

It felt like it took an eternity to make his way down the halls and to the throne room . Stolas tried to focus his mind on “prince mode” but it was next to impossible.

An almost uncontrollable tremor shook his hands and would not subside no matter how much he kept moving them. Stolas felt the rubbing of the clothes like fire against his skin, each movement sending an electric current to the base of his stomach, reminding him that just a few minutes before, it was not clothes that had caressed him. Stolas thought of all the times he had followed that same path with his own hands, in the solitude of the night, when the whole castle was silent and Stolas had to stifle his moans against the pillow. But whatever excitement he might have generated when he touched himself could not compare to the sensation of Blitz's hands against his abdomen, caressing his lower back and electrifying his every feather. Stolas stifled a sigh, it was definitely going to be a very, very long meeting.

Alfred met him in the hallway and Stolas followed alongside him. It did help to keep him grounded and remember where he had to be, at least.

Once the double doors opened, Stolas was greeted by the sight of Paimon standing before his throne. His heart pounded nervously and his stomach coiled with dread.

It didn't matter how many times he met his father, he always felt intimidated by his imposing presence. Paimon had a way of inspiring respect and fear with his mere presence. His figure was silhouetted against the throne, and Stolas couldn't discern his expression. Only the steely gleam of his reddish eyes slightly illuminated his face. Stolas stirred nervously and inhaled deeply, trying to calm himself. He was ready for this, he had spent weeks carefully choosing the words he would use in this conversation, and although the uncertainty was still there, all his doubts had dissipated in one fell swoop when he had opened the door to leave his room with Blitz in it. The imp had given him the strength he needed to step forward and try to take charge of his own life for the first time. His friend, the person he loved the most. A sudden current of warmth and hope flooded through him. Being around Blitz always ignited the strength and courage within himself Stolas never knew existed.

And, it was in that exact moment that Stolas realized he wanted to be with him. He felt something flourish within him, something that filled his chest and spread through his limbs, like a tingle that reached his fingertips. It was like magic, and it made him feel just as powerful. He almost laughed outloud at the realization. He wanted Blitz, he loved him. And even though he had just become aware of this, Stolas had a feeling it was something he had wanted from the beginning, since the moment they met.

A soft smile tugged at the corners of his beak. There was no way in Hell he was marrying Stella, not after this. He just had to reason with his father.

Maybe deep down, Paimon would want to make his own children happy instead of miserable. There was no way he could be so cruel to his own flesh and blood, right?

Stolas raised his head, his gaze full of determination. He wasn't going to back down, not this time.

“Father” Stolas called in a strong voice as he bowed in an elegant movement before him.

“Ah, so there you are, son,” Paimon said with a flourish as he approached Stolas.

"I hope that you're doing well." Stolas said as he straightened and folded his hands behind his back. *His posture was formal, straight back and square shoulders, the perfect picture of the prince he was expected to be.*

"But of course," Paimon said with a wave of his hand. "Why wouldn't I be doing well? Everything is going according to plan and the Goetia council are prepared to move forward with your wedding."

Stolas felt a lump form in his throat. He swallowed hard and tried to compose himself. He breathed in, this was it, it was now or never

"Ah, yes..." Stolas said. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking again. He tried to sound firm "As a matter of fact, there was... something I wanted to discuss with you, in regards to the wedding."

Paimon chuckled jovially. "Well son, do tell. I'm sure you'll be able to infer some input. But you know women, they see that day as theirs to command!"

Stolas regarded his father again, more calm than he had ever felt before.

"I am not going to marry Stella, father" Stolas explained in a clear, even voice. "We aren't compatible. She has made it known since the day we met that she despises me, and I cannot say I like her either. It would be senseless to force a marriage that is headed for disaster from the very beginning. Our union would be useless to the Ars Goetia, and it would make us both miserable our whole lives. "

Stolas paused to gather his words. Paimon however was no longer smiling and watched him with an unreadable gaze. Whether this was a good sign or not remained to be seen.

Clasping his hands, Stolas continued, "I understand that the Goetia family wish for me to sire an heir. However, taking into account the extensive number of members that are already part of our family, I see no problem in abdicating my position in favour of one of them. There would be no need for another precautionary heir sired by, father. The new prince would be able to procure one and, of course, I would assist in any way I would be required to help them get accustomed to the obligations their position would entail."

Paimon stared at him and Stolas stood, waiting with bated breath. There was no telling how Paimon was going to react and part of Stolas wanted to kick himself for this. This had to have been a bad idea and the silence was not helping.

Yet, he didn't want to take it back. No matter how much the anxiety was ripping through him. It had to be said and he needed to stand up for himself.

What was the difference in the minds of the Goetia if Stolas married for love and had a child than if he married Stella? He couldn't imagine.

It had to work. If Paimon had any decent bone in his body that cared about his son's happiness, surely he would agree.

Then Paimon burst out laughing. "Ho ho ho! Oh, son, I never took you to be the humourous type!"

Stricken, Stolas let his hands fall and could only stare at Paimon with forlorn. His determination crumbled to the floor "Father... I... I wasn't trying to tell a joke."

"Nonsense! Because your feeble request *is* a joke!" Paimon exclaimed with mirth. He straightened and his grin fell almost immediately. "Don't be ridiculous, boy."

"But, Father..." Stolas looked at his father imploringly. "I don't understand. I don't wish to marry Stella. I wasn't kidding when I said that we don't even like each other. We truly don't and will be miserable together."

"Pah, that's nonsense. She was chosen to be your wife and that is how it shall be," Paimon stated calmly.

"But we'll be unhappy," Stolas insisted. "I don't love her and I can't abide her company. Please, Father... Please understand that I don't wish to marry someone I don't love, let alone like."

Paimon's aura changed completely and the room went dark. Stolas felt an icy chill ascend through his lower limbs, paralyzing him on the spot. An uncontrollable terror seized him. The figure of his father seemed to grow larger and occupy the entire space with every step he took in his direction, his elegant cloak trailing behind him absorbing what little warmth remained in the atmosphere. Paimon approached his son and bent his head slightly to whisper in his ear

"Do you assume I care?" Paimon whispered. It sent a chill down Stolas spine "Your only worth has always been to continue the royal line, hence you will marry, and you will produce an heir" his words were soft, but there was a hidden threat in them.

Stolas swallowed hard, trying to talk "But..."

"Do you think I don't know where this cheap sentimentality is coming from, son?" Paimon interrupted.

Stolas couldn't gather his thoughts, he was too confused trying to control the tremors that shook his frame. Paimon rested a claw on his son's shoulder, digging his talons in his son's flesh, a silent warning.

"I *know* what you did." he growled. Stolas heart sank. No, that wasn't possible.

" I saw you and that little imp friend of yours." Paimon's voice was calm, but sharp. He circled Stolas, like a predator would do to its prey, deep red eyes bearing down on him. "I saw you practically *whoring* yourself to that lowly circus imp I purchased you." he spat.

How in the world did Paimon see that? Stolas clutched his chest and could only stare in horror at his father. Paimon had somehow spied on them? Did Alfred tell him? No, Alfred would never. He didn't even realise what they were doing, even if he could have deduced it. Whatever the case, there was no escaping the fact Paimon just knew.

"You are an embarrassment to this family. Wallowing with a plebian like a mere prostitute." Paimon's words were like knives embeded in Stolas' skin.

Stolas felt anger rising at those words. What Blitz and him had shared was real, something that connected them on very deep levels. Hearing hs father downgrade his relationship with Blitz to something merely transactional and empty...it hurt. It hurt so much.

"Thats not...! It wasn't like that! I...I love him, father!" Stolas blurted out.

Stolas couldn't even processed his words, the consequences they may have for him, for blitz. His father stopped in his tracks and looked at him with utter disgust.

“Love him? Is that what he has made you believe so you would spread your legs for him? Don’t make me laugh, son”. Paimon spat. The king regarded him with disdain, as if Stolas weren’t worth more than the dirt that stained his boots.

Stolas flinched, as if their words had physically hit him.

His father sighed exasperated, completely ignoring Stolas’ distress. “At this point, I suppose I can take partial blame,” Paimon muttered. He turned and faced the wall, letting out a hum. “I was foolish to allow you to fraternize with the likes of that clown boy and his lowly circus family. Pah! I had thought his company would help in ceasing your bitch crying and reigning in your silly emotions. But I see I was mistaken. No matter, it ends here.”

Gasping, Stolas’ gaze snapped up to Paimon as dread filled his being. “What?”

“From here on, you’re never to see that clown boy again. Him nor his little friends.” Paimon’s tone indicated there was to be no arguing.

“No... Father, no! Please, you can’t keep me from him!” Stolas pleaded, approaching him.

“I can and I will, boy,” Paimon stated calmly, peering at him over his shoulder with a single eye. “Cease your complaining!”

Stolas trembled and backed away, knowing he would be hit if he stepped out of line again.

“If that imp dares set foot near this palace again, I will have him killed. Right before your eyes,” Paimon turned to him now. His voice was low, full of promise. “Stay away from him, son. If you want your precious little *friend* to live another day, you will heed my command. I cannot allow him to be a distraction or an influence upon you. If you continue down this wretched path, that imp will die because of you. Could you live with that guilt? Would you prefer that?”

Having to hold back tears and the urge to plead further, Stolas took another step back. He hung his head in shame and trembled. Never seeing Blitz again would destroy him and break his heart. But he couldn’t allow his dearest friend to be *killed* either. A world without Blitz wasn’t a world worth living in.

He had to make sure Blitz would be alive and safe.

“I... I’ll stay away from him,” Stolas uttered, his voice cracking. He hated to sound so pathetic in front of his father, but his emotions overtook him. Falling to his knees, Stolas cried out and clutched his father’s robe. “I’ll do anything, but please just... don’t hurt him. I beg you” he whispered with a broken voice.

*‘He’s all I have in this world!’* Was what Stolas thought, but didn’t say.

Paimon stared him down, silent, and looming. The tension in the air was so thick. All Stolas could feel and hear was his rapid heartbeat. His stomach churned uncomfortably and his anxiety skyrocketed. Not knowing what his father was thinking didn’t help and yet he could do little about any outcome.

Then he sighed and turned around. “Good”

Stolas simply nodded. He knew better than to thank him or say anything else. Blitz would be safe and that was what truly mattered.

“Now then, I am glad we came to an understanding” Paimon clapped his hands together and was grinning, like nothing had happened, “it’s time we discussed the wedding The Goetia council has set a date and I think it would be perfect...”

While the last thing Stolas wanted to do was discuss the damned wedding, he merely went along and only answered his father in affirmative short answers. Exactly what Paimon would have wanted to hear.

After the meeting, Stolas was excused, and Alfred escorted him to his room. Stolas walked, hugging himself, staring straight ahead as he tried his damndest not to cry.

“You seem sad, young prince,” Alfred said softly.

Stolas glanced down at him, at the only true father figure he had, and sighed. “I’m fine, Alfred.”

“I know how much your little friend means to you.” Alfred glanced up at him.

Hugging himself a little harder, Stolas kept walking, and closed his eyes. Tears spilled and he was unable to hold them back. “I have to protect him, Alfred. I *love* him.”

Alfred was quiet, then softly said with compassion, “I know. I’m sorry.”

Although saying it out loud to someone he trusted felt good, like he had once done with Fizz, it did little to quell the despair rising within him. He accepted the handkerchief Alfred handed him moments later.

When Stolas came back to his room, fell onto his bed, and stared up at the canopy. Then at the couch. The same couch where he and Blitz spent so much time in the past. Sitting there, laughing together, tickling each other, comforting each other. Now it was also where they’d shared their first kiss.

Warmth and despair flooded through him as Stolas could no longer hold back his tears. He curled up and cried silently, tears falling.

Of course his father would be cruel. It was the same man who forced him into an arranged marriage at *eleven years old* to a horrid woman. It was the same man who never cared one bit about him. It was the same man who neglected him until it was convenient.

Now that same man was tearing him away from the best thing that ever happened to him. His best friend. His beloved. The one person who understood him, was there for him, and helped him make actual friends. The one person who opened his eyes and had him see things from another perspective.

Now that would be gone and Stolas would have no one to turn to. No one but Alfred, who actually cared. But it wouldn’t be the same.

He’d soon be suffering alone in a loveless marriage with a woman he couldn’t stand to be around. While he hated the idea of marrying this woman and having to produce an heir, at least he would have had Blitz to turn to for comfort.

But now he wouldn’t.

Stolas cried, curled in his bed, and longing for his beloved more than ever.

