

Through the Mistwoods

By Daniella Sinclair

Initium

In a serene forest stood Danielle Reyes. The soft breeze passed around her, and the aroma of fresh dew ensnared her. Danielle knew not where she was, but she was fully aware of the unnatural air that surrounded her. The trees glew with a bizarre aura to them.

The soft sound of cracking leaves approached Danielle from behind, and when she turned, she saw a young pale deer. The beauty of the creature enraptured her, and she could not help but tip toe closer.

Danielle held out a hand, and smiled at the fawn, hoping it would grow closer. The deer took slow steps towards her. The look in its entrhralling pale blue eyes conveyed cautious curiosity. Danielle kneeled down, and anxiously awaited it to grow closer.

The pale doe moved a few steps closer, but stopped just a couple meters away from Danielle. The fawn's eyes turned as white as its fur, then it extended out one leg, and bowed its head down, as if it were a subject bowing to a king.

Danielle's gaze quickly changed from adoring to confused as the fawn lifted its head, revealing its now glowing eyes. Danielle watched in awe as the young doe began to shift and morph. From the spot the deer once stood, a strange humanoid creature approached her.

"Kindest greetings, Danielle. I am Paxmors. I am pleased to finally meet you." The figure's voice was anomalous, echoing over itself, and sounded as if it were made of a chorus of different voices, speaking the same words in perfect harmony.

Danielle was petrified, unsure how to make sense of what she saw. This clearly wasn't a human, but she had no idea what it could be. It

stood like a human, but it was tall, very tall, towering over her by what must have been almost a meter. It had very human-like features. Two eyes, two ears, a mouth, a nose, but they were all shaped oddly. The eyes seemed almost vertical, ears shaped like those of a tiger. Its nose was wide, but shallow, and the slits were long.

The body was slender, and displayed no noticeable marks. This being did not wear any clothing, but its body looked nothing like a nude human, instead resembling a child's doll with the clothes removed, if children's dolls had fur.

The creature's fur was clearly well kempt, groomed. It was not long or frizzy, instead seeming short, fluffy, like a freshly groomed dog, or a thin haired cat. Stranger still was the striking lack of hair on its face, which was instead smooth, as if it had never grown even stubble in its life.

The figure slowly grew closer, and spoke once more. "Be not alarmed, my friend. I mean you no harm. I am naught but a guide."

She finally uttered the words, "Who are you?"

The figure let out an abnormal sound, one that Danielle could only assume was chuckling. "You are anxious, child, and I understand why. My companions can often take for granted how familiar this is to us. Worry not, though, I will be patient for you. Once again, I am Paxmors. I am here to join you on a journey."

Danielle sat silent, at a loss for words. They called her 'child,' which she found strange considering she's 33, very well out of the range of childhood. Their tone of speech, too, was odd, though formal. It sounded old fashioned, like a posh businessman or preacher from the 1900's.

Soon, she stammered out, “W-wait, I, I don’t understand, what is this place? Where are we? I, what do you mean you were waiting for me?”

Paxmors gestured their hand around the trees, and responded, “We are in The Mistwoods, the land between what is known, and unknown. A forest of, and without, time itself. I know that is not the answer you would want, but sadly the very nature of this land is one you cannot comprehend, not at least for the time being. I have lived among these trees countless moons. All the time I spent here, I have waited for you, and you alone.”

Danielle dropped to the ground, sitting cross-legged. As her mind ran off in search of comprehension, all she could whisper was, “I don’t understand what this means.”

Paxmors slowly kneeled down, and spoke reassuringly, “I know, young one, but I promise you shall with time. Would you allow me to place my hand upon your shoulder?”

With a sigh, Danielle put her face into her hands and answered, “I guess so. Gimme a minute, this is too much.”

Paxmors could feel the stress radiating off of Danielle as she rubbed her eyes, racking her brain for any sense of what was happening. Paxmors gently caressed Danielle’s shoulder, and began to sing softly.

“Young one, from hell you came,
But in peace you find me.
Let love wrap around your heart,
Find solace in the trees.
Into a known chaos you were born,

Now sit in unknown calm.
Though you try, you feel a failure,
Please lift your fallen chin.
I promise you, freedom lies beyond,
Take my hand, I'll show you."

Danielle felt a strange warmth, like a loving embrace. She shuddered, and in only a moment, felt as all of her fears, anxieties, and hatreds left her mind. She felt at peace, almost euphoric. Whatever Paxmors had done to her, it felt like a high.

As Paxmors rose to their feet, Danielle grasped their arm. "What was that feeling? That was amazing!"

That strange sound again, Paxmors' chuckling. "That, young Danielle, was peace. It is a welcoming gift from the Mistwoods, a glimpse of what is yet to come on our journey."

Danielle slowly got up from the ground. "Okay, but what is this journey? Can't you just tell me?"

Paxmors shook their head. "Child, you assume simplicity is available, but I'm afraid things are not that simple. You have yet to fully adjust to the Mistwoods yet. I cannot bombard you with complexity until you have had time to adjust."

She gripped onto their arm and said with a sarcastic laugh, "To hell with adjustment, I demand an answer. I pop up in this weird forest with no explanation of what is going on or what we're doing, and you just say 'oh sorry I can't tell you why?' Where are you taking me?"

Paxmors made that weird sound once more, then gently took Danielle's hand from their arm. "Patience, child, patience. The

Mistwoods are of and without time. While we traverse this land, time is within the palm of my hand. There is no need to rush.”

That tone, and the fact they kept calling her ‘child,’ it was infantilizing and Danielle was getting sick of it. Her face red with anger, she exploded. “Dammit, that doesn’t mean anything. Why can’t you just talk to me straight? Just talk to me, tell me what’s happening! I watched a deer turn into whatever you are, and you’re telling me that you can control time or whatever, and when I get mad that I’m confused you just patronize me. Please just tell me the truth.”

The trees were filled with silence, no breeze of wind, or cracking of twigs. Paxmors’s head slowly looked down. A moment later, they broke the silence. “If I could tell you the true nature of this land, this journey, you would either misunderstand the purpose of our journey, or you would no longer be capable of undergoing this venture. I entreat you, please place your faith in me, and allow me to escort you. A refusal of my proposal would bring sorrow, for both myself and for you.”

She shook her head, and took a step back. “What reason do I have to trust you?”

Without even a pause, they answered, “Within The Mistwoods, I am the only being you can speak to.”

The two sat in silence. Danielle believed it lasted for eternity, but she wasn’t even sure how time worked anymore. She let out a heavy sigh, and reluctantly spoke, “It doesn’t seem like I have much of a choice, does it.”

“I cannot force you to do anything. I can only advise you on which decisions are best.”

“Gee, where have I heard that one before,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “Fine, I’ll go. I’ll at least give you a chance to prove your point.”

Paxmors bowed their head, and without a word, turned from her and began to walk. They gestured for her to follow.

The duo walked through the Mistwoods in silence for a time. Danielle took in the beauty of the forest. She couldn’t stay mad, the scenery was too fascinatingly gorgeous. The glow of the trees illuminated the terrain, in spite of the darkness of the void colored sky. Through the canopy of leaves, she could see the stars, and their brilliant radiance. They were nothing like she had ever seen. The moon lingered within the totally black velvet sky, hanging in a strange crescent shape, one that simply couldn’t be found in reality. Rather than a simple crescent, it resembled a ring, missing a segment.

Danielle racked her mind, desperately trying to find some explanation for how separated from reality the Mistwoods are. It couldn’t be reality, it was just a dream, it must be. It felt so... real, but there’s no way it was. This could only be a lucid dream, an incredibly strange one.

“You think this is but a dream, Danielle,” Paxmors noted, “However, I assure you that all you see before you is true. You are correct to think this is not reality, but reality and truth are not always one and the same. The Mistwoods are an extremely rare exception.”

Danielle didn’t know how to respond. She tried to simply not think about it, and changed the subject. “Where are we going?”

“Remembrance, Danielle. We have lots of memories to sift through. Funny you mention it now, we are at our first stop.”

Confused, she glanced around. “This looks just like every other spot of the forest we’ve passed.”

Paxmors made that strange laughing sound again, and spoke plainly, “All through the Mistwoods are wisps and threads of time, known as Tempufilum. Myself and my companions trace these Tempufilum to different axioms, points in time we must evaluate.”

Danielle’s brow furrowed a bit, but before she could speak, Paxmors stated, “I know what you are wondering, I am afraid I cannot tell you what I am evaluating.”

Danielle rolled her eyes. Paxmors extended their arm into the air, and seemed to pinch their fingers on nothing, as if they were pulling on a spider’s silk. “Might I ask you to stay still? It will only be a moment. Also, you might feel a twinge of pain. Steel yourself for that. Worry not, it will just feel like a pinprick.”

As Danielle took a deep breath, and tried to prepare for whatever was about to happen, Paxmors twirled their hand around, wrapping whatever invisible thread they had grasped around their fingers.

They held out their hand towards Danielle, and their eyes began to glow a pure white. Their voice boomed, “Behold, the first axiom.”

Primus

Suddenly, the forest was gone in a bright flash of white. Gone was the sweet smell of freshly fallen dew. Instead, the air was sterile, clean, devoid of any smell but chemical cleaning products. Danielle pried her eyes open, adjusting to the sudden brightness, and slowly took in the surroundings of a hospital room.

In a bed lay a young woman with short, messy hair, colored of dirty blonde. She cradled a newborn baby in her arms, and softly caressed its head. The woman had a bright smile across her face, but her eyes betrayed a sense of anxiety.

Next to the bed stood a middle aged woman with blonde hair that reached down to her shoulders, and a young man in a nurse gown. They moved their mouths as if they spoke, but nothing could be heard. Danielle felt like she was watching a pantomime, or a silent film.

“Pay close attention, Danielle,” Paxmors spoke, breaking the silence as Danielle jumped, spooked by their sudden appearance aside her.

“This is an important moment, arguably the most important in your life. What can you tell me about this, child?”

Danielle slowly paced around the room, looking at the medical instruments, the closed windows, the empty chair in the corner. Then, she turned her gaze to the woman holding the child. Danielle stared at her, and felt a rush of happiness overwhelm her. She spoke with a grin that stretched from ear to ear, “This is my birth.”

“You do not remember it, as none can remember their own birth, but surely you know a great many things about it.”

“I do,” Danielle replied quietly. “That’s my mother, Valentina Reyes. She’s so young. She was only 19 when I was born, and her birthday was only a couple months before mine.”

Danielle turned to the blonde woman, “That’s my grandma, Phillipa Reyes. My grandpa wanted to be here so bad, he spent days trying to find someone to cover his shift, but nobody would. He was stuck working that day. The next week he walked out, pissed about how they wouldn’t let him take off to see the birth of his granddaughter. He didn’t even give them two weeks.

The nurse is Cameron Littles. He worked for the hospital, and was a close friend of my mom. He was my godfather, and helped raise me as if I were his own child.”

Paxmors silently approached the side of the bed, and gestured to Danielle’s mother. “Her eyes, I am sure you see it, there is an emotion there, other than love. Can you tell me what it is?”

Danielle didn’t even turn to look at her mother’s eyes. “It’s worry. She told me when I hit my teenage years how scared she was that day. My father told her that he would be there, that he would be by her side when she delivered me. Instead, once she was admitted into the hospital, he took that as an opportunity to run. He ran away, and my mother never heard from him again.”

“Do you know his name?”

“I did at one point, but eventually I got too old to give a damn about a father who didn’t want anything to do with me. I forgot it long ago, and never cared to remember it.”

“A very mature outlook, one I rather admire. Tell me more about this day, anything at all you know about it.”

Danielle gave a solemn look at the baby, herself, and spoke. "March 21st, 1991. Spokane, Washington. My mom spent all day in labor. I was stubborn, and didn't wanna come out. Eventually they had to do a c-section to get me out. I was a perfectly healthy baby girl, weighed 7 pounds and some amount of ounces. When my father disappeared, my mom considered putting me up for adoption. When she held me in her arms though, and looked at me, she couldn't imagine giving me up. Oh, wait, look!"

Danielle pointed at her mother, who was mouthing words with her grandmother. Her grandmother held out her arms, and her mother hesitated, a strong face of worry, as she carefully handed the baby over.

"My mom told me about that. It's the first time she ever handed me to someone, and she was so horrified by it. Even though it was her own mom, she was so scared that if she let me go then something terrible would happen."

"She was a very protective woman, most mothers of newborns tend to be." Paxmors strolled over to Cameron. "Tell me about Cam, that is what you call him, right?"

"Yeah, he was my godfather, but I usually called him Uncle Cam. He was good friends with my mom in high school, they lived across the street from each other. He graduated a couple years before her. He spent a lot of time with my mom, even while he was doing college classes."

"Did they ever have feelings for each other?"

"No, my mom told me that she never had strong romantic attachment to anyone after my father left, and Uncle Cam wasn't interested in women. Besides, he was married and had a kid already."

“It is an interesting dynamic, a single mother, a godfather, and that godfather’s husband raising you.”

Danielle chuckled and replied, “A lot of people told me that, but I always felt the same as every other kid I knew.”

“So you do not believe that affected you?”

“Well I wouldn’t say that. Knowing my real father didn’t give a damn about me definitely hurt me a lot and led to some depressive episodes when I was in my teenage years, but I don’t feel like it affected how I was raised.”

Paxmors made that strange chuckling sound. “It is a good thing you had such a positive outlook on it. You would not believe how many people think that being raised as such would irreversibly damage a child. In reality, things are just as you say. It does not change you, how many you are raised by. What matters most is that the people who raise you, love you.”

“Well, they certainly loved me. Through a lot of rough patches, the most consistent thing I could rely on was that mom, Uncle Cam, and Uncle Liam loved me.”

The room was silent for a minute. Danielle took in the room, watching as her grandmother silently spoke to the baby. Her mom and Cameron both looked lovingly at baby Danielle.

“Why,” Danielle asked quietly, curiously, “can’t we hear them?”

“A good question,” Paxmors responded. “But not an accurate one. I can hear them. Remember, we are traveling down these Tempufilum, something that you have little experience with. There is a great amount of information within these threads, and not all of it pertains to you. If we walked out that door into the rest of the hospital, we would see that life continues on within this thread.

Time is complicated, and it is not a beast that shows favoritism. If I, right now, took you to the other side of the globe, we would see all of the things that were happening at the same moment as your birth. The windows are closed, but were they open you would see the busy highway outside, the people coming and going from this very hospital. There is a great amount of information to take in, and your mind is filtering out what it considers unnecessary in order to prevent a sensory overload, because at this moment it is taking in all the senses, the sight and smell of this room, as well as what you hear and see from me and yourself. Your brain is essentially trying to process two different times at once, which is quite a stressor, so it simply ignores what it does not deem important. As you gain more experience, as we travel through more and more of these axioms, you will adjust, and you may start to take in more senses. You will be able to hear what is said, and you may even be able to touch things, feel them.”

Danielle stood with her mouth agape, trying to understand what was explained to her.

Paxmors, seeing the clear look of confusion on her face, followed up, “I know it is a lot to think about. Do not worry about trying to understand it. Thinking about it is unnecessary, you will adjust regardless of how much you ponder it.”

“Okay,” Danielle responded, in a whisper. “Earlier, you said I have ‘little’ experience with these threads, not none. What do you mean by that? Are you just referring to this memory?”

Paxmors laughed, and answered, “No, you had experience before this, I just forgot that you would not know how you would have gotten said experience. Surely you have experienced *déjà vu* before?”

Danielle raised an eyebrow, “Yeah.”

“Well, that feeling of experiencing something before is caused by your spirit accidentally grasping onto the Tempufulum. As a mortal, you are unable to grab onto a thread before or after the current moment, only the one you live in at the time. The feeling of *deja vu* is a disturbance in your mind caused by grasping onto your Tempufulum, simulating a feeling of experiencing a moment twice at the same time, which your brain explains by believing you have already felt it before.”

Danielle’s mouth continued to sit agape as she mulled over the implications of that. It seemed very... strange? If that was the word to put it? Danielle had never believed in any supernatural aspects of life, but despite this, here she was going through what could only be described as a supernatural event, and now a feeling experienced by billions of people was being explained by supernatural means.

“Wait,” she interjected. “I thought *déjà vu* was caused by an error in the brain? A mixup in memory and familiarity?”

Paxmors chuckled once more. “There is a common saying among your scientists, I believe it goes, ‘correlation is not equal to causation.’ That is an apt way to describe the phenomena. Yes, there is indeed a mixup in your mind involving memory recollection functions, but that is caused by the brain trying to process the disturbance created by the thread.”

Danielle simply let out a quiet “hmm” and said nothing. Paxmors smiled at her, placed a hand on her shoulder, and asked, “Are you ready to proceed to the next Axiom, or do you have more questions, thoughts you would like to speak, feelings you would like to express?”

The room was silent for another minute. Danielle watched as her grandmother handed the baby back to her mother. Danielle studied the caring gaze on her mother’s face, the eyes that screamed ‘I will love you

forever and protect you at any cost.’ Danielle, instead of smiling at this view, grew a sad look on her face.

“You said that this was the most important moment of my life, but there’s no way I could have possibly remembered it. Was the rest of my life unimportant? Why is this the most important memory, and not anything else?”

Paxmors’ eyes expressed a great amount of compassion and understanding. They spoke softly, “I am sorry, I believe I may have misspoke. Important is a very vague word, and can mean a great many things. Your birth was most likely not the most important moment in your life emotionally, or even factually. Not for you, or the people around you.

Throughout your life, you had hundreds, maybe thousands of important moments, that are important for infinitely many reasons. Those moments can be important for how they shaped your character, how they influenced your decisions, how they affected yourself and the people around you, too many for me to possibly list. It is impossible to define the most important moment in one’s life, as that is purely subjective, and up to great speculation.

One’s birth is highly important for reasons beyond their control. No one can possibly know where their life will go, where it will end, but where it starts is arguably one of the biggest deciding factors. Unfortunately, the circumstances of your birth influence your future in a trillion ways that are beyond anyone’s control. However, the decisions you make in life can shift the possibilities, and create a life of joy and happiness, regardless of one’s start.”

Danielle left her gaze on the baby for a moment, then slowly turned her eyes to the floor. Danielle thoroughly understood this

concept. The sad fact that many people's lives are dictated by their births was one she learned even before she started on her Sociology degree. Having it confirmed to her by something so much more powerful than her, however, made the reality of that truth hit even harder than when she first learned it. Dejected, she mumbled, "I guess it just hurts to think that so much in life was unachievable before I even had the chance to think about it."

Paxmors softly held Danielle's shoulder, and turned her to face them. They wiped a tear off of her cheek, and comforted them. "Life, sadly, is filled with a great many harsh truths. A man born homeless today will likely die on the streets. A man born in bondage a thousand years ago was almost predestined to die in chains. A cow birthed on a farm is certain to one day be sent to be processed in a machine. Life can be cruel, and humanity is full of flaws, people who thrive off the suffering of others. All who live mortal lives must one day be confronted with the cold apathy of nature, and the chaos of time. Through all the chaos, however, many continue on. You fought to make the world a better place, something you were greatly dedicated to, certainly more dedicated than a layperson. You make the best with what you are given. Though there is great suffering, there is also great beauty. Worry not, child. Do not let this one harsh truth tear you down. You are so much stronger than that. I know it, and more importantly, you do too."

Danielle slowly looked up at Paxmors, and looked into the white eyes, eyes that should have felt empty and hollow, but nonetheless conveyed kindness. A warmth filled Danielle's chest, and she took in a deep breath.

"I'm ready to move on, Paxmors."

Paxmors smiled, and ran their fingers through Danielle's bangs. "Then we shall continue. I know this is a lot for you, Danielle. You have had to take in a great many things in such a short amount of time. You feel overwhelmed, and that is understandable. We can take this at your pace. We are in no rush."

"I understand. I'm ready to move on."

Paxmors stepped back, and bowed their head. They turned around, reached up, once again grasping onto an invisible thread, and wrapped it around their hand.

Danielle turned her head once more to her mother, who still had a face full of love, looking at baby Dani. Her mother started to turn her head, and if only for a moment, Danielle felt as if they had made eye contact. A tear rolled down her cheek

"Wait!" Danielle blurted out. Paxmors, surprised by the outburst, turned their head, but said nothing.

"She's..." Danielle whispered. "She's just so beautiful."

The tears began to pour out. "So young... so carefree. I've never seen her like this."

"Youth," Paxmors stated, "so easily blinds one to the stresses of life. Love can have a similar effect. Your mother, in this moment, was completely intoxicated, blinded to the world. Her youth, and her love for you, obscured everything else in the world. Cherish it."

Paxmors, still keeping a tight grip on the thread, held their hands out to Danielle. "Take my hands, child."

Danielle could not tear her eyes away as she gave her hands to Paxmors. "Was I good enough for her? Was I worthy of that joy?"

Paxmors let out a laugh and answered, “Oh child, now you doubt yourself simply for the sake of doubt. You know as well as I do that I do not need to answer that.”

Danielle didn’t reply. After a moment of quiet, Paxmors spoke, “It is now time for us to return to the Mistwoods. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then let us return.”

A bright flash of light once again, and the hospital was gone. A moment later, they were back in the forest, surrounded by the dim light of the trees and the moon. Danielle’s senses quickly rushed back, the smell of dew and sap flooding her mind like a dam had broken.

She fell to her knees and started to cough and wheeze. She felt lightheaded, and couldn’t think clearly. Her mind felt like taffy in a stretcher. She couldn’t manage any words, or come up with any thoughts.

Paxmors placed their hand on her shoulder, and Danielle felt a warm aura flow through her.

“What was that?” She blurted out through a cough, feeling her body slowly clear out whatever had vexed her.

“Sensory overload,” Paxmors answered. “Your first time coming out of an axiom will tend to do that. Your brain basically had difficulty being slung back and forth between all those senses. Hopefully, now that you have experienced it once, though, you should be fine for our future axioms.”

Danielle rose slowly, and said through soft coughs, “A warning would have been nice.”

“Apologies,” Paxmors politely said. “Welcome back to the Mistwoods. Before we proceed to our next axiom, I have some questions.”

Danielle shook her head and cleared her throat. “Ask away, I reckon.”

Paxmors stepped away, towards one of the trees. They placed their hand on its bark, and slowly ran their fingers along a branch that extended outward, bearing a strange fruit. They plucked the fruit off the branch, and held it within their hands.

Danielle tried to observe the fruit. Its shape was round, just like any other fruit. She saw that the shape most resembled an orange, almost perfectly spherical. The texture seemed closer to an apple, though, totally smooth. The color was even more bizarre, a pale blue, very pale. It looked as if you put a single drop of blue paint in a glass of milk and mixed it up.

Paxmors kept their eyes focused on the fruit for a moment. They gave it a quick, soft toss into the air, and caught it on its way down with the same hand. Then they gave Danielle a sideways glance, and asked a simple question. “Do you know why you are here?”

Danielle was... taken aback, though that might be a gentle way to put it. She froze, stood motionless, as if Paxmors had given her a Medusa stare. Danielle knew why she was in the Mistwoods, why she was in such a bizarre land, but she had pushed away the question.

Danielle had a very consistent method for dealing with things that make her uncomfortable: put in the box.

‘The box’ was the personification Danielle gave to the blind spot in her brain that she deliberately put bad thoughts into. Now that

Paxmors had brought it up, though, the question ‘why am I here?’ was ripped out to the spotlight, impossible to ignore.

Danielle, in her moment of realization, knew exactly why she was there. Suddenly, all her hidden memories came crashing back into her brain.

Danielle’s eyes were glazed over, not focusing on any physical thing, instead focused inward. Slowly, Danielle came back into herself, and regained her feeling of control.

With only slight movements, Danielle looked up to Paxmors, who stood there in front of her, grasping onto the strange fruit, and giving her an empty stare.

“I’m dead.” Danielle spoke plainly, no allusions or euphemisms. As clear as glass and simple as water.

“Indeed you are,” Paxmors spoke, just as plainly. “I cannot help but notice you do not seem too broken up about it. Is there any particular reason why?”

Danielle stood rather still, her brow furrowed, and replied, “I guess I just feel shocked. I reckon there isn’t much of a reason to feel sad, since I’m here, and this proves there’s an afterlife.”

Danielle was a bit shaken up by this thought, but not exactly in a negative way. She was never a very religious person, and always believed that when she died, it would just be nothingness. It was a bit of a shock to learn she was dead, but in a way that shock was cushioned by the fact that she was wrong about death.

Paxmors sounded as if they were humming for a moment, but broke their hum to say, “Forgive me for being a bit frank with my speech, but you deserve some simplicity. This is not an afterlife, at least not as you would know it. I believe you would call it more of a

purgatory. Please, do not attempt to hold back your tears. Doing so will only hurt you.”

“I don’t need to cry.”

Pxmors gave a concerned look, and said only, “Oh?”

“I already knew,” Danielle continued. “And I can’t change it. There’s no use crying over what I already know, and cannot change.”

Pxmors began rhythmically tossing the fruit into the air and catching it as they slowly approached Danielle. “You are a strange human, Danielle Reyes. I know so much about you, yet still you are successfully defying my expectations.”

“And what did you expect?”

“Well, for starters I expected more emotion from the revelation that you are dead.”

Danielle shrugged, but didn’t say anything in reply.

“I do not think it has fully set in, yet. That box of yours that you have talked about so frequently during your life, I find it an apt description of how your brain handles things, and I feel you are still trying to hide your emotions in that box.”

Danielle took in a heavy breath and replied, “Well there isn’t much I can do about it but wait for it to hit me. You said you have questions? Do you have others?”

Pxmors kept their eyes on the fruit, watching it fly upward, then fall down into their hand repeatedly. “Could you describe to me, in your own words, your death?”

Danielle sighed. “Do I have to?”

Pxmors grasped onto the fruit tightly, and turned their eyes to Danielle. “I cannot force you to do anything, but I would not ask you something were it not important. If you do not wish to speak about it,

that is fine, but inevitably we will need to discuss it. We can discuss it whenever you are ready, though.”

Paxmors turned and began to walk further into the woods. They gestured, once again, for Danielle to follow. She stood in shock for a moment, but soon caught on and jogged to catch up with them.

“So, um,” Danielle muttered. “Do you have any more questions?”

Paxmors tossed the fruit into their other hand, then crossed their arms behind their back. “Yes, indeed I do.”

Danielle walked alongside Paxmors for a few moments, in awkward silence.

She spoke up, “So, what is it?”

Paxmors held up a single finger. They began to hum, and then in a sing-song echoed voice, they vocalized, “Rumble rumble, the starless sky, oh to find me in dead of night, with music and blankets and pillows I lie, to sing and to hum under lack of light.”

Danielle stared with one eyebrow raised at Paxmors, trying to figure out what they were suddenly singing about.

“Twinkle, twinkle, the star lit sky, oh how I run at sun’s first sight, fleet be my feet and clear be my eye, I continue my search for the greatest of heights.”

Paxmors turned to Danielle as a grin lit up their face. “The trees, they are singing. You cannot hear them, and what a shame it is. Their voices are angelic.”

Danielle, clearly confused, stumbled over her words for a moment, before giving up on what she was trying to say and moving on to her next statement. “So, your question?”

Paxmors laughed and answered, “I am sorry, the singing gets me distracted. What is the oldest memory you can think of?”

Danielle sat and pondered for a moment. It was a good question, and she hadn't really given it much thought. She eventually landed on what she believed was a good contender for oldest memory. "I believe I was four years old, I was playing with Uncle Cam's son Kerry. He was three years older than me. We were playing with his building blocks. He built a spaceship, and I built a car. A really shitty one."

"Four years, huh?" Paxmors noted, as they began to twirl the fruit on the tip of their finger. "A decent age for a child to bloom. In that case, we do not have much further to walk, just a few more minutes."

The pair strolled quietly for a few moments, Danielle's eyes locked on the fruit, wondering about its taste. It had the shape of an orange, and looked like it had an apple's texture, but what would the texture of the inside be?

Paxmors stopped twirling the fruit, and instead started turning her hand, around and around, with the fruit always balancing on top of her hand. Danielle had seen this done before, it was contact juggling, but she didn't quite recall the name of it. All she remembered was that there was a movie she loved as a child that the twirling fruit reminded her of.

The fruit still balancing on their twirling hand, Paxmors turned to Danielle and spoke her mind for her. "You want to eat the fruit."

Danielle gave Paxmors a quick glance, but immediately moved her eyes back to the fruit. "I, yeah, I do. I wanna try it, see if it's good."

With the quick flick of a wrist, the fruit was launched into the air, quickly becoming obscured within the canopy of the trees. Paxmors held out their finger, and just a moment later, the fruit landed perfectly on its tip. They slowly moved their hand, and offered the fruit to Danielle.

Danielle grabbed the fruit, and spent a moment inspecting it. She felt like a toddler investigating something new. The skin, though it looked like an apple, was squishy, like a grape. The inside must have been juicy, not firm.

“What is it?” She asked curiously.

“That, young one, is a Reveloberry. A fruit unique to the Mistwoods, whose flavor adapts to time. The taste is defined by the Tempufilum that surround it.”

Danielle was awestruck, this was truly fascinating to her. A berry that changed just because of the time.

Paxmors spoke once more, “It also has some... unique effects. Effects that depend on who eats it.”

Danielle suddenly gave a cautious eye to the berry. “What effects? Are they bad?”

Paxmors chuckled. “If they were bad, I would not have given you the berry. If I ate the berry, it would make me feel drowsy. It very much acts like a depressant. It would calm my nerves, clear my mind. Most noteworthy, however, is that it would allow me a deeper connection with the Mistwoods, an ability to hear what even I cannot normally hear, to see what is hidden even to my eyes.”

“And what about me?” Danielle interrupted, trying to get the information she needed on whether or not she should eat it.

“For a human, it would act like a stimulant. You would get a sort of adrenaline boost, feel a bit hyper. Think of it like a strong and brief caffeine high, but without much of a crash. The interesting part is that it will allow you to briefly see the Mistwoods the way I do. Trust when I say there are a great many things within the trees that you do not see with your simple eyes. The berry will connect your eyes to new areas of

your mind, and let you become one with the forest, if only for a few seconds.”

Danielle sat dumbfounded for a moment, but then without hesitation took a bite out of the berry. Just as she expected, it was very juicy. It felt like biting into the insides of an orange, but without the segments. The taste was sweet, incredibly so. There was a richness to it, her brain was reminded of chocolate, despite the flavor having very few similarities.

She chewed on it for a few moments, contemplating the strange texture of it.

“Take a few steps back,” suggested Paxmors. “Then take another bite, see how it affects the flavor.”

Taking their advice, Danielle took a couple steps into the trees and took another bite. The texture remained the same, but the flavor was certainly different. This time it had a hint of sourness to it. The sweetness was still noticeable, but it felt as if it had been muted out ever so slightly by adding lemon juice.

She took bite after bite until she was left with nothing but the stem. She looked around, waiting to see something new, but nothing changed.

“Give it a minute,” urged Paxmors. “Patience is a virtue one must greatly understand within the Mistwoods.”

The two continued to walk, and Danielle slowly began to feel the effects.

“You know,” interjected Paxmors. “This is unimportant, as you have no means of doing so here, but because of the compounds present within the Reveloberry, if you get a nice roiling boil going around it you can cause a reaction in the berry that changes the effects of it on

human physiology. Boiling it in water for just the right amount of time will make it a powerful aphrodisiac.”

Danielle, feeling her heart rate go up, couldn't help but blurt out a loud, “What?”

With a laugh, Paxmors answered, “It is just a fun little fact about the Reveloberry. You would never be capable of boiling it, but if you could that's what would happen. I just find it a bit comical. Stop here, our next axiom is there, and this is a fine enough spot for the berry to kick in.”

Danielle's hands began to quiver, and her breath started to get a bit out of rhythm. “Y-you know, you're a b-b-b-bit more comedic than I w-would expect f-f-from an other worldl-l-l-ly b-being.”

“Do you imagine all other worldly beings as having no sense of humor?” Paxmors questioned. “I may not be as humorous as those you knew in life, but my kind have to pass the time somehow. It is not exactly entertaining to watch as you sleep for a third of the day, especially with how strangely time passes for us. Let us stop here.”

Danielle's pupils began to dilate. Very wide dilation. Her green irises were almost impossible to see.

“Ah, your eyes, they are changing, child. Get ready, you are about to see it all. You will only get about half a minute, so take it all in.”

Danielle slowly looked around, trying to calm herself, and steady her breathing. Slowly, her vision began to change. First, she saw bright wires crossing through the air, hundreds of them if not thousands, all crossing over each other, going different directions. They were all tangled and weaved around each other, an incomprehensibly complex web. She felt it was safe to assume these were the Tempufilum Paxmors was talking about. They were not all identical. They all had a similar

sort of glow as the trees, but they were all of varying brightnesses, and some threads were much thinner or thicker than others. Strangely, she even saw some threads that were completely black.

In her peripheral vision, she could see more things cropping up. As she turned her head, she saw slowly growing clearer and clearer, herds of pale white fawns, all wandering around. Birds of the same color fluttered through the air, as mice and squirrels sprinted through the grass. She heard the hoot of an owl behind her, and as she spun around to look, she locked her eyes on the upside down head of an owl, staring her down intently. Danielle tilted her head, and the owl mirrored it, head still upside down.

“How can you possibly...” she muttered as the owl righted its head and flew off into the canopy.

“Quickly,” Paxmors urged. “Grab onto a Tempufulum before your time runs out.”

Danielle carefully grasped onto a thread, feeling its texture. It felt rubbery, and was oddly thick. It took very little effort to pull on. Paxmors grabbed her hand, and moved it over to another thread, one that was a little bit thinner.

“That one is yours,” they said. “Grab it, feel how warm it feels, compared to the last one.”

She clutched it in her hand, and just like Paxmors said, it had a great aura of warmth to it. It had a kind of pulsation to it, one that the last thread lacked. She turned her gaze to a black thread running perfectly parallel to hers, and reached for it.

“Careful with that one,” cautioned Paxmors. “The dark threads tend to be brittle. If you break them, you will see something you do not wish to, and cause a whole heap of trouble for both of us.”

She carefully put her fingers on the thread, and could immediately see what Paxmors meant. Instead of feeling rubbery, this thread felt like glass, except it was incredibly thin. It still flexed a little, but she could tell it would crumble if she tried to bend it.

What would she see, she began to wonder. What could possibly happen if she broke the thread? Would it really be so bad if she broke it? This land was strange, mysterious, and beyond what she knew in life, so what matter were consequences to something as simple as just snapping a line?

“I am deathly serious, Danielle. Do not disregard my words. That thread’s contents are unimportant to you.”

She carefully let it go, her curiosity unsated, and as she turned her eyes to her own Tempufulum, she watched as it slowly grew blurry, until it was utterly gone from her vision. She still felt it in her hand, but it could no longer be seen.

Confused, she reached her hand up to where the other threads once were, but felt nothing. “Why can I still feel this one, but not those up there?”

“Because I am allowing you. Without the Reveloberry’s juices in your system, you can only touch the Tempufulum I assist you with touching. I am assisting you with your own thread, but I cannot allow you to touch the Tempufulum of others when you cannot see them.”

Danielle glanced around the forest, which now felt markedly more empty without all the critters that she saw before.

“Those animals, I saw you transform from a deer into, well, whatever you are. Were those other creatures the same way?”

With a laugh, Paxmors answered, “A good guess, and fairly accurate. Those are our shroud forms. While we are in those bodies, a

part of ourselves becomes one with your existence, your realm. It gives us a clearer vision of the lives of our linked. What you see before you, the body I currently inhabit, is my true form. While within this form, we can commune with each other and the Mistwoods more easily. We can see the happenings of your realm in our true forms, but it can be blurry.”

Danielle pushed her tongue against the inside of her lip, and furrowed her brow. “That owl,” she interrogated. “What was that about?”

“Simply a curious observer.”

“And the threads,” Danielle continued. “The dark ones, what was up with those?”

“I cannot tell you,” said Paxmors, sternly. “I am forbidden.”

“Forbidden?” Danielle asked, raising an eyebrow. “You’re a creature beyond any sort of mortal power. What could be preventing you from telling me about some black string?”

Paxmors gave Danielle a stern look. She had difficulty reading the emotions of Paxmors, considering how strange their face looked, but it was pretty clear that Paxmors was looking at her like a parent tired of their kid asking for candy.

“Can’t you at least tell me why you can’t tell me?”

“I have already told you why. It is forbidden. That is all you need to know.”

The two stood in silence, staring at each other. Danielle sighed and mumbled, “Fine, I’ll drop it.”

Paxmors relaxed their gaze, and placed their hands around Danielle’s.

“Now,” they spoke calmly. “We must continue for the next axiom. Would you like the honor of holding the Tempufulum?”

Danielle looked at her hands, which seemed empty, but she could clearly feel the thread wrapped around her fingers.

“Well, I reckon I’m already holding it anyway.”

“Perfect, my thoughts exactly.” Paxmors placed one hand on Danielle’s cheek. “I’m going to say some words. I need you to echo them in your mind. That will activate this axiom. Do not interrupt the thought with another thought, lest we shall have to do it again. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Fantastic. Repeat after me in your head.”

Danielle closed her eyes, and focused only on what Paxmors was saying. She cleared her mind, and listened intently, repeating each spoken word in her thoughts as Paxmors orated.

“Time along the thread, I stop at this axiom. Grant me passage through so I might judge the future with the past. Grant me the role of arbiter.”

White flash, and the forest was gone.

Secundo

Danielle was in a simple room, one she had a lot of memories in. She glanced around the pale orange walls, decorated with paintings of butterflies, and a few family photos. A bed with flower decorated sheets sat in the corner, and on the bedside table next to it sat that familiar lamp that was decorated with holes shaped like the planets of the solar system, so that when the lights were off the planets were lit up on the walls. The floor was absolutely messy, covered in a cascade of building bricks, all completely unorganized.

This was Kerry Littles's bedroom, and on the floor, little Dani sat next to Kerry, who was helping her build a car.

Paxmors stood behind the children in the memory, looking around the room. They glanced down, and gestured to the pair of kids.

"Kerry Littles, tell me about him, and the bond you two shared."

Danielle kneeled down and looked at the blocks the children were playing with. As she got closer to them, she heard incredibly muffled speech that seemed to line up with the movement of the kids' mouths. This must have been her mind adjusting to the memory, she assumed.

"Kerry was basically my first friend," she began. "He was Uncle Cam and Uncle Liam's first son. They had him a few years before my mom had me. He was always a really sweet and creative kid. He was very artistic, almost a child prodigy. He painted those butterflies on the wall himself. We spent a lot of time together. Like, a lot of time. We were pretty much inseparable. Even though he was older than me, we hung out every second we could, even at school."

“A tight bond, indeed,” Paxmors stated. “You two got along quite well, anyone could see.”

“Yeah, we were very close. Neither of us were super popular. I was a bit socially awkward, and Kerry just didn’t want a big group. He was always satisfied with just two or three really good friends.”

“One might say the pair of you were like siblings.”

“Well that’s the funny thing,” Danielle chuckled. “I never really saw Kerry as a brother, and I don’t think he ever saw me as his sister. Even though we were pretty much raised together, we never thought of each other as siblings, we were best friends. We considered each other family, but ‘siblings’ was just way too simple.”

Paxmors strolled around the room. “I reckon it is fitting then that your oldest memory involves him.”

Danielle stood back up, and paced toward the door. “You said in that last memory that these thread thingies, Tempufilum, contain like, actual time, not just my memory. That the world is still going on outside this room.”

“This is indeed true.”

Danielle turned toward Paxmors, and gestured at the door.

“Could we go out of this room, and look at the rest of the house?”

Paxmors gave Danielle a stern look, an eyebrow raised. “This is possible, but it is not the purpose of our journey.”

“Well, no, I reckon it isn’t,” Danielle rebutted. “But you said that time doesn’t matter to you, that we can go at whatever pace I like. If that’s true, why couldn’t we just... go out there?”

Paxmors was silent for a moment, and let out a sigh. “Your curiosity is boundless, I must say. Fine, we may go through the house.”

They stepped slowly over to the door, and gave Danielle a glance. With a nod towards the door, they instructed Danielle to follow behind. She watched as Paxmors walked through the door, as if it simply wasn't there. Danielle carefully followed behind, pushing her hand through the door. There was a feeling of resistance, but not much else. It felt like she was putting her hand through thick air, at least that was the only way she could manage to think about it. Once her arm was successfully through, she moved the rest of her body into it.

She was now in the upstairs hallway. To her left, she saw Paxmors treading down the stairs, and she ran over to catch up. They reached the entryway downstairs, and rounded the corner into the empty living room. On the walls hung more family photos, Cameron and Liam's wedding day, Kerry's first birthday, a big group picture of Cam, Liam, Kerry, his little brother Jaime, who was only 1 at the time, Danielle, and her mom. Beautiful potted plants sat on tables in the room, and tapestries woven by Liam were hung up on the ceiling.

They passed through the living room into the kitchen, where they saw Uncle Liam and Danielle's mom speaking at the old oak dinner table. Danielle knew it well, it was an old table Uncle Cam had that used to be his great grandmother's.

She heard the mumbles of them speaking, but like with the kids upstairs, the words were unintelligible. She could tell by the looks on their faces though that whatever they were talking about was serious.

Her mom's face was red, and tears were clearly being held back. Uncle Liam looked sad, his face seemed as if he was trying to sympathize with her, whatever she was talking about.

Danielle stared at them in silence for a moment, then turned to Paxmors. "You can hear them, can't you?"

Paxmors, without looking at her, gave a simple nod.

Danielle inched closer to the table, trying to read her mother's lips, but she couldn't manage it. "Could you tell me what they're saying?"

"Your mother could not afford to send you to daycare. You were not old enough for Kindergarten yet, but she felt like you needed to meet new kids, other than just Kerry. She was worried you would not be properly socialized if Kerry was the only kid you knew when you started school."

Danielle was confused. "Wait, but I did go to daycare. I remember it pretty clearly."

"Liam and Cameron paid for it. That is what Liam is saying right now. 'Val, please stop crying. Me and Cam will help you pay for it, even if we have to pay for all of it.'"

Danielle watched the lips, and the words seemed to match perfectly. Then, her mom started talking.

"Dammit, Liam, I cannot let you do that. You two already help me too much. Dani is my kid, and I need to be responsible for her."

The tears came flowing. Her mom couldn't hold it back anymore, but then Liam grabbed her hands and reassured her.

"Dani is your kid, and Cam is her godfather. The way we see things, Dani is just as much our responsibility as Kerry is. Just because I didn't birth her like I did with Kerry doesn't change the fact that she's our godkid."

"You can stop translating," Danielle interrupted, trying herself to hold back tears. "I knew my mom was pretty poor when I was little, but I didn't know things were that bad."

“If you had known things were that bad,” posed Paxmors, “your mother would not have been doing her job. You were too young to be exposed to the cold realities of the world. Your mother was doing the right thing.”

With a sigh, Danielle replied, “I know, but it still hurts to watch all the struggles she went through for me. It isn’t fun to know that Uncle Cam and Liam had to basically be her bank for most of my childhood.”

“Well, your Uncle Liam said it best. They saw you as another of their kids.”

“I know they did,” Danielle spoke with a bit of a somber smile. “Uncle Liam told me all the time that I was the daughter he never had.”

Danielle watched her mother get up from the table so that she could go over to Liam and hug him tightly. A couple seconds later though, she jolted away, and turned her back to him. Liam’s face quickly shifted from serious, to happy, as turned towards where Danielle was standing.

She felt the strange resistance she felt when she walked through the doors pass through her legs, and just a moment later, little Dani was running over to the dinner table holding up her ugly block car. Kerry showed up just a second later holding his spaceship.

She watched as her mom wiped at her eyes, trying her best to stop crying.

“Parenting is difficult,” Paxmors said. “Your mom did a very good job hiding that difficulty from you. It is part of her job. Even once you grew old enough for her to tell you about it, it would have still been strange to tell you about all those difficulties.”

Her mother turned around, a massive smile on her face. The tears were all gone. She ran over to little Dani, and looked excitedly at the goofy looking car her daughter had made. Her face glowed with happiness as she seemingly gushed about how creative Dani was, and how beautiful of a car it was. Uncle Liam pulled out an old disposable camera and took a picture of Dani and Kerry holding their creations.

Danielle looked at Paxmors and whispered, "I think this is all I need to see."

"Are you sure?" Paxmors asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Alright, then we shall leave."

A flash of light once again. Danielle was slowly getting used to the blinding brightness of the transition from memory to Mistwoods and vice versa.

Danielle was back in the Mistwoods, and once again she felt all of her senses come rushing back. She felt her heart rate jump just a bit, but thankfully she didn't feel the same overwhelming jolt to the mind that she felt last time. Instead, she just felt light headed, as if she had an iron deficiency.

Paxmors gave a quick glance at Danielle. "It seems you have adjusted."

Danielle nodded and gave a quick "Yep."

"Kerry Littles, he is a very important part of your life, is he not?"

"He is. My closest friend, my oldest friend. He was always there for me, and I was always there for him."

Paxmors began walking through the forest, and Danielle followed closely behind.

Danielle silently walked, led by Paxmors, as she looked around the forest. All she could think about was the fact that there were countless beings like Paxmors around her that she was just simply incapable of seeing.

“Hey, Paxmors,” Danielle asked. “What are you?”

Paxmors chuckled and answered, “I have already told you. I am a guide, your guide, for this journey.”

“No, not that, I mean, *what* are you? What are you and all the other things here like you?”

Paxmors, without stopping or looking back at Danielle, replied, “We do not have a name, we simply are. We only have each other, and the ones we watch. We have no need for a designation, only individual names.”

“But I don’t need a name for you, I need to know what you are. Why do you exist? What do you do? How do you do the things you do?”

Paxmors hiked without speaking, merely humming for a time. Danielle, who was growing irritated, shouted out, “Are the trees singing again? Can you just pay attention to me please?”

Paxmors, forcibly, shouted out, “I am. Be patient, child. I am simply deliberating how to answer your question in a way that you can understand.”

“I’m sure that whatever you say, I can understand.”

“Not quite. Language is limited. There are some things that aural language is not built around. There are concepts that I cannot explain to you because you lack the words and knowledge to comprehend them.”

Danielle, dumbfounded, could only let out a high pitched “What?”

“It is not easy to discuss, Danielle. Please, do not overestimate my ability. I am greatly intelligent, and greatly powerful, but I am still limited in how I can interact with you because of the differences between us. Myself and my associates understand perfectly what we are, and other such things, because we need to understand it, and our means of communication adapted as such. Mortal beings, however, have no need to understand such things, so you do not create the means to do so.”

They walked in silence for an excruciating while, only the humming of Paxmors for Danielle to listen to.

“I think I know a way for you to understand me,” Paxmors suddenly declared. “Think of me as a part of you. When you do something, or something happens to you, I have a sort of mirror within myself that lets me experience it as well. I am connected to you. I watch what happens to you, think about it, process it all, and make mental notes. When you pass on, I help you on a journey to review the events of your life so that you may better understand them.”

It sounded as if Paxmors was going to continue, but they simply didn’t.

Danielle began to stammer. “Um, and...?”

Paxmors glanced over. “And what?”

“For what purpose do you do this?”

Paxmors held their stare for a minute, then turned away and simply replied. “That is the part where you lose the ability to understand.”

Danielle just grunted and dropped the topic. “So where are we going next?”

“Right here,” Paxmors answered without letting even a single second of silence pass after Danielle’s question. “We are going to sit here for a time, give your mind some space, let it relax before we jump into more axioms.”

Danielle watched as Paxmors, without dropping an inch, folded their legs in a criss-crossed position in air. They then slowly descended onto the ground. Danielle held an awkward stare, but Paxmors simply gestured toward the ground in front of them and offered, “Sit. Rest.”

Danielle laid down, keeping her legs outstretched, supporting herself with her elbows. “I don’t suppose there are many fun pastimes for someone like me in the Mistwoods?”

“There are,” answered Paxmors, grinning. “We have spent most of our time doing the most popular one. Talking. Speech is how one learns about others. You have been here only a brief time, and I must admit I have the advantage when it comes to conversation, seeing as I know almost everything about you. You, I am sure, still have plenty of questions, though.”

“Yeah, I do, but so often I ask you something and you just handwave it away.”

“I do not mean to be dismissive, there is just a certain border where your comprehension cannot go as far as I can describe. As I said before you lack certain words, but you also lack entire facilities. I have more senses than you. Humans have five senses, touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste. For comparison, I have all of those plus three. All of which are beyond your understanding, but I can tell you that one of them corresponds to our ability to manipulate the threads of time,

another relates to our comprehension of other forms, and the final relates to the thoughts of others.”

Danielle squinted her eyes and asked, “Why can’t you explain them to me? If I get what they relate to then surely I can understand the sense itself.”

“Not quite,” Paxmors stated frankly. “Imagine trying to explain sight to one who was born without eyes, or hearing to someone born deaf. This is how it would be for me to explain the senses to you. I can tell you how they relate to me and my physiology, but trying to explain the sense itself would be impossible. Believe me when I say that I would love to discuss such interesting concepts with you, but I am simply not capable of doing so.”

Danielle put her head in her hands and started rubbing her eyes. “Great, yeah.”

“You might be able to understand my sense of thoughts, however, since you humans consider it a sort of superpower. I can attempt to explain that if it would please you.”

“Well, like they say, one out of three ain’t bad.”

Paxmors laughed and responded, “This is somewhat true. In short, your brain functions like a computer. It sends signals like electricity through the synapses to calculate and comprehend everything you take in. My senses allow me to notice and understand the reverberations made by those signals, almost like sound waves. This allows me to essentially read thoughts.”

“Great, good to know you can prod my thoughts whenever you want. Why do you bother talking to me?”

“Because speaking is nicer, and also because you lack the facilities required to understand my thoughts. We could not have a conversation through thoughts. To do so, you would need these.”

Paxmors grasped onto their head, their fingers pulling apart what Danielle assumed to be the hair, and revealing three strange little protrusions on their skull. They resembled baby goat horns. They held their hair back for a brief period more to display these horns, then fixed it back to how it was originally.

“These are my ears that hear thoughts. That is all I can explain to you of my senses. However, anything else I can answer, I will.”

The duo sat silent on the grass, Danielle looking toward the canopy, contemplating what she might want to ask.

She tilted her head as her gaze moved toward Paxmors. “You said you know everything about me. If that’s true, why do you keep asking me questions about my life?”

With a laugh, they replied, “Now that is a fantastic question. You see, though I know all of the facts about your life, and can see all the happenings of it, I could not see your thoughts in your life. While you sit before me, in my physical presence, I can hear your thoughts, but watching your life from the outside is like you watching a film. You can see and hear what is happening, but obviously you can’t smell what the actors smell, or taste what they taste, or touch what they touch. I also cannot know the happenings of people’s lives unless they directly happen alongside yours, as you could not know the happenings of a character’s life in a film unless it was discussed.

For example, your father’s name. I know his name, because his name was said around you, and I can hear and see all the things that happen around you. However, I had no way of knowing if you knew it

until I asked. By asking, I was able to learn that you at one point knew it, but have since forgotten.

Similarly, your relationship with others, or how you view others relationships. I knew, factually, that your Uncles Cam and Liam were married, but it would be impossible for me to know if your mother and Cameron ever had feelings for each other, or were just friends. This is why I asked you, so I could see your thoughts on it. I knew, factually, that you and Kerry were close friends, and spent almost every moment together, but I could not know if you had other thoughts or feelings for him until I asked.”

With an eyebrow raised, Danielle pried further. “Did you think I had feelings for him?”

Paxmors kept a straight face, Danielle finally getting a firm grasp on the meanings of their different expressions. “I had no opinion on such a thing, my job is to evaluate your life, not make opinions on it. However, I am sure you know a lot of people in your life thought you did have feelings for him. You heard friends as well as family ask if you were dating. You said no, but I needed your thoughts for confirmation. Your mouth can lie, but your brain can’t. It is also good to hear your thoughts on things in your own words, even if I already know the facts.”

“Huh, I guess that makes sense.”

She sat in thought a while, thinking of possible questions to ask. Then, one hit her. “What are those black threads I saw?”

Paxmors suddenly grew a very grim face, one that Danielle hadn’t seen. They started avoiding eye contact with Danielle. A sharp exhale, and they gave a non answer. “I cannot tell you. I have already told you they are forbidden for me to discuss.”

“Come on, isn’t there anything you can tell me?”

Paxmors closed their eyes, sighed, then shook their head. “Fine,” they blurted out. “I can tell you this: They are called Tenefilum. The task of judging them is a difficult one, and is carried out by those much my greater. It is a great responsibility, and is not a task we take lightly. It is gravely serious, and as such is treated with care, and respect. I can look at these Tempufilum and tell you which thread belongs to who. That thread there belongs to Parker Fripp, your eighth grade American Literature teacher. That one there belongs to Amanda Myles, a woman you mistook for your mother in the grocery store. I know these things because myself and my associates discuss our duties, the responsibilities we are given. But that Tenefilum running right next to yours? I haven’t the slightest idea who it belongs to, because those who are linked to ones of Tenefilum are isolated to themselves. They may only discuss their threads amongst themselves.”

“Do you know what a Tenefilum means? Do you know why they are special?”

“Yes, I do, but I am forbidden from discussing it with you.”

“Are you sure that’s all you can-”

“Yes,” the chorus of voices exploded, the first time Danielle had heard anger from them. “When I say that something is forbidden, Danielle, do not take my words lightly.”

She was scared. This anger that Paxmors clearly felt was palpable. Danielle felt the air around her grow hot, thick. She felt her heart jump, and her body began to quiver. She could not respond.

Paxmors’s expression softened as they realized the fear Danielle was feeling. “I am very sorry for distressing you. The Tenefilum’s are just a very sensitive topic. I let that sensitivity get the better of me, and I

have frightened you. I apologize deeply. Is there another question you would like to ask?"

Danielle took a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself. Her head felt a little light, fuzzy. "Yeah," she spat out with difficulty. "Why do I feel like this?"

Paxmors nodded their head, and answered calmly. "You are connected to me. Each of my kind is linked to a living being, and a part of them is within us. I am linked to you, and you are now in my realm, so the emotions I give off can greatly impact you in a way they would not were you still in your own reality. You are essentially feeling a more powerful form of your own emotions, compounding off of the emotions you already feel. Continue taking deep breaths, the feeling will subside quickly."

Danielle took a deep breath in. She glanced around the Mistwoods, looking at the beautiful trees that surrounded her. Breathe out. She imagined all the gorgeous creatures that were there, but invisible to her eyes. Breathe in. She bathed in the soft light that surrounded her, the calming pale blueness. Breathe out. She turned her gaze to the black velvet sky, where the odd crescent moon brought her comfort.

Danielle was calm.

"I'm fine," she sputtered out. "I can go on."

Paxmors calmly stood up, and replied, "Then go on, we shall."

They began to walk, and Danielle jumped up to follow behind. Paxmors said nothing as they walked, and it was a long walk. Danielle felt as if they walked for an hour, but said nothing. She didn't know what to say, what to ask.

“You do not need to ask anything, Danielle.” Paxmors stated, clearly hearing her thoughts once again. “Silence is good. It allows you to ponder on what you have experienced.”

“Just one quick question.”

“Go ahead, child.”

“Why have we been walking for so long? I feel like we would have stopped by now.”

Paxmors tilted their head one direction, then another, and quietly let out a hum. “Well, we would have, were we going in a straight line down your thread. We are not doing such a thing. It can sometimes be productive to jump between different points of life, skip the teenage years to look at the adult, then return to the teenage years to see the evolution. For some it is most effective to start from the end of life, then go backwards. There are different orders for each person.”

“So where are we going now?”

“Your mid twenties, right as you finally got used to independence.”

“I think that might be an exaggeration. I’m not sure I ever adjusted to independence.”

Paxmors chuckled. “Very few do at that age, from what I have heard.”

The silent walk continued for a few minutes more, and Danielle began to wonder what would have been going on in her mid twenties that they would be visiting now. Those times were a little more than a few years ago, and she spent a lot of that time too stressed to remember things well, so it was mostly a blur.

Paxmors reached a quick halt, and grasped into the air. “Here!” She exclaimed. “Are you ready?”

“I reckon.”

“Then steel yourself. You know this pain, you will be ready for it.

We now enter the third axiom!”

White flash, bye bye Mistwoods.

Tertio

Apartment, a shitty one. Danielle immediately recognized it as Kerry's place. He moved out in 2016, so she knew this was sometime before then. She had to be around 25 at the absolute oldest. She glanced around, and in the living room she saw Kerry, painting on an easel. The Dani in the memory was standing next to him, watching him paint. Kerry's girlfriend, Hannah, was the subject of the portrait.

Hannah was on her knees, wearing pretty casual clothing, making a face that screamed a pained sadness.

Paxmors stepped around the room, glancing at the decor, painted by Kerry himself. They turned to Danielle, gestured around the room and spoke, "Well, you know the deal. Tell me about this."

Danielle nodded, taking in the scenery. "I remember this, but it's been a while so it might be a bit fuzzy. This was sometime in autumn, 2015. We had just graduated college a couple years prior and were living in Salem, Oregon. Kerry had entered into an art competition hosted by an art museum he really liked. The reward for first was a grant from the city government for a mural in historic downtown, and a weekend long exhibition in the museum. He spent all month trying different things, but hated them when he looked at the final products. This was the one he hated the most."

Paxmors glanced at the portrait. "Would you elaborate to me why? Any layperson would look at this portrait and think of it as absolutely gorgeous. The composition of it is incredible. It is highly detailed."

This was undeniably true. The portrait depicted a woman, obviously modeled by Hannah, on her knees, dressed in rags. Tears

poured from her eyes, and she was shrouded by a dark room, lit only by a candle. The woman held an old ragdoll in her arms, tightly squeezed against her chest.

“Because he thought it was obvious.”

Paxmors turned from the painting toward Kerry. “In what way?”

“The painting, if I remember correctly, was about the mourning of childhood passed by. It depicted the feeling of being lost in the world, yearning to return to the carefree nature of childhood. The issue was that it was depicted by a grown woman crying holding a doll. It was a powerful painting, but not one that you contemplate. You take one glance at it, get the meaning, and move on.

When someone looks at the Mona Lisa, they’re supposed to think things like ‘oh I wonder what she’s looking at’ or ‘what does the expression mean.’ When you look at the screamer, you think ‘why did the artist choose such an odd style’ or ‘what is the guy screaming about.’ Has my hearing adjusted yet?”

Paxmors had an inquisitive look. “Perhaps, we will need to wait for a sound first.”

Danielle walked over to Kerry, and inspected the painting. She could hear, very softly, the brush on the canvas. “The painting is almost done. Give it a few seconds, and we’ll figure out.”

The room was still, Kerry’s paintbrush being the only movement. Soon, Kerry removed the brush, and set it down. He took a few steps back, and stared at the painting intensely. Memory Dani glanced back and forth between the painting and Kerry. Her lips moved, and Danielle could hear the sound clearly, as if she were there, but all the words were still unclear, as if encrypted.

Suddenly, Kerry shouted. He ran to the easel and threw it onto the ground, then screamed once again. Hannah and Dani ran over and tried to comfort him, but he simply fell onto his knees and hid his face with his hands. More muffled shouting was heard.

“Close,” Danielle said. “It sounds the right volume, but I still can’t make out the words.”

“The next memory will be it then,” Paxmors reassured.

“I had hoped I could hear his explanation. He would have done a better job than I would have.”

Paxmors shook her head. “You forget I can already hear these memories. Regardless, Danielle, I don’t want to hear his words, I want to hear yours.”

She sighed and said, “Kerry was obsessive about his art, and the impact it had on people. The idea of his painting sitting in a hallway full of other identical portraits and just being treated as another pretty picture to gawk at offended him. He wanted a painting that shocked, that intrigued, that encouraged the viewer to stare, think about what it means. He wanted a painting like ‘Saturn Devouring his Son,’ that was so horrific you had to stare, or something like ‘Who’s Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue,’ that was so weird you sat and wondered why it was so oddly simple.”

“So he hated his paintings because they were bland, in his opinion?”

“Pretty much. His greatest fear as an artist was being like Thomas Kinkade. Meaningless paintings that conveyed no emotion, and existed just to be sold on puzzles or hung up on the walls of boring people.”

Kerry pushed himself back up, his eyes filled with resolve. “That’s something he did a lot,” Danielle pointed out. “He would freak out a

bit to vent his anger, then he'd get back to work, brand new resolve. He was always very strange when it came to emotions. He was never super outspoken, kinda held his emotions close to his chest. He was kind, an amazing friend, would sit and listen to people's emotions for hours, but never really had much to say about his own feelings. If I remember right, this next painting was the final one. In that moment of anger, when he threw the painting on the ground, he had an idea."

Paxmors observed Kerry as he picked the canvas off the ground, the paint smeared a bit on the floor.

"What was this idea?" They asked, simply.

"Just watch. It's the paint. He smeared it by accident, and realized what he could do."

Kerry placed the canvas back on the easel, and rushed to his art station with a fire in his eyes.

"This was insane to watch," Danielle continued. "I'd never seen him so focused before. He completely forgot that me and Hannah were there. He just stood at that station, and messed around with the paints. He poured some black into his red, grabbed eggs from his fridge to put their whites into the black, and the yolks into the orange. He put the shells into the red, hell, I lost track. He grabbed all these random ingredients from his apartment and dumped them almost haphazardly into the paints. I remember with a couple ingredients he closed his eyes and asked us to put them into a random color and not tell him which one, things like motor oil and glue."

Just as she said, Kerry began to wildly run around the apartment, return to quickly throw something into a bucket, then run away again.

"And what was the point of this?" Paxmors questioned, observing the interesting changes to the colors.

“To make it unique, impossible to replicate. To make it stand out. To give it a unique texture. According to Kerry, it was a common practice with abstract artists, especially Barnett Newman, who was one of his favorites.”

The pair watched the scene continue to unfold, Kerry running back and forth, while Dani and Hannah stood and curiously watched.

“This,” Danielle continued, as she pointed towards Kerry. “What we’re about to see, genuinely made me feel like he had lost his mind.”

Kerry leaned on his table, staring down at the paints with an inquisitive look. He rubbed his face, and whispered something. He stood, wondering, for a long while, before suddenly his eyes lit up. He pointed directly at Dani and Hannah, and shouted, a smile shining from ear to ear. The two began to walk over, confused.

“Kerry, for what he considered his *pièce de résistance*,” Danielle spoke. “He wanted the three of us to all have a part of ourselves in it. He made out with Hannah, then spit into the white.”

Kerry ran out of the room, then returned with an onion and two knives, and a shot glass. He placed the onion on the table.

“Then, he wanted me to put my face near the onion while he chopped it up. He asked Hannah to use the shot glass to collect my tears. Obviously he could only get a few drops, but what little he got he poured into the blue.”

Kerry gestured backwards to Dani and Hannah, asking them to back away. As they did, he used the second knife to make a shallow cut into his forearm, to which Hannah and Dani immediately freaked out.

“He urged us to keep away, he needed to prevent ‘contamination’ or something like that. His blood just dripped from his arm directly into the red paint. He got a good amount of his own blood, just

enough to make me seriously consider how safe it was, then finally asked us to bandage it up.”

“An incredibly strange decision. It portrays a massive dedication to his art.”

“That it did,” Danielle replied. “If not complete obsession. I always adored that about him, though. He did everything for his art, no matter the cost to himself. I had just never expected that it would extend to physical costs.”

“The painting, how did it turn out? He did not let you watch him paint it, did he?”

“No, he didn’t. I think he’s about to kick us out in just a second. He said that any outside stimulation may distract him. He asked us to take his phone, his laptop, his speaker, all that business. He wanted no contact with the outside world until it was done. The only thing I know is that he painted over that last painting that he hated so much. We never got a picture of it, so we were the only people to ever see it. It was lost to time. It’s always been kinda funny to me how even though he thinks that’s the worst painting he ever did, it’s partially responsible for who he is as an artist.”

They began to watch Hannah and Dani walk around the room, gathering every electronic device in the room and taking them elsewhere. They blocked the windows, and locked the doors. As they started to head into the room they would be staying in for the rest of the painting, Paxmors tapped Danielle’s shoulder, and urged her to follow behind. A part of her wanted to stay behind so she could finally see what the painting process was like, but she quickly decided against it, feeling it would taint the importance of it in her mind.

They walked through the door, Danielle feeling that strange resistance once again, and stood in Kerry's room alongside the memory of Dani and Hannah.

Danielle had a certain nostalgia for the decoration in that room. On the ceiling hung a beautiful tapestry, woven by Uncle Cam. On the walls were hung Kerry's favorite artworks. "String Theory VI" by Mildred Thompson, "Immersion" by Andres Serrano, some photos by Elton John, and a litany of other paintings, portraits, photographs, and drawings, some of which were done by Kerry himself.

On the bedside stand, Kerry's medication sat. Kerry always had a lot of medication he needed to take for some genetic issue he had that ran in his family.

"Me and Hannah sat here for almost four hours while Kerry painted. We never saw anything of what he was doing, but he was working for so damn long."

"And," Paxmors began to ask. "How was the result?"

"You'd have to see it, there's no way I could describe it."

"Danielle," Paxmors said with a hint of mocking twinge in their voice. "I have seen it. Anything you have seen, I have seen as well. I want to know your thoughts."

"Oh, well, I thought it was really good," Danielle said, slowly starting to trail off.

"Is that doubt I sense?" Paxmors joked. "Do not forget, Danielle, I can sense your thoughts."

"Well I'm not lying," she said with a bit of a heavy breath. "I guess I just never really got it, you know? I don't have that same understanding of art that he has. I can look at a painting and get that it's pretty, I can even get that it may have some deep meaning to convey,

but I just never really cared that much about all the questions of like ‘oh gee oh my what makes something art’ or ‘wow this is so abstract, I wonder what emotion it’s trying to convey.’ It just never really made much sense to me.”

Paxmors, carefully examining the print of String Theory VI on the wall, asked her, “Did that affect your opinion on him as a person, or on his desire to be an artist?”

“Oh, god, no,” she answered bluntly. “He’s my best friend. Even though I never understood it, I always supported him. I was there for his paint sessions, I modeled for him with Hannah, I even went to his first exhibition. Kerry loved to rant about the art that he loved, and I loved hearing him ramble about all this stuff he was so passionate about. I supported him no matter what. I’m sure he didn’t understand me wanting to be a politician, but he still supported it.”

Paxmors nodded, and turned toward Hannah, who was sitting on the foot of the bed, speaking to Dani. “Hannah, tell me about her. What do you think of her?”

Danielle smiled and said gleefully, “I think she’s wonderful. She’s an amazing friend, and an even better lover for Kerry. The two of them started dating in college. All three of us went to UCLA. She was majoring in Theater and Film, wanted to be an actress. They both had part time jobs at the coffee shop in the library. They hit it off, got really friendly, and eventually I was able to encourage Kerry to ask her out. She wanted to ask him out too, and was too nervous to do it. They started officially dating a few weeks later, and have been going strong since.”

“So you approve?”

“I more than approve, I love them. They’re perfect for each other.”

“And the competition,” Paxmors carried on. “Kerry won, did he not? How did things go for him after that?”

“Amazing. Things went better than any of us expected. His painting won first place, the judges called it beautiful, one even meeting him in person to tell him it was the most fascinating abstract painting he had ever seen. He was given the grant for the mural, and he did a painting of the skyline, and small portraits of different artists, like musicians and painters and whatnot, who were born in Oregon.

His exhibition was very popular, popular enough that some people asked if they could buy them. He refused to sell them, though. He believed his best artworks deserved to be seen by the public, not owned by a single person. He donated a couple of those exhibition paintings to the museum, which were displayed in a ‘local art’ section.

He ended up being a bit of a local celebrity. Schools and local businesses were hiring him to do artwork for them, the city gave him a little bit of money to teach a weekend course on art appreciation, and he was finally able to quit his server job and make a somewhat decent living off of doing street art. He’s not world famous or anything, but he doesn’t really want to be. He just wanted to do art.”

“And you?”

“Well, I wanted to get into politics. I had a lot of difficulty doing that. Kerry and Hannah tried to help however they could, but there was only so much an up and coming artist and a starving actor can do to help someone get into politics. I spent a lot of time working as just a clerk, but I did eventually get elected onto city council, which I served in for seven years before, well. You know.”

“What was your ultimate goal?”

“Well as much as my friends liked to joke that I would be the first Female president, I never really wanted to go further than being in the House of Representatives. I wanted to play a role in national politics, but I wanted to focus more on representing a group of people and doing what they need. Being a president would have been too much responsibility for me. Who knows though, it might have happened. I guess I’ll never know now.”

Paxmors had a sympathetic look, and comforted Danielle, placing a hand on her shoulder and caressing her gently. “I am sorry that you must lament that. You believed in yourself, though and chased what you wanted. You were dedicated. Do not forget that.”

“Yeah,” she replied, with a sigh. “I just wish I could have seen how far I could have gotten.”

“You would have gone far, have faith. Your story was cut short, and it was beyond your control. Do you have any questions, maybe anything else of note you would like to discuss?”

She sat in thought for a while, staring longingly at the memory of Dani and Hannah talking, laughing, having fun. “I think that’s all.”

Paxmors smiled, and said, “Then we will return.”

Gone was the memory. The smells and sounds of the Mistwoods returned. Danielle took in the scenery once again, and lamented how hollow the forest felt without all the creatures she saw before.

“This forest is so gorgeous, but it’s so empty.”

Paxmors laughed and answered, “That is only because you can no longer see the inhabitants. They are all there, I promise you. Just because you can no longer see it, does not mean it has gone.”

“But I wish I could see it like you do, permanently. I wish I didn’t have to eat those berries just to get to see the truth for like twenty seconds.”

“Well,” they responded, holding out the word for a bit. “It might not be impossible.”

With a raised eyebrow, Danielle stared confused at Paxmors, who quickly blurted. “Ah, I have spoken too much. Disregard that, for now. You are free to pick another Reveloberry, if you wish. While you reside here, the Mistwoods and all it holds are yours to admire.”

Danielle, quick to accept the offer, looked around, and locked her eyes on a tree bearing fruit. She skipped over and plucked it from the branch. She happily looked at the smooth, squishy skin, and took a bite. This time, it had a sort of bitter taste to it, one that greatly surprised her. She was reminded of some Italian soda she tried many years ago.

As she took the last bite, she said with a full mouth. “So, where to next?”

“Next,” they answered with a laugh, “Is this way.”

Danielle followed Paxmors, slowly feeling her heart rate go up. Her hands started to quiver once more, and then the vision finally came back. The Tempufilum returned, the beautiful glowing web in all its glory.

She looked around her, and all the beautiful creatures were back. She saw a white wolf walking alongside a pair of wildebeest. A hare hopped alongside a fox and a pair of squirrels. So much serenity, a peace that Danielle had seldom seen.

But this was not her focus. No, her eyes were drawn to the Tenefilum. There were almost a dozen of them, contrasted completely

against the many thousands of bright blue threads. The teal aura was completely missing from the Tenefilum, the glow simply outlining them, accentuating the absence of light. The blackness enraptured Danielle, capturing her gaze. All the Tempufulum flowed, looking soft and rubbery, but the Tenefilum were of obsidian, rigid and reflective like glass.

“Your curiosity,” mused Paxmors, “Is admirable, but you will not learn the truth of the Tenefilum by staring.”

“No,” she answered. “I won’t.”

“Danielle, please do not get any ideas. Discovering what lies in the Tenefilum will only hurt you. There is nothing good.”

Danielle sighed, and turned away. “What does forbidden even matter here? What kind of afterlife is this where-”

“This is not an afterlife, Danielle,” Paxmors interrupted. “It is a purgatory. You know nothing of afterlife.”

“Purgatory, afterlife, same damn difference. I’ve spent my whole life believing that there’s nothing after death, and now here I am, proof that all my beliefs about the universe were wrong, proof that there is so much more beyond life, proof that the universe is boundless, and that anything is possible, but even here I have to follow rules! Welcome to the Mistwoods! Welcome to irrefutable evidence of divine otherworldly power, now read this handbook and follow these rules, do what I say! Don’t break the rules! Why? Because we said so! Because of-”

The cacophony of Paxmors’s shrill voices screeched and flooded Danielle’s mind, “Enough Danielle! Cease this impudent mithering and open your ears to my words! You know nothing of the Mistwoods, nothing of the realm you find yourself within. You feel yourself a

prisoner, and I your tormentor, but you are naught but a petulant child demanding to hold knowledge beyond your comprehension. The laws of the Mistwoods do not serve simply to imprison you. You are not forbidden from knowing of the Tenefilm for our entertainment. You are forbidden for your own good. Even I am forbidden from the knowledge held within the strings of darkened glass, for it is not within my power to handle what lies within. A child reaches out to touch a cobra, and you would suggest allowing it for the sake of freedom. Speak naught on what you cannot understand.”

While the countless voices of Paxmors roared, Danielle had fallen to the ground, unable to hold herself up. Her heart pounded out of her chest, as her brain grew light and felt as if it were TV static.

She tried to look around, cherish the final moments of the Reveloberry’s effects. Before the sight faded away, she saw the creatures not even acknowledging the scene being caused, as if it were normal. This was no distraction to them. Then, they were gone.

Paxmors finally finished their tirade, and stared down at Danielle, a fire blazing in those empty white eyes. Not a word was spoken, as Paxmors knelt down and lifted Danielle onto her feet.

Paxmors, up until this point, had always been very patient and hands-off with how they guided Danielle, asking her to follow, asking her for permission before entering and leaving any memory. Now, it seemed, Paxmors wished only to discourage her from any of her urges to learn more about the Tenefilm. They led her to a particularly thick tree, and effortlessly lifted her up into the canopy, then above it.

They sat atop a branch which towered through the leaves, and Paxmors gestured to the Mistwoods.

“This forest, it has no end. No matter how far you run, you will simply continue forward. This is because time itself will never stop. Even after trillions of trillions of years, after the heat death of the universe, this forest will continue on, stretching forevermore, hoping for a new big bang, with new lifeforms, if that even happens at all. Do you know why?”

Danielle stared over the trees, her eyes feeling glazed over. “No, I don’t.”

“Because nothing in life is certain, except for death. Even we, with the power to move in and out of time, to manipulate it, watch it like a serial, have no means of knowing the future. It is impossible to know everything. If this journey has taught you anything so far, I would hope that is the fact that not everything can be known. Some truths can only be known to some people, and though you may doubt this, I recognize the misery of that fact just as well as you. I understand very little about the Tenefilum. I know not how they work, or how they come about. I understand nothing about how they are even possible, because they violate my understanding of how time and the Mistwoods work. They are reserved for those more powerful, more knowledgeable than I. Though this place and inhabitants may be beyond you in some circumstances, we are not all powerful, omniscient, or omnipotent. There is a saying you humans have, ‘there is always a bigger fish.’ It applies here as well. Though I see those linked to Tenefilum as powerful, beyond me, I know there is likely some other being that they see the same way I see them, or you see me.”

“So what lies beyond this?”

A soft laugh, “I do not know. I know what pertains to my existence, and the existence of you, but not what lies above me. The

same way you could never know what lies beyond death, I cannot know what lies ahead of me when my time draws to a close.”

“So... you can die?”

“It is not that I can die,” they posed. “It is that I, Paxmors, will die. At least, that is how you would describe it. My kind exist to guide those we are linked to. Once their journeys are complete, our purposes are fulfilled, and we cease to exist in this realm. What lies beyond is only up to speculation. Maybe there is nothing, the same way you believed there was nothing after your death. Maybe there is another Mistwoods where I will be judged for my journey. Maybe there is a heaven or a hell. I cannot know, but my kind do not ponder on it. We do not look at death the same way creatures like you do. We do not spend time pondering it, what lies on the other side of it. Instead, we simply accept that what must come will come, and that the appropriate time to deal with it is when it arrives. To worry about your passing is a distraction from what really matters.”

Danielle gazed into the sky, the bible black sky enshrouding the forest, whose glow was obscured by the canopy. The stars, like pinholes in black paper, randomly littered the sky, surrounding the crescent moon, which hung perfectly in the center of the sky, directly up above her.

“Paxmors, you said that eventually we need to discuss my death. That I would need to take it out of my box. I think I’m ready for that.”

“Are you sure? Seeing your death from the outside can be frightening. You must be certain that you-”

“I’m ready.”

Paxmors gently grasped Danielle's hand, and led her down the tree, falling as softly as a feather. "Then we must get to walking. We have a few years to pass by."

As they began walking, Paxmors asked Danielle, "So what do you remember of your death? It's alright if you can't remember much. Death in youth is a traumatic, and often adrenaline filled moment."

Danielle, nodded, and sighed. "I actually remember a lot. I feel like some of those moments are burnt into my retinas. Thursday, May 3rd, 2024. Me and Hannah were going to get dinner from a fast food place, Kerry stayed at home to work on a commission he needed finished by that weekend. Hannah was five months pregnant with what was going to be her and Kerry's first kid, a girl named Sabrina. We were talking about a camping trip we were planning when a semi truck ran a red light at the intersection we were passing. I remember it felt like time was frozen. That truck is burned into my mind, even though I saw it for what had to be only a fraction of a second. Suddenly, everything was black. I don't think I even got a chance to scream."

"A sad death, but all things considered, not horrible. At least you felt no pain. You were 33 years old, sadly early for someone of your health. Hannah, she was 35, correct?"

"Yeah," Danielle whimpered, barely holding back her tears. "And she was one of my best friends. She was the wife of my oldest friend. She was about to have a kid for god's sake, why did she have to be with me? Why couldn't I have just gone by myself. It was just burgers, I could have gone alone."

"A consistent thing with humans, I have heard, is that anytime someone is hurt in their proximity, they blame it on themselves. Danielle, were you driving the car?"

She sighed and answered, "No."

"Were you driving the semi-truck?"

"No."

"Are you able to see the future?"

Danielle sighed once again and said, "I get it. It still just sucks."

Paxmors gave a short chuckle and said, "Of course it does. It is death. Even those who are at peace with death hate experiencing it, let alone being associated with someone else's death."

Danielle was inconsolable. She fell to her knees and began to weep.

"Kerry, he's all alone. I'm gone, Hannah's gone, his future daughter is gone. My mom, I was all she ever had. Uncle Cam and Liam, they loved me like a daughter. God dammit they must all feel horrible. They shouldn't have to mourn me, it's not right. Jaime looked up to me, how does he feel about this?"

"Danielle, please, do not flog yourself or blame their pain on your actions. None of this was in your control."

"That doesn't matter! It doesn't matter that it wasn't my fault, it's still wrong they have to deal with it all. I wish I could come back, be born again and somehow comfort them. I wish I could distract them from their pain."

Danielle sat on the ground and wept, and Paxmors attempted to comfort her. She felt the same warm energy pass through her that she felt the first time Paxmors embraced her, but it helped noticeably less this time. Rather than ceasing her sadness, it just calmed her, made her breath steady.

Paxmors stood, and spoke nothing. No words of comfort, no remarks on some fancy philosophical statement. Instead, they seemed distracted, as if something wrong had caught their attention. They

turned toward where they were originally walking, and started to hum. Danielle was certain that the humming was just their thinking noise.

The chorus of Paxmors's voices muttered out a few words, the dozens of voices making it hard to pinpoint what exactly they said. They held their hands against their chest, blankly staring off at something in the distance. Their humming continued sporadically until an expression of realization lit up their face. The cacophony of surprised vocalizations all whispered a single word, but Danielle could not understand it. Paxmors's look of realization slowly relaxed, and returned to a sort of neutrality.

They turned toward Danielle, who was slowly calming down. "Are you alright, child?"

Danielle kept her eyes on Paxmors as she stood, and disregarded their question. "You look like you just solved some puzzle, what was it?"

Paxmors did not hesitate. "Nothing that concerns you. Are you alright?"

Danielle breathed in heavily, then let it out in a quick exhale. "I'm fine, let's just keep on going."

They started back walking, but something was off, she felt. This entire journey, Paxmors had ignored most things and focused on Danielle. The few times Paxmors was distracted were not during important moments. Danielle was bawling about the horrifying realization of her death, and all the implications that came with it. Paxmors, however, was focused on something else on their path.

"Do not doubt my intentions," calmly reassured Paxmors. "I had a realization, one that distracted me. I am not impossible to distract, but this distraction does not concern you. I apologize if my being

distracted was interpreted as a lack of care for you. That was not my intention, nor is it true that I lack care for you. I, as your guardian, care for you deeper than you understand.”

Danielle could not help but feel somewhat disillusioned with this journey. She did not doubt that Paxmors cared for her, but bit by bit she felt less and less that any of this actually mattered. She felt like a rat in a trap, a mouse in a cage being used for a science experiment, as if she only existed for someone else’s gain.

“That feeling is common, Danielle. It is normal to feel as though this does not matter. I mean, you are dead, what does anything matter to you anymore? I assure you though, it does. You cannot let that feeling get the better of you. It is a deeply self destructive emotion, an urge to hurt yourself as a demand for liberty. I assure you, though, that you will get so much more, so much better, if you stand by me, and continue onward.”

Danielle was irritated, and shouted out, “And what would that be? What would I get by keeping on?”

“Happiness,” they spoke. “You would find peace, a place to rest. Assurance that you did at least one thing right: following me. If you break from this path, all you will find is pain and suffering.”

Danielle just shook her head and blurted, annoyed, “Just take me to see my death, as if I need to see it again.”

Paxmors, not pausing their stride, simply gave a calm glance backward at her. They held this glare for a minute, then stopped. They gestured upwards. “We are here.”

“Can I eat another Reveloberry?” Danielle asked. “I would like to see what the threads look like at their end.”

“Of course,” they replied sweetly. “I told you before you need not ask permission. The berries are here, and so are you, so you may eat them whenever you wish.”

Danielle strolled over to a tree bearing a few berries, and picked one. She ate it, only barely making note of the sour taste, and waited.

Her breath was unstable, and her hand began to shake. Her body started to twitch, and her heart was now beating uncontrollably. A minute later, the visions finally returned. The creatures were back, all walking calmly around, but now she heard a strange singing coming from all around her. The words were unintelligible, sounding as if they were another language, but the notes were beautiful.

“The trees,” spoke Paxmors with a smile. “They are singing. What a fantastic moment that you may hear them.”

Danielle agreed that the singing was great, but it was not her focus. Instead, she turned her gaze to the threads. Paxmors didn’t even need to tell her which one was hers, she could tell immediately by the two threads that stood next to each other, ceasing at different points. They were parallel to each other, but one was longer by a foot.

“The shorter one is Hannah’s,” Paxmors confirmed what Danielle already knew. “You did not die immediately in the accident as she did. You passed a week and a half later in a hospital.”

The threads, at their ends, went upwards and connected to the canopies of the trees. They hung from the limbs, tied in simple knots to the branches. This did not apply to the Tenefilum though, which was still running next to Danielle’s. It went on in a straight line for another couple feet, then stopped. It didn’t hang from a tree, it was just cut off, floating in air.

Danielle made note of the fact that Hannah's thread was perfectly in line with her own. She looked backwards, and the threads continued to be perfectly parallel, even through all the twists, turns, and weaves. That had to mean the web of threads was not random. No, the threads were arranged by the proximity of the people they are linked to. That had to mean...

"I know what you are thinking, Danielle," Paxmors interrupted her thought. "You do not want to continue it. That thought can only serve to hurt you."

Now, Danielle was furious. She was tired of Paxmors making demands of her. She was tired of the stupid rules. She's dead, rules shouldn't matter. She reached her hand up and grasped onto the void black string, and felt its fragile glass texture in her palm.

Paxmors suddenly seemed panicked, a new emotion to read. The fear started to make Danielle herself scared, her heart pounding.

"Danielle, I urge you to heed my warning. You do not understand the consequences of what you are about to do. Please, I entreat you, listen to me. I only have your best interests at heart."

Danielle clenched her teeth, trying her best to brush away this artificial fear Paxmors had put into her. Her grip on the Tenefilum grew only tighter as she shot a furious glare at Paxmors.

"Why should I care?"

"Because you have no other choice. I am the only one here you may speak to. You have nothing here but me and the blessings of the Mistwoods. You have my word. I know you feel that I am untrustworthy, that mayhaps my actions are dubious, but you have my word that I am doing everything I do for you and your sake."

Danielle gripped harder. “That gives me no reason to let go of this thread. It gives me no reason not to snap this thread like a twig and find out just what lies in here.”

“If I knew, I would tell you.”

“But you do know,” She shot back. “That’s what you found out. You know whose thread this is. You know what these threads mean. Tell me.”

“You know I cannot do that.” Paxmors looked desperate. The fear Danielle felt grew worse.

“Why don’t you stop me? If you care so much, if it’s such a big deal that I don’t break any Tenefilum, why are you standing there, watching me?”

“Because I am forbidden from stopping you.”

Danielle’s grip remained strong, but her confusion pulled her attention, if only for a moment.

“Just as I am forbidden from telling you the contents of the Tenefilum, I am forbidden to stop you from figuring out. I cannot control you. I can urge you into a certain direction, but you are an independent being. You have free will, and I am not allowed to control you. Your decisions are yours.”

Danielle and Paxmors looked through each other, eyes locked on eyes. In her peripheral vision, she saw the creatures continuing about their business, slowly fading away. Her time was running out.

“Good, that means you won’t be in trouble when I do this.” She twisted her wrist, and an ear splitting sound of shattered glass echoed in her brain.

Paxmors threw an arm toward her, and the many voices screamed out in terror, “Danielle!”

Suddenly, she could no longer breathe. She felt as if something was blocking her windpipe. Her entire body flashed with pain, forcing her to her knees, then flashed with pure numbness. Danielle grasped at her throat. Her head was slammed with a wave of excruciating agony, every single inch burning hot with a flamed pain. She tried to scream, but nothing could be said.

A flash of darkness. The Mistwoods had disappeared.

Mors Voluntaria

He sat in an uncomfortable chair, plastic, fold-out. He wore a burgundy and rose gold suit, a stark contrast from the black suits and dresses of the other guests. Despite the contrast, this was rather normal. He always stood out. Not because he wanted eyes on him, it was just who he was. He stood out. Especially at moments like this, he needed to be true to himself.

The wind was soft, and the smell of nature was beautiful. The river rushing beside them could be clearly heard. This was the perfect place. Miss Reyes knew her daughter well.

He rose from his seat, and walked to the front. He slowly approached the urn that sat on the table, next to a picture. In the photograph, a woman with short dark hair, and tan skin, smiling widely, brown eyes gleaming with joy. His heart nearly skipped a beat when it seemed like the woman in the picture blinked, but he tried his best to ignore it.

He stood for a moment, silent, the weight of the moment hitting him like a baseball bat. A tear started to roll down his cheek, but he wiped it away, took a deep breath, and turned around.

There were a lot of people in the crowd, but there were only a handful he cared about, all in the front row. Dad and Pops, Jaime, Miss Reyes, Mister and Missus Gale, Louie, and Fia.

All of them had grim looks on their faces, Dad and Pops looking like they were only barely keeping it together. Miss Reyes, she was clearly heartbroken, her face almost completely hidden behind the handkerchief that kept wiping her eyes. Missus Gale looked broken up

too, but she gave him a small little smile, her eyes saying ‘we love you, you can do this,’ as if he would have ever needed encouragement to speak at his best friend’s funeral.

He had stalled long enough. It was time for him to finally speak. Before he could speak, though, he heard a whisper in the back of his mind, echoing that he was going to mess up. He tried his best to ignore it, though.

“It’s strangenten, reallyum, to be here here yeah. I juj has the vum... fuck, ida, not. Sorry I need a second.”

He turned around, clenching his teeth. He mumbled under his breath, the rushing river hiding the speech from the crowd. “You idiot, what’s wrong with you, god you’re such an idiot idiot idiot stupid braindead fool dumbass no! I got this.” His words were rapid, and he took a deep breath in. “Got it got it got it got it got it you can do it they hate you they hate you no no no they don’t you got this just speak from the heart.”

He took a long and drawn out breath and slowly turned back to the audience. Pops and Dad looked a tad bit concerned, but it seemed they were too sad to recognize exactly what was happening. He was quiet for a second, then continued his speech as if nothing had interrupted him at all. A total shift, and suddenly he was perfectly confident and articulate.

“Just a few weeks ago, I was here for my wife’s funeral, and it hurt to be there just as much as it does to be back. Just like Hannah, my bond with Danielle was special. At Hannah’s service, I said that whenever someone passes, a lot is left behind. A lot of questions are left unanswered. Those who weren’t that close find themselves asking ‘who were they truly?’

I've always felt like it's impossible to know someone's soul, because you never truly know your own soul. In our lives, we spend so much time learning about ourselves. If you can't even know yourself, how can you know another? But you know what, I knew Hannah and Danielle's souls. I think what I feel the most guilty about with this situation is that there are so many things I never shared about myself with them. I hid things from them. Obviously though, I can't linger on that guilt, just as all of you can't linger on any guilt you have. All I can say is that you should never wait. You never know when someone will be gone before you get the chance to tell them. Be honest, be true, don't let the fear that maybe people will judge you keep you from being honest."

Now he was trailing off, this wasn't relevant. The whisper came back, this time berating him for saying something that had nothing to do with his speech. He was an idiot, and should get back on topic.

"Danielle Sofia Reyes, my oldest friend, my best friend. I knew her since she was still in diapers. We grew up together. Our families can tell you that we were brought up like siblings, but you know what? That wasn't enough to describe us. We were best friends, a bond that connected us stronger than even family.

If you wanna know who Danielle was, I think the best story to describe her goes back to when we were in college. I work too hard, and I always have. My parents can attest to the fact that every day after school, as soon as I finished my homework, I started painting. I wouldn't leave my room, just stare at the easel and paint, all night, until bedtime. It got to the point where they had to tell me 'now Ker-Bear, you can paint until 5, but after that you need to play with your toys! You need to go play with Danielle!' Didn't it, Pops?"

Liam raised his hand and chuckled a bit, "Yeah, it did."

"Well that habit of mine kept going through college too, except it was worse because now my degree depended on my ability to do art! So all I did was work on art. I would get out of class, go to my dorm, and sit at my desk making sketches. I was an art major. Now, for comparison, Danielle was a double major, Sociology and Political Science, and she minored in Economics. I'm sure you can see the difference."

The visitors chuckled just a bit.

"Now if I told you that between the woman who was double majoring, had a minor to work on, and a part time job to worry about, and an art major who only barely went to work, that the double major had the most free time, would you believe me? Well you should, because it was true. She was so mad at me for so much of college because she would have two hours of free time on a saturday, and I would look her dead in the eyes and say 'sorry, I have to sketch fifty more flowers!'

A couple months of that went by and she got sick of it. She came up to my dorm bashing down the door, and when I finally opened it up she grabbed me by my shirt collar and started hooting and hollering at me, 'you stupid little ass, you're only going to college at all because I told you to, and I finally convince you to go to college with me and you have all this free time to have fun, but you can never spare a night to go to a bar with me, you're such an asshole!'

She loved me. She hated me, but she loved me. Danielle was honest, brutally. She was never one to beat around the bush. She told things to you straight. In my life, there were three universal truths: death, taxes, and Danielle wouldn't bullshit you. She was never afraid

to shout at you or call you out when you were being an idiot, and hoo boy was I an idiot a lot.

At this point, me and Hannah had been dating for seven years, and Danielle was so mad at me for not proposing to her. Every time we hung out it was always ‘heya Kerry, so nice to see ya, have you proposed to Hannah yet?’ Every time I said no and every time she spent ten minutes ranting to me about how we loved each other, and we were ready for marriage, and I needed to stop sitting on my hands. You know why I never listened to her? Cause I just wanted to work. I didn’t have time to propose to her! I didn’t have time for marriage! I needed to focus on my art! Didn’t matter that we were already pretty much married, how we were living. Living in the same house, sleeping in the same bed, spending almost every bit of free time together, Mister and Missus Gale were very disapproving of that.”

Missus Gale gave a laugh and said “And Danielle knew it, she had the answer for you.”

“That she did, but I wouldn’t listen. I was too stubborn. Danielle got so sick of it. Eventually, she had enough, and you know what she did? She got Hannah to propose to me! The three of us had planned out a fun little trip to hike in the woods, but at the last minute she dropped out and said she was sick. Then, at the top of the hill, at the end of the trail, Hannah got down on one knee and said, verbatim, ‘Are you finally gonna fucking marry me, or am I gonna need Danielle to smack you around?’ Of course, I said yes, and when I got back, Danielle went up to me and just laughed at me. ‘Seven years, and she had to be the one to get on one knee. Shame on you!’

Danielle was like a sage, always giving advice, telling you how to do things when you didn’t know how. She was a mean sage, but you

know what? I needed a sage that would tell me what's what. Even though I was older, she was always the more mature of the two of us. She was a blast to be around, every time we hung out we had an amazing time, but that never stopped her from being the most blunt, realist person you would ever know. She never loved anyone, and you know why? Because she didn't need to. I always admired how self determined she was.

She never felt like she had to live up to any expectations, she never felt like she owed anything to anyone. She was her own person, and she lived for herself. I didn't have that. I always wanted people to approve of me, to think highly of me. There were times in my life I did stupid things just to appease people, and she never hesitated to look me in my eyes and tell me how much of a moron I was.

Without her, I've lost a huge part of my soul, just as I did with Hannah, but I ask that you do not pity me. I ask that when you go home tonight, you do not wallow in self pity. Cry, weep, sob, let your emotions free, but do not lay around and feel sorry for yourself. That's not what she would have wanted. She would want you to love one another, to be there for each other. Don't think of just yourself and your sorrow, she would want us to gather together, be a comfort to our fellow man by offering a hand of compassion. When I go home today, I know I'm gonna be depressed. I'm gonna feel like shit, but I won't let that stop me. I'm gonna keep going. I'm gonna do what needs to be done, and finish what I started.

On this beautiful Summer day, we are all gathered to say farewell to Danielle, a gift to all of us, a gift that we will never forget. A gift that we will not take for granted. A gift who would remind us all the importance of love, the importance of honesty. The importance of

having a good time while we still can. I thank you all for listening to me ramble. I love you all, and I know Dani did too.”

He picked up the urn, and started to approach the path down to the river. Quietly, the crowd stood up and followed behind. The river was beautiful, clear. The sandy shore of the river was bright and hot. This was a beautiful day, and no better day could come for this.

At the bank of the river, Miss Reyes, Dad, and Pops stood beside him. Dad and Pops were holding hands, staring teary eyed at the rushing water. Miss Reyes was holding herself together, but only barely.

The whisper was back, they’re gonna be gone, and you won’t have been able to say goodbye because you’re a fool. You are an idiot.

He took in a deep breath, and held tightly on the urn. This was his final farewell. He turned to Miss Reyes and asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to do this?”

She sniffled, and quietly answered. “I wouldn’t be able to let her go. I can’t do it.”

He nodded, and whispered a simple “Okay.”

“Kerry,” she said, her voice cracking. “Thank you so much. I love you.”

His tears were becoming harder to control. “You’re welcome, Miss Reyes. I love you too.”

He turned to his parents, and asked, “Are you guys okay?”

Dad nodded his head. “We’ll be okay. We’re ready.”

He took a deep breath. Admittedly, he was trying to stall. He wasn’t ready for this, no matter how much he tried to appear otherwise. He took a couple steps forward, until his shoes were completely submerged in the running river. He could feel his socks and

the hem of his pants getting wet, but he didn't care. He barely even noticed.

Then, he heard a voice. He turned around, but nothing was new. Nobody said anything. When he turned back to face the river, for only a moment he saw a figure. He tried to ignore it.

He removed the lid from the urn, and looked at the gray ashes. He was never a religious man, and he knew Danielle wasn't either, but he couldn't help but mutter under his breath, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Nobody but him heard it. For a split second, he hoped that if there was any chance for her to not be gone, for her to still exist, somehow, then maybe those words would help. He sighed at the foolish notion, and slowly tilted over the urn, carefully scattering the ashes into the river. He could hear Miss Reyes weeping behind him.

When the urn was empty, he was overwhelmed with a powerful sadness. She was gone. Her ashes had been scattered, and she was now consigned to nothing but memory.

He turned, and walked back to his family. As soon as they were with him, he threw his arms around them, and wept uncontrollably.

Pops whispered, his voice clearly cracking, "It's okay, let it all out. We're here together."

Miss Reyes, Dad, and Pops all held him close, and they wept. "I love you all, so much." He whimpered.

They all let it out of their systems, and tried to gather their composure. His family all went to speak to the guests, to hear all their condolences, their "sorry for your loss"es, but he stood still. He couldn't handle speaking to them. Instead, he stood, and watched them from the sidelines.

The whisper told him that they all hated him, that they thought his speech was awful, and that they didn't care about his presence.

It was all over. Danielle and Hannah were gone, and now their services were finished. For those guests, it was all over. Some of them would go home and cry, but he barely recognized a lot of those people. Some were Danielle's coworkers, some were distant family, some were distant friends from college. He knew they would go home, be a little sad, but go back to business as usual the next day. For him, it was far from over. There was still so much to deal with.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a shadow, someone staring from the distance. When he turned to look, however, it was gone. All he could think was that he needed to finish his art.

He finally worked up the strength to approach the crowd, but only for his loved ones. All the condolences, he didn't care about them. He approached Mister and Missus Gale, and hugged them tightly. They offered some loving words, as much comfort as they can give to a son-in-law, but he wasn't paying attention to the words. He just didn't have the energy. He said he loved them, and goodbye. The same with his parents and with Miss Reyes. The same with his brother and sister-in-law, and his little brother. He bade them all farewell, and left.

He got into his car, an old beat up sedan, his shoes still soaked with river water, and drove off. The traffic once he was out of the wilderness and made it back into the city was annoying, but nothing he wasn't used to. Although, as he drove, the intrusive thoughts kept hitting him.

About half an hour later, he was finally home, but it wasn't a happy feeling. He had to enter his empty home, walk past what was

going to be Sabrina's room, stroll past his empty bedroom, and finally enter his studio.

It was time to finish his masterpiece. For the past week, he had worked tirelessly on a mural he was painting on the wall of his studio. Every morning, he locked himself away from the world, painted the mural, and went to bed. Today was the first day since he started that he had left home. He finished the majority of the mural this morning. Now, all that was left was the final touch. His signature.

He stood silent in the dimly lit studio, and stared at the art. On the left was a portrait of Danielle in her favorite dress, perfect to almost every detail. The freckles on her cheeks, the mole on her shoulder, the gleam in her eyes, each ruffle on her dress. The baby blue dress that dangled from her shoulders and covered down to her ankles was twirled around, as if she were dancing, and revealed the sapphire blue sandals on her feet. That was what she wore to his wedding, to Hannah's graduation, to every formal event.

On the right, Hannah was depicted in a costume she wore for her first play as a professional actress. Ophelia, in Hamlet. Her ginger hair was curly, just as she wore it for the role. All around the mural, surrounding the two, were a series of abstract shapes, random colors, and amorphous blobs of patterns, accentuating the few real objects. The block car that Danielle held in that old family photo, the bouquet that Hannah tossed at their wedding, a disposable cup from the coffee shop the two worked at when they met, dozens of symbolic images, small in scale, scattered wildly throughout the mural.

At the top of the painting were the words, "I will go eastward and westward, eternally following the moon, as it chases the sun."

On the bottom, "One day, would you join me, Lazarus?"

He took in a deep breath through his nose, and walked over to his desk where his video camera sat. He took a minute to set up the tripod, get the camera adjusted on it, and make sure the angle was right. Once it was finished, he crossed the hall into his bedroom. He wasted no time reflecting on the solitude of the room. He knew it was empty, why ponder it? That strange figure in the corner didn't matter, nor did the whispers. No, he headed straight for his closet, and reached into the back where a large safe, almost as tall as he, sat.

He punched in the code, 08251988, and pulled open the heavy door. There were a good amount of options for him to choose from inside, but he already knew which one he was going for. He wanted a spread, so he grabbed the 12 gauge.

He knew it was unnecessary, but out of force of habit he closed the safe back before he walked back over to his studio. With his tools in place, and camera at the ready, all he needed was to hit record. There was a shadow behind the camera, but he paid it no mind. He had to get his work done.

As soon as he pressed the little red button, he got into position in front of the mural.

"Hello. My name is Kerrison Jay Littles. I'm a multimedia artist. I paint, I draw, I write, I photograph, and I direct. I'm making this video to present my masterpiece, the peak of my artistic ability.

Some people live for their passions. I don't. I live for life. I live for those I care about. I live for love. I live for the sake of what life offers. My passion, my art, it does not give me reason to live. Instead, it gives me the means to survive. It grants me immortality. With what gave me reason to live gone, and my passion allowing me life beyond the grave, I present my masterpiece, 'Mors Voluntaria.'"

He took a couple steps back from the camera, closer to the mural. He got himself into position.

“Its sculptor well those passions read, which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things.”

With calm, steady hands, and deliberate movement, he put the barrel of the shotgun into his mouth. His eyes were locked into the camera lens. He did not blink, nor close his eyes. His face showed no hesitation, nor did it show worry, or doubt. Instead, he only displayed readiness.

With his thumb, he pulled the trigger.

Veritas

Danielle tumbled into the dirt, screaming, shouting violently. Her head was burning, every single cell exploding with suffering. The torment just kept going. Her voice was growing weak, her throat raspy, but she could not stop screaming. It was too much for her to handle. Never before had she ever experienced anything even close to this pain.

Her eyes watered and her ears rang, all that she could understand was the shrill ringing, and the dark dirt. Seconds later, though, it was gone, as if extinguished by some magic. She laid on the ground, arms wrapped around her head, wheezing breath, her heart beat faster than a bullet train.

Danielle, slowly recovering, heard the rhythmic sound of crunching leaves, footfall. She pried open her eyes, and saw hooves, like those of a goat. She turned her head, trying to see the rest of the creature, and saw a similar creature to Paxmors, though admittedly only vaguely. This thing was much more intimidating. Instead of the pale white, this creature was a dark gray. The fur on Paxmors was thin, but this one was a good bit bushier. Paxmors was generally closer to being human-like.

This thing was certainly humanoid, but the differences were much more noticeable. This thing had horns in the same place Paxmors did, but these horns were long, and curled back and outwards, like a ram. The eyes were bloodshot, rather than pale. Looking at its face, it was clear that this thing lacked the humanoid face of Paxmors. Instead, it was an animal head, but not one Danielle had ever seen. It had a snout, and a nose like that of a dog. No fangs were visible though.

It reached down toward her, with two hands, both on its left side. That was when Danielle realized that this thing had four arms. All she could think was how insane it was that a while ago she thought Paxmors was a strange sight.

A group of voices spoke in unison again, but this had noticeably less voices. It sounded as though it was only a few clearly distinct voices, rather than an entire chorus.

“If this all goes well, then hopefully you should see nothing stranger than me. Please, take my hands.”

She identified a deep, bassy voice which sounded tense and inhuman, a monotone woman’s voice who conveyed no real emotion, and a man’s voice, this one softer, higher pitched, that sounded relaxed.

She did not grab its hands. She was cautious, and after what just happened, she didn’t feel rushed to trust anything. She tried to shout at it to get away, tell it to give her space, but all that came out was an incoherent moaning.

The creature held its gaze on her for a moment, its eyes conveying no emotion. Soon enough, it placed its hands behind its back, and took a few steps away.

“You mortal creatures do so love to meddle in things. Your most admirable trait is your persistent desire to bend reality to your will, and seemingly often manage to do so. You humans are a bit limited, but I imagine it will not be too long, in the grand scheme of things, before I finally see some groundbreaking stuff from you.”

It snapped its fingers, which it seemed there were only three of on each hand, and a log carved into a stool appeared, which the creature sat on.

“That being your greatest strength, I must also admit it is your greatest weakness. Sentient creatures for some reason simply feel the need to stick their nose into places they do not belong. More often than not, that behavior simply gets you in situations like this, but one in a million times you make some grand revelation, so you keep digging around where you do not belong. You are toddlers who keep playing with the loaded gun, and it keeps discharging into you, but once in a million times you happen to shoot a burglar by accident.”

Its lip twitched, and an eyebrow raised. “I realize that might be a bit in poor taste. I apologize.”

That memory, Danielle began to think, it was so vivid. It wasn’t like those axioms she visited, cause she wasn’t watching them from the outside. She wasn’t an observer who could choose what to watch and what to ignore, she was Kerry. She was in his mind, living what he was living. Her mind was flooded with guilt. It hit her, the fact that her best friend, the person she cared about the most in the entire world, killed himself.

“There’s a saying you humans have, I believe it goes, ‘curiosity will kill the cat?’ I hate to be blunt, but that seems to be an apt descriptor for this situation. You were warned.”

Her blood began to boil. Paxmors had been patronizing her for this entire journey until her breaking point where she could no longer handle following orders, and now she had just lived through her best friend blowing his goddamn brains out and here this thing was blaming it on her. She wanted to shout at it, let it know how pissed she was, how much of a cruel joke this whole situation was, but she couldn’t make the words. All she could do was grunt, and moan.

“Yes, yes, it’s so unfair, it’s an awful situation. You’re angry at me, even angrier at Paxmors, and you just wanna explode. I get it. Thankfully for me, you can’t really interrupt me so you can scream and throw a fit, not yet at least. You are still recovering from that vision. You are currently dealing with trauma, and your body is in shock. For the time being, which shouldn’t take too long in case you are wondering, you are nonverbal, and you will have difficulty moving. You can still communicate with your thoughts, at least. You won’t split my ears with your whining, but you can still talk to me.”

Danielle began to think of a long list of expletives, every swear and curse she had heard to try and convey how pissed she was. It gave her an unbroken stare. Come to think of it, it didn’t seem to blink at all since she had seen it.

“A bit immature, but I reckon that is a wholly understandable response to this. Now, do you have anything productive you would like to say?”

Danielle was still shaken up, her anger was still the only emotion her mind could comprehend. The long list of expletives kept going.

“Right then. I reckon I will just try to start this on my own, and hope that you keep up.

Danielle, you broke a Tenefilum, which was not a very smart thing to do. You’ve caused immense damage! Breaking that thread created a time paradox! The universe may never recover!”

There was a moment of silence as the creature waved its hands in the air and gave Danielle an almost comical stare. Its expression remained unchanged, never smiling or frowning or anything.

Its hands dropped onto its knees. “I’m just messing with you. Time can’t be broken, not by these threads. They’re just physical

manifestations. Threads repair themselves very quickly. In all seriousness though, you are untrained in handling Tempufilum, and frankly would not be capable of using them at all without Paxmors's help. The guardians of the Tempufilum know how to enter axioms in such a way that you are separate from the perspective of the one the thread is linked to.

This is necessary, as without that external perspective, you would not be able to communicate with the guardian, nor would you be able to truly take in the full context of the axiom. Because you could not do this, when you broke the Tenefilum, you were sent into Kerry Little's mind. Doing this with a Tempufilum that is not yours is already a terrible thing to do. Doing it with a Tenefilum is exponentially worse, because you are guaranteed to see the worst part of life.

Tenefilum are defined by their final moments. Unlike your axioms, the Tenefilum have one axiom, the finale, and all other moments come second to that. My kind, tasked with the study of the Tenefilum, and the guarding of those they are linked to, begin our task with what lies at the end. We base our understanding of the end with what comes before, so we must know the end most of all."

Danielle, being deliberately obtuse, disregarded all of that, and only thought of a rude way to ask what the creature was.

"You are antagonizing me, 'trying to get a rise out of me' I believe you humans call it. If that helps vent your frustrations, feel free to continue, but if you wish to get a reaction from me I'm afraid you will be sorely disappointed. If you would like to actually recover, might I recommend taking some deep breaths? The air in this area has a noteworthy effect which calms the nerves of those reliving their traumatic memories, or in your case, someone else's. They only really

work, however, if your breathing is steady, deep. They need time to sit in your lungs. If you take a deep breath in, let the air sit, then the calmness will, how do humans say it... oh, yes, 'hit you like a truck!'"

Danielle gave it a stare that was almost bloodthirsty as her breath slowly became more steady.

Its lip twitched again, and its nose did a quick flare, "Huh, that might be a bit in poor taste as well. Apologies, once again. To answer your question, though, I am Paenitenderium. I know that is a bit of a long name, however, so you may call me Desi."

Danielle steadied her breath, and she could feel herself slowly getting calmer. Her anger was still palpable though. Her thoughts raged, wondering why that thing was being so cruel, so uncaring. At least Paxmors tried to care. This thing, though, was just being an ass. It was like it just saw this as a joke. Like her suffering was none of its concern.

"Frankly, Danielle, your suffering isn't my concern. I am uncaring about your plight because it is not my duty to care. Paxmors's duty was to care, but I am not Paxmors. In fact, we are nothing alike as I'm sure you can tell. I am showing you empathy by at least trying to explain to you what is happening. Were I in worse of a mood, I would have simply left you here on the floor and gone about with my business which you have interfered with. Counter to your childish and petulant belief, however, I am not cruel. I am here, by your side, away from much more productive things, for your own sake, so that I may explain to you these circumstances.

I know that it is in your nature as a creature with free will to fight back and rebel and maintain some sort of facade of independence, but ask yourself, where has that attitude gotten you thus far? Mayhaps it

would not be the worst idea for you to heed my words, as you did not with Paxmors.”

Danielle’s anger began to subside, and she realized that it was probably right. She tried to push herself off of the ground, which took a great amount of effort, but she was eventually successful.

Once she was finally sitting up, she glared at it and said, “So you’re one of the things that are in charge of the Tenefilum?” Immediately her face was filled with surprise at the fact that she could finally speak again. “Where are we?”

“First of all, you don’t need to keep thinking about me as ‘it’ or ‘that thing’ you know. I gave you a name to call me for a reason.”

Danielle rolled her eyes and exclaimed with great exhaustion, “Why do you care? Do you really give a damn?”

“Can’t say I do,” it replied. “Just figured you might have missed my name or something.”

“You’re a lot more intrusive of my mind than Paxmors was.”

“Well that’s because I am not Paxmors. If I were Paxmors you wouldn’t be able to get much of an explanation for this predicament. Were they here, all they could do is say ‘I’m sorry you had to deal with that, now let’s keep on going,’ something you clearly would not want to do.”

Danielle took a deep breath. With her mind clear, she noticed the air was very sweet. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Desi’s eyes widened a bit, as if Danielle’s statement had just alerted it. “Oh, yeah, that, where we are. Yeah, we’re in the Mistwoods.”

Danielle squinted a bit and looked around. This was clearly a woods, but it did not seem like the Mistwoods. The glowing blue aura

was gone, none of the trees were lit up, the sky lacked that unique crescent moon, and the woods were filled with a thick gray fog.

“No,” she said with a subtle laugh. “This is not the Mistwoods. The Mistwoods were pretty, bright, this just feels dark.”

Desi leaned back a bit and stretched its arms, all four of them.

“Well, my job is rather dark. The environment fits the job.”

“Why does it matter that the environment changes?”

“Privacy, mostly.” Desi began to rub its shoulders with his extra arms. “The stark contrast between this area and the others is meant to help people know when they have strolled into the wrong area. It ensures nobody will walk in on us doing our work.”

Desi stood up and reached into the dark canopy, plucking from it a Reveloberry. It sat down and took a bite from it.

“Might I have some?” Danielle asked.

Desi shot her a glare and stated bluntly, mouth full of Reveloberry “You’ve caused enough damage today in the Mistwoods. You may have that free will, and Paxmors may not have been able to say no, but I can. I can say no. So I will. No, you cannot have a Reveloberry and risk any other situations that could happen.”

Desi took another bite of the berry, swallowed it, and gestured toward it saying, “Honestly you probably wouldn’t like it anyway. The Reveloberries in this area are a very acquired taste. It takes a great amount of adjusting to, and frankly it tastes like shit if you haven’t adjusted to how overwhelming the flavor is.”

Danielle watched as Desi took messy bites out of the berry. The way it was eating the berry, sending little bits of juice flying with every chomp. It reminded her of a scene in a fantasy movie Hannah really liked.

As monstrous as Desi looked, Danielle could not deny that it behaved infinitely more human than Paxmors did.

With a full mouth, Desi said, “Thanks Dani, I’ll take that as a compliment. That movie you’re thinking about, that’s Peter Jackson’s *Return of the King* by the way. I know you weren’t the biggest fan, but you remember Hannah and Kerry loved it though. The scene is Denethor eating that food really grossly while Pippin is singing that song. I’ll take it as a backhanded compliment to how natural I am, as opposed to the weird pricks in the rest of the forest.”

Danielle was hit by a barrage of thoughts from that statement. It had called her Dani, which was something only her family and close friends did. Desi somehow knew the movie, as if it were some expert of human artistic media. The strangest was that Desi seemed to have some sort of distaste for the other beings in the Mistwoods.

As Danielle had those thoughts, Desi’s eyebrows rose, and it looked surprised. “You’re right, that was a bit odd. That’s not how I normally think. That’s just Kerry getting to me.”

Danielle’s eyes grew wide. “What do you mean?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, Kerry, I’m his guardian. I’m linked to him. Something I’m not sure you noticed is, uh, Paxmors, their behavior was influenced by your personality. Their hatred to hide information from you, their hesitancy to tell you no because of your free will, that’s not a guaranteed personality from all of the guardians. They are all disallowed from telling you no, but not all of them are as happy to do so as others.

Their personalities are influenced by the one they are linked to. You always believed that information should be free, so Paxmors hated lying to you, hiding things from you. You always tried to be kind and

helpful to everyone, so Paxmors took time to sit and answer your questions. You were a politician, and needed to present a formal and eloquent front in public, so Paxmors always puts on a formal affect. That's why they sound so weird. If you hated talking, and always preferred just getting to work and getting things over with, they would have been rather quiet, only talking when necessary, and not taking breaks to have conversations.

In a more extreme way, myself and my fellows are influenced by those we watch. Unlike you, as a politician, Kerry was an artist, and made a living off his creation, not how people saw him as a person. He could be much more casual, laid back. That's why I act nothing at all like Paxmors. I'm sure you've noticed my striking lack of emotion? That's because, I'm sure you know, Kerry was never a very emotional person. He was always calm, only letting his emotions break in the most extreme circumstances. Even during your funeral he managed to somewhat keep his cool until the very end."

Danielle was a bit taken aback. "Wait, so you're Kerry's, guardian, thingy, whatever you are?"

"Yep, Kerry is who I'm linked to. I don't know why you're surprised. Who else would be talking to you about this? It was Kerry's thread you messed with."

"So... you can tell me about Kerry?" Danielle asked, her curiosity thoroughly piqued.

"I sure can, within reason."

Danielle was silent for a moment, trying to think through this situation. "Why did Kerry, you know..."

"Kill himself, yeah, you don't need to specify. I know. Kerry kills himself because of things you don't know about him. You see, Kerry

has some issues, big ones. Issues that he didn't want to tell you or Hannah because he was scared it would change how you looked at him."

"Like what?"

"Are you sure you wanna know? He did hide these things for a reason."

"Well, he's gone now, so I reckon it doesn't matter. He said in his speech at my funeral that he regretted not telling us anyway."

Desi nodded its head, and took a final bite from the berry before tossing the stem onto the ground. "Eh, sort of. Whatever. Kerry isn't mentally all there. I'm sure you know the medication he took for his 'genetic issue?' Well, that was actually antipsychotics. Kerry is schizophrenic. "

Danielle's jaw dropped. "What? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean Kerry has schizophrenia. He had to take that medication or else he couldn't function. A lot of his artwork was his own secret way of coping with his disorder. The painting that got him into the museum exhibition, do you remember what it was called?"

"I think it was called Fractimens."

"Exactly, that translates from latin to 'broken mind.' Kerry always had a thing for naming his art in latin."

"Yeah," Danielle whispered, the revelation getting to her. "He did."

"Kerry kills himself because his schizophrenia makes him believe it's necessary to complete his masterpiece. He had not taken his medication for a couple days before that. I'm sure you noticed in his final moments the voices and the visions, those are the effects of his medication wearing off. After you die, he's sent into a depressive

episode. When you're in the hospital, and Hannah is dead, he's clinging onto the hope that maybe you'll survive. That kept him going. That goes bye bye now that you're dead.

He feels lonely, isolated. All he has are his parents. He hardly leaves the house, hardly eats, eventually stops his meds. He's sane enough to get the mural completed, his own artsy way of honoring your deaths. Once the meds wear off though, he starts hearing the voices, and seeing the images, getting the intrusive thoughts. Eventually, he's convinced that the mural wouldn't be complete without signing with his... forgive me for being crass, liquified brains."

Danielle was frozen. She felt like she had been petrified. This was a lot to take in. Suddenly it felt like everything she knew about Kerry was shaken up. Their whole lives together, best friends, and she never knew. Hannah was literally his wife, but she didn't know.

"Yeah, yeah, a bit of a revelation, I know." Desi said with a seemingly sarcastic tone as it stood up and started pacing around. "I hope it doesn't make you nervous if I pace, gotta stretch my legs a bit. These hooves are made for walking, not sitting. But yeah, Kerry never wanted anyone to know about his schizophrenia. The only people who knew were Liam and Cam, because obviously they would have to know, that's a bit of a no brainer. Your mom didn't know, none of his friends knew, none of his family other than his parents had a clue. His parents never told anyone about it for the sake of his privacy. When he was old enough to understand the severity of having schizophrenia, he told his parents to never tell even his closest friends. He said never mention it to anyone unless he tells them that person knows. As far as I'm aware, they were faithful to that request."

Danielle was as stone. She sat on the ground, unmoving. Not a sound came from her. She wasn't sure how to take that all in. Obviously it didn't change her opinion of him. The fact that he was born with an illness didn't make her think less of him, but man did it feel like it shook her world. To learn that her best friend had been hiding something so huge from her.

"Yeah," Desi continued. "Kerrison is an interesting case. I have judged a handful of Tenefilum. Most of the time, the subjects linked to Tenefilum end up the way they do because of a long series of events, or an unattended problem that slowly grows and grows until it's unmanageable. Kerry is unique, in that what makes him the way he is stayed managed, hidden under the surface, cared for and kept in check, almost completely forgotten, until a massive upheaval forces that issue back into the spotlight, and allows it to go unattended for just long enough to have an effect."

This was such an odd feeling. To have this insane realization that what she knew about her best friend wasn't true. Only, was it truly a lie? This didn't change who he was, or how he behaved, or how he presented. It had no effect on the meaning of their friendship. The fact that he was dealing with such a problem had nothing to do with their friendship. No, this was about Kerry. To think otherwise was selfish. This wasn't about what he was hiding, this was about what led to his horrible death.

"Forgive me for rambling, especially since you can't understand my duties anyway, but it's not very often I get to talk about my duties with someone who has no exposure to it. And by not very often, I mean it has never happened in my brief time of service. I think Kerry is

my fourth. The relationship that you had with him was interesting to watch from his side because-

"No," Danielle blurted out, a feeling of revitalization washing over her. It did not change the deep sorrow she felt about his passing, but it at least helped her realize something important. "Him being schizophrenic doesn't change anything. He had it under control until we were gone. That has no effect on our friendship. It was his secret to keep, and if he didn't want to talk about it, that was his choice. I get why he didn't wanna talk about it."

Desi exclaimed, still maintaining a passive face of apathy, "Now that is a perspective. Quite a way to see things. Very big of you, mature, understanding. Go ahead and give yourself a pat on the back for that world shattering discovery!"

Danielle rolled her eyes and sighed, "Okay, I get it, not anything huge. Look, I just got hit with a lot, throw me a bone here."

"Dani, look at this snout, I'm the one who should be getting a bone thrown to them."

Danielle gave an empty stare at it and said nothing.

"Wow, nothing. I'll be here all night, be sure to roll down your mistroofs and tip Paxmors. That's beside the point. Yes, you were supposed to think that, cause frankly his illness didn't affect you. If it had, yeah, you would be mad about it, but it didn't. Good job. Paxmors would be glad you got to such a good outlook on things. Now, I believe that should answer all your questions, am I right?"

Danielle looked into the trees for a bit, and spoke, "Just one more thing. I don't get how time works here, and at this point I've kinda given up on ever understanding, but, uh, is Kerry dead already? You keep on talking about him in 'is' instead of 'was,' but I just saw his

death. Paxmors said something about the Tenefilum violating their understanding of how free will works. The way I see things, the fact that Tenefilum exists basically means that fate is in some way predestined. Does that mean that Kerry would have died regardless of what happened?”

Not even a moment went by before Desi interjected, “Nope, not in the slightest.”

Danielle squinted a bit and asked, “How? How could Tenefilum represent someone who dies by committing suicide without predetermining them to die by suicide.”

Desi shook its head and muttered, “Nah, that’s just not how it works.”

“Well, Desi, could you at least try to explain it to me?”

Desi was quiet for a second, and breathed heavily through its nose. “Dani, you’re asking me some serious truth about the universe, existential stuff. Lucky for you, two ways I differ from Paxmors are that I know the answer to that question, and I am not forbidden from telling you.”

Danielle, for the first time in a long while, smiled. “So... will you tell me?”

Desi sighed and answered, “I’ll give you the brief rundown. Don’t expect specifics. Getting too far into specifics may make your brain literally explode. Shit, that’s also in poor taste.”

“I wouldn’t have even noticed that one if you hadn’t brought attention to it.”

“Whatever, moving on. The basics are that time isn’t a straight line. Things are way more complicated than that. Entropy happens, the universe is defined by chaos, and time is no different. An infinite

number of timelines are created in infinitely small time spans. When you snap your finger,” it snapped its fingers on its upper left most hand to demonstrate.

“An infinite number of new timelines were just made, and all of them are equally true. A lot of you idiot mortals who have a toddler’s understanding of the idea of a multiverse always go ‘whoa wouldn’t it be wacky if there were a timeline where the Mongol Empire lasted forever,’ or ‘oooooh what if there’s a universe aliens came and invaded us’ which is just so simple and surface level. There’s a universe for literally everything. There’s a universe that is exactly like yours in every single way except a nitrogen molecule ten trillion lightyears away went left instead of slightly left-”

Danielle held up a hand and shouted “How is any of this relevant?”

Desi was quiet for a bit, then said, “Damn, you’re right, I’m rambling. I’m getting into specifics and I said I wouldn’t do that. Kerry liked rambling, gave that to me if you couldn’t tell. Whatever, there’s an infinite amount of universes, and they’re all true. They just have different truths. Well, the universe you lived in had the truth that you got in a crash, Hannah died immediately, you died weeks later in the hospital, Kerry quits his meds, and as a result he takes a shortcut to death.

There is a universe where it is equally true that Kerry decided to go get some cheap hamburgers with you, and all three of you died, or where it was still just you and Hannah, but Hannah had super reflexes and was able to avoid the crash and you guys just went on to get hamburgers and laugh about how crazy that was, and then live full lives until the ripe age of 100. In those two scenarios, Kerry’s thread would

not have been a Tenefilum. In that universe, I don't exist. But, we are not in that universe, so I do exist. Nothing is truly predetermined, but there are an infinite number of universes, meaning that everything is true. Nothing is predetermined to happen to you in your life, but everything is predetermined to happen sometime."

Danielle silently rubbed her temples, her head spinning trying to take all that information in. "Okay, yeah I get it. You don't need to go further."

"Are you sure? I could talk about going backwards and forwards through the threads if you really want me to blow your mind."

Danielle waved her hands and shouted, "No. I'm fine, that's not really what my question was anyway. What I wanted to know is, based on how weird time works, especially here, is Kerry dead? Like, right now?"

"Technically there are infinitely many universes where he is dead right now, but in your timeline, no, he's still breathing. He hasn't even heard word of your death yet. Though it may feel as if a good bit of time has passed, in reality it has only been about ten seconds since your passing."

Danielle's jaw went slack. "Ten seconds? What?"

Desi nodded and replied, "Yep, time is strange here."

"No, no no, I mean, I'm still in the hospital? There's still a while before any of what I saw happens?"

Desi sighed and muttered out a quiet swear. "Look, I see what you're getting at, and all I can say is no. A million times no. Technically, none of what you saw is predestined, but you lived in the timeline where that does happen. That not happening is only theoretical."

Danielle laid onto her back, "You're a real blast to be around."

“I’m just telling you how it is. Would you rather I have lied to you?”

“I guess not. I’m clinging onto some hope that maybe Kerry won’t die.”

“Well hey, Kerry’s hoping the same for you.”

“Yeah, wow, what a mood raiser, he totally won’t be disappointed at all. Thanks for the help Desi, you’re doing a fantastic job.”

Desi picked another Reveloberry from the tree and spoke as it took a bite, “Well lucky for me, cheering you up isn’t my job. Now, do you have any more inane questions, or are you done?”

Danielle rolled her eyes, and laid on the dirt silent.

“Are you going to answer me,” Desi spoke, breaking the silence. “Or are you just gonna lay there and act all somber and brood about how hard you have it?”

“I reckon I have nothing else to ask,” She answered, shaking her head.

“Well, in that case I reckon it’s about time you finally get back on track. Hm, that might not be the most accurate descriptor. You’ve thoroughly derailed what was going to be your journey with this whole shitshow you started, so if I had to guess, you won’t be continuing where you were supposed to go.”

“So where am I going?”

“It’s not my job to know, that’s up to Paxmors.”

“I’m going back to them?”

“Of course.” Desi took another bite from the Reveloberry. “Look, Dani, I get that you’re worried. ‘Oh it’s gonna be awkward, oh it will feel so weird,’ trust me, they won’t care the way you do. It’ll be fine.”

Danielle took a deep breath. A smile shot across her face, and she chuckled. “Are you sure I can’t have a Reveloberry before I go? I would love to see what this place looks like.”

Desi gave her a deathly stare. “Your words to Paxmors were incredibly similar before you broke my Tenefilum. You may fool them, but despite Paxmors having me beat in experience, I lack the naivete that they possess.”

Danielle laughed, not able to hold it back. “I guess you aren’t wrong. So, you’re gonna send me back, is that it?”

Desi nodded and answered, “Yeah, that’s pretty much it. It will feel the same as going into an axiom, but since you are staying within the Mistwoods, the pain will be much less severe.”

Danielle let out a heavy exhale and spoke, “That’s a relief. I was getting used to that feeling, but it was never really pleasant.”

Desi tossed the Reveloberry into the air, which strangely never fell down, and placed its arms on Danielle’s shoulders.

Danielle breathed steadily, and joked, “You know, Desi, for an ugly goat thing, I reckon you aren’t as bad as I thought. At least you aren’t as irritating as Paxmors.”

Desi did not crack a smile, maintaining its expressionless face. “I’ll have you know I am beyond a goat. My physiology is far beyond what you understand. Might I also recommend giving a kinder eye to Paxmors? They are, in effect, a part of you. You made them. The same way Kerry made me. It would be quite rude for him to come here and hate me. Paxmors simply did what they believed best within their power. Now, I have more important things to attend to, and you do as well. So, I bid you bon voyage, sayonara, and gute nacht, Dani.”

Danielle did not get even a second to answer before her mind was filled with white. She felt a mild discomfort, but no serious pain. Whatever this place was, it was gone now.

Rubicon

The scenery was familiar. Danielle never thought she would think such a thing, but it was true. The glowing blue aura had returned, the thick fog had receded. As she turned her gaze to the sky, she felt a sort of joy at the visibility of that strange moon.

“Welcome back,” the familiar chorus of voices rang. “I am pleased to see that you have returned unmolested. How do you feel?”

Danielle looked Paxmors up and down. They were the same thing they were before, but now their face conveyed what seemed to be worry. At least they didn’t seem super angry.

“I reckon I feel fine. I’m a little confused, trying to wrap my mind around the weird stuff I just learned.”

Paxmors did their familiar, but still strange, laugh, and responded, “I am sure you are very confused. You might now have a better understanding of how the universe works than I do. It is a great privilege to speak to someone linked to a Tenefilum, especially when they are not explicitly forbidden from elaborating to you this process.”

Danielle snorted a quick laugh and said, “I’m not sure about that. He said a lot of crazy stuff that I was never really qualified to understand. I think I got the basic premise, but the more complicated stuff flew over my head.”

“Well, at the very least it is nice to see that you are well. I am sure that Paenitenderium already gave you a thorough reprimanding for why you shouldn’t have done what you did, so I will not harp on it too much. All I will say is that I hope you understand how much you have undercut your journey.”

Danielle sighed and started pacing around the trees. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, I did a stupid thing that I shouldn’t have done, and it was bad, and I should have listened to you, because I should have accepted that I’m not allowed to be curious, and I should have fallen into lockstep and obeyed your every command.”

Paxmors nodded their head and spoke, “Now Danielle, you know that it is not at all what I mean. There is nothing wrong with curiosity. There is a problem with being unable to control it. I do not wish to berate you, I merely wish for you to understand the mistake you made.”

“Yeah, I understand it. We don’t need to waste time with it. So what’s going on? Why am I back here with you and why is my journey being cut short?”

Paxmors nodded their head, and gestured to the threads above them, though Danielle could not see them. “The Tempufulum are special, almost sacred. By touching another’s Tempufulum and reciting the words, or in your case breaking them, you view their nearest axiom, axioms that are marked by the guardian assigned to each thread. These are sacred memories, moments that in one way or another define the person they are connected to, even if in minor ways. Seeing another person’s axiom taints your view of your own. You lose focus on your axioms, as your mind becomes more infatuated by the idea of seeing another person’s life. You step into our territory, as judges, though you lack the authority to be such a thing. Such a differential in power, such an imbalance, I am afraid we simply cannot permit. So, your journey is forced to come to a premature conclusion.”

Paxmors began to walk, quite a bit faster than they normally did. Danielle had to jog to keep up. Even though they were clearly just walking, for some reason their movement was fast.

“And what does that mean? How would this have normally ended?”

Paxmors did not slow down, their pace continued steadily. “I am afraid I cannot tell you that. How your journey would have ended depended on how my judgment of you and your life went. There are infinitely many possibilities for how it could have ended.”

Danielle, slowly starting to feel as though she was out of breath, tried to keep the conversation flowing. “And how did my choices change that? How is this gonna end now?”

“Now,” Paxmors exclaimed. “Your options are a bit limited. Regardless of how you were judged, you would have been given a choice. What would have changed is how many options you had to choose from, and which options were available. With this turn of events, you have four choices.”

Danielle was never the most physically active person, so by this point she was very well exhausted. She started to stumble and shouted out, “Can you please slow down?”

Paxmors almost immediately stopped and turned back to Danielle. “Apologies, child, this is just a very important moment, and I was lost in it. We are almost there.”

Danielle took a few seconds to catch her breath. “It’s fine, just, be patient with me, you know? I can’t get around here as well as you can.”

“Of course, I just got a bit caught up in the moment,” they laughed.

Once Danielle was ready, the two began to walk once again, this time in silence. She began to reflect on her time here, how odd it was that it was nearly over. She hadn't developed any special connection to this place, she wasn't there nearly long enough to do that, but it was undeniable how astounding the Mistwoods are. It was special, beautiful. The serenity was awe inspiring. It gave Danielle a small twinge of sadness to know that it would soon be gone.

Soon after, Danielle saw where this journey was coming to a close. The sound of rushing water became clear, and her eyes locked onto a beautiful river of bright aquamarine.

"That," Paxmors spoke as they drew closer, "Is the Rubicon. This is the final stop on our time together."

Danielle did not reply. Instead, her mind was filled to the brim with the thought of how beautiful this river was, how immaculate the water seemed. It was a perfect final destination, and only heightened the pain she felt about her journey's end.

They stood on the bank of the river, the water flowing swiftly past them. For a time, there were no words, Paxmors giving Danielle the time to admire the grand beauty of the Rubicon. Soon though, they finally spoke.

"It is time that you made your decision. Are you ready to hear your choices?"

Danielle took a heavy breath, and nodded her head.

Paxmors pointed to the other side of the river. "I will give you four options. You will choose which one you wish for, and keep it in your heart. With your decision made, you will cross the Rubicon, and the Mistwoods will take care of the rest. Listen closely, child."

Paxmors gently floated almost a foot off the ground, and their eyes turned black as pitch. The cacophony of voices spoke, though they felt, in a sense, as if they had been corrupted.

“Your first option is simple: Terminus. Nothingness. You will be granted eternal peace, and never again have to face any strife. You will never know pain, suffering, sadness, anger, or envy. However, you will achieve this by ceasing to exist. Just as you will never again know pain, you will never again know happiness, for you will know nothing. It is a true ending. This, we call, Terminus.”

Danielle’s face was painted with discomfort. “Well that certainly doesn’t seem like a pleasant option.”

Paxmors did not reply. Instead, they continued. “Second, is Renatus. To begin anew. Your soul will be brought back, reincarnated, if you will, into the body of another. You will live again, but you will hold no knowledge of your previous life. Your current knowledge will be wiped away, and have no influence on your life. Where, how, what, and who you will become, will be random chance, just as all life begins. You may live a longer, fuller life, with more riches and happiness, or you may live a worse life, with greater pain. You may be a revolutionary who saves lives, or you could be a villain who ends them. You may not be human, you might be a mouse, a hyena, or something that isn’t even from earth. You might not even be a sentient creature, instead something that is nowhere near what you know as living, like a plant, virus, or even a tardigrade floating around in space. You will gain nothing, nor will you lose anything. You will experience all the random chance, suffering, and pain of life again, and gain in this moment naught but the knowledge that you will live again, and the hope that your new life will be good. This, we call, Renatus.”

Danielle shook her head, and with a tired voice murmured.

“That’s just a hollow repetition. It might as well be nothingness.”

This statement was again ignored, and Paxmors spoke further.

“Third, is Mutatio. You may ascend. Because of your trespassing within the Tenefilum, you can choose to be the guardian of a Tenefilum. You will be granted a life within the Mistwoods, and enjoy all the benefits it bears, including those that in your current state you are incapable of appreciating. You will live amongst us, speak with us, eat with us, breathe with us. You will lose all knowledge of your life, but you will know that at one point, you were alive, just as all guardians of the Tenefilum were.”

Danielle tried to speak up, interrupt them as she was blindsided by this information, but Paxmors did not pause.

“You will learn secrets of the universe that you could never comprehend in your current state. However, you will enter into a pact. As a being living within the Mistwoods, you will live in compliance with the laws of the Mistwoods, and your existence will be defined by the lives of others. This pact is not eternal, though it cannot be broken unless you choose to do so at the end of a course of duty. You will be given a choice once again, but not until the end. This, we call, Mutatio.”

Danielle tried once again to speak, “Please, can you stop for a moment and explain?” She was neglected.

“Or, you can choose Reputio. You may throw caution to the wind, and deny these three paths I have laid before you. It is impossible to know what lies beyond this choice, not only for you, but for myself. Though the choices laid before you are random, they are a controlled random. The specifics cannot be controlled, but the general nature is

set in stone. Rejection, however, is purely unpredictable for all who are involved. You will not know what lies beyond, and the fate of Paxmors will be unknown. This chaos, this total embrace of unpredictation, we call Reputio.

Regardless of which you choose, your memory of this journey will be gone. Only those who live within the Mistwoods can know of its existence.

There, beyond the roiling Rubicon, lie your options. Terminus, Renatus, Mutatio, or Reputio. Take heed, and consider cautiously. Your decision will be final.”

Paxmors’s eyes slowly returned to their normal white, and they slowly descended back onto the ground.

Danielle rushed over and gripped their hands. “What did that mean?”

Paxmors stood silent, turned to Danielle, and replied with a solemn look on their face. “I am afraid I don’t know. The Mistwoods were speaking through me. Your decision is up to you. All I have ever been able to do is guide you to this point.”

Danielle stumbled backwards, confused. “Terminus... Renatus... Mutatio... and, Reputio. I don’t understand.”

Paxmors stared blankly at the far shore, across the Rubicon. “I am afraid... that beyond this point, I can help you no longer. I have served as a guide, and with your journey at an end, I can guide you no longer. I am unable to give you counsel on this decision. That is up to you. I must bid thee farewell.”

Paxmors reached into the canopy of the trees, and pulled from it a Reveloberry. They turned and approached Danielle. “A parting gift, from me to you. Whatever your decision is, may you enjoy it. Maybe

we will meet again, maybe we will not. Though this journey was chaotic, I am proud to have met you, and been your guide.”

They placed the berry in her hand, but Danielle could not reply, she simply didn’t know what to say. As Paxmors walked away, they slowly blurred, fading from Danielle’s vision. She tried to run towards them, screaming, “Wait, no, I still have questions!”

She could not run further though. Right where Paxmors finally disappeared, she slammed into an invisible force. She tried running around, but whatever force that held her back ran in a semicircle around the bank of the river. The Rubicon was the only way she could go.

Feeling defeated, she collapsed into the ground, her back resting against the strange force. She gazed at the Reveloberry in her hand. If she has to go, she wants to see the Mistwoods in its full glory one last time. Who knows how beautiful the Rubicon is with the Reveloberry in effect?

She got back up, and took a bite. This time, the Reveloberry had a very bittersweet flavor. It was pleasant. Bite after bite, the final Reveloberry slowly went away, the bittersweet taste growing stronger with every swallow.

The effects came in waves, just as Danielle had gotten used to. First, was the spike in her heart rate. Then came the jitters, her hands shook, her feet tremored. Her breath got uneasy and labored. Then, slowly the vision came back. She looked into the forest, gazed at all the beautiful white creatures, the gazelle that hopped alongside the bears, the butterflies and sparrows that flew together in the air. It was all so much. Behind her, hidden within the sound of rushing water, she heard a voice, only one voice, singing. The words, she didn’t

understand, but the emotion was clear. It was cheery, lighthearted. It was kind, and loving. The tone felt like a loving embrace.

She turned and faced the river, and its beauty was breathtaking. The aquamarine water was glowing brightly, and salmon as pale as printing paper leaped out of the water in perfect arches. Dragonflies hovered over the water, moving around, here and there, back and forth, in unpredictable patterns. The only thing that felt out of place was the lack of Tempufulum in the air. The canopy was clear, no threads obscuring it. She could finally see how the sky was affected by the Reveloberry. The velvet black had now changed to a vibrant midnight blue, and the stars began to twinkle. Some even shot through the air, leaving bright teal streaks of light. The moon seemed to glow even brighter than before, like a calm blue lightbulb.

Her eyes affixed themselves to the far side of the Rubicon. No creatures waited on the other side. The forest continued on, and the lights glew just as brightly, but it seemed as empty as the Mistwoods always did without the Reveloberry. Slowly, she watched as the salmon faded away, and the lights slowly dimmed. The effect was gone. That was her last time seeing the Mistwoods's true beauty.

Unless, of course, she chose Mutatio. She could live here, maybe forever if she chose that. She would be restricted by her pact, but surely the beauty, the joy, the grandiosity, all the secrets of the universe, would be worth such a pact.

Renatus, Terminus, those choices were awful to her. She felt almost downright disgusted by them. All she ever thought in life was that she would die and go into nothingness. Knowing that she could choose something more, why would she ever choose such a thing?

And Renatus, that was almost insulting. It was just Terminus with a coat of paint. Oh, wow, she could come back as someone else, but it wouldn't matter in the slightest. She wouldn't know anything about her life. She wouldn't know a thing about Dani, or her mom, or Kerry, Hannah, Uncle Cam and Liam, none of them. It would all be gone. Sure, it might be better, but the brutal truth was that it would almost certainly be even worse. It was a meaningless choice, and would give her nothing. She outright despised those options.

Mutatio was so clear. It would be amazing. Even if she had to lose her memory of who she is now, who she used to be, at least she had knowledge of what would come next. She could live in this beauty. The amazement of the Mistwoods, she could stay here.

But, what about Reputio? It was pure unpredictability. She had no clue what could be on the other side, but that's exactly why it was so tempting. She may never have this chance again. She knows what the Mistwoods are like. Even if she forgets the experience, she will have had that experience. This chance, though, the chaos on the other side, it could be something she has never experienced before. It could be something she may consider impossible. It felt as if it called to her.

Only, she had that nagging thought in the back of her mind, something trying to force its way out of her box. It kept screaming, loud enough that she could no longer ignore it. What if it's something awful? Something horrible? Wanting to break the rules, go beyond what is known is what got her in so much trouble in the Mistwoods anyway. Maybe it wasn't the smartest decision. No, it definitely wasn't the smartest decision. It would be best for her to go with something safe.

Mutatio, that was where she wanted to go. The Mistwoods, they were amazing. It was the perfect option. She got the chance to live again, live in a life that she could reasonably assume would be safe, comfortable, and beautiful. She would get the guarantee of learning so much more about the universe, and who knows what would lie ahead after her time as one of them is over? She could get the chance to ascend even further! Learn even more! Reputio was nothing compared to it. Mutatio was the right choice, the best choice, it had to be.

Resolved to a final decision, Danielle began to walk. Step by step, she approached the water. She repeated in her mind the word, Mutatio, Mutatio, Mutatio.

She could feel the Rubicon's droplets gracefully flying in the air hit her face. The mist landed all over her body. She took her first step into the water.

As soon as her foot was submerged in the Rubicon, a shout from the deepest recesses of her mind echoed. But what if Reputio is something good?

She continued to walk, her other foot became submerged in the river.

She couldn't judge the unknown as awful just because the unknown is bad sometimes. Sometimes the unknown is amazing. Danielle remembered how in her life, sometimes she would go on a date and hate it, but sometimes she met a really nice person. Sometimes she met a new person and thought they were annoying, but sometimes they became good friends. Hannah was an unknown once, and she was one of the kindest and most amazing people she had ever met.

With every step, the river got deeper and deeper. Quickly, it reached all the way to her waist.

No, no, no, that's not a safe thought. She had to make the safe choice. Curiosity kills the cat, she should know this by now. Mutatio was the safe choice, it was what she had to go with. She couldn't just forget the perfect nature of the Mistwoods. She may never get the chance to live there again. But, what if she never got the chance for Reputio again?

Her thoughts flicked back and forth like a metronome. Mutatio, Reputio, Mutatio, Reputio. She slowly approached the center of the Rubicon, her mind still flying back and forth.

Take the chance, she thought, take the chance. Take a chance on love, on friendship, on life, on hope.

Her thoughts grew heavy, and her body fell weak. The water was now almost to her breasts. Reputio, Reputio, Reputio she thought. Her knees felt like they were going to buckle, but she wouldn't give up, she kept walking. She repeated it in her head, over, and over again. I reject it, I reject the three decisions, I choose Reputio.

One step, another, each step was more difficult than the last. A third step, a fourth. There wasn't a fifth. Her mind went blank, her body worked up the strength to mutter a single word.

"Reputio."

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, and Danielle collapsed into the roil of the Rubicon. She had no more strength. Her body was whisked down the river like a feather in a tornado. She lacked the strength to hold her breath. Her lungs began to fill with water, and her head felt lighter and lighter. Her eyes were shut, her body completely limp, but her mind tried its best to keep fighting.

Her final thought, Reputio, Reputio, Reputio.

Her mind was gone. With a flash of white, it was all swept away. The glow of the trees, the visions from the Reveloberries, the walks with Paxmors, her discussion with Desi. It was all gone. The Rubicon, too, faded away. The Mistwoods no longer existed in Danielle's mind.

The air was sterile, clean.