

if a Turtle Could Talk

12

## Zero

Myths of the human world become reality in the mossy forest. When a loved one passes, a star shining bright dims and descends. Each contains sweet dreams, a sincere heart, and a silent farewell. Mystical forces gather them into Turtle Yard, the cozy home to generation after generation of Star Postmen. “Our shells are gifts,” Papa Turtle liked to tell Little Turtle, proudly. “Only we are given the task of carrying stars to our forest friends.”

A story about stars circulates among the forest dwellers, one that every child hears from their parents.

“This is the tale of *The Little Prince*. A human pilot wrote it,” said Papa Turtle to Little Turtle one night before bed. “The little prince believes that everyone has a star in the night sky, but you're not able to see yours because there are millions and millions of them.”<sup>3</sup>

Eyes wide, Little Turtle gazed up in wonderment. “Will I ever see my star?”

“We only see the stars of those we love, and then only when they leave the world.” Papa Turtle replied, nodding knowingly. “And that's where our responsibility begins.”

## One

Little Turtle could not recall how many days it had been since Papa hadn't returned home. He was last seen the day of a dazzling star shower by the hill where the rabbits had their holes, and was now gone without a trace. Filled with worry, Little Turtle made her way to a tree stump near the rabbits' holes to ask if anyone from the Rabbit family had noticed anything unusual. Sadly, not a single one recalled anything of the sort, nor could they say where exactly the holes led to. "Most of them are dead ends," acknowledged one. "We love digging, but never mean to travel far."

Over time, fallen stars began to pile up in the Turtle Yard. In Papa's absence, Little Turtle found herself instilled with a sense of responsibility and quickly assumed the role of Star Postman. On soft nights, she tenderly gathered and tucked away the fallen stars into her shell, the only place where the stars' messages would be preserved.

From time to time, newcomers appeared in the mossy forest, though most of them knew little about how they arrived. Few of them believed in the stars. Perhaps the often-foggy atmosphere had something to do with it—most nights, it was hard to see the faint light of the stars as they fell to earth. Yellow Bird, a new arrival in the forest, could not be convinced of the star story until, one day, Little Turtle came knocking.

"Star for you. Please sign here," she chirped.

It was Little Turtle's first time on delivery, and she had to turn her shell inside-out to find Yellow Bird's star. She knew she had selected the right one once his feathered wingtip brushed against it and filled his modest nest with soft light and an ethereal hum. With a gasp, Yellow Bird realized the star belonged to his mother.

“She... wishes that she could have prepared one more meal for me... We had a fight before I flew into this strange forest.”

“It is... sad,” Little Turtle murmured in faltering tones. Papa hadn’t yet taught her how to properly console someone. She herself was mostly preoccupied by thoughts of his disappearance. “It’s lucky you’re here to receive her star. You wouldn’t have if you were somewhere else.”

Yellow Bird left the mossy forest early the next morning, perhaps returning to his original home, perhaps journeying elsewhere. Little Turtle continued with her deliveries in the coming weeks, but with Papa always in the back of her mind. Was he traveling somewhere, like Yellow Bird? Was he stuck? Would one of the dimmed stars in the yard be his one day?

Red Fox, ever perceptive and kind, invited Little Turtle in one evening and comforted her with a chocolate pudding that she had learned how to make from a human recipe. “Your papa’s star remains in the sky, shining bright. We don’t know which is his; any of them could be. But know that all of them are looking after you.”

This would not do. “But what if he never comes back, or I can never find him?” Little Turtle wanted to know. “I miss him...”

Red Fox smiled sagely. “Little one, you’ll live in this forest much longer than any of us. Countless star showers will happen, and there’ll be many, many stars that need your delivering. Though you’ll grow older, keep your bravery and passion shining bright, just like your papa’s star, and I promise he’ll be with you wherever he may be.”

With a wistful sigh, an ache in her heart, and a full belly, Little Turtle left. Before turning in for the night, she glanced at the yard, hoping to spot the warm glow of starlight. Only grass and mossy roots remained; all the stars had been delivered. Little Turtle turned away and began trudging over to her favourite stump, drained from the day's work.

She stopped. Papa would always check his shell before sleeping, recalled Little Turtle. Indeed, he had once told her that some stars could be as small as young pearls, easily forgotten at the end of a long day. Retreating into her shell to take a look, she found instead, a letter.

“What is this? Wasn't here this morning...” she muttered to herself. Papa once told her that humans used letters to deliver messages, similar to the way that forest creatures communicate with their loved ones through stars. Little Turtle turned over the letter; it did not have an envelope or address. It simply read, “Where am I?” in Papa's handwriting. Little Turtle recoiled in shock, reading the words over and over again. How did this get here, and what could it mean?

Resting on her stump, Little Turtle eventually fell asleep under a clear sky, the mysterious letter tucked beneath her.

## Two

In a matter of days, another handwritten letter from Papa appeared in the same corner of Little Turtle's shell. With wonderment, she read it over a bowl of Red Fox's pudding, eyes wide and shell quivering.

To whomever is able to read this letter,

I find myself in the human world—yes, the very human world we read about in tales. I don't know when it is or where exactly I am. The illustrations of humans from our archives are mostly accurate, except that they are all much bigger than we thought; even an infant one is far larger than anyone in my family!

It must have been a while since I fell into that rabbit hole. A human found me on a riverbank, picked me up, and carried me back to his enormous home. Imagine Red Fox's den, except a hundred times bigger, and with large windows that offer a clear view of outside! I've never seen the sun and sky closer and clearer.

Somehow, I can understand humans, or at least this one. He talks at me, always going on about his next book, something to do with their history. Apparently, he likes to think about this book while walking along the river where I was found.

They use something called a clock to count time, a curious thing. It's circular with writing around it, and arms that point to the writing. I wonder who decided on that standard? I taught Little Turtle how to count time according to the number of sunsets and sunrises, but things are so strange here. I've never seen a sunrise appear so quickly after a sunset. I remember when Little Turtle asked me if there was

a place where we could see many sunsets without waiting. Maybe this is that place, where the little prince used to live! 4 She should like to see it.

One of the most fascinating things in this place is a big rectangle that shows moving scenes and makes sounds. This must be the television I read about in our archive, however this one doesn't have the metal sticks on top. All I can say is that the human spends a lot of time watching it! Sometimes he puts me inside of a translucent container, with warm water and scattered rocks in it. Luckily, he also finds food for me. I can't tell what exactly it is, but it all tastes good enough. What I do recognize are pieces of watermelon. The thing is, they have really thin skins and no seeds. No seeds! Humans have truly found the cave of treasures.<sup>5</sup> Anyway, mostly I stay outside of the strange, translucent container. When the human isn't around, I walk up to the chair across from the screen and fiddle with the tool used to control the television. Sometimes the television comes to life and I just... observe.

Now, according to the television, humans believe that some stars are actually different worlds—they call them planets. Well, I don't buy it. If stars are planets, then what are those things we gather in our yard?

*Stars are different worlds?* The strangest feeling came over Little Turtle. It was as if her world was turning upside down, inside out. She dropped the pudding and plopped down heavily. The letter continued beyond her cognition and became unfathomable...

Humans organize stars into twelve shapes, called zodiac signs. Our archive says that ancient Greek humans invented this system, but the television says it arose from ancient Babylonian humans, wherever that is.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, another human group called the Chinese represent time using twelve animals. Is twelve a significant number for humans?<sup>7</sup> Are these human groups related? If I figure out the relationship between stars and animals, and between the stars over our mossy forest and the ones in this human world, is it possible for me to find a way back home?



## One

The mysterious letter made Little Turtle's head spin. She had lots of questions to ask. She remembered Papa saying humans created a way to count time, involving terms like *week*, *month*, *year*, and *century*. But the human world depicted in Papa's letter did not resemble any time recorded in the mossy forest's archives.

Little Turtle mused through the night, stars twinkling above. If the human world where Papa was wasn't recorded in the archive, could it be *another* or a *future* human world? How did he get there? If his world lay in another space, were they both under the same stars? If his world lay in the future, was the mossy forest in the present?

*Present*. Little Turtle used to get confused about the term. When one speaks of *now*, *now* has already passed. Being present is akin to struggling with a leaking container, unable to grasp the escaping liquid. If one digs deeper, it is not even clear where the liquid comes from. If *past* accumulates from *present*, and *present* accumulates from *future*, then *future* must also come from somewhere—but where is *somewhere*? Or does *future* come from nothing, seeing as *present* does not exist? Does *past* then not exist?

Sagacious as Red Fox was, even she was not able to respond to these questions. Little Turtle tried to console herself with the thought that Papa probably had the best answers to all her questions, especially given his new experiences. She really wanted him home.

Inspired by the magically appearing letters, Little Turtle began looking for channels to send return letters to Papa. She threw a letter into the deepest hole the Rabbit told her about, but it stuck on the mud walls. She threw a letter into every corner of her shell, but they remained lodged inside.

She tried everywhere that seemed feasible to no avail, and eventually, in a fit of desperation, folded a letter into a shell-shaped boat and placed it into the river next to the oak tree stump. She prayed that it would somehow bring her letter to Papa.

## Two

“My voice was probably heard,” she thought as she pulled another magical letter from her shell.

To whomever is able to read this letter,

I now know it's been three weeks since I sent the last one.

Humans say that a day has passed after one sunset, that a *week* has passed after seven sunsets, and that a year has passed after 365 sunsets. This is the basis of their time. The human, named Yong, recently celebrated his 53rd *year* birthday. Isn't it crazy that humans have the ability to memorize their birth time?

Yong teaches other humans at a place called university, where students call him professor. You wouldn't believe that humans have places for adults to study—they never seem to stop learning. When he comes home, Yong dedicates time to read bedtime stories to his grandson, as I used to do with my Little Turtle.

Throughout all the stories I've heard, my favourite character so far is Kuafu, a hero in Chinese mythology. He is a giant and, in each hand, he holds a yellow snake that has emerged from his corresponding ear. Kuafu wants to race the sun to the point of sunset. But he overestimates his power, finding himself thirsty and needing to drink from the Yellow and Wei rivers. Being a giant, they're not enough to quench his thirst. He wants to drink more from the Great Lake in the north, but dies of thirst before he can. His gigantic body turns

into a mountain, and his enormous wooden walking stick falls and grows into a vast grove of peach trees, quenching the thirst of those who come after.<sup>8</sup> Really, it reminds me of the story of Prometheus, in Greek mythology. The story doesn't say why Kuafu wanted to chase the sun though. Was he also trying to steal fire? I mean, the wooden walking stick would've been perfect as a torch!<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, Twisting Turtle, from the same book of Kuafu, *Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*, is depicted like me: black shell, bird-like head, and snake-like tail.<sup>1011</sup> Yong says it's a myth, passed down verbally before humans learned how to write. He says myths aren't representations of reality, but rather organs at best.<sup>12</sup> I don't really know what he means, but it's a nice surprise to know that one of our ancestors used to live in this land. Actually, he seemed to get along well with the humans.

Yong's grandson enjoys the story part but doesn't want the bedtime. On that turtle story night, he jumped out of the bed and lifted me up. He is a little boy, lithe and lovely as a fawn. He held me in front of Yong, with a fine freedom in his eyes, saying, "I know what this turtle is!"

There was a very short moment when I was excited and frightened into a fit. My thinking was suspended. No sooner had my heart expected to hear "Star Postman" from his lips than this boy made a sound I had never heard: "He is a Ninja Turtle!"

Wait, what is Ninja?

“Put it down. What’s your source on that?” Yong laughed out loud.

They discussed the ninja thing at some length before the boy retired to bed. Whatever the Ninja Turtle is, their conversation in no way turned upon our world. Humans seemingly have the knowledge of various creatures from their archive system; although they have different names in human language, I recognize some who have visited the forest.

I can’t say I like all the bedtime stories Yong tells, or that they all make sense to me, but they give me the sense that our archive records on human tales are really just a drop in the ocean. What I’ve heard only here goes far beyond what we know. Although it is disappointing that they don’t know what I am—even though we have learned a lot about who they are and what they’ve done—I wonder how many more stories are hidden within different parts of this land, and if ours exist in some corners of human books.<sup>13</sup>

## One

Little Turtle sat on the old oak tree stump—it had become her favourite place to look down into the reflection of the glimmering moon and stars in the water. She tried to sort out her thoughts after all she had read from Papa. The night sky was alight with familiar sparkles. She was so accustomed to their existence, but now it was as if she were seeing them for the first time, and they felt strangely foreign.

Life was as clear as crystal only a short while ago. Each star contained sweet dreams, a sincere heart, and a silent farewell. They would descend and gather into the Turtle Yard when a loved one passed, and all in the Turtle family were destined to be Star Postmen. But now she was uncertain about what a *world* even was, and sometimes she even found herself asking what she herself was.

Intriguing and frightening thoughts raced and snowballed through Little Turtle's head. "If all the creatures in human myths are created by human imagination, is the mossy forest also part of myth? Are we recorded in some book? If we live in an imaginary world, where is Papa right now? Are we not real to that human world? If humans are in the real world, is Papa now part of it? If he is real to humans, then what am I?"

With a shiver and shake, Little Turtle arose from the stump she had been resting on and felt around her shell. No more mysterious letters, but a few stars instead.

Time to finish up ahead of the next shower. Who might this one belong to?

## Two

A long while later, Little Turtle found another letter in her shell.

To whomever is able to read this letter,

It's been a year. Yong's grandson, Duan, has grown out of bedtime stories. I miss the times when I would tell my own daughter stories before bedtime, and she would keep asking questions... Duan goes to school, does homework, plays video games and watches movies with his parents in a theatre. Strange to think there's a place dedicated to telling stories to kids, instead of their parents doing it. Bedtime is no longer a tradition, but everyone seems okay with it. I suppose this theatre is just as good for storytelling. Duan recently watched a movie and came home with a new pastime of ambushing people with his toys behind doors, insisting they are all alive.

Sometimes, when the room is quite quiet, I try to recall back in my home forest, how I witnessed how trees grew, how rivers flowed, how clouds drifted, and how vapor condensed into dew. But it's becoming harder to remember. What is the yard like? Who is my neighbour? How limpid is the river beside the Rabbit family? What does the starry sky look like? I have a daughter but sometimes I struggle to recall her lovely face. It scares me, but occasionally I have to work really hard to recall my own name. I don't know why my memory seems to be fading. Is it the food? The air? I don't know. The air of this world is utterly terrible. The sky here is divided into pieces by telegraph poles. I can see just one or two tiny stars in each piece. Although they're not as dazzling as what I remember, stars, unlike humans, are never awkward. Besides that, their summers are so much longer than winters, and are increasingly longer still, or so I hear from the television. Yong's family doesn't seem bothered by the heat, however. There is a machine in this room that keeps the air cool.

Our friend Black Penguin would love to visit me next summer (if we can still recognize each other). Like Duan prefers, we could stay inside and never play outdoors.

I remember the night Yong told a beautiful story of someone who dreamt of being a butterfly and really believed in it, taking pleasure in flitting and fluttering around. One day he woke from a night's sleep and saw his human form laying on the bed, solid and unquestionable. But still the questions came. "Am I a person dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being a human?"<sup>14</sup> Sometimes I wake up and get confused about myself in the same way.

Before my memory disappears completely, I write these letters to give you a snapshot of what I've observed and found in this strange land. It seems I'm a foreigner living amongst humans by accident. I won't give up on finding a way back to my mossy forest. But if there's no way to go, and you happen to know my daughter, Little Turtle, please tell her that no matter what worlds we find ourselves in, she and I will always collide.



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<sup>1</sup> The language used by the mossy forest's dwellers is translated into English based on the human interpreter's understanding.

<sup>2</sup> The title is inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's quote, "If a lion could talk, we would not understand him." See *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 223.

<sup>3</sup> Papa Turtle's recollection of the story is factually inaccurate to us, likely because of distortion between human and forest realms. Page 90 reads as follows: "*I wonder,*" he said, "*whether the stars are set alight in heaven so that one day each one of us may find his own again.*" Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans Katherine Woods (London: Mammoth, 1995), 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 35. The little prince saw the sun set 44 times in one day on his little planet.

<sup>5</sup> Wild watermelons in ancient times are dissimilar to watermelons nowadays. The flesh was typically pale, watery, bland or bitter with large seeds, and the skin was thick. Modern watermelons are the result of human domestication over thousands of years. For a study of their evolution, see Paris, "Origin and Emergence of the Sweet Dessert Watermelon, *Citrullus Lanatus*."

<sup>6</sup> The system of astrological signs was first recorded in Old Babylonian texts, later introduced into Greece. Combined with Greek mythology, it is now known as the 12 constellation sequence. After it was integrated into Indian Sanskrit Buddhist scripture, Buddhism was introduced to China. The earliest evidence of Babylonian zodiac signs in Chinese culture can be traced back to the Sui Dynasty (581–618). However, they were expanded upon by relating zodiac signs to geographical areas, directions, solar terms, and individual destinies. Around the time of the Ming Dynasty, Daoism personified the constellations, giving each of them a personality and illustration.

For more, see the talk "Dang Guren Yudao Shi'er Xingzuo 当古人遇到十二星座" [When the ancients met the twelve constellations] and Shi Jie Xiao Shi De Min Zu 世界消失的民族 [The lost nations of the world].

<sup>7</sup> No study has shown a relation between zodiac and Chinese animal signs, but the number twelve is an interesting commonality. There are twelve equal divisions of the Zodiac and each constellation represents one. In ancient China, Jupiter, whose orbital period is around twelve years, is used to record time, and so it is named the "Year Star岁星". Later, the twelve years were named "Earthly Branches地支". Twelve animals, originating from animal worship and Totemism, were distributed amongst the branches.

Animal worship has a long history in ancient China. In Chinese mythology, animals play a variety of roles, from clan ancestors to messengers of God, and from legendary heroes to demon beings hunted by heroes. According to research, 90% of the legendary figures recorded from ancient China are incarnations or evolutions of animal deities. For more, see Xianjun Xie and Yanyu Zhang's research.

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<sup>8</sup> The story of Kuafu chasing the sun appears in *Guideways of Mountains and Seas* a few times with different focuses and details. This version is combined with excerpts from *Da Huang Bei Jing* 大荒北经 [Guideways of Wild North] and *Hai Wai Bei Jing* 海外北经 [Guideways of Overseas North].

<sup>9</sup> Kuafu is recorded as a hero who dares to challenge the superior power of nature and is eventually transformed into nature (peach trees and a mountain). Commentators and scholars have given various interpretations. Guo Pu 郭璞 (276-324) regarded Kuafu's action as a philosophical case of "cosmic mystery" and considered his transformation a "triumphant compensation", while early mythologist Mao Dun 矛盾 (1896-1981) believed Kuafu represents an ancient tribe of giants analogous to the Greek titans. However, in contemporary China, Kuafu has been honoured as a spiritual figure. Contemporary writer and mythologist Yuan Ke 袁珂 sees Kuafu as a pioneer for pursuing the light of truth. He runs close to the light but is never able to grasp it firmly. Although he fails, his spirit transforms into forms that enable others to follow in his footsteps.

The sun serves as one of the most popular motifs of myth. Motifs are commonly divided into three types: characters (i.e. god, witch, ghost), backgrounds (i.e. special beliefs, traditions, objects), and singular events (i.e. steal fire, chase the sun, move mountains). These motifs independently exist as essential concepts of mythology and are replicated in countless works of narratives, genres of literatures, and cultural forms. Kuafu chasing the sun, as a fundamental motif, expresses the collective consciousness of human community, becoming a dynamic cultural symbol in the Chinese-speaking community over the years. For more, see "Lun Bijiao Shenhuaxue De Muti Gainian" 论比较神话学的“母题”概念 [On Motif Of Comparative Mythology] and *Shan Hai Jing Quan Yi* 山海经全译 [Complete Translation Of Guideways Of Mountains And Seas].

<sup>10</sup> The book *Guideways Through Mountains and Seas* 山海经 is commonly translated as *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a translation that assumes the word 经 *jing* means "classic". The book consists of eighteen volumes, containing mythical legends, creatures, plants, medicines, and so on, and was never considered religious canon. Modern Chinese mythologist Yuan Ke 袁珂 (1916-2001) commented that "route" or "guideway" is a more sensible translation based on the predominant use of this word in an ancient Chinese context.

For more, see Yuan Ke 袁珂, *Shan Hai Jing Quan Yi* 山海经全译 [Complete Translation Of Guideways Of Mountains And Seas].

<sup>11</sup> Twisting-Turtle (玄龟 *Xuangu*) a creature recorded in *Guideways Through Mountains and Seas*. Its description, translated in Strassberg, a Chinese Bestiary, is as follows: "The Strange River flows east from south of the Niu-Trees Mountain into the Xianyi River. In it are found many black turtles that have the form of a turtle but with a bird's head and a viper's tail. They are called Twisting-Turtles and make a sound like wood splitting. Wearing a piece of one from the belt as a talisman will prevent deafness, and it can also remove calluses."

Origin: 柎阳之山。怪水出焉，而东流注于宪翼之水。其中多玄龟，其状如龟而鸟首虺尾，其名曰旋龟，其音如判木，佩之不聋，可以为底。

Richard Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary* (Berkeley, Calif: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 86.

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<sup>12</sup> Ernst Cassirer analyzes how non-rational thought processes comprise culture, and how this kind of thinking has enormous power in myth, art, and language. From page 8: “... *the special symbolic forms are not imitations, but organs of reality, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us.*”

Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans, Susanne Langer (New York: Dover, 1953), 8.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of *myth* in China did not appear until the 1920s, but that does not mean there existed no myths. On the contrary, there was plenty of mythological material in ancient China, scattered amongst different collections in different eras. As for the process of passing down myths, Western culture does so systematically while Chinese myths become scattered yet again. Northrop Frye’s theory states that myth evolves from ideology, and healthy socio-cultural conditions incorporate *myths of concern* and *myths of freedom* in a balanced way. Some scholars believe that since Confucius became a myth of concern in the Han Dynasty, the myth of freedom was suppressed. The balance was broken, and so the systematic development of myth in China became impossible. For more, see Yanyu Zhang’s research.

<sup>14</sup> The butterfly story is a well-known Daoism philosophical question raised by Zhuang Zi. See Taiyan Zhang 章太炎, *Qi Wu Lun Shi* 齐物论释 (Wuhan: Chong Wen Shu Ju, 2016).

## Supplement Material

My thesis exhibition *If a Turtle Could Talk*, shown at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery from October 28 to November 21, 2020, was accompanied by this story of the same name. Papa Turtle, a Star Postman, inadvertently travels from his mossy forest home to the human world, and sends letters back to his daughter, Little Turtle, observing how their relationship to nature is different from that of humans, questioning how the creatures of his world understanding of time, history, knowledge, and even existence.

Growing up with Western storybooks, surrounded with cartoons and movies as after-school entertainment, I did not realize how little I knew about the myths from my own culture until migrating to the West for university. This poignant realization led me to look into the similarity and distinctness of myths across different cultures, and to contemplate the question of why we still need myths and recreate them, even in an age where the world is well analyzed and excessively explained.

The answers to this question offered by the three artists in the exhibition vary. Ed Pien says that myths give us the pleasure of trying, a free way to wonder and celebrate the imagination; Anxiong Qiu believes humans are able to create things that reflect on yet go beyond reality; Xiaojing Yan sees myth as a way to escape from reality. For me, as a person with no pious religious or political belief, myths, or any surreal realm, provide a spiritual anchor and a crystal lens with which to read this world.

Some stories from the past have become myths, and stories from today will nourish the literature and humanity of the future. Everyone has space to create their own imaginary world, and being serious about what we convey does not have to be the same thing as relying only on facts, I sensed.

Everyone has their own forest, whether mossy or not. Each of us has taken a short trail through the realms of imagination; some of us walk straight to the exit, some get lost, and some pass through with a promise to visit again. Yet for all of us, the forest is always there, waiting for its dwellers.

Welcome to my forest.

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