

a promise to keep

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Summary

Whenever I'm with you, I already feel like I'm at home.

Notes

for roy :D

He misses Nie Huaisang.

On most days, Jiang Cheng can quell the yearning. On most days, Jiang Cheng tells himself that he doesn't deserve her, and that he should leave her be.

But today, the summer air of Lotus Pier is heavy and boiling, and his mind keeps drifting to perfumed hair and skin, ink-stained fingers and wrists. He's never felt so fond of smudged sleeves before, of the marks that she would leave on her arms as she would push them up. Whenever she's painting, she gets lost in it completely — but Jiang Cheng always likes to look at her more. Of course her work is lovely; but when he looks at her, he sees her smile, her laugh, her kisses — all simmering underneath.

Today is a slow, warm day. The kind he wants to spend quietly in her arms, either in the lakes of Yunmeng or in the soft sheets of either of their chambers.

But should he really...? Since he last saw her, what if she tired of him?

You can trust me, A-Cheng, she had once told him. *I'll make it as easy as I can for you. I promise I'll make it easy.*

He doesn't want to see her lip tremble like that again, that sheen to her eyes.

And why should she be the one to keep pulling at his hand? He's grateful she had, yes, but — how much longer can he keep her waiting?

He mounts his sword, and flies to Qinghe.

He walks among the market, weaves through the spaces between colorful stalls with their clamoring vendors. One that boasts shimmering pots of makeup catches his eye; he thinks of how a soft pink could soften the apples of Nie Huaisang's round cheeks, or how deep red could tint her lips into sin.

"You look like a man in love," the vendor tells him, smiling in a way that lets him know she knows *just* who he is: Maiden Nie's suitor.

(It's one of the few things he enjoys being.)

"Your maiden will enjoy this, I think." A slightly purple-red rouge is held up. "Goes well with gold. Matches your colors."

A wink.

He takes it.

He knows the way to her; his heart, his blood knows it, too, and they sing with every step. He stands where he knows her window is high up above, and gazes up at the high spires,

picturing her there.

Perhaps he's let it be too long. She sends letters to him, though, and he keeps those perfumed papers and pressed flowers close, and finds the distance shortened.

He picks up a small, smooth stone and tosses it. For a moment he wonders if it'll fall back and strike his forehead, and if that would make her laugh.

He doesn't know when her voice became the sound of a new world. There is *before*, and there is *after*. She stayed in Yunmeng every night it was being rebuilt, and held him to her chest and sang quietly to him. Even if her voice wavered, she sang.

The window opens, and there comes that voice. "A-Cheng?"

He flies up to her. She leans out of the window, grasps for her shoulder to draw him into a kiss.

"Hello," she says, bright-eyed. "What a lovely surprise."

She flips her fan open over her reddened lips, steps back to let him in through the window. Once he's in, she holds out her free hand and he takes it, puts the small pot of rouge into her palm. "For you, love."

Ink-stained fingers close around it, and Jiang Cheng gets a kiss laughingly placed on his cheek for his efforts. "You're not so shy anymore."

Shy, perhaps, is not the right word, but it is the tactful one. He had never been shy about staying close to her — but saying it? Yes, that had taken some time. But knowing she needed to hear that he would stay, that he was safe, that he loved her — that pushed the words from his trembling lips. It seemed so easy for her, but he knew she was trying to. Every smile, every kiss from Nie Huaisang is a hard-won blessing.

She puts the rouge on her cheeks, admires them in a small hand mirror. "Do I look pretty?"

"Beautiful."

You always look beautiful.

Jiang Cheng, from the moment he met Nie Huaisang, had thought her to have oddly charming mannerisms. The way she hid behind her fan but would let him catch glimpses here and there, how she would tilt her head up as he spoke — and unconsciously, he would lean down to her — and hide their mouths behind her fan. Among the crystal falls and lush greenery of the Cloud Recesses, it was easy to feel like they were the only ones in a secret paradise, and he liked how she made him feel like the only one. Even with her face hidden, her eyes would be on him.

She didn't tell Wei Wuxian first -- she told *him*, Jiang Cheng.

"I think you like me," is what she had said, one night with Emperor's Smile on her lips. "And so I'm going to trust you with something. We're the same kind of different, with our families,

but there's something else about me I want to share with you."

"What is it?" Even with the liquor in his veins, he knew there was tension prickling between them.

"I'm a girl," she said. There was no fan hiding the brightness in her eyes that night. "Can't change it, don't want to. Don't want to fight it anymore. I am, I just am."

She trailed off, and looks at him. "If you're going to like me, Jiang-xiong, like all of me, as I am."

"Of course I do," he remembers telling her, and in that moment, he hadn't wondered yet if she liked him too, only knew that she had just told him something important, and so he offered his hand to her and she held it, and they sat like that. They looked at the stars and she pointed them out, told him which ones would guide him home, which ones would guide him to her.

They had talked more the next morning, and Jiang Cheng asked her that evening if she would want him as a suitor someday.

"You're too observant, Nie Huaisang," he had mumbled, cheeks on fire. "I wanted to confess you to another way, but... Thank you for last night. I'm happy you c-could trust me with that, and m-maybe you can trust me with y-your heart someday?"

She had thrown her arms around him, and laughed, sweet as a songbird.

And now their someday is *today*. She's red-cheeked before him, and she's beautiful, has always been beautiful, but Jiang Cheng thinks she looks *happy*, now. And she's the most beautiful when she's smiling like this.

"Lay with me," Nie Huaisang says, and so he does, fits right into her arms and she holds him like she's shielding him. He thinks the days spent with her do change him, somehow: he always leaves Qinghe feeling a little stronger. A little lighter.

(Though his steps and heart *are* heavy as he walks away from her. But his precious days with Huaisang are also what keep the burden on his shoulders manageable. She fills him with light.)

She strokes his hair, a slow, steady rhythm.

"I miss the days when I could see you freely," she says. "I didn't know what I had."

Jiang Cheng feels a tightening in his chest. He tenses in her arms, hears the rustle of her clothes as she hastens to hold him closer.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs. They stay silent for a while, until she says, "I know it's not the same, but I'm your family, too. You'll always have me, whatever happens to us. We love each other today. And we've had so many days together. more than other people have gotten to have... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but I'm your family, too, and I love you."

Her words a bit clumsy, stumbling out of her frantically, but he knows what she means. And he knows she has *chosen* him. He can't even begin to explain how much that means to him.

"You're more than that," Jiang Cheng blurts out, "to me, you're already my wife."

She freezes for just a moment; the hand that resumes running through his hair shakes.

"Really?"

"I want to spend my life with you," he tells her. His voice shakes like her hands. "A-Sang, soon, I'll ask Chifeng-zun for your hand."

"When?" She sighs. "Ah, I'll tell you when. Da-ge's been so irritable lately."

"When I see you again," Jiang Cheng decides, kisses her forehead before he lets her hair fall back. "Come to Yunmeng soon. I know it is not yet fully built, but..."

"Mm. He'll say yes to you. I think he likes you." She always has a faint smile on her lips, but it becomes so irrevocably fond when she looks at Jiang Cheng. "And to think I was worried about you two meeting. He's surprised me."

Nie Mingjue, since learning he has a sister, has taken to bringing her even more gifts than before. The fans and paints and fabrics are joined by makeup and jewelry, now. He presses her less about mastering the saber, but has asked her to keep up the skill she has. He has also gifted her a fan with a blade within in, and Jiang Cheng sees it now, sitting on the top of a chest. He makes a note to ask Nie Huaisang to show him how it works later.

"How would you ask me?" Nie Huaisang asks softly.

"Hm?"

"How would you ask me to marry you?"

"After I get your brother's blessing," Jiang Cheng begins slowly, and he's quietly surprised with how easily the words start rolling off his tongue like a dawning rain. "I would find you, and bring you chests of gold and jade. For your hair, your neck, your wrists, your fingers. Belts and earrings and skirts — whatever you desire. Paints and fans and the rarest pieces I can find. Lotus Pier doesn't have much now, but soon, I'll have enough for you. And I'll have — me."

He falters a bit. "You'll have me to love you and protect you forever, A-Sang. I'll do anything to give you the life you want."

"You are the most precious treasure I could have," Nie Huaisang says, her touch on his cheek gentle. "I love you."

"And I love you." Jiang Cheng presses the promise to her lips.

"I don't want you to go," Nie Huaisang whispers. "What will you bring me next time?"

"What do you want?"

“A comb for my hair,” she says after a slight pause, but from the pleased smile on her lips, Jiang Cheng knows she must have been wanting it for a while.

He puts a hand on her forehead, smooths back her bangs. “It’s getting long.”

“Perhaps one day you can braid it for me,” she whispers, “when you make me your wife.”

“I like the sound of that,” Jiang Cheng says. “And know that I would marry you now if I could. Until I do — would you like me to braid your hair now? Or do you want to wait?”

“Braid it,” she says, claps her hands together.

“Where’s that pin I got you? With the birds?”

“It won’t match this outfit,” she says, amused, but she fetches it anyway. “What happened to your fashion sense, hmm? Do you just want to see me decked out in your gifts?”

“Yes,” Jiang Cheng says. With the way life has gone, he’s learned that there’s only room for honesty with people he loves.

“Then I’ll wear it every day,” she murmurs, and shuffles over so he can braid her hair. She sways a bit in anticipation as he collects and weaves the strands together, tying them to the bun already at the top of her head. When he’s finished the two twin braids, he adds the pin onto the right side.

She takes his hand and holds up the mirror so she can admire the two of them.

“You know what we look like?” She says.

“What?”

“Like what I always dreamed of,” Nie Huaisang says softly. “And I can’t wait until I never have to let you go again. Until I’m really your wife.”

“You’re already my everything,” Jiang Cheng tells her helplessly. “Once Lotus Pier is built, I’ll bring you home. I promise.”

She smiles at that. “I know you will, my love. And let me say, until then, it’s okay. Whenever I’m with you, I already feel like I’m at home.”

And their promise is sealed with a kiss.

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