

天

tiān

prologue (13,701,024,838)

Gone are the shades of blue in the sky, replaced by smudges of black and gray. The sun no longer rises; it has deserted this land. The earth is cracked and torn, gurgling lava from its crevices, hissing and spitting bright orange death. It sets everything in its path ablaze, showing no mercy.

Endless lumps of sea creatures float in the warm waters, the smell of their rotting carcasses stinging the air. Rats; cows; tigers; rabbits; dragons; snakes; horses; goats; monkeys; chickens; dogs; pigs: all animals of the land try to flee. Birds of all shape and size take flight, though they can only go so far. They can only survive for so long.

Life is erased as if it were a mistake, the gore of billions of beings staining a crumbling canvas. Surprisingly,

it does not take very long at all. A calm silence creeps in, all except a crackle of fire here, a crash of tidal wave there. The kind of stillness that hasn't been heard for billions of years.

The earth is dying.

The universe is ending.

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Guan ming teo

zero (0)

The very first thing he remembers is being surrounded by warmth. It is comforting, safe, and natural. He basks in this pleasant glow, happy to remain here, though at the same time yearning for something else. How long he had been here, he cannot say. This sacred and safe place, this womb, is all he knows.

Something stirs him from his dozing. He sleepily peers out, the glare keeping him from seeing fully. He sees a being, like him, amongst an endless sea of bright warmth. She is perfect, an iridescent and pure being. She is like him. Together, they are everything. She smiles at him, and he smiles back.

She understands all, and thus so too does he. He is her twin, after all, and they are both perfect beings. She

concentrates, creating the vastness around them to buzz with frenzy. Suddenly, a colossal expulsion rends the womb, matter flinging outwards at phenomenal speeds.

The bright warmth dissipates; leaving a cold, dark, empty feeling. Now they are surrounded by a chilling nothingness, the absolute antithesis of before. It seems lonely here. He knows this is not true though: it cannot be lonely for as long as she is with him. This is only the beginning, the beginning of everything.

“From now little brother, I will be known as 上帝 (shàngdì,)” she says.

“And I will be known as 天 (tiān,)” he says.

“Let us explore.”

one (1,379,115,240)

The ends of the universe all tend to look the same after a while. Not much changes from one spot to the other; there are some small rocks hurtling through, and there are some large rocks hurtling through. The larger rocks get larger still by attracting smaller rocks to them, so on and so forth.

Every now and again, shàngdi will stop to stare at a particular rock. Nothing seems out of the ordinary about this rock over others, yet it is one she has chosen. When she makes this choice, she concentrates on it, causing other rocks to arc towards this one. They collide at an almost exponential rate, causing it to grow faster than it would ever have hoped—without shàngdi's help. It con-

denses, becoming white hot, as more rocks slam onto its surface to form layer upon layer of crust.

Almost as soon as she had begun, she stops. One out of perhaps every dozen stays luminescent and hot, emitting light far into the distant nothingness. Most others sit as a gigantic sphere, millions of times larger than before, waiting for something.

Of all these creations, some of them crumble, collapsing into themselves, unable to stably sustain its new size. Some break into smaller pieces as they collide with something, which is occasionally another previous creation. Unfortunately, shàngdì is unsatisfied with nearly all of these.

After a very, very long time doing this, they call upon a relatively young collection of rocks. shàngdì and tiān had stopped here twice in the past already. There is something about this place that shàngdì likes. They had stopped by previously to create the now blazing globe from a hydrogen cloud. shàngdì nods.

“This is the best spot, little brother. We will build upon that rock there, and both take part in the formation,” she states.

This is rare. Most of the time shàngdì handles the formation, with only the infrequent occasion when tiān would do so, because his sister couldn’t be bothered. tiān has only taken part in the formation of perhaps a few hundred billions, give or take.

They both concentrate upon this rock, drawing other rocks to it, increasing its size and temperature to almost unfathomable proportions. When they are finished, shàngdì gives it a little push in the direction she favours.

“Let us take a break for a little while, and keep an eye on this one. We have done plenty for now,” she sighs.

“A game of 圍棋 (wéiqí)?” he asks.

“Yes, good idea.”

two (9,102,790,338)

shàngdì adds what are hopefully the final touches, and they stand back to admire their creation. It has been rotating around the glowing ball in a most impressive fashion: not too fast and not too slow, not too close and not too far. She was right, tiān thinks, this is the perfect place.

“It is our finest work so far!” she exclaims.

“Yes, it certainly is. This is beautiful, sister.”

shàngdì starts things off with a very simple life-form, planting the seeds to achieve our goals in the earth. Some grow and some die: it is quite trial and error in creating an organism that will thrive in this climate.

Over the course of many games of wéiqí, soon enough rudimentary life becomes sustainable.

It is fairly easy after that. They play wéiqí, and watch their creations grow, giving them a helping nudge every now and again, creating complexities, the opportunity to evolve. Before either of them realise, another age has passed.

Fish and crustaceans rule by numbers in the oceans; many species of land- and air-based animals have come and gone. One line, derived from monkeys, shows promise. They are still far from what shàngdì and tiān would call ‘intelligent,’ but their potential seems high.

shàngdì decides to nap, and tells tiān to go do something about them; she is tired and feels like resting. shàngdì seems to be losing interest in the plan, tiān thinks. As he is about to leave, shàngdì stops him.

“Are you going like that?” she asks, gesturing at his form.

“Ahh.” tiān concentrates and creates a humanoid vessel to slip into.

“You don’t have enough hair.” tiān quickly fixes this.

“Now you have too much.” Another quick fix.

“Maybe you should be taller.” Fix. “A bit more tanned perhaps?” Fix.

shàngdì begins creating vessels for herself too, demonstrating to tiān a particular feature or trait. They while away some time, having fun dressing up in humanoid suits and fooling about. When they are settled:

“Perfect!” she exclaims. “Before you go—” she starts again, as he is leaving.

shàngdì stops him, pulls him close, and they kiss passionately with their newly formed lips.

three (13,697,085,342)

It is tiresome work. Some can handle the strain of manipulation, while most succumb to the shock and die out. Still, amongst the many, many failures, it does not take comparatively long for an intelligent strain to emerge.

While tiān spends an increasing amount of time with these humans, shàngdì's interest has waned. She tags along with tiān very infrequently to visit, and gets bored quickly, retiring to the endless space of their home.

tiān forges ahead, teaching agricultural techniques, language, and morals. He teaches architecture, mathematics, and science. Many display selfish or greedy traits, which he tries to curb. The very few, the finest and best

disciples, he bestows favour and advanced teachings. He calls them 仙 (xiān).

Civilisations are in full swing, however crude and unwieldy. Many people are rough, savage and imperfect. tiān still has hope for them, even if shàngdì no longer does. She has given up on the idea completely, claiming that they will not find what they are looking for.

“Look at them. They are pathetic. We will not find it from *that*,” she states with a dark vehemence, which he recognises to be her norm of late.

“We knew it would take time. Have you given up, on what we have spent so long trying to create?” he counters.

“I no longer wish for it. I want it to be just us again. You are all I need, tiān.”

“I don’t think we should give up, not yet. I still see it. It is faint, but it is there. These are our creations, sister. Do we not have an obligation to see this through?”

“I do not see it. If you feel so enamoured to those things, why don’t you become one of them?” In tiān’s shocked silence, she continues: “How about this then,

little brother—go and live amongst these primates and search. If you do not succeed, we scrap it all and play wéiqí together, just like we used to. However, you are not allowed to use any of your powers on them; there will be no more meddling with their minds. Yes or no?”

tiān thinks about this; while he does not want to live amongst them, neither does he want to give up yet. He agrees to her proposal, even though it would pain him to be away from her for so long. They spend a seemingly last and final time holding each other, loving each other.

When tiān is ready, in a new vessel, shàngdì sees him off. She binds his power, limiting him to only a few key abilities, and then adjusts the cloth on his body so it sits more naturally. She tells him to be safe, as he is less able than he used to be, and to think of her. They hold each other once more.

“Remember, just call for me when you’re finished. I’ll be here, waiting. I love you, tiān, don’t forget that.”

tiān nods, and begins his next journey, what will be his toughest challenge yet.

“I love you too, sister.”

four (13,701,024,823)

When I meet Hope for the very first time, I fall in love with her right then and there. She's beautiful: long wavy brown hair, big hazel eyes, fair princess skin, and a smile to die for. At the beginning I don't hear her laugh too often, but when she does, it sounds like the light tinkling of crystal bells singing in the wind. I am hopeless for Hope.

"What are you looking at?" she asks me.

"You, my dear," I answer with a smile.

"Wwwhhhyyy?" Hope forms a funny expression on her face.

"Because you're beautiful," I reply.

This is it, I think. This is what I have been searching for. The emptiness within me fades away, and I feel happy. For the first time in a long time, I feel happy. I smile for no reason. I laugh at a recalled memory. I *am* happy.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Just thinking.”

The years go by in an instant. It’s not enough. I guess time really does fly when you’re having fun.

I am showing people how to use simple tools. I am showing them how to farm, to cook their food, the art of communication. In their eyes, I am a god. Their simple happiness makes me smile. I feel attached to them, sort of as if they were my pets, but more than that: within them, I am searching for something. Something I badly want to find.

The world shifts. I am enhancing lives, cultivating and advancing special abili-

ties, and teaching them what to do with it. I watch as they grow, as they use what I have taught them to forge empires. I watch these empires rise and fall, over a great time.

Another shift. I see nothing but light; and it is beautiful. It is everything to me. I feel more love for it than anything else. I know it does for me too. It calls to me. It says, I wait for you. Come back to me.

I wake with a start. What was that dream about, I think. I let out a held breath, almost like a sigh, and sit up. Bedside clock says 3am. I must be lonely. I quietly make my way out of the bedroom, and into the kitchen.

Fill a glass of water. Take a big gulp. Finish it. Cool my feet on the tile floor, which helps to slow my heart rate. I begin to feel better. More normal. Whatever normal is, I think. I let out another sigh as I make my way back to bed.

I don't know what the point is. I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm searching for something, but I have no clue as to what that is. It's some unknowable concept, but I feel it in my heart: there is something missing. How can I find a solution to a problem, if I can't even pinpoint what that problem is? I am lost.

There's this feeling. It's something in the deep recesses of your mind, which pulls you back or drives you forward. Whether or not you realise it, your heart has counted every disappointment; every rejection; every mistake. It recoils in fear for you, because your brain's too stupid to run away. You can feel it, hurting with every heavy beat. You're at an impasse—where any action could be fatal—and so you do nothing. Until it breaks.

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“I tried to be what you want me to be, but I'm not. I'm not perfect. I just—just can't keep doing this. I've lost sight of who I am. I don't think I'm right for you. I just keep hurting you. I think ... someone else would be better for you. Better than I am,” Hope admits.

I am stunned. Somehow, I expected us to last forever. It felt like it would, at the beginning. So safe and sure. As if nothing could go wrong. The blood drains from my face and pools in my stomach, which feels heavy and volatile. I sweat, my lips tremble, my hands shake.

“I don’t ... I don’t understand. Are you giving up? Are you going to let this all go, everything we’ve been through together?”

I don’t even hear the answer, but I can see it in her eyes, the way they narrow under her brow; in her mouth, as it downturns and quivers at the edges. In the position of her body, in how she’s distanced herself. In the tears that spill over her eyelids and run down her face—and most saddening, in how I do nothing to stop her pain. I am in shock. I want to reach out, but I don’t. I am numb.

The door makes the hollownest sound as it clicks shut.

five (13,701,024,837)

I stare at my hands, but they do not feel my own. Were they always like this? Trembling and afraid. The future is such a mystery, and I am but one weak, extinguishable flame in a sea of billions. I am nothing.

I open my eyes but I cannot see. I blink several times as a sharp panic rises in my chest. I hold my hand to my face. Spinning around, I see nothing. I am surrounded by nothingness.

Except ... a pinpoint of light, far, far away, though it only takes one blink of my eyes for it to come close enough to surround me. An intense, warm, yet

calming light, it emits a radiance I have never known before, so bright it feels as if my eyes are on fire. I have to shut them from its brilliance.

“You do not remember?” it doesn’t speak so much as places the thoughts in my mind. It is a thing; not simply light, but a sentient thing.

“Ahh,” it muses, “you are breaking down. You cannot expect it to last this long.”

The light shines even brighter through my eyelids, and I can feel the warmth turn to blistering heat. I am being stripped away, burning up into nothingness. I feel like I am dying.

When I wake up, I gasp in air as if I were holding my breath for far too long. Sweat has made my body clammy, and I pull back the sheets to sit myself up. I press my hand to forehead, trying to slow the awful throbbing in my skull.

I gingerly make my way towards the bathroom, eyes barely open, feeling for the corridor with my outstretched hands. I pull down my pyjama pants and sit down. As I reach for the toilet paper—

“How is your head?” a pretty voice asks.

I jump up; then slam myself back down on the toilet. My eyes snap open, and I stare about wildly. Standing right in front of me is a beautiful girl. She looks to be in her early 20s, small and thin, with darker-than-black and beautifully straight hair reaching past the small of her back. She is barefoot, but wearing a pale green summer dress, printed with blooming oriental lillies. She is very beautiful. She is also in my bathroom, watching me urinate.

“What are you—who are—what—what are you doing here?!” I exclaim, too shocked to be coherent.

“Talking to you. How is your head?” she smiles slightly, a little like a smirk.

“Please get out!”

She's waiting for me as I finish up, hands held behind her back, smiling at me eagerly. I rub at my temples with one hand, then sigh. I must be hallucinating? Perhaps I'm having a stroke, and this girl the product of a clot in my brain?

"You're not hallucinating, or having a stroke. The pain in your head should go away soon. I am real, and I am here," she pouts.

"H-h—how?" I stammer, the delight of shocking me again easily noticeable in her beautifully big, blue-gray eyes.

"I know everything. How is your head?" she asks one more time.

"It's still painful," I grumble.

"Well, you'll feel better when it goes away. You'll remember soon, and then we'll talk," she nods before abruptly turning to walk into my bedroom.

"Ahh wait, where are you—"

When I enter, my room is empty. She has vanished.

The throbbing in my head gets worse over the course of the day; I knock back headache pills like candy to no avail. Tiring of it, I take something extra strong and decide to sleep it off.

Nothingness again, but I am not alone this time: the girl is with me, amongst all the empty. She looks even more beautiful than before, though she isn't smiling now—she looks concerned.

“This will hurt,” she says.

“What will?” I ask.

My eyes burn from a sudden burst of radiance, and I hear two popping noises as the juices bubble away. I try to scream but my throat feels as though it's on fire, soon followed by everything else. My entire body boils into vapour.

When I wake up, tears are drying on my face. I heave a sigh, clamping my eyes back shut as I let out a shudder. Sobs run through my body, fresh tears escaping my eyelids. I am alone and I have failed.

“How is your head?” she asks.

So much time has gone by. I have failed time and again. I have spent so long here, trying to be what I’m not. Trying to find what I was looking for. My heart aches; the heart that is not my own.

“You remember now, yes?” she asks.

After a moment, I reply: “Yes.”

“Why don’t we go back? To the way it was before. You’ve worked for so long, why don’t you have a rest? Come, let’s go home,” she reasons convincingly.

This heart beats.

“Yes, alright. Let us go home, sister.”

six (13,701,024,838)

Out in the nothingness, removed of vessels, shàngdì and I play a game of wéiqí. She knows much has changed in me since we separated so long ago. She simply wants things to return to how they used to be.

“I love you, tiān,” she tells me out of the blue.

“I love you too, sister,” I reply.

“I want you to stay here, and await my return. I will not be very long. Promise me you will stay here?”

“I will wait for you.”

“Good. This is for the best,” she believes.

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I put on a vessel. I don't actually need it; for some reason, it just feels more comfortable. I sit and wait, wondering what our purpose will be now. What have we worked towards all this time? Did we really achieve nothing?

I just wanted to find the one. I was searching for so long. No, we were; we wanted to find it. Something like us. A pure and perfect being. My heart beats. It beats, and I think of her. Of Hope. Was she not perfect? No, she wasn't. I only wanted her to be.

I hear voices cry out in pain, and tears well in my eyes. I can see. The place I have called home for so long is being destroyed. I do not feel this is for the best. I feel only sadness. I feel so ... human; so flawed and imperfect. Am I not a perfect being? Why do I not feel it to be so?

I think of Hope; is she already gone?

—

There is a large fire in the distance. Splits in the land reveal yawning chasms of either darkness, or the bright

molten core. A few buildings awkwardly lean against one another, as if they are trying to keep each other upright, like leftover soldiers in a war. This isn't a war though; the earth doesn't stand a chance against shàngdi. What possible retaliation is there?

Hope is here. Cowering by a freestanding doorframe, lying curled up on a bed of rubble, while the dead and dying litter around her. A cut from her head has leaked blood down her hairline; it has congealed into a dark crust. Her entire body is covered in bright pink blisters, rich with liquid, some already burst and bleeding. She is crying. The sobs force shudders through her entire body.

Splintered wood and fragmented concrete crunch underfoot as I walk towards her. She is startled by the sound, her head snapping in my direction. Her eyes are wide and fearful, more animal than human.

“Is someone there?” she chokes it out, ash and dust clogging her throat.

“... Hope?” I am almost afraid to say her name.

“tiān? Is it ... really you?”

I hold her in my arms, as gently as I can. I tell her that I love her, and that I'm sorry. I do what I can to heal her wounds, but I feel her soul dissolving away. I envelop both of us in darkness, in nothingness, and directly feed power into her.

The blazing light returns; shàngdi has come full circle for another pass. I hold Hope ever tighter, hiding us away in the blanket of nothingness, and wish that it will hold.

Little by little, small holes appear in the darkness. Shafts of light rain down; I use my own body as a shield to keep Hope safe. Soon enough larger cracks appear, letting greater light through, and with a hiss it eats away at my vessel, overwhelming us both with the smell of charring flesh. I look into Hope's eyes.

“I—I'm sorry, tiān. I'm so sorry ... for e—”

The light consumes us in the very next instant.

epilogue (13,701,024,838)

She feels it; as if her entire being has cleaved in two, and is filled with anguish. She has destroyed her tiān. They, who have been together their entire existence, no longer are. It is only her now; only shàngdì. She is consumed by despair and fury.

Her light grows stronger; brighter; hotter. Nothing escapes its wrath, the fiery embodiment of a lost brother, partner, friend, and love. Everything evaporates, gone forever, until even shàngdì herself fades away.

What once was is no more. The universe has been merged together into a sea of warmth, all surrounding and encompassing. It feels comfortable, safe, and natural.

things you may already know

1. The numbers in the chapter markers are Earth years.

It is estimated from modern science that: the universe is between 13.3–13.9 billion years old, having expanded out from an extremely hot and dense state, and is continuing to expand outwards today; our sun was only formed about 4.57 billion years ago; the origin of life on Earth is estimated at around 4 billion years; the *Homo* genus, which includes modern humans and species closely related to them, is estimated to be around 2.3–2.4 million years old; there are written records regarding the history of civilisa-

tion in China dating as far back as 1,700 BCE (around 3,700 years ago.)

2. 上帝 (shàngdì) means “Celestial Lord” or “the Supreme God”, a term used as far back as 1,600 BCE.
3. 天 (tiān) means “heaven” or “god”, a term used as far back as 1,122 BCE. shàngdì and tiān are essentially different words for the same thing.
4. 圍棋 (wéiqí) is an ancient board game played in China documented as long ago as 300 BCE (but may be older.) It is popularly known in Japan as *Go*.
5. 仙 (xiān) means “immortal”, “saint”, as well as “wizard” or “magician”. It is a term used in Taoism, Chinese alchemy, and mythology to name a few.