

marry in six months, or even in twelve; but a long engagement—”

“Yes, dear ma’am,” said Mrs Croft, “or an uncertain engagement, an engagement which may be long. To begin without knowing that at such a time there will be the means of marrying, I hold to be very unsafe and unwise, and what I think all parents should prevent as far as they can.”

Anne found an unexpected interest here. She felt its application to herself, felt it in a nervous thrill all over her; and at the same moment that her eyes instinctively glanced towards the distant table, Captain Wentworth’s pen ceased to move, his head was raised, pausing, listening, and he turned round the next instant to give a look, one quick, conscious look at her.

The two ladies continued to talk, to re-urge the same admitted truths, and enforce them with such examples of the ill effect of a contrary practice as had fallen within their observation, but Anne heard nothing distinctly; it was only a buzz of words in her ear, her mind was in confusion.

Captain Harville, who had in truth been hearing none of it, now left his seat, and moved to a window, and Anne seeming to watch him, though it was from thorough absence of mind, became gradually sensible that he was inviting her to join him where he stood. He looked at her with a smile, and a little motion of the head, which expressed, “Come to me, I have something to say;” and the unaffected, easy kindness of manner which denoted the feelings of an older acquaintance than he really was, strongly enforced the invitation. She roused herself and went to him. The window at which he stood was at the other end of the room from where the two ladies were sitting, and though nearer to Captain Wentworth’s table, not very near. As she joined him, Captain Harville’s countenance re-assumed the serious, thoughtful expression which seemed its natural character.

“Look here,” said he, unfolding a parcel in his hand, and displaying a small miniature painting, “do you know who that is?”

“Certainly: Captain Benwick.”

“Yes, and you may guess who it is for. But,” (in a deep tone), “it was not done for her. Miss Elliot, do you remember our walking together at Lyme, and grieving for him? I little thought then—but no matter. This was drawn at the Cape. He met with a clever young German artist at the Cape, and in compliance with a promise to my poor sister, sat to him, and was bringing it home for her; and I have now the charge of getting it properly set for another! It was a commission to me! But who else was there to employ? I hope I can allow for him. I am not sorry, indeed, to make it over to another. He undertakes it;” (looking towards Captain Wentworth,) “he is writing about it now.” And with a quivering lip he wound up the whole by adding, “Poor Fanny! she would not have forgotten him so soon!”

“No,” replied Anne, in a low, feeling voice. “That I can easily believe.”

“It was not in her nature. She doted on him.”

“It would not be the nature of any woman who truly loved.”

Captain Harville smiled, as much as to say, “Do you claim that for your sex?” and she answered the question, smiling also, “Yes. We certainly do not forget you as soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions.”

“Granting your assertion that the world does all this so soon for men (which, however, I do not think I shall grant), it does not apply to Benwick. He has not been forced upon any exertion. The peace turned him on shore at the very moment, and he has been living with us, in our little family circle, ever since.”

“True,” said Anne, “very true; I did not recollect; but what shall we say now, Captain Harville? If the change be not from outward circumstances, it must be from within; it must be nature, man’s nature, which has done the business for Captain Benwick.”

“No, no, it is not man’s nature. I will not allow it to be more man’s nature than woman’s to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved. I believe the reverse. I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather.”

“Your feelings may be the strongest,” replied Anne, “but the same spirit of analogy will authorise me to assert that ours are the most tender. Man is more robust than woman, but he is not longer lived; which exactly explains my view of the nature of their attachments. Nay, it would be too hard upon you, if it were otherwise. You have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to struggle with. You are always labouring and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship. Your home, country, friends, all quitted. Neither time, nor health, nor life, to be called your own. It would be hard, indeed” (with a faltering voice), “if woman’s feelings were to be added to all this.”

“We shall never agree upon this question,” Captain Harville was beginning to say, when a slight noise called their attention to Captain Wentworth’s hitherto perfectly quiet division of the room. It was nothing more than that his pen had fallen down; but Anne was startled at finding him nearer than she had supposed, and half inclined to suspect that the pen had only fallen because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught.

“Have you finished your letter?” said Captain Harville.

“Not quite, a few lines more. I shall have done in five minutes.”

“There is no hurry on my side. I am only ready whenever you are. I am in very good anchorage here,” (smiling at Anne), “well supplied, and want for nothing. No hurry for a signal at all. Well, Miss Elliot,” (lowering his voice), “as I was saying, we shall never agree, I suppose, upon this point. No man and woman would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you—all stories, prose and

verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy. Songs and proverbs, all talk of woman's fickleness. But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men."

"Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything."

"But how shall we prove anything?"

"We never shall. We never can expect to prove any thing upon such a point. It is a difference of opinion which does not admit of proof. We each begin, probably, with a little bias towards our own sex; and upon that bias build every circumstance in favour of it which has occurred within our own circle; many of which circumstances (perhaps those very cases which strike us the most) may be precisely such as cannot be brought forward without betraying a confidence, or in some respect saying what should not be said."

"Ah!" cried Captain Harville, in a tone of strong feeling, "if I could but make you comprehend what a man suffers when he takes a last look at his wife and children, and watches the boat that he has sent them off in, as long as it is in sight, and then turns away and says, 'God knows whether we ever meet again!' And then, if I could convey to you the glow of his soul when he does see them again; when, coming back after a twelvemonth's absence, perhaps, and obliged to put into another port, he calculates how soon it be possible to get them there, pretending to deceive himself, and saying, 'They cannot be here till such a day,' but all the while hoping for them twelve hours sooner, and seeing them arrive at last, as if Heaven had given them wings, by many hours sooner still! If I could explain to you all this, and all that a man can bear and do, and glories to do, for the sake of these treasures of his existence! I speak, you know, only of such men as have hearts!" pressing his own with emotion.

“Oh!” cried Anne eagerly, “I hope I do justice to all that is felt by you, and by those who resemble you. God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow-creatures! I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as—if I may be allowed the expression—so long as you have an object. I mean while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one; you need not covet it), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.”

She could not immediately have uttered another sentence; her heart was too full, her breath too much oppressed.

“You are a good soul,” cried Captain Harville, putting his hand on her arm, quite affectionately. “There is no quarrelling with you. And when I think of Benwick, my tongue is tied.”

Their attention was called towards the others. Mrs Croft was taking leave.

“Here, Frederick, you and I part company, I believe,” said she. “I am going home, and you have an engagement with your friend. To-night we may have the pleasure of all meeting again at your party,” (turning to Anne). “We had your sister’s card yesterday, and I understood Frederick had a card too, though I did not see it; and you are disengaged, Frederick, are you not, as well as ourselves?”

Captain Wentworth was folding up a letter in great haste, and either could not or would not answer fully.

“Yes,” said he, “very true; here we separate, but Harville and I shall soon be after you; that is, Harville, if you are ready, I am in half a minute. I know you will not be sorry to be off. I shall be at your service in half a minute.”

Mrs Croft left them, and Captain Wentworth, having sealed his letter with great rapidity, was indeed ready, and had even a hurried, agitated air, which shewed impatience to be gone. Anne knew not

how to understand it. She had the kindest “Good morning, God bless you!” from Captain Harville, but from him not a word, nor a look! He had passed out of the room without a look!

She had only time, however, to move closer to the table where he had been writing, when footsteps were heard returning; the door opened, it was himself. He begged their pardon, but he had forgotten his gloves, and instantly crossing the room to the writing table, he drew out a letter from under the scattered paper, placed it before Anne with eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on her for a time, and hastily collecting his gloves, was again out of the room, almost before Mrs Musgrove was aware of his being in it: the work of an instant!

The revolution which one instant had made in Anne, was almost beyond expression. The letter, with a direction hardly legible, to “Miss A. E.—,” was evidently the one which he had been folding so hastily. While supposed to be writing only to Captain Benwick, he had been also addressing her! On the contents of that letter depended all which this world could do for her. Anything was possible, anything might be defied rather than suspense. Mrs Musgrove had little arrangements of her own at her own table; to their protection she must trust, and sinking into the chair which he had occupied, succeeding to the very spot where he had leaned and written, her eyes devoured the following words:

“I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own than when you almost broke it, eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant. You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone, I think and plan. Have you not seen this? Can you

fail to have understood my wishes? I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice when they would be lost on others. Too good, too excellent creature! You do us justice, indeed. You do believe that there is true attachment and constancy among men. Believe it to be most fervent, most undeviating, in

F. W.

“I must go, uncertain of my fate; but I shall return hither, or follow your party, as soon as possible. A word, a look, will be enough to decide whether I enter your father’s house this evening or never.”

Such a letter was not to be soon recovered from. Half an hour’s solitude and reflection might have tranquillized her; but the ten minutes only which now passed before she was interrupted, with all the restraints of her situation, could do nothing towards tranquillity. Every moment rather brought fresh agitation. It was overpowering happiness. And before she was beyond the first stage of full sensation, Charles, Mary, and Henrietta all came in.

The absolute necessity of seeming like herself produced then an immediate struggle; but after a while she could do no more. She began not to understand a word they said, and was obliged to plead indisposition and excuse herself. They could then see that she looked very ill, were shocked and concerned, and would not stir without her for the world. This was dreadful. Would they only have gone away, and left her in the quiet possession of that room it would have been her cure; but to have them all standing or waiting around her was distracting, and in desperation, she said she would go home.

“By all means, my dear,” cried Mrs Musgrove, “go home directly, and take care of yourself, that you may

A Broken Engagement

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Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Sherlock (TV) , Sherlock Holmes & Related Fandoms , Persuasion - Jane Austen
Relationship:	Sherlock Holmes/John Watson
Characters:	Sherlock Holmes , John Watson , Mary Morstan , Irene Adler , Mrs. Hudson , Harry Watson , Clara (Sherlock) , Greg Lestrade , Greg Lestrade's Wife , Mycroft Holmes , Mummy (Sherlock)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Regency , Regency Romance , Oral Sex , Hand Jobs , Anal Sex , Перевод на русский Translation in Russian
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engagement to Mrs Adler? Harry accepted their card from Mycroft and made suitable noises about being “very pleased” and “completely disengaged that evening”.

John felt himself to be too agitated to speak to anyone with composure, so sat down at a small writing table nearby and pretended to busy himself with writing a letter. Too late, he realized that Greg Lestrade and Sherlock were quietly conversing by the window almost at his elbow. He buried his head in his writing and unashamedly strained to overhear their conversation.

Greg was teasing Sherlock about the party the next evening, “You have not been in Bath long enough to appreciate the fine art of card playing.”

Sherlock snorted. “It is pure chance, no skill is involved. Card parties hold no interest for me at all.”

Greg sighed in agreement, then nudged Sherlock with his elbow. “I suppose all your interest will be for Mrs Adler?”

Sherlock replied with cool indifference, “No, she is not invited. My Lady Mother has found out some information to her disadvantage, and I believe all intercourse between her and our family is at an end.”

John felt his heart stop, then resume thundering. Could it be true? Had Lady Holmes dismissed Mrs Adler from their house? John rejoiced to hear it. Sherlock was *not* engaged! Perhaps he had a chance after all!

After a moment of silence Greg spoke. “Look at them,” he nodded at Captain Murray and Mary Morstan. “He has forgotten that six months ago he was engaged to another.”

Sherlock said quietly, “He is an active man with an active profession. It is natural that his thoughts and emotions should move quickly. It is different with us gentlemen who live quiet, private lives. I know I should never forget being engaged, even if my fiancé were to be lost to me forever.”

Greg laughed disbelievingly, “It is active, busy men who have the strongest feelings! Take a navy man such as Captain Murray, I have no doubt his feelings are robust and able to bear the heaviest weather. He will have labour and toil enough, for Mary’s fortune is not so large that they will be able to live upon it without his profession.”

“True enough,” Sherlock admitted. “But I will put forth that private gentlemen have tenderer feelings, and with less to distract us our thoughts dwell more consistently in the domestic sphere. Consider that when Captain Murray is at sea, Mary’s life will revolve around his letters. When he is home, her every thought will be only for his comfort and entertainment in the short time they have together before he goes away again. I imagine,” Sherlock coughed for a moment, “I imagine that she will live for those times of domestic happiness when he is home and those memories will be her main support and stay for those times when he is away.”

John was horrified at this juncture to knock a pen off the table, drawing their attention to him. Both looked around, but then returned to their own, very interesting, conversation. John drew a piece of paper toward himself and began to write in earnest.

“Surely,” Greg said, “you do not believe that active men are unable to feel emotions?”

“Oh no,” Sherlock hastened to add. “I fully believe that active men are capable of the full range of emotions, particularly when they have a responsive partner. Who could not love, with eyes full of love looking back?” They looked at Mary and Captain Murray for a moment. “All I claim for myself is that private gentlemen have the capacity to love longest, even when all hope is gone.” His laugh was self-deprecating and bitter. “It is a small enough claim, you need not envy it. Indeed,” he added in a lower voice, “sometimes I wish it were not so.”

Just then Harry called out to John, saying that their carriage was ready and that they must leave as they had another evening party to attend. John rose from his table, tucking his paper into his jacket, and accompanied Harry and Clara down the stairs. As they were assisted into the carriage, John slapped himself on the forehead. “My dear, please excuse me! I seem to have left my gloves on the writing table. I will be just a moment.” With that, he dashed back up the stairs and into the Lestrades’ drawing room.

“My humblest apologies, it seems I forgot my gloves. Ah, there they are.” He crossed to the writing table, and as he had hoped, Sherlock and Greg were still standing at the window. He picked up his gloves and at the same time dropped his piece of paper on the table. Catching Sherlock’s glance, he looked pointedly at the paper, then left the room again. Sherlock was clever. It would be enough.

..oOo..

Sherlock snatched up the piece of paper on the writing desk and secured it inside his jacket before anyone could mark what he had done. His pulse was loud in his ears. How to find a moment to read it? Now, or should he wait until they were safe at home? No, he could not wait so long to read a message from John.

Perhaps the same cover which John had used would work for him? Murmuring about some correspondence which he needed to address, he excused himself from Greg’s company and sank down to sit at the small writing desk. With shaking fingers he unfolded the letter and read the sharply slanted, hurried, almost illegible writing.

Dearest Sherlock,

I dare greatly to address you as such again, but I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own than when you broke it, eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that an active man forgets sooner than a gentleman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone, I think and plan. Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?

I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice when they would be lost on others. Excellent creature! You do us justice, indeed. You do believe that there is true attachment and constancy among navy men. Believe it to be most fervent, most undeviating in your servant,

J. W.

I must go, uncertain of my fate; but I shall return hither, or follow your party, as soon as possible. A word, a look, will be enough to decide whether I enter your father's house tomorrow evening or never.

Sherlock could hardly breathe. John loved him! John had written to him right here at this table, listening to his conversation with Greg. He let the sounds of the room fade away as he dreamed of John's blue eyes lit from within by passion.

"Sherlock!" Mycroft sounded annoyed, he must have been calling Sherlock previously.

"Yes?" Sherlock replied.

Mycroft rolled his eyes. "I said, we need to leave immediately as I have an appointment at the gunsmith to see a new double-barrel he had in stock. We need to hurry."

"Of course, as you wish." Sherlock stood, tucking the precious letter inside his waistcoat.

They made their way down the stairs and started into town. Mycroft was impatient. "Please walk faster Sherlock, or we will not have time to inspect the gun properly before closing time."

"Mycroft, I do not feel well. Perhaps I should just go home and let you see the gun by yourself."

Mycroft stood irresolute. Clearly he felt that if Sherlock were unwell, he should not be allowed to walk home alone. Mycroft would have to give up his appointment to take his brother home. With a resigned sigh, Mycroft turned and gave Sherlock his arm as they proceeded up the street. "Would you rather we called for a chair?" Mycroft asked solicitously.

"No, no. A walk will do me good." Sherlock answered. "Too much sitting indoors, that is all."

Just then Sherlock heard the quick tap of familiar footsteps on the pavement behind them. With only a moment of preparation he turned and saw John walking up to them. John glanced at Sherlock and a look was given, but no word was needed.

Mycroft was greeting John. "Captain Watson! Perhaps you could do me a favour, if you are heading up towards Camden Place? My brother is not well, but I have an appointment in Market Street. Perhaps if you would be so good as to escort him home? He will not have a chair unless you are more persuasive than I."

John smiled. "I would never try to persuade Mr Holmes against his will. I would be happy to escort him home, if he would accept my hand?" John extended his left hand to Sherlock.

Tempo Rubato

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Relationship:	Lán Zhàn Lán Wàngjī/Wèi Yīng Wèi Wúxiàn
Characters:	Wei Ying Wei Wuxian , Lan Zhan Lan Wangji , Jiang Cheng Jiang Wanyin , Lan Huan Lan Xichen , Lan Qiren , Nie Huaisang , Meng Yao Jin Guangyao , Wen Ning Wen Qionglin , Wēn Qíng , Luo "Mian Mian" Qingyang
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Angst with a Happy Ending , Romance , persuasion au , Separations , Pining , Mutual Pining , Depression , Miscommunication , Angst , Emotional Roller Coaster , Self-Harm , Implied/Referenced Self-Harm , Reconciliation , Eventual Smut , Alternate Universe - Jane Austen Fusion , Underage Kissing
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Sunday passes in a haze of tired emotions. The combination of the concert and his meeting with Nie Huaisang has left Lan Wangji hollowed out and exhausted, and he ends up sleeping long past his usual 5:00am wake up time. The day is slow and plodding, eaten up by chores and his own dour musings. He considers calling his brother and pressing him about Jin Guangyao, but thinks the better of it. He feels they must talk at some point, but he resolves to approach the matter after he has officially turned Jin Guangyao down.

Monday morning arrives crisp and cool, the edges of spring beginning to poke their way past the tenacious Gusu frost. Lan Wangji arrives at the office, early as usual, dropping off his briefcase and heading out to deliver the ritual coffees. He is resolved to act professionally, as if nothing has happened. He will pick up the report and the day will carry on as usual, rote and routine. It can't be long, he thinks, before this project comes to its conclusion, and Wei Wuxian will depart. Lan Wangji can only wearily hope that he takes this turmoil with him.

Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian are already in the teacher's lounge when he arrives, although it doesn't look like they are set up to work yet, the two of them not seated, coats still being peeled off.

"Good morning," Wen Qing greets him with a smile.

"Good morning," he replies, setting the coffees on the table. "I trust you both had a good weekend?"

"I had a delightful weekend, thank you," Wen Qing says. "How was the concert?"

Wei Wuxian coughs and averts his eyes.

"It was very agreeable," Lan Wangji offers smoothly, pointedly not looking at Wei Wuxian.

Wen Qing raises an eyebrow at Wei Wuxian, but she doesn't address him, turning back to Lan Wangji and gracing him with another smile.

"You're a little early, so I'm afraid the report hasn't been printed yet, but if you give me a minute, I'll get it ready for you," she says.

"Of course," he says. "It's no trouble to wait."

She opens her laptop and brings up the document, sending it to the printer with a click. There's a familiar hum as the printer comes to life, then a shrieking, whirring noise as it promptly jams itself.

"Well, that's no help, is it?" Wen Qing says lightly.

"I've got it," Wei Wuxian says, heading toward the printer. "Just add another copy to the queue while I unjam this thing."

"All right," she calls, turning back to Lan Wangji with an elegant shrug. "Sorry, but your wait just got a little longer."

“It’s no trouble,” Lan Wangji repeats.

“Hmm,” Wen Qing hums, tapping the edge of her phone into her palm. “Come here for a second,” she says, beckoning Lan Wangji closer.

He approaches as she swipes her phone open, scrolling through the gallery until she lands on the shot she wants. She presents Lan Wangji with a photo of Wen Ning, smiling sweetly with his arms wrapped around a beaming Luo Qingyang. The two of them are wearing matching sweaters.

“Aren’t they ridiculous?” Wen Qing asks.

Lan Wangji hums in agreement. “They look happy,” he observes.

“They do, don’t they?” Wen Qing scrolls through a few more photos and sighs, looking a little sad.

“Is everything all right?” Lan Wangji asks.

“Oh, everything’s fine,” she sighs again. “I’m just feeling a little melancholy. I can’t help but think of poor A-Qing,” she admits. “She was such a presence, you know? A real light in the dark. And when she was snuffed out, well.” Wen Qing swallows, staring at the picture on the screen.

“It sounds like she was well loved,” Lan Wangji offers tentatively.

“She was,” Wen Qing says. “That’s just it. He loved her so, so much. We all did. Don’t get me wrong, I want A-Ning to be happy, but a part of me can’t help but feel sad for A-Qing. It’s like she’s being forgotten. And I can’t help but think, that if it were the other way around —” she chokes a little and has to steady herself.

“If it were the other way around,” she continues, “then A-Qing would not forget him so easily. She was so doting, so loyal. I can’t imagine it,” she sighs. “What am I even saying? Of course A-Ning is moving on. He has such a soft, affectionate heart. He must love someone.”

Lan Wangji struggles for something to say, feeling his lack of skill with words acutely in this moment.

“I’m being silly,” Wen Qing chides herself. “Maybe men just forget faster,” she quips.

“I disagree,” Lan Wangji finds himself saying, surprising himself.

“Oh?” Wen Qing raises an eyebrow in surprise. “You don’t think so?”

“I think,” he says, “that at the very least, there will be exceptions.”

“Oh, of course,” she says, waving that away as obvious. “I suppose it would be pretty contemptuous of me to just write you all off like that, but I think I could make a general argument that we have better memories overall,” she says. “Especially, perhaps, when it comes to recalling tender feelings.”

“Perhaps our inability to express ourselves helps it to appear so,” Lan Wangji says carefully. “But I would offer that a truly passionate attachment is such that, with the right temperament, anyone might continue to love long past the point of hope.”

Over at the printer, Wei Wuxian drops a load of paper and swears.

“You doing okay over there?” Wen Qing calls.

Wei Wuxian doesn’t reply, he just makes shooing motions at her and keeps frowning at the mess of paper, hands hovering almost aimlessly over the spilled pages.

Wen Qing turns back to Lan Wangji. “So it’s a matter of temperament, you think?”

“Perhaps,” he says. “It is like you said. Your brother’s affectionate heart must dictate how he loves.”

Wen Qing smiles sadly. “Yes, I think you’re right. You’re a very kind person, you know that?”

“I don’t think so,” Lan Wangji says.

“I feel as if you wouldn’t forget,” Wen Qing says.

“No,” Lan Wangji agrees. “Never.”

Wen Qing holds his gaze, and suddenly Lan Wangji is feeling very tired. He’s never felt hollower, more resigned to his fate than in this moment.

“You sound as if you have something to remember,” Wen Qing murmurs.

Lan Wangji lowers his eyes. “I did. I do.”

“And are you past the point of hope?” she asks softly.

“Long past.” It’s like a bloodletting, the words spilling out of him almost unbidden. “Even if I can’t forget, a feeling that persists so long in the absence of hope can only root itself in sorrow. That is where it must thrive. Love that dies a swifter death is a mercy,” he says.

“How poetic,” Wen Qing says. “I hadn’t pegged you as a romantic.”

“I’m not,” Lan Wangji shakes his head. “Not anymore. It’s too late,” he says. “Too late, for me.”

The sound of the printer roaring to life brings Lan Wangji’s head around to where Wei Wuxian is still frowning, head lowered in concentration over where the freshly printed papers are ejected onto the tray. He gathers them into a tidy stack, keeping the edges even with each other before turning his back to Lan Wangji and fumbling the pages into a folder, scrambling to scribble something and stick a final piece of paper on top before slamming it shut. He spins around and walks across the room to shove the folder unceremoniously at Lan Wangji’s chest.

“Here,” Wei Wuxian says, voice a little hoarse. He’s still frowning, and his eyes are dark and glassy under his furrowed brow.

Lan Wangji accepts the folder and steps away, nodding at Wen Qing as he takes his leave. He heads rapidly back to his office, feeling the need for movement after yet another taxing conversation. He doesn’t know what moved him to say so much. Hasn’t he had enough, he thinks? His reserves are all tapped out.

He enters his office and sits down at his desk, glaring at the folder for a few long minutes before taking a deep breath and getting down to it. He flips open the folder and stares at the front of the report, going absolutely still. There’s a sticky note there, violently yellow, Wei Wuxian’s jagged handwriting scrawled diagonally across the perfect little square:

[Is it really too late?]

There’s a moment so quiet, so still, so perfectly devoid of sensation, and then suddenly, it hits him all at once. There’s a heated flush, a dizzy swoop, and a feeling of vertigo so strong he has to grip the edges of his desk to remain upright. His heart is in his throat again, fluttering like a moth, and he swallows it down, feeling slightly nauseated.

It takes another moment for the room to stop spinning, but when it does, Lan Wangji rises to his feet, walking around his desk and heading straight for the door. He yanks it open, meaning to storm back towards the teacher’s lounge, but Wei Wuxian is on the other side of the door, fist raised as if to knock and eyes wide with surprise.

Lan Wangji doesn’t know how long they stand there, frozen, just staring at each other helplessly before Wei Wuxian pushes past him into the office. He paces back and forth in front of Lan Wangji’s desk until Lan Wangji turns and lets the door click shut behind him. Wei Wuxian rounds on him, wild-eyed and breathless, and Lan Wangji is frozen all over again as Wei Wuxian levels him with a desperate, plaintive stare.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian says, voice firm. “I can’t do this anymore. I won’t be silent. Lan Zhan, I can’t—God, this is agony, but I just can’t! I have to hope. Tell me I’m not too late! Tell me that twelve years is not too long to want—to hope—“

His voice breaks on the last word, and he stops to take a shuddering breath, fists clenching at his sides.

“Lan Zhan, I know I’ve been an asshole. I know I’ve been angry, and bitter, and resentful, but Lan Zhan, there’s been no mercy for me, no death of love. I’ve never loved anyone but you. It’s always been you. It could only ever be you.”

Lan Wangji remains motionless, face slack with shock, caught in a state of such pure agitation that it’s almost anguish, his heart wrenched open like an old, weeping wound. He can’t speak. He can barely breathe.

“Lan Zhan, you—“ Wei Wuxian takes a step closer, hands unfurling, fingers spread wide, his palms facing upward as if in supplication. “You pierce my soul.”

Lan Wangji breaks.

He doesn't remember moving, but suddenly, Wei Wuxian is in his arms, and Lan Wangji is shaking, wracked by silent, heaving sobs. Wei Wuxian holds him tighter as Lan Wangji clings to him, pressing his face into the crook of Wei Wuxian's neck.

"Wei Ying," he chokes out. "*Wei Ying.*"

"Yes," Wei Wuxian breathes into his hair. "I'm here, Lan Zhan. I'm right here."

Lan Wangji lets the tears come, a relentless onslaught, years of pent up sorrow finally flowing free. It's an excruciating catharsis, his despair rushing forth in a violent flood that almost threatens to pull him under. But Wei Wuxian is there, an anchor in the storm, and Lan Wangji gives himself up to the current, trusting in Wei Wuxian to hold him.

Slowly, the shaking subsides, the tears cease to flow, and Wei Wuxian pulls back just far enough to rest their foreheads together.

"Oh, Lan Zhan," he soothes. "My Lan Zhan. You still feel things so deeply."

Lan Wangji draws in a long, shuddering breath, and then exhales it just as unsteadily. "Wei Ying," he says again, less choked, but still waterlogged.

"Hmm?" Wei Wuxian hums, raising his hand to brush his thumb against Lan Wangji's cheek.

"You love me," Lan Wangji whispers.

"Yes."

"You *love* me."

"Always," Wei Wuxian vows.

Lan Wangji screws his eyes shut against fresh tears. "Then," he breathes, "It is not too late."

"Oh, thank goodness," Wei Wuxian says, and Lan Wangji can hear the soft smile in his voice.

"Lan Zhan, look at me," he says.

Lan Wangji opens his eyes, locking onto Wei Wuxian's wet, limpid stare.

"Can I kiss you?" Wei Wuxian whispers.

Lan Wangji nods, the barest tilt of his head, and then Wei Wuxian is cradling his face, and Lan Wangji's eyes flutter shut as Wei Wuxian guides their lips together. It's soft, but insistent, Wei Wuxian's mouth working to coax Lan Wangji open, pull him closer, invite him deeper, and Lan Wangji goes gratefully, desperately, sinking into the hot pull of Wei Wuxian's mouth, soothed by the caress of his lips. He gives himself over to the heat unfurling at every point of contact, flooded by warmth as his despair drains away like water through the sieve of his battered heart.
