenly someone had flipped the color on. Rainbows and all.

He picked out another book, one with a centaur love triangle, and tossed it aside dramatically.

"Too kinky, even for him," he said, just as he heard the faintest sound near the door.

His head snapped up.

The grin spread wider as he sat up straight. "There you are, big bird! Took you long enough. I found us some real literary treasures today, you're gonna lose your feathers over this pirate crap, I swear—"

Then he saw Stolas's face.

And the smile died instantly. His heart dropped like a stone.

Stolas staggered through the threshold, he barely made it into the room before he collapsed. Blitzø was off the bed in a second, the books forgotten, his hands reaching out instinctively. He caught him by the forearms before he could crumble.

His eyes were swollen, the feathers beneath them blotchy and damp. Two long red marks travelled down his cheeks—scratches, like claws had raked down them. He looked like a ghost of himself.

"What the fuck—? Stolas—hey—"

Stolas didn't answer. Didn't even blink. Just stood there.

Blitzø stepped in closer, gently curling his fingers around his elbow.

That's when he felt it, the trembling. Violent. Like Stolas's entire nervous system had been short-circuited.

Blitzø's throat went dry.

"Come on," he said softly. "Let's get you in the bath."



OKAY, SO
HEAR ME
OUT,

"CURSED
SEA PRINCE
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STOLAS
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THERE
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CHACK!

HMM...IT
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CRAP, I SWEAR—



He helped him forward, step by slow step, until they reached the bathroom. The water steamed faintly as Blitzø eased the faucet off, testing the heat. He turned to find Stolas perched on the edge of the tub, his gaze blank. His movements were stiff when Blitzø helped him undress, tugging off the heavy embroidered vest with careful fingers. But Stolas wouldn't meet his eyes. Wouldn't speak. The claw marks looked worse in the light. Blitzø's jaw clenched tight.

When he reached out to steady him, Stolas flinched as if it burned.

Blitzø said nothing. Just eased him into the tub, stepping in behind him.

He sat close, legs framing Stolas's, and pulled him back slowly until he rested against his chest. A tense silence enveloped them, and Blitzø felt as if everything around him were made of glass and any misstep could shatter it all into pieces.

Blitzø soaked a cloth and gently ran it along his arms, his throat, the slope of his shoulders. He didn't say anything. Didn't push.

But inside, his thoughts were screaming.

What the fuck happened to him?

Oh, he was gonna definitely killed the fucker who'd dare to touch him, that was for sure. He didn't want to upset Stolas more than necessary, but Blitzø made a mental note to grab his old curved blade from the vault in the apartment. Someone was going to be disemboweled slowly and painfully, that was for sure.

Stolas's breathing was shallow under his touch, as if he was trying with all he got left to hold himself together.

Blitzø dipped his fingers into the water again and began preening the bent, damp feathers at the nape of his neck with slow and steady strokes. He'd never done this before, although he'd seen Stolas do it a million times. But he needed to do something. Anything to make him feel better

Still, Stolas didn't say a word.

And it was *killing him*.

When the bath had cooled, Blitzø dried them both off in silence, wrapped Stolas in his robe, and walked him slowly back to the bed. He sat him down, pulled a blanket over his shoulders, then ducked into the kitchenette to warm up some tea.

Stolas didn't move. He didn't even blink.

Blitzø knelt in front of him, offering the bowl with a forced little smile. "C'mon. You gotta eat something. Just a little."

Stolas didn't reach for the cup.

Blitzø waited. Minutes passed in stillness before he finally asked.

"What happened?"

Stolas didn't answer at first, and Blitzø was starting to think he wasn't going to, when he muttered, barely louder than breath.

"It's over."

Blitzø's brow furrowed. "What's over?"

Stolas turned toward him then, finally meeting his eyes. There was nothing in them but ruin, sorrow so vast it swept through everything in its path, leaving behind nothing but a hollow shell.

"Us." he said finally

And Blitzø watched, helpless, as his eyes filled with tears. Slow. Quiet. His shoulders folded inward, his body shaking with each breath.

Blitzø's heart thudded and the floor disappeared beneath him.

"Hey, hey, no, don't do that- Don't fucking say that, you don't get to say that—"

Blitzø clambered up onto the bed beside him, gripping his shoulders. "What the hell does that mean? What do you mean *us*? What happened?"

Stolas lifted his head, looking at him. His voice came, small.

"Andrealphus... he knows. He knows about us."

Blitzø's breath hitched.

"He's... he's out of patience," Stolas continued. "He wants the deal with Vassago closed. And tomorrow night, I'm expected to... to sleep with him. Seal the investment."

Blitzø reeled back slightly, stunned. "Wait — *what*? I thought you were just supposed to *seduce* the guy. Flirt. Talk him into writing checks and entertain him. You never said—"

Stolas averted his gaze, hugging himself. And Blitzø saw it there, the shame.

The undeniable truth.

"I didn't want you to know," Stolas whispered. "He's been...using me, since the beginning. Ozzie's deal gave him power over the club... and he took advantage of that, made sure to use it to parade me around. I am just a tool in his game of influence, you see?" he sniffed, trying to compose himself "I've done it before, Blitzø. That's what he expects from me."

There was a flash. And something inside Blitzø snapped.

"He *touched* you?" his voice turned rough.

"No—"

"He *used* you?! Gave you to others?"

Stolas shuddered under his touch.

"I'm going to fucking kill him."

Blitzø shot to his feet. His fists clenched so tight his claws dug into his palms. His voice was fire, seething, savage, unfiltered. All the softness in him ripped away in an instant.

"That icy bastard thinks he can touch you? Use you? Hurt you like that and walk away *breathing*?" Blitzø spat, pacing now, shoulders coiled with rage. "I'll tear his fucking spine out. I'll carve his name into the stone floor and piss on it. I swear on Hell's last flaming pit, I'm going to slit his throat and watch him bleed—" he went for the door, blinded by the rage.

"Blitzø, *no!*" Stolas cried, reaching for him, pulling him back. "You can't! If you do, he'll retaliate. He'll hurt you. I *won't* survive that."

Blitzø froze.

Just like that, the fire stuttered.

Stolas crumbled again, curling in on himself. "We have to end it. Before it gets worse. I don't want you to go through this. I don't want you to see me like that, please. I won't be able to look you in the eye." he sobbed, his breath catching.

And Blitzø shattered.

He sank to his knees in front of him, all the rage disappearing in an instant.

"Don't," Blitzø whispered, voice barely holding together. "Don't say that. Don't give up. Not on me. Not on *us*."

Stolas sobbed, shaking his head.

"Stols, babe. Please don't do this. I can take it," Blitzø choked. "I *will*. If it's for you, I'll take it all. Just... don't leave me." he wiped the tears that kept streaming down his face, pulling their foreheads together. He cradled his neck, threading his fingers at the feathers there "Please, don't do this" he whispered. He felt Stolas shaking his head

"No. No, you won't be able to stand it," Stolas breathed. "The jealousy will eat you alive. I know it will. And I cannot bear to see you look at me like that, like I betrayed you, like you're repulsed by me. It will *kill me*, Blitzø."

Blitzø blinked hard, fighting back a rush of tears that threatened to spill. He cradled Stolas's face in both hands, thumbs brushing at the wetness beneath his eyes.

"Listen to me," he murmured, voice low but steady "You're not disgusting. You're not filthy. You're not some cheap, broken thing to cast aside. You're Stolas fucking Goetia. You're the most intelligent demon I have ever known. You use words like *ravishing* on a daily basis and you don't even feel embarrassed about it. You managed to get my dyslexic ass reading, and I am telling you, that's was a real fucking feat you pulled on your own there. You..." Blitzø swallowed, trying to control the turrent of feelings that threatened to take over him "... you're a fucking star, Stolas. *My star*. One I didn't even know I was looking for. And somehow, you managed to light up my whole damn life, and it had been a pretty shitty one up until now."

Blitzø gave a shaky laugh, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "And goddamn, you're the only one who's ever made me say sappy shit like that."

Stolas let out a wet chuckle at that, a cracked sound .

Blitzø's voice dipped, softer now. "You know? I stay awake sometimes, just to listen to you breathe. Because it still doesn't feel real. Like you stepped out of a dream that wasn't mine to have."

He drew in a breath, thumb brushing gently over Stolas's cheek. "And I swear, nothing you do — nothing that happens, is gonna change the way I look at you. You're it for me."

His voice cracked on the next words, but he let them fall.

"Because I love you."

Stolas blinked at him like he'd misheard, like Blitzø had just said something completely insane, like *"I'm gonna take up knitting"* or *"Let's adopt a hellbeast and name it Cupcake."*

"You... what?"

Blitzø's heart gave a painful little twist. "I said I love you, alright? Fuck, don't make me spell it out. You know I suck at that."

Stolas's eyes widened. His mouth opened, but no words came. Just a breath, sharp, trembling, like he'd been holding it in for centuries.

Blitzø's chest was thundering, the silence stretching just long enough to make him want to bolt. *Shit*, he never should've said it. Not like this. Not now. He should've—

"I love you too," Stolas said.

Blitzø froze. His brain short-circuited. Then jolted back online all at once, overloaded and scrambling for meaning.

"Y—you what?" he squaked.

"I love you," Stolas repeated, breath hitching. "I am in love with you, you maddening, wonderful imp."

His voice cracked halfway through, and then he was laughing and crying at the same time, and Blitzø felt his whole damn body just *breathe*, like something inside him had finally unclenched after years of holding on too tight.

Then Stolas surged forward and kissed him.

Their mouths crashed together, messy and desperate. Hands fumbled, feathers brushed Blitzø's face. He tasted salt, heat, everything he'd been starving for, and Stolas kissed him like he'd just been handed back the air he'd forgotten how to breathe.

They broke apart just long enough to stare at each other, eyes red, faces wet, smiling like absolute fools.

"I've loved you for so long," Stolas whispered, voice breaking around the words, "I thought maybe I was cursed. That I'd never be allowed to want something real. But you..." he gave a watery laugh "You ruin every rule I ever followed. And I can't — I don't want to stop."

His hands trembled where they clung to Blitzø, like he was afraid letting go would shatter the moment.

Blitzø huffed a shaky laugh and brushed his thumb gently under Stolas's eye.

"Too late, fancy feathers. You grabbed on like I'm your emotional support imp, and now you're stuck with me. No refunds." He dropped a quick kiss on his beak, grinning through the chaos in his chest.



LISTEN
TO ME,

YOU'RE NOT
DISGUSTING.
YOU'RE NOT
FILTHY. YOU'RE
NOT SOME CHEAP,
BROKEN THING
TO CAST ASIDE.
YOU'RE STOLAS
FUCKING
GOETIA.



YOU'RE THE
MOST INTELLIGENT
DEMON I HAVE EVER
KNOWN.

YOU USE WORDS
LIKE RAVISHING ON
A DAILY BASIS AND
YOU DON'T EVEN
FEEL EMBARRASSED
ABOUT IT.

YOU MANAGED TO
GET MY DYSLEXIC
ASS READING, AND
I AM TELLING YOU,
THAT'S WAS A REAL
FUCKING FEAT YOU
PULLED ON YOUR
OWN THERE.



YOU.....
YOU'RE A
FUCKING
STAR, STOLAS.
MY STAR.

ONE I DIDN'T
EVEN KNOW
I WAS LOOKING FOR.
AND SOMEHOW, YOU
MANAGED TO LIGHT UP
MY WHOLE DAMN LIFE,
AND IT HAD BEEN
A PRETTY SHITTY
ONE UP UNTIL NOW.

YOU KNOW?
I STAY AWAKE
SOMETIMES, JUST TO
LISTEN TO YOU
BREATHE. BECAUSE IT
STILL DOESN'T FEEL
REAL. LIKE YOU
STEPPED OUT
OF A DREAM THAT
WASN'T MINE
TO HAVE.

AND I SWEAR,
NOTHING YOU DO—
NOTHING THAT
HAPPENS, IS
GONNA CHANGE
THE WAY I LOOK
AT YOU. YOU'RE
IT FOR ME.

*BECAUSE
I LOVE YOU.*



YOU...
WHAT?

I SAID I
LOVE YOU,
ALRIGHT?
FUCK, DON'T
MAKE ME
SPELL IT OUT.
YOU KNOW I
SUCK AT THAT.

I LOVE
YOU TOO



Y—YOU
WHAT?

I LOVE YOU.
I AM IN LOVE
WITH YOU, YOU
MADDENING,
WONDERFUL
IMP.

"But I don't want you to go through this," Stolas said, still raw, steadier now. "I won't drag you into this mess. You shouldn't have to—"

"Hey." Blitzø cut him off, thumbing away another tear clinging to the corner of his beak. "You don't get to push me away now. We're a team, remember?"

Stolas opened his mouth to argue, but Blitzø beat him to it.

"You're stuck with me, birdbrain." His voice dropped, hoarse but sure. "So you better get used to it." He guided his head, so Stolas was resting on his shoulder. The owl breathed in, relaxing against him. Blitzø traced circles under his chin "I can handle this. We'll come up with something to remind my fuckass brain why you have to go with him. To remind myself that you..." He hesitated, afraid to say the words. Afraid they'd solidify, become too real. And real things had a way of falling apart on him.

"I love you" Stolas whispered again, capturing his mouth and sealing the words with his lips.

"I love you, come what may" he said when finally pulled out.

And it was *those* three words that made Blitzø wonder how the hell could a screw-up like him deserve the love of someone like Stolas? After all the pain, the fear, after clawing his way out of the wreckage that used to be his life... he must've done *something* right.

He pulled Stolas closer, burying his face in the soft feathers of his neck, letting himself be wrapped in that scent, that warmth that felt like home.

"Come what may," he echoed.