

The first thing to know about Eleonora was that she didn't dare show weakness.

Like the mighty mountain, she stood tall. Like the crashing waves against the shore, she came with force and gusto. Like an arrow shooting forward, she was quick and she pierced your soul. That much they knew.

Eleonora was a woman of many characteristics and all of them built her up into a mighty fighter who never once showed a sign of struggling. Not to anyone's face at least. She reserved those moments for when she was alone and able to ignore the rest of the world.

When her womanhood was questioned, she stood with grace and beauty and did not falter. She laughed that jingly laugh and waved her hand like it was a jest. There was nothing anyone could say that she didn't already hear. There was not a single word that someone could say that would make her shrink back into a corner. She knew herself and carried pride in it.

Valentina had only ever seen Eleonora show her weakness once.

They sat close in a church. Her hands were tightly clasped around a rosary and her mouth had moved in silence as those beautiful eyes were closed. She was begging, crying out, hoping that whoever was out there might listen and take pity on her. A single tear rolled down her cheek and her breath grew shaky. Valentina was almost certain at that point that they would see an entirely new side to her, but like she always did, she picked herself up and moved forward. Weakness was brief, it was fleeting. She carried the world on her back and rested only for a moment before she kept pushing forward for more.

The world was not built for a woman like Eleonora. She lived with great passion and warmth that rivaled the sun. Her words soothed the coldest of hearts and her smile was a sweet thing that gave a look inside what awaited at the pearly gates for a desperate sinner that repented. She was a cathedral and Valentina would have laid at her feet calling to a God they did not believe in just for a chance of her attention. That old bastard never answered any of their calls and yet they would have gladly proclaimed the might of Adonai if it meant that Eleonora might look their way.

She was a great force and she could never be tamed. She would always be the proud Eleonora who never let the world decide what she deserved and who shouldered every burden just so that those around her might be spared. She was selfless that way. Every secret whispered to her remained safe, every connection was deep, every sacrifice was invisible. She ensured that anyone and everyone around her felt the might of her love and yet never stopped to consider where it came from. That was just the way she was.

The second thing to know about Eleonora was that you never really knew her at all.

Valentina had spent days picking apart their every interaction and every word that Eleonora spoke. They had spent so much time around each other, laughed over the same things, bonded in ways Valentina never thought that they were capable of, and had come to know each other well. And yet — Valentina felt like they knew so little about Eleonora still.

They knew Eleonora's favorite color, how she liked her coffee in the morning (with a little cream and lots of sugar), and they could tell you Eleonora's favorite outfit (the red faux snakeskin two-piece with the ruffled gloves to match). All of this they knew. But Valentina could never tell you where Eleonora grew up, her nightly routine, if she talked to her parents still, or what her worst fear was. They knew that she chewed on her nails when she was nervous and that she thought of her hair as her crown but they didn't know what she saw for her future nor what her favorite childhood memory was. Eleonora shared everything and yet nothing at the same time. They could never really tell with her.

They bore witness to the way that she walked and spoke. She laughed, she talked about her day, but she never really spoke about herself and her life. Valentina picked up pieces here and there, all the tiny

details that they could possibly find just to know her. Oh, what beauty there was in knowing Eleonora even if they knew nothing at all.

But one thing that Valentina knew for certain is that Eleonora loved her sisters more than anything else on this Earth.

They never had any siblings of their own, so they didn't know the experience of growing up with them. But Valentina figured that the love of a sibling was something that they could experience vicariously through the heavenly gift that was Eleonora's love for her sisters. She spoke of them with pride and there was never a hint of bitterness in her voice when she mentioned them. It was honestly their favorite part of hearing about them. They could get a little glimpse inside of Eleonora's head where there weren't a dozen walls put up to preserve her safety.

They understood. Everyone had their things and nobody was obligated to share. It didn't make them any less curious about her though. They could see her eyes light up when she spoke of Margherita's art shows and they could see her smile widen when she talked about Sofia's amazing mind that knew so much even though she was only eight years old. They knew it when they were together that Eleonora lived and breathed for the very thought of her sisters' happiness.

Of course, Valentina had never met Eleonora's sisters. Not until today. Today was the day that they would finally get a look inside the life of the woman they had to admit that they were madly in love with. They were only friends. Just friends. They weren't sure which way Eleonora swung. She kept that locked up like all the other aspects of her personal life. It was a miracle that they even managed to get this far, really. Eleonora was protective, they knew that much.

And still, here they stood, looking dapper. At least, they thought so. They had finally taken some product to their curly hair and made it into something nice. Curls still there but no longer an unbrushed mess that they wore around like Eleonora wore her hair. They had picked out a nice silk button-up for this. Something that was nice but didn't seem like they were trying too hard. That was important. The pleather skin-tight pants were simply because they really liked the look. The leather jacket was the staple of the entire look. Valentina had proudly decorated it with a pronoun pin, the lesbian flag, various silly ones, some with comments, but all pins that made them happy. But nothing quite as happy as the carnations that they spent ages carefully painting onto the jacket. Using an outline, of course, because God knows they could not paint for the life of them.

In their hands, a plastic bag with some cannoli from the bakery Eleonora liked.

Swallowing the lump in their throat, Valentina knocked on the door.

She heard some running, what sounded like Eleonora's voice shouting, a lot of giggling, and finally the sound of the door being unlocked.

To their surprise, it was not Eleonora at the door, but a young girl who couldn't have been older than seventeen. She was much paler than Eleonora. Her hair also was a different texture. Unlike the tight, dark brown coils that Eleonora had, she had light brown waves. Her eyes were rounder and she really didn't look much like Eleonora at all. That was a surprise. She looked up at Valentina and smiled wide. "Hi! I'm Margherita. You must be the mechanic my sister has been talking about nonstop" she said, "Eleonora is being a primadonna and refusing to come out until she feels she looks perfect." Her voice got louder as she emphasized the last part.

"Marghe I will cut your hair while you sleep!" came Eleonora's voice.

Valentina chuckled softly and held up the bag, "My dad is the mechanic. I just work at his shop part-time. But, I brought a bribe."

“Cannoli! I already like them!” Margherita chirped, “Come on in. Shoes off though. Eleonora is crazy about dirt tracking onto the carpet.”

Valentina walked in and looked around. They’d seen many apartments and houses, visited many friends, seen all kinds of decor. Their friend Julchen was meticulous and everything was neat and had its place. There was never even a pillow out of place. Marianne was regal and had one million things you could not touch in her apartment. Alice was minimalistic but cozy with her things. Her placed looked filled just enough to make it seem like someone did live there. This apartment was different.

There were shelves on each wall that were filled with dozens of trinkets. Ceramic roosters, picture frames, figurines, mosaics, candles, and plants. There were prints and paintings covering the empty spaces on the walls and the coffee table at the center of the living room was covered in magazines, books, and gaming controllers. There were blankets with intricate patterns on the couch and even the kitchen looked wild and full of life with all of the little signs hanging up and the multicolored jars.

Valentina loved it.

“You can sit wherever. She’ll be out in a minute.” Margherita said, “So...Valentina right?”

“Mhm.” they nodded, “I like the decor.”

“Nora, Sofia, and I decorated it together. ‘Nora said she wanted the house to look lived in so we went to a thrift store and picked out everything we liked.’ she said, “We add to it whenever we find something we like.”

Valentina fiddled with the zipper on their jacket, avoiding looking at Margherita and holding the urge to look at the hallway, “It’s very pretty.”

From around the corner, they caught sight of who they assumed was Sofia. She was cautious, not nearly as friendly and ready to talk to them as Margherita had been. She looked much like Margherita. Her hair ginger and wavy and her eyes round.

“Come on Sofia, don’t be rude.” Margherita called.

Sofia shook her head. She remained right where she was. Margherita turned around apologetically. She shrugged and plopped herself down on the couch next to Valentina. She looked over her, a curious expression written on her face as she seemed to take her in. It was like she was a different species, taking in the sight of a new being.

“What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Being nonbinary.” she asked, “Nora told me that you’re nonbinary.”

Valentina’s expression softened and they nodded. They slowed on bouncing their leg and they seemed too deep in thought to even think about drumming their fingers, “It’s...different. I often feel like life would be easier if I was just a boy or a girl. But I’m not either. I’m something new and some people get it and others don’t. I don’t bother entertaining people who don’t see me though. Life is much better surrounded by people I know understand and see me. But if I had to describe what I feel like, it feels like I am the color yellow. I’m not blue nor pink. I’m just...yellow”

Margherita nodded, “I think I might be nonbinary too. But not like you. I like looking like a girl. I like doing things girls usually do. But I don’t feel like one. Sometimes it feels like I’m wearing it like a costume. A fun costume that I love but still a costume.”

“Yeah?” Valentina asked, looking at her. They started bouncing their leg fast again, “Well. There’s no one way to be nonbinary. I mean, I like when people think I’m a guy. I like dressing more masculine. But I’m still not a guy. I’m just me, ya know?”

Margherita nodded, “Eleonora...doesn’t always understand. It’s different for her.”

Valentina nudged her, “Everyone is different. No two people experience these things the same way. And that’s okay.”

She smiled ever so slightly and clasped her hands together, “I like you. I think Sofia will too when she finally decides to come out. Which will probably happen when ‘Nora is done getting ready.’”

Valentina laughed lightly, “Should I have come later?”

“Oh definitely. Aaaaaand. Between just me and you. You don’t have to be worried.”

Valentina finally stopped drumming their fingers and bouncing their leg. Their mouth parted and they raised their eyebrow, “Huh?”

“You don’t have to be worried. Eleonora really likes you and she’s really picky about the people she keeps around so I think you’re doing just fine.” she winked at Valentina before sitting up properly. The bathroom door opened exactly after as if timed intentionally.

Out walked Eleonora and Valentina felt their breath leave them. Here was the very person who owned all of their affections. Eleonora.

It didn’t matter what she was wearing, Valentina adored her. The gold butterfly clips that moved in her hair were like a halo crowned over her. They could admire the pale blouse and the floral stay she wore. They could find beauty in the pale pink skirt that flowed down. They could stare at the rings on her fingers and the gold necklace around her neck and it would still have been impossible for Valentina to love her any more than she already did. They could have a million other women lined up all with wealth, thrills, and more to pair with them and Valentina would still push them all aside and run to Eleonora. It didn’t matter if Eleonora did not return their affections, they were forever tied to her. They would always follow after her with the promise that they’d support her in her every wish and endeavor. They loved Eleonora as she was and even if this never grew to be anything more than the friendship they’d carved out for themselves, Valentina knew that Eleonora would always own the key to their heart and deepest parts of their soul.

“You came early!” she laughed, pushing her hair back, “I thought I had a little more time to prepare.”

“I wanted to make a good impression.” they laughed, standing up, “You..you look wonderful.” Eleonora shrugged and opened her arms to embrace them. Of course, they gladly fell into her arms. Their head pressed to her chest for just a moment.

“They brought cannoli! I think you should keep them.” Margherita said, already halfway through one of them herself.

Eleonora tsked and laughed, “Well don’t eat all of them. I want one too.” She quickly turned to Valentina, “Thank you, you really didn’t have to.”

“But I wanted to.” they said.

“And they’re amazing!” Margherita called.

Eleonora’s eyes filled with light when their eyes met for just a second. The both of them seemed to want to look anywhere else. Which is what finally brought Eleonora’s attention to Sofia hiding in the hallway.

She walked over and knelt down in front of her. Valentina could not hear a thing, but they didn’t really want to. This was clearly not something for strangers. It did not mean she didn’t admire her. Really, it made their heart beat faster to see Eleonora knelt down in front of Sofia with a gentle smile and offering a hand to hold.

Sofia nodded and took her hand, walking with her towards Valentina. She stopped about six feet away from them and dug her toe in the carpet before she finally looked up, “Hi. I’m..uhm...Sofia.”

Valentina smiled and knelt down. They waved to her, “I’m Valentina. It’s nice to meet you.” Sofia had her hand to her mouth and looked up at Eleonora before she pointed at some of the spikes on Valentina’s jacket, “Can...can I touch them?” “Of course you can.” they said.

Sofia cautiously let go of her sister’s hand to take a few steps forward. Her hand was still by her mouth and she wasn’t making eye contact. Once she was in front of Valentina, she took her other hand and carefully moved to touch the spikes. As soon as she did, her eyes lit up and her hand dropped from her mouth.

“I like them!” she said, “And they brought food.”
“What do we say?” Eleonora asked.

“Thank you!” Sofia happily chirped. She grabbed one of the desserts and quickly planted herself next to Margherita.

Eleonora looked at Valentina and pushed her hair back, “Well, I wanted to take us out to one of the shopping centers. Do you mind a little walk?” “Not at all.” Valentina said.

She smiled again. That beautiful smile that they could never get enough of.

All they wanted in the world was to continue seeing that smile.

“Let’s go then. Marghe, Sofia, let’s get our shoes on.”

They quickly did as told and Valentina swore in that moment that one day this beautiful woman would be theirs.

They were having lunch the next time that Valentina saw her siblings. They hadn’t come with them. It had originally just been a plan between Eleonora and Valentina. Their little lunches together were the most precious of things. In those moments, the two of them could talk about anything that was on their minds and they could be happy.

“My parents are really on my ass about finishing college but I feel like I want to go into a trade.” Valentina said, “But at the same time I already poured all this money into college so maybe I should finish it?”

Eleonora shrugged, “Ultimately it’s up to you. If you feel a trade is more suitable then go for it. And who knows—maybe one day you will want to finish college and you can continue. There’s no rule saying you have to do it all right now.”

Valentina nodded, “That’s true. I think I’m just hella used to everyone making everything an either or like there is no grey area.”

“Life is far too complicated to be limited to black and white.” Eleonora said. She swirled her drink with her straw.

They could agree with that. Though it seemed like everyone wanted things to either be right or wrong, Valentina never saw the world as being that simple. They were multifaceted beings with different senses of morality and justice. It was impossible to attempt to make everyone see everything the same. There were people like them who saw little purpose in many things. Who found enjoyment in life because if nothing mattered then everything mattered. They functioned on a plane of existence where living life to its fullest was the dream. Self-made joy was the pinnacle of humanity.

Suddenly, Eleonora’s phone rang and she quickly picked it up to answer.

“Hello? Yes....this is she.”

Eleonora’s bright smile suddenly turned into a look of concern. Valentina frowned.

“I’ll be right there.” she said. She hung up and looked up at Valentina apologetically, “I know I’m your ride home so do you mind coming with me to pick up the girls? If you want to be dropped off instead that’s okay.”

“No no, I’m more than happy to tag along. Is everything okay?”

“Margherita got into a fight. And if I’m picking her up early, that means I need to get Sofia too since her school is right down the block.” she shook her head, “I’m sorry that our lunch was interrupted by this. I’d say Margherita isn’t prone to fighting but that would be a lie.”

Valentina waved their hand, “Hey. It’s not a problem at all. Come on, let’s go get that taken care of.”

As they shifted to get up from their seat, Eleonora reached forward and took their hand. She squeezed it gently and then stood up herself. Valentina, repressed as can be, felt their heart jump into their throat. It took them a few seconds after Eleonora started walking out the door for them to register that she had indeed reached over and held their hand. Even as they walked out as well, they could feel their hand buzzing from the contact.

They were honest, though. They did not mind joining Eleonora at all. In fact, they quite liked the fact that they were able to join her that day. It certainly allowed them to see more of who Eleonora was when she was away from the expectations of others.

Of course, joining Eleonora meant bearing witness to the incompetence of many people in the educational field when it came to their priorities.

“She broke a student’s nose.” the principal tsked, drumming a pen against the table. Her lips were pressed in a thin line and droopy eyes stared at Eleonora as if anticipating the argument that was certainly ahead, “That is unacceptable behavior and we have to take action.”

“Who was it?” Eleonora asked, arms folded. She was tapping her foot against the wooden floors in time with the clock in the corner.

Tick tock. Valentina listened to it go as the tension in the room built up and became thick enough to cut with a knife.

Valentina felt like they were intruding. Perhaps they should have stayed in the car and waited. This was something that felt like it was far too personal for them to be seeing. Eleonora’s arms were crossed, her stare deathly. Margherita meanwhile was holding an ice pack to her hand and avoiding eye contact with anyone.

“It doesn’t matter who. She broke a student’s nose and that is grounds for suspension.” the principal sighed. She put the pen down to clasp her hands together, “Miss Di Paolo, we push for students to resolve their problems without physical violence.”

Tick tock. Valentina’s eyes shot towards the clock again, counting the seconds that passed. They were finding it difficult to determine whether they were better off in the car or not.

“None of you do anything when it comes to actual bullying.” Margherita muttered.

Eleonora’s head whipped around to Margherita. She raised an eyebrow and Margherita finally looked up only to nod at her sister. Whatever this exchange meant, it did not please Eleonora in the slightest. She scoffed and put a hand to her hip while the other waved as she spoke.

“It was that girl wasn’t it? What’s her name—Julia?” Eleonora shook her head, “I have been hearing about how this girl doesn’t leave Margherita or any of her friends alone for months. In fact. I have had multiple meetings with the school about fixing this problem and have found no solution. So honestly if you’re going to suspend her for standing up for herself, go ahead. I will not be punishing her for taking action where the school refuses to.”

Tick tock.

Valentina watched as the principal gaped at her. This was...something else. Not in a bad way, no. It was shocking mainly. It had been a while since they had been in high school but these problems were still all too familiar. They supposed that some things never really did change. But Eleonora standing firm was something that made their eyes sparkle and their heart beat faster.

She really did just have that effect on them, didn't she?

Valentina wouldn't have traded that for the world.

"There is no need for aggression, Miss Di Paolo." the principal said, her voice still monotone despite the way her hands were fiddling with the pen in her hands. She was standing up straighter and Valentina caught her eyes skittering around the room for just a moment.

"Apparently there is since you call me in the middle of my day to tell me you're punishing Margherita for some bullshit. Suspend her. Fine. But don't expect me to punish her for taking care of a problem that I and multiple others asked you to solve long ago."

Tick tock.

She didn't wait for the principal to answer, she didn't wait for any sort of response at all. Eleonora took Margherita's hand and walked out with her.

Valentina sat there in silence for a couple of seconds before they too pushed themselves out of their seat and ran after Eleonora.

"I'm not punishing you for Julia getting what she deserved." Eleonora huffed.

"She kept making comments about Julchen and I got tired of it." Margherita said.

"So many school's are so useless when it comes to actually solving their bullying problems." Valentina added.

"It doesn't help that her parents make large donations." Eleonora scoffed, "But it's whatever. Come on. Let's pick up Sofia and go out for a treat. That principal is insane if she thinks that I'm punishing you for doing what all of us wanted."

"I'll pay." Valentina offered, "We can do whatever you want."

"Oh you don't have to. I dragged you along into my family stuff. It doesn't feel fair." Eleonora said.

it." Valentina just shook their head, "I *want* to, Eleo. Whatever you and your sisters want, I'll cover

"I-Alright." she nodded, "You're too good to me, Valentina."

They laughed and took one of her hands to squeeze it, "I don't think I can be good enough. You are deserving of all the good this life has to offer."

Maybe it was bold, maybe it was too much, but what did it matter? Whether it was Eleonora squeezing their hand or them squeezing hers, it was all the same. There was love stored in these actions and words unspoken. Safety was found in this space that they shared and when Valentina thought of Sofia and Margherita, they knew that there was a space reserved for them too.

"Can we get bubble tea?" Margherita asked, "I know a really good place that also has macarons that are *so* good!"

Valentina nodded, "I said anything. Bubble tea sounds nice."

Margherita punched the air, "Yes! God I am gonna devour some of those creme brule macarons."

They laughed and watched as Margherita ran up quickly to her sister's side to update her on the adventures of the day up until she punched this bully.

Valentina shoved their hands in their pockets and thought about what it might be like to be more to a woman like Eleonora.

“We’re going to be late!” Eleonora groaned as she pressed her forehead to the steering wheel.

Traffic was piled up and here she and Valentina sat trying to get to Sofia’s dance recital, “Why did they have to do construction on the highway today?”

Valentina gently rubbed her back, “Hey, we’ll get there.”

“We might miss her entire thing at this rate.” Eleonora frowned, “I promised her I’d be there. I knew we should have left earlier.”

“Nobody could have predicted this, Eleo. Don’t be too hard on yourself.” they said.

Eleonora simply banged her head on the steering wheel as a response.

“At least Margherita is there with her.” she said.

“She’ll understand. Have you ever missed anything for her before?”

“Well, *no*. But-”

Valentina took that chance to reach over and cup Eleonora’s face with one hand, “She’ll understand. She’s young but she is smart and you are a good sister.”

Eleonora’s gaze stayed on Valentina. Those brown eyes scanned over her features and her breath was warm against Valentina’s face. They were so close and more than anything, Valentina wanted to reach more and gently tug her forward. The distance between them was so little and they knew they could have.

Instead, they brushed her cheek gently and pulled back. Eleonora probably did not want what they wanted. She was someone far out of Valentina’s league and they knew it well. Beautiful women like Eleonora deserved far more than a mechanic’s child could give her. They had no wealth, no influence, no way to provide for someone like her. Kissing her was something they could dream about, but never truly have.

Even if they weren’t. Eleonora had never spoken to them in a way that suggested she might want more. Valentina was left to dreaming and wanting and knowing that fate had other plans.

Eleonora cleared her throat and started to drive again as the traffic lifted.

That was the thing about all of this. The more time that Valentina spent around Eleonora, the more that they wanted, the more that they dreamed, and the more that they wished they could have more than the world was granting them. They couldn’t help it and no matter how hard they tried to walk away and search for what they wanted in someone else, they kept coming back to Eleonora.

Eleonora who smiled like the sun and who fought with her nails on. Eleonora whose hair was a halo of coils and curls. Eleonora who was sitting next to her in this car on their way to see Sofia perform. This was who they kept falling back on every time that they tried to move forward. When they went out with anyone else, all they could see was all the ways that they weren’t her. And maybe it was unhealthy. And maybe it was restricting Valentina’s love life to compare everyone to the person they wanted and could not have. However, they did not care. They did not care because a lifetime of loving Eleonora, even if unrequited, was better than a life without her.

“We made it! With a couple minutes to spare!” Eleonora cheered as soon as they defeated all the traffic and arrived at the school.

She quickly unbuckled herself and practically leaped out of the car. An amazing feat given that she was in a rather tight dress and heels.

Valentina was slower to climb out. They put a lot of thought into what they wore tonight, wanting to look the best that they could when next to Eleonora. Though, they were convinced that nobody on this

Earth could ever dress themselves in a way that was impressive enough to be on par with her sense of style.

“Come come, Valentina!” Eleonora called as she locked the car. She was frantically pulling out a giant sign and some flowers she insisted they buy. For every ounce of energy that Eleonora was displaying, Valentina was cool and emotionally regulated.

“She doesn’t even go on first. We have time. Breathe.” they chuckled.

“We still have to make sure we get good seats so she can see our sign. Margherita said she saved some seats towards the front but it was getting full.” Eleonora was running—or rather attempting to run—in her heels while Valentina followed behind.

Sure enough, towards the front, Margherita was waiting and seemed to be batting away people trying to take the two extra seats that were beside her. As soon as she caught sight of Eleonora and Valentina, her face relaxed and she gestured for them to quickly get there.

“You’re lucky. It was getting harder and harder to save these seats. I can feel the usher glaring holes into my head.” she said. She tilted her head as she saw the sign that Eleonora had. It was rolled up but the sparkles and bright pink on it were still visible, “Please tell me you did not bring something corny to embarrass both me and Sofia.”

“It is not corny. It is me showing my love, butthead.” she stuck her tongue out at her sister.

“It’s corny and you know it.” Margherita laughed, “But hurry and sit down before someone tries to come over here and fight for these seats. Also! Hi Valentina!”

“Hi,” Valentina chuckled, “Traffic was awful. They closed down the main highway to get here so it was absolute ass trying to get through. But we made it.”

“I told you to leave earlier, Eleo,” Margherita said, shoving her sister gently.

“Hey! I was doing my hair.” she said, poking at her sister’s side.

“Always you with your hair like it doesn’t always look good!” Margherita rolled her eyes, “You spend so much time worrying too much about how you look you vain peacock!”

“I am not vain! If anything you are with how much time you spend on your skincare routine every night.”

“I have sensitive skin!”

“I have complicated hair!”

The two of them broke into a playful fight. Eleonora was tickling her sister and Margherita was laughing so hard that she was starting to snort. The people around them scowled and it was clear they were being disruptive, but Valentina let them be because the sight of them like this warmed their heart.

Margherita’s laughter and Eleonora’s smile are enough to keep them happy for the next ten years. Valentina had no siblings of their own and even their relationship with their dad was strained at best most days. It made working at the shop from time to time difficult, but they persevered anyway. It was a complicated, messy, sometimes frustrating, but it was all theirs they supposed. This was different. There wasn’t any resentment and there wasn’t any bitterness either. There was nothing but raw, unfiltered, pure love. Eleonora was laughing without concern for how anyone looked at her and Margherita was happily laughing with her.

“Do you mind?” someone finally spoke up. Margherita and Eleonora were struggling to compose themselves but they managed to sit in their seats with only giggles slipping past their lips. Meanwhile, Valentina was glaring daggers at the person that asked that question. So what if they were laughing and having a good time? The show still hadn’t started. Maybe they were just biased.

“Oh the show is starting.” Eleonora said.

And then she took Valentina’s hand.

They stared down at it for a good minute, in disbelief. Here was the most beautiful woman they had ever met and she was holding their hand. Oh, had they not been somewhere like this show, they just might have combusted.

Self-control and shame did not exist now. This was a win and they refused to allow any sort of fear, anxiety, or doubt ruin it. They were holding hands and Valentina took the opportunity to rub their thumb along the back of her hand.

They tried so hard to focus on the dance routines. Spinning girls and their little jumps. Tutus that were blush pink on them and hair in tight buns. Each of them doing this funny little dance for the adults. The music playing belonged to songs far too advanced for children their age and yet they were doing some form of choreography anyway. Some form. Because whatever spinning and jumping that they were doing, cute as it may be, was not what Valentina imagined when it came to that music. They all looked absolutely adorable and Valentina was certain that they would have enjoyed the recital more if they were able to pay attention, but Eleonora's hand stayed in theirs and it made every ounce of attention rush to her. When she laced their fingers together, they felt their heart jump up into their throat.

She only let go towards the end of Sofia's routine and it was to unroll the sign she made. It was glittery pink and bold with big chunky letters that spelled out "GO SOFIA".

Margherita hid her face as soon as she did, muttering something about how embarrassing this was and how she hoped that nobody from her school was seeing this.

But Valentina? They were practically swooning. Margherita might have been embarrassed and perhaps this was embarrassing in a way, but Valentina was stumbling and tripping in love. They found adoration in Eleonora's cheers, her happy holding the sign above her head like there was nobody behind her, and the way her hair bounced with her. In her joy and her love for her sisters, Valentina found all the riches in the world. Eleonora was all the wealth anyone could dream of.

Sofia caught sight of them and her pale face went bright red, but she waved happily anyway.

Valentina took the chance to wrap one arm around Eleonora's waist. She looked down at them with that prize-winning smile and leaned into them while holding up her sign.

All they ever dreamed of was right here and they didn't plan on letting it go.

At some point, Eleonora decided that she trusted Valentina enough to ask them to watch over Sofia and Margherita while she took care of an emergency out of town. Something with their mother. Something that Eleonora didn't seem to want to talk a lot about. Valentina would never push her either. What she told them was her decision to make and they were content knowing what they did so far. Whenever she felt safe enough to reveal more was for her to decide.

Margherita, on the other hand, was not nearly as reserved.

"I don't get why she still talks to mom when she bothers to show up." Margherita said.

"It's not my place to ask, but if you need to let it out, kid, go ahead." they said.

Margherita sighed and looked down. She was digging her nails into the sofa, "She's...not a good mom. I don't know how else to put it. She left us behind."

"I always wondered, but I didn't want to ask about something personal." they said, "I'm sorry she did that to you."

She laughed and shook her head, "Sofia is too young to remember or care."

Valentina pat the spot next to them and Margherita happily took it.

"I don't remember our mom more than the bad and the feelings she left me with. Even though she was around, I guess, before leaving Sofia behind. It's been Eleonora since the beginning. I think if I were to ever imagine my mother's face again, it would easily be replaced with 'Nora.'" she said, "It's her voice

that sang to me, her hands that held mine when I was scared, her kisses when I got hurt. She is the one who showed up to my art shows. She's the one who works so hard to give us the best life she can. Eleonora has done it all."

"Are you angry about it? Eleonora seeing her?" Valentina asked, "These are a lot of big feelings to deal with."

"No. Not really. I don't really care about meeting my mom again. Eleonora can do what she wants. I'm not going to throw a fit about it. But I haven't wanted to see our mom since I was a kid. Maybe I was angry once, but I realized that I already had all the motherly love in the world. And I realized that even if it didn't come from the woman that birthed me, it doesn't make it any less real. Eleonora is my mom. It's her. It's always been her."

"That's true." Valentina said, "But it is okay to still have complicated feelings about it. You're only a kid. None of this should be something you're experiencing."

Margherita nodded and started to tremble a little, "I just feel that I have to be strong. If Eleonora can be strong for the both of us then I have to be strong for Sofia."

"Nobody in this world can be strong all of the time. Not even Eleonora. It's okay to feel."

Margherita nodded but did not dare look up. When she began to tremble, Valentina wrapped their arms around her. She gladly fell into the embrace. They sat like that for a few minutes. Not a word was said but all was understood. This was still a rough subject and there were many feelings that came with it. They couldn't blame Margherita for not being thrilled even if she was content with Eleonora as her maternal figure. Sometimes pretending something bothering you was fine was just the only way to feel like there is some control in the situation. She was still a kid and all that she had seen was unfair.

"She really likes you, you know." she said, "I haven't seen her this happy in a long time. It's...nice. She doesn't usually treat herself much."

"Yeah?" they asked. A small smile was growing on their face, "Well, I really like her too."

Margherita stayed right there in Valentina's arms, breathing slowly, sniffing in between, and not saying much. That was perfectly okay with them. Eleonora liked them and Margherita trusted them. The universe was finally on their side.

"Thank you for checking out my car for us." Eleonora said, "I know nothing about them." At this point, Valentina was certain that Eleonora was teasing her and tempting her. Here she was sat perfectly on a blanket in the grass. She had a soft pink dress on and a pretty creme sunhat with primrose tucked into the pink ribbon. She was carefully eating a sandwich. Margherita and Sofia sat with her, the three of them having a little picnic while Valentina worked. It was the perfect day really and they couldn't help but feel satisfied knowing that they got an excuse to sit around and admire Eleonora. It also gave them front-row seats to see the love she had for her sisters.

"No problem." Valentina winked at her, "I like working on your car better than the cars at my dad's shop. At least here I can take a piss without someone freaking out that I'm avoiding work."

"Is it scary being under the car?" Sofia asked from beside Eleonora.

"Not really. It was at first, but I'm so used to it now. And I make sure I take all the precautions so that I'm safe." they said.

"Oh! Okay." Sofia chirped.

"Maybe someday I can teach you how to fix cars, yeah?" they asked.

Sofia began to jump in her place, absolutely thrilled about the suggestion, "That would be so cool! Can I help now?"

"Mm, we gotta wait a little. I gotta make sure you stay safe if you're helping me with the car."

“Aw...I’m not that little.”

“Nah,” Valentina said, “You’re strong and big. But not quite big enough yet. And I think Eleonora would kill me if you got hurt on my watch.” “Only a little.” she said.

“Well as soon as I am big enough, will you let me?”

“For sure, kiddo.” they said, “But for now, you can lend me tools. How does that sound?”

Sofia didn’t need to be told anything else. She bolted from her spot next to the toolbox by the car, “I can pass you anything from here!”

It was good to hear so much delight in her voice. Of the three of them, they worried about their impression on Sofia the most. Little kids were brutally honest and the thought of Sofia having a poor impression of them scared them more than anything else.

Well, almost anything else. They still had to admit that the thought of being brutally rejected by their dream woman intimidated them greatly.

“Do you see anything wrong yet?” Eleonora asked.

Of course, they still found ways around those fears. Fixing up Eleonora’s car offered a few perks. It meant that Valentina had an excuse to be cheesy as ever.

“Oh. I did find something here.”

“Oh?” she quickly sat up, “What is it?”

Valentina slowly slid out from under the car and hid something in their hands. Eleonora, Sofia, and Margherita all were sitting up to see what they assumed to be the problem with the car. That was not the case. When Valentina opened their hands, there was a flower made from gears and scrap metal. It was chunky and messy and imperfect, but they held it up to give to Eleonora anyway. Her expression went through confusion, realization, and then bashfulness.

“Aww, that’s so cute!” Margherita laughed, “Eleonora you have to admit that it’s cute.” “It’s very cute.” she chuckled. She reached forward and took it, gently running her fingers along it. She took in every detail of Valentina’s work.

She put the flower down next to her plate and she reached up towards the ribbon in her hat. She plucked some of the primrose and moved forward to tuck it behind Valentina’s ear.

“There. A flower for a flower. Though I think yours is much prettier.” she said, picking up the metal flower again.

Valentina smiled big at her, certain that things were going well here. Perhaps they would win over Eleonora in this lifetime. Such a feat would send them over the moon. But as they looked at her face and the tender expression written on it, they once again were reminded that they would spend the rest of their days fighting for the love of this woman.

“I think you’re the prettiest flower that ever did bloom.” they said.

Eleonora hid her face with her hat which caused Sofia and Margherita to giggle. Satisfied with the reaction, Valentina slid back under the car to inspect it more.

They eventually did find what was wrong with Eleonora’s car. There was an oil leak and the transmission needed a good look at. All things that they were than happy to fix for Eleonora free of charge.

The sun had started to set and Valentina was cleaning the dirt and grime off of themselves from the day. They would have to take a shower once they got back home. Ah, a warm bath sounded so soothing right about now. They heard the sound of the door opening and turned around to see Eleonora. She was in a robe now and her hair was in a bonnet. She still looked so beautiful to Valentina.

“It’s late out.” Eleonora said, “And the news said they’re expecting a big storm. You could stay the night here.”

Valentina shook their head, “I’ll be okay. I’m a great driver.”

“But wouldn’t it be safe anyway?” Eleonora asked, “I’d hate for you to get caught in the storm.” Valentina waved their hand, “I don’t want to be a burden. Really.” “You wouldn’t be a burden at all. The girls love you.” she said.

“Nah, really. It’s okay ‘Nora. I’ll take my greasy ass to my house.”

“Valentina.”

“Hm?”

“I’m asking you to stay the night.”

They blinked and stared at her. Slowly they pointed at themselves and then looked around the yard before finding her eyes again. Eleonora nodded slowly and Valentina short-circuited.

“You...want me to stay the night?” they asked.

“Yes.” she laughed, “I think we’ve been dating long enough that you can stay the night.”
Valentina did a Windows startup.

“We..We’re dating?”

Eleonora stared at them, “...yes? We–What did you think this was?”

“I thought we were just being good friends.”

Eleonora hit them with a blank stare before breaking into laughter. Valentina’s face went hot as they re-evaluated all of their interactions, all the times they spoke, every moment that they shared. It was clearer now that they looked back on it but nothing had been said so they assumed that Eleonora’s actions were strictly platonic.

“Oh darling,” she was still laughing, “This entire time I thought you were just taking things slow. I thought you knew I was into you.”

“God no!” Valentina covered their face, “If I knew I’d have been a lot more bold. I thought you weren’t interested in me at all. Honestly I thought you might be straight.”

She shook her head and came closer, “Valentina, dear, I am the biggest lesbian you’ll ever meet.” “Yes, I see that now.” they laughed, “And here I was thinking I was so scandalous with my metal flower.” “I thought it was cute.” she said, gently shoving Valentina’s shoulder, “Really sweet honestly. But yes, I really like you.”

They were close again, Eleonora standing right in front of them and looking down. What a tall beauty she was. Valentina couldn’t help but stare at her. They had permission now, didn’t they? This confirmation meant that they were free to want to stroke her shoulder, hold her hand, stand so close she could smell her perfume, and reach up gently to cup her face. All of this was theirs now.

So they did reach up. They cupped her face, a pale hand against beautiful copper skin. They looked into those earthy brown eyes that held life and they leaned in to kiss her. Her lips were soft and she smelled like flowers and citrus. Valentina wrapped an arm around Eleonora’s waist and decided right then that they would never let go.

“Did you really think that I was holding your hand and inviting you everywhere with my family platonically?” Eleonora whispered. It was late at night and they were laying in her bed. Sofia and Margherita had long since gone to sleep.

“We never said anything about it so I thought we were just good friends!” they laughed. Eleonora’s laughter rang through the room and she gently reached over to stroke Valentina’s cheek, “Do I make you nervous, Valentina?”

“Extremely so.” they said, “A beautiful woman like yourself deserves the glories of heaven. I’ve got nothing to offer but the feelings in my heart.”

Eleonora pushed some of Valentina’s hair back, trailing her fingers along their jaw and down to their collarbone, “And what if I don’t want what heaven has to offer?”

“Then what does a woman like you want?” Valentina asked, eyes sparkling as they looked up at Eleonora.

“To be vulnerable with someone. To love. To have someone I can trust.” she said, “You. I want you.”

“I think I can do that.” they said.

Eleonora hummed. She sat up and gazed at them with adoration in her eyes. They wondered how they had missed it before. It was so vivid now. Her affections were clear, her intentions bold. How had they assumed it to be anything else?

“What about you. What does Valentina want?” she asked.

They looked at her and trailed their fingers along her skin, taking in the warmth and truly appreciating that this moment here was real.

“To spend the rest of my life peeling back every layer to you.” they said, “I want to know about your family, your deepest thoughts and desires. I want to know you at your lows and at your highs. I want to always find out new things about you. I want to keep discovering who Eleonora is.”

She smiled and lay down, pressing her head against Valentina’s chest, “I think we can manage that. So long as you can live with my sisters being around.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” they said, “It would be an honor to spend my life with them in it as well.”

Eleonora’s smile became so tender and she held onto Valentina tightly.

They still didn’t know everything about her. They didn’t know what her biggest fears were, what kept her up at night, what was the happiest moment in her life, or what her relationship with her mother was exactly. But that was just Eleonora.

She was open with her love—never letting it hide away. She was grand and she was extravagant. She made sparkly signs to hold up at dance recitals and she worried about missing even one event. She laughed like the sun. In her joy was stored a million precious moments. She was just that way. She felt every rich emotion fully and though her walls were always up, a glimpse at her world wasn’t hard to see when you took the time.

She was strong. She raised two girls on her own and took a role she should never have had to. She was mighty and she did not complain. There was never a sign that she would have had things any other way. She loved her sisters and she loved them deeply. They were her world and they were her driving force. Every decision that she made, she made with them in mind. They knew that much. They had seen her praise them and they had seen her fight for every moment she could have with them. She had her fair share of baggage and secrets, but who didn’t?

Eleonora walked with grace and she loved pretty things. Even if she came from little, she made the most of what she had and never let her sisters think that things might be complicated. She wore pink dresses and sunhats. She was beautiful in every way there was. She was tall, she was gorgeous, she

walked with a crown to call her hair, and she wore clothes that screamed of money she did not have. Her soul was filled with the desire to love.

The first thing to know about Eleonora is that she did not dare show weakness.

Strong and kind.

Women like Eleonora always seemed to sacrifice so much and never take a break. But that wouldn't be the case here. Valentina swore that she would make this woman take care of herself. They would take days to spoil her, they would remove her from stressful situations as much as they could, and they would teach this woman to stop giving bread from an empty basket.

One day she would no longer feel like she had to shoulder every burden for the people that she loved.

The second thing to know about Eleonora is that you never really knew her at all.

They had all the time in the world to learn what made her tick and who she was. Layer by layer, they would get a glimpse into her life, and that was enough for them.

Their heart was in her hands and they were determined to show her a world where she did not always have to be strong. She would be allowed to feel, to express, to be. Everything she never had because she was hiding it to be strong would come forward. She would be able to cry without judgment and scream when she needed. Valentina was certain of this. Kissing her forehead, they closed their eyes and dreamed of everything that could and would be.