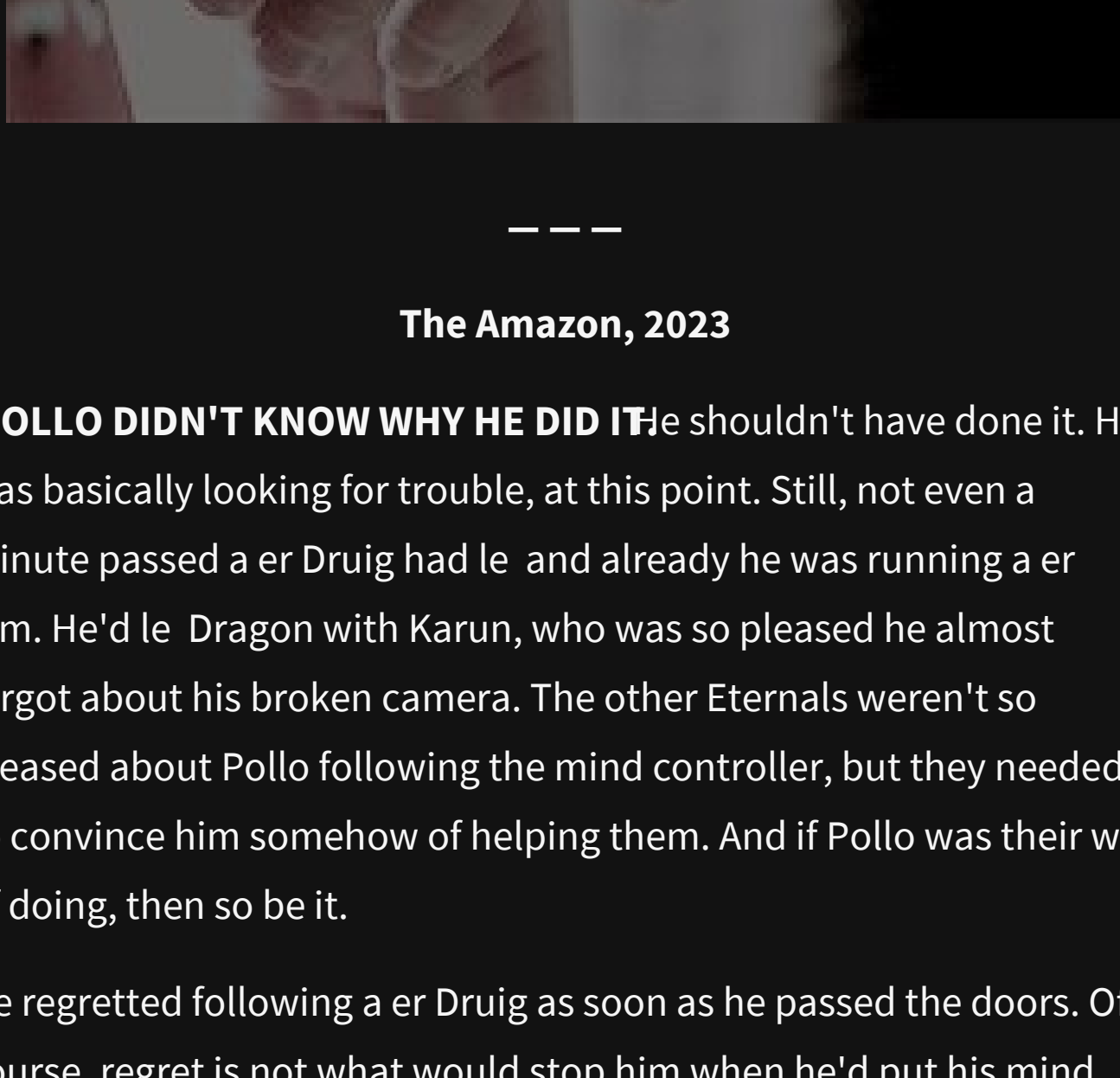


xxvi - Stay gold



The Amazon, 2023

POLLO DIDN'T KNOW WHY HE DID IT. He shouldn't have done it. He was basically looking for trouble, at this point. Still, not even a minute passed a er Druig had le and already he was running a er him. He'd le Dragon with Karun, who was so pleased he almost forgot about his broken camera. The other Eternals weren't so pleased about Pollo following the mind controller, but they needed to convince him somehow of helping them. And if Pollo was their way of doing, then so be it.

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He regretted following a er Druig as soon as he passed the doors. Of course, regret is not what would stop him when he'd put his mind into doing something. He was well aware that the most likely situation was that Druig would spat in his face and scream at him, yet something in him was urging him to follow him. To talk to him. His thoughts made very little sense at the moment. He didn't care. He had to talk to Druig. He had to, Druig had the answers. And... Well, maybe he'd missed him a little bit. Just a little bit.

It wasn't hard to find him. Pollo's first instinct was to look at the place where they would stargaze and where they'd fought. His instinct had been right. Druig was there, turning his back on him and a hand on his face. He couldn't his expression, still he knew it couldn't be a particularly happy one. Ajak was dead. His existence was a lie. His last words to Ajak were a threat. Pollo was back. All at the same time.

"Let me guess, you're here to convince me to help you and the others," he snarled, knowing who was behind him without even having to look. "Well, go ahead. Let's see what you have to say for yourself."

Not much, to be perfectly honest. He hadn't followed him to try to convince him of anything. He'd followed him because... Well, it was Druig. And even if the cold anger could still be felt in his veins, he was used to following Druig around. The village seemed to have brought back that old habit of his. He shouldn't have followed him. He knew it would do no good to either of them. He just hadn't managed to resist it.

And though he didn't have anything to say to convince Druig, for once, he had the possibility to talk and be listened to. He had to take advantage of it. This might very well be the last time he was sure Druig would listen to him before the emergence. So what was it that he wanted to say more than anything? He could've used this moment of quiet to let his anger free and tell Druig about all of the horrible things he'd thought of. He could've also made sure Druig was okay a er everything he'd learned today. Instead, he decided to ask one question. One question that had been haunting him for thousands of years. One question he'd never gotten the answer to before.

"Why do you never dance with me?"

The question seemed to surprise the mind controller which was understandable. Pollo wasn't even sure he would say it out loud a few seconds before. He turned around, finally facing Pollo and making actual eye contact for the first time that day. His blue eyes weren't as cold as he'd expected them to be. Rather, there was something almost red and tired in them. He'd been crying. Pollo didn't say anything about it. He knew Druig wouldn't want him to.

He'd half expected the smaller man to start laughing. He didn't. Instead, he came closer. So ly, as to not scare o Pollo, he took his hand in his own. For a moment that seemed frozen in time, they looked at their fingers as they seemed to fit perfectly. It was like their hands had been made for the other's. Only then did Pollo realize that they'd never actually held hands before. He wasn't sure why. A er all, the warm feeling that resulted from the gesture made all of Pollo's anger melt away. His fear was still there, yes, but at least his anger was gone.

Druig pulled him closer, passing an arm around his waist and hiding his face in his neck. In shock, Pollo didn't say anything, nor did he move. He hadn't expected such a reaction from his friend, not so soon at least. Druig was supposed to hate him. Druig had always hated him. Or at least... That's what he'd convinced himself of.

"What..." he noticed the way his voice cracked and immediately cleared his throat, not wanting to let his weakness show. "What are you doing?"

"I'm dancing with you," replied Druig like it was the most obvious ever as they started to turn slowly. Then again, that might've just been in Pollo's mind. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

Yes. For so many years, it was exactly what he had wanted. Now... now he wasn't so sure.

"What I want are answers, Druig," he stated, though he did make sure of keeping his voice so .

The smaller Eternal hummed, yet he didn't let go of him as they continued to dance. Good. Pollo didn't want to stop. And, anyway, that way, they couldn't see the other's face. They couldn't see what they were feeling. It was all the better. Pollo didn't know what he was feeling.

"Then ask. And I'll give you your answers," he continued. It felt strange, feeling his words against his neck, feeling them leave his lips. Pollo hoped Druig didn't notice the chill that went down his spine.

His questions. He had so many of them. He needed to put them in order. But it was almost impossible to concentrate with Druig so close to him. He wanted to push him away. Or pull him closer. He didn't know what he wanted. He was almost certain that Druig was smirking, right now. It was all too familiar, for something that had never happened before. Druig's body, his smell, he knew them all too well. A er all the hate, all the tears, all the tears, they couldn't be back. It didn't make sense.

"My memories... How long have you been erasing them?" There were many questions that came with this one, yet it seemed like it was the one that had came back to him the more o n since he'd parted with Druig.

"Since Babylon," he answered, holding on to Pollo a bit tighter when he heard him whimpering in shock at the news. "And I wasn't technically erasing your memories. Just locking them away in your mind. You still have them."

He was well aware of that. The flashes had told him a long time ago. When he got a memory back, it was always painful and scary. Which is why his next question was the following. "Can you give them back to me?"

Druig seems to hesitate before he found the right words. "I could. But all those memories coming back at the same time would you a tremendous amount of pain. Do you think you could tolerate it?"

He could, yes. However, he didn't wish to. Pain was... never something he'd particularly liked. It reminded him of his mortality. And now, with Ajak... well, you know, it was even harder. He could die. He didn't want to. Not right now, at least. He'd lost a family that he'd never had, yes, but if there was the slightest chance he and Druig could go back to normal... Actually, he wasn't quite sure that he would take it. He still needed time to think.

"Did you ever regret it?" He continued to ask, ignoring the last question, though Druig knew him well enough to know the answer. "Locking away my memories, I mean."

"I regretted that it was the reason you le ," Druig admitted. "And I also regretted not being able to find a better way to help you sooner. But it made you happier. It did. So, I think that, in the long run, if I had to do it all over again, I would. I might change a few things, but I would."

Pollo's grip on Druig's shoulder got a bit tighter. Druig pulled him closer once more. They could have melted into one another. He had to let go. Pollo knew it. If he didn't, then they would stay like that forever. Yet, he found himself thinking that it couldn't be such a bad thing. Who would miss them? Most of the Eternals would miss Druig, probably, as they needed him for their plan, but what about Pollo? He'd lead them to Druig. It was what he'd been asked to do and now... now he didn't have any more cards up his sleeve.

"I have one last question," Pollo breathed out, letting his chin fall on Druig's shoulder. "Did you... Do you hate me?"

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He could've asked if Druig had missed him, yet it was that last question that really mattered. If Druig hated him, then he would have both answers. How can you miss someone that you hate? It was something that had been stuck in Pollo's mind since he'd le. How come he'd missed Druig when he was supposed to hate him?

"I think I did, at least once or twice. Like when..." he seemed to realize what he was going to say and pause, coming up with another example. "When you le. I hated you. I still thought I did when I saw you, earlier, and now... I don't know. Maybe I never hated you, a er all. And you, Polly? Did you ever hate me?"

A good question. Sadly, Pollo feared he didn't have the answer to it. Or it might have just thought that because his mind had gone crazy when he'd felt Druig's lips against his neck, spelling out the nickname he'd once hated. He didn't hate it anymore. Not because it was a good nickname, but rather because it was Druig who had given it to him. Well, maybe that was the answer, a er all.

"I tried," he finally decided to say. It wasn't much and it didn't mean more than what you might think, nonetheless it was the right answer. They both knew it.

Then, there was quiet. Not silence, as it was a rather rare thing in the Amazon, but quiet. And that was the next best thing, really. They were so close that Pollo could hear Druig breathing and could even feel his heart against his chest. It was perfect. In that moment, Pollo forgot about the fight, about the Deviants, about Ajak and even about the emergence. He forgot everything. For once, he was glad. Glad that his mind could focus on nothing more than Druig. Of course, there was always that small doubt in the back of his mind that Druig was the reason why he couldn't think of anything else.

He closed his eyes as he sunk a little deeper into the embrace. "You never answered my first question."

"Which was?"

"Why do you never dance with me?" He repeated. "Before, I mean."

He didn't really expect to get an answer and, really, it didn't matter that much. Right now, he was happy. Nothing Druig could say would change that.

"Because I was scared of what would happen if I did," replied Druig. "I was scared we would start dancing and dancing and not stop until we both died of exhaustion."

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And that might have been what would happen today. A er all, neither of them seemed capable of stopping. Or maybe they just didn't want to. The strange impression that as soon as they would part they'd start fighting again had taken over Pollo. He was sure that the same thought had passed through Druig's mind.

Druig was, without a doubt, a mediocre dancer. He didn't really seem to know what to do and would step on Pollo's feet every now and then. But he tried. He really did. And that was enough to make Pollo smile. All those years, all those times he'd asked for Druig to dance with him, he'd never visioned it di erently. This was what he had wanted. More than answers, more than revenge, more than anything. He'd always thought that the greatest kind of happiness was out his reach, impossible to fathom. He'd been wrong.

As Druig tried to make him spin —and failed— Pollo started laughing. At that moment, Druig finally saw the other Eternal's face, for the first time since they'd started dancing. And he was everything he remembered. The sun had started to set, making everything it touched gold. The mist that had started to appear in the forest was gold, the flowers were gold and Pollo was golden. So very golden. His eyes, normally a deep brown, had taken the colour of melted gold, shining with sunlight. His smile was golden as well, lighting the whole place and making the sun so jealous that it had to leave its place to him. His touch felt like gold as well.

He'd wrapped the sunlight around him, like a cloak, yet it didn't hide his face. It should have. Because his face was making him go crazy. It was rare seeing Pollo so happy, but not only did he get to see him that way but the sun seemed to have made a pact with him to make him look ethereal. If the sun had once cried, when its tears had touched the Earth, it had birthed Pollo. A drop of sunlight made it real. Or maybe not. Someone as perfect couldn't be real. The threads of gold that seemed to appear in his hair and the sun that caressed his skin so tenderly that it made Druig jealous couldn't be something real. A er all, wasn't that what he'd thought a few seconds before? That Pollo was Ethereal? It must've been a dream. There was no way Pollo was standing in front of him, laughing in such a beautiful way.

Had never considered himself as golden. Not even silver. The least Pollo deserved was moonlight to go with his sunlight. Druig was a starless night, dark and silent. He was the cloud that hid the sun. If he could at least find the slight part of silver inside of him, then he could give it to Pollo, yet he never found it. He found an empty darkness, incapable of keeping up with the light of others. But today, he felt... di erent. It could've been anything, really, still he was convinced that it was the fact he could bask in Pollo's light that was changing him. For the first time in centuries, he felt like sunlight touched him as well and gold could appear on his skin. Because of Pollo, he was golden as well.

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Pollo's anger had completely melted away, to the point when he'd almost forgotten about it. Almost. Druig was here, now, but how long would it take before their next fight? Had they not been this happy before he'd le ? Still, he tried to push the thoughts away. And it was much easier than he would've thought, as the sunset seemed to have decided to help him out.

Druig was golden. He'd always been. There was just this raw light that poured out of him every time he spoke. His words were painted gold, no matter how sharp they were. He'd always felt it, the golden energy that flooded all of his sense whenever he was around Druig. It was the first time he could actually see. Of course, he'd known it was here. He'd known since the first time they met. It didn't change the fact that he'd never gotten to see it before. As the fading sunlight hit the both of the, he could see golden flicker and Druig's blue eyes. For once, there was something almost warm in them. A golden light seemed to burst through his skin as he smiled, fighting everything around him. Lighting Pollo himself. Druig was golden. So very golden.

Pollo had never considered himself to be golden. He knew that most would've described him as much, probably due to his powers, yet he didn't see it. He looked in the mirror and saw cold steel. Sunlight would bounce on his skin, giving an illusion of gold when it never even touched him. At that moment, he felt di erent. He could feel himself absorbing the light, gold running through his veins. He didn't remember feeling such a thing before. He knew it was just the sun, yet it felt like Druig was the one making him golden. Not with his powers or anything, just... by being here. How could such a simple thing have always been so complicated for the both of them?

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That all changed when Druig's body tensed up and a cloud came to hide the sunset. Pollo let go of his hand, trying to see what was happening to him. That is, of course, before he saw Druig's eyes turn yellow. Not gold. Yellow. He took a step back, like it might've saved him from getting his memories erased. His anger might've melted away, but his fear was still there. Not of Druig, not really, but rather of what kind of decision he could take.

"Something's wrong at the village," stated the mind controller, his eyes going back to their usual colour.

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Then, he noticed the way Pollo had flinched away, hurt washing over his features. He should've expected it, a er what he'd done. He'd lost Pollo's trust. He was well aware of that. He just thought... Well, maybe he thought forgiveness would've been easier to acquire.

"We have to go," he continued, his voice harsh once more. He should've remained so , he should've continued to work for forgiveness. He couldn't. Not now. Not when something that seemed to create so much fear was happening in his village.

It seemed that the golden days really were over.
