

(spoilers for The Sandman herein)

This is gonna be rambling.

So, this fic started in July when I was just beginning to write my beefleaf longfic and realized that my character design for He Xuan was very much like that of Dream from the Sandman. I chatted with hawkhusband about it on discord and basically brainstormed the numbered part of the summary right then and there, just thinking which parts/characters of tgcf each member of the Endless would mesh with the best. Hawk hit me with the “I would like to see it” reaction gif and in great despair, seeing as I was only just beginning to write what would end up being [a 128k fic](#) (I provide the link because I am indeed proud of it--go, read the longfic my childe), I knew that I would eventually have to write this other thing. ~~(little vignettes my ass)~~

Ideas gathered gradually; I wrote most of it in September-October--the first two chapters while I was taking a break from the beefleaf fic, and the rest after I was done with it. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how well the Endless fit into the world of tgcf: gods and demons were all human at some point, but what about beings beyond humanity?

Xianxia got me into Daoist philosophy--I re-read the Dao De Jing last year, and then read the Zhuangzi. I incorporated my experience reading the latter into a Xue Yang redemption fic, which was largely about retreating from society as a necessary measure to achieve mental stability. I read the Yijing while writing the beefleaf fic, and notions of fate and changing states permeated the longfic. So, by the time I drafted my bangfic, I had already been immersed in Daoist thought for a good half a year.

Here's something about the Endless, which is made explicit in The Sandman: They represent states of being, but in so being, they also shape their complements: Destiny shapes free will, Death shapes life, Dream shapes reality, Desire shapes hatred, Despair shapes hope, Destruction shapes creation, and Delirium shapes sanity.

Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;  
The difficult and the easy complement each other;  
The long and the short off-set each other;  
The high and the low incline towards each other;  
Note and sound harmonize with each other;  
Before and after follow each other. ([DDJ 2](#))

Well, how convenient!

Each chapter expresses this duality: Mei Nian Qing wanders, Xie Lian perseveres, Destruction creates, Death shows mercy, Desire resides alone, Jun Wu is set free, and hualian must choose their reality. The duality of being is natural--I honestly didn't intend most of these in the beginning, but they were inevitable, as negative space is when one paints a subject.

I wrote a detailed outline and sent it excitedly to hawk. Drafting went smoothly--having the outline meant that I had a vague sense of the larger picture.

What's the main theme? Eternity, I think. I'm breaking down the escapism of the genre a little bit. I'm asking, what does it mean to be endless? How does one interface with the ineffable, and how does one reconcile it with their humanity? Must one become an archetype, or a story, in order to become truly immortal? I certainly don't know, and I leave it ambiguous in the end.

## CHAPTER ONE, 'A stroll'

The first chapter opens up the setting and acclimates the reader to this larger universe the fic is set in. It introduces several themes (fate, eternity, the passage of time), motifs (the crane, the 'bat', the red string--all symbols having to do with eternity (although I twist the bat one a bit from its cultural significance)), and plot points (MNQ's past with JW, the cliff they swing their legs over in the memory which reappears in the last two chapters, the notion of having a 'trembling heart'). I think the first chapter also communicates the most with the last chapter--both involve surreal quests, and the last chapter brings back the cranes.

The beginning of the chapter is kind of depressing--disintegration, entropy, the Big Boredom. It's offset by MNQ's sense of humor, but that humor is nevertheless offset by his melancholy. But starting that way sets us up for comfort. Pretty much directly in the center of 'A stroll', we get the main (and, heartening, in my opinion at least) theme of the fic via a quote from the Zhuangzi:

*"It is possible to describe the ineffable, but these words take you away from its reality. Before things are born, they cannot stop being born, and once dead, they cannot resist going. Death and birth are not far apart, but what causes them is beyond our sight. Notions of a cause or no cause are irrelevant. I search for their historic roots but they disappear into the past. I look for the end of the future, but it never ceases to arrive. Infinite, unlimited, there are no words for this. To try to define it is to place it in the same category as 'Is there a cause or is there not?' These are just words and they begin and end with things."*

The first chapter destabilizes our view of linear time. We're thrust into the fluidity of memory, and then a liminal state, caught between sunrise and sunset, the only place we may peer at reality's weft, the Big Book, the red string. No matter how genre-savvy we are, we can't search for the purpose of our quest--we cough it up, or we run heedlessly into it.

The first chapter has a resolution, but it's a teetering one, one that shows us we still have a ways to go. For MNQ, the sun is still setting.

## CHAPTER TWO: 'Stations'

Alright, we're keeping the notion of changing states and alternate realities, but where the first chapter was about changing outward states, the second is more about changing inward states. We're also getting more of a sense of violation and helplessness--MNQ's wandering had an (albeit, wonky) intent, but XL's is staggering and painful. Delirium is a mercy when no one else will offer it.

Both Ch.2 and Ch.6 are about survival. Much like the penultimate chapter (and Book 4 of tgcf), the second chapter begins with a sense of entrapment, and ends with a sense of freedom.

Why does XL earn his freedom from Delirium's realm? Because even in a low state, even drunk and helpless, he shows her compassion. He senses that she has been violated (in the Sandman canon, it's vaguely implied that she was, in fact, violated, and that's why she turned from Delight into Delirium), and seeks to help her, even when he can't help himself. For this, Delirium takes a liking to him (and, as we know from tgcf canon, his 'it only takes one' sense of empathy and perseverance allows him to survive Book 4).

Motifs: worms, butterflies. Decay, metamorphosis, rebirth, all that good stuff. I was thinking about titling this chapter 'Like butterflies', but I felt like that might be too heavy-handed? I wanted the butterfly symbolism to slowly emerge.

On a mechanical level, the second chapter also introduces us (even if only by name) to a few of the Seven, and also allows the only-tgcf reader to get acclimated along with Xie Lian, who is similarly confused about Delirium's dysfunctional family.

### CHAPTER THREE, 'Blood, ash, and rain'

Thus begin the central chapters, all three of which focus more on a member of the Endless than a particular tgcf character.

In The Sandman, Destruction leaves his post for good--destruction still happens, but he has decided he will no longer direct it. He takes up cooking, painting, poetry. He avoids his family, and as a result, his family falls into discord. His defining advice to Dream (which Dream does not take, resulting in Morpheus's demise and replacement by another aspect) is that it is always possible to abandon one's role. It's a very Zhuangzi-esque sentiment. So, it seemed natural to have him interact with the ideal Daoist sage of the tgcf pantheon, Yu Shi Huang. That was the starting point for this chapter.

We pick up the rebirth cycle theme from the last chapter, but for the most part, it's less internal, less emotional here, although it pervades everything that happens. We see Destruction woodenly going about his destructive tasks and escaping into creative tasks. Either way, he's hounded by his sense of duty. As the ox-man says, "Can't escape things that're done down here so easy." The duality's tangled up, because the message of the chapter *isn't* that escape is the

ideal 'end state'. There is no end state. Destruction returns to his duty, but it's because he finds emotional fulfillment in it.

This chapter also moves from entrapment to freedom, although both the beginning and end involve the visceral fulfillment of destruction. THE. TIGER. IS. OUT. Popping a cystic zit, making the sky rain with blood, this is pure *id*. Both this chapter and Desire's chapter are about selfishness, and oppose the equity theme in Death's chapter. But in different ways. Destruction is the ecstasy of *solve*; Desire is the ecstasy of *coagula*.

What other things are going on in this chapter?

The acne metaphor at the beginning comes back in the ugliness theme of the Despair chapter, and in the final chapter, Jun Wu's face is marred by what appear to be (at least to Xie Lian) cystic acne scars. Both the augury-crow and the universe-jar also come back in Ch.7, as a treat.

Also, of the Endless, Destruction is the one who most exemplifies change. So, throwing a hexagram in seemed natural: 'Yijing' translates to 'Book of Changes'--the idea is that the yin and yang lines in each hexagram are constantly changing states. Taking a hexagram tells you 1) which state you are currently in, 2) which state this will likely evolve into, and 3) how to best prepare for this change. That third point is what makes the Yijing a philosophical text of a sort, in the way it combines proto-Daoism with proto-Confucianism--the Yijing itself pre-dates Confucius, and its auguries derive from oracle-bone divination--that is, it's pretty much as old as the Chinese language itself.

I picked a hexagram that involves rain, and toyed throughout the chapter with repeating the language of the hexagram.

(Also, if you're curious what this version of 'The Taming Power of the Small' turns into, since both the first and sixth lines are yang-turning-into-yin lines, it becomes Hexagram 48 ䷛, The Well: "The town may be changed, but the well cannot be changed. It neither decreases nor increases. They come and go and draw from the well. If one gets down almost to the water and the rope does not go all the way, or the jug breaks, it brings misfortune. The image: Water over wood: the image of The Well. Thus the superior man encourages the people at their work and exhorts them to help one another." Which fits how Destruction is at the end of the chapter, I think!)

#### CHAPTER FOUR, 'The slippery ones'

As for organization, it was inevitable that Death would occupy the central chapter, for a couple reasons. For one, it's a pun in Chinese ('four' and 'death' are homophones: the pinyin 'si'). And, more importantly, since the whole fic is about eternity and endlessness, it must necessarily revolve around the notion of ending, as a galaxy revolves around a black hole.

In *The Sandman*, it's said that Death existed as soon as the first life came to be, and that when the universe ends, she'll be the last one left to lock it up behind her. Her first appearance is in the first volume, and feels incongruous with the previous pulpy mix of dingy, male-dominated horror and violence. When Death appears, Dream is feeding pigeons in a park in the middle of day, and mopes to his sister about how he feels he lacks a purpose. She proceeds to chew him out, and then takes him with her on her usual errands--accompanying various ordinary people as they depart from their lives. Dream recalls a poem extolling the release of death, and at the end of the scene he seems rejuvenated.

(The genius of that scene is that you don't realize until the end of the series that this was the moment Dream decided he wanted to die, and the ensuing adventures weren't about him finding joy in his work again, but were about him settling his affairs so his next aspect could take over.)

So, Death is no gloomy reaper. She's pleasant. She's everyone's first love. She reminds He Xuan of his once-fiancée, and she reminds Hua Cheng of Xie Lian.

Originally, this chapter was mainly gonna be about Death interacting with Hua Cheng, but it expanded to all four calamities (especially focusing on He Xuan). It begins grandiose, and ends on a personal note. We cannot comprehend death, but it frames the simple, heaven-appointed years we all live.

The point of this chapter is, I think, captured in these lines:

*Everyone always gravitated to the tragic stories of heroes, of martial gods who ripped through other mortals' woven intricacies like spider silk. But what of the fallen? There were millions trapped in the still-raging fires of Tonglu, too warped beyond recognition to even know who or what to beg for anymore. Each had been human once, a fine mesh of hopes and humors, never before seen and never to be seen again. What of them?*

*No one told their stories.*

*But Death was fair, or at least she tried to be. One birth; one death. Most of the time.*

As a whole, this fic plays with the idea of attaining immortality in the realm of stories. So, I'd be remiss not to acknowledge the bias of stories that preponderate--'great man' history, etc. Even He Xuan, who is in a sense 'the correct' socialist villain to stan, even he consumes a lot of souls--many of whom were simple drowning victims, and all to avenge four. But it's all the same to Death, the great equalizer.

Nevertheless, seeing Shi Qing Xuan thriving amidst squalor, even Death reflects that sometimes *life* is better. Death is open-minded that way, and she shows mercy.

Which brings us to...

## CHAPTER FIVE, 'Mine'

...The least merciful of the Seven.

This one gave me trouble from beginning to end. The main idea was that Desire would tempt Hua Cheng over his eight centuries alone, but never be able to possess him fully. The main trouble was that I wasn't sure how to introduce a whole new 'monster-of-the-day' adventure without it feeling--oh, forced? Distracting? So, instead, I decided to talk about Desire's involvement in canon events. But then, that'd be a montage, and it just seemed like there were too many montages in this fic, and this chapter was the worst offender.

But I pressed on.

I had decided pretty early on that Desire should speak for themself in this chapter, but with those other narrative difficulties, I couldn't help but feel that this was just a gimmicky way to keep the montages interesting.

Nevertheless, it was fun to write. It's fun to put on a campy voice. I think when I was writing this I was thinking about various drag queen youtube series, like UNHhhh and Fashion Photo Ruview. Also (not a drag queen, but) Freckle's infamous monologue from Caleb Gallo--that sort of drawling, decadent voice suits Desire very well. There's something cloying and irresistible about Desire's materialism, about wanting and taking. Like the Destruction chapter, this chapter appeals to the id.

But it also speaks to the necessity of these more cruel aspects. Compare:

*...And it wouldn't have come into being had Xian Le not fallen, had Xie Lian's greatest devotee not died and refined his outward nature, had he not refined a powerful blade from his own right eye, refined his artistic skill with countless months of continuous effort. Destruction looked around at the thousand god cave, and he ruminated, reflected on his decade of breaking up dirt, of thinning sprouts--all so that new, robust growth might spring up from the ashes. And here, even here, in the fires of Tonglu, to see such a wonder. (Ch.3)*

And:

*Poor boy, he died before he finished growing up. But that didn't stop him from craving. You know, people like that, convinced that theirs is a "noble" devotion, they have such a nasty habit of casting me as a nagging pest or a dastardly villain. But, my darling, do you think his spirit could have held together without me? I'm Desire, my sweet. I encompass all attraction. I am the binding force holding together every molecule in the universe. That little soldier could never have become the Crimson Rain Sought Flower without me. He couldn't have even become Wuming. (Ch.5)*

Their personalities are different, but they come to similar conclusions in which they find meaning. So, is one better than the other?

How does this chapter fit within the rest of the fic? It's comic relief, for sure; the humorous, lilted tone of this chapter contrasts sharply with the Despair chapter that follows. But it also leads into it: at the beginning of the chapter, Desire is confident, but by the end, they're left unfulfilled and doubtful: *What more could you want?* The trajectory of this chapter opposes that of Ch.3, where Destruction finds purpose. By the end of Ch.5, we've stripped Desire, and found that they are a void. Desire is empty at core, in their infinite striving outward. And in the end, they're alone, speaking to a mirror and called away by Despair.

## CHAPTER SIX, 'Ugly'

I wrote this one in a day. I had to; drawing it out would be hard on my mental health. (At the same time, it's one I had looked forward to for a while--I had already imagined a few scenes). It's an intense chapter, but hopefully the feeling of freedom at the end is all the more satisfying, and the seventh chapter is all the more a relief.

I've already talked about this chapter a lot: For most of the chapter there's a feeling of entrapment, and it ends with a sense of freedom. While reading tgcf (I had been spoiled about JW's identity), I found the use of armor and masks very compelling--it made me think about the Qliphoth in Kabbalah--from wikipedia:

*"The qlippot are metaphorical "shells" surrounding holiness. They are spiritual obstacles receiving their existence from God only in an external, rather than internal manner. Divinity in Judaism connotes revelation of God's true unity, while the shells conceal holiness, as a peel conceals the fruit within... they also have beneficial properties, as peel protects the fruit, restraining the Divine flow from being dissipated."*

The nature of armor is to protect, but for Jun Wu, it's a way of hiding from himself. I've mentioned this in a few of my metas, but I find it compelling to extend compassion to fictional villains, because it's excellent practice in being able to extend compassion to oneself: when it's hard, when we cast ourselves as villains to be hated, when we reject ourselves.

And this chapter is all about Jun Wu rejecting himself, rejecting any weakness, any 'trembling of the heart'. Throughout, he's fleeing, from himself and from Despair. He isolates himself and attempts to protect himself, but in so doing, he only makes things worse; he only makes himself uglier and more worthy of rejection.

And yet, in the end, he's able to accept his ugliness, and receive acceptance in turn.

I also liked writing this chapter bc I was able to throw in a bunch of headcanons: the armor being made from the bones of dead officials, Jun Wu using pain to feel alive, Jun Wu punishing himself through Xie Lian.

The suffering is heavy in this chapter, as is the catharsis at the end. The reader is emptied, and ready to be filled with the lush realm of the Dreaming.

## CHAPTER SEVEN, 'Lucid dreams'

Ch. 7 picks up quite a few loose strings from previous chapters. It communicates the most with the first chapter though: both involve a quest. But, where Ch.1 is a quest through nonlinear time, Ch.7 is a quest through nonlinear space: throughout the chapter, Xie Lian describes passing through vast swaths of space in a single footfall, or, in the beginning, feeling frozen in space, unable to move.

Xie Lian begins his journey in the comfortable embrace of a cloudy landscape ~~of cum~~ after his first night reunited with Hua Cheng (the cloudy substance is... the same material the pearl in fengqing's dream is made of :P). Some of his initial questing is purely aesthetic, but I think that's necessary to get that sprawling feel. (In a fun little easter egg, he also recovers the crow Destruction gave to Delirium in Ch.3.--the Dreaming is a place where symbols can come to life.)

As for the Western characters, these are recurring characters in The Sandman: Cain and Abel, the guardians, Calliope. King Hatshepsut doesn't appear in Sandman canon, but on the wiki it said she was one of Dream's ravens back in the day, and it seemed like the right time period (Dream always has a raven working for him, but the identity of the raven changes--their souls are largely drawn from dead humans). Through these extra characters, we get a sense of what it means to be an archetype living in Dream's realm: everyday, Cain and Abel repeat their same routine; they can't evolve or change. On the other hand, King Hatshepsut is just passing through, not committing her entire afterlife to Dream's realm.

Xie Lian's conversation with King Hatshepsut mirrors Mei Nian Qing's conversation with the 'bat' in Ch.1. Both flying creatures inform the subject where they are, and both bring up the notion of death and endlessness.

Moving onto the dreams of tgcf characters, a lot of these were for fun, like, 'oh, what would this character dream about?' We see people dreaming their hopes (QYZ), their fears (PM), their everyday traumas (LW), their repressed desires (fengqing), or some mix thereof (beefleaf). And the equity theme from Ch.4 comes back: *Looking into the windows, Xie Lian could see whole other dreamscapes, each an intricate, shimmering jewel of its own. Every cottage contained a universe, each vivid and pulsing with its own breath.*

I thought it would be funny, given that it's a Sandman au, for Dream to appear only briefly. We've gotten plenty of accounts of him by now: Delirium regards him as stuffy, Destruction knows



Dream would be disappointed in him for taking leisure time, Desire regards him with contempt, and Death tells He Xuan that he reminds her of him (:P had to reference the inception of this fic somewhere). But, in the 12k chapter named for Dream, Dream only appears in person for half a page. As we experience any classic poet, we experience Dream through his impact more than anything else.

After Dream takes Hua Cheng away to destroy the thousand god cave he commissioned for Calliope, we get to the scene that ties most intimately with Ch.1. Here again, we have the five friends playing cards, we have the precipice, and Jun Wu now carries a fan made of crane feathers. In this scene we see that junmei have apparently become symbols themselves: they roll about like a yin-yang, and when they jump off the cliff, they fly away as cranes, like the ones Mei Nian Qing saw when he first entered Destiny's realm.

But what will hualian become?

Thus far, talking about the trajectories of the chapters in this fic, I've said a lot about entrapment and freedom and moving from one to the other. Ch. 7 opens with a superficial sort of entrapment, which Xie Lian escapes by falling into an unknown fate, facing a primal fear. And then he wakes up. It's notable here that Xie Lian decided to leave his comfortable dreaming state because he sensed he had to get back to Hua Cheng, and he felt panic while falling because he was afraid he wouldn't get to see Hua Cheng again.

This opening mirrors the journey over the course of the chapter. In dreams, Xie Lian seeks out Hua Cheng; whether he is waking or sleeping, it is Hua Cheng's presence that keeps him bound to any particular state. In the end, Xie Lian faces a primal fear (Jun Wu) and is again forced to make a jump.

--And then another jump, when Hua Cheng explains Dream's offer: to choose a reality to exist in, to live in the waking world and eventually fade away, or to retire to the Dreaming and live on as stories--a strange existence, perhaps not a true life at all.

Which is more free? Who is kinder, Death or Dream? Whichever option they choose, they choose together, bound willingly by Desire.

"I'll think about it," Xie Lian answers quietly, and abruptly, the sprawling reverie comes to a close. We've fallen awake.

--Left, perhaps, as Mei Nian Qing would have it, with a bittersweet sense of fulfillment :)