xxxi - Pollo did actually see that coming

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Iraq, 2023

POLLO WAS STRESSING OUT. The emergence was about to start, they didn't have the Uni-Mind yet and he had a particularly bad feeling about... something. He wasn't quite sure what, though. His whole body was tense and he could hear whispers that didn't seem to come from anywhere in the room. The voices were too loud for him to understand what they were trying to say, yet he was almost certain that they were warning. Something was about to happen, something other than the emergence, though linked to it.

As closed his eyes, trying to get the whispers to fade away, he was quick to open them once more, the sound of Sersi running in and of some beeping making him flinch. He opened his eyes, yet Sersi wasn't even inside the lab yet. He didn't question as it didn't take her least then a second to arrive. The map of the world in front of Phastos had turned red, beeping frantically.

"Oh, no," the inventor said. "My god."

"What about the Uni-Mind?" Enquired Sersi.

"I haven't figured out a way to connect us, but I'm close," he replied. "I'm very, very close."

Everybody gathered around the map, Druig placing an arm around Pollo's waist.

"How much longer?" Asked their Prime Eternal.

"I don't know, Sersi!" He snapped at her, breaking under the weight of stress. He walked towards Makkari, taking her hand into his own. "Find the point of emergence."

As soon as the last word passed his lips, she ran away, making Phastos stumble a bit, surprised by her fast reaction. As she did so, Pollo suddenly felt a strange emptiness, realizing that Druig had let go of him. He turned his head, to see that he'd walked towards Thena, who was admiring a painting on the wall. He was tempted to go see them and hear what they were saying, yet he didn't, as he could see he wasn't meant to be in this conversation. Instead, he closed his eyes once more, tracing circles on his temples to try and get rid of the headache that had appeared along with the whispers.

"You always knew the end was coming," stated Druig casually, trying to stop himself from looking at Pollo as he said those words. "It must be a relief."

"That Deviant is still tracking us," she replied sharply, knowing that this is what he really wanted to talk about.

"Revenge won't bring peace for you, Thena."

He and Thena were on good terms, after all one of the main reasons he'd left the Eternals was that Ajak had wanted to erase her mind, nonetheless, it was Pollo that had made him want to talk to her. When he'd seen him again, he'd barely recognized Pollo. It's not like he had changed or anything, yet the anger had started to eat him alive, and if they'd kissed at that moment, he was sure he would have tasted the bitterness on his tongue. They'd been lucky, for once. Pollo had never been good at holding a grudge. But revenge... Well, it had changed him for years, making him wake up with nightmares and even worse, memories. He could see that same look in Thena's eyes, the same look that had made Pollo almost impossible to recognize a few days ago. He didn't want this to change her as well.

"But killing it might," she answered, a smile on her lips.

Druig stayed silent, knowing that whatever he would say would only fuel her anger. Then, she paused, looking at him once more. His gaze diverted towards Pollo before her eyes met the mind controller's.

"Don't hurt him."

It wasn't a threat. And she wasn't begging him either. She simply said it. It was more like a warning, really. Not that she would hurt him but rather that if he risked hurting Pollo again, he would lose him for good. They'd been on thin ice for years. Now, they were happy. Nevertheless, if he did anything to him, he would break his trust forever.

With that realization, she walked away. He stayed there for a few seconds, looking at the painting, until he felt someone coming to stand next to him. He didn't even need to look to recognize Pollo. He smiled, taking his hand. Pollo didn't say anything, but even asking what they'd been talking about. He just stayed there. That was all Druig wanted him to do. For the moment, at least.

But everything went to shit when Ikaris walked into the lab, wearing his suit.

"I'm close to figuring it out," claimed Phastos.

Thena he used the beams coming from his eyes to destroy the prototype Phastos had been working on, throwing him away at the same time. The inventor groaned as he fell on the ground, everybody else standing up in surprise. Pollo called out Phastos and tried to walk towards Phastos, though Druig held him back, knowing that the sudden movement would bring Ikaris' attention to him.

"Boss, what are you doing?" Asked Kingo, confused yet sure there must've been a good reason for Ikaris' actions.

"I've let this go on long enough," was his only answer.

Just after that, Sersi came running in, a panicked look on her face. "Don't hurt him!"

Pollo wasn't sure if she was talking about Phastos or Ikaris, yet it's to the inventor's side that she went, helping him stand up as he groaned in pain.

"He lied to us," she declared. "He already knew about the emergence."

"No, he didn't," tried to defend Kingo, looking at Ikaris for confirmation.

"Ajak told me everything when we left Babylon," he admitted.

Kingo seemed to hesitate before talking once more, both confused and pained. "W-What?"

"You were never gonna let us stop the emergence," guessed Phastos, shaking his head.

Dragon, who had gone to Pollo's side to protect him, hissing at Ikaris. The flerken had never liked him.

"No," he confessed. "I only wanted to protect you from the Deviants."

"If Ajak wanted you to take her place, why did she choose me?" Wondered Sersi.

He stayed silent, yet he didn't look away from her. Tears started to appear in her eyes as she opened her mouth, starting to understand. Pollo understood as well, letting out a sob as he placed a hand on his mouth. Though for some reason he wasn't surprised by the realization, it still broke his heart to think about it. The whispers only seemed to get louder as he shook his head, in denial.

"What have you done?" She choked out.

Druig, who had previously been looking at the ground, lifted his head, placing himself in front of Pollo to protect him in case Ikaris decided to attack him. He'd understood as well, mostly due to his boyfriend's reaction. "He killed her."

Sprite, who wasn't standing far from them, looked at both Druig and Pollo, before looking back at Ikaris, as though those words were foreign to her. Druig hugged Pollo, who'd only started to cry more when the words had been spoken.

"I had to," he defended himself.

"She loved you," Sersi whispered, as though she couldn't comprehend the situation.

Phastos whimpered and Kingo gasped, looking at the ground. Pollo, through his own tears, could see that Ikaris's eyes were starting to water. He wanted to tear them off. He didn't get to cry about Ajak when he was the one who'd killed her. He didn't even get the right to think about her.

"Did she?"

"She loved you," she repeated, a single tear rolling down her cheek.

"Do you think it was easy to live with the truth?" He tried to excuse once more, as though finding reasons to hate Ajak would make it easier. Pollo had been there and he knew his efforts were worthless.

At this point, most of the Eternals were crying, even Druig who'd started stroking Pollo's hair was trembling. And though Dragon had never met Ajak, he was sure that he'd heard him whimpering.

"To know that one day all this would end?" Continued Ikaris. "To keep on lying to you?"

Sersi gasped, not trying to stop the tears from falling, while on the other hand Ikaris might have had tears in his eyes, yet none of them rolled down on his cheeks.

"If we gave humanity the choice, how many of them would be willing to die so that billion more could be born?"

"We're not giving them a choice," stated Phastos. "Is this why you're willing to kill? You are so pathetic!"

"I'm an Eternal, Phastos. I exist for Arishem. As do you," he declared.

"I wouldn't change a single thing about who I am. Born or made. But I do not exist for Arishem..." Sersi tried to take his hand as he advanced towards Ikaris, but he pushed her away. "...I exist for my family!"

"Then you are making the same mistake Ajak did," said Ikaris, almost like he was pained by those words.

And that when it became too much for Pollo. "How dare you say her name!?"

He walked away from Druig, too quickly for the mind controller to realize it until after he'd done it. Ikaris looked at him blankly, probably expecting such a reaction from him.

"Don't act like you didn't choose to follow me when you already knew what I would do, Pollo," he countered.

And though at first he'd wanted to disagree with the fact that he'd followed Ikaris, yet it's the last part that caught his attention. Dragon meowed, probably trying to get him to walk away from the confrontation, still he didn't listen.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he denied.

"Have you not figured it out yet? You've always hated me, Pollo, even before I gave you a reason to," he started, not letting Pollo reply. "You can know what people are going to say before they say it, so you must've known I would kill Ajak. Stop fooling yourself."

The whispers started getting even louder than before. "You're crazy." He wasn't quite sure if he was talking to himself or Ikaris.

"Am I? You're a seer, Pollo," he claimed. "Admit it."

"Shut up!" Pollo claimed, placing his hands on his ears, though it didn't do anything against the whispers. "I'm not a seer!"

For a brief moment, the whispers stopped. And in that moment, he made the mistake of letting his hands fall to his side, noticing the way everybody was looking at him strangely.

"I didn't say anything, Pollo. Not yet," stated Ikaris, proving his points.

And that's when the whispers got even louder than before. Pollo's hand shot up towards a stop where no one stood, an expression of terror on his face. "Makkari, no!"

Ikaris followed his gaze, barely a second passing before Makkari ran into the lab and stopped at the exact spot where he'd been looking.

" I found Tiamut," she declared.

"No!" Exclaimed Phastos as Ikaris' eyes started to glow, shooting beams towards her.

"Makkari!" Tried to warn Kingo, who then jumped in front, getting hit in the shoulder by the lasers instead of her.

Pollo felt Druig's arms around him once more as he looked silently at his friend who'd fell on the ground. He'd done that. He'd warned Ikaris of where Makkari would appear. The speedster, who's escaped the lasers, ran to Kingo's side, taking his hand to see if he was okay.

"Get out of here!" The movie star told her.

She seemed confused, yet when she saw the faces of her friends, she didn't question it, running away. Ikaris had a surprised look on his face as he watched Kingo curiously, like he'd never believed it was possible for his friend to turn against him.

Ikaris walked towards him, maybe wanting to help him up. "Kingo."

He stood up and made a ball of eternity appear in his hand, directing it towards Ikaris.

"You do not turn against your family," he declared. "Gilgamesh died because of you."

Pollo was ashamed to say that the thought hadn't occurred to him. He'd thought of Ajak of course, yet he'd forgotten that Gilgamesh could probably have been said had Ikaris not tried to hide all this from them. Even if he could feel the cold anger building up inside his chest, all Pollo found himself able to do with it was to let it pour out of his eyes.

"You won't succeed against me," Ikaris warned them. "And I will kill every one of you if I have to."

Good. Then we're on the same page? Pollo didn't say what he'd been thinking, as he didn't want his voice to break. That and he feared Ikaris hadn't even talked yet, the interaction only being in his head. The whispers might have stopped but it wasn't enough for him to be sure of what was happening. Him, a seer. It explained a lot, however he still couldn't quite believe it. He should've known about this. Ajak should have told him. Why wouldn't she tell him?

From the corner of his eyes, he could still see Sersi crying and he was tempted to go hug her, yet the fact that Druig walked towards Ikaris didn't reassure him, so he preferred to stay put. He knew what his boyfriend was trying to do. If Ikaris decided to attack the Eternals right now, Druig would be the closest to him, leaving all the time in the world to Pollo so that he could escape. He wouldn't let that happen. And that's not like he would need to anyway, as Ikaris started walking away, glancing at Sersi one more time.

"Wait," called out Sprite. "I'm going with you."

She walked towards him as Sersi gave her a pained look. "Sprite..."

Thena seemed to choose this moment to come back to the room, stopping in front of the door when she saw all the tears and betrayed faces of her face.

"What is this?" She enquired,

Ikaris' eyes glowed once more, yet before he could shoot lasers at her, Sprite used her powers to transform themselves into millions of insects and escape. Thena took out her sword, expecting an attack of some sort, yet it didn't do anything against the illusion. When the insects disappeared, both Ikaris and Sprite were gone, making it impossible for the others to track them. With another muffled sob, Pollo took Dragon in his arms, hugging the flerken tightly.

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It didn't take much time for them to get Makkari back, explaining everything to both her and Thena. Druig and Pollo had sat down, nobody daring to talk to the latter about his newfound abilities as a seer, knowing the mind controller would strike them down if they even tried. Druig was drawing with his finger on Pollo's back, trying to get him to calm down as he stroked, tears still streaming down his face. He wasn't sobbing anymore, yet his eyes just wouldn't stop pouring out.

" Why did Sprite go with Ikaris?" Questioned Makkari, which Pollo had been wondering about as well.

"Because she loves him," replied Kingo plainly, which earned him a bunch of strange looks. "Oh, you guys didn't pick up on that? He really fooled us, didn't he? Karun, let's go."

"Wait, where the hell are you going?" Asked Phastos, stopping Kingo before he could start walking away.

"I can't help you guys," he stated. "I still think Ikaris is right."

Phastos, of course, was quick to assume the worst of that last statement. "So, that's it, huh? Just gonna follow him?"

"I love the people of this planet. But if you stop this emergence, you are preventing so many other worlds like this one from being created," explained Kingo, though he wasn't trying to convince them, knowing it was impossible. "I still have faith in Arishem. But I refuse to hurt any of you for my beliefs."

Makkari frowned as he started to walk away, glancing at Pollo in confusion like he would be able to stop Kingo. Seeing that he wouldn't be able to do much, she placed her hand on the movie star's shoulder, stopping him before he could reach the door.

" We need you," she signed

"Even with my help, we're no match," he sighed, shaking his head at her. "It's Ikaris."

He continued to go towards the door, stopping once more before he left. He looked at them, smiling faintly. "But... I hope to see you on the next planet."

"Kingo," called out Pollo, the name sounding broken and weak as he said it. "I can't wait to see the next Shadow Warrior movie."

It wasn't really a goodbye, nor did it really mean anything in particular. But that was enough. Kingo did a little bow, turning around and leaving for good this time. Phastos gestured his hands towards where his friend had once stood, desperate. While Kingo was already halfway through the corridor, Karun was still in front of the door.

" Thank you for all you've done for humanity. It's been a great honour," smiled the valet. " I will miss you all." He then turned towards Dragon, bowing his head at the flerken. " You more than anybody, beautiful creature."

He placed his hand together, tears in his eyes as his voice started to break. Pollo's lips twitched ever so slightly as he noticed the way his friend bowed his head at Karun, which was really the closest thing from an apology for him. The human nodded back before walking away, following Kingo.

"Look, if I'm gonna get myself killed going up against Ikaris, we'll need to have a backup plan," said Druig, making Pollo tense up at his words.

"All of our powers, even if they're amplified, are not enough to kill a Celestial, so..." Phastos didn't finish his sentence, probably not knowing how to.

"Well, Sersi did turn a Deviant into a tree."

"I'm sorry, what?" Enquired Phastos, turning his head towards her. "You didn't wanna tell me that?"

" You've never been able to do it before," signed Makkari, reminding Pollo that neither she nor Phastos had been there when it had happened.

"I don't know how it happened, okay?" The Prime Eternal replied.

"And I'm pretty sure I couldn't do it again."

Phastos scoffed at that, apparently not appreciating her answer. "Well, now is the time to try, don't you think?"

"Phastos, that Deviant is dead. Our plan is to put Tiamut to sleep, not to kill it." Druig nodded slightly at her words, looking at his boyfriend with apprehension. "I can't kill a Celestial."

"Sersi. Sersi." The inventor clapped his hands together, still trying to convince her.

"We can't!" She snapped, making him freeze as he let his hands fall to his side.

Sersi, realizing the way she'd just said it lowered her voice, shaking her head. "We can't."

"It's okay, Sersi," Druig breathed out. "I got this."

Pollo stayed silent as he started to hear the whispers again, a chill running down his spin as he was faced with the horrible truth. Druig wouldn't be able to put Tiamut to sleep.

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