

He awoke slowly, uneasily, to the sense that something was *wrong*.

Morning light flickered into a strange room with bare stone walls and a floor completely covered in brightly colored pillows of various sizes, as well as an obscene number of thick, plush blankets. He shifted uneasily, only to discover that he was lying half buried in a heap of said pillows, upon a large, cushy bed. They were soft to the touch, made of a material that reminded him of the delicate silks that he'd ogled during festival nights as a small child, and he idly stroked the pillow, letting his eyes flicker shut once more.

Wherever he was, it was warm—a vast improvement to sleeping in the slushy, snowy conditions on the road. He didn't remember entering an inn, much less one with such strange decor choices—but then again, he didn't remember leaving the temple.

No.

That wasn't right. He'd been on the beach just moments before, staring out at the waves beyond him, but even before then, something else had happened, something *dangerous*, something **wrong**—

Agor.

Panic surged up in his chest, and he let out a strangled noise, sitting bolt upright...only to list sideways and tumble to his right, collapsing into the pillows below him. A whimper escaped him, and he tried to reach over, to prop himself up—but he *couldn't*.

His arm wasn't working.

Something was *wrong*.

With a slight, distressed noise, his gaze flickered over to his shoulder, as he tried to move his arm once more, experimentally—and then his gut *sank*.

His arm was **gone**.

Where it had once been, all that remained was a viciously scarred, healed over stump, too short for Eros to even see properly, because something was wrong with his left eye, in a way that he just couldn't place.

Something was *wrong*.

He tried to lift his hand up to rub at his eye—but he didn't have a *hand*, because his arm was *gone*.

His arm was **gone**, and something was *wrong*, something was **wrong**—

He couldn't **see** out of his left eye—and, suddenly, he couldn't *breathe*.

It seemed to be hours before he finally regained even a *shred* of composure, hours spent clutching at his eye, his throat, the stump of his arm, ricocheting between the need to grasp at what remained of his severed limb, to protect it from some nonexistent attacker, and the need to scramble as far away from his own mangled form. Nonetheless, he eventually managed to get to his knees and scramble over to the far corner of the room, defensively cramming his body into the junction of the walls, before collapsing onto his side once more and began to **sob**.

Parts of him were *missing*.

He'd been torn apart and stitched together in a way that was unimaginably **wrong**—and while he was no stranger to his body being **wrong**, this time, parts of him were **missing**.

By the time his lungs and gills learned how to cooperate once more, his tears had run dry and every ounce of his being had gone numb. His knees were tucked in close to his chest; his arm was braced at his side to give him as much support as he could—but, despite his best efforts to remain upright and balanced, he still listed to his right with the strange weight of his remaining arm.

He felt *numb*.

It wasn't the first time that he'd faced death, nor the first time that he'd woken up to a body seemingly too foreign to be his own—but something was *different*, this time. Something fundamental to him was missing—something *human*, something **real**—and he knew, from the depths of his soul, that it would never return.

Shakily, he leant back against the pillows behind him, wedging himself further into the corner; he let himself fall into the wall at his right, feeling far too numb to care.

He scooped up one of the dozens of plush pillows surrounding him, clutching it as close to his chest as he could, as tightly as he could with his one trembling hand, squeezing it as if his life depended on the strange feeling of being *real* that came from holding it so close to his chest. He screwed his eyes shut as tightly as he could, trying to block out the strangeness, the *otherness* of his own body—but all that arose from his attempts was a profound feeling of defeat.

He was **lost**, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

He sat there, alone, for another long while, numbly inspecting his body. His skin was tinged with a slight purple undertone, in a way that made him look strangely bruise-like, or

almost *livid*. Someone had changed his clothes; he was wearing what seemed to be a very oversized nightgown, one lacking in sleeves, exposing the stump of his non-dominant arm.

Drawing in a deep, steadying breath, he steeled himself to inspect the scarred, mangled limb—but, before he could move even *slightly*, the door to the room creaked open. With a slight, frightened noise, he scrambled further back into the corner, drawing his pillow tighter to his chest defensively, even as his gaze snapped up to meet the cobalt stare of an enormous naga.

His eyes widened—as did the eyes of the man frozen in the doorway.

The man was *large*, vastly taller than anyone that Eros had ever met before and distinctly muscular. His serpentine tail was a shimmering, iridescent indigo-teal, and his skin a deep, earthen hue. Shimmering bluish scales covered the majority of his body, save for his forearms, his face, and a large splotch of bare skin upon his torso. His fluffy onyx hair framed his face like a halo, falling to just below his shoulders in thousands of soft, delicate coils; his cobalt eyes were lined with kohl, bright and stunned and *piercing*, and he had large, orcish tusks, despite the fact that he was distinctly naga in appearance, otherwise.

They remained there, staring at each other for a long moment—until the naga let out a whoop, surging forwards with startling speed.

“You’re awake!” he cried, diving down so that his face was level with that of the siren. Eros let out a startled yelp, holding the pillow in front of his face defensively—and the stranger pulled away sharply, guilt flashing through his gaze.

“Sorry,” the naga said sheepishly, drawing his shimmering tail beneath himself, plopping down right in front of Eros. The siren lowered his pillow, eyeing the brightly hued serpent warily. The other man flashed him a lopsided grin, his lip curling awkwardly around his large tusks.

“I’m Helios,” he chirped, extending a hand to Eros. The siren eyed it warily, then turned his gaze up to that of the naga with a scowl. Helios winced, retracting his hand.

“Sorry,” he mumbled once more, rubbing the back of his neck. Eros scoffed, only to immediately regret it as the naga’s gaze flickered with hurt.

“I’m Eros,” he said quietly, averting his gaze to the pillow clutched tight to his chest. His voice sounded harsh, foreign to his ears, and it made his stomach turn uneasily. Helios, oblivious, let out a slight, breathy laugh, leaning back just a touch.

“You have no idea how good it is to see you awake,” he murmured. “I just completely freaked out when I found you—I thought you were dead, if I’m being honest.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, where Eros couldn’t bring himself to meet the other man’s warm gaze—and then, Helios abruptly lurched to a standing position, causing Eros to flinch.

"Come on," he said with a smile, offering his hand down to Eros. "You must be hungry."

Eros hesitated, glancing between Helios's outstretched hand and his own glaringly absent arm. He'd had enough issues with balance already, just shuffling about—he had no idea if he'd even be able to stand, with everything that was *missing*.

"I...I don't know if I can walk," he admitted weakly, returning his gaze to Helios and shrugging his shoulder pointedly.

"Sure you can," Helios chuckled, "I mean, you've—"

The naga broke off, a hesitant frown crossing his lips. His gaze trailed down Eros's body, and the siren swallowed, feeling all too uncomfortable under the naga's piercing stare. Helios's gaze flickered back up to meet that of the siren—and then his brows furrowed worriedly.

"This..." he trailed off, reaching for Eros's left, causing the siren to flinch back into the corner with a slight, panicked noise. Wincing, the naga pulled away abruptly, returning his hand to his tail.

"This isn't an old wound, is it?" he asked softly, hesitantly—and sudden tears pricked at Eros's eyes at the softness of the other man's voice.

"No," he croaked, squeezing the pillow tighter to his chest. "This is—"

He averted his gaze, forcing in a deep, steadying breath. "The last time I was awake, I had an arm."

Helios's face *fell*. "Shit."

"Yeah." Eros laughed weakly, bitterly. "Something's wrong with my eye, too."

"Gods," Helios whispered—and then, without warning, he scooped Eros into his arms, yanking him into a tight, crushing hug and tearing a hitched, startled cry from the siren's throat.

Immediately, he began to struggle, trying his hardest to shove the other man away with his one good arm—but, after only a few, short seconds, a powerful, crushing wave of defeat crashed through his chest, and he crumpled against the chest of the stranger before him.

Tears stung at his eyes, sudden and vicious—but, despite his best efforts, he couldn't stop them from falling. Within seconds, he was sobbing again—and, before he knew what he was doing, he was burying his face in the naga's chest, leaning into his touch for even the slightest shreds of comfort he could attain.

"I'm so sorry," Helios murmured, clutching him as tightly to his chest as was humanly possible—but Eros couldn't bring himself to *care*. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could change about his situation, no way he could undo all that he had done, no way to rebuild himself or reclaim all that he had *lost*—

"You're gonna be okay."

The stranger's voice cut through his thoughts, a gentle, reassuring sound that cut to his very soul like a knife—and it was then that Eros began to *bawl*.

After a long, sickening moment, curled up in the strange man's arms, his sobs ebbed away into nothing but shaky breathing. Guiltily, he pulled away from Helios—only to let out a yelp as he all but collapsed atop the naga's tail. The other man lunged forwards immediately, steadying him gently, and Eros's cheeks *burned* with sudden shame.

"Sorry," he mumbled, sinking back into his corner, tugging his arm free from Helios's grasp. The serpent frowned slightly, worriedly, but let him pull away, nonetheless.

"It's okay."

The room fell silent for a long, uneasy moment—until Eros finally spoke, his voice shaky and hoarse.

"I should get going," he rasped, shifting his weight so that he was braced against the wall. Hesitantly, he tried to shuffle to his feet—but, before he could get even a few inches from the ground, the naga drew himself to his full, imposing height, looming over him with a grave look on his face.

"You're not going anywhere," Helios stated simply, crossing his arms—and Eros shrunk back down to the floor, dread clawing its way up through his chest.

"I need—" he began weakly, only to be cut off by the naga.

"What you *need* is medical attention," Helios stated sharply, causing Eros to flinch. A flicker of worry crept across the naga's face; still, he continued proudly not even a beat later. "And, luckily for you, you've got the absolute best apothecary in all of Canna here to take care of you."

"I don't need to be taken care of," Eros protested weakly.

Helios scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Nope. Nuh-uh. None of that macho man bullshit."

Eros scowled. "It's not—"

"Nope," Helios repeated, shaking his head. Eros opened his mouth to speak, but Helios sank back down to his level, meeting his gaze sternly.

"You know how I found you?" he asked, his voice tinged with annoyance. Eros hesitated, wanting to retort—only to deflate slightly and shake his head weakly.

"Lying in the spirit's shrine, completely unresponsive, buck naked," Helios rattled off, ticking down his fingers, "Feverish, shivering—"

"I don't need help," Eros protested weakly. Helios scoffed again—and then, before Eros could so much as react, the naga leant in, gently taking him by the hand. Eros flinched away from him, panic flickering through his chest—but as their gazes locked once more, Eros found himself completely **stricken** by the earnest emotion within the naga's deep cobalt eyes.

"Losing a limb—and an eye—that's **big**," the naga breathed, his voice pained. "That's not something you should have to learn how to deal with on your own. That's not something you *can* deal with on your own."

Eros swallowed hard, averting his gaze; the naga squeezed his hand gently.

"I can help you," Helios continued, his voice adamant and almost pleading. "I can *help* you—but only if you let me."

Eros hesitated, his stomach turning.

He didn't want this.

He didn't want to put himself in harm's way yet again, didn't want to rely on someone when he was so desperately **vulnerable**—but at the very same time, he had no one else to turn to.

He was **lost**.

He had nowhere to go—but, for the first time in his life, there was someone offering him **help**—and maybe it was the shock of everything getting to his head, but something within the naga's words felt gut-wrenchingly **genuine**.

"I can't pay you," he mumbled, guilt and defeat sinking through his gut. The naga scoffed.

"I can't just let someone suffer—especially when I **know** they could use my help," Helios countered stubbornly, sinking back on his tail. "It's just not how I work."

Eros swallowed hard, weighing his options one last time—and then, with a shuddering exhale, he nodded.

"Okay," he murmured weakly, turning his weary mocha gaze up to the naga—who blinked surprisedly, recoiling slightly—only to **beam** not even a second later.

He let go of Eros's hand, drawing himself up just a tad, smiling brightly. "You're not gonna regret this—I *promise*," he insisted, relief flooding his voice.

Eros swallowed hard, nodding weakly; the naga offered him a hand once more.

"Come on," Helios murmured kindly, "Let's get you something to eat."

After struggling to get to his feet—and then, of course, struggling to stay on his feet—Eros stumbled to the kitchen, clinging to Helios's arm all the while. The naga was endlessly patient with him, steadying him with each and every fumbling step.

By the time they got to the kitchen, Eros was fighting back tears of shame; as Helios guided him onto a large, plush chaise, the naga offered him a soft, reassuring smile—and an overpowering wave of *guilt* crashed through Eros's chest.

He sniffled weakly, scooting back to the arm of the chaise, scrubbing at his eyes as he tucked his knees in close to his chest—and Helios's smile faltered. He knelt in close to Eros's side, worry creeping across his face, and the siren's stomach only sank all the more.

"I'll be right back, okay?" the naga murmured, gently tapping Eros's ankle with the end of his tail. Eros nodded shakily, burying his face in his knees.

The naga's frown deepened; for a moment, he hesitated, only to then slither across the large, open room to fetch several pillows and a blanket from a heap at the other side of the kitchen.

He placed them next to Eros, smiling weakly. "Take your pick."

Eros hesitated briefly, glancing between the naga and the assortment of items, and then snatched up one of the pillows. He shuffled back against the head of the chaise, clutching it to his chest protectively, warily; after a second, his gaze snapped back up to Helios, who grinned at him, flicking his ankle with the tip of his tail once more.

"This is now your pillow," he murmured, eyes glimmering with mischief. "This is your *official* pillow, okay?"

Eros snorted.

"Thanks," he mumbled, hugging the pillow closer to his chest. The naga laughed softly, flicking at his ankle yet again.—and then, quickly, he darted away, crossing over to the kitchenette.

Eros watched him as he wound through the room, pulling out a kettle, a small wooden box, and a basket of fruit. He set the fruit on the counter briefly as he filled a kettle with water; after setting the kettle on the stove to warm up, he scooped up the basket once more and darted back over to Eros.

"Do you want any?" the naga offered, crouching down besides him. Eros shook his head slightly.

His stomach felt off, as if it was twisted into an enormous cluster of knots; the very sight of the fruit made him feel sick. He didn't know if he'd be able to eat, much less keep anything down—and he didn't feel compelled to so much as try.

Helios frowned worriedly, drawing away slightly. "Not hungry?"

Eros shook his head again. The naga nodded hesitantly, then drew himself back up to a standing position.

"I'm gonna put this back, then," Helios stated gently. "Don't hesitate to ask if you're hungry, okay?"

Eros frowned. "You're not eating?"

Helios chuckled weakly, adjusting his grip on the basket. "You woke up while I was eating," he admitted—only to hesitate.

"Or cleaning," he amended sheepishly. "I kinda realized how messy everything was this morning, and I kinda went overboard tidying things up."

"Oh."

Eros averted his gaze back to his pillow. Helios chuckled softly.

"I'm gonna make some tea, though," the naga stated, "Lemme put this away, and then I'll be right back, okay?"

Eros nodded slightly. As the naga slithered away, he lifted his gaze once more, letting it roam around the large room around him. It was airy, filled with windows and bright curtains, along with a few strange, abstract paintings composed of bright, swirling colors. He frowned slightly at the sight, scrutinizing the strange artwork as the kettle began to howl—until a chuckle from Helios startled him entirely.

His gaze whipped around to meet that of the naga, who was filling a few mugs with boiling water.

"My cousin made those," Helios admitted sheepishly. "She's some big-shot artist, and she insists on sending me one of these every time my birthday rolls around."

A slight, weary smile crept across Eros's lips. "Sounds fun."

Helios chuckled. "I send her tea," he grinned, "It's my specialty, after all—and, speaking of which—"

The naga darted across the kitchen, snatching up the wooden box he'd set aside earlier before whirling around to face Eros with a broad grin. "I'm thinking ginger?"

Eros hesitated—only to let out a puff of laughter, a weary smile creeping across his face.

"You noticed my sore throat, huh?" he asked, a slight, teasing tone to his voice. Helios chuckled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Again, I'm an apothecary," he confessed, "I kinda have a knack for this kind of thing."

Eros's lips curled into a slightly more genuine smile. "Ginger would be great."

Helios *beamed*.

The naga finished preparing their tea, then brought it over to Eros. As they drank, Eros finally mustered the courage to ask a few soft questions, namely: where was he, and how had Helios found him?

Both answers turned out to be confusing. They were in Port Songes, a small town on the east coast of Canna—which was months away from Gelu, even on the fastest of ships. Helios had found him lying against the altar of the central shrine of the temple that he lived in, completely and utterly unresponsive. Despite the unnerving nature of his situation, Eros wasn't panicked by the realization. It hadn't been the first time he'd awoken on the complete opposite side of the world from where he was supposed to be, after all. After gauging his reaction, Helios shrugged off the oddity with a quick joke.

Moments later, after they finished their tea, Helios guided him out of the rainforest and into the city beyond, to the bathhouse at the outskirts of town.

"Guided" probably wasn't the best word—when Eros's shoddy balance finally gave out, and his legs collapsed entirely beneath him with strain, the naga scooped him up and carried him the rest of the way through the sprawling town, a fact that had Eros's cheeks burning with shame the entire time.

When they finally reached the bathhouse, Helios carried Eros through the sprawling building to a large, empty pool in a secluded room at the back of the establishment. He set Eros down at the edge of the water, and placed the toiletries that he'd been carrying with his tail down besides the siren.

Eros flashed him a wavering, strained smile, which Helios returned warmly.

"I'm going to go get you some clothes," Helios announced, chuckling slightly. "I would offer you some of mine, but seeing as you're wearing everything I have at the moment, that, uh, probably wouldn't work out."

Eros nodded slightly, forcing in a steady, even breath.

"Anything in particular that you'd like?"

Eros hesitated.

No matter what, he wanted to be able to dress himself—but he didn't know the limits of what he'd be able to do with just one arm. He doubted that said limits were forgiving in the slightest—but, at the same time, there were measures that he needed to take, for safety's sake.

He didn't know Helios, didn't *trust* Helios—but, beyond that: his siren nature was something that he didn't want to share with anyone else, **ever**.

If there was a way to hide it, even slightly, he would do so.

“Could you get me a turtleneck?” His voice was hesitant, weak; still, Helios nodded, offering Eros a soft smile.

“Turtleneck,” he repeated emphatically.

Eros swallowed hard, averting his gaze. “Thank you.”

An uneasy moment of silence passed between them—until Helios patted him on the head with the end of his tail, causing him to flinch.

“I’ll be right back, then,” the naga chuckled, flashing Eros a grin; within seconds, he was out the door.

For a long moment, Eros watched the bathhouse door, waiting to be sure that the other man had left; when it became apparent that Helios was gone, a slight, exhausted sigh escaped him.

Slowly, he turned his gaze down to his legs and to the garish purple scars weaving down the side of his left limb. He swallowed, hard, trying to shove aside his unease as he awkwardly shuffled to his knees; hesitantly, he peeled the oversized nightgown from his body, gradually exposing his bare form—but the moment that he return his gaze down to his body, his breath caught in his throat.

The unnatural scars continued up the entire length of his left side, trailing up his hips, stomach, and chest before webbing out across his shoulder.

His stomach turned.

Swallowing hard, he let his fingers trail up the edge of his shoulder, tracing the scar up his neck, past his jaw, and up to his cheekbone.

For a moment, he wondered what his face looked like. He wondered how far the flame-like marks extended, how deeply Angor’s wrath had burned into his body—

In an instant, panic seized through his chest, and he forced himself forwards and into the water.

He ducked beneath the surface of the pool, breathing deeply, letting his gills flutter open; however, even after a long moment spent beneath the still, glassy water, his tail refused to form.

Hesitantly, he tugged for his magic, trying to coax the transformation forwards even as panic began to claw at his chest once more—only to realize, like a punch to the gut, that there was nothing there.

His magic was **gone**.

When Helios returned, Eros was still reeling—but as he numbly took the bundle of clothes from Helios, he tried his hardest not to let it show.

Speaking of his magic would only raise questions, and ones far from good for him, by any means.

After the naga left the room once more, he set about trying to dress himself, but found that the only thing that he could manage to put on without great struggle was a short, simple tunic, cut in traditional Alstroemerian style. Still, he forced himself to don his usual turtleneck and a pair of leggings, though it took him nearly ten minutes to do so.

He didn't call for Helios right away, instead choosing to sit on the stone floor besides the door for a long, silent moment.

The absence of his magic had him sick to his stomach—but the more he thought about it, the more the memory of frigid white eyes bored into his soul. He forced himself to shake his head, but the action merely made him feel even more nauseous as the world spun slightly around him.

Something was off with his balance—and the realization brought hot, pained tears to his eyes.

He'd lost so much, too much, in the battle with Angor, and it just made him feel *sick*.

Walking took a while to adjust to. Between the unnatural weight of his right arm, his altered depth perception, and his unsteady balance, it proved far harder than he'd expected it to; still, he was determined to get back on his feet. It made him feel sick, relying on Helios for support every time he wanted to do something—particularly because he barely knew the other man.

It wasn't that he felt *unsafe* around the other man—no, Helios's constant reassurance had Eros growing quite thankful for his presence, even so shortly into his stay with the naga. He did, however, loathe the fact that he was so feeble as to be so completely reliant on someone else, particularly someone who owed him nothing.

So, he started with baby steps, determined to gain some semblance of ability once more.

He started by crawling the length of the room that Helios had let him stay in, shuffling back and forth on his knees for the entirety of the first night that he'd spent with the naga. He hadn't wanted to chance sleeping, hadn't wanted to have to deal with whatever horrible nightmare his brain would grant him after battling Angor, after losing *so much* in just an instant.

As a result, he'd taken advantage of the sleepless nights to practice moving, balancing with his new, frustrating body.

Helios caught him on the third night, after he tried to stand using one of the sconces in the room for support. He hadn't realized that it had been broken—until he accidentally tore it out of the wall with his weight. In an instant, he toppled down to the ground, shattering the glass dome and dousing himself with hot oil.

Frantic, the naga came rushing in at the sound of his pained, startled cry, and as he tried to make sure that Eros was okay, the siren began to sob, apologizing.

Helios scooped him up and rushed him to the bathroom, setting him down on a large stone bench poised beneath a showerhead. Carefully, he plucked shards of glass from Eros's arm and legs—and it was then that they discovered that, within seconds of Helios rinsing his wounds with a wet cloth, said wounds healed over.

This had both men staring at Eros's legs in absolute wonder. The siren's gaze slowly trailed up his left side, taking in the network of vicious scars on his body and the stump of his left arm—and, then, a strange, uneasy sense of realization curled through his chest.

The spirit had spoken of power, of a *blessing*—and there was a *reason* that he'd woken up with healed wounds.

He swallowed, glancing at Helios, who was staring at his shoulder with a worried expression on his face. Eros bowed his head, humiliation creeping through him.

Helios, noticing Eros's embarrassment, took the siren by the hand, startling him. Eros glanced up sharply, meeting the other man's deep blue eyes—and was immediately stricken by the concern within them.

"You have healing magic?" Helios asked him, his voice concerned yet curious. Eros hesitated, then shrugged weakly.

"I guess," he mumbled, turning his gaze back down to his legs. Helios frowned, returning his attention to Eros's legs as well. Eros drew in a deep, shaky breath, then continued.

"There's been a lot of...new developments on my end, since you found me," he admitted weakly, bowing his head—only to flinch abruptly as Helios plucked another piece of glass from his leg.

"Sorry," the naga murmured rapidly, glancing up at him worriedly. Eros swallowed hard, turning his gaze back down to stare at his scars. His hand clenched slightly, and he forced himself to breathe, to fight back the unease that was clawing its way up his chest.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Helios asked quietly, plucking a final piece of glass from Eros’s legs before turning his gaze up to meet the siren’s mismatched eyes. Eros drew in a deep, shaky breath—and then hesitated.

He didn’t want to talk about it.

He didn’t want to so much as *think* about it—but Helios was making it clear that he was a willing ear...and for some odd, inexplicable reason, Eros felt more than a little compelled to trust him.

The naga had taken him in, selflessly and insistently, and had proven to be more than accepting of everything that he had revealed to him so far about his situation. Everything in Eros’s mind was *begging* him to open up, to *trust* the stranger before him, to get even an ounce of the weight of what had happened off of his chest—and so, hesitantly, he spoke.

“Just four days ago, I was in Gelu,” he murmured quietly, drawing in a deep, steadying breath. “Four hundred years ago, a demon was summoned at a temple by its southern border. A friend of mine was there, and her fiancée sealed the demon away.

“But it didn’t last,” he croaked, swallowing hard. “Magic like that doesn’t just stay sealed away—especially not when five stupid, *stupid* people go chasing it down.”

“Oh.”

Helios’s voice was soft, stunned, little more than a puff of breath. Eros chuckled weakly, an uneasy feeling of numbness creeping through his chest.

He didn’t want to speak of the demon, to so much as utter his *name*—even though, deep within his soul, he knew that the demon was *gone*.

The spirit had done something, something **wrong**—and something fundamental within his world had **changed**.

Angor was dead.

Angor was **dead**, and yet, Eros couldn’t bring himself to speak his name.

“He *tore me apart*.”

His hand trembled against his shoulder, where it had trailed up to clutch at the stump of his arm, rubbing gently at the scars. It was strange, touching it, to the point where the mere contact of his digits against his warped, scarred skin filled him with poignant **revulsion**.

Helios slithered around Eros, so that his tail was curled around the siren’s back and draped over his legs, and so that he was seated at the man’s left, in his blind spot. Eros swallowed, uneasy—but then a cool hand was trailing up his chest, gently tracing the burn-like scars marring his skin, and he found himself frozen in fright.

Helios's hand hesitated just below Eros's shoulder; Eros turned to gaze warily at the naga.

"Can I?" Helios asked hesitantly, gesturing to Eros's shoulder. Eros swallowed, fear pricking at his chest; still, for whatever reason, he found himself nodding slightly.

The naga paused momentarily—and then, hesitantly, his hands met the siren's skin.

Helios's touch was timid, *tender*—and an overwhelming *revulsion* began to ache through his gut as the other man trailed his fingers across the lines of his scar.

He wanted to rip his gaze away from the man gently holding what was left of his arm—but the thought of not being able to see that Helios was touching that vulnerable part of him made him feel all the more sick to his stomach.

"Desensitization is something really, really important after losing a limb," Helios murmured quietly, rubbing his thumbs over the edge of Eros's residual limb, causing the siren to shudder with revulsion. "It's honestly incredible that you're okay with—"

"I honestly feel like I'm about to throw up."

Helios's hands left his shoulder abruptly. "Sorry."

Eros averted his gaze; for a moment, a heavy, aching *silence* filled the room—until, quietly, Helios continued on.

"I'm not saying that you ever need to let anyone touch your arm," the naga rasped, "but it's important to get used to feeling things with your shoulder again. Touch isn't something that anyone should be afraid of—"

"I'm not afraid of touch," Eros muttered quietly, snorting. "I've just had some really shitty experiences with it, lately."

Helios nodded slightly, removing his tail from Eros's lap. Eros swallowed slightly, feeling a rush of shame surge through him, causing his cheeks to flush a deep, purple-tinged red.

"I won't touch you if you don't want me to," Helios insisted, "but getting used to having things touch that part of your shoulder is important to adjusting. Whether it's just fabric, or even your own hand, it's important to desensitize your limb to being touched again. It's something that needs practice, but it'll be worth it later on."

Eros nodded hesitantly. Helios uncurled himself from around Eros, returning to sit at the siren's right. He scooped up the container of glass with his tail and dumped it into the bathroom trash can.

"Now," Helios began, turning his earnest gaze back to Eros. "What happened with the demon?"

Eros hesitated, forcing himself to breathe in deeply once more before speaking again.

"There really isn't more to tell," he lied, his voice cracking slightly. "Next thing I knew, I was waking up in your room, and...and my...my arm was *gone*."

Guilt sank like a stone into his stomach, heavy and full of dread—and yet, he felt adamant in his lie. There were some things he couldn't say, not to any being upon the earth—because he knew if he said the words aloud, they would seal his demise.

He liked Helios—and it was for that very reason that Eros decided, then and there, that he could never tell Helios the truth of what he was.

If Helios didn't kill him on the spot, then whatever he decided to do with him would be far, far worse.

"Gods," Helios whispered. Eros chuckled weakly, bitterly, turning his mournful gaze back up to Helios—only to be stricken by the genuine sadness and worry in the other man's electric blue eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Eros."

Eros swallowed, shaking his head slightly. "You don't need to be sorry for me."

Helios shook his head in response. "I can't imagine what that must have been like."

"It was cold," Eros laughed weakly, averting his gaze. "It was colder than anything I've ever felt. It was like ice, but if ice could tear you limb from limb, if ice was something that could kill you just by staring it dead in the eyes."

Helios drew in a shaky breath, opening his mouth as if to speak—but then he shut it once more, shaking his head.

"I'm so sorry, Eros."

Eros swallowed, nodding slightly. Helios took him by the hand, squeezing it gently; Eros's gaze flickered down to meet that of the naga.

"You're going to get through this," Helios insisted, "I promise."

Eros nodded, a strange feeling of comfort creeping through him at the surety in the other man's tone.

Helios offered him a wavering grin, then lifted himself up, letting go of Eros's hand.

"Come on. Let's get you some tea."

The days passed quickly, fading into a strangely comfortable blur more easily than Eros had anticipated.

Helios finally wheedled Eros into sleeping later that night; however, after being awoken by a vicious nightmare of Angor's burning white eyes and accidentally waking up Helios with his panicked sobbing, the naga took charge in changing Eros's terrible sleep patterns.

Helios was an expert botanist and apothecary with minor magical abilities; he spent his days tending to the vast garden of aromatic herbs and flowers he'd established on the grounds surrounding the small, secluded temple that he'd long since taken residence within, working with a local doctor to develop magic-imbued hybrid plants and to create teas and tinctures with them in order to engineer the most effective remedies possible.

Helios had regaled him with the tale of how he'd come to stay in the temple, which came as a result of a few wrong turns taken while exploring the forest, a strange, nagging feeling that repeatedly prompted him to visit the temple to tidy up, and an eventual confrontation with the local authorities after he accidentally fell asleep while basking in the temple's courtyard and missed his routine safety check-in—which had then led to an invitation to make the ancient building his permanent home, so long as he continued to maintain and guard it.

The temple was located near a spring so imbued with elemental magic that any herbs grown from the soil around the temple gained potent magical properties; as such, Helios spent most days of the week tending to the gardens surrounding his home and the wide variety of hybrid plants that he'd created—something that he often invited Eros to take part in, and that the siren had taken a surprising liking to. Unlike Helios, he had no knowledge of how to care for plants—but, despite his lack of expertise, he'd quickly come to enjoy the various routines involved in caring for each different species of plant, as well as Helios's enthusiastic chatter, which ranged from descriptions of each plant and their practical uses to stories of his various adventures across the Cannan continent.

Even as his voice rose with excitement, the naga's hands were strikingly gentle in all that he did, from turning over the leaves of each plant to check for bugs or traces of infection, to prying weeds out from between the roots of his favorite berry bushes, to lightly tapping Eros's forearm to get his attention, often simply to show him a weird fruit or bug that he'd just found.

It was a strange sort of phenomenon, noticing just how gentle Helios's hands were—but, the moment that Eros noticed it, it was impossible to forget.

In the moments when his balance gave out entirely, the weed-riddled herbs provided the perfect excuse to lay down beside the glimmering pools of the spring, fiddle with the various plants at its banks, and generally enjoy the soft tropical-winter sunlight.

Each night, Helios set about preparing Eros a soft herbal tea each night to help him sleep. It was surprisingly effective, in that he always found himself drowsy within moments of

consuming it. Nonetheless, there were still many nights when Eros was awoken by the haunting vision of four white eyes boring deep into his soul—nightmares, of increasingly violent intensity.

On these such nights, Helios often took to lingering in Eros's room, coiled loosely around the siren. Eros was hesitant to sleep with the other man at first—but one night, after a particularly vicious nightmare, he'd found himself stumbling to Helios's room before he could so much as process what he was doing.

He'd tried to explain himself, and, though his attempt had proved to be nothing but awkward and feeble, the naga had merely flashed him a teasing smile, cracked a flirtatious joke, and then untangled his tail to allow Eros to nestle into his arms for the night.

It was strange, realizing how much it *helped*, turning to someone else for comfort—but at the very same time, it felt *right*.

After that, they both ended up taking residence in Helios's larger chamber, moving some of the copious pillows that Eros had been sleeping with into their shared room—a fact that had Helios cackling excitedly, tossing pillows at Eros. He ended up hitting the siren dead in the face at one point, having come at him from his blind side; after a brief moment of panic, Eros tackled the naga, batting at him with the offending pillow, causing the naga to shriek with delight and attack him in return with another pillow.

They'd roughoused for quite a while, until they'd both collapsed, laughing uncontrollably.

It had been difficult, adjusting to walking and doing things with one hand, but with Helios's endless encouragement and time alone to practice without judgment while the naga was out working, Eros was starting to actually get a hang of it.

He still wasn't comfortable touching his arm, but Helios had insisted that, although he was adjusting remarkably quickly, there were just some things that would take time.

Strangely enough, he found himself comfortable with that fact.

While there were still things that Eros had kept hidden from him, things that weighed heavier upon him with each smile that Helios shot his way, a strange fondness was beginning to blossom in Eros's chest every time they interacted, even just weeks into his stay with the naga.

The man was lighthearted and joyous, yet serious and intuitive when the moment called for it; he was entirely unlike anyone Eros had ever met: honest and kind and encouraging and

selfless. Despite the truly unnerving circumstances that had brought him and the naga to meet, Eros found himself strangely *happy*, staying with Helios.

He found himself *happy*, despite everything that was so glaringly *wrong* with his own body, despite everything that could so quickly become *wrong* if Helios even knew an inkling of the truth.

Still, found himself caring less about everything that was *wrong*.

His powers had continued to evade him entirely, and so, as the days went by, he found it easier and easier to pretend to be *human*—and, for the first time in *months*, he found himself relaxing into an easy cadence of being. Thoughts of Angor and the spirit and all that he was gradually slipped from his mind, giving way to an easy companionship and *joy*, in ways that he'd never quite imagined before.

Eventually, after a few weeks, and successfully re-learning how to walk with his altered sense of balance, Helios coaxed him out into the apothecary shop.

At first, he just hung around his friend, awkwardly trailing Helios as he darted back and forth between the back room of the shop area, where the herbs were stored and medicines were created, and the front counter, where various people from towns across the region stopped by every so often to buy Helios's products or admire the intricately carved interior of the temple's courtyard.

After a few hours, however, when Helios settled down in the back to work on crafting his various poultices and ointments, the naga began to direct Eros on how best to help. He couldn't grind herbs up due to his lack of a left arm, as he frustratingly discovered by spending nearly thirty minutes trying to crush up some chamomile for a tea that Helios was trying to brew. So, instead, Helios had him bundle up herbs for some of the specialty concoctions that his store created.

They chatted throughout the entire morning and well into the afternoon, exchanging stories from their pasts as they worked. Helios regaled him with story after story of his life, split between excited rambling about the tiny town that he'd grown up in and only slightly more reserved tales of his various adventures in and around Port Songes, where he'd relocated in order to pursue his dream of being a botanist.

He was enthusiastic in speaking about his childhood—something that wasn't much the case with Eros. There were very few moments from his early life that were worth speaking of, very few moments that he even cared to *think* about—but Helios's enthusiasm over him opening up had him bringing out every story he could remember, not only from Unda, but from his time on the Osprey as well.

By the time that they closed up shop and began to make their way into town, just before sunset, Eros was rambling excitedly about a stunt he'd pulled in Alstroemeria's outer isles, posing as a dancer during a mercenary job involving his former pirate crew. Helios was an eager listener, commenting and laughing occasionally as Eros excitedly regaled him with the tale, gesturing wildly with his hand as he spoke.

"So, when they brought the soldiers, I put on a *show*," Eros laughed excitedly, striking a pose—only to stumble slightly. Helios caught him in an instant—and their gazes met for a moment, both slightly startled.

Then, Eros snickered, shoving his shoulder into Helios's side. The naga cackled amusedly, smacking the back of Eros's head lightly. The siren laughed, flashing the other man a flat, yet amused look.

"I put on a *show*, and I was damn good at it," Eros declared, "I duped them. I tricked them. I *fooled* them—and now the *Osprey* isn't allowed anywhere near Alstroemeria anymore, not unless they want to start a military incident."

Helios cackled, a raucous, open sound.

"You could start a military incident *anywhere*, you dumbass," he declared, grinning broadly. Eros snorted.

"You sound mighty proud of that fact," the siren countered, smirking devilishly. Helios rolled his eyes.

"Name one place—*one place*—where you *haven't* gotten into some kind of trouble," he hissed amusedly, his forked tongue flicking out for just a split second as he spoke—and, immediately, Eros *froze*.

"I've actually never been *here* before," he admitted, averting his gaze. Helios froze in his tracks, blinking surprisedly.

"*What?*"

"I've never been to Canna before," Eros confessed. "My captain grew up between here and Alstroemeria. Turns out, he caused some international incident *here* that was bigger than the wedding fiasco in the isles. He, uh...he was kinda a wanted criminal here. I never got the chance to ask him why, but he made a point to avoid Canna at all costs."

He glanced up at Helios, who was staring at him, utterly shocked.

"What—"

"I have been the literal worst friend *ever*," Helios interjected, his voice uncannily grave, even as he darted in front of the siren and grabbed him by the shoulders. Eros flinched slightly,

a little startled. Helios let go of him abruptly—only to take him by the hand instead, affixing him with an earnest, guilty look.

“I haven’t shown you *anything*,” Helios explained, distressed. “I haven’t shown you the beaches or the caves or the lakes or *anything*—”

“It’s okay, Helios—”

“No, it’s *not*,” the naga insisted, dead serious. “Canna’s beaches are *legendary*, and you’re like, the ocean dude, and we haven’t gone to the beach at all, and—”

“Then take me to the beach, dipshit,” Eros snorted.

Helios’s eyes *lit up*—and then, with an abrupt *whoop*, he effortlessly scooped up the siren and whirled him around, tearing a burst of laughter from the smaller man.

Helios led him through the city and down to the beach, chattering excitedly about how he and his mother used to race each other through the forest surrounding their home and to the nearby lagoon as they made their way to the shore.

The moment they reached the beach, however, Helios snatched Eros’s hand and all but dragged him down to the breaking waves, causing the siren to let out a startled squawk. He barely had time to yank off his shoes and toss them feebly to the sand before Helios scooped him up with his tail and threw him into the water.

Before long, they were wrestling and roughhousing in the water, slowly making their way deeper and deeper into the ocean as they played. They spent hours messing around together—splashing and fighting playfully at first, and then floating on their backs to watch the setting sun after they tired.

Soon, a routine built between them.

Most days, as had become the norm, they tended to the garden and the sprawling fruit trees dotting both the interior and exterior of the temple’s grounds. On the days that they tended to the apothecary shop, they often left the temple entirely in the evenings and made their ways down to the beach to splash about in the water. Through it all, they *talked*, exchanging stories and chit-chat and everything in between, bickering amusedly and horsing around at every opportunity—and, before long, Eros found himself overwhelmingly enamored with the naga.

He was proud and smarmy and slightly vain—but enthusiastic and caring and *warm*, all at once. He was a little overexcitable, and endlessly energetic. He was soothing, *gentle*, and the

one thing that kept Eros grounded and **whole**—and though the sheer and sudden way in which the naga had become vital to him should have scared him, it ***didn't***.

Helios was one of the kindest people Eros had ever met; each and every day, he was stricken by some new detail of the naga that only further cemented in his mind how much he **adored** his companion. Helios was boundless energy, as full of life as the very ***sun***—and everything about him just inspired the same passion for life within Eros.

It wasn't to say that things were easy, by any regard.

Physically, things were improving—but there was still a dull, uneasy knowledge deep within Eros's soul that things would never be the same as they were before.

Occasionally, he found himself reaching for things to his left, or trying to adjust his arm—only to realize again and again that his limb was missing. In these moments, he always felt uneasy—but with Helios at his side, offering him gentle teasing and dumb jokes, even the hardest of moments became bearable.

None of the things that had scared him, that *still* scared him, were quite as overwhelming when he was with Helios. From his blind eye, to his arm, to even his nature as a siren—none of it seemed as important with Helios at his side.

In all of his actions, Helios treated Eros as an equal, as a *friend*. There wasn't a single moment when Eros felt at all inadequate with the naga, even when he was at his most disheartened or distressed. Helios was simply *there* for him, a constant, steady support—and, in all honesty, the most precious of friends Eros had ever had.

When he was with Helios, he felt *alive*.

It was far from the adventure he was used to, far from the sort of relationships he was used to—but, in a way, it was infinitely better than anything he had ever known. Helios was *gentle*, as tender as the early morning sun, peaceful like no one else within Eros's *world*—and he graced the world around him with the soft light of something *beautiful*.

He found these thoughts swirling in his mind as he laid with Helios on the roof of the temple, gently curled up against the other man's side, staring at the stars. It was an absolutely cloudless night, and Eros had insisted that they climb up to watch the sky. Helios had arched himself up on his tail and hoisted himself onto the roof with the help of an adjacent tree; Eros had insisted on climbing the tree himself, but after nearly falling, Helios had wrapped his tail around Eros's waist and effortlessly lifted him onto the roof, causing the siren to blush a deep burgundy hue.

They laid there in silence for a long, long moment, gazing up at the sky—and before Eros knew what he was doing, he began to speak.

"I can't believe I haven't said this before, but—*thank you*," he murmured, nestling into the naga's chest. Helios hummed quietly, wrapping his arms around Eros. His tail followed suit not even a second later, coiling around Eros's legs, guiding the siren closer to his body.

"You don't need to thank me, dumbass," Helios murmured. Eros shook his head, letting out a slight noise.

"I do," he rasped, nuzzling into Helios's cool form, though the naga hissed fretfully in return.

He fell silent for a moment, then sighed, and continued, "These past three months could have easily been the absolute worst of my life. I lost so much—*too* much. If it hadn't been for you..."

Eros trailed off, dragging in a deep breath.

"If it hadn't been for you, I don't know where I would be now," he confessed weakly. "I know that I wouldn't be as happy as I am now, for starters."

Helios scoffed.

"You would be," the naga reassured him, running a hand through his hair. "You'd be happy."

Eros shook his head slightly. "Not like this."

He fell silent for another short moment, then continued on, his voice shaky and quiet.

"You make me feel happier than I have in a long time," he breathed, a strange, overwhelming sense of **emotion** building deep within his core. "When I'm with you...I feel like I'm *alive*, really, truly **alive**. I...I don't know where I'd be without you."

Helios hummed softly, soothingly. "You'd be somewhere," he replied, "and you'd be happy."

"Not like this."

"You would be," Helios insisted, his hand trailing through Eros's curls. "You're absolutely incredible, dumbass. You're genuinely one of the strongest people I've ever met, and—"

The naga broke off, drawing in a deep, steadying breath.

"I know that it's only been three months, but gods, Eros, you mean the world to me—and I just want the world for *you*," he stated quietly, a strange note of wonder in his voice.

"When you smile, I just..." he trailed off hesitantly, dragging in a deep, shaky breath. "When you smile, it's like thunder, and my heart does this—does this *thing*, like **lightning**—."

Eros's face *flushed*.

"When you laugh," Helios continued, his tail curling tighter around Eros's smaller form. "When you laugh, I just—I just—"

He hissed weakly, rolling onto his side to face Eros. His face was flushed; his pupils were blown wide with emotion. Eros's face burned—and then, suddenly, Helios's hand was upon his scarred cheek, caressing it gently. Eros shivered slightly, and the naga, realizing his error, moved to pull away—but then Eros let out a soft noise of protest, causing Helios to hesitate.

“You...” Eros began, trailing off embarrassedly. “You can touch me.”

Helios hesitated. “Are you sure?”

Eros nodded, letting out a slight, weak noise. “I like it when you touch me.”

His stomach lurched uneasily as the words left his lips—but as Helios returned his hand to Eros's cheek, gently tracing the space just below his blind eye with his thumb, a strange, overwhelming warmth blossomed in Eros's chest—and he realized, like a blow to the gut, how much he *meant* what he had said.

His eyes fluttered shut as he leant into Helios's touch, the action all but entirely unconscious.

Something was clawing for purchase deep within his soul, something as vast and overwhelming as the very sea, something that he'd never quite felt before, something that filled him with the strangest sense of *urgency*—and it *scared* him.

It was a yearning to lose himself within the halo of the naga's arms, a deep-seated enthrallment with the man before him, a sudden and overpowering warmth that bloomed within his soul upon simply speaking with Helios.

This wasn't something that he wanted to feel. This wasn't something that he'd ever thought he *might* feel—but it was *there*, flooding through him like a tidal wave.

Helios was a burning, *beautiful* halo of light, and Eros was nothing more than a moth, helplessly drawn to his flame. He didn't want to leave, didn't want the world to fall into darkness again—but if he deluded himself into thinking that anything between them would work, he would burn to nothing but ashes.

His eyes flickered open to peer into Helios's soft cerulean gaze—and his stomach turned at the warmth within the naga's eyes.

“I know I'm going to have to leave,” he rasped mournfully—and instantly, Helios recoiled from him, sitting up abruptly.

“Leave?” he asked, a note of hurt in his voice. Eros sat up as well, frowning.

“I mean...” Eros trailed off, averting his gaze. “You wanted me to stay with you so I could, like, get back on my feet, and I'm—I'm so much better off than I was just a few months ago. I can handle myself.”

Helios averted his gaze. "Oh."

"I don't want to be a burden on you any longer than I have to," Eros whispered, though the very words he was saying made his heart want to break. He turned his mournful stare back up to the naga, swallowing hard, trying to build the courage to say what he needed to.

Helios was the most beautiful of souls he had ever met—boundlessly selfless, relentlessly optimistic, and by far a better person than he, himself, ever had been...and yet, for some reason that Eros couldn't comprehend, Helios had bestowed his endless warmth unto him in a way that no one ever had before.

There weren't enough words in the *world* to precisely describe the depths of his sudden feelings for the naga.

"I...I should leave."

He swallowed hard, forcing back tears, pointedly looking anywhere but at Helios as a strange, uneasy silence settled between the two.

"Why would you ever think that you're a burden to me?"

The words surprised Eros—but what startled him was the sudden grief within Helios's tone. He glanced back up at Helios, whose cool blue eyes were wide with anguish.

"Gods, Eros, how could you ever think that you're a burden to me?" he asked, his voice shaky with hurt.

Eros swallowed hard.

"I just...I thought that..."

He trailed off with a slight, distressed noise, trying to gather his strength, all too aware that his voice had been *far* shakier than he had intended for it to be.

"I just thought that I **was**," he confessed, "I thought that I was taking advantage of you, of...of how *kind* you are. I-I thought you'd be better off if I left."

"Gods above, Eros," Helios croaked, his voice hoarse with grief. "Did you not hear a word I said?"

Eros swallowed, looking away—and then, suddenly, Helios's hand was cupping his jaw, turning his face so that he was peering up into the naga's wounded gaze.

"You mean the *world* to me," Helios whispered, almost reverently. "It would break my heart, Eros, literally, *break my heart*, if you were to leave."

He averted his gaze embarrassedly, letting out a slight hiss. Eros frowned, reaching up to caress Helios's cheek, leaning into the naga's steady form ever so slightly. Helios's face grew warm beneath his touch; slowly, he turned his gaze back down to the siren in his grasp.

"You mean the *world* to me, Eros."

The siren's heart *ached*.

"I know, its stupid," Helios scoffed, averting his gaze once more, pulling away from Eros's touch. "I know that we've barely known each other for three months, but you...you're already too important to me to lose."

Eros forced himself to breathe, forced back the tears that had begun to prick at his eyes—and then he spoke, his voice shaky.

"You mean the world to me, too," he croaked—and as the words left his lips, he found that he *meant* it, more than he'd ever *meant* anything before.

It was terrifying, *more* than terrifying, just saying the words aloud—but the moment Helios met his gaze once more, pupils dilated with shock, his heart just seemed to *melt*.

"I don't want to lose you, either," Eros rasped, his face flushing a dusky red. "You're the most selfless person I've ever met, worrying about me all the damn time—and I don't want to take advantage of—"

Helios yanked Eros into his arms, cutting the siren off in an instant. He nestled his chin against the top of Eros's head, letting out a slight hiss—and, suddenly, Eros was *melting*, collapsing into the naga's chest.

"You're not taking advantage of me," he insisted, drawing Eros even closer to his chest. "I *want* to worry about, you, dammit."

Eros nodded feebly, a tiny, distressed noise escaping his lips.

"I won't stop you," Helios murmured, "I won't stop you if you want to leave. But gods, Eros—I want you to stay with me, more than anything else."

Eros swallowed, fighting back fresh tears. He buried his face in the naga's chest, clutching the other man as if his life depended on it.

"I want to stay, Helios," he breathed—and the tears he'd been trying to fight back began to streak down his cheek. Helios buried his face in Eros's hair, holding the siren as tightly as he could.

"Then stay," he mumbled. Eros nodded weakly, letting out a shaky, breathless laugh.

They stayed there, on the roof, nestled in each other's arms—until they awoke the next afternoon in a frantic rush to get back inside to the shop, having vastly overslept.

Helios Asterion Lumenox had never considered himself a romantic, by any means.

Despite his tendency to make jokes and flirt with those around him, he'd never been particularly interested in relationships—or love in general, really.

Romance was a serious thing, among naga. It was an elaborate, serious dance of trinkets and baubles exchanged between a pair who were already particularly close; It was a tradition, set in stone unlike anything else that Helios had been taught of—and it was *confusing*.

He'd expressed his lack of understanding to his mother, once, when he'd been much younger. She had just laughed, telling him that there were aspects of Cannan tradition that he'd come to appreciate with time—but Helios had long considered her declaration nothing but bullshit.

That is, he'd considered it bullshit until Eros had stumbled into his life.

Even within the short few months in which they'd known each other, the man had become far more than just a friend to him—and every time the smaller man smiled or laughed or launched into an hour-long story about his time on the *Osprey*, or suddenly initiated a game of tag on their way to the market, or even just *looked* Helios's way, the naga found himself free-falling deeper and deeper into *love*.

He wanted to cradle Eros to his chest forevermore, keeping him as wholly warm and happy and *safe* as he could; he wanted to make Eros as happy as humanly possible; he wanted to do anything and everything that he could possibly do to make Eros understand just how *brehtaking* he truly was.

It was in the middle of the night, curled up on the roof of the temple and wrapped around the man that he had so quickly come to adore, that he finally found himself absolutely stricken by the desire to find a proper courtship gift for Eros.

Still, it wasn't until the night of Port Songes's spring festival, just two weeks later, that he finally found something for Eros.

They'd left the temple at sunset, and had begun to meander through the festival, talking and laughing all the while. They'd been discussing what to do for dinner when a small stand caught Helios's eye. The table was laden with jewelry, from tail bands to necklaces to earrings of all sorts. His eyes lit up when he saw it, remembering a quiet conversation he'd had with Eros just a few weeks before.

He'd been cleaning his tail bands, as he did every week, and Eros had curiously asked him about them.

He had three tail bands—one denoting his status as medical personnel, another that indicated his pronouns, and a third merely for decoration, a delicate gold band adorned with tiny gold and amethyst flowers that his father had originally made as a bracelet for his mother. He'd happily explained to Eros the significance of his different bands—and then, curious himself, had asked if there were any jewelry-related traditions in Alstroemeria.

Eros had hesitated, as he always did when presented with questions about his life in the isles, but had proceeded to explain how important jewelry was to people in Alstroemeria, as both a sign of status and family connections. He'd joked offhandedly about how he'd pierced his own ears just to wear a pair of earrings he'd stolen as a kid—but Helios hadn't missed the almost wistful look in the other man's eyes as he had spoken.

So, when he noticed the jewelry vendor—an elderly woman calling out to the crowd, a mix of naga and foreigners, as was common during festival time—he immediately sent Eros off to get some lilikoi-flavored candy for both of them, then slithered over to the vendor.

She flashed him a fanged grin as he approached, gesturing to her wares with her tail.

"I know that look in your eye," she chuckled, her voice raspy and amused. He hesitated, and she continued, laughing. "You're looking for a gift, aren't you?"

Her tone was knowing, and Helios found his face flushing. The woman laughed, brushing her braids from her face, flicking the end of her tail.

"Take your time, kid," she chuckled, "First gifts are always the hardest."

His face flushed an even darker hue. He sidled up to the table, and began to look through the various items, all too aware of the elderly woman's amber stare.

"You trying to find something for that human boy?" she asked wryly after a moment, startling Helios so much that he nearly dropped the necklace he'd been inspecting. The woman laughed, hissing slightly, causing his cheeks to burn.

"Kids your age are so hilarious when it comes to this stuff," she snorted. Gently, she reached over and took the necklace from his hand, placing it back on the table.

"You don't want to go with that stone—not very good for a first gift," she explained. "You want something with *meaning*."

Helios nodded slightly, a flicker of worry building in his chest. "Could you...could you help me?" he asked worriedly. "I want to get him something *perfect*," he continued, insistent and earnest.

"Of course," she replied, smiling warmly.

When he returned to where he'd left Eros, the other man had already returned, and was holding a small bag. His expression was somewhat troubled, but the moment that he noticed Helios, a warm smile spread across his face.

He trotted over to the naga, grinning broadly, flaunting the bag in his hand.

"I got your sweets, you dumbass," he chuckled, and Helios couldn't help but laugh in response.

"Thanks," he replied, grinning as he took the bag. He paused for a moment, then beckoned to Eros.

"Come on," he said, flashing the smaller man a warm smile, "I have something to show you."

He led the siren out of the festival and down to the beach, to where the crowd disappeared and they found themselves alone besides the breaking waves.

Helios paused for a moment, nervously coiling his tail beneath himself, transferring Eros's gift from his tail, where he'd been clutching it tightly, to his hand. The smaller man was distracted, peering out at the sea with a pensive, almost *worried* expression upon his face. Helios frowned slightly, hesitating for just a moment—and then, without warning, he scooped Eros up with his tail, eliciting a startled shriek from the other man, followed by a burst of laughter.

"Helios!" he protested, smacking the naga's arm as he pulled him in close to his chest. Helios cackled—and before Eros could protest further, Helios quickly removed the necklace he'd bought and fastened it around the other man's neck.

The smaller man flinched slightly as the pendant touched his chest; he glanced down at his sternum—only to immediately *gasp*.

Hanging from a thin gold chain was a delicate, rounded sapphire, glimmering slightly in the moonlight—and as Helios placed Eros back on the ground, his breath caught in his throat, noticing immediately how the smaller man stepped away from him to inspect the pendant with wonder.

"Do you like it?"

Eros whirled around, eyes wide with emotion.

"Helios, it's gorgeous," he breathed, clutching the pendant gently. A proud grin split across Helios's cheeks, and Eros's face flushed. He glanced down at the necklace—then back up at the naga, eyes filled with worry.

"I just—" he broke off, biting at his lip—and Helios's heart sank. "I can't."

“Oh,” the naga murmured, averting his gaze. Eros averted his own gaze, his cheeks flushing an even deeper crimson.

“I can’t take more from you, Helios,” he continued weakly, “Not after everything you’ve already done for me.”

Helios frowned, turning his gaze back to Eros, whose face was a deep, flustered burgundy. He crossed the short distance between them, and gently cupped Eros’s cheek with his hand, tilting the human’s face towards his own. The lithe man lifted his anxious mocha and white gaze to meet that of the naga—and Helios’s heart *ached*.

“I *want* you to have this,” he confessed frailly, his own face flushing as the words left his lips. “I want to make you *happy*,”

Eros rolled his eyes, a slight, wobbly smile creeping across his face. “You already make me happy, dumbass.”

Helios’s face flushed all the more. Eros gently took Helios’s hand, drawing it away from his cheek—only to kiss his palm gently. A startled squeak escaped the naga’s lips; he recoiled abruptly, accidentally yanking his hand free from the smaller man’s grasp.

Eros’s face flushed. “Sorry.”

Helios stared at him, a slight sense of wonder building in his chest—and then, without warning, he darted forwards and pulled Eros into a hug. The smaller man melted into his touch almost instantly, winding his arm around Helios’s neck—and for a moment, Helios was overcome with *adoration*.

Eventually, however, he pulled away—but only after pressing a tender kiss to the smaller man’s forehead. Eros’s face flushed deep, flustered red, and Helios couldn’t help but chuckle slightly at the sight—an act that earned him a swat on the arm from the other man. He snickered again, and Eros rolled his eyes.

Then, hesitantly, Eros glanced back down at his pendant, a slight frown tugging at his lips.

“Are...are you sure I can keep it?” he asked—and Helios scoffed.

“I got it for *you*,” the naga insisted, “It’s *yours*.”

Eros hesitated, then nodded bashfully, tucking a strand of hair behind his ear.

“Thank you,” he murmured quietly, taking the naga’s hand and squeezing it gently.

Helios’s heart swelled; a soft, warm smile spread across his face. Eros’s face flushed; his gaze flickered back down to the pendant, then back up to Helios.

“It really is beautiful,” Eros confessed quietly. Helios’s grin broadened proudly.

“Not as beautiful as you,” he remarked, smirking. Eros snorted, rolling his eyes. He punched Helios’s arm weakly, earning him a cackle from the naga.

“If anyone is the beautiful one here, it’s you, dumbass,” he teased, “You look like a gemstone.”

Helios let out a gasp of mock horror, dramatically bringing the back of his hand to his forehead and pretending to faint. “I’m a *python*, you—you ignorant daddy-long-legs!”

Eros snorted. “*Daddy-long-legs?*”

Helios froze—and then he began to sputter, trying in vain to come up with a coherent defense as Eros cackled.

“You—you *asshole!*” he finally cried, slapping his tail against the sand. Eros doubled over, laughing all the harder. Helios’s cheeks burned with embarrassment—but he couldn’t help but grin.

“You know—” Eros broke off, wheezing with laughter, “My legs aren’t the only—”

“Nope!” Helios cried, covering his ears and curling up into a mortified ball. “Nope, nope nope—”

Eros’s laughter only grew louder; Helios’s face burned with embarrassment.

“You’re a pain in the ass—”

Eros’s cackling grew even more raucous. Helios scoffed—and then, without warning, he launched forwards, tackling the smaller man to the ground with a mischievous hiss.

Eros let out a shriek of laughter as he tumbled back into the sand, batting at Helios playfully. Helios cackled with delight, smacking at his hand in return—and, as per usual, they began to roughhouse.

Eros knew that he was no real match for the naga. In addition to being several times larger than *anyone* he had ever met—or likely *because* of that fact—Helios was one of the strongest people he knew. Still, as he twisted out from under Helios, scrambling through the sand on his hand and knees, his heart swelled with sheer, unadulterated *joy*.

There was no danger here, no anger, no *fear*—just Helios, struggling to untangle his tail and grinning from ear to ear. The naga snatched him up by the waist, yanking him back into his arms, and Eros let out a gleeful shriek. Helios hoisted him up into the air, and Eros struggled against him, smacking at his arms, laughing all the while.

The naga cackled, throwing himself backwards into the sand—and another shriek escaped Eros as they hit the ground. He scrambled free of Helios's arms and to his feet, but Helios immediately surged up after him.

With a whoop, Eros took off running down the beach, laughing and yelling out teasing, playful insults to Helios all the while—an endeavor which ended in Helios tackling him to the sand once more, eliciting a final, delighted shriek from the siren.

Helios rolled off of him almost instantly, and flopped into the sand, panting heavily. Eros, equally breathless, smacked his arm lightly, fighting back his still-raucous laughter.

"You dumbass," he snorted, "I bet you got us lost—"

"You were the one who started running, idiot," Helios interjected, a breathless, stuttering laugh escaping him. "If anyone got us lost, it was you."

Eros scoffed.

"You could've caught me in no time flat," he teased, "You're a twenty-four foot long *snake*, and I have balance issues. There's no real competition here."

Helios cackled lowly, and a puff of laughter escaped Eros in return.

"You're such a dumbass," he teased. Helios hummed amusedly, shifting in the sand—only to then draw his tail up and wind it around one of Eros's legs as he rolled onto his side.

Eros's face flushed. "The hell are you doing?"

"You're soft," Helios teased, looping one of his arms around Eros's waist.

"You're *covered in sand*," he retorted, swatting at the naga's hand.

Helios hissed, laughing. "So are you, dipshit."

Eros rolled his eyes. "Touché," he drawled, "but at least I'm not the one who got us lost."

Helios laughed breathlessly; his coils wound tighter around Eros's leg. "For the record, I doubt we're *lost*—"

"So you admit it?"

Helios hissed softly, amusedly. "Yes," he drawled, "If we're lost—which we totally *aren't*—it is one-hundred percent, absolutely, entirely my fault, and—"

Eros cut him off with a bark of laughter, swatting at his arm playfully. "You ass, that's not—"

"It absolutely *is*," Helios insisted deviously. Eros snorted.

"Helios—"

"Your Eminence," Helios interjected grandly, "Your Majesty, King Eros of the Oleander dynasty, o Master of Pirates, Wooer of Married Men—"

"Stop—"

“Scourge of Unda, Fighter of Lamps—”

“That was *one time*, and—”

“*Daddy~*”

Eros froze—and then let out a mortified groan, his face flushing. Helios cackled; Eros smacked his arm, playfully shoving the naga off of him. Helios’s laughter only grew more raucous as he flopped back into the sand.

“You’re the literal *worst*—”

“You know you love me,” Helios cooed. Eros shoved him, huffing exasperatedly.

“You’re an absolute *degenerate*—”

“What, like you’re any better?” Helios teased.

Eros scoffed. “I’m not the one who just—who *literally*—you just—”

The siren broke off, his face flushing with embarrassment. Helios cackled, smacking the sand with his tail. Eros scoffed again, scrubbing at his face and rolling onto his side, so that his back was to Helios.

“I’m not the one who literally just made jokes about—about—”

Eros broke off again, his face burning all the more. He curled in on himself, clutching at his face—only to freeze when Helios’s cool, gentle hand met the bare skin of his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Helios murmured quietly, winding the end of his tail around Eros’s waist. “I wasn’t trying to make you uncomfortable.”

Eros huffed. “Take me to dinner, first, you prick,” he mumbled sheepishly—only to immediately regret his choice of words as Helios’s tail stiffened around him. His face burned, but, just as he opened his mouth to apologize, Helios spoke, quietly and tentatively.

“Is that...is that, uh, what people usually do?”

Eros froze.

Slowly, hesitantly, he rolled over onto his opposite side, so that he was facing Helios. A guilty, worried frown traced the naga’s lips, and Eros couldn’t help but frown in return.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, pulling himself into a seated position. “Dinner and drinks are usually used as an excuse to go further with someone you don’t know well.”

“Oh.”

There was a moment of hesitant silence, punctuated only by Helios slowly drawing himself up into a seated position.

“What do you do when you want to go further with someone you *do* know well—but like, as in *dating* them?”

Helios’s voice was small, hesitant—and Eros’s stomach turned.

"You make *mistakes*," the siren mumbled, turning his gaze to the sand. "I learned that the hard way."

"Oh."

They fell silent for a long moment, before Helios finally spoke, his voice frail.

"Who was she?"

Eros hesitated. This wasn't any sort of conversation that he wanted to be having, not when the story of all that he and Oona had been had ended in his *death*.

He didn't want to talk about this—not with Helios, nor with any other being upon the earth.

His years with Oona at his side had been among the best of his life, full of light and life and *adventure*. He'd trusted her, he'd *loved* her, in a way that he'd never imagined that he could ever love someone else, in a way that he'd thought had been real and mutual, in a way that he'd come to doubt entirely in the months following his death.

She had meant as much as the moon and stars to him—but now, the very thought of her just made him feel *nauseous*.

She had ***drowned him***.

She had turned him into a ***monster***.

He didn't want to talk about her—not with Helios, who was right before him, Helios, who made his heart ***ache*** with something he didn't quite have words for, Helios, who would ***hate him*** if he knew even half of the truths lurking beneath his skin.

Tears stung at Eros's eyes, sudden and unbidden; he forced in a steady breath, averting his gaze.

"I don't want to talk about her," he croaked. Helios hissed, a small, anxious sound.

"Eros—"

"No," Eros interrupted, lurching to his feet. He stumbled slightly—but then Helios was right behind him, steadying him—and Eros whirled on him, a cocktail of anger and grief and *fear* surging through his chest.

"I don't want to talk about her," Eros snapped, his voice cracking with pain. Helios hissed frustratedly.

"You've never told me anything about her," Helios argued weakly, "I just want to know—"

"It's not anything that you need to know about," Eros retorted, a flicker of anger slipping through his chest.

"Why not?" Helios asked, exasperated, "You've told me about everything else—"

"This is different," Eros said flatly, "It didn't end well—"

"Did you love her?"

Eros balked, stumbling away from Helios. "*What?*"

"Did you *love* her?"

Eros scoffed, running his hand through his hair, turning away slightly.

"Yeah," he confessed bitterly, "I loved her."

Helios hesitated—and Eros continued, a note of scorn creeping into his voice.

"I've told you about Oona before," he stated bluntly, "We met in Lapis. She stabbed me; I broke her fingers. She joined the crew; we became friends—more than friends. No matter what happened, she was there for me.

"I slept with her." he scoffed, scrubbing at his eyes. "It was a mistake. It didn't work out. We were in love—but it wasn't that kind of love. We figured out a different kind of relationship—and we were together until we weren't."

He turned back to Helios, an uneasy anger brewing in his stomach. The naga was staring at him blankly, expectantly—and Eros couldn't help but scoff.

"That's it," he stated flatly, "I fell in love with her, and one mistake led to another. The End."

Helios frowned anxiously. "What happ—"

"I told you, I don't—"

"It didn't end well, I get it—"

"No, you *don't*," Eros snarled, jabbing at Helios's chest with a finger, sudden fury snapping through his chest like the barbed end of a whip. "You don't *get it*, Helios, because you ***can't***."

Helios let out a hiss. "I would get it, if you'd just—"

"No," Eros snapped, "You wouldn't."

Helios's eyes flashed with grief. "You don't know that."

Eros scoffed. "You think I don't know you?" he snarked angrily, jabbing at Helios's chest again, "Your world is built on sugarplums and rainbows and love and safety and every little beautiful piece of shit—"

"If that's seriously what you think—"

"Yeah, it seriously *is*," Eros laughed hysterically, throwing his hand in the air, "It ***is***, because you're too damn kind to even be able to *process* half of the shit in *my* world that's ***wrong***. You don't ***get it***—"

"No," Helios snapped, jabbing at Eros's chest in return, anger flashing through his voice for the first time since Eros had bet him, "You're the one who doesn't ***get it***."

Eros flinched away from his touch. “Don’t—”

“You don’t **get it**,” Helios hissed, ignoring him, “I *love* you, more than I have words to describe—”

“So what?” Eros snarled. “You think you’re entitled to know everything about me—”

“Of course not!” Helios cried, throwing his hands in the air. “I’m not entitled to know *jack shit* about you—but what you don’t get is that I **want** to know you.”

Eros froze.

“The hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I just said,” Helios snapped. “Even if there’s something in your life that’s so devastatingly horrible that I’d never be able to understand it, I want to at least *know* what it is.”

Eros scoffed. “That’s—”

“I want you to trust me,” Helios pleaded, grabbing his wrist—and, immediately, Eros tried to tear his hand away.

“Eros—”

“Let go,” Eros hissed, twisting his arm, trying to break Helios’s grip—but the other man’s fingers only tightened around his wrist.

Panic surged through his chest, causing his breathing to catch in his throat.

“Eros, stop—”

“Let go of me,” Eros snarled, thrashing against Helios’s grip. The naga hissed anxiously; in his peripheral vision, Eros just barely caught a glimpse of Helios’s other hand darting into his blind spot—and, without any sort of warning, Eros whirled and slammed a furious roundhouse kick into Helios’s side, catching the naga off guard and causing them both to go tumbling down into the sand.

Immediately, Eros scrambled to his feet, tears pricking at his eyes. He stumbled around to face Helios, his breathing hitched and frantic—and, for an instant, their gazes met, startled cerulean on terrified mocha and glowing white.

“Don’t *touch* me,” Eros spat, though his voice wavered fearfully. Helios blinked, hurt and panic flashing through his gaze. He began to sit up, to draw himself to his full height—and Eros stumbled backwards, forcing in a steadying breath, cradling his hand to his chest.

“Don’t—”

“Eros—”

“*Don’t.*”

His voice was cold, tinged with fury—yet the trembling in his hand and his shallow, shaky breathing betrayed his fear. Helios froze in his tracks, guilt drooping through his features, and Eros took the opportunity to stumble backwards away from him, forcing himself to breathe.

He was **defenseless**.

Helios outclassed him effortlessly, when it came to anything physical—and, without his song, without his *magic*, he was without any sort of weapon that he could possibly use against the naga.

He didn't want to hurt Helios—the very thought of doing so made his heart *ache*—but he didn't know if Helios had the same reservations about hurting *him*.

No.

He knew that Helios wouldn't hurt him, that Helios could *never* hurt him—but his mind still raced with rampant thoughts of chains around his wrists and knives at his throat, of being beaten until he didn't know if his body was his anymore, of being thrown into the endless sea by his lover's fragile hands—**violence**, raw and unfettered, bestowed upon him through the naivety of his trust in the world and the people around him.

He trusted Helios—but there was some dizzying sense of fear deep within his chest that made him realize that his trust only went so far. The very thought of telling Helios any of the things that he'd kept hidden for so long made him want to vomit.

He couldn't trust Helios, not in the same way that he'd trusted Oona, not when trusting her so deeply had gotten him **killed**, not when the very act of trust had become a weapon for the world around him to exploit.

His hands were shaking uncontrollably, now, and he moved to steady them—only to realize with a lurch of revulsion that he'd somehow forgotten the blinding white of Angor's eyes, and the *depths* of what the demon had stolen from him.

“Eros—”

“I need to be alone right now,” Eros interrupted coldly, forcing himself to breathe. Helios nodded quietly, averting his gaze to the ground.

There was a moment of silence, a moment of Eros just trying to force himself to breathe—until Helios spoke softly, mournfully.

“I'm sorry—”

“Just go,” Eros snapped, hugging himself tightly as he turned away from the naga. “Enjoy the festival. I'll meet you at home.”

With that, he turned on his heel, and strode off across the sand, quickly leaving Helios far behind him. Still, even as the city lights beyond the shore faded into a tangle of rainforest, his

hand refused to stop shaking, and he found himself clutching at his shoulder, forcing himself to breathe, fighting back a scythingly sudden wave of memories.

Oona, sitting in his lap as he combed through her hair, grumbling about the knots that she hadn't been able to untangle herself. Oona, sitting at his side in a seedy tavern, cracking jokes and shamelessly helping him cheat at poker. Oona, stealing his jewelry and teasing him every time he stole some of hers in return.

Oona, venting to him about her parents, her abusive marriage, and the birth of her twins, and listening to him in return as he spoke of his own secrets, of all the things he hadn't dared to tell another soul.

Oona, trailing her fingers over his skin in the dark, murmuring stories into the crook of his neck as they fell asleep.

He hadn't let himself think of her, not like this.

He hadn't let himself dwell on it, hadn't let himself so much as process the absolute weight of what she'd done to him, hadn't allowed himself even a moment of recollection that was anything but bitter—but now, he found furious tears stinging at his eyes, and a profound sense of grief tearing at his core.

He'd trusted her with everything that he was—his humanity, his heart, his secrets, his *life*—and she had destroyed it all.

She'd killed him.

Oona had **killed him**—without a word to preface the raging storm she'd thrown him into.

He'd loved her.

He'd loved her—truly and fully and in every way that he *shouldn't have*—and he'd been helpless to all that she had done to him.

He'd loved her, and she had taken his trust and **ruined it**.

Now, he was falling in love.

Now, Helios wanted to *know him*; now, Helios wanted him to **trust him**—and the very thought of that made him feel sick.

He couldn't trust Helios.

He couldn't trust Helios—but he **wanted to**.

Eros froze in his tracks, the wind suddenly swept from his lungs by the sheer *force* of his realization.

He **wanted** to trust Helios, more than anything else in the world—and that was something that he'd never felt before.

Trust wasn't something that had ever been easy for him. Even before Oona, even before he'd become a siren, trust had been something that **scared** him. It was something that he'd rarely shared as a child, and something that he'd only become more reticent with as he'd grown older—not only because there were so few people who'd ever given him a reason to trust them, but because whatever trust he'd once had in the world had been ripped out of him, bit by bit.

The world had never given him any reason to trust anyone within it, much less any reason to **want** to trust anyone within it.

When he'd trusted people in the past, it had been something tentative, something fragile, built up over time to become something that he **needed**, something that he **relied on**. There were only two people he had ever come to trust with his life—his adoptive father, Veit, and *Oona*—and, in their own ways, the two of them had each played a key role in his death, one watching and one *acting*.

He'd changed, that night, in more ways than one—but he'd changed even more in the months since then.

He'd learned to use his magic. He'd laid down his life for a group of strangers. He'd lost things that had once been integral to his body and soul.

He'd met *Helios*.

He trusted Helios—but not as much as he wanted to. He was *scared*—overwhelmingly, gut-wrenchingly **scared**—because every time he'd trusted someone, he'd gotten **hurt**.

No matter what he did, it always ended the same—if he trusted someone in even the most miniscule of ways, that trust would come back to hurt him **tenfold**.

Still, irrational as it was, he wanted to **trust** Helios.

He wanted Helios to **know him**—and the truth of all that would entail was *terrifying*...yet oddly **exhilarating**.

He didn't know how, didn't know when—but somewhere, between cups of tea and roughhousing and nights spent watching the stars, he'd fallen in **love**.

He forced in a shuddering breath, scrubbing at his eyes as tears began to slip down his cheek. Something swelled in his core, something straining and desperate—and he breathed into it, trying to steady himself against the despairing emotion.

He'd made a *mistake*.

He'd let his fear get the best of him—and he'd lashed out at the one person who loved him **back**.

He found him retracing his steps, wandering back across the beach, caught between the urge to race home as quickly as he could and the urge to drag his feet and avoid facing Helios's inevitable anger.

Still, by the time he reached the temple, he had long since resigned himself to the ensuing argument. Quietly, he slipped his key out of his pocket, unlocked the door, and crept inside, sneaking through the central atrium and into their home area.

Helios was lying on a couch at the far end of the living room. The tip of his tail flicked at the side of the sofa miserably. As Eros pulled the door shut behind him, Helios sat up, glancing over at him—and the moment their gazes locked, Eros froze.

Helios frowned, averting his gaze guiltily; Eros forced himself to breathe. He locked the door behind him, then crossed the room to sit on the floor besides Helios. The naga glanced up, meeting his gaze mournfully, and Eros forced in another shaky breath before finally speaking.

"I'm sorry," Eros murmured quietly. "I shouldn't have talked to you like that—and I sure as hell shouldn't have hit you."

Helios nodded weakly. "Yeah."

"I just..." Eros trailed off, nausea curling through his stomach. He took a deep, shuddering breath, then continued.

"We need to talk about boundaries."

"Boundaries," Helios agreed, nodding again. Eros nodded in response, hugging himself tightly.

"Yeah."

A moment of silence passed between them, before Helios spoke softly.

"Do...do you want to go first?"

Eros shook his head.

Helios drew in a breath.

"Don't hit me," he whispered, "Not in anger, at least. It's fine if we're just joking around, but if you're trying to hurt me—"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you," Eros protested shakily, "I just couldn't get you to let go."

Helios hissed frustratedly. "You weren't listening—"

"You crossed a line," Eros snapped. Helios's eyes narrowed.

"What, by asking you about—"

"It had nothing to do with Oona at that point, Helios," Eros stated coldly, "The one thing that you **do not do**, no matter **what**, is physically restrain me. That's my boundary."

"Oh."

Helios's voice was small, guilty—and Eros averted his gaze shamefully.

"I've told you before that I haven't had good experiences with touch," he confessed weakly. "I don't want to get into it—"

"I don't want you to feel like you have to hide things from me," Helios interrupted, his voice tinged with hurt. Eros's stomach turned nauseously.

"I want you to listen when I tell you that I'm not comfortable talking about something yet," he replied quietly. Helios averted his gaze, hissing quietly.

"I want to be someone you can trust," he murmured weakly, mournfully. Eros breathed deeply, trying to steady himself.

"I know," he admitted, "There's nothing I want more in the world than to trust you—but I need you to understand that **trust** isn't easy for me."

Helios nodded weakly; Eros averted his gaze.

"I **love you**, Helios," he rasped softly, "I *love you*, and I want to be more honest with you—but I'm just so **scared**. Nothing good in my life has ever lasted—and you're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time."

Helios hissed softly, a worried, distressed sound. "I don't want you to be scared," he murmured, a tinge of guilt in his voice. "Not in general, and not with me."

Eros scoffed.

"I've been lying to you, Helios," he admitted bitterly, keeping his gaze trained on the floor below him. "I've been lying to you, about more things than I can count—and I'm scared that if I tell you the truth, you'll hurt me."

Helios hissed again—but this time, the sound was distinctly angry.

"Do you *seriously* think I would ever hurt you?" he scoffed, incredulous.

Eros swallowed hard, but remained silent.

"You don't actually think that I'd hurt you, right?" Helios asked, his voice wavering with worry.

Eros forced in another breath, hugging himself tightly.

"Eros," Helios hissed, slipping off of the sofa to sit on the floor. "Please tell me that you don't—"

"I don't have any way of defending myself," Eros whispered frailly, still refusing to meet Helios's gaze. "I wouldn't be able to fight back, much less get away."

Helios hissed furiously. "Why the hell would I—"

"Because that's just what **happens**," Eros choked, his voice wavering despite his best attempts to keep it even. "No matter what I do, the people that I love turn *violent*—and I don't know how to fight back."

"She *hurt* you."

Helios's voice was furious, *worried*—and tears flooded Eros's vision at the sound..

"I trusted her," he whispered. "I trusted her with my *life*—"

Helios hissed. "Eros—"

Eros scoffed again, rubbing at his face. "I promise you, Helios, I'm going to be honest with you—but I need your word that you're not going to hurt me."

"Eros—"

"Your **word**, Helios," Eros insisted, turning his fearful gaze up to meet that of the naga before him. "I want to trust you, more than *anything*, but if you can't promise me this—"

"Eros," Helios stated sternly, taking him by the hand. "I swear to you, on all that is holy: so long as I live, no one will ever hurt you again—least of all me."

Eros's breath hitched in his chest; he tried to breathe, to force back the sudden wave of *grief* flooding through his chest—but as he tried to inhale, dizziness rolled through him like thunder, and a choked, breathless sob escaped his lips.

"I **love you**, with all of my damn heart," Helios murmured softly, squeezing Eros's hand gently. "The last thing that I want to do is hurt you—and I'm so, so sorry if I've ever put any sort of doubt in your mind about that fact, through my actions or through my words."

Eros nodded weakly, finally managing to force in a breath. It was as if there was something wound tight within his core, something threatening to snap if it was tugged at in the slightest—but as Helios squeezed his hand gently, it seemed to twang, like the string of a plucked guitar.

"I love you, Eros, and nothing you could lie about is ever going to change that," Helios murmured weakly, his voice wavering slightly. "I love you, more than I ever thought I could love anyone else—and I want to **know** you."

"Your passions, your thoughts, your fears, your happiest moments, your worst memories—I want to know them all—but if you're not comfortable with that, then that's okay."

"I just want you to know that I love you, and that nothing you could ever do could push me away—unless you, like, explicitly tell me to back off, or—"

"Helios," Eros interrupted sternly, squeezing the naga's hand. "I love you, too, from the bottom of my heart, in a way that I've never loved anyone else in the world."

Helios hissed quietly, averting his gaze. "You loved Oona."

Eros scoffed. “Yeah,” he admitted, “but not like this.”

Helios remained quiet.

With another slight scoff, Eros shuffled forwards and into Helios’s lap, letting go of the naga’s hand to cup his cheek. Helios glanced up at him mournfully—and Eros’s heart **wrenched**.

“Oona showed me that I could love—and then she taught me that trust meant nothing,” he murmured, his voice shaky and pained, “You’ve shown me everything that love can be—sudden and *overwhelming* and **beautiful**—and you’ve shown me that trust is something that I could *want*.”

Helios hissed quietly, cupping Eros’s hand with his own. Eros swallowed hard, trying his hardest to steady himself before continuing quietly.

“There’s no comparing the two of you, Helios,” he stated. “You’re different, in a way that makes my heart **hurt**—fundamentally and overwhelmingly and beautifully *different*.”

“I **want** to trust you—and that’s something that I’ve never been able to say about anyone before,” Eros confessed, his voice cracking feebly. “You make me **want** to be trusting and open and honest and *vulnerable*—and everyone else I’ve ever trusted has just taken those things from me without asking.

“You’ve made me want to be *known*—even though the very idea of that scares me more than anything else.”

Helios hissed; Eros averted his gaze guiltily, letting his hand slip down from the naga’s cheek—but then the end of Helios’s tail curled around Eros’s waist, drawing him in closer, and Eros’s gaze flickered back up to his face.

“I love you, Eros,” Helios insisted firmly, “I love you—and if anything so much as **tries** to hurt you, I will tear it *apart*. I don’t want you to be afraid—especially not when it comes to something as crucial as **trust**.”

Eros opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn’t muster the strength to utter even a single word. He closed his mouth, averting his gaze and pulling away from Helios slightly—but then Helios gently guided his chin up, tilting his face so that their gazes met once more, tugging Eros even closer than before—and Eros suddenly found himself **lost** in the naga’s mournful cobalt eyes, which glimmered like tide pools at sunset in the soft golden light of the room.

“I want you to trust me,” Helios murmured quietly, “I want to be *yours*.”

Eros’s breath caught in his chest.

“What?”

"I want to be the one you love," Helios confessed shakily, "I want to be the one you **trust**. I want to be *yours*—because you mean more to me than anyone else ever has.

"I want to **know** you, more than I've ever wanted anything else in the world."

Eros swallowed hard—and then, hesitantly, he wound his arm around Helios's waist, gently pulling the naga closer to him once more. Helios hissed quietly; his tail tightened around Eros's waist in turn. The siren flushed.

"I want to trust you," Eros whispered, his voice shaky. "I want to be **yours**, too. I want you to **know me**—but I just...I *love you*, so much that I feel like my heart is going to break."

"I don't want to break your heart."

Eros laughed mournfully. "I know, dumbass."

Helios flushed; his hands slipped down from Eros's cheeks, winding around his neck instead. He pulled the siren even closer to him in a tender hug, burying his face in the crook of his neck.

"I'm sorry," Helios mumbled. Eros let out a slight noise, letting his hand fall from Helios's waist to run his thumb over his tail. "I should have listened to you."

"That doesn't excuse how I acted," Eros argued quietly. "I love you, and I shouldn't—"

"You were being honest," Helios stated bluntly, pulling away to look Eros in the eyes. "I want you to be honest with me, Eros—"

"There's a difference between being honest and being a dick," Eros countered.

"Yeah," Helios snorted, rolling his eyes, "You were a dick—but I'd rather you be a dick than be too scared to tell me when something's wrong."

Eros nodded feebly, suddenly and overwhelmingly *exhausted*. He leant into Helios's chest, hugging him tightly, pressing his forehead against the naga's collar; Helios embraced him in return, pressing a tiny kiss to the top of his head.

"I love you, Helios," Eros murmured frailly, nestling into Helios's chest. "I love you, with all of my heart—but there are just some things that I can't talk about yet."

Helios squeezed Eros gently, planting another kiss into his hair. "I understand."

"I mean it when I say '*yet*,'" Eros insisted, his voice pained. "I want to trust you with everything I am—but I'm **scared**."

"Is there anything I can do to make you feel less scared?" Helios asked softly. Eros shook his head, letting out a soft noise.

"No," he confessed, "This is something that's just going to take time."

"Okay," Helios murmured softly, reassuringly—and Eros *sagged* with relief.

The naga's tail squeezed him gently, and Eros nestled into his companion's chest. For a long, silent moment, they merely sat there, holding each other exhaustedly—until Helios finally spoke, his voice quiet, yet grave.

"I need you to make me a promise."

Eros pulled away from him slightly, peering worriedly up into the naga's cobalt stare. "Anything," he vowed, reaching up to squeeze Helios's hand firmly. The naga inhaled deeply, nodding slightly.

"You...you said that you've been lying to me," he began slowly—and Eros's stomach sank.

"Yeah," the siren replied, his voice little more than a croak.

"Promise me that you'll come clean if whatever you're hiding becomes a problem," Helios insisted sternly, taking Eros's hand and squeezing it tightly. "Promise me that, if it becomes something that hurts you, you'll tell me everything."

Eros hesitated—and then nodded, feeling all too sick to his stomach.

"I promise."

The next two weeks passed in a strange sort of blur.

It was getting hotter, to an almost unbearable degree; paired with the rising humidity, the weather was generally *unbearable*. When there was a lull in the orders due and the customers coming in, Helios had taken to flopping out on the comparatively cool stone floor, despite his love for the heat. At first, Eros had been loath to take off his shirt and join the naga—but after a few days of coaxing, he finally gave in.

Helios hadn't so much as noticed Eros's gill scars, being much more interested in his chest itself. Each time that Eros took off his turtleneck, the action was promptly followed by a wolf-whistle, and, occasionally, a crass remark, a routine which ended in Eros playfully throwing his shirt at Helios and missing entirely.

They'd taken to going to the beach nearly every afternoon, simply out of desperation to cool off; every few days, Helios packed them a dinner so that they could eat while out and about, typically in the sprawling wilderness between Port Songes and the temple. The naga insisted that he kept dragging them out into the jungle because he wanted to show Eros around—but Eros knew otherwise.

"You just want to bask, you dumb snake," he snarked, on one such evening. They were lounging in the shade of a mango tree, sprawled out in a patch of dirt between the tree's thick, prominent roots. They'd been forced to keep the shop open later than usual due to a frustrated customer; afterwards, they had decided to skip their routine trip into town and just find somewhere quiet to eat together out in the forest beyond the temple.

"No," Helios drawled childishly, "I'm showing you around. We've been over this."

Eros snorted. "Sure."

"I showed you where this tree was," Helios offered smugly. Eros scoffed, smacking Helios's chest lightly.

"Don't even try, you overgrown reptile," he chided amusedly, grinning from ear to ear. "You're sitting right in a sunbeam."

Helios cackled, smacking his tail against the ground lightly. Eros snorted, lazily dragging himself into a seated position.

"I can't believe you," he moaned dramatically, bringing his hand up to his forehead in a gesture of mock-fainting. "You're *enjoying* this horrible weather."

"No," Helios said, a mischievous grin creeping across his lips as he, too, sat up. "I'm enjoying the *view*."

Eros's face *flushed*.

"Asshole," he mumbled, smacking Helios's arm lightly. The naga cackled again, wagging his eyebrows; Eros scoffed.

"It's not like it's anything you haven't seen before, dumbass," he muttered, self-consciously drawing his hand over his bare chest to clutch at his shoulder. Helios snorted, rolling his eyes.

"That doesn't take away from the fact that you're gorgeous, though," he countered with a grin. Eros's face only burned all the more.

"You *prick*," Eros mumbled, averting his gaze. "Don't say stuff like that when you don't mean it."

Helios hissed frustratedly; his hand gently settled on Eros's thigh. "I mean it, Eros," he insisted—but Eros just scoffed.

"Look at me," he snorted derisively, gesturing down at the unnaturally-hued scars spiderwebbing down his livid skin. "You can't seriously think—"

"I do," Helios stated stubbornly, titling his chin up defiantly. "You're stunning—and that is *not* up for debate."

Eros's face burned—but the moment he opened his mouth to speak, Helios tackled him into the grass below with a cackle, causing him to let out a startled yelp instead.

They tussled for a moment, until Helios had Eros's hand pinned besides his head and his tail tangled around the siren's leg. Eros struggled feebly for a moment, laughing lightly—and, then, something flickered through his chest, sudden and insistent, stealing the breath from his lungs, only to vanish as quickly as it had come.

He didn't have so much as an instant to think about it, however, as Helios darted in close, flashing him a devious grin.

"I told you—you don't get to argue with me on this," Helios purred mischievously. Eros scoffed.

"Really?" he drawled, "You're the beauty expert, here?"

"I mean, yeah," Helios snorted, peeling his tail off of Eros and sitting up. "Like, *seriously*—look at me."

He gestured to his broad, mostly-scaled chest with a cocky smirk; Eros rolled his eyes, letting out a snort of laughter as he sat up as well.

"A work of art," he replied fondly, unable to keep from grinning.

Helios's smirk became devilish. "Well, this isn't a museum," he remarked with a wink, "So you can touch me if you want~"

Eros's face flushed. "Prick," he mumbled, a tiny, flustered smile creeping across his lips. Helios cackled, smacking the ground with the end of his tail.

"What, you like what you see?" he cooed—and Eros's face **burned**.

"You wish," he lied, his voice little more than a mutter as he averted his gaze, brushing a lock of hair from his face. Helios gasped in mock-offense, clutching at his chest as he flopped back into the dirt.

"Augh," he cried, writhing as if in pain, "You wound me!"

Eros snorted, rolling his eyes. Helios glanced up hopefully, met his measuredly flat, unimpressed gaze, and immediately burst out laughing. The end of his tail smacked the ground once more, and Eros couldn't help but laugh in return.

"You're such a dork, Helios," he scoffed fondly. Helios grinned up at him, sitting up slightly.

"You know you love me," he cooed. Eros hummed, glancing up, tapping his lip with his finger—and Helios scoffed at the sight. Eros grinned at him devilishly—and then, without giving Helios a chance to react, he lunged forwards, tackling the naga back to the dirt.

Helios cackled, smacking at Eros, who, in turn, swatted at him playfully. The naga let out a snarl, baring his tusks playfully—and, immediately, a strange, unfamiliar wave of emotion surged through his chest, prompting him to bare his own teeth and growl in return.

Instantly, Helios froze, shock flickering through his gaze. Eros froze as well, completely and utterly taken aback by his own reaction, startled that such a sound had actually come from his mouth, and panicking slightly over why on *earth* he had just **growled** at Helios.

They stared blankly at each other for a long moment—and then Helios burst out laughing, his tail thrashing against the ground with the sheer force of his amusement.

Eros couldn't help but laugh in return, his heart suddenly soaring.

They roughhoused for a little while longer before they made the long trek home, hands tightly clasped together. When they reached the temple, Helios untangled their hands in order to unlock the door—but only briefly.

The very moment that they entered the living room, Helios moved the bag of food to his tail and scooped Eros into his arms, causing the siren to let out a startled yelp—which quickly became a peal of laughter as Helios dragged him across the room and tumbled back into one of the chaises.

Still laughing, Eros writhed out of his grip, twisting so that he was sitting in Helios's lap, facing the naga. Helios grinned up at him, wiggling his eyebrows. Eros snorted.

"I love you, dumbass," Eros murmured fondly, resting his hand on the naga's collar. Helios's grin softened, becoming a gentle, tender smile.

"I love you, too," he replied softly. He gently pulled Eros in closer to his chest, then adjusted his position so that the siren was nestled snugly against him. Eros flushed, but relaxed into the naga's arms nonetheless.

They laid there for a long moment, still and silent and basking in each other's presence. Eros shut his eyes, quietly nestling into Helios's chest, shifting his position ever so slightly so that he could better hear the naga's quiet heartbeat.

It was steady, unwavering—yet delicate at the very same time. It was soothing, rhythmic, like the gentle pulse of some sort of dance; it was a song, born of all that comprised the man he loved, a melody that spoke of nothing but home and warmth and love and **safety**.

The very sound of it set adoration surging through his soul, ferocious in its potency. He snuggled closer to Helios once more, and the naga let out a soft hum.

"We should go to the bathhouse tomorrow morning," Helios murmured quietly, gently running his hand through Eros's hair. The siren let out a soft, disgruntled noise, and Helios chuckled.

"I mean, we've been planning to take tomorrow off for a while now," he continued, "but I was thinking that we might take an extra day or two to ourselves. The garden doesn't care either way, after all, and—"

"What would we do?" Eros asked hesitantly, shifting his position in Helios's lap and lifting himself up to peer curiously into the naga's bright cerulean eyes.

The naga grinned mischievously, looping his arms around Eros's waist. "Anything you want," he declared proudly—and Eros's breath caught in his throat as something **yearning** swelled through his chest.

"I want to dance with you," he blurted, barely even processing what he was saying. Helios blinked, confused.

"Is that a euphemism that I'm missing?" the naga asked bemusedly, raising an eyebrow.

Eros shook his head, suddenly overwhelmed by the tide of emotion surging through his chest. He clambered out of Helios's lap, taking the naga by the hand and gently tugging him out of the chaise. He strode into the center of the room, then stopped, turning back to face Helios.

"I want to dance with you," he stated insistently, all too aware of how hot his cheeks had suddenly become, "I want to dance with you, right now."

Helios rolled his eyes. "In case you haven't noticed, I don't have legs."

"We can figure it out," Eros insisted, squeezing his hand, "You don't know it won't work until you try."

Helios frowned. "I don't think we have enough space."

"We can go outside," Eros offered weakly, gesturing to the door with his shoulder. Helios's frown deepened—and Eros's heart *sank*.

"Please?" Eros asked softly, imploringly, squeezing Helios's hand once more. "I haven't danced with someone else in *ages*."

Helios hesitated.

"We don't have any music," he complained weakly—and Eros hesitated.

There wasn't any danger to his voice, not now, not when his magic had so entirely fled him. There was no monster to unleash, no demon to awaken with his song—no cosmic punishment to beware each time he spoke.

Something uneasy swelled in his core, like a strange sort of hollow fog or a shadow of doubt, but Eros ignored it.

He took a deep breath, letting go of Helios's hand. The naga hissed quietly, averting his gaze—but before he could so much as speak, Eros wound his arm around Helios's neck, pulling him in close. Helios glanced down at him, and a rush of affection surged through Eros's chest.

He dragged in a deep breath, forcing back some strange pressure rising in his throat—and then, quietly, he began to sing.

“I was listening to the ocean,” he began, his voice wavering slightly, “I saw a face in the sand—but when I picked it up, then it vanished away from my hands.”

Helios’s face softened; his arms wound around Eros’s waist, and a tiny, wobbly smile crept across the siren’s lips as he averted his gaze.

“I had a dream: I was seven, climbing my way in a tree; I saw a piece of heaven, waiting in patience for me.”

Eros paused momentarily, forcing in another shaky breath. Helios hissed quietly, and Eros glanced up at him nervously.

“I didn’t know that you could sing,” Helios murmured, his brows furrowing slightly. Eros’s face flushed.

“I don’t,” he mumbled bashfully. “I just...I don’t.”

Helios frowned. “But you’re singing now.”

Eros chuckled lightly. “Yeah,” he admitted. Helios’s frown deepened; he pulled Eros in closer to his chest.

“What changed?” Helios asked softly, cupping Eros’s cheek—and Eros’s face flushed as a soft, wobbly smile crossed his lips.

“I’m not scared anymore,” Eros confessed, cupping Helios’s hand with his own. “Not of this.”

Helios smiled, a small, flustered gesture.

“You have no idea how happy it makes me to hear that,” he murmured, gently caressing Eros’s cheek with his thumb as he drew his tail around the siren, encircling them both. Eros flushed an even darker red.

“I love you, you dumb snake,” he mumbled. Helios’s smile became all the warmer—and before Eros could process what was happening, the naga scooped him up and whirled him around with a delighted laugh. Eros couldn’t help but laugh in return.

Helios grinned at him, drawing him close to his chest once more before guiding him down into a seated position on the stone floor below. He curled his tail around Eros, causing the raven-haired siren to blush all the more as the naga turned his hopeful gaze back to him.

“Sing for me,” he insisted, taking Eros by the hand—and something swelled within the siren’s chest, impelling him on through the song.

“And I was running far away—would I run off the world someday? Nobody knows, nobody knows.”

He paused again, forcing in a breath, trying to fight back the strange presence surging through his core—but then Helios squeezed his hand, and all thoughts of the uneasy aura within his soul were swept aside in an instant.

“Keep going,” the naga murmured—and Eros couldn’t help but comply.

“And I was dancing in the rain; I felt alive and I can’t complain—but no, take me home.”

Something was building within him, something all-too-familiar and yet foreign all at once, something that he couldn’t so much as explain, something that he couldn’t so much as *fight*. It swept him on through the song, rising through his soul voice like a slow, crescendo.

“Take me home where I belong—I can’t take it anymore.”

There was a tingling in his fingers, a sort of electric energy that hadn’t been there before, intoxicating and almost frightening. It was heady, surging within him like the sea, cool and inhuman yet so utterly *natural* that it made him feel more desperately **alive** than ever before.

“I was painting a picture; the picture was a painting of you—and, for a moment I thought you were here, but then again, it wasn’t true.”

With every note, it grew stronger, blossoming rapidly within him—but as he turned his gaze up to meet Helios’s adoring cobalt stare, he couldn’t so much as bring himself to worry.

“And all this time I have been lying—oh, lying in secret to myself. I’ve been putting sorrow on the farthest place on my shelf.”

There was nothing to worry about, nothing to be scared of, not now, not with Helios’s arms around his waist. The naga’s eyes were an endless blue, like the sea on a cold winter’s day, soothing like nothing else in the world.

Eros knew that, if he were to lose himself within them, he would slip into something far deeper than anything he’d ever known—and, startlingly, *exhilaratingly*, he **wanted** that, more than anything else in the world.

*“And I was running far away—**would I run off the world someday?**”*

He wanted to trust Helios, with every fiber of his being—and something **powerful** surged within him, full of exhilaration, as he realized exactly how **much** he yearned for the other man’s love.

*“**Nobody knows, nobody knows.**”*

Something was building deep within his soul, something unspeakably **alive**, something that ached deep within him with some sort of animal ferocity, vying for something as essential and immaterial as air with a yearning unmatched by anything he had ever known.

*“**And I was dancing in the rain; I felt alive and I can’t complain.**”*

It was curling within his throat like a looming tendril, curious, yet far from tentative; it was a pressure in the hollows of his being, begging him to *sing*, to let it flow through him like air, like water, like blood and life and everything in the world that was good and *his* and—

“But no, take me home—”

It crashed through him in an *instant*, *visceral* and *powerful* and *electric*, like a thunderclap and a punch to the gut all at once—and suddenly, he was *alive*, completely, utterly, ***alive***, in a way that he’d never been before: full of light, full of *yearning*, full of *power*—and then, with a hiss, Helios tackled him to the ground, bringing their lips crashing together in a bruising, desperate kiss.

Eros let out a startled, muffled noise, sheer ***terror*** shooting through his chest. Helios merely hummed into the kiss, causing Eros to let out an involuntary whimper as the naga’s tusks jabbed at his bottom lip. He struggled against Helios’s form, trying to free his wrist from the naga’s grip—but the naga’s hand refused to budge.

His body was shaking, now, as his mind went entirely *blank* with fear—and then, suddenly, Helios released his grip on Eros’s wrist, allowing the siren to yank his hand away

Immediately, he shoved the naga away from him with all the strength he could muster. Helios recoiled obediently, though Eros knew his blow had been pitifully weak—and the very moment that their gazes met, Eros’s stomach ***sank***.

A strange cloudiness obscured the vivid cobalt of Helios’s eyes, an unnatural sort of haze that hadn’t been there merely seconds before. His stare was vacant, dull—and the power within Eros’s soul curled through his throat like a vengeful god.

“Helios?” he asked weakly as he sat up, his voice little more than a croak—but even still, it was melodic, as if the song still lingered within his soul.

Helios tilted his head slightly, his gaze still utterly blank—and suddenly, Eros’s chest constricted with *panic*.

This wasn’t right.

This wasn’t what was supposed to be happening. His magic was *gone*, it was supposed to be ***gone***—but there was Helios, awaiting his next command.

His magic was *back*.

His magic was ***back***—and it was ***stronger***: vicious and *desperate* and terrifyingly ***inhuman***.

He could feel it, now that he knew what it was, surging within him like the tumultuous sea, *yearning* for an escape, ***threatening*** to spill forth from his lips, to bloom forth from his very soul, to claw its way into the world and be known only as a word of fathomless power—and for

an instant, he grappled with the deep-seated yet irrational urge to **sing**, to bend the world to his will and entangle Helios within the strains of his voice.

It was **power**, of a scale that he intrinsically knew was too great for any mortal to hold.

He hadn't noticed it, hadn't questioned it—but in that instant, it was overwhelming, *overpowering*, as entirely **ruthless** as the sea itself.

He forced in a breath, fighting back his insistent song—but as he did, Helios let out a hiss, snatching Eros's attention away once more.

The naga scrubbed at his eyes, letting out a slight, disgruntled noise before turning his attention back down to Eros. His brows furrowed; a worried frown crossed his face, and he reached out towards the other man—only to hesitate as the siren flinched away from him, still distinctly shaken by the sudden, unprompted kiss. Helios hissed quietly, drawing his tail in on himself and bringing his hand back in to his chest.

“Your *lips*.”

Sudden, vicious dread sank into Eros's stomach at the naga's worried tone.

“Yeah,” he croaked, trying to keep his voice as even—as *human*—as he could. Helios's frown deepened. He glanced around himself warily, almost confused—and Eros's stomach *turned*.

“Did I...did I do something?”

Helios's voice was shaky, fearful—and Eros averted his gaze, too utterly guilty to look his companion in the eye.

“You were singing,” Helios continued, his voice wavering worriedly, “You were singing, and then...”

He trailed off, scrubbing at his eyes again, letting out another frustrated noise. Eros gathered his legs beneath him, all too aware of how his magic was pulsing within him, eager and insistent and **vicious**.

“I can't remember,” Helios murmured, glancing up at Eros fearfully. “I can't remember what I did.”

Eros swallowed hard, forcing back a wave of panic. Helios hissed quietly, gently placing his hand on Eros's knee—but even the tender touch brough Eros to flinch. His frightened gaze snapped up to meet Helios's worried cerulean eyes—and then, hesitantly, Helios reached forwards, brushing Eros's soft, swollen lips with his thumb.

Eros tensed beneath his touch, but forced himself to keep his gaze trained on Helios, even as his hand began to tremble. He curled his fingers against the stone below, focusing on

the bite of the tile against his nails rather than the gentle rasp of Helios's fingers against his cheek.

Helios met his gaze once more, his brows furrowing confusedly. Eros bit at his lip, wincing slightly at the sharpness of his own teeth against his bruised skin. Helios's frown deepened—and, then, his eyes *widened*, as if he'd suddenly reached some sort of epiphany.

He sat back on his tail, and then, hesitantly, he reached up to touch his own lips.

His eyes widened immediately—and Eros's stomach turned nauseously. Helios glanced at him, stunned; Eros forced himself to breathe, to maintain eye contact, to remain *silent*—and then Helios spoke, his voice shaky and weak.

"You *kissed* me."

His voice was pained, almost betrayed, and Eros's nails dug into the tile at the sound.

"You kissed *me*," he corrected frailly—and Helios *froze*.

"I kissed you," he said bluntly, incredulously. Eros averted his gaze. Helios swore, turning his gaze to the ground.

"I kissed you," he repeated, his voice full of horror. He brought his fingers to his lips once more, staring at the ground in shock. Eros forced in another deep breath, trying his hardest to both steady himself and force back his song.

"Yeah."

For a long moment, they sat there, in a tense, uneasy silence—until Helios glanced up at him, his gaze weak with hurt.

"I..I hurt you, didn't I?"

Eros dragged in a breath, fear creeping through his core. "It's not your fault."

Helios shook his head weakly. "I *hurt* you," he argued, panic rising in his voice, "I can hear it in your voice. Something's different. Something's *wrong*."

Eros tensed. "Helios—"

"What did I *do*?"

Eros opened his mouth to reply, but his magic tugged in his throat, silencing him immediately. He curled in on himself, averting his gaze and rubbing at his throat. Helios hissed frustratedly, the end of his tail curling around Eros's ankle—and instantly, a flash of panic whipped through Eros's chest.

He yanked his foot free from the naga's grasp, scrambling to his feet and then away from Helios. His chest was suddenly tight, and his breathing shallow; he glanced behind himself furtively, caught between the panic of his present and his past, of what he had become and what had been done to him, of the man he loved and of all that terrified him.

“Eros—”

Helios’s hand landed on his wrist—and, immediately, Eros flinched away from him, nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste to escape the naga’s touch. He whirled around, eyes blown wide with sudden fear—and, before he could stop himself, a command slipped free from his lips.

“Don’t touch me.”

Helios’s eyes glazed over; his hands fell to his side obediently—and Eros’s stomach turned nauseously, even as a strange sense of victory swelled through his chest at the feeling of unleashing his song upon Helios. He stumbled away from the naga, forcing in a breath, trying to tamp down the urge to sing, the urge to **indulge** in his magic; he squeezed his eyes shut tightly, trying to force away his still spiralling thoughts of hands on his wrists and a knife at his throat and fists bashing against his weak, battered body and Helios’s bruising lips—

“I won’t touch you.”

Helios’s voice was quiet, *even*, **mournful**, and the very sound of it brought Eros to pause.

He glanced back at Helios, forcing himself to meet the naga’s clouded eyes, forcing himself to bite back the fear surging through his chest like the magic in his soul, forcing himself to *breathe*—but the moment that their gazes locked, Eros found himself frozen in place.

“I won’t touch you,” Helios repeated quietly, his gaze still hazy. “I have no right to touch you—not if I’ve hurt you like this.”

Eros’s heart **ached**.

“It wasn’t your fault, Helios,” he croaked, stepping backwards, clutching at his shoulder. “I—”

“I hurt you,” Helios interrupted, his voice hushed and full of anguish. “I hurt you, and—”

“Helios.”

His power spilled from his lips with ease—but rather than soothe the vicious, aching urge to *sing*, the very act of *singing* only made the magic within him surge with shameless, desperate **greed**.

Eros drew in a deep breath, steeling himself—and then, before he could stop himself, he swept forwards, swiftly capturing Helios’s lips in a long, tender kiss.

Eventually, he pulled away, his face flushing with heat—only for his heart to sink as he caught Helios’s still-vacant stare. He swallowed hard, and stepped away from Helios, guilt surging through his chest.

He knew what he needed to do.

He couldn't trust himself around Helios, not when his own naivety had ended like this, not when his very voice had turned into a weapon again, not when he'd just **used** that weapon on Helios.

Helios needed to know what he was—and, because of that, he needed to *leave*, to **leave**, before Helios put two and two together and realized just how wrong he'd been to ever let him into his life.

He needed to *leave*—before the one person who made him feel *safe* turned against him once and for all.

“You’re going to remember every moment of tonight,” he murmured, his voice cold with power yet wavering with heartbreak.

“You’re going to remember what I did to you,” he continued gravely, ***“You’re going to realize what I am, and you—”***

He broke off, his voice faltering as he took in the slack, vacant grief in Helios's face.

“You’re going to realize that I’m DANGEROUS,” Eros croaked, his voice catching in his throat. ***“You’re going to realize that I’m a liar. You’re going to realize that there’s no reason for you to keep me by your side—”***

“I don’t care.”

Helios's quiet, angry voice caught him off guard. Eros glanced up at him, fighting back tears—only to see that the naga himself was crying silently, though his eyes remained clouded over.

“I don’t care,” Helios rasped defiantly, sticking his chin out. Eros shook his head, averting his gaze again.

“You’re going to care,” Eros argued, his voice desolate. ***“You’re going to care, because one of these days, I’m going to hurt you—”***

“The only way you could hurt me is if you left me.”

Eros forced in a shaky breath, hugging himself tightly. ***“Stop arguing with me.”***

Helios's face fell slack—and Eros's heart *broke*.

“You’re only going to get hurt if I stay with you.”

“I’m okay with that.”

Tears pricked at Eros's eyes. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“I don’t care.”

A strangled, bitter laugh escaped him, little more than a broken sob. ***“You’re going to care.”***

“I care about you.”

Eros shook his head vehemently, hugging himself all the tighter as tears began to slip down his cheek. **“Stop doing this.”**

“I can’t.”

Eros let out a sob, squeezing his eyes shut as tightly as he could. His hand jittered up from his chest to claw at his face, the gesture feeble and *wavering*.

“Stop.”

“I *can’t*.”

Another strangled sob escaped Eros’s throat, and he crumpled to a heap on the ground, his legs giving out on him entirely.

“Please, stop—”

“I *can’t*.”

Helios’s voice was little more than a plea, wrought with desperation though it remained strangely distant—and the very sound of it sent a pang of sheer, utter *grief* through his heart.

“Why?” he pleaded, clawing at his cheek. **“Why can’t you just let this go and get this over with?”**

“Because I *love you*, Eros,” Helios croaked—and in that very instant, it was as if all of the power within Eros’s soul just *vanished*.

He collapsed in on himself, sobbing, clutching at his face, feeling suddenly empty and *heartbroken* and *alone*.

“I can’t think of a reason to be with you anymore, Eros,” Helios rasped, his voice choked with grief. “I can’t think of any reason, and I *know* that you did that to me—but I love you, *anyways*, and there’s nothing you could ever do that could take that away from me

“I *love* you, Eros—and I want that to be reason enough for you to *stay*.”

Eros shook his head, still clawing at his cheek. “It’s not a reason,” he sobbed. “It’s selfish. It’s selfish, and I can’t be selfish with you.”

“There’s nothing you could do to me that could be more selfish than ripping everything I feel for you away from me,” Helios hissed, his voice full of pain—and whatever fragments remained of Eros’s heart shattered like *glass*.

“I’m sorry,” he bawled, “I’m sorry, Helios, I’m so sorry—”

“Make it up to me,” Helios insisted stubbornly, “Let me be selfish. Let me have this. Let me keep my heart. Let me keep *you*.”

Eros’s sobs only became more broken. “Why would you—how could you still *want* me?”

“Because I *love you*—”

"I don't want you to love me," Eros protested, still sobbing, "I don't want you to love me, not—not like this."

"I don't care," Helios hissed, "I love you—but I need *everything*, Eros. I need *all* of you. I need my **reasons**."

Eros shook his head, whining weakly. "I can't *do* this."

"Give me back my reasons," Helios urged, "Make me want you again, and not just because I love—"

"Stop saying that," Eros choked, **"Stop saying that you love me."**

"I—"

Helios broke off, clutching at his throat. He glanced up at Eros, his face going gaunt with grief—and then, for the first time since they'd met, Helios began to sob.

"I—"

He broke off again, crumpling to the ground in despair. "I love—"

Eros sobbed, curling in on himself. "I can't—I can't do this. I can't let you love me, not when I'm—"

"I love your smile," Helios hiccuped, cutting him off. "I love your smile, because the first time I got you to smile, my heart just...it just felt **whole**."

"Stop," Eros pleaded, "I don't *want*—"

"I love your *laugh*," Helios continued desperately, "I love your laugh, because when you laugh, it's like the world is filled with colors I don't have names for."

"Helios, stop—"

"I love your *voice*, because there's no one else who I can talk with for hours."

"Stop—"

"I love your *tears*, because I know that they mean you **trust** me enough to let me watch you cry."

"St—"

"I love everything about you, and—"

"Stop."

Helios immediately fell silent, though tears still streamed down his cheeks.

"I love you, Helios," Eros hiccuped, rubbing at his face, "I love you—and I **hurt** you, without even realizing it until it was too late. I can't let you love me, not like this, not when—not when you mean this damn much to me, not when I—"

"I want you to **trust me**," Helios begged—and Eros shook his head miserably.

"Helios—"

"I want you to trust me enough to know that how I feel for you will never change," Helios insisted, "I want you to trust me enough to *let* me love you. I want you to—"

"I'm *scared*, Helios," Eros bawled, "I'm *scared*—and I just can't do this. I just—I can't **do** this. I can't love you. I can't let you love me—"

"There's no letting me love you, Eros," Helios interrupted, "It's already happened. I'm already in love. It doesn't matter whether you're human or siren or whatever, because I—"

He broke off, clutching at his throat. "I—"

"Don't."

"I'm **yours**, Eros," Helios sobbed, "I'm **yours**, and my feelings aren't going **anywhere**, and—and I don't want you to feel *scared*, not with me."

Eros shook his head, sobbing, letting out a pained whine. "I don't know how to *not* feel scared—"

"Do you love me?"

The question caught Eros off guard—but the answer spilled forth from his lips immediately, entangled with all the power and desperation of his song.

"I love you, more than anything else in the world."

"Then love me," Helios croaked, "*Love me*, and let that carry away your fear."

Eros sobbed, shaking his head. "I can't."

"What are you so **afraid** of, Eros?" Helios pleaded, his voice little more than a desperate mewl—and something deep within Eros's very being **splintered**.

"Don't you get it?" he bawled. ***"I just gave you every fucking reason to HURT me—and I can't deal with the person that I love trying to fucking KILL me again."***

Helios went **rigid**, horror gashing across his features—and despair *lashed* through Eros's chest as he realized just what words had left his mouth. He crumpled in on himself, a hitched, keening noise clawing up his throat—and, in that instant, Helios's sobbing grew all the more *desperate*.

"Eros—"

"She **killed** me," the siren choked, sobbing, fighting for air, fighting for any shred of resolve he could muster, fighting against the urge to simply let Helios's love spirit him away entirely—even as all of his efforts only grew more feeble by the instant. "I loved her, and she **hurt** me for no fucking reason—and I don't want to find out what you'll do if I—"

"I'm not going to **do** anything," Helios insisted, sobbing. "I don't—I don't want to **hurt** you—I don't—"

Eros shook his head, sobbing. "Helios—"

"I would rather tear my own *heart* than hurt you, and I don't—"

"*Helios—*"

"I just want ***YOU***," Helios hiccuped. "I just—I just want to ***hold*** you—"

"Hold me," Eros pleaded, his resolve crumbling *entirely*, ***"Hold me, please, I need you to—"***

Helios cut him off *immediately*, surging forwards and tackling him to the ground with an enormous bear hug. Eros didn't even fight it, too distraught to so much as *care*. Helios scooped him up into his arms, winding his tail around Eros, burying his face in the siren's hair—and, in an instant, Eros was **LOST**.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed, clinging to Helios for dear life. ***"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm—"***

"It's okay, you idiot," Helios hushed him, hiccuping miserably, pawing at his hair in a frantic attempt to soothe him. "I'm *here*. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Eros sobbed all the harder. ***"I love you—"***

"Let me say it back to you, Eros," Helios pleaded, his voice as desperate as the siren had ever heard it—and Eros couldn't help but comply.

"You can say anything you want," he choked out, ***"You can think anything you want. You can have back everything I've stolen from you. You—"***

A sudden fit of coughing cut him off; he began to hack and wheeze and choke on his own air—but all the while, Helios cradled him to his chest, running a hand through his hair, murmuring choked, desperate professions of love under his breath.

Eros's entire body was shaking like a leaf in a storm, twitching with each hacking, cough that he tried to bite back—but still, Helios held him, winding his arms around the siren as tightly as he could.

"I'm sorry," Eros rasped, fighting for air. "I'm so sorry. I'm—"

He broke off, another fit of coughing tearing through him; Helios soothed him insistently, hushing him with a raspy utterance of his name and a kiss to the top of his head. "It's okay. You're *okay—*"

"I'm sor—"

His voice gave out on him entirely then, pain raking through the back of his throat. Spots danced before his vision with sudden *delirium*; his magic flickered weakly within him, almost entirely depleted. Still coughing, he weakly shoved at Helios's chest, trying to push the naga away—but Helios's strong arms wound all the tighter around him, and Eros's desire to escape vanished in an *instant*.

He crumpled against Helios's chest as his coughing ebbed into shuddering sobs. Helios hissed softly, nudging at Eros's leg with the end of his tail, clinging to him tightly with one hand and combing through his hair with the other.

"I **love you**," the naga breathed, his voice shaky with relief, "I **love you**, you—you *stupid* fucking self-deprecating fish."

Eros sobbed, burying his face in the crook of Helios's neck. He tried to speak, but barely managed a pained whimper. Helios squeezed him gently, shushing him quietly.

"I'm here, you idiot—and nothing in this world is going to change that," he insisted, his voice cracking feebly. "I'm **here**, and I'm **yours**—and no amount of danger or freaky siren magic or *anything* is ever going to change that."

Eros nodded weakly, whimpering slightly.

"That doesn't mean I'm not fucking **angry** with you," Helios hissed quietly, fury creeping into his voice.

Eros sniffled, nodding again. He tried to apologize, but only managed to croak hoarsely. Helios shushed him gently, pressing a kiss to the top of Eros's head once more.

"I'm **angry**, Eros—but not because you lied to me, and not because you messed with my head," he rasped, his voice growing frail. "I understand why you lied. I understand why you used your powers on me."

"You're *scared*," Helios hissed, "You're *scared*, and I understand being **scared**."

"No," he continued gravely, "I'm angry because you thought that my feelings for you were something that could ever just **go away**. I'm **angry** because you thought that there was anything in this world that would ever let me **hurt you**."

Eros sobbed, clutching Helios all the more tightly. Helios squeezed him in return, hissing frustratedly.

"I love you, you—you *dumb fucking fish*," he hiccuped weakly, "I **love you**—and it **hurts**, finding out that you think that everything I feel for you is disposable."

Eros let out another fractured sob. He tried to beg, to let out a desperate plea for forgiveness—but no sound escaped him. His throat burned; even the mere attempt to speak felt like claws ripping through his vocal cords. Still shaking, still shuddering, he crumpled into Helios's touch and began to sob in earnest once more, winding his arm around the naga's neck.

"I **love you**, Eros," Helios hissed softly, coiling himself around Eros even more tightly than before. "I **love you**—and it hurts my heart to see you this afraid of me."

"I **love you**, and nothing in this world could ever make me *not* love you," Helios croaked—and *love* surged through Eros's chest, ripping another raw, broken sob from his throat.

"I'm not going anywhere," the naga insisted, his voice rough with pain, "and even if it takes a hundred years, I'm going to prove to you that there's nothing you need to be afraid of, with me."

Eros tried to speak, tried to protest—but when words finally clawed their way up his throat, they were nothing but a desperate plea.

"Don't leave me."

The words bit like barbed wire within his throat, raw and agonizing and wrought with toil—but the moment they left his lips, a visceral wave of **anguish** tore through his chest.

"Don't leave me, *please*—"

"I'm not leaving you," Helios insisted, squeezing him tightly—and Eros couldn't help but sob in return.

"Please, *don't*—"

He broke off with a whimper, the words hitching painfully in his throat; still, Helios shushed him gently, drawing him in closer to his chest and running his fingers through his hair.

"It's okay, baby," Helios soothed, "I'm here."

"*Please*—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Helios insisted, squeezing Eros once more. "I'm here—and I'm **yours**."

"Don't **leave**," Eros sobbed, still shaking uncontrollably. "I'm **yours**, Helios—"

The naga shushed him tenderly, nuzzling his chin against the top of Eros's head. "I'm **here**, Eros. I'm **here**."

He awoke in the night to a clap of thunder, and Helios's coils shifting around his waist. A slight whimper escaped him, and he stirred feebly—but in an instant, Helios was there, snuggling into the crook of his neck, murmuring sweet, soothing nothings as he pressed kisses to Eros's jaw.

"Sleep, baby," he insisted. Eros let out a soft, disgruntled noise, weakly grasping at Helios's tail.

"Where are you going?" he rasped blearily.

"Getting some water," the naga murmured, pressing another kiss to Eros's jaw. "*Sleep*, handsome—I'll be right back."

He began to pull away, and Eros couldn't help but whimper, stricken by sudden, irrational fear. Helios wound back in, pressing up against his side, shushing him quietly; immediately, Eros relaxed.

He met Helios's soft, concerned gaze in the dark as thunder rolled once more—and his heart **ached**.

"Please don't go," he croaked weakly. Helios shushed him softly, gently sweeping wayward curls from Eros's face, even as his tail tightened around the siren's waist.

"I'm not going anywhere," the naga promised quietly, "Not without you."

Tears pricked at Eros's eyes; he nodded feebly, whimpering quietly. Helios hissed quietly, shifting his position so that he was lying on his side besides Eros, snuggling back into the crook of the siren's neck.

"I'm here, baby," Helios insisted softly, mournfully. Eros nodded listlessly, scrubbing at his eyes briefly before returning his hand down to Helios's tail, which was still looped around his waist.

"Promise you'll stay?"

Helios let out a quiet, affirmative noise. "Always," he vowed, pressing a kiss to Eros's throat.

The siren nodded weakly, letting his eyes flutter shut. He stroked Helios's tail absently, and the naga hissed softly, kissing Eros's jaw once more.

"*Sleep*, baby," Helios insisted, gently nuzzling Eros. "Sleep, now—we'll talk in the morning."

Eros nodded once more, the gesture listless and drowsy—and before he knew it, he slipped back into a haze of uneasy dreams.

When he awoke again, it was to the sound of soft breathing and Helios's body wrapped around his own. He was lying on his side, curled up in Helios's arms with his forehead against the naga's chest. One of Helios's hands was in his hair, idly combing through his unruly curls. The naga had draped his tail over Eros's hip, cradling him gently; the majority of his tail was piled up just behind and around Eros, encircling his smaller form entirely.

Half-awake, Eros nuzzled in closer to Helios, pressing a kiss to his chest. Helios let out a tiny, embarrassed noise; Eros chuckled weakly in return, earning a kiss on the head from the naga.

"You're so pretty," Helios mumbled, nuzzling into Eros's hair, pressing another kiss to the siren's head. Eros's face flushed; he snuggled into Helios's chest sleepily.

"*You're* pretty," Eros countered groggily. Helios snorted.

"You're a fish," he argued, "Fish are objectively pretty."

Eros scoffed. "How?"

"Shiny."

"Mmph," Eros conceded, letting his eyes flicker shut once more. Helios yawned, shifting his position slightly.

"What kind of fish are you, by the way?" the naga asked softly, his hand still trailing through Eros's hair. Eros grumbled drowsily, nuzzling into Helios's chest once more.

"Tired fish," he replied, his words slurring together, "I'll show you later."

Helios hummed thoughtfully. "Nope," he countered mischievously, pressing another kiss to the top of Eros's head. "I wanna know."

Eros pouted. "Asshole," he grumbled, "Let me sleep."

Helios grinned, shifting his coils so that they cuddled Eros a little more snugly. "Nope."

Eros opened his eyes again, titling his head up to glower at Helios—who beamed at him blithely in return. The siren scoffed, rolling his eyes and snuggling back into Helios's chest.

"Guess," he mumbled smugly.

Helios let out an indignant noise. "You want me to *guess*?"

"Yup."

"Can I at least get a hint?" Helios pleaded.

Eros snorted.

"One hint," he agreed, pressing a tiny kiss to Helios's sternum.

The naga hissed happily; the tip of his tail smacked at their pillow. A small, flustered smile crept across Eros's lips; Helios pressed a kiss to the top of his head, squeezing him gently, and his smile only *grew*.

"What's my hint?" Helios asked, his voice conspiratorial. Eros chuckled.

"My nickname on the *Osprey* was Teeth," Eros mumbled, a drowsy smirk creeping across his lips. "Granted, that was for other reasons, but the name still applies now."

Helios *froze*.

"You're a ***shark***," he breathed, his tail excitedly smacking the ground once more. Eros let out a puff of laughter.

"No, dumbass," he chided.

Helios deflated slightly. "Oh."

"Think smaller," Eros said reassuringly, turning his gaze up to the naga. Helios blinked, a little surprised.

"What—"

"*Smaller.*"

Helios fell silent for a moment, his brow furrowing as he thought.

"A piranha?" he asked, hesitantly. Eros grinned.

"Smaller."

Helios's frown deepened. "*How* small?"

Eros smirked. "Smaller than my thumb."

The naga froze, his eyes going wide—and then, before Eros knew what was happening, Helios tackled him, flipping their positions so that he was poised above Eros, staring down at him in sheer delight.

"You're a betta fish!" Helios cried, his voice full of wonder. Eros grinned up at him—and immediately, Helios darted back to sit against his tail, clutching his cheeks as an enormous, dopey smile curled across his face.

"Oh my gods, you're a ***betta fish***," Helios breathed—and Eros flushed at the elation in his voice.

He sat up groggily, scrubbing at his eyes before shuffling over to Helios, smiling softly at the wonder-struck naga—who glanced up at him furtively, suddenly stricken.

"What *color* are you?" Helios asked, his voice desperate. Eros smirked.

"You'll just have to wait and see," he grinned, winking at Helios—who immediately darted forwards, tackling Eros back against the pillows with a mischievous hiss. The siren let out a startled yelp as he fell—only to dissolve into laughter in an *instant*.

He wrestled with Helios for a moment, batting at the naga playfully—until Helios snatched his wrist, pinning him down. A flicker of panic shot through his chest, only to vanish the moment that his gaze locked with that of the naga.

Helios's cool cerulean eyes seemed alight in the morning light, and almost electric in his excitement. This close, Eros could see every little fleck of silver that ringed the naga's dilated pupils, like stars lingering in the dawn sky; this close, the deep, effervescent blue seemed to draw him in, beckoning him like crashing waves and all that was *beautiful* within the world.

His breath stilled in his throat, caught by the strangest sense of longing—and then Helios's soft, shaky voice cut through his utterly enchanted stupor.

"Can I kiss you?" the naga croaked weakly—and a sudden pang of ***yearning*** struck through Eros's chest, urgent and insistent beyond anything he had ever felt before.

He tried to speak, to usher breath back into his lungs, to somehow convey to the naga above him that there was nothing he wanted more than to be kissed, but all he could muster was a shaky nod.

Still, Helios seemed to understand. His eyes softened; slowly, he leant in, and captured Eros's lips in a tender yet insistent kiss.

Eros's eyes slipped shut almost immediately, contentment easing through him as Helios sank into his touch. He fell slack as the naga's lips began to work against his own—and, for a brief, breathtaking moment, he was lost in the gentleness of Helios's touch, in the fingers tangled up with his and the lips pressed against his own and the tail constricting around his leg so tightly that, for a moment, it seemed to be a part of his own form.

There was something about the naga's presence, something that set some deeper, more *vicious* part of him alight with ecstatic, overwhelming **adoration**—and, within an instant, he found himself powerless to do anything more than fall apart within Helios's strong, embracing arms.

In that instant, it was all he could process—an indescribable sense of *love*, of **safety**, as if all that existed within the world was Helios and himself—but, eventually, Helios pulled away, bringing the world back into vague focus, leaving Eros dizzy and breathless and all too unsure whether centuries or mere seconds had passed.

His eyes fluttered open to meet Helios's heady cerulean gaze; the naga offered him a soft, fond smile—and something deep within his soul sung with desperate, vying elation, a yearning so intense that it stole the air from his lungs.

It was terrifying, realizing that Helios had so quickly become a vital part of him, that Helios had so completely stolen his heart—but at the very same time, it made him feel **safe**.

He was **safe**, nestled in Helios's arms—**safe** in a way that he'd never known before, in a way that he hadn't realized he'd *yearned* for, in a way that he hadn't realized he *could* yearn for—and as terrifying as it was, it felt **right**.

"Gods," Helios breathed, his words snatching Eros's attention away from the torrent of emotion surging through his chest. "I can't believe I've never kissed you before."

The siren's face flushed. "You have, dumbass," he chided lightly, amusedly. Helios snorted.

"Yesterday doesn't count," he replied, rolling his eyes. "Not now, not after I know what kissing you is *supposed* to be like."

Eros's face **burned**.

"You're such a *romantic*, you asshole," he mumbled, swatting at the naga—but only succeeding in bumping him with the end of his left arm. Helios grinned, nonetheless.

"You *make* me romantic," he teased, winking down at Eros. The siren scoffed, though he couldn't keep a tiny, fond smile from creeping across his lips. Helios cackled in return, and Eros's heart ***melted*** at the sound.

"I love you, Helios," he confessed weakly, an uneasy sense of sorrow creeping through his chest.

Helios frowned, his brows furrowing worriedly.

"I'm not leaving you." the naga stated sternly, causing Eros's face to flush. "No matter what."

Eros opened his mouth to speak—only to hesitate as a sudden, overwhelming sense of worry swept through his gut.

"Promise?"

Helios nodded slightly, tenderly brushing a strand of hair from his face.

"I'm ***yours***, Eros," he murmured, offering the siren a faint, mournful smile. "There's nothing in this world that could *ever* change that."

Eros swallowed hard, a pang of guilt striking through his gut—but as Helios gently caressed his cheek, it morphed into something distinctly ***yearning***.

"Can you kiss me again?"

The words left his lips before he so much as had time to think about them; still, the slight, fond smile that crept across Helios's lips in return made something deep within his soul ***melt***.

There was something about Helios, something that set him apart from anyone else that Eros had ever met, something about his tender hands and his soft cerulean eyes and his sunny-sweet smile, something that spoke of safety and *home* and everything in the world that he had never known that he'd needed—and as the naga's lips came to work against his own once more, he let himself drown in Helios's presence, surrendering himself entirely to the torrent of emotion rushing through his soul.

After a long moment of dazed, heady kisses, the duo finally parted and began their morning. While Helios prepared breakfast, Eros sat on the counter besides him; as such, Helios took advantage of the siren's proximity to steal countless tiny kisses from his lips, bringing Eros to flush with each little affectionate gesture.

"I want strawberries," Helios pouted in between kisses, turning his attention to the fruit he was slicing. Eros scoffed.

"Then we'll get strawberries," he countered loftily. Helios snorted.

"I've never found them this early in the year," he admitted. "The ones in our garden aren't big enough to produce fruit this year, and the big harvests aren't for another few months, which means that it'll take *ages* for them to ship overseas."

Eros rolled his eyes. Helios darted in for another kiss, then turned back to the fruit.

"Well, at least we have mangoes," Eros smarmed, slightly triumphant, though flushing. Helios scoffed.

"I *still* don't understand how you like those things," the naga grumbled, eyeing one of the aforementioned fruits accusingly. Eros snickered.

"You're just mad because you—"

"I'm not *mad*," Helios declared, flashing Eros an exasperated look. "Yes, I always get my tusks stuck in those stupid excuses for fruit. Yes, I made a mess—"

"Yes, it was hilarious—"

Helios let out an indignant squawk, accidentally driving the knife down through the peach he was cutting with too much force. Eros laughed, and Helios whirled around to face him..

"It was *disgusting*—"

"You got mango *all over* your chest. You said that you were still sticky, after a *week*—"

"I *was* sticky—"

"We went to the bathhouse *twice*—"

"*Sticky*, Eros, *sticky*—"

"Helios," Eros stated gravely. "You didn't have a problem when I drooled on you in my sleep. You didn't have a problem when you were *rolling in the sand*. You didn't—"

"I'm not *mad* about the mango—"

"Yeah, ri—"

"I am, however, mad about *you*," Helios purred, flashing Eros a teasing smirk.

Immediately, Eros flushed—but before he could speak, Helios darted in and pressed a kiss to his jaw, nudging him gently with his nose before pulling away. Eros's face burnt all the more; his gaze flickered up to meet that of his lover—and at the sight of the utter adoration in the naga's vivid cerulean eyes, he couldn't help but let out a soft, slight noise.

Helios's expression grew all the more tender, and Eros's heart *melted*.

"Can you kiss me again?" he asked weakly—and, with a hesitant nod, Helios leant in once more, letting his lips brush against Eros's jaw. The siren's breath hitched slightly as his

lover's tusks grazed against his throat, but he made no move to push the other man away, too delighted by the new contact to even consider it.

"I don't know how much of what I've heard about sirens is true," Helios began slowly, pressing a kiss to Eros's jaw before trailing lower, "but there's, uh, one thing that kinda sticks out to me a little."

Eros swallowed hard, his face flushing as Helios pressed a kiss to his throat. "What is it?"

Helios hesitated, then pulled away to look Eros dead in the eyes, his face as grave as Eros had ever seen it.

"Do you have gills?"

For a moment, Eros froze, trying to process the naga's words—and then, in the space of an instant, he began to sputter, recoiling from Helios, scrambling further back onto the counter.

"*What?!?*"

Helios flinched, his face flushing in response. "Sorry, I—"

"What kind of *question*—"

"Sorry—"

"You—"

Eros broke off, curling in on himself with a mortified whine, covering his face with his hand.

"Yes, I have gills," he warbled weakly, tucking his knees in close to his chest. "They're on my neck."

Helios hesitated again. "Your neck?"

Eros nodded embarrassedly, curling in on himself all the more. "They're usually just these little scars," he confessed frailly, lowering his hand to his gills. "They only open up if I'm having trouble breathing, or if I'm underwater, so—"

"And you've been covering them," Helios blurted, his eyes widening in shock.

Eros winced. "Yeah."

Helios stared at him for a long moment, aghast—and then, without warning, he snatched up his knife and rocketed out of the kitchen at top speed. Immediately, Eros sprung into motion, leaping off of the counter and barrelling after Helios, out the door and into the temple's courtyard.

"Don't you *dare*—"

"You're *covering your gills*—"

"It's not like I *use them*—"

"You use them to *breathe*—"

"They don't work in the *air*, Helios!"

The naga stopped dead in his tracks, whirling around suddenly. Eros skidded to a stop just behind him, backpedaling slightly to avoid running into the other man—but, just as he began to stumble, Helios caught him by the waist, tugging him in close.

Immediately, Eros's face flushed. "Helios—"

"Promise?"

Eros balked. "What?"

"Promise me you don't need them to breathe?" Helios asked weakly, worriedly.

Eros scoffed. "I need them to breathe, dumbass," he drawled amusedly, "but only when I'm in the water."

Helios's brow furrowed, but he nodded slightly, nonetheless. Eros rolled his eyes, easing out of Helios's grasp before gently taking the knife from the naga.

"If you're really that worried, I can stop wearing the turtlenecks," he murmured softly, turning his gaze up to meet his lover's fretful cerulean eyes. "Please don't ruin my shirts, though, okay?"

Helios *flushed*. "Sorry."

Eros snorted lightly.

"Don't apologize, you dumb snake," he chided fondly, a shy smile wobbling across his lips. "I'm honestly touched that you're worried about me."

Helios hissed quietly, averting his gaze. Eros flushed slightly.

"I worry about you, too, you know," he admitted softly, shuffling awkwardly, adjusting his grip on the kitchen knife.

Helios glanced up at him, his gaze soft and pained. "You do?"

Eros nodded weakly, his face flushing an even deeper red. Helios's brow furrowed fretfully.

"What do you worry about?"

Eros's face *burned*.

"I worry whether you get enough sleep," he mumbled sheepishly, averting his gaze. "I know that you've taken to waiting up the better half of the night in case I have nightmares, and I just worry that—"

"I'd stay up the whole night to make sure that you were ok—"

"I know," Eros murmured guiltily, turning his soulful gaze up to meet that of the naga. "That's just one of the things that I love about you, the fact that you're always looking out for me—and just everyone you meet, in general.

"But your health is important, too," the siren insisted painedly. "I don't want you getting sick, especially if it's because you're not taking enough care of yourself."

Helios averted his gaze, hissing slightly, hugging himself. "I don't want to stop caring about you—"

"I'm not asking you to," Eros interrupted rapidly, sweeping forwards, sudden fear clawing through his chest. He passed Helios the knife, then took the naga's free hand in his own, squeezing it tightly.

"I'm *never* asking you that, not again," he vowed, adamant. "Your love means more to me than anything else in the world, Helios—"

"You don't mean that."

"I **do**," Eros insisted, squeezing the naga's hand even more tightly than before, even as a sharp pang of *anguish* speared through his chest. "You mean **everything** to me—"

"You tried to make me stop loving you."

Eros fell silent, averting his gaze—and Helios *hissed*, the sound distressed.

"I was **scared**, Helios," he finally whispered, his voice strained. "I made a mistake, singing to you."

Helios hesitated. "What do you mean?"

Eros forced in a deep, shaky breath.

"I thought that my magic was gone," he admitted slowly. "I haven't been able to feel it since I fought the demon, and so I thought that I was **safe**—and when I realized what I'd done to you, I didn't know what to do. I thought that the only way to keep you from breaking my heart was to just get it over with myself."

Helios hissed angrily, squeezing Eros's hand tightly. "I could **never** hurt you," he insisted, worry and fury twined together in his voice.

Eros averted his gaze guiltily.

"I know, love," he whispered, "It just took me a little too long to realize that."

The world was quiet for a long, agonizing moment—and then, gently, Helios took him by the hand.

"You have no idea how much that *means* to me, just hearing that from you."

Eros glanced back up at him, his heart *fluttering* feebly—and then, suddenly, a bubble of laughter slipped past his lips, prompting him to avert his gaze once more.

"I was going to kiss you, you dumb snake," Eros admitted exhaustedly, "But you're just too damn tall for me to reach you."

Helios snorted, a sly grin splitting across his face.

"I guess there's just some things that just work better lying down," he smirked, letting go of Eros's hand to place a finger over the siren's lips, curling down to hover over the smaller man—and, immediately, Eros's face **flushed**, causing Helios to double over cackling in the same instant.

"You're such a dumbass," Eros snarked, a grin creeping across his burning cheeks. Helios quickly fought off the last of his laughter, coughing slightly as he lurched upright once more—and Eros couldn't help but roll his eyes.

"We should finish breakfast before the flies get to the mangoes," he stated wryly, gesturing back towards the kitchen.

Helios pouted, crossing his arms. "I still can't believe you convinced me to buy *more* of those things."

"You're the only person I've ever met who's been excited about the fact that I'm a siren."

His voice was little more than a raspy exhalation, even to his own ears; still, Helios turned to face him in reply, his vivid eyes soft with genuine curiosity. Eros fiddled with the bottle of water in his hand, glancing down at his legs, which dangled over the edge of the roof. While Helios's upper half was sprawled out on the tiled roof, basking in the little sunlight that had begun to peek out after the last night's downpour, the naga's tail had long since nestled around his hip, gently holding him in place and guiding him closer every time he anxiously fidgeted away, reassuring him with his silent, insistent touch that he was *home*, that he was **safe**—

"I mean, there was my friend, Astra, but she doesn't exactly count," Eros continued, the words spilling out of him before he could so much as *try* to stop them. "She's the only other siren I've ever met, and she was more focused on trying to keep me from getting killed than anything else."

Helios chuckled, bumping Eros's leg with his tail in an almost absent manner. "I mean, you do have a knack for getting yourself into *sticky situations*."

Eros snorted, shooting the naga a flat, wry look. "You're the one who seems to have a vendetta against any fruit with seeds bigger than a grain of *sand*—"

"I mean, I think we can both agree that they're the *pits*—"

Helios broke off with an indignant squawk as Eros flopped backwards, crashing down onto his chest without a hint of grace. Immediately, the naga began to sputter, batting at the gleefully uncooperative siren in a feeble attempt to get him to move. After a moment of deliberately ignoring Helios's whining, Eros flashed his lover a customary shit-eating grin, took a long, drawn-out drink of water, and then finally twisted around and began to clamber over Helios—an action which was quickly cut short as Helios flopped his arm down across Eros's waist, causing him to crumple back down onto Helios's chest with a startled squeak.

"He—"

"—but, you know, I think that this outcome is quite *peachy*."

Eros *froze*—and then, slowly, he turned to meet Helios's gaze, completely and utterly unimpressed.

"....did you seriously just spend the last two minutes setting up a fruit pun about my *ass*?"

Helios pursed his lips, glancing away childishly.

Eros's eyes narrowed. "Helios...."

"....I may or may not have been waiting for that pun to come to *fruition* for a while, now."

Eros snorted, a slight smirk twisting across his lips. "Unbelievable."

Helios hummed, lazily tilting his head to the side, meeting Eros's gaze with a mischievous smile. "I think that pretty much sums you up."

Eros *grinned*.

"You're one to talk, dumbass," he teased, squirming onto his back so that his legs were draped over Helios's chest before letting his head loll to the side so that he could look the naga in the eyes. "I can't go ten seconds without getting distracted by the fact that you're a *natural wonder*."

Helios scoffed, swatting at Eros's leg with the end of his tail. "You're saying that as if you're not the very definition of stunning," he chided, drawing a snort of laughter from the siren.

"I don't see *you* getting so distracted that you ruin a week's supply of valerian root," Eros snarked, prompting Helios to scoff once more.

"That's because I only have eyes for you, dumbass," he declared poutily, childishly flicking at Eros's knee with his tail tip, once again. "You can't distract me, because you're already the center of my attention."

Eros's face flushed. "You—"

"I love you, dumbass," Helios chided, his voice fond and his tail absently flicking against Eros's knee. "Everything about you makes me feel more complete than I've ever been—even though I've never felt like I was missing something."

Eros swallowed hard, hesitantly turning his gaze to meet that of the naga—and, after a brief moment of hesitation, Helios curled over onto his side, adjusting his position so that they were face to face.

“I love you, you dumb fish,” Helios murmured, his fingers tracing a featherlight path across the siren’s ribs. “I love you, more than I have words to describe—and everything I learn about you, no matter how unimportant it might seem, makes me all the more excited to be by your side.

“I just want to be a part of your world, even if there are parts of you that you’re not ready to share with me,” the naga insisted, his hand fumbling to grasp that of the siren. “I’m here for you, no matter what—”

In an instant, Eros swooped in, cutting the naga off with an insistent kiss—only to pull away after just a brief moment, some powerful, overwhelming emotion surging through his chest, all but *threatening* to spill over as he met Helios’s gaze.

“I’m going to tell you everything,” he breathed, squeezing Helios’s larger hand as best he could. “Right here, right now—I’m going to tell you *everything*.”