

But everyone knows that at the end of the rainbow is a faery that grants six wishes, AND an enchanted island, AND there is a LEPRECHAUN with all his gold, and stuff. So, my quest is well worth it in the end. See, my parents died a few years back, and I'm still convinced that it's my fault. And i know most kids feel like that when their parents die. But my parents didn't just get into some hapless accident-- they were murdered by something... unnatural. Something that shouldn't have existed. Something that I had accidentally created. One of my six wishes is going to be to have my parents back with me; that i know for a fact. The remaining five wishes, I don't know.

Ohh, sure, there's a couple of obstacles-- Desert of hearts, fire- breathing dragon, Puzzle Forest, and the epically-named Sea of Doom --but nothing i can't handle with my powers. Oh, right, by the way, i have powers...which is the reason i know all this crap about the end of the rainbow, because honestly, what normal teenager knows anything about that sort of stuff? I mean, no, I'm not psychic. But i can control a few things...well never mind, you'll find out when the time comes. My hand is sort of cramping up, and i don't feel like explaining all this stuff to you right now.

So tomorrow, i set off. I still need to pack, and say goodbye to my friends (all two of them!) and whatnot. A week ago, i told my grandma that i was leaving. She smiled and patted my hand and said that it was fine, and good luck. Then she went off to her room to rummage around, because there was something that she wanted to give me, but she couldn't find it.

I've got this huge buzz right now--anxiety, nervousness, and the overall excitement of spending the better part of my Summer Vacay in a totally different universe.

Ohhhh yes. This should definitely be great.

DAY 2: Well, so, i packed up all my stuff, and crammed it into my backpack. It looks sort of sad, actually. My dark green backpack is like this huge giant lumpy package. I need to go. I said goodbye to all my friends already, and i really need to start heading out of here...but i can't. I don't know why, i just can't force myself to go down into my basement and read words out of some book and hope that i get transferred into another world. I mean, it seems easy enough. But what if i don't transfer all the way through, or i get stuck in some OTHER world, and i don't even make it to Dawnair country, and then i can't get back and I'm stuck forever in some sort of void of death--you know, i really need to stop worrying about this. I should just get up, and walk over to my door, and descend the basement steps, and open that damn spell book that i got when i was in seventh grade, and flip to the sixty-eighth page, and read the spell out, and close my eyes, and wait to be taken away to Dawnair. My indecision is going to be a horrible roadblock on this trip. Maybe if i write about something else and take my mind off of it, I'll make up my mind to do it.

Yes. And maybe sheep will grow long tongues which they will use to trip people.

Granny found the thing that she was looking for, and she gave it to me. It's a thin gold chain with an old key on it. I asked her what the key was for, and she just gave me this smug look and said,

"Charlotte. This is the key to your house."

I was like, "Granny...I live with you. I don't even own an iPod, much less a house." and she just smiled at me and hobbled away. What the heck...

ARGH, i need to do this. I NEED TO. Why am i just lying here on my bed writing in this ridiculous journal that Jared gave me, when i should be down in the basement, preparing to go on a fabulous quest?!!

It's because I'm scared. That's why. I don't want to admit it to anyone, least of all myself, but I really am scared. That's why I'm stalling, why I'm just sitting here. You know what? No. I'm going to get up, and I'm going to go down those stairs and get that spellbook and go to Dawnair. **LATER::** Oh, my God. I went into the basement and i dug around until i found that superold spellbook that i haven't touched since i got it. See, i was scared, that i was going to die if i used it. I've never used any of the spells in it before, even though i know I'm perfectly capable of executing at least all of the spells in the first twelve chapters. It was just too scary of a prospect for me, to think that i could cast spells. It made me feel like i was some sort of a witch or something. I'm *not* a witch. A witch has to make some sort of sacrifice to the devil or something like that. I wouldn't know, because I'm not one. But I'm not a witch, i was just born with powers, and some people happened to know about them, and give me this old spellbook, so that i could...well...cast spells.

But, moving on. I opened the book and i searched the spell that i was looking for--the one that appears in the book every four years, so that you don't use it every day. And it only stays in the book for two months. How depressing is that? So it basically forces you to use the spell, or wait another four years. Well, when i was twelve, i opened the spellbook and looked at it and found that special page and read the description and snapped it shut immediately, deemed that this book was Of The Devil, and then left it in the basement and haven't touched it since two months ago, when i was talking to Jared about Summer Vacation. He was all,

"So, Charlotte, what are you going to do for summer vacation this year?"

And i was all, "I DON'T KNOW, JARED."

"Maybe you should use that spellbook you got in seventh grade," Jared had suggested. I had given him a look of utmost horror and recoiled from the idea.

But, of course, like everything that anyone says, EVER, the idea was planted in the back of my mind. And i was thinking about it. And i kept thinking about it. For two whole months. Then on a random impulse, i thought of that one spell, the one that i can't even tell you the name of because if you know the name you might use it. And you are not allowed to use it, because it's reserved for...well, people like me.

Alright. So i pulled out this book and I read this spell and i closed my eyes and waited. And then this whole awful, tingly-shocky feeling rushed through my veins. It felt like every muscle in my body had turned into metal, and i was standing in a giant furnace, and all of my body parts were just melting into a horrible heap of Charlotteness. And i was gripping the pages of the books because it specifically instructed the spell-caster not to let go, no matter what happened. Because you see, the spellbook is the only way back into The-World-As-We-Know-It; as in, planet earth, and the solar system with Neptune and Mars and all those other great planets that we don't bother learning all that much about.

So i didn't let go, and I forced my eyes to look down at my hands, which were clinging to the book. And i tried screaming because what i saw was just so disgusting and terrifying, but i

couldn't because my mouth was already gone. My hands were melting *into the book*, if that makes any sense, and my whole body, from my blue hair to my black-painted toenails, was just a massive swirl of moving lights that were getting sucked into the book, except my hands, which were firmly clamped onto the book. My first thought was *LET GO. MAKE IT STOP*, but then common sense shoved that thought away and i just gripped on even tighter, and then all the sudden i could see a lake, and it looked like glass, because it was so shiny and calm-looking. But i could tell it was a lake because there were fish swimming around in it, and there was even a random sprig of purple seaweed floating on the top, with a strange bird nibbling on it. And as i stood there on the pink grass, holding a spellbook in my hands, I realised that i was hungry.

Which was just the most random thing to think of when i found myself in an alternate universe. But it was still my first thought. So i closed the spellbook and tucked it away into my backpack, and pulled out a Lucky Charms cereal bar. A voice in my head that sounded suspiciously like Granny's said, "*If you're going to be eating all those cereal bars, at least get a healthy sort of cereal*"

For once in my life, i ignored Granny's voice and chomped down on my unhealthy cereal bar. As i was eating it, i felt a presence. I turned around, not having the faintest idea of what to expect, and saw a giant ball of white fluff that was walking toward me on stick-like black legs. I blinked a few times just to make sure i was really seeing what i thought i was seeing. I was. The walking ball of fluff came directly up to me, and i wondered if it was a sort of dangerous animal here. What if, hidden under all of that fluff, was a huge row of fierce, pointy teeth? I certainly hoped there wasn't. I could see two small, round black eyes staring at me. An opening appeared underneath the eyes, and the fluff made a noise.

"BAAAAAA !" it said.

I screamed. It was just so loud and unexpectedly shrill, that i couldn't help myself. The creature blinked at me, and then baa'd again. This time i didn't scream. It didn't seem exactly intent on killing me, and I could somehow tell that under all that fluff, it was eyeing my cereal bar. I backed away from it a little bit, taking another bite of my cereal bar.

It happened so fast. First i was standing there, eating my cereal bar, and then an incredibly long, pink tongue shot out of the thing's mouth and wrapped around my legs, effectively tripping me, and making me drop my snack. The creature snatched up my cereal bar and ran away in a waddling fashion on its odd legs. I stared after it. *Was that a sheep?* I wondered. It looked exactly like a 3D form of how i used to draw sheep. How i would draw sheep now, if i had any reason to draw them. So, so weird.

After my encounter with the sheep-thing, I was a little bit shaken up. I had had no idea what to expect when i came to Dawnair, and now i had even less of an idea. I mean, the grass here is *pink*. And they have weird sheep with long tongues! WHO STEAL YOUR CEREAL BARS!

...i feel even more frightened. And i haven't seen anyone, at all. Not a single person is here. Oh wait...i see someone now. They look pretty normal. They look like they're headed over here. I think, by the way that they're walking, that they're a girl. Maybe i should call out? No no, i'll just wait here until she comes up to me.

LATER, AGAIN:: Woops. That was totally a guy. A really thin guy who walks by swaying his hips in a very feminine way. His name is Lynx, and he has cat ears on the top of his head, like

the people that i used to see in manga books. But they're not a decoration. He doesn't have normal human ears, just the cat ears. And he has a tail. But everything else about him appears to be human...this is just so weird. He's got dark brown hair that's almost black, and his cat ears are black. His eyes are green and his skin is an olive tone, almost like he's Italian. Except that Italy doesn't exist here, so i really don't know where he's from. His cat tail is black and grey striped, sort of like a ring-tailed lemur, and his eyes are the shape of cat eyes, and slanted above his high cheekbones, which gives him this really attractive, although a bit cryptic, appearance. He wears black skinny jeans and a tight ocean blue shirt with a yellow and red star on it. His shoes look like Converse All Star, but they're not, because Converse doesn't exist here. I think he's around my age, but I'm not sure, and i don't want to ask him. Geez, I have all these questions and I'm too much of a wuss to ask any of them. I need to get over my shyness.

Lynx introduced himself to me, then quizzed me on where i was from and why i was there, and then he asked my name.

"Charlotte," i told him. He gasped and fanned his hands in the air as if he was super duper excited about something.

"Charlotte Scene?!!" Lynx cried, his eyes wide and expectant. I felt slightly creeped out that he knew my full name, but I nodded, confirming his guess.

Lynx grabbed my backpack and swung it over his shoulder, and then seized my arm and pulled me along with him as he started heading along a section of purple gemstones that were laid along the ground like a sidewalk.

"What the hell, where are we going?" I asked, but I didn't try to twist out of his grip. I had no choice but to trust him right now, and besides, he had my backpack. If i did get out of his grip, he'd still have my spellbook, and there would be no way to go back to Earth. He eventually led me to a large rock that appeared to be a massive diamond, and pressed his palm to it. We both shimmered out of existence, and then i was standing in some sort of house.

The house's walls, floors, and ceilings were made out the same type of partially-see-through rock that Lynx had pressed his palm to outside, and it seemed like there wasn't a top to the house. There were rows and rows of cavities cut out into the rock, much like in a catacomb, only each cut-out square was big enough to be a room. Odd but interesting people filled the entire house, some with cat ears like Lynx, and some with rabbit ears, and some with bird beaks, and some with long tentacles like an octopus. I tried not to stare, but I found myself staring at every single person who passed me.

Lynx led me to one of the rooms, and set down my backpack on a bed that looked like it was carved out of the same rock that seemed to be everywhere. It didn't look very comfortable at all.

"Here you go, Charlotte," Lynx said. He had this huge catlike grin spreading across his face, and then he walked away. And i didn't even protest.

He left me here in this random cubbyhole of a room, without any introduction to anyone else, or instructions of any sort, and he didn't even tell me how i was going to reach him again.

But i know he'll back be really soon.

Would it be especially odd to say that I could feel him walking towards me?

LATER, AGAIN. . .HOW MANY TIMES AM I GOING TO HAVE TO WRITE THE WORD

"LATER"?: So i guess I'm not crazy, because Lynx did come back, right when i knew he

would. I don't know how i knew it, i could just feel it. I could feel his presence, and i knew it was him. This is all so mind-boggling...

Lynx looked really pissed about something, his cat-tail lashing around as he entered.

"You need to come meet someone," he told me. I could tell that he wasn't pleased about me meeting this person, whoever they were.

"Who do i have to meet?" I asked, curious. I pulled my backpack onto my shoulders, not taking any chances. If someone, anyone, took my backpack, i would be stuck here forever. That was not a risk i was willing to take.

"Just...this person. My sister," Lynx said, his tail lashing around harder. His cat ears twitched inward and then pointed towards the doorway. "Never mind, here she comes now." he sighed, taking a few steps back. A tall girl sauntered in. She had dark brown hair and black ears similar to Lynx's, only instead of her eyes being green, they were a piercing, icy blue. I felt like shrinking back from her gaze, but i stayed where i was as she sized me up with those cold eyes.

"Charlotte Scene, huh?" she asked. I nodded, then realized that if i wanted to make an impression on her, now was the time to do it.

"Yeahh, what?" I asked, as nonchalantly as i could. I saw her reevaluating me and i straightened up, my posture giving off a 'screw you' type of aura. She now seemed less like an imposing ice queen and more of an annoying know-it-all that I'd encounter in the hallways at school.

"I have a map for you," Lynx's (annoying) sister told me, reaching into the pocket of her (annoying) oversized light pink hoodie. She brought out a rolled up piece of paper, and i reached for it. She (annoyingly) handed it to Lynx instead, as though this small (annoying) act of defiance would make her a better person than me. Then she (annoyingly) swept out of the room in an annoying sort of way.

"I know. She's so annoying," Lynx sighed, sitting down on the bed that looked so uncomfortable. As soon as he sat down, i knew the bed was comfortable. So i went and sat down next to him, my backpack still slung over one shoulder. It was the most comfortable bed i had ever touched in my entire life. The rock seemed to fold around my body in the exact way that i wanted it to. It was perfect.

"What's her name?" i asked.

"Liz." He said, knowing that i was talking about his sister. But he stretched it out like, "Lizzzzzzzzzzzz", in this way that i knew that he was fed up with her attitude about being better than everyone else. Or maybe it was just the weird connection that Lynx and i had.

"Why did she give me that map?" i asked, taking the paper from Lynx's hands.

"I have no idea. Honestly? i don't even know how i knew who you were, or how i knew that i had to bring you here. I hope you don't think that's weird of something--"

He broke off, and laid back on the bed, folding his arms underneath his neck in what looked like a complicated knot. Then he sighed, really long, as i stared at him, waiting for him to say something else. He didn't. But it wasn't an awkward silence. It was a comfortable silence, the type of silence that i had while i was on a long car ride with Granny, and neither of us had all that much to say.

I unrolled the map and looked at it, then burst out laughing. It looked exactly like a map i had drawn of my backyard, back when i was in fifth grade. The names of places were different,

but it was the same sort of horribly drawn caricatures of my yard. I had thought that my backyard was boring as hell, so i had added in a few elements--mountains, unicorns, zombies, and a few other interesting things. Those same exact drawings were on the map that i had unrolled before me, the same one that I'm holding in my right hand right now, while i write this.

But the sun is going down, so I will just stop writing for now, and go to bed on this comfortable creation that is made out of rock.

DAY 3:: Today, I checked to make sure my spellbook was still in the pocket where i had left it, strapped my beaten up backpack to my shoulders, and started for the front door where i had entered the day before. And then there was this weird feeling in the back of my mind, and I stopped walking, and then I sat down to wait for Lynx to come with me. I could feel him coming closer, and I could feel it when he broke into a jog. I could feel him start worrying when he thought I'd left without him. It was the best feeling ever.

"Ready to go?" Lynx asked me, a grey backpack over one shoulder. He broke into a grin when he saw that i was just sitting there, waiting for him to come. I reached into the pocket of my black cargo pants and pulled out the map, waving it at him.

"Of course I am!" I exclaimed, excitement bubbling up inside of me. He grabbed my hand and then we walked straight into the rock walls. It was like walking through a waterfall-an enormous weight crushing down on your shoulders and head, trying to push you down. I emerged from it panting and struggling for breath. Lynx emerged as calm as he'd been before.

"Geesh," I mumbled, sitting down cross legged on the pink grass. Lynx sat down across from me and we spread out the map.

"Here's where we are now," he informed me, resting one long finger on what looked like a giant ice cube. Underneath the drawing, in a scrolling script that was hard to read, i could read the words, Areyan Commons .

"Areyan? What's that?" i asked Lynx, although i felt as though I should know this already. Lynx's tail twitched in an amused fashion. He pointed to the rock that we had just walked through.

"That rock. It's called Areyan. That's where we get our strength from."

"That's why everything in there is made out of that rock..." I realized, a smile forming on my lips.

"Yeah, that would be correct. It's quite a unique rock, actually. You can do most anything with it. If you imagine hard enough, Areyan can bend to your will and become whatever you want. I wouldn't recommend doing that with clothes, though. If you lose concentration...that could be bad."

I made a disturbed face and then turned back to the map.

"So we're here. And we need to go...here." i said, tracing the paths with my index finger as i planned out our journey in my mind.

"How the hell are you planning on getting through Puzzle Forest?" asked a male voice that wasn't Lynx.

Lynx and i whirled around, both of us instantly on guard. Lynx bared his teeth and i wondered, not for the first time, what sort of creature he was.

A boy stood there, not much older than i was, with shaggy black hair, black eyes, and dark grey cat ears. His looks were very similar to Lynx's except that this boy was wearing a

black shirt and khaki shorts. His grey tail arched as he strode towards us, and then he went,

"HI I'M ANTHONY." in a very loud voice. Then he grinned at Lynx and twitched his ears forward. Lynx glared at Anthony, radiating hostility, then sat back down again, slowly, tentatively. Anthony sat in between both of us, and then poked Lynx's cheek.

"Hi, Lynx, hello Lynx's Friend. I'm going to come with you. Liz told me about your *adventure* type thing," he said, placing emphasis on the word 'adventure'. And then he ignored us and started pouring over the map.

"My name is Charlotte," i introduced myself. Anthony didn't even look up, but twitched his ears to acknowledge that he had heard me.

"That's my second-cousin," Lynx informed me. I looked at Anthony, and back at Lynx.

"I can tell," I said. I turned my attention back to the map.

"Well?" Anthony prodded, looking up at me, "how are you planning on getting through Puzzle Forest?"

"I don't even know what Puzzle Forest *is*..." I sighed, looking around. According to the map, that was our second obstacle. "Why don't we start with this...Valley Of Grey? What kind of a name is that?"

"It's where we bury the dead people," Lynx said, looking slightly wary, "Are you sure we have to go through there?"

"Yeahh, that's what it says. See?" I showed him the map, leaving my finger on the words Valley Of Grey. He studied the map and began tracing different paths around it, trying to figure out an alternate route. But there wasn't one.

"Great. We're all going to die, now." Anthony said. Ohh, well wasn't that just the most uplifting thing to say.

"Why are we going to die? If the Valley Of Grey is the place where you bury your dead, i should think we'd be fine. I mean, i can understand how it's a bit creepy, but I really do not--"

"Charlotte, you don't understand," Lynx broke in, cutting me off.

"What? What don't i understand?" i asked.

"The dead don't always stay dead," Anthony explained, his ears twitching. I laughed, but when i saw their expressions, I stopped short.

"Wait, seriously?"

"Yes, Charlotte. Seriously." Lynx said. I felt my face drain of color, and then I studied the map again. The crudely-drawn zombie was there, both arms outstretched in the stereotypical zombie fashion.

"Oh, my God." I said. "We're going to die."

"Not if we can get our hands on a spellbook. We can just re-kill them all." Lynx suggested, flipping around so that he was lying on his back. A weird tingle went down the back of my spine. Did he know about my spellbook? I hadn't mentioned anything about it to anyone, nor had my backpack left my sight since i had arrived. There was no way he could know. No possible way at all.

"Yeah, but where exactly are you planning on finding one of *those*?" Anthony questioned, cutting into my thoughts. "Those aren't really the most common thing around, you know. And if we did find them, they're really expensive, and i doubt anyone would let us use their spellbook for free. Basically, we're doomed."

"We're not *doomed*." Lynx sniped, rolling his eyes. "Just pack some Areyan and we can use some of our powers to kill them off."

"Umm. . . does Charlotte *have* powers?" Anthony asked, looking over at me. I sighed, and closed my eyes. When i reopened them, both cat-boys were still staring at me.

"A few," i admitted, twirling a strand of my long, blue hair around my finger.

"What can you do?" Lynx asked, not in a challenging way, but in a sort of I Just Want To Protect You If You Can't Protect Yourself way.

"Well, i can control fire. That's my major. And I can--"

"Well gosh. If you can control fire, i really don't think you need any other powers anyway," Lynx pointed out, "Fire kills the undead faster than anything else."

"That's true. Man are we lucky," Anthony agreed. He stood up and said, "wow. Look at it."

Across the sky was stretched the longest, most brilliant rainbow i had ever seen in my life. Each and every color of the rainbow was distinctly different, but it blended together so that you couldn't tell where one of the colors started and another ended. Random sparks appeared in the rainbow, as if stars were being born and then dying just as quickly, a brilliant flash in the rainbow being their only existence.

"Faeries," Lynx said. I instinctively knew he was talking about the flashes.

"What are they doing?" i asked.

"Fighting." He replied. It was only one word, but it sent chills up and down my spine. Faeries were supposed to be serene and peaceful creatures, not bloody war machines.

"We're never going to get anywhere if we don't start out now," Anthony said, "so let's go. It's almost lunchtime and i haven't eaten anything yet."

"You haven't eaten yet?" Lynx asked, giving his second cousin an odd look, "Well what was stopping you?"

"The fear that i was going to be too late and not make it in time. I really want to go with you guys. I mean...i need to get to the end of the rainbow, too. There's things that i need that i can only get by going there. I live in this country and i've never even thought about going there for real. I mean, sure, we've all thought about it since we were kittens, but it was never a serious idea..."

"I know what you mean," Lynx said. I stood up and Lynx sprang up next to me.

"Let's go," i decided, rolling up the map and sticking it back into my pocket. And off we went.

We walked for about six miles, and then we stopped to take a rest and eat. I had no idea what the time difference was, because i was really tired and not hungry at all, but i forced down some food anyway, knowing that we wouldn't be making another stop any time soon. I ate a piece of cornbread, and that was it, and then i sat down here on the ground to write this.

I'm sitting on this really uncomfortable root, actually. It's digging into my upper thigh, and i can feel the seams on my back pockets digging into my butt. But it's not as bad as it could be, and i really am just too tired to move, so i'll just sit here for awhile, until we start moving again.

Lynx and Anthony just got into a fight over whose tail is better. I voted for Lynx's tail and Anthony gave me a dirty look and stuck his tongue out. It's a small, pink tongue like a cat's.

I just realized that although i know next to nothing about these two boys, not even their

ages or their last names, i trust the both of them completely. I feel like I've known them for my entire life, even though I've only known them a few hours. And the connection that i have with Lynx is getting stronger. I swear i can feel his thoughts now, too. But not all of them, just some of them, almost as if he's only sharing the thoughts that he wants me to hear. It's strange, but it feels perfectly normal. If something like this had happened back on Earth, i would've been like, *what the hell?!! what's going on...?!!* but here, in Dawnair, it's not weird at all. It's normal.

LATER:: I am going to die. I am doomed. I am going to die. I AM GOING TO DIE. DEATH AWAITS ME.

The thing is...we're about to enter The Valley of Grey. We made a short stop about a mile off, so that we could rest, and just basically do whatever we felt we needed to do before we continued. It didn't take that long, the total journey was about twenty six miles. The one thing i kept thinking about was how much easier and quicker this all would have been, if only we had a car. I mentioned that at one point, but Lynx and Anthony just stared at me, and i spent the next four miles trying very hard to explain to them what a car was. In the end, they still didn't get it.

"So, wait...it's just like a box on wheels?...*WHAT?*" Lynx asked, totally confused. I groaned.

"Nevermindddd..."

"It sounds fantastic..." Anthony said, sounding like he meant it.

"Well, yeahh. They are," i replied, "Which is what i have been trying to tell you for the past hour and a half..."

So after i finished my lame, pathetic attempt at describing cars, we trekked in silence for awhile. I wondered if there was some way to bring Lynx and Anthony back into the Real World with me. I wondered if they would be willing to go. I wondered how people would react to their appearances. And then i started wondering what *was* the Real World. Maybe the world i came from wasn't the Real World at all. Maybe *this* was the Real World, the place where cars didn't exist and clear, shiny rocks that had magical powers did. Or maybe i was just over-thinking the whole situation. Yeahh. That was probably it.

I still *am* over-thinking it all. My brain is going to melt away if i keep thinking about this. Because i keep wanting everything to make sense. And nothing here is *supposed* to make sense. Everything here is a mystery to me, and that's how it is supposed to be.

But in a really strange way, everything makes sense at the same time that it makes no sense.

You know what else is making absolutely no sense?

Me, and what I'm writing right now.

I can hear louder noises from the valley, echoing off of the trees and the walls of the mountains on the other side. Ghastly moans that sound like someone is trapped in something that they don't want to be in. I so do not want to do this. If Lynx and Anthony weren't here with me, i would definitely not even be thinking about doing it.

I'm sitting on a tree branch, and I'm realizing that i don't even know what kind of tree this is. It isn't a maple, or an oak, or an elm, or any of those types of trees. The shape of the leaf looks like a six pointe star, and the bark isn't rough at all. It's smooth, like a birch's bark, only it's not all peely and weird. Plus the bark is light blue... the leaves are green, though. It's like a throwback to the Real World, textures of everything here are weird, and they're all the wrong

color, and then finally something is normal and it seems weird to me. Maybe I am losing touch with the Real World...

Anthony wants to leave, now. He's all antsy. Both he and Lynx are on the edge, their tails are lashing around in agitation, and their ears keep pointing in every direction. Just looking at them makes me nervous. I don't want to be nervous. I want to be calm. If I'm nervous, my powers might go haywire and doom us all. And that would be just the worst thing ever. Oh, my God. I can hear noises, echoing across the valley. I'm getting so anxious just sitting here waiting. I wonder if I have to look at the zombies in order to kill them, or if I can just sort of blast them away all at once, in a big wave or something. I don't know if I'll be able to kill them if I'm looking at them.

What am I even saying? How can I kill *anything*? I'm only sixteen. I can't *kill* someone. Even if they're undead. I'm just not old enough. Killing things is what murderers do. It's what the marines do, so that they can defend our country. It's what hunters do, to get animal furs and meat for their family. It's not what a sixteen year old does over her summer vacation.

Oh. Lynx just decided that we have to go, now. Wish me luck with this.

DAY 4: You will not believe what I have just been through.

On the bright side, I can control my powers just fine now, and I am still alive.

On the dark side, Anthony can't control his powers quite as well, and Lynx is really hurt. I'm not sure how bad it is...but here, I'll start from the beginning.

So after I packed up my journal and securely strapped my backpack onto my weary shoulders, we all set off. I could still hear the moaning, echoing and echoing and echoing. Instead of fading, it seemed to grow stronger every time the sound wave bounced off of another mountain wall. It was hideous and inhuman, that much I could tell. But the problem was, that it also did sound human. Some small degree of humanity still remained inside of these creatures, and you could hear it in the way that they sobbed, that they knew what they were, and they wished that they were different. They didn't ask to be reanimated in such a mockery of the human form. Instead, some higher form of being made them this way.

And gave them an incredible thirst for brains.

When I was little, I always wanted zombies to be real. Most girls my age were talking about princesses and unicorns. I already knew that those things existed, although I had to keep my mouth shut about it. I found that when I talked about these things: the unicorns that I saw in my backyard, and the princess whose eighteenth birthday party I had attended, parents kept me away from their children. They said I had an overactive imagination.

I didn't have any imagination, because what other children imagined, for me, was the real thing. I started reading books that my younger brother, Logan, had, and I read one or two that were about zombies.

From that point on, I harbored a secret obsession with zombies.

Or maybe not so secret, judging by the pictures I drew in school. A happy, square-ish house with a smiling family of kittens outside of it, and a huge rainbow stretching across the sky. And from the left of the picture came a huge wave of zombies. Actually, I think that's when parents first started to tell their kids to stay away from me.

But here, in Dawnair, it wasn't just my imagination that produced huge zombie waves. As we entered the valley, the three of us were all eyes and ears. We didn't talk, we didn't make a

single sound. At some points we held our breath, trying to be even quieter than possible. The first zombie i saw was a child. We heard a *splat* and i tensed up beyond recognition. My shoulders were as stiff as a brick, and all of my muscles were so tight that my shaking body would not turn to let me look. Anthony turned first. And his tail stuck straight up. A tiny mewling noise started at the back of his throat and he glommed onto my arm, scared. I jumped at the unexpected physical contact and then whirled around, forcing myself to look. Lynx turned around at the same time. There was a little girl. And I saw her. And I opened my mouth to scream. And I shut it instantly.

She was almost four feet tall, and she was just standing there. Her skin was grey and green, and mottled with bruises, and the long, stringy blond hair that was somehow still attached to the crown of her head almost completely hid the section of her rib cage that simply *wasn't there*. She scratched her arm with something that was originally a human hand, but now looked more like a claw. A clump of skin bunched together under her long bloodstained fingernails and then fell off of her arm, hitting the ground with a splatting noise. She tilted her head to the side as she stared at us, exposing a large hole in her neck.

"Be quiet!" Lynx hissed, clapping his hand over my mouth. I don't know how he knew that i was about to scream, but I am so glad that he did. His hand over my lips made me angry, angry about what the world had done to this little girl, and angry that i had to either kill her or be killed by her. I chose the first one.

I cupped my palm the way Granny had taught me, and just rested for a moment, feeling the heat in the living things around me. Everything that was dead was alive once, and everything that is dead wants to be alive again. Alive with the burning life of fire. So, it was no great surprise that my powers were instantly attracted directly toward the girl. All the heat that was in my body suddenly seemed too hot, too itchy, to stay there. So i pulled all of my extra body heat into the palm of my hand, and i aimed it directly at the zombie girl's chest. She exploded into flames, not making a single noise, not a scream or a moan or anything. And then the flames were gone, and she had dissolved into a pile of dirt. A beetle scuttled out from inside the dirt heap and burrowed into some blackened grass. I shivered. Anthony made a gagging noise. Lynx just gave me a small half smile, like he was impressed with me. And then i heard a noise like an egg falling and breaking open, followed by numerous other sounds of the same tone. Splatting. A smell filled the air, like when someone leaves rotten meat in a black container. In the middle of the world's hottest summer. This time i turned around in a record time of two seconds.

A massive amount of zombies stood there, reaching towards us, wanting our flesh.

"Shit," said Lynx.

"Run," said Anthony. Instinctively i grabbed both of their hands. It was true that holding hands slowed down our running by the slightest bit, but it was better to be slower than it was to get separated. I chanced a look over my shoulder and saw how close they were.

Um... yeahh, Fuck that. I let go of both of them and tilted my hands backwards, my body heat filling and refilling my cupped palms as i sent fire towards the zombies, until i was so cold that I couldn't feel my feet. I knew i should stop before i did something horrible, such as overexerting myself, so i grabbed Lynx's hand again and started running. Anthony was doing something, but i couldn't tell what it was out of the corner of my eye. It looked like he was

kneading his palms. And then a blinding white light bounced off of the mountain's side and directly into our eyes. I temporarily lost my vision.

"WHAT THE HELL, ANTHONY?!!!" i yelled.

"I'm sorry! I meant to deflect *them*!" he yelled back, a panicky note in his voice.

"How long have you been able to use your powers?" Lynx asked Anthony in the calmest voice he could summon.

"I. . . I don't know! About. . .three months?"

"Three months?!!" i shrieked. That would not have been enough time for *anyone* to learn about their powers. Anthony probably didn't even realize what he could do with the full extent of his powers. He also probably didn't realize how his powers affected him.

"My eyes...i can't see as well..." i heard Anthony mumble next to me. *Shit*. Well he was realizing how they affected him *now*.

"Your eyesight?" i asked Anthony, although i already knew the answer, "Your powers affect your eyesight?"

"Well i guess so...i mean, everything just got a lot dimmer."

He tripped over a rock, and i grabbed his arm to steady him, and we kept running.

"Lynx, can you carry him?" I asked. Lynx didn't even stop to answer. He wrapped one arm around Anthony's waist and scooped him up as we ran. Millions of calculations ran through my mind. Anthony was going to slow us down. Lynx wouldn't be able to run as fast. The zombies were going to catch up to us and devour us, and eat our brains like soup. Or cheese dip. Yeah, they could just dip a limb into the brain and it would be like a zombie's crackers and cheese dip.

Whoa, what the hell was i thinking? Where was my mind going? WHY WAS I THINKING ABOUT CHEESE DIP? This was practically the zombie apocalypse that my guyfriends in the Real World were forever drawling on and on about. And i was thinking about whether i would be soup or cheese dip?

I was losing it. That had to be the explanation for it. A sharp breath from Lynx brought me and my wandering thoughts back into reality. A younger zombie had attached itself to his back and had started gnawing away at his backpack. Anthony wasn't in any position to knock it off without getting his whole face chewed off, and Lynx was carrying Anthony. He didn't even think to put him down in order to defend himself. The zombie's claw was sunk into Lynx's shoulder as it tried biting through his backpack, to stupid to realise that it could get an easier meal if it would just move up or down two feet. I balanced out my feelings, and imagined that my hand could slice into anything, anything at all. Lynx was silently encouraging me, i could feel it. This would explain how and why, without saying a word, I silently plunged my hand into Anthony's arm, ripping through muscles and tendons. Because i used my numbing powers, Anthony didn't even feel it. But he felt it when i started draining out his body heat. He looked over at his arm and his mouth dropped open in shock.

"Shut up! I need to. To save Lynx. To save all of us. So just shut up!" i told him. He snapped his mouth shut and gritted his teeth against the pain that he knew he would be in when my hand was removed, and thus the numbing powers. I let go of the breath that was trapped in my lungs, and retracted the waves of power that were numbing Anthony's arm. He'd seen the wound and imagined how much it should hurt, so his body would no longer react properly to the

numbing, anyway. Anthony had an extraordinary amount of body heat. I pulled out just enough, converted it inside of my palm, and roasted the zombie directly off of Lynx's shoulders. I saw a foot, and i killed that, too. I didn't understand how much trouble we were in, but i knew it had to be pretty bad if they were this close. So i took a chance, and i pulled the remaining body heat out of Anthony, and, gripping it all tightly in my wrists, turned around. There were far more zombies than i ever thought. Rows and rows of them, steadily jogging towards us in a shuffling sort of way, losing body parts as they ran, and not caring. Did they even have the *ability* to care? I curled my fingers inwards, until i felt so full of heat, i thought my entire body was going to ignite. Then I aimed all of it at the zombies, turned once more, and began to run again. I did not stop to see what effect my heat waves had caused, and it was because I did not want to. What I wanted to do, was I wanted to run, and run fast, and get away from here forever, and never have to return. So I ran.

My legs were like ice, and it made me slightly clumsy, but i got used to it quickly, and i kept going. Anthony was slumped over. I touched him, and discovered with a start that he was incredibly cold. If i had just killed Anthony...

Immediately i took out more of my own body heat and pushed it back into Anthony, warming him just the slightest bit more. Not enough. He would get frostbite. I took out even more from myself and pushed it in. Not enough. He needed more heat. He could have my body heat. He could have all of it.

I started pushing and pushing, just pushing all of my heat into Anthony. I felt like absolute ice, but I forced my legs to move. I had to go I had to go I had to run I had to go I had to--

--Fall.

My frozen limbs didn't even feel the cold shock as I tumbled down the side of the ravine. The majority of the zombies stopped at the edge of the precipice, with one or two tumbling down with me. Lynx had leaped down over the edge, clinging to a rocky shelf that jutted out a good twenty or thirty feet below the place where the zombies were standing. I plunged into a body of water, and didn't move. No current carried me, no slight breeze from the wind rippled the waves. It was as smooth as glass, and as frightening as hell. I didn't even bob slightly blow the surface of the water, but remained in the exact position i had landed in. My head was twisted to the side, my arms wrapped around me to shield myself from the cold, and my knees were pulled up to my chest. If i had landed on anything other than this strange water, i would have broken my neck for sure. On the left of me was a large, steep inclining hill, and past the hill was what looked like a dark forest. On my right was the sheer drop into the water, the zombies already leaving in despair. They couldn't get down here without falling to pieces on the way down, like the two who had gone over with me. Those two had been instantly drowned, trapped by the water, and were gone forever.

Body heat returned to me in full force, and my skin crackled from the sudden warmth. I mellowed out and closed my eyes tightly, then opened them again. Slowly, checking for any pains or broken limbs, I sat up. And then I sank beneath the surface of the water, and it started moving, rushing around me like a river from the Real World. Except i wasn't getting wet. What was going on with that? Who ever heard of water that wasn't wet?

"Stop that," I instructed the water. It stopped, and resumed its original jellied form. Whoa whoa whoa. What? *What?* It listened to me...? How did the water listen to me? How did water

listen to anyone? Water didn't have ears. Water just did its own thing. It didn't obey me, or anyone else. Every year, in the winter, water flooded Granny's basement, no matter how hard we begged it not to. I remember, last year I wrote a poem in school, about how neat it would be if water listened to me and obeyed everything I said, but acted more like a friend, not as a servant. I had wanted that to be a reality so badly. And in Dawnair, that was reality.

"Bring me up to Lynx and Anthony. My friends. Up there. Please?" i asked it. Everything that was in the form of a liquid surged upwards, towards the rocky ledge where Lynx and Anthony rested. Anthony was trying to help Lynx in any way possible, but he had no way to help him. Lynx's arm was bloody from where the zombie had sunk its nails into him.

"Heyy, guys, what's going on?" i asked. Anthony pointed to the water. I nodded.

"That's.. ...um..." he began, stuttering.

"I know, I know. But just...just don't say anything. I don't understand what's happening, either. Just drag Lynx over to the edge and we can get him down safely, and we can figure this all out later."

Anthony nodded, showing that he understood, and then pushed Lynx close enough for me to catch. I hauled my backpack off of my shoulders and saw that some stupid zombie had gotten a hold of it and chewed a hole in the front pocket.

Dammit. And I had to take this to *school* next Autumn?

I was originally heading for my bandages, but then my hands paused over something else. A red book, with scrawling white script across the front. In two seconds, I made a decision. I put my backpack down on the water that i was sitting on, and put my arms around Lynx's torso. Together, Anthony and I pulled Lynx onto the wave that I was sitting on, and Anthony jumped down after him. The water lowered us down to the ground opposite the Valley of Grey, and then returned to sitting in its original position, as though it had never moved. But i wasn't fooled. I knew what i had seen, what i had felt. I stared hard at the water. It seemed to be mocking me. I thought i saw the water assume the form of a girl, but i wasn't sure. At the moment, i didn't care, either. All i wanted was for Lynx to be healed and be safe. i pulled out the spellbook and flipped through until i found the correct verse. But then i faltered, and i couldn't say it. I just...i couldn't. And so Anthony is sitting next to Lynx, trying to bandage up Lynx's shoulder, and Lynx might warp into a zombie at any given time, and I'm too selfish to help them because i don't want to read a spell out of a book, like a sorceress.

I am such a selfish bitch.

LATER:: Well, that's that, then. I read the spell and healed Lynx. And then I got majorly bitched out by both Lynx and Anthony.

"WHY DID YOU NOT TELL ME THAT YOU HAD A SPELL BOOK THAT IS JUST UNBELIEVABLE BLAH BLAH BLAH".

That was Lynx.

"You mean we easily could have just wiped out all of those zombies without putting a hole in my arm and freezing me to death?"

That was Anthony.

And on and on it goes. I'm pretty sure they're still going on about it, and that was hours ago. They are pretty sensitive about me not telling them about the spellbook. I have no idea why. I mean, i can see why they would be a tad bit offended that i didn't tell them about it. And i

did cause them both some pain because i neglected to mention the fact that i had an old spellbook in my backpack, which we could have used to safely travel through the Valley Of Grey. And okay, so i put a gaping hole in Anthony's arm and used up the majority of his body heat. But I was in pain, too! I nearly died myself! And by the time i had realized just how badly we *did* need a spellbook, it wasn't like we could stop and spread out a picnic blanket, and sit down on it together to study which spell to use. So i can take some of the blame. But man, are they ever guilt tripping me. Especially Lynx. The connection that we had is really dim, and i don't feel like i know him as well as i thought i did.

When it boils down to it, though, i guess i never really knew Lynx in the first place. I don't know his last name, or his age, or even his species. I don't know why he's coming on this quest with me and risking his life for me. I don't know a single thing about him, other than his first name. That's it. That's all i know.

Anthony, he talks nonstop. I know more about Anthony than i know about Jared, back in the Real World. His favorite color, his favorite type of pasta, and his penchant for telling really lame jokes and thinking they're hilariously good. And I love Anthony, I really do. In the way that a small child loves a puppy, of course. I'd be absolutely devastated if he died, and I'd miss him if I didn't see him for a month.

Which makes me think. How am i going to deal, when i get back to the Real World? And when did I stop saying "back home" and start saying "back to the Real World"? When did i honestly stop thinking of the Real World as home? Not, of course, that I think of Dawnair as home. I just don't feel like I have a home. Anywhere. Is that especially strange? It used to be, that when i heard the word "home", i thought of Granny, and of my little fourteen year old brother Logan, and of the ugly, sickly green house that was somehow beautiful despite its pukey color. Now, that's not what i think of. When I say the word "home", out loud, like I did just now, I picture emptiness. Blackness. And a feeling comes and wells up inside of me, and it makes me feel like I'm melting, like all of my muscles and bones are made out of lead, and I'm standing in a vast furnace, and all of my body is melting. It feels like when I was between the two universes, holding the spellbook between my hands as hard as I could. That's what I picture when I think of home.

How am I going to feel when I get to the end of the rainbow, and I have to go back to Granny's house? There's no question about staying here. I am definitely going to return. But I am going to miss Lynx and Anthony, so much. I am going to miss ridiculous sheep-things that steal my cereal bars. I am going to miss the pink grass, and the huge sparkling rainbow that stretches across Dawnair's entire sky. There is so much here to miss. But there's so much more to miss in the Real World. Green Day, for example. I miss Green Day. And I miss cars, and electricity, and sunny side up eggs, and showers. SHOWERS. I haven't taken a shower in five days. I can not even begin to describe to you how utterly disgusting i feel. And i know i probably don't look all that great, either. Lynx and Anthony, they look perfectly fine. They could have just stepped out of a Calvin Klein commercial for all the dirt they have on them.

I looked down at my arm, and realized just how dirty it really was. Taking one finger, i slowly dragged it along my arm. It left a path of pale skin streaked with dirt as I dragged it over my greyish arm. That. Is. Simply. Revolting.

I need to take a bath of some sort. Or a shower. Anything.

EVEN LATER:: That was an adventure.

I went to go take a bath in the water, before I realized that i was with two boys. Even if they have cat ears, they are boys. And I am going to burn in hell if I take a bath in front of two hormone driven teenage boys. So obviously, I had to sit back down and think of how to take a bath with some privacy. In the end, I decided that there was no way to do this, so I hopped off of the grassy hill we were camped on, stripped off my shoes and socks, rolled my pants up past my knees, and waded down into the water. This time the water behaved normally, washing up over my bare feet and cleaning away the dirt. I thought for a moment, and then stripped off my shirt and flung it on the bank. What was the difference between a bra and a bikini top, anyway? Other than that a bra obviously covered a lot more.

I leaned backwards in the water until my hip muscles were stretched as far as they could be, and then let my feet rise up to level with my body. Just lying there, floating in the water, as the current slowly pulled me deeper was a beautiful thing. The water lapped gently at the sides of my face, and I pushed my head back until both of my ears were under the water. I could hear fish swimming, I could hear the swishing of their tails as they sped through purple seaweed five feet away. The sounds of everything was amplified, even the sound of the water hitting against my body as the wind blew waves towards me. I closed my eyes and just listened to the wonderful sounds of Dawnair's freshwater life. And then someone grabbed my sides and tickled me.

I exploded with unexpected laughter as I sank into the lake, and then resurfaced as fast as I could, gasping for breath.

"What, was that for..." I panted out, as I turned to meet a new face. A girl was standing next to me in the water, and although at first glance I thought she was taller than me, I realized that she was standing higher up on the bank.

"Hello, I'm Catherine, and this is my lake," she told me, "and you're welcome for saving your butt earlier."

"Catherine...?" I echoed, my mind scrambling as it was trying to make sense of this.

"Yep. Catherine. And you are...who?" she asked. As she waited for my answer, she began to braid a section of her long, dark blue wavy hair. I noticed bits of purple seaweed were tangled up in it, and I had to force my hands from instinctively reaching out to remove the seaweed. When I didn't answer for a moment, she glanced up at me. Her eyes were dark blue, almost black, and they blinked at me from beneath thick dark purple eyelashes. I couldn't tell what kind of clothes she was wearing, but it pretty much just looked like a green sheet that she'd wrapped around herself. I realized with a start that she was a water nymph, and that the pool I was currently standing in most likely belonged to her.

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Charlotte," I hastily introduced myself, "and thank you, thank you so much for helping me. And my friends." I looked around to call over Lynx and Anthony to meet her, but I didn't see either of them. A slight frown pulled at my lips. "Um. Wherever they are."

"I'M RIGHT HERE!" Anthony yelled, springing out from behind a bush. I narrowed my eyes at him and wondered if he'd been spying on me. Then i noticed that he was pushing Lynx's head down under the bush. Or maybe Lynx was spying on me and Anthony was stopping him? I hadn't felt a single thing through Lynx and I's connection, hadn't even noticed that he was there. But now i saw him, and he saw me seeing him, and he flushed, his cat tail whipping Anthony's

legs. Anthony didn't care, but stared at Catherine with a look of wonder.

"I'M ANTHONY!" he told her, yelling it down so that she could hear him. I put my face into my hands. Did he have to be so obvious?

"He's cute." Catherine told me in a confidential tone. I blinked. I didn't even know her, and here she was, talking to me like we were best friends. Dude. What the hell...But it wasn't a bad thing. I sort of liked it. Back in the Real World, i didn't have all that many friends. I pretty much only had Jared, actually. And my other friend Bethany, who was Goth, despised her name, and called herself Spider. But Jared was a guy, and an attractive guy at that, and he had a lot of other friends. Mostly girls, who hated me because he happened to live next door to me and be best friends with me. Oh sure, on occasion one of his fangirls would be the slightest bit smarter than the others, and she would realize how close we were, and that we really weren't interested in each other in that way. She'd try to get more familiar with me, in an attempt to be brought into what she envisioned was our 'inner circle', or some stupid thing like that. But those were fake friendships, and after a while, I'd realized that, and stopped trying. Lots of girls talked to me, but not really as friends. It was more of a, "Let's Get Close To Jared's Best Friend And Maybe He'll Notice Me!" type of thing.

Spider was a total lesbian, and had been decidedly so since the second grade, so i could rest assured that she had absolutely no interest in Jared, and that she liked me for who i was. Well, uh, not in that way. See, she *had* a girlfriend...who, incidentally, hated me, because I was so close to Spider. It got really awkward whenever the three of us tried to hang out together, and eventually i just stopped trying. This is all the good luck that I have had with making friends.

But with Catherine, it was like an instant bond. I knew i could trust her, and her telling me that she thought Anthony was hot, really was not an awkward thing at all. I knew instinctively that she was talking to me because she liked me, not because she liked Anthony.

"He is?" I asked. I hadn't really thought of Anthony that way, although I knew in a subconscious sort of way that he was attractive. I looked at him and watched as he climbed down the hill towards us, tripping over nothing and faceplanting before rolling down the rest of the hill into the water and landing at our feet on all fours, like a cat. I stared down at him.

"No, he's not." I decided firmly, shaking my head. Catherine laughed, and her laughter sounded like the tinkling of a glass chandelier. It was beautiful. Lynx slid down the hill gracefully, and waded in next to me, not looking at me. Without a word he pulled his shirt off and threw it over my head. It landed over my eyes so that i couldn't see anything, and i pulled it off, messing up my dripping hair.

"Keep your shirt on," he said, giving me a stern look. I avoided staring at his chest.

"What are you, my father?" I sniped as i pulled his shirt on. It was the blue shirt with the red and yellow star in the center. The fabric was amazingly soft and caressed my skin perfectly. I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly feeling embarrassed for no reason at all.

"You don't have a father," Lynx stated blandly, and then turned his gaze to Catherine. "Who, exactly, are you? The Water Nymph of this region?"

"Yeahh," Catherine said, suddenly examining her light blue nails. I wondered if it was nail polish, or if her nails really were that color.

I didn't even realize what Lynx had said until a few moments ago, when i opened my journal to write this. *You don't have a father?* How did he even know that? And how did he know

my last name, too? The first time I'd met Lynx, he'd asked if my last name was Scene. How had he known that, when I'd never seen him or heard of him before in my life? This is all just so frustrating. I have so many questions to ask Lynx. But he went out hunting for our dinner, because he said we had no need to be eating crumbly bread that was lying smushed to pieces at the bottom of his backpack. Frankly, I couldn't agree more. I don't know what sort of meat we're supposed to be eating, but I'm starving, and I'll take anything i can get. Using my powers drains my energy away.

LATER STILL:: Lynx came back, with a weird looking animal that must be the equivalent of a Dawnair squirrel. It is about the size of a squirrel, and has blue fur and tiny black eyes. It's tail is bushy and has purple patches in it much like a squirrel's tail, only much longer. Or rather, it *did* have these assets. But it's currently roasting over the fire, with its fur in a nasty little pile. I am not going to even question how Lynx caught it, or killed it. I don't think i want to know.

Lynx, Anthony, and Catherine are all eating fish. Raw. With their fingers. I don't know what to think. It reminds me of the Lord Of The Rings movies that i watched with my brother Logan once. I didn't really pay much attention, it was mostly short people walking up and down hills and creepy things popping out and surprising them. But i do remember one particularly gruesome part of one of the movies, where some creepy creature thing with a loincloth on took a huge bite out of a raw fish's head. It was a really nasty thing. There was lots of blood and tendon-snapping. As i sit here writing by the firelight (thus succeeding in getting little smeary bits of ash all over the pages of the journal), I'm realizing that Lynx really didn't need to go out and hunt the squirrel-thing down for me. He could have just let me eat raw fish with the rest of them. Or even cooked fish. But the thing is, that I absolutely hate fish. I can't stand the feel of them, or the way that they look, or even their texture. It's all one hundred percent nastiness. I think, somehow, Lynx knew that, because no one even asked me if i wanted fish. He decided that he was going to get me something else to eat, and that was that.

What really surprised me, though, more than how strong the connection between Lynx and i was growing, was when Anthony took a cookie out of his pants. Yeah, i know, right? He just reached into his pants and pulled out a cookie and started munching it. I was kind of in shock. And then i went,

"Where...did you..get that?"

Lynx glanced over to find out what we were talking about, and saw the cookie.

"Where did you get a cookie?!!" he asked, sounding as shocked as i had.

"My pants," Anthony said. Lynx looked across at me, trying to figure out whether Anthony was lying or not. I solemnly nodded my head to affirm that Anthony was telling the truth. Lynx looked at the cookies with new eyes.

"Where, in your pants, was tha-- nevermind," I said, interrupting myself, "I don't think i want to know. Anthony, that is SO revolting!"

Lynx turned away in obvious disgust. I scooted closer to Anthony.

"Do you have another one of those?" i asked.

"You want a cookie?"

"Yes, Anthony. I want a cookie."

"You want a cookie that came out of my pants?"

"Not particularly. But a cookie is a cookie."

"Cookie," he repeated, and then pulled out another one and handed it to me. I bit into it without even letting myself think about where it came from. It tasted like an old, stale chocolate chip cookie. It was good.

"Charlotte...why, *why* are you eating that cookie..." Lynx sighed from right behind me. I turned around, feeling a little ashamed for not noticing that he was there. What had happened to our connection? Once again, I'm starting to think that i only feel him when he wants me to. Like he's the one in charge of our amazing connection. He probably is. He probably knows every single thing about me, and doesn't want me to know how he knows that. It's mind-blowing, how much he knows about me. And the scary thing, is that I didn't tell him any of it.

DAY 5: I slept with Lynx.

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA you should have seen your face just then!! I wish I had seen it too. That's not what i meant. But it's not a lie! I just slept *next* to him. See, we lined up by the fire in rows, for warmth. Because even though the days are hot, at night it gets freezing cold. And i mean that literally. There was frost on my clothes today.

But still. You should have seen your face...

Alright. So we told Catherine about my amazing mission to find the end of the rainbow. No one told her why Lynx was coming, and she didn't ask. She just nodded a bunch of times, and then decided that she was coming with us. I was thrilled. So was Anthony. Lynx just sat there.

"You can't leave your water," he said flatly. Catherine shrugged.

"It's okay," she told him, "my water is alright. And I can put my younger sister Bird in charge of it while I'm gone. It doesn't matter all that much. Besides, you guys need all the help that you can get."

"Your younger sister is named Bird?" Lynx asked.

Everyone ignored him.

"That's true. We do need all the help we can get," I agreed, cracking my neck to the side. There were a number of loud popping noises as my muscles stretched to the maximum, and then I tilted my head the other way. My entire body was tense, and I envisioned myself as a wooden clothespin, all tightened up and stiff.

"Whatever. Let's go, our next memorable obstacle in this crazy- ass journey is to trek through Puzzle Forest. That isn't going to be easy," Lynx said with a yawn. He stood up and wandered over to the edge of the woods, looking up at the top of the trees. One tree had a steady looking branch about seven feet off of the ground, and Lynx leaped up and grabbed it, swinging back and forth on it.

"Okay, guys?" I started, feeling slightly embarrassed that i had to ask this, "Um...what, exactly, is Puzzle Forest? And why is it so hard to get through?"

Silence greeted me. I looked around at their faces. Catherine was staring out over her body of water, a look of longing in her eyes. You could tell that she wanted to stay here where she belonged, but that her sense of selflessness overcame that feeling. Anthony was fiddling with the pocket on his khaki shorts, opening and closing it, undoing the buttons and then buttoning them again with two fingers. Lynx was still swinging back and forth on the branch. He pulled himself up to chin level with the branch, and then dropped down again, landing perfectly and squarely on his feet. He walked back over to us, and sat down next to me.

"It is sort of a big deal to explain," he began. He took a deep breath, like there was so much that he wanted to tell me about it, and then just let it all out in a big sigh and closed his mouth. I poked his shoulder, feeling slightly alarmed about this whole Puzzle Forest deal. Why were they making such a big deal over it? Why couldn't one of them just explain it to me? Any little detail at all?

"Please?" I begged Lynx, opening my eyes really wide and staring at him. He looked away. I stuck out my lower lip in a pout. He fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment, and then gave in to my puppy eyes.

"Dammit. FINE. Well I can try to explain a little bit to you. Puzzle Forest starts off with a test. There's this dlink--"

"A *what*?" I asked.

"A dlink. It's like a stollab and a vareskout mixed together."

"A what and a what?" i asked, staring at him. My whole mind just sort of blanked out as I heard these weird names. He pointed to the fire pit, where there was still a pile of fur from the squirrely creature I'd eaten last night.

"A stollab," he said. I nodded as I stored that name away in my mind. So their equivalent of a squirrel was a stollab. Lynx started saying something, but it came out as gibberish, and then he paused. He couldn't think of how to describe the other creature. So he picked up a blackened branch, and started drawing in the leftover ashes from the fire. He drew a big circle, with a bunch of smaller circles in it, and then drew four sticks at the base of the big circle. I just looked at it. Anthony and Catherine looked at it, too. There was a moment of strained silence.

"That's supposed to be a vareskout?" Anthony asked. His voice was quivering just enough to let me know that a vareskout looked nothing like this, and that Lynx's rather sad Circle And Stick drawing was incredibly humorous.

"Well, yeahh..." Lynx said, blinking down at his drawing. Anthony burst out laughing, and Catherine followed suit. Even though i didn't know what it was supposed to look like, Lynx's drawing was incredibly funny all the same, so i laughed, too. After a reluctant look at his picture, Lynx grinned, too, and smeared it away with the branch.

"Try explaining it to her!" Catherine suggested. Anthony wiped his eyes, drying away the foggy tears of mirth, and cleared his throat.

"It's like this. The vareskouts are any size, really. They can grow up to twelve feet tall, but some are so short, that they don't even come up to knee height. And they have a bunch of fur, but it's poofy and it sticks out like it's been struck by lightning. And it's white, and really really curly. And they have really long tongues, some have tongues that are up to twenty feet long, and they use them to trip their enemies, or sometimes they trip fellow vareskouts-- well, they trip anything, really, and--"

"OH!" i exclaimed, suddenly having a revelation. I grabbed the tree branch out of Lynx's hands, and drew the sheep- like thing that i had encountered on my first day in Dawnair. My drawing looked exactly like the creature, and i hoped i had guessed the right animal.

"Yeah! That's it!" Catherine cheered, and she grinned. "You're a pretty good drawer."

"It's just a doodle," I said with a shy smile.

"You've already seen a vareskout?" Lynx asked in astonishment. I nodded.

"Yeah, within the first five minutes that i got here. It tripped me and stole my food."

"Hahh, yeah, they do that," Anthony said, chuckling, "They're pretty harmless, actually. But they're always hungry, and they'll do anything for food."

"So a dlink, it's basically a stollab and a vareskout mixed together?" I asked.

"Yeah," Lynx confirmed, "And I know that doesn't sound fearsome or anything at all. But he's got thousands of naitaorcs under his powers, who do anything that he wants them to, and--"

"Thousands of whats?" I asked. Lynx paused, and then turned to me and looked me straight in the eyes. An image filled my brain, or a huge wolf with dark reddish-brown fur, the rusty color of dried blood. A mouthful of snapping teeth was set below the long snout, and it had three tails that looked like foxes' tails. I shuddered and the image left my mind, leaving me staring deeply into Lynx's eyes. We just stared at each other for a few brief minutes, until I realized that it was really awkward, and I glanced away.

"That's a naitaorc?" I asked in astonishment.

My guesses that Lynx was the one controlling the connection of our minds were no longer just guesses. I was so sure of it now. How else would he know that he could give me that image in my mind's eye? But how did he form the connection? And why with me? Or did he form connections like this between him and everyone else? Or did everyone have this connection here, not just Lynx and I? Maybe here, in Dawnair, it was considered normal to have such a deep connection. Maybe Lynx was just more powerful with his connections, which was why a foreigner like me could have a connection with him.

Lynx seemed unaware of my thoughts, which were bubbling over and over, and flowing into each other, getting scrambled around until my brain hurt. He just answered my question about the naitaorcs.

"Yes. That's a naitaorc. So you see, the dlink has thousands of naitaorcs under his control, because the dlink possesses some mad sort of magical powers, and he cast a spell on the inhabitants of Puzzle Forest, that makes them all obey him, blah de blah, so on and so forth. So, visitors who come to the woods get a mission. He gives them a time period in which to accomplish this mission-- he always gives out nearly impossible missions, by the way, so don't think it's going to be something easy --and then if they don't report to him with their completed mission in the allotted time, he lets the naitaorcs...eat them."

"Oh, my God." was all that I could think of to say. How would we get through that? I remembered the first time I'd met Anthony, and his first words-- *How the hell are you planning on getting through Puzzle Forest?* I didn't know how we would get through it. If I lost my life here and now, would I die in the Real World too?

Yes. Yes I would. It wasn't some sort of game, or just a dream world. It wasn't like the world in C.S. Lewis's books, *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, where you came out a few moments afterwards, even though you had been in that land for hours and hours. I knew there was some sort of time difference because of how often I felt tired here when no one else did, but I was not exactly sure what the time difference was. It seemed that the days here were twice as long as the days back in the Real World, but I couldn't ask. I'd tried, once, and Lynx had told me that there were thirty-six coacheis in one day. One coachei is fourteen pnirts, by the way. Don't feel bad if you're really confused by that. So am I.

Good Lord this time is confusing. At least they still have most of the same English words.

Like day, and night, and door. And other simple things like that. Earlier today i asked how long it would take to get to Puzzle Forest from where we were-- which, by the way, is called Rainbow Lake. I know, not much imagination to that name, is there? --and Catherine informed me that it would take about thirteen coacheis.

"What the hell," I asked her, "Is a coachei?"

"You know, a coachei," Catherine said. When my expression remained hopelessly blank she sighed and said, "Like, fourteen pnirts in a coachei, and three ecals in a pnirt?"

I just looked at her, and then I started cracking up as i realized what she was saying.

"That's like twenty- four hours in a day, and sixty minutes in an hour, and sixty seconds in a minute," I said, making the comparison out loud. Catherine gave me a funny look.

"It's like, what?" she asked. Then she started laughing. "Those are the weirdest words ever! Is that how you used to measure time?"

"Yeahh..." I responded, thinking about how strange this was. I'd never had the experience of someone thinking that a normal, every day, generally acknowledged and widely accepted word, was weird. What if they thought that the word toast was weird, here Oh my God, did they even *have* toast?!! I really really, hope that they have toast here. Back in the Real World, all that i eat is toast. Toast and cheese. Sometimes, I even have toast with cheese on it.

I know. I am very healthy, am I not?

Well anyway, that is how I found out about coacheis and pnirts and ecals.

So, moving along. The walk to Puzzle Forest is going to take about eight hours worth of walking, and it's about seventeen miles away. Thankfully, there aren't all that many obstacles on the way. Well, not unusual ones. For instance, there is not a giant horde of drooling zombies awaiting us. Which is a very, very good thing. Although, now that Lynx and Anthony have found out that i carry a spellbook with me, i don't think it'd be too hard to defeat a million zombies, anyway. I need to go through my spellbook and read all of the different spells, and try to figure out which ones would help me, were we to run into some horrible personals along the way.

I asked Lynx about that, actually. If we could defeat the dlink with my spellbook, i mean. He had to think about it for a moment, and then came to the conclusion that we couldn't.

"It has its own magic," he'd told me, "and it's way too strong for you to handle right now. Plus, after you defeated him and used up about half of your energy, you'd have to defeat all of the naitaorcs, which are frightening individuals that also possess an insane amount of power. So all in all, you would use up all of your energy at the beginning of the forest, and then we would be in the middle of the forest and we would meet a pamgersit, and then we would be royally screwed."

"A pamgersit?" I repeated.

"Never you even mind..." Lynx sighed, shaking his head.

Because he told me to never mind, I now want to know what a pamgersit is, more than ever. I mean, okay. Listen. PAMGERSIT. Say it out loud. Now say it again. Hilarious, right? So what the hell is a pamgersit? How can something with a name like 'pamgersit' be even the slightest, most remote bit, terrifying? It can't. If i saw a terrifying creature, and someone told me that it was called a pamgersit, i would burst into hysterical laughter.

So i have about six minutes left before we set of for the grand, creepy old Puzzle Forest. I am starting to wish that i could stall this, or at least find some way to get around going through

Puzzle Forest. When i knew that there were going to be obstacles that would make the going a bit tough, i didn't realize just how tough they were going to make it. I never even anticipated that there would be zombies. The spellbook warned me of many things, but fighting a huge mass of the Undead was not one of the things that it cautioned me about. I'm starting to wonder what else, exactly, it failed to mention. Maybe it thought that with my powers, I really could handle anything and everything. Maybe it was gauging my powers somehow and it was like, "Oh, you know, killer wolves that have huge teeth, ready to gnash you to pieces. No biggie. Charlotte can handle it, easy!" Ughhh. Stupid spellbook. How did it know what to tell me, anyway?

Oh. Did i mention, that the spellbook will randomly have words of wisdom in it for me? I will randomly open it to a page, and it will have some sort of message for me. At first, i thought that the messages had some sort of deep, profound meaning. But they don't. They're just all around random and unhelpful. Yesterday, it informed me that the longest recorded flight of a chicken in the United States was thirteen seconds. Why. Do. I. Need. To. Know. That.

I don't. I don't need to know that. I really don't. There is no way that such information could ever be useful to me. Especially because i am fairly certain that chickens do not exist here in Dawnair. Squirrels and sheep don't, so why would chickens?

Hey, we are starting to get packed up, so i have got to go now...Man am i scared.

LATER:: I have seen a dlink, and i have already defeated him. Well, pretty much. See, he gave us the best mission ever. He told us that we had to capture an alien and bring it to him. An alien is a person from another world. That would be me. Hello! Easiest mission ever!

But because we don't want to raise suspicion of trickery, (mostly we just don't want him to take it back and give us a different mission) we're going to dress me as a boy. Yeah, that would be correct. I am going to be cross- dressing. Luckily, I have a lot of experience in cross-dressing, because my cousin Rian is a cross- dresser, and we used to have sleepovers where she showed me everything that I never wanted to know about cross- dressing. So i knew exactly what to do. Which, I know, is slightly creepy. But hey, whatever works.

The dlink looks like a stupid, drooling mess of evolution. I would draw a picture, but I'm afraid that no picture can capture the hideousness of a dlink. And I'm not even kidding you. The dlink that I saw was about four feet tall, and its head was far too big for its body. It had beady little rodent eyes like a stollab, and the body of a really, really fat vareskout. White puffy fur and everything. It also had what looked like two small fat hands, with no fingernails. The rest is just too hard to describe. But the way it talked...ew, ew, ew. It made a clacking noise with its tongue when it spoke, that sounded like an insect of some sort, and multiple strings of drool hung from its mouth. It had yellow teeth that were streaked with brown, and i wondered what it ate that had stained its teeth such a dark color. Hidden behind those disgusting teeth was a thick purple tongue that reminded me immensely of an earthworm.

"Sit down. Who are you?" it clacked at us, "State your names, all of you."

We all sat down on the ground, so that it was taller than us.

"Lynx Legend"

"Anthony Legend"

"Catherine Marine"

"Charlotte Sierra" I told him boldly. Lynx swiveled his head around and gave me a sharp look, but said nothing. I didn't know what it was about this dlink, but i felt like i couldn't trust it

with my real last name. I didn't even feel comfortable giving it my first name. It made some muttering, clacking noises to itself, walking around us in circles. It stopped right behind Catherine, and just breathed on her. She sat upright, rigid, and I could see her struggling to stay still and not run. My sense of justice perked up, and i felt like i was in a completely different situation. The edge of the forest was the busy Washington D.C. subway system, and the dlink was a pedophile, abusing its power over Catherine. My muscles tensed, and I had to act. I had to get that horrible, gawking thing away from Catherine.

"We're going to the end of the rainbow," I spit out, as though telling it a secret that it had to force out of me. Its attention snapped towards me, and it regarded me with those horrible little eyes.

"What?" it hissed. I was quivering under the intense gaze, but I held eye contact, swallowed around the lump in my throat, and repeated myself.

"We're going to find the end of the rainbow. Can we please pass through this forest? We won't destroy anything, I promise," I said. The dlink inched closer to me in a shuffling way, and it took all of my power not to back away from him.

"Pass. Through," it said, clacking and hissing. Some drool spilled out and dropped onto my Airwalk shoes. My eye may have done some unintentional twitching, as well. But i knew that, just like with Lynx's sister, i had to put on a brave front.

"Uhm, Yeahh! Please?" I asked, suddenly getting an idea. I twirled a strand of my hair around my finger and widened my eyes a lot, like a really ditsy person. In my mind, i was picturing one of the many girls who hated me because of Jared. Brendah, her name was. With an 'h' like that, too. She had long, waist-length light brown hair, and was obsessed with the band All- Star Weekend. She chomped gum very loudly ("Like a friggin' cow!" Spider had told me once) and her eyes were huge, like she was taking in everything around her, but it was going right out one ear the very same second that it came in the other. I'd seen her in the locker room at school, though, right after a guy had broken up with her, and she was completely normal. She talked in a normal voice and wasn't spacey at all, and i had realized that the entire "Oops, My Bad, Silly Me I Know Nothing" attitude was just a fake front. Really, by that alone I could tell that she was an incredibly smart person. No one could pull off acting like an entirely different person, all the time, unless they were smart. Right now, I needed to be at least as smart as Brendah was.

"Please?" the dlink repeated. It somehow looked delighted that i was begging it.

"Yeah, please? Cuz if you could do that ? That would be, like, super duper awesome!" I said, staring at it with my hugely widened eyes. I knew my green eyes were most likely unnerving the dlink. My eyes tended to have that effect on people. They were just unbelievably green, like dragon scales. I'm not bragging about it or anything. Just being realistic. Knowing this, i purposely dropped my eye level to just below the rim of the dlink's black eyes, hoping not to intimidate it.

"Find me an alien and i will let you pass through my forest," the dlink said, coming even closer, so that it was inches from me. Its breath smelled so disgusting that I nearly recoiled. But i curled my hands into fists and stayed where i was. My nails bit into my palms as i clenched my balled up fists even tighter.

"A, whaaaat?" I asked loudly, flipping my hair over my shoulder. I was freaking out and

my palms were sweating like crazy. I didn't even know what the others were doing. All of my concentration was on fooling this dlink that was standing in front of me and staring at me and trying to terrify me and succeeding. I wanted one of them to interrupt, so badly. Just to get this awful creature away from me, that's all I wanted. A distraction. Get it away. Make it leave me alone. Take its horribly beady eyes away from me.

"An alien, stupid," it said, its lip curling up over its stained teeth. "It's a creature from another planet or world or even universe. Even though this is the only universe--"

It broke off and appeared to be thinking. Whatever it was thinking about, it couldn't be good. So, curling my toes under my feet and clenching my teeth, I spoke again in my Brendah-Voice.

"So, like, just find this alien- thingy, and we can go through your forest?" I asked.

"Not so fast. Find it in thirty- six coachies. Otherwise I will have those who are under my command chase you down and chew your stupid brain into tiny pieces."

"Thirty- six coacheis? Oh, my God, well okay, I can totally try that! Thanks, we will so be back soon!" I chirped, unfurling my fingers and grabbing Lynx's arms. The dlink hustled off into the thick underbrush and out of sight. We all stood up and looked at one another. Catherine brushed some dirt from the forest floor off of her dress.

"Charlotte. That was brilliant," Lynx said, looking at me with approving eyes. I smiled weakly and nodded my thanks.

"Yeahh, Char. It was. But where are we supposed to get an alien?" Anthony asked, frowning. Lynx, Catherine and I stared at him. He thought about his words for a moment.

"Oh," he said. Lynx smacked his second- cousin on the back of the head and we sauntered off to figure out how to approach the dlink again, with our apparently 'new' alien.

At the moment, I am wearing Anthony's clothes, because we are basically the same height and size. If i was a cross- dresser, I would never wear clothes like the ones that Anthony wears. It's horrible. These shorts that I'm wearing? Yeah, he just changed his clothes yesterday, so not only am i wearing his dirty old clothes, but they're khaki, too. I do not wear khaki. I hate khaki. And his shirt! IT'S SO ITCHY. WHY Anthony...why ? Why must your shirts be so itchy? And your shorts be so...khaki? Ughh.

My hair is either going to have to be cut off or hidden underneath a cap. The problem is, we don't have a cap. And my hair is waist- length. And it is dyed cotton candy blue. So there is no way to pass me off as another person, much less a boy, while i have hair like this. My stupid hair. But I love it! I don't want to cut off all of my hair...but it's going to have to happen. I think i might cry.

EVEN LATER, SO MUCH LATER I HAVE SO MUCH TO SAY AND YET I AM SO TIRED TO WRITE IT ALL:: We cut off my hair to above my shoulders. I don't have a mirror, and neither does any one else. Which is probably a good thing, because i do not want to see myself. I'm sure it looks awful. Even though everyone assured me that it doesn't.

"Girls always think that about their hair," Anthony said, "It's like when skinny girls think they're fat. They're not, but they complain about it all the time and they think that they look awful. But they don't."

"I didn't say i was fat. I said i didn't like my hair," I pointed out. Anthony just shrugged and went back to talking to Catherine about some game called Starwest. I sat there and tugged on a

piece of my hair, willing it to grow out, even as i sat there. And I swear it stretched and grew about an inch even as i sat there pulling it. I was in shock, and stared at the bunch of hair. Surely it was longer now. It wasn't this long a few seconds ago, I knew that for a fact. As my whirring thoughts went into hyper- drive over this discovery, Lynx came over and sat down next to me, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. He was wearing a black long-sleeved shirt that had striped black and white sleeves and reminded me of his tail. His pants looked like jeans, but were made of some weird material that i had never seen or heard of before. When his leg accidentally brushed against my bare arm, I could feel how soft the fabric was, and i didn't blame him for wearing them.

"What's up, Charlotte Scene?" Lynx asked me, cocking his head to the side and looking at me. I exhaled in a frustrated way, blowing my newly choppy fringe away from my eyes. Before this ridiculous haircut, I hadn't even had a fringe. I was sure that I looked like a completely different person.

"Not much, Lynx Legend," I replied, dropping my hair and turning my head towards him. I was pretty sure that I saw him cringe when I said his last name.

"Should I have said Charlotte Sierra?" he asked in a mocking tone. I curled my lip at him in a silent sneer and went back to twirling my hair around my finger. I felt like I wanted to cry. I know, i know, I was tearing up over my hair. It sounds retarded. But I'm being serious. It was the one thing that everyone contributed to me. If someone drew a stick figure and it had long, long blue hair, every body knew that it was supposed to be me. People could tell that it was me, because of the long, long blue hair. It was my trademark; my most well- known characteristic. Spider even drew me as a superhero in a comic book that she drew, and named the whole book after me. It was called Captain Blueberry, and it was a very kinky sort of book, but everyone knew who it was supposed to be because of the long blue hair.

And now it was gone. Chopped off. Lying in a dark, dirty hole somewhere, forgotten by the world. Hidden from the sun. Birds couldn't even use it to line their nests with. It was of no use to anyone. The tears finally pricked at my eyelids and I blinked rapidly. I did *not* want to cry. Crying was pretty much the last thing that I wanted. But my body was so tired, and so sick of traveling. I didn't want to walk any more, not even a single step. My blinking just formed the tears even faster and they spilled over my eyelids, streaking down my face. *Well, there goes the last of my makeup*, I thought with a bitter laugh. Lynx made some concerned noises and put his arm around my shoulders. I sobbed into his shirt until I couldn't breathe anymore, and then i just leaned against him. We stayed like that for a long time, my face turned into his chest and his arms around me, neither of us moving.

"Whoa guys, whoa," Anthony said as he walked by with an armful of firewood, "I totally did not know that you two were in that sort of a relationship."

"Shut up, Anthony," Lynx and I said in unison. And then i laughed and pulled away, my face feeling slightly itchy from my dried- up tears.

"Okay, okay," I said, standing up. I filled my lungs with oxygen, held it in for a moment, and then exhaled loudly, letting my body relax. "I'm good to go. Let's pack up and go."

Everyone else stood up, too, and gathered their stuff. We had only walked about half a mile away from the place where we had first encountered the dlink to cut my hair and so that i could change my clothes, so Anthony, Lynx and I gathered up our backpacks and set off,

Catherine skipping along beside Anthony, backpack- free. The Dawnair sun was huge and bright white, glowing in the sky so much that it hurt my eyes even when i was shielding them. We walked the half- a- mile back, with my companions randomly giving me advice on how to shuffle my steps like a boy, or how i should hunch my shoulders over more because everyone could see what Lynx referred to as my 'assets'.

"My what?" I asked, looking at him. I knew exactly what he was talking about, but i just wanted him to feel all awkward and say it. Lynx squirmed around, squinted up at the trees, kicked at a sapphire- blue pebble that was resting in the parched pink grass that was turning yellow with thirst. I poked his shoulder.

"My what?" I repeated, feeling gleeful. Lynx gave me a withering look.

"YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN," he said in a thunderous tone. I pretended to be offended.

"Lynx, I don't! I swear, I have no idea what you're talking about!" I protested. But the huge grin that had spread widely across my face gave me away, and he rolled his eyes at me and kept walking.

"Nice try, though, Charlotte," Catherine said quietly so that only I could hear, "We all wanted to hear him say it."

"I know," I whispered back, "I'll get him to say it some day, just watch."

"I doubt that," Anthony said, his head in between both of ours. We twisted our necks a little bit, so that we could see him fully.

"When did you get there?" Catherine asked, raising an eyebrow at him. He shrugged, and flicked his hair out of his eyes.

"A while ago. Hey, we're almost there! Look, we have like three...more...feet..." Anthony trailed off into silence as we watched the dlink shuffle out of the woods and come towards us, its lip curled up in a snarl.

"This? You expect to pass this sorry thing off as an alien?" it clacked, barely giving me a glance. It didn't seem to notice that Charlotte Sierra was missing.

"It is. This is a boy from a whole other universe actually," Lynx said, "his name is Logan Scene."

My eyes widened and i swiveled my head around to stare at him. How did he know about Logan? I suddenly got the most intense feeling, that he could just read my mind like an open book. It probably looked like a mix between a horror story and a teenage comedy novel. Lynx temporarily widened his eyes at me, warning me not to show surprise and ruin everything. I cleared my throat as the dlink's tiny eyes riveted on my face, examining me.

"There's only one alternate universe, so you must be from there. Which planet are you from?" the dlink asked me.

"Earth," I said in as deep of a voice as i dared. I wanted to sound like a guy, but i didn't want it to sound completely fake. The dlink nodded, and appeared to be thinking.

"How many ounces in one pound?" it asked.

"Sixteen," I replied. Catherine tilted her head to the side as she watched the exchange, no doubt wondering what a pound or an ounce was.

"Name of the town you come from?"

"Pontiac."

"What state?"

"Michigan."

"What country?"

"The United States of America."

"Who is the president there?"

"Barack Obama."

"What is the longest that a chicken on earth has been able to fly?"

"Thirteen seconds."

"You and your companions may pass through my forest unharmed by me or the naitaorcs. But you only have twenty- four hours to do that." it looked across at Lynx, Anthony, and Catherine, its face serious and no longer mean. I could tell that the dlink was a male, by it's face shape. He didn't want to be here threatening people. And now he just looked tired, like guarding Puzzle Forest was a job that someone else hired him for. I could feel the dlink's sorrow at...something. I couldn't quite tell what. Something that had happened recently.

"Thank you," I said, a smile breaking out over my face. The coincidence that the dlink had asked me the exact question that I thought I'd never need to know the answer to, was just too strong. Was the Spellbook so magic that it could predict the future? I now had another connection, similar to the one that Lynx and i had. But this was a connection that i had to break.

"I wish you safe traveling, Charlotte Scene," the dlink said, bowing down to me. Wait, why was he bowing? Wasn't it more powerful than me? I didn't question how he knew my name-- because i knew his. It was as if his name had been stored away in my subconsciousness, and was waiting to truly meet him before it would surface to my memory.

"Thank you, Crowning," I told him, bowing to him as well. Suddenly, the dlink rushed up and grabbed my face between its hands.

"Tell Elena that you met me, and that I let you pass," he instructed me, and i could feel his emotions weaving through my brain. Agony. Sorrow. Anger. Loneliness. Love? The only Elena that i knew was my grandmother. So he was suggesting that my grandmother knew him? That she had been to Dawnair before, and met him? I had so many questions, but now was not the time to ask any of them. I would ask my grandmother when i got back to Earth.

"I will," I promised. The dlink let go of me and gestured at Lynx to come closer. Lynx cautiously stepped forward, his swishing tail the only sign that he was uneasy. Both of their mental connections to me shut off at the exact same time. Crowning whispered something in Lynx's ear, who nodded and stood upright again.

"I swear," Lynx said. Crowning nodded and then walked away, fading back into the underbrush. I looked over at Lynx as my two connections were reconnected in my mind--one for Crowning, and one for Lynx.

"What did he tell you?" I asked. Lynx shook his head and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Nothing, it doesn't matter. Let's go."

I wanted to protest, and throw a tantrum until Lynx gave in and told me what Crowning had said to him, but a bigger part of me understood that time was of the essence, and we had to keep going. So the four of us looked skeptically at the thick, tangled bushes, silently turning over different ideas in our minds. How were we going to get through such a dense forest? If it had only been leaves and branches, that would have been one thing. But there were thorn bushes, too, with thorns as long as my fingers. And those did not look like a pleasant thing to

run into.

"Yeah, let's go!" Anthony echoed Lynx sarcastically, folding his arms. His brow creased, and for the first time since I had met him, Anthony looked genuinely pissed off about something.

"Well, you and I can go, Anthony. But what about Charlotte and Catherine?" Lynx asked. I frowned, not understanding what he was talking about.

"What do you mean, you and Anthony can go? I don't think any one of us is going to head into those thorn bushes," I pointed out, sitting down on the hard ground with a sigh. Catherine sat next to me and leaned her head against my shoulder. She was so thin and frail, even for a nymph, and I thought she would snap in two if I touched her right now. I had seen Catherine in front of the dlink, whom she hated and feared, and I knew she could be strong. But she was just too fragile to last all that much longer if she didn't get water sometime. Even the strongest water nymphs needed a massive amount of water to travel great distances. And if an outsider to Dawnair like myself knew that, the surely Lynx and Anthony knew that. It surprised me that they hadn't said anything about it thus far. But maybe they knew something that I didn't, which wasn't altogether impossible. Even now, as our small group pondered how to get through the bushes, the two of them knew something major, that they were not telling me. How could either of them possibly get through those bushes?

"Actually, Charlotte," Anthony began. At first I was slightly confused, as a good three minutes of silence had already passed. And then I realised that he was answering my question about what he and Lynx had been talking about.

"Actually, Charlotte, what?" I prompted when he faltered.

"Umm...how exactly do I put this? ..Hmm...Ohh, I know. Look here," he said, squatting down beside me. He held his arm out with his palm facing upwards, his fingers gently resting open as though he was offering to take my hand. And then, with a snapping sound like scissors cutting through paper, there were four- inch claws jutting out from his fingernails. I stifled a shriek and jumped backwards, jostling Catherine off of my shoulder as I sprawled backwards. I regained my composure quickly, and gave Anthony a nasty look.

"What the hell, Anthony...what did you have to do that for?" I asked, sounding sharper than I'd meant to. I flinched at my own grating voice. I didn't want to yell at him, or bitch him out or anything like that. But I was so tired, and I wanted to eat a proper meal and take a shower, and just generally go home, and I was trying so hard, so very, very hard, just to stay here. I had the spellbook. I could leave at any time that I truly wanted to leave. But although the majority of my consciousness was complaining, a very small part of me told me to persevere, and to stay here. And that very small part was the part that I listened to.

"Well, you wanted to know how and why Lynx and I could get through the forest, and you couldn't, and so I showed you--"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, cutting him off, "I get that part. But what I want to know, is why couldn't you have just, oh gosh, I don't know...warned me, or something? I mean, I don't want to be a mega- bitch here. I'm just so tired and stressed out, and I don't need any more surprises like that. I'm sorry for snapping at you. I'm such a horrible person, to snap at someone as sweet as Anthony all of the sudden--"

"Hey, hey.." Lynx said in a concerned voice, kneeling down next to me, "you really must be delusional and stressed out, Charlotte. You just called Anthony 'sweet'. There are many,

many adjectives which one may use to describe my second- cousin. For example: 'annoying', 'short', 'weird', or 'aggravating', to name just a few. But 'sweet' is not on the Anthony Adjective list, I'm afraid. I even double- checked, just for you. But nope, it is definitely not on that list."

"Apologise, you jerk!" Anthony exclaimed as Catherine and I doubled up with maniacal laughter. It was one of those moments when something really isn't all that funny, and you *know* that it really isn't all that funny, but you haven't truly had something to laugh at in such a long time that you somehow find it hilarious. My loud laugh, coupled with Catherine's silver- bell laughter, mixed and made a sound sort of like a seal snorting illegal substances. This just made the both of us laugh even harder, provoking Lynx and Anthony to join in. A random image came up in my mind, and i knew instinctively that Lynx had let it slip through accidentally, and had not yet noticed that. It was a still image, like a photo snapshot, and it was of me. I was standing in the lazy river that belonged to Catherine, and I was wearing Lynx's shirt. My hair was hanging around my face, with water dripping from the ends. A small, genuine smile was twisting my lips up at the ends, and it wouldn't be bragging to say that I looked really, really good.

My first thought was, "Where the hell did that come from?"

My second thought was, "I wish i could use that as my facebook profile picture."

I closed my eyes and concentrated on that image, imagining that I could control the connection between my mind and Lynx's. I can't really describe what happened, because it took place so quickly and it was all in my head, and i just...i can't figure out how to describe it. But it was like pulling on a tape measure-- you grab the very end of it, and the harder you pull, the more of the measure comes out. So i grabbed the end of the image, and i pulled it with my mind, and the rest came with it. I was in charge. Not only of the image, but the entire Lynx And Charlotte Connection, as well.

And memories started flooding my mind, except that they weren't my memories. They were Lynx's. He was forty- two in cat years, which was around seventeen or eighteen in human years. He had wanted to be a human when he was little, and had tried to pull off his ears and tail, before his older sister Liz rushed in and gave him a lecture on how hybrids were so much more attractive, smart, and generally just *better* than humans. When he was eight in human years, he had had a run- in with a water nymph who had tried to drown him out of spite, and ever since then he had hated nymphs, especially water nymphs. When his mum died, Liz had stepped up to take care of him. She defended him from the other kittens who picked on him for being smaller and skinnier than they were. She saved him when their mum made a return from the Valley Of Grey. This was before the homes had been made in the Areyan rock, and had no protection from the zombies that encroached the territory of the living. Then Liz had experimented with their mum's old spell book and accidentally sent it into some weird alternate universe that was inhabited mainly by humans, and they had no way of getting it back. In addition, Liz turned into a megabitch from the overload of stress going on.

I received an image of the spellbook that was so clear and realistic, it was hard to tell whether it was really there or not. And then i had a revelation. Yeahh, Lynx's missing spell book *was* really there. In fact, even as i'm sitting here right now and writing this in my journal, the spell book is sitting crunched down in my backpack, next to a pair of socks and a paper bag full of cereal bars. It makes me wonder why Lynx hasn't said anything about it. He knows that it's the same one, that I can feel. But for some reason, he hasn't stolen it or even asked for it back yet.

Why not? Doesn't he want it back?

"Charlotte, get out of my head!" Lynx yelled, interrupting my thought process. Startled out of my reflections, I dropped the connection instantly, feeling guilty.

"You can't just file through my memories like that," Lynx said, looking sort of cross.

"I'm sorr-- wait, no I am not! How many time have *you* read through all of *my* memories, Lynx?" I demanded, turning on him sharply. I felt angry, now. Really angry. All of my private thoughts, my darkest memories, my most treasured secrets-- he knew all of them. Not because I had trusted him enough to tell them all to him; but because he had gone sneaking through my head without any sort of permission. I frantically grabbed a hold on our mental once more, but it was like a huge concrete wall had been built around the doorway to his mind. There were no files to grab onto and pull. So i imagined myself hurtling straight through the concrete wall, searching for what he knew about me. I wanted to erase them from his knowledge. All of them.

It could not have been easier had there been a huge neon- colored folder with 'Charlotte' scribbled across it in huge block print. The memories of every moment that Lynx and I had spent together swirled around, pushing towards me to prevent me from getting farther into his mind. I felt like i was on the battlefield of a video- game. *Ignore the distractions of the enemy!* was the first thought that came to mind. I ignored those memories and probed deeper, back farther. And i found every single thought he'd ever had about me. The emotional wave that hit me was so strong that I let go of the connection once more. I opened my eyes and looked at Lynx, and was shocked by the anger and hurt that I could see in his dark green eyes.

"I said, *you can't do that*," Lynx said in a scary- ass voice. Anthony and Catherine just sat in silence, not knowing what was going on, but knowing enough that they should stay out of it.

"Why *not*, Lynx?" i asked, my own voice sounding threatening, "Why is it okay for you to search *my* mind, but not okay for me to search yours?"

"Oh, my gosh." I heard Catherine whisper, "Anthony, they have a mind- bridge. Charlotte and Lynx have a mind-bridge."

I wanted to ask them what, exactly, a mind- bridge was, but I kept my eyes locked on Lynx, waiting for his response. His lip curled up in a snarl, and he was tracting and retracting his claws at lightning speed, his tail lashing back and forth in anger. There was absolutely no trace of our 'mind- bridge' anymore, and somehow i felt endangered. Yeah, endangered. As in, i thought Lynx was my mortal enemy. I reached inside of myself and extracted body heat, then curled my fingers, holding the heat in the palm of my hand. I was ready to completely torch Lynx the split- second that he tried to harm me.

Thankfully, though, that split- second never came. Anthony bolted in between Lynx and I, dealing both of us a powerful hit on the head. The force of it knocked me backwards, making me drop the heat in my palm and return it to my body. Lynx had four long scratches on his cheek, just deep enough to bleed but not deep enough to scar. Apparently, Anthony had left his claws out on that hand.

"What the *hell* are you two doing? Are you honestly going to kill each other? Is that seriously how *utterly retarded* you both are? Aren't you guys supposed to be in love or something? CUT THE SHIT. WE HAVE BIGGER PROBLEMS TO WORRY ABOUT THAN YOUR STUPID MIND-BRIDGES."

"In love?" i asked, raising both eyebrows skeptically. The pain in my temples felt like I had been hit with a rock. I hadn't known that Anthony was so strong...

"Shut up, Legend," Lynx snarled, his elongated canine teeth pressing down on his lower lip until tiny dots of blood appeared. They rolled over the curve of his lip and dropped to the ground. I watched them fall, and suddenly, my eyes filled with unexpected tears.

"Anthony's right. This is so stupid," I said, standing up and brushing off my boy's shorts. "Let's just go. We have safe passage now, don't we? So just.. just forget about this whole thing and let's go."

"Yeah. Ohkayy," Catherine agreed, following suit and standing up next to me. She slipped her hand into mine, and i almost shivered at her touch. Her hand was so delicate, it was like holding flower petals. I felt as though if i held on too tight, i would bruise her hand and crush it. I made sure to keep my fingers loosely around hers.

"Thank you for finally seeing some thing my way," Anthony said, and i somehow managed to smile. The scary, serious Anthony was gone, replaced by the lite and funny Anthony that i knew and loved. Lynx didn't say anything, but scowled at us and crouched down next to the thorn bushes lining the outside border of the woodlands.

"How to do this..." i heard him mutter to himself. He unsheathed his claws and carefully cut one thorn off of a bush. It fell to the ground. Nothing unusual or extraordinary happened, so he cut off another thorn. And still, nothing happened. When it was apparent that the thorn bushes were not enchanted, or something like that, Lynx slashed and tore his way through the thorn bushes until he was practically out of sight.

"Charlotte, Catherine," Anthony began, "Quick, follow close behind Lynx. We don't want him to get too far ahead so that we get separated. If we get separated, there's no telling what could happen."

"Yeahh, okay," I said. He was right, of course. I got down on my hands and knees and began following Lynx's trail. I could see only the back of his crawling figure, and i felt awkward. Lynx paused and turned around, looking at me from over his shoulder.

"Are you staring at my butt?" Lynx asked me suspiciously. The anger had dissolved from his eyes, and i knew we were both going to pretend that our argument hadn't ever occurred. His question made me feel guilty, and I shrugged.

"There's really nowhere else to look..." I pointed out.

"It's okay, Charlotte. I'm staring at your butt, too," Catherine admitted from behind me. My eye twitched involuntarily.

"What?" I asked her, leaning to the side and staring over my shoulder at her.

"Well...what else am i supposed to look at ? If i don't watch you, i'll run into the thorn bushes or something else that is equally painful."

"That's just creepy, Catherine. But i guess, at least I don't have a guy staring at my butt."

"WHAT?" It had now dawned on Catherine that Anthony was following her.

"Hey, that is totally not why i put you in front of me," Anthony defended himself.

"Anthony Legend, you are a pervert," Catherine scolded. He shrugged helplessly.

"i seriously just wanted to protect the girls by putting them in the middle... I'm sorry, guys...Look, can we just keep going ? I'm sure we don't have to crawl through the entire forest."

"Yeah, let's keep going," Lynx said. He crawled on, and we all shuffled after him.

After about another ten or fifteen minutes spent on hands and knees, kneeling on thorns that had fallen from the branches, we were out of the thicket and able to stand up.

"Ahhh, yes, this is so perfect," Catherine sighed happily, stretching her pale arms above her head. I heard a cracking noise as i straightened my back.

"Ow..." I groaned, rubbing my neck. I looked down at my knees, which were almost black with dirt, and pulled a thorn out. My knees were so numb that i hadn't even been aware of its poky little presence in my skin.

"Charlotte, that is gross," Anthony said, pulling a thorn out of his finger. It started to bleed, and he stuck his finger in his mouth, sucking the blood out.

"Your mouth is full of germs and other harmful bacteria that could infect that wound, more than if you would just leave it out and exposed to the air around us," Catherine informed him, looking smart. He screwed up his face at her like she was nuts, and then turned away. But he took his finger out of his mouth.

"So now what?" I asked, looking around. The trees weren't as close together as they had appeared from the outside of the forest, and looking around at them, I noticed something odd. On the bark of one of the trees on my right, was carved a symbol. Near the bottom of the tree's trunk was a small pile of thin off-white objects, that looked like bones, but were too thin. I walked over and picked one up, examining it. The pile looked almost like mouse bones, but not quite.

"Oh, my God," Catherine said, backing away from the tree she was standing next to. There was another pile under that tree.

"Hybrid cat bones," Lynx informed us in a monotone voice. He walked to the next tree, and looked at the pile there. "More hybrid cat bones."

"Where did they come from? I swear they weren't there when we first got here..." I said. I dropped the bone I was holding and involuntarily shivered, crossing my arms against my chest even though I wasn't cold. Something, was wrong.

"They look like nymph bones, to me," Catherine said, walking over. Anthony picked one up and turned it over, looking closely at it.

"No, they're hybrid bones," he said, agreeing with Lynx. I joined them and took the bone from Anthony. It was slender, and almost reminded me of...Oh. It was exactly what I thought it was.

"No, they're bat bones," I corrected them. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy.

"They're too big for that," Catherine said, and Anthony and Lynx agreed with her. I held the bone between my thumb and my middle finger, and snapped it. It was as thin as a toothpick, and made a cracking noise as I dropped the fragments to the forest floor.

"You call that big?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. My friends stared at me with something like awe.

"Yeahh. You just snapped this huge thigh bone. I'm getting kind of creeped out," Anthony said, backing away from the tree. He found an open spot, with a small amount of sun flickering through the thick tree branches overhead and stopped, looking around.

"Uh...right. Huge thigh bone. Try bone the size of a small twig?" I replied, shaking my head. There was a long silence, which amplified the noiselessness around us. There were no birds chirping, no squirrels rummaging through the leaves for food. I could hear the sound of Anthony's breathing, as clearly as if it was my own. Suddenly, Lynx snapped his fingers, startling

us all, and making Catherine jump.

"They're the bones of the naitaorc's prey. They take on the appearance of your animal identity. In reality, they're all different creatures, and they look different to all of us for the same reason," he explained.

"If i didn't have you guys here with me, I'd think I was going crazy," I said with a sigh. My animal identity was a bat? Since when? And since when did I even have an animal identity? I sat down next to the spot where Anthony was standing, letting my now- beaten and torn backpack fall to the ground. And I just kind of sat there, and waited for them to sit down. Eventually, everyone was sitting in a small circle, looking at each other.

"We have forty- eight hours to get out of here," Lynx said. He looked me in the eye, and asked, "How the hell are we going to get out if we're in the middle of the biggest naitaorc trap in Puzzle Forest?"

And no joke, right after he said that, the thorn bushes that we had just crawled out of wrapped around us, biting their thorns into our flesh, and tying us together so that none of us can move anything except our arms and hands. Lynx and Anthony don't even have that much of a privilege- they're forced to sit, unable to move even their tails. We've been sitting here countless hours. At first we tried getting out, but then realized that it was impossible. Naitaorcs are nocturnal. I think we're waiting for them to come kill us. If I die here, I will be so mad.

DAYY 6, DURING WHICH WE'VE ACQUIRED A NEW QUESTER:: Man. I thought for sure, that I was going to die. And I can't believe how calm I was about it. I was just like, 'yeahh, I will be so mad.' And writing the title of this entry kind of shocked me. Dayy 6?? YOU MEAN I HAVE ONLY BEEN HERE FOR SIX DAYS?!!! Not really including the first day, either. . because I was still at home for that day. So I've only been here, for five days? I think I'm going crazy. It feels like I've been here for far longer...And I haven't even been here for one week! Well, I have to go in twelve minutes, because we're about to go fight a fire-breathing dragon.

But I figured, that I'd share with you a little of what's been going on. Since, the last time I wrote, I was sort of...tied up. Hahahaa, get it? Tied up... Okay. Sorry.

Terrible puns aside, here's what happened.

We were sitting there in silence after it got darker, and I was thinking of the dlink. He had promised us SAFE PASSAGE. What the hell? Now we're sitting here trapped by naitorcs, and being killed by a thorn bush? That was not how I planned to go out. Struggling was pointless, unless the point was to get as much skin ripped off by the thorns as possible. Which, for me, it was not. I wish I could say that an incredible battle ensued, and there was a bloody fight with naitaorcs, during which we fought bravely, and then won. But in all actuality, the most exciting thing that happened was a man jumping out of a tree and landing in front of me. I screamed.

"Hey," he said. All calm- like, as though he jumped out of trees every day. For all I knew, maybe he did. Lynx and i stared at him. Catherine and Anthony struggled a bit to turn around, but in the end they gave up. He walked around us in a circle, smirking. I wanted to punch him in the face and wipe that smirk right off of it.

"Are you going to help us?" I asked evenly. I might as well find out now before i got my hopes up. He looked at me, sizing me up with his blue eyes.

"Yes," he said, "but i was planning on acting like i was only here to taunt you, and make

you a little bit scared of me first, and then be all heroic and release you in the end.”

“At least he’s honest,” Lynx mumbled. I stared up at the man, and realized that he wasn’t as old as I had originally thought. He was tall, for sure- I could tell he was taller than normal, even though i was tied up in an awkward position. He had dark brown hair that fell to just above his shoulders, and blue eyes that stared at us from behind square glasses frames. Beneath his fitted argyle sweater, he was thin. And the most surprising thing was that he looked completely normal. As in, he didn’t look like a hybrid of any sort, or like some sort of mythical creature. Until he smiled, and I caught a glimpse of his teeth. His canines were elongated. Like a vampire’s. I blinked a few times. Vampires, didn’t exist. That was made- up shit, created for the enjoyment of teenage girls. Wasn’t it? Looking at the newcomer, I wasn’t so sure.