

Elian fell in love with someone that he knew he could not have. He knew from the moment that he met him that he was doomed to heartbreak. And the thing was that he really didn't care because the way he was living when he was around him made him feel so good. Anything that could fill him with this much joy had to be something worth taking a risk for. It had to be something that was worth living for even if it ended in heartbreak. So he happily indulged in the guilty pleasure of it all.

It wasn't bad, nor was it something that he regretted after all these years. It was one of the best things that he had ever experienced. Each moment that he spent with him had made him swoon and feel weak. It was terrifying yes — he had to admit that he never would have caved into his feelings had Lorenzo not been the one to make it clear how he felt first. There was too much to lose and too big of a risk for him to have mustered up the courage to look in the mirror and say "I love men" on his own. There were risks for someone like him and not everyone that he knew was aware of that.

Elian was too afraid to find out what he had to lose if he let the burning feeling inside of him out. It threatened to expose him bare to the world. He was vulnerable as he broke free from his chrysalis. Every moment and every step that he took into this new world meant there were conflicts with his home world that he would have to battle. Bare and vulnerable and yet expected to have the armor of an aged soldier to battle against all that the world had to throw at him.

And then came Lorenzo.

Lorenzo.

He was so wonderful and so terrible and he made Elian's heart beat. It was for him that his lungs breathed.

But now Elian was a weary old man. He had wrinkles in the corners of his eye from how often he smiled and they were one of the only indicators that he was aging. Elian did not seem to fall victim to time. The only thing to really give away his age when not looking at his appearance was his behavior. His mannerisms were laced with the years that had passed and the people he'd met. His home was full of trinkets that told stories and his porch was where the children in the neighborhood found themselves because he was a warm presence. He was the very sun.

*"Life blooms from your veins"* Lorenzo had once said, *"In your skin are the very secrets of the Earth."*

He was poetic like that. Elian thought it was all flowery and meant nothing but flattery. But the ink on his skin with trees and life nodded to what Lorenzo had said all those years ago. He clung to those words like cologne on his shirt. He craved it like he was a man in the desert. He longed to hear those words spoken again. To be loved so deeply. To be seen the way he had been seen then. As someone who was capable of life in all the ways, the world rejected him.

Oh, how he longed to know the touch of someone who came close to the stolen moments from that year.

"Did you ever love someone?" one of the kids asked, "Do you love someone?"

Here they were on his porch, chickens in the hands of some of them and watering cans in the grasps of others. All of them went silent at the question.

Elian thought about the years that had passed and he wondered for a moment if his heart did still beat for Lorenzo. Were the feelings he felt simply nostalgia for the youthful love he'd

found? Had he gone all of these years clinging to something so juvenile and never allowing anyone in quite the same?

“I did once.” he finally said, “And I do.”

He knew in the deepest parts of his heart and soul that if Lorenzo ever popped up into his life again, he’d stumble over his words and his face would grow warm just like it had those years ago. The wrinkles would melt away and his eyes would grow brighter and he’d be a teenager once more — desperately looking to preserve what once was. It would wash over him and return him to an earlier mind and his sensibility would fly out of the window.

Elían knew that he was still in love.

He’d spent all of these years all alone and he didn’t even know if Lorenzo had ever felt the same. The end to their romance wasn’t something they both agreed to and it wasn’t something that he had seen coming. At some point, Lorenzo simply stopped showing up to their meetings and Elían foolishly waited every day until fall for a lover that would never return.

“What was her name?”

“Lorenzo.” he said gently, “His name is Lorenzo.”

*“Your dad doesn’t look for you when you run away?” Elían asked. He swung his legs back and forth and met the eyes of the other.*

*“He does. But he’ll never find me here.” Lorenzo said. He had an interesting manner of speaking. Sometimes he was loud — so loud that the world seemed to shake. He was bold and full of fire. But in their conversations together, he was so quiet. In the moments like this where they sat with take-out boxes on their laps and laughter in between their bites, he was so quiet that Elían might have missed what he was saying if he wasn’t listening.*

*Elían laughed, “And what if he does one day? What are you going to tell him?”*

*There was silence between them and within it, Elían discovered his own complex feelings beginning to bubble and rise. He could hear the wind blowing, the laughter of kids, the sounds of cars honking and people shouting at each other from around the corner. His home, his domain, his kingdom that he gladly allowed Lorenzo to be a part of.*

*“That I ran away because I found you.”*

The children clung to the fact that Elían had told them he loved another man. There was something about hearing someone so wise, so kind, and so patient say those words that filled some of them with hope for the future. Some of them simply thought it was sweet that he could speak so truthfully. There were a number of reasons that the children admired him and the list only grew longer with time. The more they learned, the more they loved, and the more that Elían became their safety.

Elían took in every moment with them and treasured every question that he knew would only build up a world where they could be honest with themselves and all that they knew. All of the love that they exerted he returned with his aged advice on how to tackle every problem the world might dare throw at them. He became more than just another old man then, he became a friend, a teacher, and a sign that the future would be okay.

“What was Lorenzo like?” asked Peter, one of the kids who loved to be around him the most. He had especially become thrilled by the stories that Elian allowed them to hear about his mysterious lover that was no longer around. He asked questions as if the world would fall apart the next moment and he would never hear them again. He breathed in every word and Elian loved to see how happy he was with every tale that he told. And he didn’t mind at all — he loved having the chance to reminisce about all of those things from his youth that he longed for.

“He was very loud. Very angry. Very frustrating,” Elian laughed, “Nothing seemed good enough for him and yet he also loved so many things. He loved cats and the sun but hated the heat and cleaning. One time he got so mad when I said that we should spend the day washing my car to cool off. In my defense, it was a really cool car. An old beauty now.”

Peter looked up at him like he had struck gold. There was wonder and stars in his eyes, his smile carried the future that sure to come — one where they would never have to fear as Elian feared and hurt as he had been hurt.

“What did you like about him?”

“That he was full of passion,” Elian said, “And when he smiled the world stopped turning. He liked chickens and feeding them. One time he forced me to steal some chickens with him from this person he didn’t like. So he was fun and full of adventure too.”

“You stole chickens?” Peter asked, ‘Why?’

“Honestly? I don’t remember what that man did to warrant us stealing his chickens. I only remember that Lorenzo disliked him and that was justification enough for me to join him. I like chickens too. You kids play with my girls enough to know that.”

Peter laughed and nodded, one of the smaller chickens resting in his arms. Elian had to admit that he was mildly impressed by this child’s ability to keep a chicken so still. “What happened to him?” The question he dreaded.

How did he find it within him to admit that he didn’t know? That he had sat waiting at their spot every day for weeks until he gave up. That even now he still avoided that corner of the street because all it brought was the pain that the person he cared for so ardently. Explaining that he had no idea what became of him, who he was now, or where in the world to find him. He was left with a trail of unrelated somethings that led him to nothing. It wasn’t that he hadn’t tried over the years to find him and learn where Lorenzo had gone, but that no matter where he searched he found nothing. Elian waited for the return of a ghost until his own heart had broken too much to wait anymore. Why was explaining that so difficult? It seemed so simple and yet Elian could not form the words — his tongue betrayed him.

Instead of explaining the pains of his aching heart, he stared at the ground until Peter decided to move on into the next conversation.

*“I love you.”*

*Elian’s eyes widened and he stared at the teenager in front of him. His face was heated up with a barely visible blush. His dark brown eyes were hidden behind messy curls falling in his face.*

*“If you don’t feel the same, that’s fine. But please above anything else, don’t be disgusted with me.”*

*His heart was thundering and his throat felt dry. He knew that there were many things others would say. They would mock Lorenzo for not being a man in their eyes. They'd mock Elian for wanting to be with someone who seemed to forsake gender. They'd call him cruel names and he would bleed from them all. He knew what would come from loving someone like Lorenzo and still, his heart beat in tune with his. In the silence from their words came the thundering of their hearts and Elian knew that he did not care.*

*He was gay.*

*What a way to be damned. He would be forever condemned and lose anything left that he had. The world wouldn't understand. They hardly understood Lorenzo. Now they would rob Elian of his masculinity and deny him the right to be a man. He would be mocked and belittled, torn apart until he was beyond repair. They would throw him to the wolves and never question their motives or if he truly deserved it.*

*But as he stared at this man before him, he knew that in the deepest crevices of his soul lay a space for just the two of them.*

*"I love you too."*

Elian still had some things from the past. It was hard to part with trinkets and gifts that had sparked a beautiful flame inside of him. Little bracelets, a rosary, some pressed flowers, and notes that were meant only for his eyes. Now the bracelets were falling apart, the rosary was worn and lost color, and the pressed flowers and notes threatened to turn to dust. He kept them on a shelf, reserved for all the fond memories of his youth and every so often he dusted it and was thrown back to life being seventeen and in love.

On days like today, he liked to bring everything down and travel back all those years. He liked to imagine that the years hadn't washed over him and that he would be able to walk out the door and meet Lorenzo once again.

As he flipped through the scrapbook that carried those flowers and those notes, he felt a tugging at his heartstrings — a song being played on them. Still, the times he found himself being more fond of recently were those when he was hidden in his house with a cafecito, looking back at what once was.

He ran his fingertips over the notes Lorenzo wrote him, smiling with all the fondness in the world.

*"I've never been the best Catholic, but I believe I have to thank God for bringing you to me"*

Elian had long since abandoned the idea of the church. God may have existed, maybe he didn't. That wasn't his to know. All he was sure of though was that if there was someone to thank for that youthful romance, he would thank them thoroughly while cursing the fact that they robbed him of his joy just the same.

*"Do you see the good you bring out in everyone that meets you?"*

He didn't and he never would. Elian didn't like to think of himself as being anything more than a regular man. Even as a teenager, he didn't consider himself to be anything particularly impressive. He lived and he loved and he had the chance to give the same to Lorenzo. He would have done it all over again in a heartbeat.

And he knew what Lorenzo would say. If he still was filled with the passion, hope, and desire for more that was present when they were young. He would tell Elian he was a gift from the heavens and that the Earth was blessed to know him. He would tell him that creation hid in the deepest parts of his gaze and that in his hair were the secrets to a perfect world. He would tell Elian that life came from his veins.

Elian would disagree. He would tell him he was just someone from these streets. Someone with dreams and aspirations like the many other faces that lived there. He was one man in a sea of desires and wants that were drowned out by the wealthy. And still, Lorenzo would look at him and tell him that he was special, that he was unique, that Elian was proof that the world was good.

*“Do you read these silly little notes or do you just entertain me by pretending?”*

He treasured them then and he treasured them now. While he thought about the what ifs and the different scenarios that there were to imagine when it came to these memories that he had left. Elian wondered if Lorenzo was the same man he was then. Of course, everyone had to grow up, mature, and change into someone else. But he had to hope for the chance that his spirit hadn't died and that when he imagined him, he was just that too.

He had to hope that his father hadn't gotten to him and destroyed the fire that he bore. That he was finally accepted and able to become the man that he was always destined to be. Great, impactful, strong, resilient, and carrying power in his words. Somewhere out there some other kids were talking to an aged man who had all the stories in the world to tell. Somewhere out there, Lorenzo was thriving.

Lost in his thoughts, Elian did not notice the knocking at his door. When he finally did, he closed the book with its hidden memories and put back on that shelf with the trinkets that he treasured so much. It had to be the kids again, looking for more stories from him. He never got sick of telling them and they never seemed tired of receiving them. In that way, Elian accomplished everything he ever wanted from life; he made an impact on the youth.

*“Will you wait for me?” Lorenzo asked.*

*“Wait for you?”*

*He nodded, “If I have to disappear for a little. If my dad finds out and stops letting me come here with him. Will you wait for me?”*

*The thought of being robbed of this romance killed him. Elian felt nauseous at the very thought of Lorenzo disappearing without a trace. He knew if that came to be, he'd worry like never before. He'd be afraid of what it meant. Would he be safe or would it be a sign of something much more cruel? Lorenzo didn't talk a whole lot about home so he wondered a lot about what it would mean if he suddenly stopped coming.*

*Yet, he already knew his answer.*

*“I'd wait every day for the rest of my life for you to come back.”*

*He said it with the ignorant promise of youthful love. The idea that this was the way that it would always be and the certainty that the future could not touch their deepest love and desire to keep the other in their world. Elian spoke proudly because in his mind, the horrors of the world would never be able to hurt them.*

*Lorenzo looked at him and when he did Elian was certain that the stars decided to rest in his eyes. They glittered with all the wonder in the world, all the joy. Elian could see the halo around Lorenzo's head, solidifying the happiness he knew was something so pure and nothing to be ashamed of. This was one of God's gifts. One of those few precious things that were forever imprinted on his mind.*

*He knew the risks that he was taking. He understood that if anyone caught them then it wouldn't be good. The fact that they were fitting together despite their puzzle pieces never being meant to was something the world would frown out. Their safety lay on crumbling sand. Their love was stored in a wax building to protect it. The entire world was against them and they both knew in the back of their minds that one day they would have to face it. However, in moments like this one, where they were sprawled on the rooftop of a building, there was not a worry in the world that could have torn them apart. They were happy. They were free. Elian could spread his wings and be exactly who he wanted to be.*

*Reaching to cup Lorenzo's face, he brought him in for a kiss. Because this was their kingdom. This was their land full of their ambitions and all that they coveted. Here, they were safe from anything the world had to throw at them. Here they were Elian and Lorenzo.*

One day, Peter came by as per usual with his friends.

"I have another friend who is coming," he said, "But he's not here yet."

"That is quite fine," Elian said, "He can join us when he gets here. I'm sure you'll be here for a while."

His home had truly become a place for all the kids to play. And really? He didn't mind it all that much. Neither did their parents. It gave them somewhere to be that was safe and they knew exactly where to look if they weren't nearby their homes. He'd exchange conversation with them and they would give him food sometimes as a thanks for keeping an eye on the children.

Peter especially stuck around for long. He was only about ten years old and he adored playing with the chickens or simply listening to Elian tell him stories. His fondness of the tales of Lorenzo and Elian made him stick around for longer. In him, Elian saw hope that the future would be kinder and he hoped that he was able to witness such a thing.

Even the teenagers sometimes found themselves in his yard. It was hard to live in a world where so few adults seemed to truly understand what was going through their heads. Rebellion, anger, fear, loneliness. Elian knew it all and even to those that didn't come into his yard, he offered a smile. There were so few things you could do to reach someone that doesn't want to be seen besides a simple, gracious smile. He offered his light to anyone that might take it and if it was one of the older kids, even better. He knew their heartache and their worries. His teenage years had long since passed but they still rang fresh in his mind all of the time.

So he was surprised when Romeo showed up at his gate.

Peter must have been running around again when the other kid showed up. He was a skinny and tall thing, but Elian figured he couldn't have been older than fifteen. He had ginger hair and pale skin covered in freckles. It seemed like he had been rollerskating there. When he met Elian's eyes they were a bold green but what caught Elian's attention was the shape of them. They were familiar.

"Is Peter here?" he asked, popping some gum in his mouth.

Elían nodded, “He is. You must be his friend.”

The kid opened the gate and sure enough he had rollerskates on, “We both go to the same rec center all of the time for soccer. Are you Elían?”

“The very one.”

Something about him had struck Elían as being so familiar. He wasn’t sure at the time what it was. But the way his hair was parted, the shape of his eyes, and even the sound of his voice carried familiarity that made Elían panic in the oddest way — as if there was something about this kid that there was to feel anxious about.

“My name is Romeo Bernardi.” he said, holding a hand out to shake Elían’s hand.

“Elían Hernandez Cañizares,” he replied, smiling at him, “Peter is in the back with the chickens. Don’t be afraid of them, they aren’t very mean-spirited.”

“My uncle has chickens and I played with them all the time as a kid. Still do. I’ll be okay. But thank you.” he nodded and he quickly disappeared to go play with the other kids in the back of Elían’s house.

What an odd feeling to feel like he knew this child from somewhere. He knew for certain that he had never met a Romeo Bernardi in his life, but still, he felt it deep inside that he would feel this again when it came to him.

Later on in the day, Peter tugged Romeo along to sit down and listen to Elían’s stories. Or rather, he was attempting to.

“Come on!” Peter had groaned, “You’ll like it I promise.”

“I really have to get back. My dad is going to be mad if I get home late.”

Peter did not seem to be a fan of that answer, pouting like he was six years old.

Elían chuckled, amused at how desperate Peter was for this new friend to hear his old stories about his youth and the love that he had experienced.

“Even for just one story?”

“It’s okay, Peter,” Elían waved his hand, “Romeo can come back another time and I’ll tell my stories earlier in the day.”

Though defeated, he accepted these conditions. He let go of his friend and Romeo looked up to Elían with a thankful look.

*“What do you want to do when you grow up?” Lorenzo asked while sitting on a swing with Elían.*

*“I don’t know really. Maybe be a teacher? I like working with kids. I already volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club. What about you?”*

*“I want to write.” Lorenzo said, “I want to write poetry and have it published and known by people. I could get out all of my thoughts about my dad, life, us and I think it would be really nice.”*

*“That sounds nice. I’d read your poetry from cover to cover.” Elían said with a smile, “I think you’ll make a great writer.”*

*“I think you’ll make a great teacher.”*

*They sat there on those swings. It was dark out and they were both risking it all by doing so. They knew well that there was a lot that they could lose by being out late, but they were content. They felt safe in each others presence and that was all that seemed like it mattered.*

*Lorenzo started to swing, going higher and higher.*

*“Swing with me, Elian!” he laughed.*

*“I’m fine just watching.” he said.*

*Lorenzo wouldn’t take that as an answer, “Nope! You have to swing with me or I won’t come back tomorrow and then you’ll forever be sad.”*

*Just like him to threaten Elian so playfully with all of the things he feared the most. They could afford to make light of it though. Neither one of them wanted to stop meeting up and the summer seemed to be passing them by so quickly and yet they were even more devoted to each other. Every moment that they spent together, they built something beautiful together that only grew stronger.*

*He watched as Lorenzo swung, going high higher until the swing was making noise too. Someone might wake up if they weren’t careful. But careful wasn’t at the top of his concerns. He was thinking about how happy Lorenzo looked, how sweet his smile was, and how much Elian was head over heels in love with this idiot. He was stubborn and sometimes so clueless to the world around him, but Elian felt his heart beat for him. Inside there was a room being made to fit him in so that they never had to be apart.*

*Elian chuckled and shook his head, “Fine. I’ll swing with you. But you have to promise to come back tomorrow.”*

*He would. There was no way that he wouldn’t. The two of them had been meeting every day now and continuing to develop the romance of their lives. Elian showed Lorenzo a new part of his world in this city every day. He showed him a bodega one day and then a hiding spot the next. Whatever it was, he always had something new to make their adventure for the day. Ice cream or snow cones, a thrift store or a local market. Elian always found something to make the day special.*

*“Tomorrow and every day after. I promise.”*

*What a pair they were. Someone who would wait every day and someone who would come every day after this conversation. They were certain to have their romance written in the stars for all the cosmos to know. Elian loved Lorenzo and Lorenzo loved Elian. It would remember this forever and when they were aged and wrinkled, it would still reign true.*

*Lorenzo jumped off from the swing. He went high in the air — flying across the small area before them and then landing. He dusted himself off and then bowed like he had put on a grand show.*

*Elian laughed and clapped, simply bringing his swing to a stop.*

*“Boo, you should have jumped too.”*

*“Will I ever please you?” Elian asked with a playful tone.*

*“We’ll see.” Lorenzo said.*

*He laughed and shook his head. He was certain that he could spend all of forever attempting to please Lorenzo and there would always be some small silly thing that he wanted Elian to do. And none of it was grating, it was all amusing and funny. Really, he loved the*



*unpredictability of him. He loved that Lorenzo always found some ridiculous thing to focus on and laugh about.*

*“Challenge accepted.”*

As expected, Romeo came back. He was wearing those rollerskates again and this time he brought some snacks with him.

“My uncle made cannoli.” he said, “I brought them in a cooler so they wouldn’t get all gross.”

“That’s a very sweet gesture.” Elian smiled, “Come, sit. Is it just you and Peter today then?”

Romeo shrugged, “It seems so.”

That was fine enough for Elian. Sometimes there were those days where only a couple kids came. It wasn’t concerning at all. Peter always came without fail, but Elian knew that it was not out of negligence from his parents. He had to admit though, he had never met a kid so insistent on hearing every story he had to tell before Peter.

“Tell us about Lorenzo.” Peter asked.

Elian laughed, “What would you like to hear?”

“Well,” Peter thought, “You never told us how you met?”

Romeo stopped popping his gum and perked up to listen. He sat next to Romeo with his legs crossed.

Elian sighed and thought back to those memories again, “It was summer and I was seventeen. It was a really hot day and I had been on my way to get some ice from the store so I could make snow cones. But then he came bolting down the street. He ran like he was in a race or playing football. Slammed right into me and made me drop everything that I was holding. When I got angry, he tried to keep running but fell into me again. We started arguing right there on the street before it became clear to me that he had no idea where he was.”

Peter laughed, taking it in with his regular smile. But Romeo, Romeo he stared at Elian like gears were turning in his head. Something inside of him was thinking deeply as he spoke. At the time, Elian did not know what that meant. He didn’t think anything of it beyond that maybe he was too finding some sort of reflection of himself in Elian.

That’s what it always was after all. These kids with all the potential in the world were lost in their thoughts about who they could be honest with. Who they could tell their secrets to and who would listen and keep them safe. Another one on the list of children who found their most vulnerable expressions of the self in Elian was nothing surprising.

But he also knew on some level that that wasn’t the reason Romeo stared up at him like he had struck gold. No, there was more and Elian would find out soon enough why this child with his rollerskates and bubblegum stumbled into his neighborhood.

“He said he had nowhere to go. That he was running away from his father and he didn’t want to go back yet. I saw parts of myself in him. So I made the decision to help him hide from his dad. Little did I know that it would lead to the most beautiful summer I ever experienced.”

By that point in the story, a couple more kids showed up at the gate. A couple more voices that would get to hear about the most recent rambles about Lorenzo. Not that any of them minded really.

He looked into the eyes of all the children listening to his stories. All of them so ready to hear about this love that he only had the courage to open up about in his old age.

Elian felt like a teenager again.

He could tell every story from that summer. Every little thing that made him fall in love. Every moment that he felt freer than he'd ever been. The acceptance that he liked men which had been so hard to ever admit before he met Lorenzo.

Because that was the big part of why he hadn't let go all these years, wasn't it? The fact that when he was with him the fear of the world washed away. He didn't care about the expectations laid out for a man like him. He wasn't afraid of what the world wanted him to be and how well he fit into that role. He was simply Elian and he was happy.

"You see, his father was some businessman in the city. Really important work. Lorenzo never elaborated but from what I understood, he came from money so his dad must have been doing well. And he wanted Lorenzo to take after him, practically forcing him into walking in his footsteps. Or at least he attempted to. Every day in the summer he brought Lorenzo with him and every day, without fail, he'd sneak out after doing the bare minimum and come to meet me."

He expected a lot of the younger kids to listen. They always seemed so entranced. What surprised him was the way that Romeo was leaning forward, listening closely, eyes full of wonder. He held so much interest that he didn't see in the other children. It was a different type of wonder. He was finding something else in Elian's stories.

"What was your favorite thing about Lorenzo?" Peter asked.

Elian smiled. There were so many things that he adored about him. He could spend hours naming them all off, but Peter had only asked for one. So he thought and then it hit him.

"My favorite thing about him was the way whenever he was shy, he hid his face with these heart-shaped glasses. And when he was confident, he pushed them up on top of his head. It gave me a glimpse into what was on his mind even when he didn't want to tell me."

He finished telling his stories for the day soon enough. The kids started going home. Even Peter left at some point, but Romeo lingered a little longer.

"Have you ever looked for Lorenzo?" he asked, sharing the cannoli he brought.

"No. We got into an argument before he disappeared and I figured he never wanted to speak to me again." The cannoli felt familiar too. It almost made him wonder, but he pushed that aside. He didn't have cannoli often so it was most likely a coincidence.

Romeo nodded, "I hope you get to see him again."

Elian smiled, "Thank you."

*"I can't just leave my life!" Lorenzo scoffed, "I can't abandon everything! I'd have nothing!"*

*Elian's face felt hot. Everything in him burned, "And I have nothing to lose? Do you have any idea what I have been risking by being with you?"*

*"That's not fair!" Lorenzo had said, "You know what I'm risking."*

*“And you know what I’m risking!” Elian couldn’t feel anything but frustration and anger. He had given up so much, was giving up so much, and he had come to Lorenzo hoping that there was a chance for them to live the life they wanted away from the people that restricted them, “You know what will happen to me. I thought you would want to leave your dad behind after everything!”*

*“Maybe one day but not like this!” He was hiding behind those heart-shaped sunglasses. Elian couldn’t feel anything but frustration with the fact that even now he was hiding.*

*“Not with me, you mean.” His shoulders slumped and he shook his head.*

*“Elian that’s not what this is,” Lorenzo had said.*

*Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe he was being irrational. They were teenagers, what did they know about the world? But Elian was certain he knew about this city, about his kingdom. He knew the way it functioned and all that came with it. He knew what he was risking by loving Lorenzo, he knew it when he confessed to him. All of these things he was aware of and he still thought that maybe there was a chance that Lorenzo would run with him. He thought that they could build their own kingdom and live away from the expectations of those around them.*

*Maybe there was a chance that they would be able to create something for themselves and never have to think about the way the past sought to limit them. He had been holding onto that sliver of a chance like it was written in stone and now he was facing the fact that he was asking too much of someone else who was also just a teenager too.*

*Lorenzo hated his father, he had said it himself time after time. They didn’t get along and he expected Lorenzo to bend to his every whim. The only reason he accepted Lorenzo at all as the man he was happened to be because he was so desperate for an oldest son to make his legacy.*

*Elian didn’t understand and it broke his heart. All he wanted in the world was a place where he could be himself and he had found that in someone. He supposed that was what he got for looking to find himself in someone else. He was his own person, his own body and mind with dreams and aspirations. He had his own wants, his own thoughts, and it was foolish of him to view his state of being as an extension of someone else.*

*It didn’t make it hurt any less. He burned and he felt ashamed and embarrassed. He bet so much on the idea of him and Lorenzo eloping or living some other whirlwind romance. But the man he was looking at now wanted nothing to do with that idea.*

*Elian was grappling with the reality that Lorenzo might not be the person he was meant to be with and it tortured him like nothing else.*

*He admit feelings he was afraid of tackling for years. He allowed himself to be a person that he had sworn he would never let out. All of that happened because he met Lorenzo and the idea that this was a waste of his time or nothing meant to last was agonizing.*

*“I thought you wanted this.” his voice broke. He could feel the lump in his throat growing and his heart being crushed. He was stupid. This was stupid. He shouldn’t have assumed that this was going to be a fairy tale ending. Elian felt more like the teenager he was than he had felt in so long.*

*“I can’t do it.” Lorenzo said.*

*Those four words made him turn away. He didn’t say another thing to Lorenzo. Elian made a decision to walk away.*

*Maybe he felt led on. Like their meetings had now been full of empty promises. He was a teenager; what else was he to feel? He didn't understand everything in the world and he had experienced so little of the romance he had dreamed of. His experiences were vast but still so little in so many ways. He knew of the struggles of poverty, cultural restrictions, and he knew the pain of scraping by using his wits. Elian wasn't stupid. He knew so much about the world, but he also knew that there were still so many things that he did not have a clue about. Just like this. The pain of youthful heartbreak was an unbearable thing. Still, Elian knew that if he could, he would turn back time and stop himself from walking away. It was much too late for now.*

He didn't like to think back on the argument. He blamed himself a lot for being a teenager that only thought with his heart. If he had known back then that it would be the last time he saw him, he would have done everything to stop arguing with him and simply enjoy that day whether it was the last time or not. Thus, he didn't really make it an option to bring it up with the kids more than the one time he mentioned last time the kids were over.

He liked those moments when he could pretend there were only fond memories of his time with him.

"I have someone I want you to meet." Romeo said the next time he came over. He popped his gum as he looked up at him, "But he won't be here for a bit. He's at work."

"Oh really?" Elian asked, "And who would that be?"

"My uncle." Romeo said, "I think you two might get along. He also likes to tell me stories all the time too. You remind me a lot of him and I told him about you when I went home from the last time I was here."

"Well, that's very sweet of you, Romeo. I look forward to meeting him." he said.

He was used to meeting parents and older siblings, but uncles and aunts not so much. This would be a first. Still, if it was what made Romeo happy, he would indulge. He was sure he could make up decent conversation with his uncle.

He had no idea then. He didn't know what was to come and could not have prepared for it. He had hardly been able to figure out why Romeo felt so familiar. The cannoli, those eyes, and his laughter were something that threw him back to years ago. He was unable to pinpoint why initially. Of course, by the time it was starting to piece together in his head, the day was close to ending.

"What's your uncle's name?" he had asked Romeo.

He suddenly looked sheepish. Elian wasn't sure he liked the way that Romeo got quiet.

"Well you see-"

Before he could finish, Elian heard the gate opening and when he looked up, he froze.

Many years had passed by and they had aged him. Though he still looked fairly young, a few wrinkles here and there gave him away. His hair was starting to grey in some places but he still dressed like the young man he had been all those years ago. This made him suddenly feel so sheepish.

"Lorenzo?" his voice was soft, "Is that you?"

The man at the gate was a handsome thing. He was much more muscular than the Lorenzo he knew. His hair was combed back unlike the mess of them that had been in his face

when they were younger. But he still dressed the same too. He wore those wine colors well and his face and eyes were the same as they had been all those years ago.

He had tattoos now that went up his arm and neck. Elian noticed a particularly faded one peeking through his shirt. A rooster that he himself had done during their time together. It was so faded that he almost missed it.

“Hello Elian.” his voice was deeper now too. It sent chills up his spine. Lorenzo had become exactly the man he always imagined that he would. He was....he was still the most handsome thing in the world.

“I’m going to go find Peter.” Romeo said, popping his gum again. He quickly sped off leaving just the two of them there alone.

“Have you always been this close by?” There was hurt laced in his voice. Had he spent all of these years wondering and wishing for a chance to meet him again and he was close by the entire time?

“No,” Lorenzo said, coming closer, “I actually live four hours from here. I’m visiting my brother and his family.”

He took careful steps forward and Elian stood up from his spot on the porch.

The years disappeared and he was a kid once again. He was a teenager with dreams of romance and desires. He was vulnerable and open about everything that he wanted in ways that he hardly allowed himself to be any other day.

He had all the words in the world to say. Anger, frustrations, all of his heartbreak to release. It was overwhelming and he had been carrying the burden of it all for so many years. But now that he was in front of Lorenzo and could see him, he couldn’t find them. His throat was dry and his tongue was twisted. He could only stare at Lorenzo and try his best not to break apart and burst into tears.

“I’m so sorry.” Lorenzo pleaded as he stood in front of him, “ I know I should have come back. I shouldn’t have left. I wanted to. I really did. But my father caught me and never let me hear the end of it. I had no way of coming back and I thought maybe...you had moved on already by the time I did have a way.”

How many years had he spent waiting for the chance to talk to him again? Now here he was and he hadn’t the slightest clue what to say. Lorenzo was staring at him, waiting for him to speak, but Elian could only continue to stare.

“Please Elian,” Lorenzo said, “Say something.”

They were in front of each other now. He could see into Lorenzo’s eyes and they had not changed. They were the same, beautiful brown they had been. They looked like they had seen many things too. Elian wondered how he looked to Lorenzo. He still had locs that went down his back. They had little cuffs and bits of jewelry in them. His eyes were weary but still had some playful light dancing in them. He had many more tattoos than he had when they first met — that was something they seemed to share in common. There were many things about Elian’s appearance that changed and many that stayed the same. As he stood there, he couldn’t help be amazed at how different Lorenzo looked but also still so very the same.

“I told you I would wait for you every day the rest of my life, did I not?”

Lorenzo's shoulders fell and a smile broke onto his face. They were too old men now. Their youth had gone years ago. Elian immediately pulled him into an embrace, afraid that he might disappear again without a trace. He'd done enough sitting by and yearning.

"I may be hugging you but know I am also so incredibly angry that you disappeared on me."

"Be as angry as you need to," Lorenzo said, "I won't be mad."

He wanted to be angrier than he was — he wanted to seethe and have reason to snap at Lorenzo. Nearly forty years of waiting and he had no idea if he would ever see him again. He had waited, avoided all romance, and sworn that his heart only belonged to this man for years. So many thought him to be so incredibly insane for it and maybe he was. As he looked back at it, he spent a lot of time betting on the chance of meeting Lorenzo again.

But oh how it was worth it to hold Lorenzo in his arms once again.

*Elian sat there for hours. Lorenzo hadn't shown up all week. He thought the first day that he was still mad. He thought the second day maybe it was a bad idea to have thrown his impulsive desires onto him. By the end of that week, he knew that Lorenzo wasn't coming back. Still, Elian waited. Every day he waited with hopes that he would come back.*

*He didn't think their argument warranted that, but he had walked away from him out of anger. Maybe Lorenzo didn't want to see him again. The very thought made Elian feel sick.*

*So he waited. Each passing day he would go to their meeting spot exactly at the time they were supposed to meet. He would wait until the sun went down with extra food on him just in case Lorenzo returned. He did this every day for the rest of the summer without question. When friends would ask him to go somewhere or when his family asked what he was up to, he made up excuses just to wait on that bench for hours in hopes that Lorenzo would come back.*

*His heart was buried in that park that they laughed in. His soul was scattered along the bench where they sat. Every bit of his affection that consumed him was also reflected in the puddles that collected each time it rained. Elian was to be found in everything about their little spot.*

*He never did act the same after that. The pain of teenage love was overbearing and it wore him down day by day. Teenage heartbreak was one hell of a demon to fight with.*

*Elian must have spent so many days crying himself to sleep and hiding it from all of his loved ones. There was no point in risking his safety by outing himself now. He didn't have the one person he was willing to risk it all with. Elian had no more reasons to leave home behind.*

*Maybe it was immature to lean so hard on someone. No, it was immature. He knew it was in his bones. There had just been a different part of him that wanted to believe that he was being adult about this heartbreak. He wanted to believe that this pain and torture meant something more. However, the reality is that it meant exactly what it was on the surface — he was young and dreaming of things that were beyond his reach.*

*Who was he to think that he was going to achieve something that others like him were never going to have? Maybe it was easier in the city and maybe there was more of a chance for someone like him to live a life that was full and happy, but it was just that; it was chance. It wasn't a promise, it wasn't written in stone, it was just a chance.*

*It didn't stop him from crying. He would sit on those swings late at night and sob and scream for the return of his heart. He knew it wasn't going to solve anything and that he really shouldn't have chosen to base his world around someone he'd only met that summer. He knew that nothing would come from throwing a fit, but he also knew that if he didn't allow himself to feel everything in those moments when he was alone, then he would be punished by the world for feeling them elsewhere. Men like Elian were men before others and because of it, there was so little that they were allowed to experience and feel openly. It was their truth and he had to accept that. It didn't matter how much pain he was in, these feelings could not ever be seen by the eyes of white men.*

*When he finally stopped crying about it, he mostly lay in bed at night dreaming of all the ways that they would meet again.*

*Elian carried those dreams with him into the future.*

"Romeo told me about you." Lorenzo said, "The first time you told him stories about us. I'd told him stories about us too and I guess he put two and two together."

"What an amazing chance." Elian said. He placed a tray of cookies in between them and then brought over some coffee, "To think I spent so long wondering what ever happened to you."

Lorenzo smiled softly, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that made Elian's heart melt now. Even in their aged states, he thought that Lorenzo was the most wonderful and handsome man he'd ever met. He would have gladly given up anything and everything to let him know that.

"He called you uncle," Elian said, "I thought you were an only child?"

"My dad knocked up one of his assistants about three years after we met. Feliciano is my brother's name. He's a pain in the ass and being 20 years older than him is insane sometimes. But he had Romeo with his wife, Monika. I'm the old uncle now who could be his grandpa." he laughed.

"Your dad never changed it seems." Elian shook his head.

"No, he didn't. Eventually, I stopped talking to him but Feliciano keeps in contact with him. Says he wants Romeo to have his grandpa in his life. I think he's just aware he's the favorite of us and milks it for what it's worth. I can't blame him. I'd do the same in his shoes." Lorenzo told him. He picked up his coffee to take a drink and sighed contently, "The coffee is amazing as it always was."

"Your cannoli was amazing when Romeo brought it by. I was trying to figure out why it felt so familiar." Elian chuckled, "I've...missed you terribly."

Lorenzo frowned. Elian didn't mean to sour the mood but to avoid saying the truth would have only created more things inside of him to keep bottled up. He couldn't have a conversation with Lorenzo and not tell him how he had spent years yearning for another chance to meet him again. It was only natural at this point.

"I really am sorry that I never took the time to find you again. I guess I thought that you didn't want to see me again after our argument."

"We were young, we were teenagers," Elian said, "I haven't been mad at you in ages. Not truly. Any anger I have now is more angry that so many years passed. Angry that we fought and

angry that you left me waiting. But I'm not angry at the you you are now. I have different things to put my energy towards now. I am becoming an old man."

"As am I." Lorenzo said, "Do you think we could perhaps become old men together?"

His heart jumped at the question. He was surprised at how forward he was but thrilled to know that his love for him wasn't being wasted even now. There was a chance for them to build the kingdom of theirs that they only dreamed about once.

"You still love me after all these years?" Elian asked. His voice shook and was almost barely audible. It was full of wonder and hope. He hadn't been sure that Lorenzo would love a tired man like the one he was now.

"I never did stop." Lorenzo said, "You always were meant to be the only one my heart belongs to."

Elian put his coffee down. There were so many emotions that were taking over and he couldn't stop himself from crying right there. He'd held back those tears for many years, letting them build up over his scarred heart. Now he was breaking apart from all the pressure of having to keep it hidden. He'd done a good job at bottling it all up and never letting anyone see. It was an act of protection, but he didn't need it anymore.

He had loved this man for all these years and even now, he was crumbling at his very presence. To know that his affections had not gone wasted all of these years was more of a blessing than anything else could ever have been. It meant that he had done the right thing all along. Yes, they both looked much different now, but he wouldn't have had it any other way.

"I have waited many years to hear those words." Elian said when he had finally managed to compose himself.

Lorenzo reached out to grab his hands gently, "I am yours if you will take me."

Elian thought about those teenagers in love. Who promised each other the world, who grew old, who told stories to other kids now about a life they had known before and a romance they had experienced.

What joy the teenager in him felt knowing that he was reunited with him.

He'd have to thank Romeo for this chance because without him it might have never occurred. He'd have to thank Peter too. Perhaps it was odd to thank children for this, but he knew that without them, he'd have lived never having the opportunity to do this.

Lorenzo kissed Elian's hands. He shook a little but Elian couldn't pretend like he wasn't shaking either. He was absolutely trembling at the base of Lorenzo's love for him. He had no idea what his thoughts were yet, what his own feelings about waiting so long were. He could imagine them and perhaps he would guess right, but they came from different worlds and he knew that. There were certain things that Lorenzo would know that Elian wouldn't and of course, there were things that Elian had lived through that Lorenzo could never understand. Still, as he sat there, listening to the sweetness that escaped Lorenzo, he was happy.

This was such a big moment. It was a chance that he never thought he was going to get again and yet here it was. And it made his heart thunder, his stomach twist, and his nerves go insane. He was looking at the man before him, certain that all he wanted in the world was finally right there for him. He could love and live as his younger self dreamed of. The stories that he told were no longer met with sorrow but met with happiness.



He thought back to all the things that they had done when they were younger, all the places that they had seen and the sights they called home. They could take all of that and build a new one now. They could have what they had always wanted but had been denied.

They could catch up on the past, all that led to them separating, why it took so long. There would be no bitterness between them because they would know that nothing had been done with the intent to hurt the other. They could rest easier knowing that they had each other now.

He lifted their hands up, returning the kiss to Lorenzo's hands. A sign of his love that he happily returned to him. They were here, they were alive, and Elian planned to never let him go again. Whatever they would fight about, he'd never take that chance again. To be an old man with Lorenzo by his side was all he needed for the foundations of his kingdom with him.

Elian used one hand to cup Lorenzo's face. He smiled at him and laughed softly, because what other answer was there?

“Of course I will. Aye Lorenzo, my beating heart has always had space for you.”