

*“It’s hard to forget someone who gave you so much to remember.”*

She sat on horseback. A warm cloak wrapped around her neck and chest, flowing freer down her back, protecting her from the icy wind that cut across the mountain. Absently, but affectionately she stroked the mane of her horse, the fingers on her opposite hand held loosely around the reigns. Perhaps it could be described as melancholy; the expression that transformed her face, made her eyes distant and her jaw tense. She certainly felt it; a heavy achy weight in her chest. Inescapable, no matter how far from Skyhold she rode, even out here in this cold beauty, surrounded by nothing but silence.

She took in a slow breath of the cold air, her head tipping down towards her chest and closed her eyes. The tension in her jaw grew in strength as her mind began to re-tell her a story. The one that had led her here - to feeling like this.

*Burning candles nearly at their end flickered in the rookery. The crows squawked quietly in random intervals but mostly remained silent. She stood there, her hand on the railing at the top of the stairs, unmoving because her eyes were caught on the sight of her Spymaster. Leliana. The hood she so often wore was off, laid on the wooden table she sat at. Her short red hair fanned her face, her eyes down-turned to the letter she was penning with the feathered quill. She was under no illusions as to whether or not the Spymaster knew she was there. Leliana continued what she was writing and only when she was finished, looked up. The smallest of smiles was given, but the warmth it contained was unmistakable. Her heart began to ache, because inside of friendship that was the moment she had begun to want more.*

It was rare laughter that made it worse. Innocent moments where a woman so closed off to the world had found safety in opening up to her. Talking to each other became so very easy. Finding space to be comfortable and be themselves, not the people they had to be for the rest of the world. They shared fears. Goals and dreams. They worked together. In moments where prying eyes were absent teased each other and every now and then, a flirty playful banter emerged.

Alone at night, in a large room she’d never quite felt comfortable in the ache grew and wants birthed fantasy.

*She walked her down the stairs to the door, opening it with a smile. A thank you for the report and the conversation that had flowed afterward was given. Leliana turned to go, but something made her pause. Curiosity sparked. Hope followed. The Spymaster turned around, looking at her. Leliana took a step forward, then another until there was no space between them, strong hands so gentle as they framed her cheek. She felt Leliana’s breath teasing her lips in the seconds before she leaned the taste of her mouth*

The fantasy was cruel. She knew she should stop. But at night when she closed her eyes, she couldn’t help herself, couldn’t stop what she wanted from showing her what might be. And when she touched herself, and exploded with sensation there was a name that left her lips on a tortured groan. She could have loved her Spymaster, fiercely. Accepted every part of who she was.

Could have.

Her hand came off her horses mane, gloved fingers pressing against her mouth and jaw as emotion intensified her regret. In her mind the story continued.

*She had been so sure that rejection was coming. Even as she asked Leliana for the moment alone, because she could not stand another second of not telling her how she felt. Vulnerability felt foreign to her, but something inside of her would not let that fear hold her back. She had to take the risk. Even if she knew nothing would come of it.*

*"I love you," she whispered, dark brown eyes colliding with wintery blue. "I love how strong you are. I love how much you care about everyone here, not just Josephine even if you won't let them see it. I love the sound of your voice. I love your pain, your regrets. I just..." quieter. "I love you." The silence was damning. She couldn't stand it, but she couldn't fill it.*

*"I didn't know you felt this strongly."*

*"You wouldn't have," she whispered. She'd hid it well. Like a coward she looked away. She didn't know, she'd never know, what was on Leliana's face, what was in her eyes, when the Spymaster said;*

*"Perhaps I owe you an apology. I have flirted with you. I love who you are, and that you make me feel like myself. That I can be myself, when I'm around you. It has been... a long time since I've had that. But I don't think..."*

Looking back the words hadn't been a full rejection. Just doubt. And now, as the scene played again, regret ripped her into pieces and her eyes clenched shut. She should have looked at Leliana. She should have stopped to really listen. She should not have been afraid of the silence. She should have asked that they try. Just try. Slowly. Gently. Just to see if the what ifs could be conquered, if there was something there that could have grown.

She hadn't done that. She hadn't heard what was between the words, she had let her surety of rejection taint everything else. And now the moment was gone.

So too, was Leliana.

They wrote occasionally. They remained friends as her once Spymaster took up her new position as head of the Chantry. But what was left in the space between them, was the moment lost.

Slowly, she drew her hand from her face. Slowly she opened her eyes, raised her head and took in another breath. She couldn't change the past. Nor, could she keep holding on to what ifs and the regret of what could have been. The only thing that was real now, was that she should would never make that mistake again.

Through pain, there was strength. In regret, wisdom.

Once more, she closed her eyes. "Good-bye," she whispered.

Her eyes opened, her grip tightened on the reigns and with a guiding hand on the horse she rode away.