

mask knell grip

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by [exoscopy](#)

Summary

Nie Huaisang kills Meng Yao to save Nie Mingjue's life: again, and again, and again.

Notes

Follows MDZS novel timeline, up until it doesn't.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Huaisang should have expected it, the first time around: Nie Mingjue dies in the dungeons of the Nightless City.

A letter is delivered to the Unclean Realm recognizing the new Sect Leader Nie and inviting him to pay tribute at the Sun Palace, where he will also witness the execution of the rebel traitor Lan Xichen. Lanling Jin has thrown their lot in with Qishan Wen. Yunmeng Jiang is scattered to the winds. There are still rumours of the Yiling Patriarch roaming the countryside, striking at Wen supply lines with his army of fierce corpses – alone. Hanguang-jun killed two hundred Wen cultivators in an attempt to rescue his brother before finally succumbing to his injuries, despite their best efforts to capture him alive. No one knows what has become of Jiang Wanyin.

Nie Zonghui holds himself like he's prepared for an outburst of tears or a temper tantrum. Nie Huaisang's grip creases the edges of the letter until he looks up with a calm his body doesn't feel, and says, "Qinghe Nie accepts the terms of Chief Cultivator Wen Ruohan."

Qinghe Nie protests, because Qinghe Nie would rather shatter than bend. *That* is when Huaisang unleashes the tantrums. The hard-eyed cultivators of Qinghe shed blood like rivers but at their young master's tears, all of them dissolve like the mountain slopes during the rains. The journey takes a long time, because Nie Huaisang is not yet accomplished with sword flight, golden core yet unformed. It leaves him a lot of time in which to consider his failure.

When they drag Lan Xichen out into the great courtyard of the Palace of Sun and Flames he is defiant. His white robes are dirty and torn but he radiates ice and fury. When he meets Huaisang's eyes, he looks shocked, and then sad and resigned. There is no blame in his gaze. Of course not. Why would there be? Nie Huaisang is only Chifeng-zun's useless younger brother: unaccomplished, frightened, and weak. Nie Huaisang is only doing what he must to ensure his sect's survival. Nie Huaisang is a child Lan Xichen knew, and failed to protect, and Lan Xichen will blame himself instead.

The war has also left Qishan Wen fragile, Huaisang knows. This is why it must be seen that Sect Leader Nie is here, baring the throat, being a good emblem of the great sects' submission. This is why, as they are reading the list of Lan Xichen's crimes, Nie Huaisang stands and unsheathes his sabre.

There is an unmarked grave south of Hejian that has led to this. A young man unceremoniously stabbed to death, a letter of recommendation rotting in the dirt. Another young man lying in a Wen mausoleum, his sabre shattered. Nie Mingjue has died younger than Huaisang will live to. A caged bird is more valuable than a dead one. Not this time.

He pays the Wen and Nie cultivators no mind. The shouting, the clashing of swords; it will all be quiet soon. His own sabre bites spine-deep into his throat.

Jin Guangyao dies.

It wasn't enough. There is a deep yawning fury in Nie Huaisang; emptiness taken root and grown into a truly luminous flower. When he set out for vengeance it wasn't to bring his brother *back*, but just to restore enough of him for Huaisang to mourn. A name plaque Huaisang could add to the ancestral shrine, a body Huaisang could bury; a grave Huaisang could visit, even one so cold and hostile as the stone castles. Jin Guangyao has taken all of this from Nie Huaisang yet again. It doesn't matter how much incense Huaisang burns or how many paper chariots he offers if Nie Mingjue's spirit is imprisoned by Jin fucking Guangyao, yet again. When did it start?

So when the chance comes to enter the mirror in Jin Guangyao's former study, Nie Huaisang takes it.

It doesn't matter how: some minor squabble over who has the right to the remains. At first it's out of morbid curiosity, as though by walking through this trophy room Nie Huaisang might absorb even the slightest hint of satisfaction. Then raw fury overtakes him. It feels as though the resentment contained in these objects is pouring into him. Huaisang thinks he should feel satisfaction that by the end of Jin Guangyao's life all of his little hidden places were so poisoned by tragedy as to be unsafe, even his mother's tomb, but he doesn't. He just feels a sudden, lurching, hollow desire to be back in Qinghe. But he's here, everything he's done has brought him here, so shouldn't he make the most of it?

Stealing documents is the same as catching birds. It's all about timing and distraction. At first he has no intention of doing anything with the messy notes: he just thinks he might want another little trophy to line up side-by-side with Jin Guangyao's cap, as though another trophy might replace the tomb da-ge deserves. It's only when he's glancing over them in the carriage that he has an inkling of what he's stumbled upon. An opportunity to undo the murder that has shaped the last decade of Nie Huaisang's life. The flower in his chest unfurls.

For whatever reason, Wei Wuxian chose not to repeat time, not to create a world where he never made any of his mistakes - or are they living in that world now? If so, there's a couple of notable omissions Nie Huaisang could raise with Wei-xiong. He won't, though. He'll never see Wei-xiong again, not as in this life.

Come morning, the inner disciples find Sect Leader Nie's body cooling in the inner chambers, the walls splashed with blood. He has left a letter. It details succession of the Nie sect leadership to a distant cousin, and then a list of everything he ever knew.

Nie Huaisang dies-

Nie Huaisang wakes gasping in his bed in the Unclean Realm. His *old* bed, the bed of the second young master Nie. It's still scattered with his youthful detritus: a pipa he'd had smuggled in that he'll throw aside in a few months in favour of a gifted yangqin. A crumpled stash of pornographic leaflets. A brush left to grow crusted with ink, a sight that makes him sigh now with experience. It fills his mouth with dust to know the things he used not to know.

When did it start? If he reaches Meng Yao before he can catch Nie Mingjue's eye does it change? He has to try it sooner.

He cries and coaxes and begs his way to Hejian, where the war is not yet truly underway for most of the cultivation world, but Qinghe Nie, stalwart and knowing at the edge of Wen lands, have always been watchful. The loyal lieutenant da-ge has left in charge of the Unclean Realm is charmed by Huaisang's whining. That never changes. They send him off, well-guarded, under the guise of bringing an essential stash of new provisions to the frontier and raising the sect's morale with a visit.

They all used to laugh with him fondly. He was everyone's little brother, soft and sly and silly; the Nie scoff at southerners' fripperies, but he is one of theirs, so the Nie forgive him things they would not forgive anyone else. They do not ask questions, for example, when he gives a group of them quiet instructions concerning a recent recruit. *Haven't you heard? He's the bastard son of Jin Guangshan.*

Nobody finds the battered body in the thick mountain forests.

Time bends. Qishan Wen sends Wen Chao and the Core-Melting Hand to Hejian on a 'routine patrol'. The hostilities escalate irreversibly. Here, Nie Mingjue kills the younger Wen brother first, and cuts down Wen Zhuliu, who crushes Nie Mingjue's core with his dying breath. The qi backlash claims him before sundown.

He has Meng Yao pushed off the fortress ramparts.

Nie Mingjue is killed defending the evacuation of Hejian.

He has Meng Yao 'accidentally' stabbed during a battle.

Nie Mingjue is cut apart by a hundred Wen swords.

He has Meng Yao turned away at the gates and his throat slit in a Qinghe ravine.

Nie Mingjue is ambushed, betrayed at Langya.

Meng Yao dies-

Nie Mingjue dies-

When did it start? How soon was it that Jin Guangyao's shadow came to fill every corner of Nie Mingjue's life? He knows the little story of how they first met because he's heard it from both of them. Nie Mingjue told it less and less as the years went by, while san-ge told it as a small cold comfort to Huaisang after da-ge was dead – *remember the man he was, A-Sang? He was astute and righteous. You, too, will be like him* . Poison. He could never be Nie Mingjue; no one could. And besides, being like Nie Mingjue means Huaisang would be dead, reborn by now into a different life instead of here in this cage of choices, trying to run back a weiqi match to see if his victory changes.

If he's to be born again after all this is over, after Nie Mingjue is laid to rest and Jin Guangyao is – gone, where will he be reborn? The upper realms? No, he's too mired in blood. It'd be nice, if ironic, to be reborn as a bird. There are some birds that can remember the faces of the people who hurt them - *no* . Huaisang doesn't want to remember anything but now he remembers too much, several lives' worth of failed rescues and successful murders.

He wakes up. He repeats the steps flawlessly because he's drilled them across lifetimes, as surely as the other disciples train with sabres. This time when he arrives at Hejian, he dispenses with the middlemen.

He finds Meng Yao kneeling on a riverbank, just as it was in their little stories, lips still damp with fresh water. His eyes widen when he sees Nie Huaisang, taking in the beast emblem sewn onto his tabard, the rich patterns on his outer robe.

“Young Master Nie?” Meng Yao says. He doesn't even have time to bow. Nie Huaisang tackles him backwards into the river.

This is not a cultivation battle, but it never has been, between the two of them. Meng Yao claws at his face and arms and Nie Huaisang bears down with all the rage of lifetimes of thwarted vengeance. It thrills the twisted little knot inside of his ribs to see the expressions crossing Meng Yao's face, even distorted by running water: the fear, the fury, the *betrayal* -

It takes a long time for Meng Yao to stop moving. Nie Huaisang holds him under for what feels like a whole incense stick longer, holding his own breath to make sure, to see at what

point a human would probably stop, but Meng Yao doesn't stop, he never stops, that was his problem all along.

Nie Huaisang rocks back. He is straddling Meng Yao's chest. There are thin lines of pain on his face where Meng Yao's nails found his skin. His robes are soaked to the waist; he is cold with water and with violence. When he stumbles back onto the riverbank, wringing out his robes, there is a small bamboo caddy of water lying next to a bundle of rations.

Nie Huaisang drains the caddy empty. He eats the bread. He watches Meng Yao's body drift downstream.

Nie Mingjue dies on the front lines six days later.

Fine, Nie Huaisang screams soundlessly into his own bed, raw with a fury and grief he can't fully contain. Meng Yao will live past Sunshot. It makes his throat clench to run through the catalogue of da-ge's deaths: not enough arrows, a rope snaps at a crucial time, a report of an odd sighting isn't filed with sufficient concern – most of them problems that a competent administrator could overcome, couldn't they?

No, but apparently not just any administrator. One eager to prove themselves, work until every odd hour of the day, one who would remember every little detail and weigh the cost of each decision. Nie Huaisang knows his own strengths. He has a painter's mind; he can see the broader shape of a thing before he sets brush to paper. He has a keen gift for improvisation, and a talent for acting, and a determination that spans lives. But the mere thought of browsing through some dreary inventory of bowstrings and barley makes his head spin. Nie Mingjue needs a bookkeeper to get him through the start of the war, and a spy to end it. Isn't that right? Why is Huaisang here, doing this, if Nie Mingjue simply dies on a battlefield?

In the first try, at least he would've been allowed to bring back Nie Mingjue's body. Wen Ruohan had said as much in the letter. He'd even been allowed to see his da-ge, restored by demonic cultivation to something almost pristine, a more peaceful corpse than even his original death. Not the mangled thing they kept carting back.

So: Meng Yao lives. He lives long enough to become Jin Guangyao. He lives long enough to become Nie Mingjue's sworn brother. Huaisang is at the feast after the ceremony, watching Jin Guangyao pour wine for his brothers, flush in his legitimacy and his triumph and his new robes.

He stays with the revelries until Jin Guangyao comes to his table, ever the perfect host, and Huaisang plays his part to perfection: a little too loud, a little too drunk and emotional. Jin Guangyao smiles indulgently at his da-ge's spoiled little brother who has escaped the

meanness of war. In this life he barely knows Nie Huaisang. He's sent gifts and they've exchanged fond words, but their best and closest days are ahead of them. Tonight he's even so kind as to offer to take a drunk, sloppy Huaisang up to his rooms.

"I don't want to bother Yao-ge," he slurs. Jin Guangyao laughs softly at the young master's precociousness and doesn't correct him.

"It's no worry, Nie-er-gongzi," Jin Guangyao says. "It's my responsibility. After today, the promises I've made to da-ge extend to you as well." It could be fate that, just at that moment, they pass by the stairs. Huaisang has rewritten fate often enough now to know that it is as cold as a Hejian river.

For all those looking on – it's the wine, isn't it? It's the dizziness of having lived through the worst thing imaginable and finally being able to see a future? It's Nie Huaisang's unfamiliarity with the Jinlintai – it's his weak core – it's his pamperedness, his uselessness, his softness –

-and that's why as Nie Huaisang trips down the stairs, he ends up pulling Jin Guangyao with him, isn't it? So what if he jams his fingers into Meng Yao's skin for the second time in as many lives, silk and dry air under his nails instead of roughspun and river water? So what if he hears himself shrieking not with fear but with rage? So what if the impact snaps both their necks?

Nie Huaisang and Jin Guangyao die-

In this life he resurrects even earlier and learns how to play the guqin. The second young master of Qinghe becomes known for his skill with music rather than painting. He begs his brother to send him to the Cloud Recesses at a young age, and weathers the fight about the glories of sabers over strings with so much fire that Nie Mingjue seems downright taken aback. Huaisang stomps out of the room in a huff that's only half-feigned and doesn't give in even when da-ge shouts at Huaisang to unlock the door or he'll miss dinner.

He's got all the time in the world and then twice over. He can afford to be patient for this long. Nie Mingjue is a new sect leader who has no close confidants but his brother; Huaisang wins this round without too much more waiting.

On the day he's meant to leave for the Cloud Recesses, he's struck by how much he doesn't want to go, not really. Soon war will come to Qinghe and the da-ge he knows and loves will pick up his saber, meet Meng Yao, and set foot on the path to his own death. There are so few precious days of peace left to them. He could stay in the Unclean Realm. Nie Mingjue would shout at him for being fickle and secretly he'd be glad for Huaisang's change of heart. But what would da-ge do in Huaisang's stead? He would do what needed to be done.

He's not the best student and he never will be, but his dedication to the guqin catches Lan Xichen's attention, and Huaisang imagines the harried letters from da-ge have probably paved the way.

"Oh, yes Xichen-ge," Huaisang says, seated opposite Lan Xichen in the Hanshi. "I heard about a Lan sect song that can calm a person's qi, and I was hoping to learn it to help da-ge."

"Is that so?" Lan Xichen says. After Sunshot he will become something so polished and polite, but here he's still young. Huaisang can read the brief moment of alarm on his face before it's smoothed away.

"I learned about it from a former disciple," he says glibly. "Would you be able to teach me?"

Lan Xichen hesitates, and then says, "I'm sorry, Nie Huaisang. There are some techniques that it is forbidden to share with outsiders, even our closest allies." Huaisang doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Lan Xichen and his *A-Yao*, a perfect little closed circle.

Qishan Wen could not break Lan Xichen, but Jin Guangyao did, in the life before all these lives. Nie Huaisang had his hand in that, perhaps, but Jin Guangyao was dead and dear and so Nie Huaisang was the one left to watch Lan Xichen move like a ghost through the spaces they shared. He still remembers the first time he landed at the gates of the Cloud Recesses after the – mess in Yunping, excitement not fully feigned, answering the questions of the young cultivators who'd accompanied him, only to find that the jade token had stopped working.

The Sect Leader can revoke the abilities of the jade token.

But Lan Qiren-

Zewu-jun is still lord of the Cloud Recesses.

Here and now, Lan Xichen is watching Huaisang with concern. So benevolent; so static. Huaisang wants to rip his throat out with his teeth.

"Xichen-ge, please," Huaisang says, and starts to cry. It's not totally feigned; the best tears have some truth to them. "This technique might be my only hope to save da-ge! You care about him too, don't you?"

"Huaisang!" Lan Xichen comes over to soothe him, and Huaisang buries his face in Lan Xichen's robe and sobs like a child. There's truth in that, too. Lan Xichen is comforting because he is immovable.

"I'll bring it up with the elders at the next meeting," Lan Xichen says, when Huaisang's crying has subsided to whimpers. "It's unheard of to allow knowledge of the secret techniques outside the trusted members of the sect, but I'll do my utmost if it will help Mingjue-xiong."

“Of course you will,” Nie Huaisang murmurs into the folds of Lan Xichen’s robe. He departs the Cloud Recesses months later, empty-handed.

After the burning of the Cloud Recesses, Nie Huaisang sends a letter. Nine days later Wen troops drag Zewu-jun out of a Yunping cellar and he is taken back to the Nightless City in chains. The unnamed servant boy who helped to hide him was executed in the street.

Huaisang sighs when he hears the news. In another life he’ll learn how to enter the secret library of the Cloud Recesses, and let Lan Xichen remain happily ignorant. He’ll even turn some of the treasures he finds there onto Jin Guangyao, given time. But here and now, he’s learned something even more valuable: Lan Xichen will always find a way to disappoint him.

Nie Mingjue died two months past. There is nothing left here for Nie Huaisang. He picks up his knife.

He pushes Jin Guangyao down the stairs many more times before he becomes frustrated with its uselessness. He does it over so many lives that he perfects the angle. Bones crack, muscles twist, and Huaisang gets to see the breath leave his body before his cultivation can knit him back together. It doesn’t matter. He kills him as Meng Yao or as Jin Guangyao. He kills him in Qinghe or Lanling or on the lonely back roads which have no names. He strangles him, stabs him, poisons him; on two memorable occasions he burns Meng Yao alive and screaming.

He researches alternate cultivation methods. He searches for slow-acting poisons, fast-acting, poisons that only mimic death. He sends spies and bribes and envoys and assassins. He tries politics, he tries violence, he tries love. The end stays the same. The two corners of his world are death and death and no matter what he changes in between, its foundations are immovable.

There are at least ten times where Meng Yao or Jin Guangyao or Wen Yao, whatever he becomes, dies before Nie Huaisang can get to him. He likes those ones less, at first; he feels cheated of every opportunity to see Jin Guangyao die. As the lives shade on it turns to relief that someone has done that job for him. For as many times as Huaisang lives, his dream is still of the gentle early years.

In one life he does nothing but sit and paint, and becomes the best painter in the country. There will be other lives where he blends ink and cultivation but here he simply paints, quietly, and when war finally arrives at his doorstep he does not so much as look up from his inkstone.

Wen Xu cuts him down in his little room in the Cloud Recesses and Nie Huaisang's only thought is regret for the mountain landscape he is ruining with his own blood: his finest work yet.

He met Xue Yang as early as life eleven, a chance passing on the outskirts of Yi City, and learned enough that he went back for more in life nineteen. This is how Nie Huaisang finds himself shoving three black nails through Meng Yao's skull.

The first one was messy; he may have slightly ruined the space beneath Meng Yao's ear, behind his jaw, but that one at least will be covered up by the fall of hair. The second and third ones are easier. In another life Nie Huaisang will be subtler – he'll hide the needles as pins in a hairpiece, he'll conceal them under a gauze cap – but this is his first try.

He doesn't know why he's doing this. In this life he's not half the demonic cultivator Xue Yang is. It's not as though he'll really be able to control the corpse. It's just that it feels, every time, like the cosmos is trying to realign itself, and in the process Nie Mingjue is crushed over and over. If he keeps Meng Yao here – suspended between worlds, a transgression, just as he was in life – perhaps the cosmos will not notice the difference. Perhaps Nie Mingjue will be beyond notice, and he will die old and gently. Huaisang can lock Meng Yao, not-alive, in a room with no windows and let the world go on. The halls of Qinghe are large enough for all of them.

(Nie Mingjue-)

It hurts in a sharp, unfamiliar way that makes him nauseous. He thought he'd been numbed to failure by now. The pain is because he was so sure this time would *work*, for no reason other than the stubbornness of hope. It had been new, it had been different - so surely, this time, the outcome would change?

The room at the heart of the mountain is a bedroom like any other, except its sole occupant is chained to the floor with heavy black iron to keep him from escaping. It is a little monument, decorated accordingly: a beautiful robe, a stringless guqin, a tongueless corpse. Meng Yao chewed it off as he died, a side-effect of the poison.

Now the corpse watches Nie Huaisang in silence as he storms around the room, breaking things and tearing fabric and crying. He is still silent when Nie Huaisang finally slumps to the floor, spent, and drags himself into Meng Yao's dead lap.

“Why does this always happen?” he sobs. Meng Yao smells of dust. “Why do you always leave? Why do I have to lose you both?” The fierce corpse's mouth moves soundlessly.

“What am I doing wrong?” Huaisang says. “I’ve tried everything.” No answer. Meng Yao does not touch him, and Huaisang wishes Meng Yao could. He puts one hand on Meng Yao’s face. It’s cold. The deathly pallor of his skin makes the black veins even more pronounced. Huaisang traces one of them down to the top of his collar. Maybe Meng Yao’s white eyes follow the motion. It’s hard to tell in the dim light. Huaisang traces down the stiff embroidery of the robe, down to Meng Yao’s hand, which he takes between his own in the vain hope that he might be able to warm it up. He loses track of how long he lies there for, in the dark and the silence, this room hidden from the outside world, Meng Yao’s hand between his own, and if not for the unnatural stillness of the corpse it could almost be peaceful.

Huaisang climbs to his feet at long last. Meng Yao does not look at him as he rises. His face is shadowed slightly by his hair, and Nie Huaisang has no idea what is possessing him at that moment, but he sits down behind Meng Yao and takes out a comb from his qiankun sleeve.

“It’s alright,” Nie Huaisang says. His hands shake as he drags the comb through Meng Yao’s long fall of hair. They say a corpse’s hair continues to grow after it dies; he doesn’t remember where he learned that, he’s learned so much over several lifetimes. His chest wrings itself in half when the corpse goes still and pliant.

“It’s alright,” he repeats. “I’ll get it right next time. I will.” The corpse’s hair is dry and brittle. He’ll give Meng Yao some oil for it, he catches himself thinking. What use will that be? Meng Yao is dead.

The Nie braids are an arduous, hours-long task on a living being, let alone on a corpse whose hair is prone to snap at the slightest bit of force. It’s soothing. Huaisang loses himself for hours in it. When he is finished the floor is coated with dead strands and his fingers are sore, but Meng Yao’s hair is perfectly done in the style of an adoptive Nie lordling. He fetches a mirror and holds it up to the corpse.

Meng Yao’s face doesn’t change. He doesn’t know what he expected.

In a fit of slight hysteria Huaisang tries to lift the corners of the corpse’s mouth into a smile using the thumb and forefinger of his other hand.

He doesn’t know why he did that. The ensuing expression makes Meng Yao look even more corpselike. He drops his hand into their laps and tugs gently on Meng Yao’s sleeve, the way he would have if Meng Yao were alive and Huaisang were wheedling him about some inconsequential nonsense, the way he could have only when things were perfect.

“San-ge,” he tries, then: “Yao-ge. Yao-ge, don’t be rude, I’m Sect Leader Nie now. You have to listen to me when I say you can’t leave.” The corpse stares glassily at him. How much of Meng Yao is left in there, Huaisang wonders. Could he answer, if he had a tongue? Would he?

There is an easy way to find out. Let this room be their monument, now. The last thing Nie Huaisang does before his death is to retie his hair into mourning braids.

He has Meng Yao brought to Qinghe years early. It takes surprisingly little. A word dropped here and there about how the new Sect Leader Nie could do with a capable administrator by his side and some well-placed gossip in Yunping and some begging of the gate guards to let him know when the new recruits come by. Meng Yao is young, raw from his father's rejection, and luminous with ambition. Huaisang is struck by it, the ‘first’ time he runs into da-ge's new aide: even this young there is a coiled fury and fire in him. Why didn't anyone see it before? Huaisang sets to cajoling it out of him as soon as he can. This isn't the Jin Guangyao he got to know after he became Nie Mingjue's sworn brother; he's less tired, less opaque, still guarded and polite. Featureless clay that Huaisang can maybe press a love of Qinghe into, enough to give him pause if they all survive this version of Sunshot. Nie Huaisang's tired of vengeance, for now. Maybe it's time for a softer touch.

He gives little gifts to Meng Yao when da-ge isn't looking; hair ornaments, spare robes, ribbons and fans from his own collection. He laughs at Meng Yao's jokes and tells him little secrets and hides behind Meng Yao when da-ge shouts at him for avoiding saber practice. He teaches Meng Yao the secrets of the Unclean Realm: the Nie braids, the hidden places, the whispers of the saber spirits. He calls Meng Yao *Yao-ge*, and scolds Meng Yao when he pretends not to hear until Huaisang calls him *Meng Yao*, or *administrator Meng*, pulling faces and whining the whole time.

At first it alarms him how easy it is to love Meng Yao, and then it makes him bitter. That was always the problem. He loved Meng Yao, and then Meng Yao broke all their hearts; and, try as Huaisang might, even right now when Meng Yao is young and unformed, he can't seem to break Meng Yao's. He doesn't understand this part. Even at this age, Meng Yao wears an unseen armour as thick as any Nie general's, as though he walks through life expecting to be unloved.

They have just had dinner together in da-ge's office - a harried, busy mess, the drums of war ringing in all their ears, Nie Mingjue frayed and too-loud in an attempt to control his fear of the oncoming; Meng Yao poised like a sword balanced on its very end, thin marks of strain around his eyes and knuckles. Nie Huaisang can see the echoes of future faultlines in the way they interact. He should end it now, wipe the slate, start again. He is standing in Meng Yao's bedroom. There is a knife in his sleeve.

He sits on the edge of the bed. Meng Yao is so tired that this small movement doesn't wake him. Usually he's as light and wary as a bird. Even in sleep his brows are furrowed as though he's still poring over some imaginary ledger, but for now he looks as though he has nothing to hide, and truly, in this life, he doesn't. He *is* only young, he *is* , and this time it's Huaisang who is something unnatural and doesn't belong. Huaisang lets go of the knife in his sleeve and buries his face in his hands and starts to cry.

"Young master Nie?" Meng Yao's surprise and worry sound to Nie Huaisang's ears like they're coming from far underwater. Nie Huaisang continues to sob, despite himself. It took only a moment for Meng Yao to wake at the sound of Huaisang crying, and some part of Huaisang is so gratified by it.

"Young master Nie, has something happened?" Meng Yao sits up and approaches, holding out a coat for Huaisang like a shield between himself and the tearful young master. Nie Huaisang accepts it anyway, letting him wrap it over Huaisang's shoulders. He cries quietly into the dark of the night and says nothing, listening to Meng Yao's quiet breathing, his undemanding silence.

When at last Huaisang's tears have died down Meng Yao asks, "Have I done something wrong, young master Nie?"

"No," Huaisang croaks. Meng Yao fetches him a cup of water and draws the coat around him a little more tightly.

"Is there someone you'd like me to speak to on your behalf?" Meng Yao says.

"No, no." Huaisang gulps wetly. If Meng Yao could fight off inevitability with words, neither of them would be here now.

"Is there something I can do, then?" Meng Yao says softly.

"Don't leave Qinghe," Nie Huaisang bursts out. It's not feigned, it's not, it never has been. There were so many things that were *not* lies between them that it makes the ones that were even worse. "Stay here. You'll have a place here forever - don't leave, alright?"

Meng Yao is as silent and forbidding as the walls. Huaisang doesn't care, though, if he's showed his hand. He's tired of there being things he's not meant to know.

"Young master Nie, have I done something to give you the impression I want to leave?" he asks.

"No!" Huaisang says. "I just - I don't want you to ever leave. I *know* what's going to happen, I'm not stupid, I know things will be different in the future but please just - don't forget me and my brother."

“Of course not,” Meng Yao says softly, at last. “I could never forget the kindness you’ve shown me.” Huaisang has nothing to say to that. He snuffles.

“You look like a mess,” Meng Yao gently chides, handing Huaisang a handkerchief. “It’s not becoming of the second young master of a great sect. Here.” He gestures for Huaisang to turn, and he takes out one of the combs Huaisang gave him from a chest, unused, and starts to undo Huaisang’s braids.

“I don’t want to be becoming,” Huaisang says, petulant as the child he looks like and agelessly tired as the creature he is. “Well, I do, but not in a way befitting a sect leader. Meng Yao-” He twists around, and the braid Meng Yao is redoing flies out of his hand.

“Second young master Nie,” Meng Yao says, when Huaisang’s voice fails him. How on earth Meng Yao manages to use the four beats of Nie Huaisang’s title to express every single emotion under heaven escapes Huaisang. He loves him. He loves him, unfortunately. If Meng Yao leaves Qinghe ever again, Nie Huaisang will kill him and start over. Surely, in one life out of hundreds, Nie Huaisang can get everything he wants.

“If something ever - happens. To da-ge,” Huaisang says, “you’ll stay with me, won’t you? I don’t know the first thing about running the Unclean Realm. You’re the only hope I’d have.”

“Nothing will happen to Sect Leader Nie.”

“I didn’t know Meng Yao was so powerful as to ensure that.”

“What are you truly worried about?” Meng Yao says, tugging on Huaisang’s undone braid. It’s a playful gesture but if Huaisang looks into Meng Yao’s eyes right now, they will both see too much.

“It’s war, isn’t it?” Huaisang says, subdued.

“War won’t reach you here in the Unclean Realm.”

“But da-ge isn’t going to hide in the Unclean Realm while the Wens posture and threaten people.”

“Then it’s not war you’re afraid of, is it?” Meng Yao says quietly. Huaisang draws a long, trembling breath. Have they really never had this conversation before, in all their lives? He doesn’t remember it. He thinks he would have, if they had.

“Da-ge cares too much to become immortal,” Huaisang says. “If he didn’t, well, he wouldn’t be da-ge. Doesn’t that mean that he’ll always run afoul of someone like - like Wen Ruohan?”

“Perhaps,” Meng Yao says. “But what would you rather have him do?”

“Stay with me,” Huaisang says, barely audible. Meng Yao sighs and pats the back of Huaisang’s head.

“Come on, young master,” he says.

“Let me do your hair too,” Huaisang says. “Please?” He shouldn’t beg, he knows, considering their stations, but Meng Yao usually responds well to it.

“Let me finish yours first,” Meng Yao says. “We can’t have you running about with braids half-done.”

“I don’t run and you know it,” Huaisang reminds him. Meng Yao snorts and then tries to hide his snort.

“We can’t have you sauntering idly with braids half-done either,” Meng Yao says, pinning Huaisang’s flyaways back with one thumb. Huaisang submits to that touch. The problem was always that he was too comfortable with it.

When he gathers up a handful of Meng Yao’s living hair it’s all he can do to keep from burying his face in it. In his mind it would still smell like dust. He cards the comb carefully through, listening intently for the clink of bone on steel nails. It never sounds. Meng Yao is here, and alive. His skin is warm with blood that Nie Huaisang has not yet spilt and his tongue is intact. His back is upright not from corpse-stiffness but because Meng Yao is wary of being gently handled. These are all knots Nie Huaisang can untie without dying. And they have time; before war, before death. They will even go to the Cloud Recesses together, Meng Yao by his side.

He’s used to watching the number of subtle differences tick upwards, after all these lives. They meet Lan Xichen. The Wens interrupt Lan Qiren’s debut lecture. The changes don’t phase him, the unknown does. When Huaisang sends Meng Yao back to the Unclean Realm there is a cold pit of dread in his stomach: what will go wrong when he isn’t there? He would say that it sours the joys of living but for the last ten cycles, at least, life has tasted like dry millet in his mouth. The birds he tries to catch no longer sing; the fish do not bite at his hooks. All the gossip he ekes out is about Qinghe, Qinghe, Qinghe. His friends start to avoid him and the dark cloud of what they take for homesickness.

When finally - finally - Meng Yao comes to retrieve him, he cries in the carriage. Meng Yao chastises him and wipes his face and Huaisang nearly sobs with relief as Meng Yao tells him all about Nie Mingjue’s latest successful military exploit. Everything will be well when they return to Qinghe, he thinks.

He doesn’t expect to see Xue Yang again, this early. The smile Xue Yang gives him is probably the same casual intimidation attempt he directs towards any young master of good standing, but it chills Huaisang far deeper. It’s a smile that seems to know what Huaisang is.

“I don’t like him,” Huaisang whispers. Meng Yao’s gaze slides to Xue Yang, at the same time that Huaisang’s does, and for a moment all three of them are caught in the trap of

acknowledgement. When Meng Yao looks back, it seems to Huaisang that he, too, is recognizing who the real monster is in Qinghe.

They never get the chance to discuss it. The next time he sees Meng Yao, he has been banished; he is begging Huaisang to be good, not to trouble his brother. Huaisang wants to scream.

He has made a promise, in this life and the life before and the life before that. He keeps his word. Wen Zhuliu's sword exits the back of Nie Huaisang's ribcage before it can strike down Nie Mingjue, and the last thing Huaisang sees before Baxia chops Wen Zhuliu in half is Meng Yao's face, utterly devoid of expression, stark white.

He has lost count of the number, but here he is, again, sitting in a study in Qinghe, watching Meng Yao calculate how many bushels of grain the troops around Hejian will need.

"Yao-ge," Huaisang whines, half-climbing into Meng Yao's seat. Meng Yao looks politely curious at this new tactic. Right now Huaisang can see the calculation racing behind his eyes. Meng Yao, Meng Yao, always *measuring*; he weighs everyone up and slots them away in the apothecary cabinet of his memory, and some drawers are locked and others are gilded, and which one did he – will he – put Nie Mingjue into? Which one is he in now? Is Huaisang nestled amid ink cakes and wine and sheaves of mulberry paper?

"Yes, young master Nie?" he says. The politeness is a wall and Huaisang is sick of it. He's known Meng Yao for what, centuries now? He's killed him enough times that they should be able to jump directly to fondness, but this Meng Yao doesn't know that.

"Yao-ge," he says more insistently. "Why don't you call me Huaisang?"

"Would that really be appropriate, young master Nie?" Meng Yao says, gently pointed. How many times have they had this conversation? There are so many truths stoppered up at the back of Huaisang's throat but he can't uncork that bottle; that's not how people like him and Meng Yao are meant to survive this world. The first instinct is always to hide behind a silk screen or a painted fan. But shouldn't the two of them, of all people, be able to be honest with each other? Who else would understand him if not Meng Yao, whose face he has watched through the intimacy of dying, violent and gentle and silent and sordid? Meng Yao understands what it feels like to be a hungry ghost with a human soul.

He leans over. Meng Yao doesn't move away. He watches, eyes opaque, even when Huaisang's breath is close enough to brush his cheek.

“Young master Nie,” he says, a fond admonishment, “Sect Leader Nie is expecting these reports this afternoon.”

“I’ll take them to him so he won’t shout at you for being late,” Huaisang says.

“He has never shouted at me for being late,” Meng Yao says.

“I know that. I think we should keep it that way, shouldn’t we? Whereas he’s shouted at me for being late about a hundred times, so it won’t make a difference,” Huaisang says, still half-across the table, still sharing air with Meng Yao.

“Or I could finish these reports on time so he won’t have to shout at either of us,” Meng Yao says.

“How dull,” Nie Huaisang breathes. “You’re not dull. Far from it.”

“Your own words would disagree,” Meng Yao says.

“Oh, what I say doesn’t mean anything, you know that.”

“Forgive my rudeness, but not saying what you mean doesn’t mean it has no meaning,” Meng Yao says. Nie Huaisang sighs.

“Yao-gege is perceptive,” he says, and kisses Meng Yao.

He doesn’t know what he expects. It’s hard to forget everything they have done with and to each other: there have been times when Meng Yao’s knife finds his back first, after all. Jin Guangyao murdered Nie Mingjue and from that soil sprouted Nie Huaisang’s thousand lives. He hates it. He wishes he could kiss their shared memory into Meng Yao’s lungs. Instead he will have to rebuild that careful trust over and over, disassemble the wall around Meng Yao’s heart with caution, build a walled garden for three in a world that only had room for one.

He kisses Meng Yao now and Meng Yao is still, so utterly still that it reminds Nie Huaisang of the times he has kissed his dead lips, and he hurls himself away so violently that ink and paper scatter over the floor. Meng Yao has a hand to his mouth now and is staring at Nie Huaisang, the look of calculation replaced with sheer bewilderment. There is a spreading stain on the topmost sheet of his report. If Huaisang leaves it, it will ruin the rest of the pile. He snatches the stack away from the leaking ink, clutching it to his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he says. He is shaking.

“Young master Nie,” Meng Yao starts, rising.

“Don’t,” Huaisang says, raising the pile between them. Meng Yao hesitates, then takes them from his hands, gently. Huaisang forces his grip to unclench before he rips them in half.

“Thank you for saving it,” Meng Yao says instead.

"It's - it was my mistake," Nie Huaisang says. "Administrator Meng, I'm sorry I troubled you in this way."

"You're not a burden," Meng Yao says.

"It isn't that. You're-" Long practice has taught Nie Huaisang the exact words which will salt and burn Meng Yao's affection forever, the words that will tear at him like a barb until one or all of them are dead.

"You're the only person who understands me," is what he says. The faintness of his voice is half-real. "I don't want to disturb that with my - my presumptuousness. I think I knew you in a past life," he adds in a rush. "I think we have karma together - maybe you killed me, or I killed you, or we were lovers, or brothers. I don't know a life where we don't share a fate. Even though we're strangers now I want you to - trust me, though I know you have no reason to."

"You've done nothing to warrant my mistrust," Meng Yao soothes, and even though Nie Huaisang knows that's untrue, his nauseous fear ebbs away. He always believes Meng Yao, even though Meng Yao lies like breathing, and lies told out of love are still lies.

"I'll take my leave. I've disturbed you enough," Huaisang says; bowing, waiting, holding his breath.

"You don't have to leave," Meng Yao says, startled, and then silent. Nie Huaisang glances up at Meng Yao through his lashes, playing on all of the innocence of this body, the naive young master Meng Yao can use as a stepping stone to his birthright. Ambition, like any desire, is a lever Huaisang can use. He will use it for Meng Yao's good in this life. It's what Meng Yao is owed.

"I'll help you rewrite that first page," Huaisang offers, with a little tremor in his voice. "It's my fault it got ruined."

"It wouldn't hurt the young master to know a little about the running of a sect," Meng Yao says wryly.

"Don't worry, Yao-gege. I know everything I need to know," Huaisang says, and smiles.

He tells the truth now, as often as he can, and if he tells it in a way that makes it hard to believe - well, Nie Huaisang is used to that. To everyone else's eyes he must be changing rapidly: lively one month, quiet and withdrawn the next, playful in the third. Nie Mingjue was bound to notice when his didi started to invade his space again, to go back to treating Nie Mingjue with the same disdain for Chifeng-zun's fearsome reputation that a crow would grant a tiger.

Ever since the life when Nie Mingjue found him standing over Meng Yao's body he's tried to keep Nie Mingjue at arm's length from his plans. But he's given up on plans now; he never was good at them. When one of them eventually shatters on the rocks of this life Nie Huaisang has another chance, and another, and another. He is trying to be the bamboo raft in the stream. He is trying to savour the cold water, rather than damming it still. And that means drinking up every moment he can with his da-ge, even though after a thousand lifetimes of watching Nie Mingjue die, there is a terror in seeing him alive again, knowing that one day he will be taken away. If not by Jin Guangyao's hand, then another's.

Now Huaisang is sitting in Nie Mingjue's office, half-reading a cultivation text under his da-ge's watchful eye, half-sprawled out in a manner most unbecoming of a young master. Nie Mingjue keeps looking at him, and Huaisang keeps pretending not to notice. It's hard to look back without seeing the stitches around Nie Mingjue's neck, or the bloody mess of his skull. Nie Mingjue is getting to his feet now, but he stops just short of leaving his desk.

"Didi," Nie Mingjue says. "How are you – finding your new room?" They've had so many variations of this conversation, when Nie Mingjue notices the change in him. In some lives he treats Huaisang more gently after the change, like trying to coax a startled horse; in others he greets it with bewildered but silent respect, and continues to push. In some he's relieved. They have never talked about it.

Now Huaisang looks. He could tell da-ge everything. He is older than his da-ge in nearly every life. He understands it all: the enormity, the fear, trying to fight off something that seems unstoppable to protect a person you love.

"I appreciate it a lot," he says to Nie Mingjue. "Thank you." Nie Mingjue nods slowly. Duty was tailor-made for him, while on Huaisang it fits as poorly as a hand-me-down robe, no matter how many years he spends on it. The world asked so much of Nie Mingjue, and there was no life where Nie Mingjue could look at what needed to be done and say no to it with any grace. That was who he is, for better or worse; something too bright and sharp and upright for the murkiness of their world. Just as Meng Yao, forever clawing with bloody fingers to find a way in through the cracks, is who he is.

"Da-ge, how are you not afraid?" Huaisang says. He winces a little when Nie Mingjue looks at him. Maybe that's too honest. There's too much they should leave unsaid between them.

"What are you so afraid of?" Nie Mingjue says, but he sounds - hopeful. Wary, too. Oh, he's - he's worried. Huaisang has worried him. That makes him feel terrible.

"I don't know! I don't know," Huaisang says. "What if something happens to you?"

"What do you think I'm trying to prepare you for?" Nie Mingjue says.

"That's - that's exactly what I mean!" Huaisang swallows. "How do you live with the fear?"

“You haven’t got anything to be afraid of if you’d only listen to me,” Nie Mingjue says gruffly. He’s right, in a way. For as long as Nie Mingjue lives, Nie Huaisang lives a life as sweet as summer fruit. “Practice your saber. Train your cultivation. Have I done something to - worry you?”

“You’ve been away so often lately.” Nie Huaisang traces the edges of the page, skirting the words.

Nie Mingjue looks grim, and sad, and tired. He’s lived a mere fraction of the years Huaisang has but he will always seem so much older. He hasn’t told Huaisang about the qi deviation yet. Maybe in this life Huaisang can free him of the weight of all his secrets. Maybe he cannot protect Nie Mingjue from the force of their entire world, but he can use all his failures to build him a gentler life.

“I’m here now,” Nie Mingjue says, then, “and yet you’re still afraid.”

Ah, it’s true; and the ropes around his chest uncoil, even if it is just for a moment. He didn’t set out to bring da-ge back but - in a fashion, da-ge is back. He and da-ge have a precious few years together before life will grind inevitably on. In past lives this period has always been a screaming blur, trying to stay one step ahead of Jin Guangyao in a game only one of them knows they’re playing, trying to pour time back into a broken water clock. But da-ge is here. Huaisang is here. Meng Yao, too, is here.

“Sit here a while longer then,” Huaisang says.

“You know I have to go look over the new batch of disciples,” Nie Mingjue says. The usual tone: *I have to work, unlike you*. Fond, full of grief and longing.

“Da-ge,” Huaisang says again. Is there something different in the way he says it this time, that makes Nie Mingjue look at him for real this time, almost wistfully?

“Alright.” Nie Mingjue lays down Baxia.

“You don’t have to stop working if you don’t want to,” Huaisang says, though his voice is full to breaking with hope. “I know you’re busy-”

“No, it’s fine,” Nie Mingjue says, settling himself back down. “Meng Yao said he’d bring the reports here. We can spend some time. The disciples will keep.”

“You make them sound like sacks of grain,” Huaisang says.

“Some of them might as well be,” Nie Mingjue says, mock-grimly. “Do they think falling on the floor and pretending to be dead is a good defence from Wens? It’s not even a good defence from me.”

“I think some of your recruits would rather face Wens than have another bout against you on the training grounds, Sect Leader,” Meng Yao says, stepping through. He closes the door behind him and answers Huaisang’s smile with one of his own. If he knows Meng Yao - and

after hundreds of lives he knows every inch of Meng Yao, from his lungs to his fingertips, to the faces he makes when being held or being murdered - he was probably waiting outside the door, always punctual but waiting for the right moment to enter a private conversation.

“The reports.” He hands them over. “Shall I ask the kitchens to bring dinner while we discuss? For second young master Nie too, if he wishes.”

“Yes,” Huaisang says immediately, before Nie Mingjue can deny him.

“Yes,” Nie Mingjue says after a moment. Nie Huaisang pulls a face, which Nie Mingjue ignores. Meng Yao smiles, a small quiet smile, and says, “Of course, young master Nie.”

“You’re my adjutant, but you listen to him?” Nie Mingjue grumbles.

“I apologise. I had simply assumed Sect Leader Nie and young master Nie were in agreement,” Meng Yao says, still smiling.

“We are!” Huaisang says.

“Have I been cursed?” Nie Mingjue says. “Am I invisible?”

“Sect Leader Nie only has to speak his orders and I will obey,” Meng Yao says mildly. Sect Leader Nie goes quiet, of course, as they both knew he would. He eyes Huaisang, then shrugs, one-shouldered, helplessly.

“What news?” he says to Meng Yao, focusing on the battle he’s more likely to win. Meng Yao glances over at Huaisang.

“Oh, is this the report from Shenze?” Huaisang says. “That was where we managed to ambush that Wen squad last month, wasn’t it? Ah - sixteen Wens, two of whom we captured alive. The interrogation was unsuccessful but we managed to recover partial remains of a note detailing deployment of future patrols to the area.”

“Second young master Nie has a good memory,” Meng Yao says. Second young master Nie has a miserably long memory, and he has to be careful to delve only as far as this life and no deeper, in this as in other things. He is tending something fragile that could only happen in this life, and will only last for so long. Perhaps this night will end in chaos and conflict like it did a hundred lives ago. Perhaps that’s simply what it is.

“Are you interested in these things now?” Nie Mingjue says. It sounds like a scolding but Huaisang can hear the complex tangle of Nie Mingjue’s fears beneath it. Meng Yao, afraid of his past; Nie Mingjue, afraid of his future; Nie Huaisang, afraid of both. They are tired, and they are afraid, and they are together.

“If it eases da-ge’s burden,” Nie Huaisang says.

“When did you get so old, didi?” Nie Mingjue says. It’s an awkward attempt at teasing. Nie Mingjue isn’t good at saying anything that’s not from the heart. Huaisang wants to cry.

“The second young master has been helping me with the reports recently,” Meng Yao volunteers. He very politely does not look at Huaisang, as though that help is not a series of stolen touches while Meng Yao works and Huaisang watches. They haven’t kissed since. Huaisang will try again, sooner rather than later. He smiles now at Meng Yao, smiles at da-ge and watches his uneasy expression turn to one of resigned relief.

Time is running through his fingers like a drowning boy’s last breaths. He will make this life matter. He doesn’t know what shape that will take, yet, but here it is for him to create, with Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue as his ink and brush.

And when war arrives at Qinghe once more, who knows? Perhaps Huaisang will cut Meng Yao’s throat and then his own; perhaps he’ll just take poison and lie down quietly in the family tomb.

But for now, they are all here in the Unclean Realm. Perhaps its stone walls can defend against time as they have defended against dynasties. Perhaps here, in Qinghe, even death can stand still.

End Notes

Thank you so much to all the time travel crew for being so supportive and patient. Especial thanks to clock for helping with the NMJ character-wrangling.

- Title is taken from [Trial Run](#), by Yau Ching, translated by Chenxin Jiang.
- Mulberry paper because of the 桑 (sāng) in Huaisang's name, but also because it produces a lovely thick and textured paper that I'm sure an art nerd like Huaisang would appreciate.
- Hungry ghosts are bound to the wheel of reincarnation because of the wrongdoing they committed in life. Always hungry, but can never be satiated.
- And of course, the [tweet](#) that launched it all.

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