threnody

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by cloudycats

Summary

For the last time, Wèi Zhuāng places himself between an enemy and his prince's retreat.

In a fit of temper, Yíng Zhèng has Hán Fēi jailed, which is quite a way to treat a foreign prince and ambassador. Hán Fēi tries not to take it personally and mostly succeeds.

After all, he does understand the situation. It's a difficult time for everyone, and for the ruler of Qín in particular recent events have been complicated. Preparing to wage war on six separate fronts is no casual feat. Intending to *win* wars on six separate fronts is a madman's dream.

But he might succeed. Hán Fēi has made enemies of the some of most deadly martial artists alive, men and women who can down a dozen opponents in less time than it takes him to down a cup of wine, and yet he has never met a person who sparked in him such remarkable terror as Yíng Zhèng in their last meeting.

It was something in his eyes, wasn't it? Yíng Zhèng likes Hán Fēi – the man has said so himself, quite candidly, on multiple occasions, and by all accounts he speaks nothing but well of Hán Fēi even when he is not in the room – and so he has never turned his gaze upon Hán Fēi without some measure of fondness. He still intends for them to speak as friends despite holding the other's country at sword point. Hán Fēi doesn't know if it's delusion or idealism, but either trait in a man he's hard-pressed to say no to brings him little comfort.

Hán Fēi's cell is a cushy enough room sequestered in a back garden, and the pair of guards stationed at the doors are happy enough to talk to him once he wears them down. One of them is quite a passable artist; when Hán Fēi hands him a brush and wooden tablet, he quickly gets to showing off his son and wife. In return, Hán Fēi draws Hónglián, though when they ask him if the picture is supposed to be of a fish he says it is and praises them for their good eyes.

Some time with Hán Fēi out of sight will give Yíng Zhèng a chance to calm down, so this isn't all a loss. Still, Hán Fēi itches to do *something*. After ingratiating himself to the guards, he writes an essay entreating Yíng Zhèng to reconsider attacking Hán. When he finishes, he reads it through, then throws it clattering it into a corner and spends a while watching the candle's light ebb and flow across a fresh bamboo slat on the desk in front of him.

Yíng Zhèng does not look at many people like he looks at Hán Fēi. It would be easy to call his gaze snake-like, hard and unwavering as it is, except that it's too human a comparison. Too mortal. Not to mention that Hónglián's snakes are remarkably personable. There have been men like Yíng Zhèng before and there will be men like him after, but how many have ever and will ever be born in a position to inherit a throne? What does one say to convince a person like that that everything between heaven and earth cannot be his for the taking?

Hán Fēi ends up penning a letter and handing it to one of his new acquaintances to mail discreetly to Quicksand's mountain estate. *Negotiations are going. I've not been murdered yet. If any of you come I will be very sad.*

No mention of his current lodgings. He'll likely already be resituated when the letter reaches Hán, and sending everyone running over a temporary arrangement will only get someone killed. Probably not any of Quicksand, but certainly someone.

Lǐ Sī visits him early the next day. Hán Fēi is terribly polite at him, to the point that he briefly looks almost guilty about the part he played in landing his old friend here, but shame sits poorly on him and within moments he's justifying himself and redirecting blame – not in so many words, of course, he wouldn't speak poorly of either Hán Fēi or Yíng Zhèng, but if Lǐ Sī isn't at fault then someone else must be, and who was in the room when Yíng Zhèng gave the order? Or so he implies.

In any case, that's not what he came down to talk about. Hán Fēi will be out by tomorrow evening at the latest by Lǐ Sī's reckoning. Yíng Zhèng is highly unlikely to have him imprisoned again, either. The king already rather regrets the first time, but rescinding the order immediately after issuing it would not come across well, and so Hán Fēi will need to bear with the arrangement a little longer.

Lǐ Sī has brought gifts to help tide him over. Wine, pastries, more ink and bamboo for writing, a change of clothes (Hán Fēi can safely assume Lǐ Sī went through his entire room), a selection of books from the palace archive which Lǐ Sī thinks he might enjoy, and a beautifully wrought puzzle box lacquered in gold with craftsmanship Hán Fēi can't immediately place the origin of.

The wine is deeply appreciated – the last time Hán Fēi touched alcohol was two days ago, and the mere sight of it now clears up some of his stress headache – but it's the box that captures his attention.

“What's this?” he asks, reaching for it.

An odd expression passes like the candle flame's shadow across Lǐ Sī's face, there and gone. He proffers the container with both hands. “Someone asked me to pass on a message,” he says.

Hán Fēi pauses. “How mysterious. And it's inside the box?”

“So I was told,” says Lǐ Sī. “They requested to remain anonymous, though they believe that once you open it you'll recognize their signature.”

Who does Hán Fēi know who would have sent him a missive in this form? He can think of a few. Not all of those are allies, but not all are enemies either, although Lǐ Sī's spoken message tips the balance precariously towards the latter. Still, it's only a box. The contents might be dangerous, but they're unlikely to kill him.

Unless they're an explosive.

Or a venomous animal.

Or an airborne poison.

Actually, this would be an excellent time to kill him, wouldn't it? Out of sight, out of mind, out of favor with the king, a country away from his cadre of charming and overprotective friends....

“Will you stay with me while I open it?” he asks.

“Certainly,” says Lǐ Sī placidly. “I admit, I'm curious too.”

Hán Fēi pauses. “Maybe you should be the one to open it.”

Lǐ Sī affects an air of well-meaning bafflement, slipping the demeanor on as easily as one might a hat. “The message was meant for you. But of course I can do it.”

Lǐ Sī prods at the mechanisms until the box lid springs back to reveal an empty container.

Hán Fēi has a horrible, sourceless premonition the moment he sees that hollow space, but it *is* only an empty box. Lǐ Sī stares at it as well, brow furrowing; he turns it over in case something might fall out, runs two fingers along the rim and bottom in search of hidden mechanisms inside, then clears his expression and proffers the box to Hán Fēi, who accepts it.

As soon as the lacquer touches his skin, Hán Fēi's entire arm seizes without his input. The box hits the ground and snaps closed.

Burning heat crackles inwards from his fingers, surges up his arm, and he does nothing but stand there dumbly as it ensconces itself in his chest and neck and head alongside pain more profound than he thought possible. The sensation comes on so suddenly that he can't think of how to react.

“What was that?” he asks. His voice sounds distant. His tongue feels heavy. Lǐ Sī is a blur, a smear of blue shadow. “Poisons aren't this fast, but there was nothing solid or liquid in there.”

“How do you feel?” asks someone as if from underwater. Lǐ Sī? It must be.

Hán Fēi lays his palm on his forehead. A thin film of sweat has already gathered at his hairline. “I have a fever.”

The blue shape drifts closer. “This way,” says Lǐ Sī, taking him by the shoulder and steering him to the bed.

Hán Fēi sits and breathes. What are his symptoms? High fever. Anything else? Focal seizure. It could have only been his body's reaction to getting hit with whatever this is, not a true symptom. Call it conjecture, put it aside.

A centipede is crawling up his fingers. He raises his hand to see better and finds that it's his own veins grown enlarged and vivid black under his skin. He pulls his sleeve back. The malady has reached halfway to his elbow and seems to be writhing; he has to watch it for a few more seconds to be sure than the movement doesn't stem from his failing vision.

“Yīn Yáng,” he says. The sender was right. He recognizes this signature. “Why? Did I do something to them? Have I *met* anyone from that school?”

“Have you not?” asks Lǐ Sī, sitting down beside him. “Then why would they go to such great lengths to curse you?”

I don't know, Hán Fēi almost replies, but that probably isn't true. This was planned, so there must be a tangible reason. When might his goals have clashed with the Yīn Yáng school's?

It takes a bit through the haze, but four words gradually drift to mind. Things always seem to circle back to them, the core at the heart of every mystery.

“I – ” His voice breaks under a wave of light-headedness. When it passes, he swallows thinly. “I don't have *time* to die. I have a country to save.”

Lǐ Sī says, “So do I.”

“Lǐ Sī,” Hán Fēi begins, then finds he doesn't know how to finish the sentence.

He remembers suddenly the wine Lǐ Sī brought. He gropes blindly in its general direction until his hand bumps against the jug. Lǐ Sī says as he uncaps it, reaching across to stop him, “Oh. No, shīxiōng, you shouldn't. That's poisoned.”

Hán Fēi shoves him off. “Every time I get arrested, the wine is always poisoned. I only didn't expect you to be responsible for it this time.” That said, he gulps down half the bottle. Immediately some of the pain clears, and he can pretend for the moment that the fever is nothing more harmful than the alcohol's false heat. He says thickly, “I'd ask if you're taking final requests, but there's nothing I can trust you with. Except this, if you want any.” He holds out the bottle. Lǐ Sī takes it and sets it down.

Lǐ Sī says, “For what it's worth – ”

Hán Fēi cuts him off. “Don't say you're sorry. Would you even mean it?” He closes his eyes. “What would you have done if Yīn Yáng hadn't approached you and I didn't drink the wine?”

Lǐ Sī's weight shifts on the mattress. “Ah. That's....”

The silence stretches, filled by nothing but the distant rushing in Hán Fēi's ears. Finally Hán Fēi says without looking up, “Leave.”

Lǐ Sī bows and goes. For a long while Hán Fēi sits there without moving, but the ground never steadies under his feet and the headache never weakens. He sighs. He finishes the wine.

He doesn't remember sleeping, but at some point he pulls himself to the edge of the bed to heave, and afterwards as he lies there shivering he realizes that the only light in the room comes from the moon through the windows. How much time has it been? How much time does he have left?

What can he do in that time?

If Lǐ Sī's smart at all, he'll have replaced any guards who have spoken with Hán Fēi. He can't send messages out of the cell anymore, and he certainly can't leave. Unless Yíng Zhèng sends for him early, all he has left to him is to write a final letter and hope it ends up in the right hands.

He hauls himself upright and sets his feet in the ground. His vision fills with static. He hasn't even stood up yet and the room is already spinning, but he grits his teeth and keeps going.

Then he's on the floor with no memory of falling.

This *body*.

Time passes. In fits and spurts he manages to crawl closer to the desk, but his strength gives out before he reaches it. After one last effort he rests his cheek on the floorboards, breathing heavily. If he sleeps, he might have the energy to make it the rest of the way once he wakes up.

Even in sleep, though, he can't escape the awareness of his physical state. Every so often the fever crests and hauls him half-awake, leaving him drifting on the floor with the half-formed shadows from his dreams looming over him.

A vision of the door sliding open blends in with the rest. Hán Fēi thinks nothing of the amorphous figure silhouetted in the doorway when it grows larger, closer, and takes a knee beside him.

Then two fingers brush against his neck, freezing compared to his skin. Checking for a pulse. They withdraw, and a voice he would recognize even in a fever dream asks, “Can you hear what I'm saying?”

He dredges up the strength to raise his hand and grab the figure's shoe. He traces his thumb across the curve of a metal fitting. No one else wears shoes with so much character. “Wèi Zhuāng-xiōng,” he murmurs. “Why did you come?”

“He was fretting,” says someone Hán Fēi can't see around Wèi Zhuāng, “so Zǐnǚ suggested he check on you to get him out of everyone's hair.”

“I'm fine. I'm great,” Hán Fēi tells Wèi Zhuāng's weird shoe. “You're not helping.”

“You're dying,” says Wèi Zhuāng.

“Did you kill people on the way here?” Hán Fēi asks.

Silence.

“A Hán general infiltrated the Qín capital and murdered guardsmen,” he croaks. “That's not helping.”

“After Qín jailed and poisoned a Hán prince,” Wèi Zhuāng replies, more brittle than Hán Fēi's ever heard him. “What are you poisoned with?”

Hán Fēi has no idea which symptoms are from the poison and which are from the curse anymore. “Don't know. Something lethal.”

“Stay alive until we get out. Your sister is here. She'll siphon it.”

Hán Fēi surely didn't hear that correctly. “You brought *Hónglián* to *Xiányáng*?”

“She came on her own.”

The other person – process of elimination places them as Báifèng – adds, “Her snakes are the ones who found you.”

The best way to resolve the situation without an international incident – without Hán provoking Qín – is for Wèi Zhuāng to take Hónglián and get out of Qín before anyone notices they left their country in the first place. As soon as Hán Fēi has that thought, though, it expands until it's all he can imagine. His grip tightens inadvertently on Wèi Zhuāng's shoe. “Don't leave. I don't want to die here.”

A callused hand covers his. “You won't. Báifèng, carry him.”

As Báifèng picks him up in a bridal carry, Hán Fēi rasps, “Not... only poison. The Six Souls Curse.”

Wèi Zhuāng goes still. Hán Fēi can't make out his expression, but Báifèng, whose face sits right above Hán Fēi, looks at him with a creased brow.

“What is that?” Báifèng asks.

Wèi Zhuāng's answer, when it arrives, sounds like he's reciting by rote. “The Yīn Yáng school's signature curse. Victims with developed inner energy can slow its progress, potentially for years. Otherwise it acts within days.”

It's unlike him to dodge around the point when he could stab someone with it instead. He doesn't seem like he's going to mention the most relevant portion of the explanation, though, so Hán Fēi finishes for him: “It's invariably fatal.”

“And?” says Báifèng. When he's met with silence from both sides, he clarifies, “What's your miracle this time, Ninth Prince?”

Hán Fēi would laugh if he had the energy for it. If that's the reputation he's cultivated, no great wonder Yīn Yáng chose the only method at their disposal that no one has ever wriggled out of. “I'm flattered you think so highly of me, Báifèng. But I don't know how to solve this case.”

“Oh,” the former assassin breathes. For a moment, no one speaks. “...Then let's go. Since this isn't where you want to die.”

Nothing to say to that except, “Thank you.”

Wèi Zhuāng takes the lead as they step into the garden. As Báifèng is otherwise occupied, he's left as the only fighter among them. Luckily, he's also the only one they need.

Aside from the bushes' trembling leaves and the blood spreading on the earth around a pair of guards' throats, the pathway lies still. It's unlikely to remain so for too long. The next shift will find the bodies and raise the alarm. Wèi Zhuāng doesn't know when that will happen.

The order of events after Chìliàn found them in the city went as follows: she sent serpents to scout the palace, the creatures reported back with the news that Hán Fēi was lying insensate on the floor in his own miscellaneous bodily fluids, Wèi Zhuāng grabbed a snake who knew the route and headed for the secluded room with Báifèng.

Reconnaissance would have been a courtesy to his foes – a time and route with fewer guards would have meant fewer pointless deaths – but he had little inclination to indulge in civility with Hán Fēi half a corpse in the Qín palace.

Poison *and* magic. Should Wèi Zhuāng knife him to complete the set? His grip on Shāchǐ doesn't change, but his other hand curls into a fist until his palm stings under his nails. How did this man survive to adulthood when it seems like any time he goes anywhere without Wèi Zhuāng, Zǐnǚ, or Yànlíngjī holding his hand there's someone around the bend waiting to off him?

On literally their first outing together, Hán Fēi made it clear what he was asking Wèi Zhuāng to sign up for. The trip consisted of the prince goading one of the most influential men in the country until he produced a murder attempt.

Wèi Zhuāng considered it entertaining enough at the time, this person who simply could not be trusted to keep himself alive. He would keep Hán Fēi breathing out of sheer spite. He liked seeing the looks on Hán Fēi's enemies' faces when they realized this lemming of a man had survived yet another mortal crisis.

That this turned out to be an unpaid full-time job didn't surprise him. (Though it never ceased to be a little irritating before he became a general and started receiving actual paychecks. *Gě Niè* hasn't ever had to moonlight as a gang leader to pay for the laundry.) That it then turned out to be a potentially life-long job didn't concern him, either. Hán Fēi could uplift Hán into a country worthy of the sacrifices they would make for it, but it would take years upon years. That's only expected.

And then Yíng Zhèng.

Something Wèi Zhuāng once said to a man he didn't kill: “You're very loyal, but you weren't smart enough at choosing a master.”

If Gě Niè echoes anything approaching that line to him, Wèi Zhuāng will hunt down everyone Gě Niè has cared about. That's not a threat, just a fact. He's within a hairsbreadth of deciding to assassinate Yíng Zhèng as it stands. All that's stopping him is that he wouldn't succeed.

Neither Wèi Zhuāng's nor Báifèng's feet make a sound as they leap over a wall and land in the shadows of another section of the palace. Hán Fēi's voice from behind him comes as little more than a strained exhale, but in the quiet he makes it out: “Sorry about your clothes.”

“You're not that bad,” Báifèng demurs in a bald-faced lie. “I've handled worse.” Of course he has: he apparently fought the Bǎiyuè necromancer in a graveyard once.

Wèi Zhuāng looks back at them. Hán Fēi's eyes are closed, scrunched in a shadow of a grimace. He might be speaking to keep himself grounded.

Wèi Zhuāng says, “When were you cursed?”

“First morning after Yíng Zhèng put me here.”

No great surprise that he's lost track of time. “It's past midnight. That was most of a day ago.” Though if his condition has worsened to this degree after such a short period –

Hán Fēi finishes the thought: “I might not make it to morning.”

Wèi Zhuāng has no one but himself to blame for getting attached. “Just stay as long as you can.”

“I can do that,” he mumbles.

He'd better, after all of the people Wèi Zhuāng has killed to keep his over-ambitious royal hide alive.

Wèi Zhuāng is one of the best swordsmen in existence. This isn't a skill set actually applicable to most situations, so he's learned to be creative with it, and in so doing he's confirmed that squirreled away at the root of every problem is something or someone stabbable. It's only that sometimes, like now, the root of the problem is *retroactive*.

“How is the situation at home?” Hán Fēi whispers.

That's one of the last things Wèi Zhuāng cares about at present, but he obliges him. “The sharks scented blood when you left. We were weathering it. But it's difficult to get anything done when we're caught up with minimizing losses.”

As expected, in other words. With Hán Fēi gone, Quicksand lost one of their representatives in court. Of those remaining, more than half have been useless without him: Wèi Zhuāng, who's too blunt for the king's tastes; Chìliàn, who the king adores but doesn't heed; and Zǐfáng, who's universally inoffensive but has a difficult time withstanding the stress of carrying the entire group's weight session after session.

After a pause, Hán Fēi says, “You should head back.”

There's another layer of meaning there. Hán Fēi is the only member of Quicksand with any chance of convincing Yíng Zhèng to bend on a topic. He's telling them not to try futilely to replace him in Qín. At this point it's best to return to Hán to prepare for the incoming, inevitable war.

The war they will not win because the country's power below the Hán king is split near-evenly between two opposing factions, the Ninth Prince's and the Fourth Prince's. Even faced with a common enemy, Quicksand and Nightfall have too much ongoing history between them to work together. Quicksand's failed attempt to assassinate one of Nightfall's founding members wasn't even that long ago.

Hán's chances of victory in a war against Qín would be negligible even without factoring in internal strife. Considering it, the percentage drops nearly to zero.

Wèi Zhuāng takes Hán Fēi's words in without addressing them. He's yet to settle on a decision, and Hán Fēi's suggestion is only an opinion. Not all of the prince's calls have paid off. Wèi Zhuāng doesn't grit his teeth, and he asks, “Do you know who set the curse?”

“I didn't see them.”

“...It would have to be one of the eight commanders. No one below should know how to cast it. Since it's unlikely to have been Water, Earth” – both of whom dropped off the face of the world under mysterious circumstances years ago – “or the leader of the school” – who likely exists, but good luck finding anyone who's met him – “that leaves five possibilities.”

“Don't,” Hán Fēi rasps.

“I fail to see what the Yīn Yáng school's existence contributes to the world,” says Wèi Zhuāng.

“You'll only get killed. Don't do it.”

“Hm.” If he's careful....

Hán Fēi seems the most alert he's been since they found him. Someone *else* spouting idiocy appears enough to hold his attention.

“*No*,” Hán Fēi croaks. He tries to raise his head and manages well enough for Báifèng to notice the attempt and help him the rest of the way. “You're worth *more* than that.”

“You're saying to let this go unanswered?”

“I'm saying to be practical.”

“Practical,” Wèi Zhuāng echoes, enunciating each syllable.

“This should have come from a personal vendetta. I don't think it directly involves you.”

They're hurried enough for time that Wèi Zhuāng doesn't stop in his tracks, but he does seriously consider it. “What did you say?”

“Of course it tangentially involves you – ”

“A personal vendetta. The Yīn Yáng school wants to kill you,” Wèi Zhuāng cuts in. “They, themselves, want to kill you. Only you.”

“I think so.”

“You haven't even met them.”

Hán Fēi gives a faint rasping exhale of a laugh. “I'm infamous.”

“Yànlíngjī and I are infamous. You're a prince who doesn't know when to to shut up.” Wèi Zhuāng starts to ask about what Hán Fēi could have done to attract the magicians' attention, but another thought strikes first. “The poison is separate from the magic.”

“From Lǐ Sī.”

That dogshit piece of human refuse. “I've wanted to kill him for a while now.”

“No you haven't,” Hán Fēi mutters.

How does Hán Fēi have this many enemies? Even Wèi Zhuāng doesn't contend with multiple concurrent assassination attempts every time he ends up in a remotely open location. (That's partly because a good percentage of his enemies are dead, cremated, and scattered from a mountain. He's stopped taking chances since the second man returned from the grave with a grudge and a power-up.)

Then Hán Fēi says, “I thought you might understand him.”

This is what Hán Fēi chooses to waste his little remaining breath on. Wèi Zhuāng humors him: “Because he killed his schoolmate?”

He doesn't qualify the question with *tried to*. Lǐ Sī succeeded, or close enough, even if Hán Fēi's body hasn't caught on yet.

“No. It was.... Forget it. I don't know why I thought that.”

Wèi Zhuāng doesn't know either. What, because Lǐ Sī's dangerous? Motivated? Because he bet his talents and his future on a single man's dream, or because he was the only person in reach at a moment when Hán Fēi needed help?

“We've lost,” says Wèi Zhuāng, clearly and surely. Hán Fēi does not deserve to die with his eyes closed. “You miscalculated, and no one else stopped you from doing it. Without you, Quicksand as an organization cannot serve the purpose meant for it. You were the only person in it with a claim to the throne. The rest of us are merely rabble. Quicksand will still try to save the country, and Nightfall will try to do the same while undercutting us at every opportunity, and it will not matter because, in the end, you could not convince Yíng Zhèng to alter his course by even the barest increment. You have failed to make any of the changes to the world that you wished to, and anyone who followed you believing in a more meaningful outcome was a fool who placed their trust in an overblown liar.”

“I don't think I can come back as a ghost no matter how bad of an emotional state you try to have me die in,” Hán Fēi croaks.

“The defeated don't get second chances.” Wèi Zhuāng slows to a stop. “Though they might get last wishes. Báifèng, take him the rest of the way once I give you an opening. I'll deal with our tail.”

Hán Fēi whispers, somehow sounding incredulous even with his voice small enough that a mouse's footsteps could overshadow it, “No, you... were those meant to be your *last words* to me? Wèi Zhuāng-xiōng, there truly is no one else in the world like you.”

“Save your breath for your sister. I'm not interested in what a corpse has to say.”

They have more pressing business, anyway. A silhouette in a flowing robe stands on the roof of a building up ahead, his form backlit by the moon.

Wèi Zhuāng's master despaired at his disciples' uncannily similar flair for drama and theatrics, and he despaired even more over the fact that it survived their training with him intact despite his half-hearted efforts to replace it with any other habit. Even if Wèi Zhuāng somehow had trouble recognizing the figure watching them, not many people besides Gě Niè would take the time to choose the only angle that frames the moon directly behind him.

“I'm not in the mood for you, either,” Wèi Zhuāng calls to Gě Niè, tightening his grip on his sword. “Especially if you came to gloat.”

“I did not come to gloat,” Gě Niè says, unruffled despite having woken up in the middle of the night to deal with a foreign general murdering guards as he sneaks through the palace grounds. “Xiǎo Zhuāng, why are you here? And... what's wrong with the prince? Why would I be gloating?”

“What isn't wrong with the prince?” Wèi Zhuāng snorts. “Congratulations, shīxiōng, you bet on the winning horse.”

Gě Niè says again, carefully, “Xiǎo Zhuāng.”

“I'll tell you if you beat me,” says Wèi Zhuāng. “Or I won't.”

“Our world is bigger than just us, now. If you can't give a reasonable explanation....”

Wèi Zhuāng knows he's a sore loser and feels no shame for it. People *should* be indignant when they suffer defeat. It's the best motivation for learning not to let it happen again. “We saved Yíng Zhèng's life once, at great personal expense. Do you remember?” He can't see Gě Niè's shadowed expression, but he doesn't need to. Predicting Gě Niè's reactions has been second nature for nearly as long as they've known each other. “But that's how it goes. Most of our allies have tried, badly, to put us in the ground at one point or another. The other way around isn't a surprise.”

Behind him, Hán Fēi breathes a word, Báifèng steps closer, and a hand that is not Báifèng's grasps faintly at Wèi Zhuāng's shirt. Wèi Zhuāng doesn't look back.

“If I don't see you again,” Hán Fēi whispers in a voice Wèi Zhuāng will one day forget, years and wars from now, “I'm happy I lived in a time when I could meet you.”

For a single, steel-bright instant, Wèi Zhuāng pictures the path his sword would take if he raised it and slashed it across Hán Fēi's throat.

Better that than this creeping misery of a death. Wèi Zhuāng could remember him as that moment, Hán Fēi's muscles and tendons offering the same resistance beneath a blade as a healthy person's would, rather than as a shivering husk of a creature stinking of weakness and staining Báifèng's white clothes with grime and bile.

Yet Hán Fēi said he didn't want to die in his killer's home, and Wèi Zhuāng told him that he would not.

Promises are only words, as meaningless as any stray breeze. But Wèi Zhuāng supposes that the reasons he can think of to *break* this one are just as empty.

“Get him out of here,” he says.

Báifèng does. For the last time, Wèi Zhuāng places himself between an enemy and his prince's retreat.

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