

1 Aurora Milos- 16 years old

*I recognized the Borgia family's vineyard immediately, despite the fact I was only there in my dream. It was the pride of Lex's father, Cesare Borgia, who had only recently won it after conquering the city of Forli and the noble Caterina Sforza.*

*Lex had to be here somewhere. Walking the fields at sunset was one of Lex's favorite things. He said it was the only time he could find peace from his father and his duties as a lord of the Romagna. I made my way up the row of multi-colored grapevines that stood just taller than me. I felt the same warm, powerful presence that was always present in our dream world. Out of the corner of my eye I saw two figures, a man and woman. We got glimpses of the pair sometimes or, if not them, strange shaped creatures. Whenever Lex or I actually look, nothing was ever there. We had imagined dozens of scenarios over the years; maybe they were guardian angels, the gods of old, or phantoms haunting us?*

*These phantoms weren't always limited to my dreams either. Maybe it was because I've wished for so long for any part of my dream world to be real, but I could swear I've seen other phantoms in the real world. Then again, I've been told I live in my fantasy world too much, trying to have my own story fit for a teen novel. The vines ahead rustled. "Lex?" I looked around, my eyes searching the field of sweet smelling vines for my best friend. "Where are you?"*

*"I'm here."*

*I spun around. As soon as I found his hazel ones I smiled for the first time since that morning when my mother had given me thrilling but terrible news.*

*“Hi.” I felt my cheeks start to heat. The uniqueness of Alexander Borgia always took me by surprise even after eleven years of knowing him, or his dream self at least. Lex was tall and lean with wide shoulders and defined muscles that weren’t always obvious through his heavy layers of sixteenth century clothes. His pale skin laid over sharp cheekbones and a long face; his chin peppered with evening stubble and an adorable cleft. His dark curly locks framed his face and fell just past his angled jaw. He was handsome in a way guys in the twenty-first century couldn’t even come close to. I loved coming back to his time in our dreams. Sometimes I wished I lived in the sixteenth century instead of the twenty first. Then I remember they didn’t have modern plumbing. Still...*

*“I was afraid you would not come tonight.” His not quite Italian accent rolled over me. “I have not seen you in days, mia gemma.”*

*‘My gemstone.’ That was one of the pet names he always called me. It was rare for Lex to use my real name, but then I always called him Lex instead of Alexander.*

*I sighed. “I need my best friend after today.” Maybe I was being overly dramatic but after the bomb my mom had dropped on me today I needed the one person I have always trusted.*

*He took a few steps closer. “What is wrong?”*

*I dropped my gaze and wrapped my arms around my waist. I didn’t want him to see me cry today. Sure he’s seen me cry many times in the past, but today the reason for my tears were too much, and it was partially because of him.*

*“Mia gemma,” he whispered, his tone soothing. His hands came up to touch my arms but, like always, they passed through me. Lex’s face turned dark and angry as he clenched his hands so hard they shook. It was our curse.*

*We could taste, touch, and smell everything in our dream world—except each other. It was agonizing most of the time but tonight I was as grateful as I was resentful.*

*My gaze focused on the vines of colored grapes. “My mom,” I started, “she told me we’re moving to Rome in a few weeks. She’s been offered a commission to restore and to curate a special show the Italian government is sponsoring.”*

*“I thought you wanted to come to Roma?” Lex’s confusion echoed my mom’s from earlier.*

*I bit my lip, nerves fluttering in my blood. “I did... I do, more than anything.”*

*“Then why are you fighting tears?”*

*My throat tightened. How could I tell him he was the reason? How could I tell him the thought of being in Rome—in Italy—without him by my side was unbearable? He was the reason I loved Italy. He was the reason I found a love for history. He was the reason I wanted to go to Rome. For eleven years he had been the only person I had ever felt I could truly rely on, the one person I knew would always stand by me and never doubt me. He was the one person who never flinched away from me because of my scars. Never made me feel like less of a person because of them. I hadn’t realized it until two years ago, but I’m in love with him. It’s not the instant love the Middle Ages are known for, it’s the kind of love that started and bloomed over more than a decade.*

*“Mia gemma, please look at me.” The gentleness in his voice couldn’t be denied. Slowly I looked up attempting to hold back tears.*

*His captivating eyes filled with compassion and held me enslaved. "You do not ever have to hide your tears from me, angioletto. Nobody knows you like I do. You are safe with me always," he vowed, the sincerity and vulnerability in his voice crushing my resolve.*

*"I'm sorry, Lex." I sniffled and took a breath.*

*He waited while I gathered myself. His hands gripping his sword belt, his shoulders tense. Something he always did when he was trying to remember he couldn't touch me.*

*How had I fallen so hopelessly in love with a dream, a figment of my imagination? Every record I searched didn't mention Cesare's favored son. Not a name, a birthday or even a damn favorite color, nothing. But then how could I have imagined him when I was five years old? How could I see and talk to him, both of us aging over the years in our dreams?*

*"You don't have to tell me," he offered. That made me smile. Lex always wanted to know everything about me, just as I did him.*

*I cleared my throat. "Part of me is so excited to go. I've wanted this forever."*

*"But?"*

*If we had been in the real world, and not my dream, I know there was no way I would even imagine telling him the truth, but this wasn't the real world. "You won't be in Rome waiting for me." I hugged myself tighter, wishing it was his arms holding me.*

*He looked stricken his astonishment mixing with a hopeful gleam that widened his eyes. "Angioletto, I don't know what to say." He stepped closer, only an inch or two between us.*

*I couldn't touch him, but I imagined how he would feel. Strong, warm, gentle when most men of his time were rough and uncaring. I could almost feel his hand stroking my hair, holding my waist, cupping my cheek. My heart raced. God, why couldn't he be real? It was so unfair!*

*"I'm being stupid I know." I wiped away my tear that escaped. "I just always pictured myself walking the streets of Rome with you by my side." There I said it, and it made the twist in my chest pull tighter.*

*Sorrow and happiness warred on his face. "Mia gemma, I..."*

*I held up my hand to stop the words I knew he would say. "Please don't." I begged not able to hold back my feelings. "It...hurts...too much to have my dream guy whispering promises I know can never happen. You're not real, and being in Rome without you... I'll have to face that truth. That's why I'm so torn up. I fell in love with a dream."*

*His eyes and face darkened, the late evening light casting shadows over his sharp face. "Say it again," he pleaded with a voice gone hoarse.*

*Fat tears welled, and, try as I might, I couldn't keep a few of them from escaping.*

*"I'm in love with you," I whispered, my voice as soft as the wind.*

*Lex's face lit up, his body relaxed, and breath whooshed out of his lungs. "I lov—"*

*"No!" Desperation swamped me. "I can't," I explained, not wanting to hurt him. "I can't take hearing you say you love me. A dream can't fall in love with me." I turned away shoving my shaking hands through my hair. "God, I should be committed for my delusions."*

*“Stop this now, Aurora!”*

*My shoulders dropped. Great, now he was angry with me.*

*“Look at me.”*

*“I’m sorry.”*

*“Stop apologizing and listen to my words.” My eyes shot up, lips sealed. No one was stupid enough to ignore the absolute authority in a Condottiero’s voice. They were some of Italy’s best and most dangerous mercenaries or military leaders; and Lex had learned from the best: his father, Cesare Borgia.*

*“I love you too,” he declared. “I think I have since we first met so long ago as children.” He closed the distance between us. I had to tilt my head up to hold his gaze. “I do not care what I have to do. I will find a way to you, to your time,” he vowed, his gaze intense and determined. His voice dropped, losing the hardness but none of the passion. “I will prove to you I am real, prove to my self that you are real. I never make a vow I cannot keep.”*

*Ever so slowly he raised his left hand, palm facing me, like he was resting his hand against a window and waited. It was our way of touching like we had when we first met as children and realized we couldn’t touch each other. It had become our promise, our solace over the years. Whenever one of us was angry or hurting or making a promise, this was what we did.*

*I could see his fierce determination, and his worry that I would reject him for the first time, ever. My raging heartbeat was so loud in my ears it was hard to think. Accepting his dream promise would only shatter me even more in the next few weeks when I finally arrived in the Eternal City and he wasn’t there. I was crazy and a glutton*

*for pain for even thinking of accepting this promise. Nothing good could come of it, but my heart and mind had different ideas. They refused to listen to logic. They wanted to be with Alexander Borgia. Turning my back on his words—from him—was never going to happen.*

*I sucked in a deep breath trying to gather my spent emotions. This had already been such a long day and my feelings were stretched to the breaking point.*

*Hand shaking, feeling more raw and vulnerable than I could ever remember, I placed my smaller hand against his. Our fingers blurred together like I was touching a hologram. I couldn't physically feel anything, but there was something else holding us together. Something neither of us understood. A bond that had brought us together despite the centuries keeping us apart.*

*"I'm going to hate myself for this in the morning," Maybe I would, but my heart couldn't survive without his whispered promises. I also knew that if Lex were indeed real, he wouldn't want me to be sad and unhappy.*

*I saw the two figures from earlier watching us from the other end of the vineyard, but they weren't important right now. I made my own silent vow.*

*I would go to Rome. I would do all the things we had talked about. I would go to all the places he told me about. I would experience his city and country the way he would want me to. I would find a way to be happy... without him... somehow.*