

The Adventures of Mysty: Tome the First: The Mountain's Curse

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Dedicated to the real Mysty, M. B.

Written over the course of mid-May 2012 to the present

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Table of Contents

...Book 1...

Parts 1-8:.....[Document 1](#)

[Part 9](#): Nate.....p.3

[Part 10](#): Things Really Get Intense.....p.38

The End (of What Has been Written).....p.45

Book 1

Part 9

Nate

Mysty drifted in and out of consciousness several times before truly reawakening. What had happened? Running. She'd been running from something. Then... pain. Darkness. She'd gotten knocked out. Fuzzy voices in her head, dark twisting shadows, and being carried along not gently, but not jarringly either. Finally she managed to recall everything leading up to the impact with the tree -- the warg, the lake, getting lost, the weird unknown boy, the cabin, Will and Ghosty...

Where was she now? The warg must have gotten her. She was probably in the dangerous hideout of the hideous Tuner Will called the Evil One. She stayed still and silent, taking in her surroundings. Strangely enough, it didn't seem all that different from her room in the cabin, except that what looked like the only doorway was blocked up with large leaves woven together into a sort of curtain. She was lying on her back on a small, hard bed with dried vegetation providing minimal comfort. The walls appeared to be made of wood, and the only light was a dim blue glow filtering in through the leaves.

She lifted up her hands to her face. She wasn't tied down, or paralyzed, or in any way restricted from freedom of movement. That was good, but strange. She stared at her fingers a moment longer. Something wasn't quite right... It was difficult to see in the inadequate lighting, but her right hand looked somewhat gruesome, with her clawlike nails and fingertips stained dark. What had happened? Had she attacked her captor and couldn't remember it? Wait, the fruit! That was all. The glowerines she'd impaled on her claws had been taken off at some point, and her hand was discolored by the juice of the things. No reason for panic.

She sat up slowly, being careful not to make any noise. Her head still hurt a little, but when she patted it down and combed through it with her fingers, she felt no blood or bruises; it was just sore. She stepped onto the dirt floor and cautiously approached the doorway. She gently tugged at one of the leaves, and found that it was only attached at the top, free to be pushed aside at the bottom. She peeked her head out past the side, and to her surprise, found that either the construction workers of this universe didn't have much imagination, or she actually was back in the cabin.

Her eyes darted around the main room, and the entrances to all the other rooms. There was nobody in sight, and apart from her own, all the doorways looked just as she'd left them. The Anghallin torch was still sitting on the table in the center of the room. What was going on? How was she here? Where were Ghosty and Will? Was all this a figment of an injured mind, and she hadn't truly come to after hitting that tree? Or, on the reverse side, had getting lost been only a dream?

She fully exited her room and slowly, quietly walked over to Ghosty's across from it. Yep, it still had that haunted feeling that her friend had liked, so this had to be the cabin after all, but the ghost was gone. Worriedly, she next looked into William's room. It was also empty. Only the storage room wasn't devoid of all signs of life, but of course, all it held was fruit. What had happened? Had her friends been captured too, and the cabin

taken over by the wargs? She leaned against the wall and took a few calming breaths. She was starting to get dizzy with worry; freaking out was not going to help her find out what was happening. She silently approached the front door and sank to her hands and knees. She grasped the little handle with her right hand, and as gently as she could, pulled open the door.

Sunlight glared through the crack, and she had to wait a second for her eyes to adjust to the sudden increase of light before widening the gap enough to see out of. What she saw in the mid-morning light doubled her confusion. William was sitting on the ground about a third of the way to the edge of the clearing from the door. Beside him, Ghosty was floating his normal couple of inches off the ground, arms crossed. Both were facing away from her, at a third person who was standing with them.

What was *he* doing here?! It was the boy who had inadvertently caused all this drama! He was still wearing that robelike garment of interwoven large leaves, his green eyes staring at Ghosty as they all stood there silently. He made a small gesture with his hands, and the ghost gave a small nod as William made a quiet rumbling noise. What were they all doing? All this was just so weird! Oh, hang on, she knew what they were doing. They were using thought-speak but she wasn't linked in to the conversation, so she couldn't hear it.

She debated what to do. She still felt a little embarrassed about her appearance, but if this guy was talking with Will and Ghosty, who didn't look very scared or worried or angry, he might already know about everything and understand her situation and wouldn't ridicule her for it or say anything stupid. And honestly, she was burning to know what in the world was going on too much to stay hidden away. She took a quick deep breath, and then let it out again as she got rather dizzy. That wasn't good. She tried again, a bit slower and less intensely. That was better. She opened up the door all the way and stepped out into the open air.

Ghosty turned around as the door creaked open. "You're awake!" he exclaimed, clearly relieved. William also twisted his head in her direction, and thumped his tail a few times. The stranger appeared to brighten at seeing her as well, before shyly looking down at the ground.

"So what's going on?" she asked, as she closed the door behind her with her foot. "How am I back here at the cabin? What's *he* doing here?"

"We were hoping you would know," Ghosty said, with a touch of exasperation. "We've been talking to this guy for about an hour now, and I've had more productive conversations with my television. Will, you can keep talking to him for now, but I'm going to fill Mysty in on what we have and hopefully get some answers from her too."

The wolf nodded, and for an instant, a hair-thin blue line appeared between his head and the ghost's. It flashed yellow, and vanished. "Was that line thing something I should be worried about?" Mysty asked them. *That was me breaking the thought-speak*

between me and the ghost, William told her with a series of barks. "Oh, okay. Good."

"So, let's go inside and we can try to piece together what happened yesterday," Ghosty said, drifting over to the cabin and continuing through the closed door. Mysty pushed it open to allow herself entry, and then kicked it back shut again with her heel. "I hope we can," she said, "because I have totally no idea what happened last night." She started to walk to the table but paused as another bout of dizziness made the room twist around.

"Here, we can talk in here," said Ghosty, holding out a hand to her shoulder and guiding her to the curtain covering the doorway to her room. "You look like you're still woozy."

"Yeah, I hit my head pretty hard last night," she told him, sitting down on her bed and leaning her head back against the wooden wall. Her friend drifted down beside her. "So," he said, "I don't really believe this guy's story, but," he admitted with a trace of that ironic smile she'd come to associate with him, "I don't believe I'd believe my own story if someone else were to tell it to me, so I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt. But to make sure, why don't you go first and then if it matches up I can fill you in on our side and his side."

"Okay. Well, there isn't too much to tell. I started back from the stream after cleaning up yesterday morning, and came across him sitting behind a tree, talking to himself. I panicked because I didn't want him to see me, and ran. A lot. I was probably halfway to the ravine when I finally stopped."

Ghosty whistled. "That's a *long* way. Why didn't you just think to us for help while we were connected, instead of fleeing like that?"

"I panicked," she said, slightly defensively. "I wasn't thinking straight. I was kind of embarrassed about not being totally human... and I didn't want to have just any stranger seeing me that way. And my mind froze up." It was tough even getting those words out without feeling very embarrassed. She took a short, slow breath and continued on, quietly. "By the time I thought to tell you and Will, the connection was lost. Probably I was too far away."

She was glad that Ghosty didn't look mad or scolding. At least *he* didn't think she was stupid for doing that. "So then what happened?" he asked.

"I wandered around for a bit, ate some fruit, and found a lake with a spring in it. I drank from it and then accidentally fell asleep. When I woke up, it was dark. I decided to find somewhere to dig a shelter in the ground, but before I could find a good spot, I heard one of those howls."

He nodded grimly. "While we were out searching for you, we heard one way off somewhere. It was very distant but we knew right away that it wasn't just Bob trying to find the way home. That noise is *creepy*, even from a distance."

"And up close it's worse," she said, shuddering at the memory. "I tried very hard not to

panic again, and maybe I would have found somewhere safe for the night, but one of them found me."

The ghost hissed in surprise. "They *found* you? How'd you escape? That super-blast stuff you did to me?"

"I didn't escape," she said. "I ran away from it as fast as I could, and I was about to try 'that super-blast stuff', but I ran straight into a tree and knocked myself out. I don't remember anything clearly from then until I woke up here in bed."

"Well..." Ghosty stared vacantly at the curtain of leaves hanging from the ceiling. "On one end, it more or less fits with what we know. On the other, we didn't know anything definitive about the wargs, and that adds a ton more uncertainty to everything." He turned back to her. "Well, now that I know what you know, I'll go ahead and tell you what I know."

"So," Ghosty said, "after Will brought you to the stream, we continued in a long

discussion about how modern science believes the universe works, and how Anghallin and the extra two dimensions might fit into it. You know about dark matter and dark energy?"

Mysty thought for a moment. "I've heard or read about dark matter some, but I can't remember much about it."

The ghost shrugged. "It's not very important to us here and now. All I was going to say is that we think dark energy, the mysterious force speeding up the expansion of our universe, might be some form of Anghallin doing stuff in the other dimensions. Like I said, it's no practical help to us, just interesting theory. To me, at least. Anyway, we talked about that for a long while, until it was around noon. You still hadn't come back, and I started getting a bit worried. I know girls can take a while to clean up, but there's not so much you can do in the middle of a forest, and you haven't needed to take forever grooming yourself before. We tried calling for you telepathically but the link seemed to be broken. I didn't want to be wrong about something bad having happened and accidentally sneak up on you while you were taking a bath or anything, though, so William went back to check on you. And as soon as he thought to me that you weren't there, the search was on."

"William managed to track you a little way after you left the stream; you came back the way you arrived, then side-tracked to a few trees, and then went off in a random direction. That's probably where you saw Nate."

"Nate? That's his name?" Mysty asked. He nodded. "That's what he says. Will caught his scent moving on top of yours, and eventually lost yours after a few hundred feet. He followed the unknown scent a while longer but it disappeared after a little while too. We decided you were well and truly lost at this point and made a full-out search and rescue plan. Will reset the thought-link between us, and Will started searching over the area where we'd lost your trail, while I came back to the cabin. You weren't there, of course, so I left a message on the table in glowerine juice for you if you came back while we were looking for you."

"I didn't see a message this morning when I woke up," she said. "That's because I wiped it off later after you'd gotten back here. I'll get to that in a moment," he told her. "We searched fruitlessly until the sun went down, then came back to the cabin. You were still gone, so after a few minutes worrying, we went back out and searched some more, farther from the cabin. We were out there when he heard the warg call, and that was when we got very worried. Will was terrified that it meant they must have gotten you, but I was certain they wouldn't capture you easily. Going by what you told me, you sure would have put up a rough fight if that tree hadn't stepped in on their side."

"So, right about this point I get chased and I hit that tree, and after this I don't know anything," she said. She spread her hands out. "What the heck happened?"

"Well, we kept searching for you the rest of the night, hoping we'd find you but

knowing it was probably a lost cause. Either you'd been captured, gotten very, VERY lost, or found some shelter for the night. We went back to the shelter just before sunrise to check it one last time before going out for a final search until noon, at which point we'd go back up the mountain and enlist the help of the rest of Will's wolf pack to look for you."

"Wow," Mysty murmured. "They'd really go through that much trouble for me?"

He held out his hands to his sides. "I don't know if they'd actively help search for you, but I know I definitely would, and I'm pretty certain Will would never give up either. But anyway, it turned out that wouldn't be necessary, because guess who we found passed out in front of the cabin?"

"Me?"

"No, a pony."

She huffed in amusement. She hadn't seen that coming, but she should have. "And this pony then flew off and found me and brought me home, right?"

"After eating you first."

"Ewwkay. Back to reality."

"So, you were out cold on the dirt, and this strange teenage guy in a leaf toga was fast asleep, leaning against the wall. I totally freaked out at first, because your hand was all covered in red stain -- huh, it still is; another trip to the stream to wash off that glowerine juice might be in order, eh? -- and the way you were positioned was unnatural; you'd clearly been dumped there by someone else, not just lain down on your own. But when I shouted, you shifted a little, so you were alive. I still went off pretty hard on that guy, demanding what the heck was going on, what was he doing here, what had he done to you, et cetera et cetera," he said, waving his hands around. "It must have scared the wits out of him, being woken up and interrogated by a furious ghost in a foreign language. I hope the poor kid doesn't hate me for that." He slowly shook his head with an expression somewhere between amusement and regret. "Will managed to calm me down and take over before I went too crazy, and linked us all with thought-speak so we could understand each other clearly again. I took you inside and laid you on your bed, and William told me to make that curtain of leaves to keep out the light, but I think the real reason was to give me some time to chill out."

Mysty gave a small puff of a chuckle. "Yeah, when you freak out, you don't get half-mad."

He returned the noise. "Indeed. That's always been one of my bigger faults. Anyway, so we got you settled, and made sure you weren't seriously injured. You whimpered a bit when I checked your scalp, but it didn't look bad in any way we could try to treat. Then, we took to questioning the stranger in a more civilized manner, and kept at it until you woke up just a bit ago."

"So what did he tell you?"

"So far, well, not too much that's helpful, but I'll tell you what I know."

Ghosty slowly rocked back and forth as he recited what he'd learned. "He calls himself Nate. No last name, no full name, just Nate. He claims that a few days ago, he woke up here with no recollection of where he came from, and that all he remembers is his name." He rolled his eyes, which was slightly tough to make out because of his translucency. "I miss the good old days, when people were real people, animals were real animals, and giant foggy sorcerer monsters were NOT real giant foggy sorcerer monsters, and the only time anyone lost their memory was after they'd been in a huge car crash, had a heart attack, or become a decade too old. But I digress. Nate says he woke up in the bushes and his clothes were gone. He yelled in shock, you heard him and fell off your tree right nearby, and he ran away, scared. He went and strung himself some clothing, and that was as far in that direction as we got before you woke up."

"What about me getting back here?" Mysty demanded. "You asked that first, right?"

"Of course," he said indignantly. "When lives are on the line, backstory can wait. Unless you're talking to a platypus. But that's a totally different story. Anyway, you saw him, you freaked out, you ran off, and he felt worried and guilty. He tried to track you down, but only had partially better luck than we had. Until nightfall. He found you crumpled on the ground, maybe directly after you hit the tree, maybe not."

"I don't see how that's possible," she said, shaking her head. "Unless the energy I'd already taken in did something weird when I hit my head, there's no way that warg couldn't have found me."

He shrugged and held out his hands in a gesture of uncertainty. "I have absolutely no idea what happened between you blacking out and him finding you. But he tried to wake you up, and failed. He knew you were alive, though, and somehow -- this is the part that's impressive -- knew the way back to the cabin. So, he picked you up and carried you the rest of the night. He set you down here at just around sunrise and fell asleep, at least until I came along a few minutes later. Like I said, I don't know if he's trustworthy and he might even be in league with *them*, but we have no counterevidence right now so he's got the benefit of the doubt. Innocent until proven guilty and all that jazz."

He looked at her questioningly. "Do you want to come out with me and maybe we can all get introduced to each other in a more proper manner, or do you want to stay in here and rest a bit longer?"

She considered it for a moment. Her head wasn't horribly sore, and as long as she didn't need to make any quick movements she didn't think that the dizziness she'd felt a few times this morning would be an issue. And though she still felt mildly uncomfortable about herself, she didn't want to look like an idiot, constantly running and hiding from this person who apparently had rescued her.

"I guess I'll come with you," she said, standing up. "At the very least, this Nate deserves a thank-you for getting me back here, although I'm not sure how I feel about being carried back here..."

"Alright then," Ghost said, lifting up off the bed. "Let's see if Will's managed to learn anything helpful, and told him what he told us about this place." Mysty pushed aside the curtain and pulled open the door with her foot. "There's something I might want to work on sometime," she said thoughtfully. "Making a door-handle at human height instead of wolf height." As she stepped out into the open air, a strong, gusty breeze tossed her hair all across her face. "And I totally forgot about wanting a headband or hat."

"Kind of odd, isn't it?" Ghosty commented. "It's never been windy in the morning before." They approached Will and Nate, who were still standing a short distance from the cabin, talking via telepathic link. Nate looked up as they paused a few feet away, and then William turned around also. *Hello again, Tuner, he rumbled. I will provide thought-speak soon, but big storm coming. We should go inside.* "There's a storm coming? That would explain the winds," Mysty said, as the group turned around and she walked to the front door yet again, as the gusts of wind intensified. She glanced up at the sky, which was still blue and sunny, except for the eastern horizon, which was a line of dark grey. "Like I said before," Ghosty shrugged, "the longer the period of great weather, the bigger the storm that follows."

Just as William entered the cabin, the last of them to do so, a loud rumble of thunder announced the hostility of the approaching weather. They all jumped a little at the unexpected noise. Mysty felt particularly uneasy; for no obvious reason, the thunder triggered a much greater fear response in her mind than it should have. Maybe that was wolf-related. Everyone knew dogs often ran and hid during storms. She'd accept that for explanation for now and do her best to keep composed, because it looked like William was getting ready to do the thought-linking. So, as they gathered at the waist-high table with the wolf at the end near the door (which he had just pushed shut), the new arrival on the side near Ghosty and William's rooms, and the ghost floating next to her on the side near her room, Mysty cleared those thoughts out of her mind.

A few seconds later, they were all connected through the wondrous Anghallin thought translation, and the introductions could begin. "Now that we are all here and can understand each other," William announced over the muffled sound of wind whistling across the roof, "we can commence with getting to know the others. Clearly myself, the Tuner, and the ghost already know each other to a reasonable degree, but obviously our newcomer does not." A crash of noise interrupted him, forcing an involuntary whine out of his jaws. Both Mysty and the boy across the table flinched, and Ghosty flickered for a second before regaining control of his visibility. "This place is totally safe, right?" Mysty asked, placing her palms on the table. Ghosty looked at her sideways. "If it's really been here a couple thousand years, then I think it'll hold up to a quick storm without much issue."

"Heh, forgot about that."

"I am positive we will be fine," William agreed. "Roughly every 22 and a half days, a large storm passes over the mountain. This shed has endured hundreds, if not thousands, of such storms, so there is no reason to worry. Now, on to introductions. We shall work our way around the table, starting with the ghost."

"Works for me," Ghosty said. "So, for reasons of my own, I do not wish to go by the name I had when I was alive, so you can call me Ghosty, or just plain 'the ghost', and we'll all know who you're talking about. Because, obviously, I'm a potato." He grinned for a second. "Don't get too scared if I pop up out of nowhere, because that's just what ghosts do. And try not to make me mad, because I try my hardest to be friendly, but if I stop being calm, bad things can happen and none of us, least of all me, want those bad things to happen."

"So I guess it's my turn now," thought Mysty. "I'm Mysty. I don't remember the rest of my name, or most things about myself for that matter. Me and Ghosty came to this forest by accident about a week ago, on the day I lost most of my memory. After a few days, we met Will here, and found out that am actually a Tuner who can do magicky stuff with the energy flowing through the universe, and also that because of a curse on the mountain, I'm part wolf too. So like Ghosty said, don't make me mad 'cuz I don't know what I'll do, but most of the time I try to be nice and helpful." She turned to face William, indicating that she was done.

"As you all already know, my name is William," the wolf said. "I was originally from the island of Britannia in the world that they arrived from much later. I was an assistant to the great Tuner Marlin, and like those next to me, my permanent move to this forest was unplanned. In an unpredictable, unintentional mistake by another Tuner, I was sent to

this world, where I soon fell victim to the curse of the mountain, and unlike our more fortunate friend, was completely and probably irrevocably -- " Another terse pause as thunder roared overhead, accompanied by the first patterings of rain colliding with the wood over their heads. " -- transformed into a wolf. For many years I lived with the pack of wolves that denned on the mountain, until the recent, dramatic arrival of the newcomers. And so for the time being, I have become mentor to the young Tuner and her ghost friend."

He tilted his head to his left, hinting that he was finished. The rain was well and truly falling now, adding a steady pounding to the low, eerie rush of wind that permeated their stronghold. "Um, well, hi," came a new voice through Mysty's head. It matched what little she had heard the stranger muttering to himself in the woods yesterday; not as deep as Will's and maybe a touch higher than Ghosty's, with the very faintest hint of an unrecognizable accent that might have been similar to that of the Japanese or Irish, but was not entirely like either. "My name is Nate. I do not remember very much else about myself. I woke up in the woods nearby several days ago, and have no clear memories of anything before that. I did know I normally wore clothing of some type and I did not have any with me, and as I had woken up, I had noticed that Mysty, who was in the tree, was wearing some. I wished to approach her and her companions, the dog and the ghost, hoping they could help me figure out what had happened, but I could not do so without clothing. I ran off and found a tree with very large leaves and good fruit and created the thing I am now wearing. I spent the night in that tree, and then in the morning tried to work up my courage to go back to this house and introduce myself," and then he paused as a huge burst of thunder blasted across the room.

Mysty found herself in a hunched-up ball under the edge of the table, and with her face burning with embarrassment, stood up again. Will had fallen to the ground and buried his head in his paws, and Ghosty was looking somewhat out of sorts as well. Nate was also looking startled and insecure, grasping the edge of the table in both hands. William also picked himself up, and with a small chuckle, commented, "The storm is very much louder when we are surrounded by it instead of buried in a cave like I have been when they came around before." Mysty turned to her phantom friend and asked quizically in thought-speak, "Why are you... doing... whatever it is, that you're doing? Are you okay?" It looked like he was oscillating very rapidly, like her mom's cellphone when the ringer was turned off. "Oh, the shaking?" he answered with a half-smile. "It's something that happens to me when I'm on the 'very worried' end of 'uncomfortable'. As opposed to the 'very angry' or 'very sad' ends, which, well, you already know about. *Fun*. I don't know if this is ghost-related or if it's just me. All I know is, I haven't heard thunder this loud since... eh, long story, involves past life, not worth going into detail or we might end up with some *fun*." He shrugged nonchalantly, though still vibrating. "It just makes me nervous and I start doing this. I'm perfectly fine. Anyway,

Nate, you were saying?"

Nate, who had let go of the table and was mostly relaxed again, started to think something, but as he did, another clap of thunder disrupted him before he could resume his narration. Ghosty stared up at the ceiling and indignantly asked, "Eesh, Zeus, what did we ever do to you?" *Brrrrrrmmmmgrrnnnnrrrr!* He shrugged, and looked back to the table with a small sigh. "I guess there's a different god of lightning in this place." Everyone looked at him blankly for a second. He rolled his eyes. "Right, two amnesiacs and one guy from the 6th century. Nobody else is going to know what I'm talking about. Carry on, carry on." Then Nate said, "Okay, where had I stopped? The morning, waiting to introduce myself, right?" Mysty nodded, and there was a "Yep," from Ghosty.

"I waited a while trying to decide how to approach you. None of you had spoken very much, but the few words I had heard sounded similar to some I knew. But..." He looked down at the table and shrugged. "I just do not have much courage. As I tried to prepare myself for a long time, I heard a noise behind me. I got up quickly and saw Mysty running away. I called out after her, but she kept running and did not say anything." He looked slightly hurt. "I was a little disappointed about this, but also worried, because she was running away from here, where we are now, into the forest. I chose to try to follow her, to apologize for scaring her off and to help her back here if needed."

Mysty decided this was a good point to quickly get something in. "Really, there's nothing you would have needed to apologize about. I'm the one who should be sorry; I was scared you might be working with someone who meant me harm, so I ran," she half-lied.

Nate looked somewhat relieved. "I am glad it was not me personally you were running from." He then went back to his introduction-turned-explanation. "I tried to find you, but you had run very fast, very far. This someone who means you harm must be very scary."

Ghosty grimaced. "Oh, he is. I know less about him than I do you, and what I do know about him (or it?) tells me I should probably keep it that way." A deep rumble accentuated his remark, emphasizing the dark mood implied by it.

"I looked all day but did not find Mysty," Nate continued. "Shortly after sunset... I heard a very chilling howl. That put me in a panic, until somehow I found her. She was

lying in a heap on the ground, and after quickly checking to make sure she was alive and not seriously hurt, I figured that she had run into a tree."

Mysty nodded ruefully, and rubbed the top of her head. "Yep, that's exactly what happened."

"I tried to wake her up, but though she moved slightly and mumbled something I could not understand, she stayed asleep. So, I picked her up as gently as I could and for the rest of the night, walked towards this cabin, hoping to stay hidden from whatever awful creature had made that howl."

William asked, "How did you know which way to go to reach the cabin? It took all day to get that far away and all night to return, and though I have had centuries to learn the lay of the land, you have only been in this forest for several days."

Nate shrugged and looked shyly at the ground. "I have a very good sense of direction," he said. "If I have been somewhere before, I am nearly always able to find it again easily."

"Lucky you," Ghosty commented. "I get lost more easily than an American in Japan holding the map upside down."

Nate looked at him quizzically. "I am guessing that was a compliment?"

The ghost smirked. "To you, it was."

"Uh, okay."

A short lull occurred in the conversation after this, with only the pounding of the rain above their heads filling the silence for several seconds.

"Sooooooo," Mysty finally said, "you carried me home, and then?"

"I reached this clearing at sunrise. You had still not ever fully awoken, so I laid you down on the steps. I was quite exhausted myself, and though I only stopped for a moment, I fell asleep. When I awoke, your friend Ghosty was yelling at me in his language, which startled me quite a lot."

The ghost smiled, with a look of slight embarrassment on his face. "Yeah, again, I apologize for that. I really shouldn't have gone off on you like I did. You did nothing wrong; I was just very concerned about Mysty."

Nate nodded. "I understand. If I were in your place I think I would have panicked as well." He shrugged. "That is how I got here, and is all I truly know." As he finished, yet another immense burst of noise shook the cabin. Fortunately, Mysty thought to herself, her involuntary yelp of surprise was hidden in the cacophony of the thunderstorm. Everyone at the table found themselves glancing at the walls with a worried expression on their faces. "Well," Mysty said with a small, embarrassed smile. "At least it doesn't look like I'm the only one who's rather uncomfortable with this storm right now."

Ghosty was not only vibrating, but flickering as well. "Oh, you got that r-r-right." He sighed. "Stammering? R-really?" He drifted up from the table, and moved in the direction of his room. "I'm going to try to r-relax in the 'haunting room'. In the front,

logical part of m-my mind, I know there's no real r-r-reason to be scared like this, but the back of my mind is very m-much hard-wired to hate thunderstorms." He grunted explosively in frustration. "I can't say as I ever remember myself stammering before." He vanished inside the doorway.

Nate blinked a few times. "I do not know how well I can rest with this storm going on, but I am very tired too. I have not slept very much recently." He looked at the rooms of the cabin. "If that's the ghost's room," he pointed, before turning to the doorway covered with the curtain, "and that is Mysty's..." He shrugged. "Where can I rest?"

Mysty turned to William, slightly concerned. "Yeah, me and you and Ghosty all have rooms, Will, but where can Nate sleep? There's only four rooms and one is filled with fruit! He can't just go outside into the rain!"

"Of course he cannot," the wolf said, sounding surprised that she would think he might have to. "But the storage room is not that full. It is simple enough to reposition the fruit so that there is room enough for a person to sleep. Come, you two, we can fix it up now. Nobody will have to relocate to anywhere unpleasant."

Mysty smiled. "Good. Unless, of course, you think the fruit is unpleasant..."

Nate quickly shook his head, and sincerely said, "No, no. I am perfectly fine with sharing a room with food."

"Heh. Yeah, lucky you."

They walked over to the open doorway, and Mysty took stock of the current situation. Several shelves lined each wall, but they were all only partially full. In the far corners, a couple of small crates held around eight fruits each. In what was roughly the center of the room, a loose pile of a dozen or two glowerines was the only fruit not stored neatly away. "This should be as simple as picking up that group there," Mysty thought, pointing, "and putting it in the boxes."

Nate shuffled over to it and scooped up an armful. "Just like this?" he asked, dumping it into one of the crates, filling it just over the top. "Yeah," she said, nodding. "Exactly." She leaned over and grabbed several, and deposited them in the other crate. Nate picked up the remaining few and dropped them on top.

"That looks clean to me," William remarked, sniffing the straw-covered dirt floor. "It smells of juice, but not at all unpleasantly." He turned and darted across to his room. "With some straw bedding, it may not be luxurious, but it should be reasonably comfortable." He dashed back over carrying a bundle of dried grass in his mouth, and gently set it down in the middle of the room, spreading it around in a thick layer.

"Thank you," Nate said, leaning over and patting his new resting place. "This is very nice." He yawned. "And now I will see how well I can sleep on it." He lay down on it. *Crrrash!* He sighed. "In a thunderstorm."

Mysty turned and left the room. "Sleep well," she said, stepping out into the main chamber. William trotted out beside her. "So, what do you wish to do, Tuner?" he asked her. "Do you feel like resting as well?"

"I don't know," she said without interest. "My head still hurts a little from last night, but not a lot..." She flinched, jarring the table with her elbow, as another loud rumble of thunder rolled in. "Ow. And there's this storm going on. Is there any sort of Tuner stuff we can do?"

The wolf thought for a moment. "Anything I can think of trying," he said, tilting over to scratch a spot on his back with a rear paw, "requires strong concentration, and thus is not well suited to being learned during a thunderstorm when one is tired and perhaps mildly injured." He straightened up as yet more noise from above rattled through the harsh slapping of rain on the roof. "I am afraid there is not that much we can do at this point except wait for the storm to blow over. It should be gone around sunset, if my sense of time is correct."

"I know mine sure isn't," Mysty said ruefully. "I don't think I'm ever going to get used to how short the days are here." She absently rubbed the spot on her arm where she'd made contact with the table. "And I really hope I won't be stuck here long enough to have to get used to it..." She sighed sadly, remembering the reason she was here in the first place. "I have no idea what's going on back home. What happened to those ghost hunters and this Evil One once me and Ghosty left? How much time has passed there? What does my mom and everyone else think happened to me, if they're even okay?" She hung her head, her hair falling into a curtain around her head, as she listened to the low rumble of a distant thunderclap. A small tear slipped down her face, and she limply wiped it away.

"I am afraid I have no answers for you, Mysty," William said softly. She was surprised for a moment that he had used her name, instead of calling her simply 'Tuner' as he always did. "I do not know how Time acts throughout the zinal plane, between worlds," he continued, looking up at her with a sad look in his big, shiny eyes. "I believe it always flows in one direction, but it may meander slowly in some regions, while running at a quick current in others. It may be that in your world, mere hours or even minutes have passed since you left. I would not worry about it if I were you. There is nothing any of us here can do about it at this point, and causing yourself anguish over it does not help you do anything productive."

Mysty winced; if it were possible that days had passed here but only minutes had passed back home, then couldn't the opposite be true, and if she ever returned, it would be years in the future? She slowly straightened up, pulled her hair out of her face, and forced herself to stop thinking about it. As Will said, there was nothing she could do to change it right now. "Yeah... I think I will go ahead and take a nap," she told the wolf. "It's better than thinking... Everything just makes my head hurt inside."

"Have a good rest," William said. He jumped a little as another extremely loud burst of thunder roared overhead. "I will remain out here... examining the underside of the table to make certain it does not need repairs."

If Mysty didn't feel a little like hiding under something herself, she would have teased him about it. But she decided against it. "You have fun with that," she told the wolf, and trudged into her room. After a moment of adjusting the bedding, she positioned herself on the bed, burying herself in hay and large leaves, both for some protection against the weather noises and the cold. It was a little chilly, which was unusual. It had been comfortably warm just about always in this forest world. But then it had never yet rained, either. Slightly shivering, she tossed and turned several times before managing to fall unconscious.

She slept fitfully, fading in and out of deep sleep for a long time. She wasn't quite able to either hold on to reality or fall into the void of restfulness, and when she finally opened her eyes and gave up trying to sleep, she felt only mildly rested and more irritable. She got out of her bed, pushed aside the curtains, and stepped out... into a city park?

"What?" she muttered, stepping back. What had happened? This clearly wasn't the cabin. Her frustrated, jumbled mind felt even more mixed up. Then, as a black cat the size of a small car slunk by and orange clouds drifted across the sky at record paces, it finally hit her that she was still asleep, and dreaming.

"Oh, duh," she said, rolling her eyes. "What has my life come to that I didn't realize that right away?"

She glanced back at where she'd stepped out of her 'bedroom', but it was gone, replaced by a pathway through the park she found herself in the middle of. There were lush trees dotted across the low, rolling, grassy hills, and there didn't seem to be any other people around. There were a few animals that didn't quite confirm to scale, though -- she had to resist an odd urge to leap up and snatch a turkey-sized robin that flew over her head, as it chirped a staccato tune that seemed vaguely familiar but didn't quite seem like bird-song.

She wondered what she could do in this lucid dream; clearly, it wasn't muddled and out of her control like some others. She wondered if she could try flying; but quickly decided not to, just in case it was actually real somehow, or if she could manage to launch herself out of bed in reality, onto the solid floor.

The sound of laughter came through to her from somewhere nearby. Intrigued, she

walked over in its direction. Strolling along one of the stone brick paths were a boy and girl about her age, their backs to her. She was too far away to hear what the dark-haired girl in the blue shirt was saying, but the boy, who had a similar hair color, clearly found it humorous. She caught a glimpse of one of his hands waving around in the air in some sort of gesture, and it was the girl's turn to laugh.

Mysty was wondering whether they were brother and sister, or cousins; possibly boyfriend or girlfriend, or maybe just friends. Then she heard the girl's laugh, and felt a small chill. It sounded enough like her own that it could have just been an echo bouncing off of the walls of the ravine of days past. Was this some glimpse of her own past sneaking through her amnesia?

Her irritation and sleepiness forgotten, she dashed up the path towards the two, immensely curious and almost giddy with excitement and hope -- if that really was her up ahead, was this a memory of hers? A distorted memory, at best, she thought, stopping to avoid being bowled over by a rampaging cartoonish dwarven cow. She was close enough to see the boy's face as he turned to the girl with a wry smile, and immediately she slowed to a stop, her eagerness slipping away like used bathwater. The face was Ghosty's. So clearly, whoever the girl was, it wasn't her, and this wasn't some memory of hers sneaking through. This was just a dream, or memory, or recollection or whatever, that Ghosty was having while resting just across the cabin from her in the real world.

She wondered whether she should call out, or eavesdrop, or just walk away and try to wake up. She felt that it might be a little rude to be breaking into someone else's dream, even if it wasn't intentional or even controllable. A little red racecar, a bit bigger than William, came tearing through the grass to her left and she had to leap backwards to avoid being hit by it, letting out an involuntary, instinctual yelp as she bounced onto the ground, even though it didn't actually hurt in any way. The boy, whom she now knew was Ghosty as a person, turned around and saw her, and gasped in surprise.

Suddenly, the entire scene changed. The sky turned grey and overcast, and the leaves on the trees turned from green to a dull orangey-brown. The unknown girl seemed to have outright disappeared. The boy grimaced, and somewhat more slowly, the colors came back to the world. He ran up to where Mysty lay on the ground, her face burning with embarrassment. "Mysty?" he asked incredulously. "Ghosty? Um, sorry for breaking into your dream or whatever... I didn't try to, it just happened!" He shook his head, looking almost as embarrassed as her, but with a half-smile. "No, no, it's no problem," he said, leaning down and helping her up. "It's not like this is a new 'dream' or anything. I'm not even truly asleep right now, just really not awake."

"I thought when I saw you and that other person, it might be a memory of mine sneaking past the block in my head... but I guess it isn't." Her voice caught a little, adding to her discomfort. Ghosty made a noise somewhere between an ironic chuckle

and a miserable whine. "Yeeeah, sorry to disappoint you..." he said, looking down. "That was... my friend that I told you about, when, you know..."

Mysty felt even worse now. "Yeah, I know what you're talking about... I'm really, really sorry for interrupting your conversation with her."

He sighed, and waved a hand in a gesture of dismissal. "It's not really her, just a memory of her lodged in my imagination. You didn't ruin anything." He tilted his head to the side, a look of interest joining the disappointed awkwardness. "Which makes me wonder, are you actually you, in my dream-thingy, or just another result of my insanity?"

"I don't know about the rest," she said, cracking a grin, "but you got at least the insanity bit right."

"Heh, I guess it really is you." He smiled and started walking back up the path, and Mysty took up a position on his right, the opposite of where Ghosty's other friend had been. "Sorry for dragging you in here, or whatever happened," he said.

"Don't be. I wasn't getting any good sleep normally. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to get some rest in reality while we're here in... Is this Rockton?"

He nodded. "Yep, Grand Rockton City Park. Normally not home to giant floating kitties."

A little gleam entered Mysty's eye as she turned and glanced at him, a devious smirk on her face. "I just thought of something..."

Ghosty glanced at her skeptically. "Oh bother. Something tells me you're going to do something ridiculous."

Mysty scoffed. "Since when do I ever do something ridiculous?" She quickly glanced behind her, hoping her idea would work....

Ghosty's eyes widened. "AHHH, I know what you're trying to do!" he gasped. "No! You are NOT putting any flying ponies in MY dream!"

Mildly disappointed, she watched a flickering horse shape behind her turn into a cloud, which swept away into the sky. "Aw, come on," she said. "Can't a girl have any fun around here?"

"No ponies. END OF STORY." Ghosty crossed his arms. "Or would you like me to bring heavy metal rock music and NASCAR into your dreams?"

Mysty shrugged. "You have a point, I suppose. I'll stop." She glanced around at the little green hills. "So, apart from the obvious random dream stuff, like the guy selling... frozen cheeseburgers? Heh. Is this what Rockton Park really looks like?"

"More or less. Maybe it doesn't look this clean or stuff in reality, but yeah, this is essentially what it looks like." He turned to face her, his face showing a little concern. "You, um, should have been here a bunch of times in reality, if you'd grown up in Rockton like the evidence says you have. You can't remember it at all?"

She sighed, and dragged a foot across the bricks. "Nope. All I remember about Rockton is my own street. My house, my backyard, I think I went to the grocery store

with my mom once... A lot of boring, dull stuff. I don't remember any friends, or having much fun... Except reading. I could always escape into books... I think." She stopped, her head not physically hurting but still in a muddle. "There's a bunch of gaps in my memory of that, too. I can remember bits and pieces of stories, but they're missing chunks. It's like someone just shoved my life through a strainer and only gave me back the pieces that wouldn't fit through. And then they punch me in the face whenever I try to get the rest back."

He looked away, at the ground. "I really wish I could help," he said, his voice a bit scratchy. The sky was starting to cloud up again, and a breeze was picking up. The frozen cheeseburger man pushed his cart into the back of a giant wagon and towed it away.

"I wish you could, too," Mysty said, sadly, "but wishing won't do us any good. Only doing stuff. Which, we never did get very far into figuring out why my memory was gone, did we?"

"Yeah," he said. "Those stupid ghost hunters!" He hissed through his teeth. So that was what that sound he sometimes made was supposed to be. "Really, though, I guess they probably weren't totally to blame. I don't even know how the Evil One fits into it, though."

"How would it, or he, or, whatever, know you and I were talking, or would be talking? That's kind of creepy."

"T-true. How did he know that?" Ghosty shivered a bit.

The two of them reached the edge of the park, and stepped out onto the crosswalk of the empty road. Something occurred to Mysty that didn't make much sense. "Hey, Ghosty? I just thought of something... I hope you don't mind me asking about it."

"Ask away, I guess." He seemed a little tense.

"You said you... you know... in spring, but it was June when we met. And you also said a while back you'd done some stuff at least several weeks ago. And in all that time... you never saw this friend whose life you saved? Why did you end up floating by my house, instead of going to hers?"

The cloudy sky suddenly darkened, and a chilly breeze picked up. Ghosty stared down at the concrete of the sidewalk, and Mysty could feel a harsh sting in her chest and head. Well, that was interesting; she could feel her host's feelings when in this dream communication state. "It's... complicated," he finally said in a low, toneless voice. "She... wasn't the same after the accident that cost me my life. She... was very upset about it, and tried to avoid any reminder of it. And I was scared to appear and make things worse." His voice was barely above a whisper. "I don't... want to... talk about it. Okay?"

Mysty hesitated, and then put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said, softly. "I... I didn't mean to -- "

She was interrupted by a humming noise that filled her mind. It sounded like a cross between a jet plane, a swarm of bees, and thunder. "Ummm, wh-what's that?" she asked nervously.

Ghosty looked up in horror. "No..." he whispered. "Not another of these dreams!"

"Ghosty?! What's happening?" Mysty looked all around for the source of the loud, eerie sound, which was getting louder and more intense.

"Tornado," he said tersely. "How -- I'm not actually dreaming. I can end this," Ghosty chanted to himself. "Back to reality. Wake *UP! WAKE UP!*"

The world seemed to swirl around, and Mysty cried out. "Ghosty! What -- " And then she sat up with a gasp, covered in loose hay and leaves in her bed. The wind was rumbling and vibrating along the planks in the cabin, which was the noise she'd been hearing in the dream. She took a few deep breaths and sank back down. "That ended badly," she muttered, closing her eyes again. A moment later, she heard Ghosty's voice call her name tentatively. She reopened her eyes and pushed the haphazardly rearranged bedding off herself. The phantom was floating in the curtain of her doorway, looking a little distraught.

"Um," he started. "Sorry about --"

"The dream?" she finished. "It's okay. I'm fine. Are you?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, lowering himself to ground level, looking a bit embarrassed. "I need to work on controlling my subconscious more... I thought I'd conquered my fear of tornadoes, but I guess not. I don't know how waking up from that was for you, but if it hurt at all I'm really sorry. That really wasn't supposed to happen."

She leaned back down. "Just forget about it," she said tiredly. "I'm fine. It was my fault, not yours. Sorry that I ruined your perfectly fine dream. I'm going to try to go back to sleep."

"I'll go ahead and, eh, talk to Will about some stuff for a bit, so that I don't drift off into daydreams, and that doesn't happen again. Have better dreams, Mysty."

"Night, Ghosty." She yawned, and unlike her earlier attempts to cease being aware of every noise and move and blade of hay, was back asleep almost as soon as Ghosty quietly drifted out of her room.

Thankfully, her sleep was much less eventful for the remainder of the night. When she eventually awoke, she felt quite refreshed, and there was wonderful silence outside. No thunder to make her want to hide under anything, no pounding winds and rain to give her headaches. She didn't even open her eyes; she just shifted and burrowed deeper into the hay and leaves. It was so comfortable like this... She didn't want to get back up and face the frustrations of reality. And for quite a while, she didn't.

Then there was a crash from the main room, and a strange cry in a strange voice. She bolted up, her mind still fuzzy. "What was that?" she whispered, puffing straw from her face. Cautiously, she leaned over and crawled out of bed. She swept a quick hand over her hair and shirt, removing most of the clinging vegetation. She peered around the edge of the curtain, and her blurry tension lessened. It was just Nate, who apparently had bumped into the table, knocking himself to the floor.

She pushed through the curtain completely and stepped out into the room, quickly establishing a thought-link between them. She was getting pretty good at that, she thought with a smile. "Are you alright?" she asked him, as he started to stand up again, but, startled at her appearance, he thumped back to the ground again. "Oh! Uh, yeah. I am fine," he said, his face turning bright red. "I just, uh, did not quite realize the table was here..."

"Well, it is pretty low... Will said that the wolves used it a lot, so they probably chopped it down to their size," she said, as he stood up. "That is probably why it is so awkwardly small," he said, running a hand over his face. Mysty could feel the embarrassment radiating from him. "I'll go ahead and, umm, get some breakfast," she thought to him, moving towards the fruit room. "I have already eaten," he said. "I will go outside and enjoy the sun being up."

Mysty heard him creak the door open and shut as she grabbed a couple of fruits, then, thinking it over, put one back. She wasn't that hungry this morning. She didn't feel sick or anything, just not hungry. "That's a bit unusual," she murmured to herself, but she didn't fuss over it. She just wasn't very hungry. That kind of thing happens. She took her glowerine to the main room, leaned against the table, and peeled it. William walked out of his room as she was halfway through.

Good morning, Tuner, he barked. *The ghost told me you connected his dream tonight.* "Yeah," she said, swallowing. "Is there any way I can stop that from happening? I don't really like going into people's minds... It just doesn't seem right."

The wolf yawned. *I not know. There must be way.* Mysty finished eating and crumpled up the peel in her hand, careful not to stab her palm with her claws. "Here," she said, with a little smile. "Let me link us up. When you talk in that language you sound like a caveman." She broke the still-existing link to Nate and with a quick little swoosh of Anghallin, established a telepathic connection with William, and Ghosty, who was just drifting out of the wolf's room.

"Good morning, Ghosty," she said. "Same to you," he replied, drifting over. "It sounded like someone knocked something over in here, but I heard you chuckling so I assumed everything was okay."

I chuckled? she thought. "I don't remember that..." No wonder Nate looked so embarrassed... Her face flushed a little. "Nate just tripped over the table on his way outside."

"Do you feel like following him out there?" William asked, stretching. "There is always plenty to see after a storm. Dripping leaves, fresh air, wonderfully squishy soft soil..."

"Wolves like playing in mud?" Ghosty lifted an eyebrow. Or at least, that's what it looked like he did. He was pretty translucent this morning.

"Say what you will, but it is quite refreshing to feel the wet dirt scratch away those spots you simply cannot scratch otherwise," William said defensively, "and then the unique cool clamminess of it... It is a pleasure unlike anything else I have experienced."

"You can roll in it all you want," Mysty said, and rolled her eyes. She pulled open the door with her foot. "But don't expect *me* to go jumping into mud pits."

The three of them walked out into the open air. The sun, which was nearly overhead, was shining brilliantly down in a sky that was, if possible, even more cerulean blue than before, and the air was actually very much cleaner-smelling.

"The immortaleaf's been washed out of the air," Ghosty said wonderingly. He held up an arm, and Mysty could actually see the tiny greyish lines of Anghallin, like static electricity darting across a Tesla coil, coursing along his fingers as his form darkened and became clearer. "I haven't been able to recharge this well in days!" he said gleefully.

Mysty tested the very wet ground with her foot. There were no puddles to speak of, since the ground was so flat, but the dirt was super-saturated, and a little gush of water came up and filled an impressively deep footprint wherever she stepped. And where William had pounced, bouncing in the mud up to his knees, a little quagmire was oozing up. "Do you think the rain affected anything else?" she asked.

"I dunno," the poltergeist said. Mysty could feel the level of ambient Anghallin slowly sinking as he got more and more distinct. "It feels so great to fill back up again. I was going to run out pretty soon. Nights are only good for so much."

"I rather like the night..."

"Heh. What I meant was, I can only get so much energy back during the night."

"I know," she said, shrugging deferentially. "Just the way you worded it..."

"And when a certain someone comes into my mind and starts doing rather Mystyrious things," he grinned, "I get even less."

She suddenly felt as if someone had punched her forehead from the inside out. "Umm, Mysty-rious?" Her face twisted up. "That seems... familiar... somehow... Ow."

Ghosty stopped holding out his flickering hands like a mad scientist in a cheesy black and white movie shouting "BEHOLD!" at his latest creation, and looked at her, concerned. "Sorry, I didn't mean anything bad by that; I was just messing around."

"No, it's not you, it's me." She shook her head harshly. "Add 'Mystyrrious' to the list of words that make my mind go crazy."

Ghosty sympathetically half-closed an eye. "Probably someone else called you it a bunch, maybe your mom or something. I mean, what with your name and all, it doesn't really take a genius to think of it."

"My m-mom..." Mysty frowned, and looked at the ground. "I miss her... I can't remember that much about her, except that she was always so busy, and I was always

so bored and run-down... but she's still my mother." She actually did wonder about that a little... was she actually her mom? For some reason she wasn't completely sure... But wondering didn't help her any.

He reached over and patted her on the back. "You'll see her again," he said comfortingly. "I know it just as much as I know that you will get your memory back before too long."

"That makes one of us." She dug at the weeping soil with the toe of her battered sneaker, still staring down at the ground.

"Want to see what Nate's doing?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Sure."

She walked over to where Nate was scraping the ground with a stick, and with a second of concentration, reworked the telepathic linking to include him. "So what are you doing?" she asked curiously.

He looked up, a little startled, as if he hadn't noticed her approach, or that of Ghosty, who was drifting beside her. "It is just something I like doing to pass the time," he said quietly. "It's a tree," Ghosty said, looking at the lines in the dirt. "Well, a drawing of one, of course. A fairly good one, at that."

Tilting her head to see it from the proper angle, Mysty took a look at it. "It is actually." Drawing. She felt a strange feeling thinking of it. Did she like drawing? She couldn't remember doing it...

"It is nothing," Nate said, his face turning red. "It is just lines in the dirt."

Ghosty chuckled quietly, shaking his head. "Just lines in the dirt... heh." He glanced at Mysty with an amused expression, then back at Nate. "Back in our world," he said, "'lines in the dirt' like this could become quite famous if they got noticed by the right people."

His face turned even redder. "Just forget about it," he muttered, and turned away, tossing the stick ahead of him into the bushes at the edge of the clearing. Ghosty looked at Mysty and shrugged. "Well, I tried... some people can't be cured of shyness, I guess."

She frowned. "I think I know how he feels... Art isn't just about fame, or just about making pretty pictures, it's about putting the inside of your mind out onto something in the world. And having people staring at the inside of your mind, judging it, isn't a very comfortable feeling."

He nodded, a hint of sadness appearing on his face. "Yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about... C'mon." He raised his voice a little. "Let's let Nate do his stuff on his own and not bother him right now, and we can go, um, discuss more Tuner stuff with William."

"Alright," she said, with a last glance at Nate poking around in the bushes with his feet, his back to them. In a quieter tone, she told the ghost, "I think wherever he

came from, he didn't have anyone else to talk to, because he really doesn't seem used to it."

"Yeah, I've been there before myself. Hopefully with some time, he'll come around and get over it. Unless..." He shook his head. "Nahhh, no way is he some kind of spy. That's taking paranoid to the max."

She huffed in amusement. "Sure. Clumsy, awkward, embarrassed Nate is a spy. For that Evil One, no doubt."

"It's all just a cover," he said, grinning. "He's really working for Marlin, and the work for the Evil One is just a front to monitor his activities, and, while he's at it, check up on your abilities and make sure you're not a threat to the great wizard's dominance. To disguise his expert cunning and stealth, he must pretend to be painfully shy and clumsy."

"As long as his 'cover' as Evil One spy doesn't involve handing me over, I can accept that," she said, smiling. "I think that's enough spy talk. Where's Will?"

"I believe that is him over there, unless that's just a dirt statue of him Nate's carved out while we weren't looking."

The 'dirt statue' in question shook his fur, splattering mud on top of the mud on top of everything else, and pounced gleefully into another puddle.

"I don't think we should disturb him from his fun," Mysty said thoughtfully. "Maybe we should find something else to do."

"Well," Ghosty said, spreading his hands, "if you've got ideas, I'm here to listen."

She stopped to think. "I don't know..." The more she watched William, the more she could feel an urge building up to go jump and splash around herself. "I think we should maybe go somewhere else, though... if I keep watching him, I think the wolf in me is going to take over and want to roll around too."

"Dang, this is serious, then," he said, holding his hands up. "We should probably go inside, then, seeing as how leaving the clearing's a no-go."

"Why?"

He looked at her with a puffy half-chuckle. "Because there's giant foggy monster wolf creatures out there who want to catch the both of us and suck the life out of us."

"Right as I was starting to forget about that awfulness..."

"That's our unfortunate reality." He shrugged. "I dislike it as much as you do. But I bet there's some way we can get the best of 'em. We just haven't figured it out yet."

She pushed open the door to the cabin. "But what? I don't want to have to attack them... surely there's a better way than fighting."

Ghosty followed her in. "Maybe there is," he said, "but I really don't think diplomacy will work with someone who calls himself -- or itself, I dunno -- the Evil One."

"Surely there's something... Everyone has some kind of weakness. Don't they?"

He shrugged, and drifted over to the other side of the table. "Generally, they do. At least one. Right now, for example, neither me nor you can get too emotional or we lose control and go nutso with the super-powers, and Will is stuck in a wolf's body. Which," he added, "I'm quite glad you aren't as well."

"For now, at least..." she muttered under her breath. She leaned against the wall between the doors to her room and the fruit room, her face slightly reddening in shame as she stared down at her fuzzy arms and her dagger-tipped fingers. "Is it really that bad?" he asked her, not harshly. "I mean, you could've gotten a tail and paws instead of teeth and claws, and then we might be in some trouble. This, though... I mean, it is your body and all, and I'm sure it's highly unsettling, but it could be much worse."

She looked sadly up at him. "And I'm afraid it's going to get worse..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why? We're off the mountain. The curse shouldn't be affecting you anymore."

"I don't.... I don't know. But... I can just feel it. It's not going to get better before it gets w-worse..." More of those undecipherable nagging feelings in her head were bugging her, and it was starting to give her a headache. "I think... I think I'm just going to take a nap now. I don't know if it was that bonk on the head or if it's something... else... but my head hurts."

He frowned sympathetically. "Well, I understand... I wish there was a way I could help you out. I certainly hope it is just you running into that tree and not anything else, but as I've said, no matter what happens, I'm gonna try my hardest to help you out."

She pushed aside the curtain to her room without responding. Her head was definitely not letting her get away easy with this. It felt like her brain was twisting around and sledge-hammering at her skull. She got into her bed and lay down, trying to slip asleep.

"Rest well," her poltergeist friend softly called from the other side of the curtain.

"I'll try," she muttered, her eyes shut tight. She could feel his presence slip out of the cabin and into the clearing, joining Nate and Will.

After about ten minutes of trying to rest, she finally gave up. The headache just

got stronger the more she tried to fall asleep. She ran her hands over her head a few times, checking for bumps or sore spots, but even the spot where she'd smacked into the tree trunk wasn't sore anymore. All the pain was on the inside. That is not good, she thought anxiously. More weird stuff with my mind...

She got up and paced a little, which took her mind off her headache a little bit. But after another ten minutes or so, she found herself extremely bored of that, and her annoyance with her headache was growing exponentially. She stopped, sat down on the edge of her bed, grasped her head with both hands, and mentally yelled at her head to shut up and be quiet. To her great surprise, the headache lessened quite a bit. The surprise turned into fear; how did that work? What just happened? That wasn't normal, was it?

She lay down again, and her head didn't disagree as it had before. In a few long, worried moments, she was asleep.

Some time later, Mysty groggily woke up. Her headache was mostly gone, but she still didn't feel too great. She got up, pushed through the curtain of leaves, and walked outside. It was late afternoon now, and the breeze was back. Nate was still off in one edge of the clearing, messing around with his stick, while William and Ghosty were

apparently talking with each other telepathically on the other side. She pushed open the door, still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Ghosty turned around, saw her, waved, and then he and Will walked over to her.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"A little, I guess," she said, shrugging. She watched as William severed the connections between himself, Ghosty, and Nate, and then relinked them all together so that Mysty could also communicate with them through thought-speak.

"We have not seen anything to further worry us yet," the wolf told her. "No wargs would appear to be chasing after you at the moment."

"That's good... I still don't understand why that one didn't find me, though." It really didn't make sense. If they were these really sensitive, super-powerful monster wolves, surely they would've tracked her down when she knocked herself out on that tree.

Ghosty shrugged. "Who knows? I agree, something doesn't quite add up, but -- "

"I am sure it just did not find you," Nate interrupted. Turning towards him, slightly surprised, Mysty saw that he'd put away his stick and walked up a bit closer to them, still remaining farther away than the rest of them were to each other. "You were in a thick patch of bushes when I found you. It just must not have seen you."

"Wargs have an excellent sense of smell as well," William said. "I do not understand why it could not have smelled her, but speculation in this instance is futile. It will not help us discover the actual answer."

Mysty sighed. "Yeah, you're right. I guess we'll never know..." The things that could have happened frightened her. Did she turn invisible? Did she teleport herself or the wolf somewhere else, like the TRNS-MTRLZR did? Did she -- forbid the thought -- somehow destroy the warg?! Or did it actually find her, and it or the Evil One had done something to her, and now there was some hidden malicious instruction inside her waiting to --

She shuddered and forced herself to stop thinking that way. Like Will said, it wouldn't help her actually figure out what happened.

"I hope we never find out what would have happened if it found you either," Ghosty added. "Here's hoping we can all stay safe here in the clearing until we can find a way home."

Mysty frowned. "But... what about Will and the other wolves? We can't leave the Evil One in control of them, can we?"

Will slowly shook his head. "It would be most wonderful if there was a way to reverse our curse," he said slowly, "but we have been this way for something close enough to eternity to our minds that it does not matter much if you cannot do so, Tuner. None of us, least of all myself, will blame you if you find a way to return to your world before you discover how to undo our current state."

"It just wouldn't be right..."

Ghosty smiled sadly. "What *is* right these days? But yeah, I agree. If we can help, in any way, I completely believe we should. Oh," he added, turning to Nate, "and figure out what to do with you. You don't remember anything more about where you came from, do you?"

Taking a step back, the boy shook his head. "N-no. I think that.... that maybe I did not quite belong there, but it is just a vague feeling..."

Ghosty halfway twisted his right arm around in an "eh" expression. "So even if you do remember, you wouldn't want to go back, huh? Oh well. We were willing to try."

"I know what you mean," Mysty said sympathetically. "I kind of feel the same way... but my head hurts thinking about it..." She looked up at the sky; the sun was drifting close to the horizon, and shadows were beginning to fall across the clearing. "It's starting to get dark. I think I'm gonna go back to sleep. See you all in the morning. Or, whenever I wake up..."

"It is getting close to sunset..." Nate commented, a slight frown crossing his face. "I do not much like the dark..."

Turning back to the cabin, Mysty nodded. "I understand what you mean..." She didn't feel quite as at ease during the night as she did during the day, and her recent experience with the warg didn't make her feel any better.

"I'll probably stay out here," Ghosty said, as she cracked open the door. "Just in case anything decides to come snoop around."

"There is no need for that, is there?" Nate asked, with a touch of nervousness. "It was only me before, right?"

"I'm not sure..." Mysty frowned, resting against the door frame, halfway inside the cabin.

"But there were also wolf tracks that were not mine," pointed out William. "I think the ghost may have a good idea in exploring, as long as things stay without much more insanity."

"Yeah, *that'd* be all we need... more craziness..." Mysty sighed, as did Nate, who took a few steps towards where Mysty stood in the cabin.

"I suppose there is nothing to lose by having you on patrol," he said, glancing at Ghosty. "I will go ahead and follow Mysty to sleep."

"Wait, what?!" Mysty suddenly had strange, worrying visions of Nate becoming trapped in her dreams, or vice versa.

"As in, into the cabin, to the fruit room, to sleep, because it is near sunset?"

She smiled, and let out a little sigh of relief. "Oh, right. Good. Sweet dreams..."

"Seeya in the morning," Ghosty called out. "Rest well, Tuner," Will told her, nodding slightly as he lay down in the last mud puddle in the yard. She pulled open the door the rest of the way, letting Nate enter with a quick thank-you-you're-welcome, and

the two of them walked into their respective rooms. Before long, Mysty was back asleep again.

Mysty bolted upright, gasping. That dream... it was a dream... thank goodness. She shivered as she lay back down in bed. It wasn't as clear as some of her others had been... but she'd seen enough to vehemently hope that it was only a product of her crazy mind, nothing more. Chasing after Ghosty, and several other people, trying to catch them... and not in a nice game of tag, either. The feeling she'd felt was not anger, but dark determination. She would have caught them, and she would have hurt them. "It was just a dream..." she quietly told herself. "J-just a dream. That's all it was and all it ever w-will be." She tried to go back to sleep, but she found herself still a bit too shaken up to peacefully rest anymore.

Wondering what time it was, she quietly got out of bed. There would be no point in sleeping, anyway, if it was already morning. She peeked past the curtain into the main room, which was lit with only the blue Anghallin candle in the middle of the table. Ghosty didn't appear to be in the room across from hers, and she couldn't see William in what little she could see of the interior of the other room. That didn't tell her too much, though. She quietly walked out and pulled open the door. Faintly, the first rays of sunlight were beginning to shine through the forest. They were blocked from directly hitting the ground by all the trees, but the sky was lightening. Late enough to get up, she decided.

She turned back and walked into the fruit room, grabbing a glowerine. She didn't see Nate in there, and shrugged as she walked back out the front of the cabin. Maybe they were all already up and outside. Hopefully nothing bad was going on. As she walked out into the open air, she spotted Will lying on the ground off to the side of the clearing, and Ghosty was there with him. "Good morning," she called out to them, peeling her fruit. "Where's Nate?"

Her friends turned to her. "Well," Ghosty said with a smile, "last I checked he was asleep in the fruit room, and as you're holding a fruit that presumably, you got from the fruit room, either you missed him there, or we missed him out here." His smile faded. "If he did come out, I hope he didn't go too far. Because last night, I did see something out here..."

She stopped mid-bite, a drop of glowing juice slipping to the ground. Swallowing, she worriedly asked, "What do you think it was? It wasn't a warg, was it?"

"Will caught the scent of it, and it was a wolf he doesn't know. Which doesn't look good for us." He stopped and tilted his head for a second. "Oh, and he says he's gonna fix up the thought-speak so you can hear him."

In confusion, she blinked. "Hear the mystery wolf?"

"No, silly, hear William."

"But I can already understand him perfectly... And don't call me silly!" she added. "This is serious!"

William trod up to her and nudged her calf with his nose. *But when I talk in wolf-talk*, he explained, *ghost cannot hear me*.

"Oh, sorry. I know that. It's just he said I would be able to hear you, and it confused me." Maybe her mind was still halfway stuck in sleep.

Will quickly reworked the Anghallin connection. "Now, it is clear that there is at least one unknown wolf keeping us under surveillance," he said, "and since we were unable to find this creature, today's Tuner lesson will be quick protection in case you have to defend yourself."

"Okay..." she nodded, and quickly buried the sticky peel of her breakfast. "Is anyone going to get hurt if I don't do this right.... or if I do...?"

"Meaning me," Ghosty added with a little grin.

"Or anyone else," she thought back, rolling her eyes.

Will whined thoughtfully. "I believe there is a very slight chance you might accidentally do it wrongly and do an intentopotentia instead, but if you do not focus on any of us, that should not be a problem if it does occur."

Ghosty backed up a little. "Okay, that's enough warning for me. I'll go ahead and, I dunno, collect some more fruit, because the storage is down to about half full." He drifted off towards the trees, the tops of which were beginning to glow yellow as the sun continued to rise up. "Stay safe, you two! Don't go blowing each other up!"

"I certainly don't plan to!" Mysty shouted after him, with a trace of a chuckle, and turned back to Will. "Okay, so, let's start." As always, the idea of learning how to better use her newfound skills excited her.

"What you're about to try is a simple shield," the wolf told her. "It is a barrier of Anghallin that is partially immune to physical penetration, and quite good at stopping any simple to moderate Tuner attacks or other potentially dangerous Anghallin. It would, for example, keep a thrown rock from hitting you, and an intentopotentia if it were not immensely large, but not keep you from hitting the ground if you jumped off the roof of the cabin."

"And why would I do that?!" Mysty exclaimed, stepping back.

"Only if you wished serious injury upon yourself. I was merely stating the limits of the shield, not suggesting that you would do something as odd as leaping from buildings," William said seriously.

"Good..." She shook her head slightly. "I definitely don't want to do that. Anyway... what do I need to do?"

"It is similar to the other things you have done so far, except that you do not focus on drawing the energy into your head or hands. You must imagine it creating a sphere around you. Really it does not matter what shape or size you make it, but a sphere is the most simple and stable. However, if you are not actively focusing on keeping it active, it will slowly decay over a few seconds, so it is not a good long-term defense."

"So, instead of pulling it into my head," she said, fidgeting with her hands a bit, "or into a stick or anything, I make it in a bubble around me."

William nodded. "That is correct."

"Okay... I'll try." She closed her eyes and reached out for that sharp feeling of Anghallin, imagining it swirling around her, keeping the world out. After a second, she felt a little push under her feet, making her balance go slightly off-kilter. She opened her eyes in concern. A lightly blue-tinted bubble had formed completely around her, and where it met the ground, it was bent out of proportion, lifting her battered shoes off the ground by a tiny fraction of an inch. She shifted her stance a little to restabilize herself, and the bubble shifted with her. "I think it's working..." she thought to William.

She wasn't expecting the wolf to jump at her, and instinctively jerked back as he hit the shield. However, his paws only pushed the shield back a few inches before he was bounced away, back to the ground with a thump. "It is working!" he announced. The bubble dropped as Mysty lost her focus, disappearing back into pure, invisible Anghallin with a last shimmering swirl. "Whoa! Are you alright? I didn't want to hurt you!"

"Do not worry," William told her, sitting up. Relieved, Mysty noticed that his eyes were bright and alert, and his tone cheerful. "It is like landing in a pile of leaves, not running into a wall of wood. As I mentioned, it is not a perfect physical shield, and is meant more to keep out malicious or unwanted Anghallin. The downside of that is, one cannot send out Anghallin from within a shield either."

"Okay, good. So it'll protect me, or whoever I make it around, but it won't really

hurt anyone who tries to come in."

"Not this version. There is a more advanced version that I could teach you that --"

"No, no," Mysty quickly told him. "This is good enough." She took a deep breath and shook out her hands, pushing away the last vestiges of the concentration required to use the ambient energy successfully. From behind her, she heard a short rustle. "I think I hear Nate waking up," she told William, without turning around.

The wolf confirmed her observation with a sigh. "Yes, there he comes from the doors now. I will have to relink us again now, and also when -- wait, perhaps not. There is our friend the ghost." Mysty nodded; she'd seen the specter slowly re-approaching the cabin through the open forest several seconds before William mentioned him.

The wolf trod over to her and looked her in the eyes inquiringly. "Would you prefer to do the linking for us all, or should I perform it?"

She smiled. "I would like to try it this time, if you don't mind. It seems like something really useful to practice."

Her tutor took a deferential step back. "Indeed," he agreed. "Have a go at it, Tuner."

Mysty didn't even bother to close her eyes this time. In an instant, she had mentally pulled in the required energy, and three faint blue lines shot out from her head, linking herself to the others. They then quickly arced around, between Will and Ghosty, between Will and Nate, and between Nate and Ghosty, so that they were all interconnected. The whole process was over so fast that it almost seemed to Mysty that she'd imagined it, apart from the almost imperceptible loss of energy, which was fading away again fast.

"That was certainly fast," the wolf thought to her with approval. "You are learning well, Tuner."

She smiled back to him, pleased. "Thank you." Maybe it wouldn't be so long before she would be able to completely remove all traces of that stupid wolf curse from her body and mind, and possibly even find a way back home.

"Good morning," she said to the approaching boys.

The ghost had a large ring of glowerines circling slowly around his head. "So, I see you're done with the possibly dangerous stuff, right?" Mysty nodded, with a small smile at the sight of the ring of fruit. "I'll go ahead and put these in the shed," he said, nodding at part of the ring. "Morning, Nate." He drifted past the sleepy boy towards the shelter.

Nate watched him go past, and then turned back to Mysty and Will with a yawn. "Good morning, everyone. Did I miss anything important?"

"No, not really," Mysty thought to him. William scratched an ear. "A quick warning to you, though," he said seriously, "we have found more evidence of an unknown wolf prowling the area at night, so it would be most wise to remain indoors after sunset."

Nate frowned a little, and Mysty thought she could see a small flicker of fear in his eyes. "I will remember that," he said. She decided to try changing the subject. She might be scared of the wargs herself, but there was no need for him to be...

"So, what do you usually do here?" she asked Nate. The boy lowered his eyes. "I have not done much... I already have told you about everything that happened before I joined your group, and I have mostly only slept since then. What do you normally do here?"

Mysty sighed. "Try to find a way out of here, back to my world.... we're mostly just trying to survive, though. Well, those of us who can survive, heh..." Ghosty had it rather easy, she thought. He couldn't die.

"Unfortunately," Will said, slightly sadly, "we are doing more of the latter than the former. I do not know if it is even truly possible to escape."

"But first," Mysty added seriously, "we have to figure out what exactly we are escaping from."

She quickly glanced behind her, just before Ghosty answered. "As far as I can tell," her friend remarked, "Fog de la Wizard and his minions, the Big Bad Wolves. And I am not sure I want to know them in more detail than that."

"But, it goes deeper than that... More than just him," she said, frowning a little. "I can feel that there is so much more that we don't know, or at least that I don't know, about this place.... yet."

Ghosty shrugged. "That may be so, my friend, but all I can feel is that the immortaleaf is back in the air." He turned to William, with a serious expression. "So... William and I were discussing some things earlier, and I don't know if it's a good idea to worry you two with it yet, so we'll be.... talking? Heh, there's no good verb for this telepathy stuff, is there? We'll be telepathing in the cabin for a bit, if that's not a problem

for both of you."

Mysty shook her head. "I'll be fine. You go ahead. I'm going to see if I can figure some more things out about this place." And myself, she thought. "I'll try not to blow anything up... but," she sighed quietly, "no promises."

William trotted towards the cabin. "Just call out if you need help," he told them both, "and do not stray far from the clearing." Ghosty floated beside him, facing back at Mysty. "Keep yourselves safe. We'll be done before too long, I hope." They broke the connection to each other, leaving Mysty connected only to Nate, who stood beside her, looking around uncertainly.

Mysty nodded, and turned to face the forest. "I'm going to go into the forest some," she told Nate.

"Okay," he responded. "I think I will stay here in the clearing."

"Are you sure? That sounds a bit boring..." She turned back to face him.

"I will just draw. It is something simple I can do that I like."

"Hmm..." Mysty hesitated a moment, considering. "I'm not sure it would be really safe for me to just leave you alone here... Um, would... would you like to come with me?"

Nate looked up at her. "Are you sure you want me to come along?"

She smiled a little. "Sure. Why not?"

"You will be sure not to, as you said, blow anything up? Such as me?"

Mysty smiled a little bigger to hide her uncertainty. "Heh, sure."

"Well..." He smiled back just a little. "I suppose that if anything bad approaches, you can blow it up, and I could not, so that cancels out the possibility of me... what exactly is blowing up? Or do I not want to know?"

"Heh, you might not want to know...." She grinned a little. "But if for some reason you do, you can ask the ghost over there; he's an expert."

He nodded. "I will remember that if I ever need to. For now I will come with you and not worry about blowing up." They both stepped over the hedge and walked into the forest proper.

"What exactly is it that you can do?" Nate asked her as they left the clearing behind, going deeper into the trees. "I know that you can make it so that we can talk without actually talking, the way we are now."

She shrugged. "I'm only learning about everything that I can do... but there is something I kind of want to try today. I know it's kind of childish..." She looked down at the ground, watching the dirt go past underfoot. "But... I think it would be really neat to be able to use telekinesis," she thought to him. She turned her gaze back over to her companion. "And if you don't know what that means," she added, not unkindly, "telekinesis is when you move stuff with your mind instead of physically touching it."

Nate nodded. "That sounds like it would be very useful."

"Well, I guess so, yes. I've just always imagined -- well, as long as I can remember, that is..." She sighed quietly. "I've always imagined that it would be kind of fun, to do something with, whatever it is that I have left of a mind... I'm not sure if it would really work, because I believe you have to have a lot of brain power, and great focus, to do it." She walked on a bit further. "One of the things I think I could do with telekinesis, would be making someone fly, or even myself, but I'd rather not, because --" She cut herself off. She didn't quite feel comfortable discussing the fear of heights that had been slowly growing in her ever since the ravine, and even more since her fall from the tree after Nate first appeared. "But anyway... what do you think I should try it on first?"

"Um, not me, I hope..."

Mysty smiled. "Don't worry, heh, I think it would be easier if I start with something more small and lightweight."

Nate looked around. "You could try one of the fruits," he suggested. "One of the glowy things. I see a tree over there." He pointed to a glowerine tree at an angle to their walking path.

"Okay," Mysty thought to him, changing direction to walk over to the tree. She looked up at it, focusing on the highest fruit she could see, about forty feet up. "I think I'm gonna try to grab the highest fruit up there, without even touching the tree...." She looked back to him, frowning slightly. "But... please do not make fun of me if it does not work.....I am at least trying to do something on my own for a change." She didn't really know if it was actually possible to do this; although she really believed it was, she couldn't recall any evidence for it. And she'd already embarrassed herself around Nate

so much already... Maybe it wasn't such a good idea.

"As long as you do not cause me to find out what blowing up is," Nate thought to her with a small smile, "we will be fine."

"Heh, okay, thanks..." She closed her eyes, and reached her hand out to the tree, as if to grab it, her face tightening in concentration. It felt like there was almost something there, that she was so close to doing something... but after about ten seconds, her hand loosened, and she opened her eyes, looking up at the unmoved fruit. She sighed, looking down sadly. "... I can't do it..." She knew this would be embarrassing... why did she even bother while someone was with her?

"I did not see any of the blue light that I saw when you do other stuff. Do you have to charge yourself before you do it?"

Mysty sighed, shaking her head. "I think I need to try things my own way, and for some reason, I believe that if I try hard enough, I can do it... I'm such an idiot, aren't I? Please don't tell Ghosty and Will that I'm doing this..." She didn't want every person she knew in this world to know about her stupid assumptions and subsequent failure to actually make anything happen.

"They might be able to help you if you ask them," Nate said quietly, "but if you do not want me to tell them, I will not tell them."

Mysty looked up and over at him. "Thank you, kind sir," she said with a small smile. "I know that I am stubborn, but I need to at least try to do some things on my own. I am really sorry that I brought you into this mess..." She gestured with her hand into the air, closing her eyes again, frowning. "I probably got myself into this mess myself, and then Ghosty, and Will, and now you... I am so sorry!" She felt like she was about to start crying. Great. As if things weren't bad enough. A slight groaning noise filled her ears as she kept speaking to Nate telepathically, trying to keep herself together, waving her hands about a little bit. "It is all my fault... sometimes I do not even know how this could happen, but then I just... I just, I don't even know! All this weird stuff happening, I just so happening to have these 'powers' that are so unbelievably strong, there are really such things as ghosts, not that I had ever questioned that before, talking animals..!" The groaning in her ears got stronger, and she finally opened her eyes to see the tree in front of her tilting down at her quickly.

She screamed in shock as the tree came down, jumping back, grabbing Nate's hand and pulling him back with her. She closed her eyes, screaming again, as she tripped on a rock, sending both of them to the ground just before the tree came down with a huge crash to the side of them, somehow not hitting them.

Part 10

Things Really Get Intense

"A-are you alright?" Nate exclaimed.

"Don't worry about *me*, are *you* okay?!" Mysty asked worriedly. Mysty scrambled up, pulling his hand and bringing him up with her. She looked at the fallen tree, and back to Nate. The tree was snapped at the base of the trunk, as if wrenched and twisted from its roots. She wasn't physically hurt, and as far as she could tell, neither was Nate. But the experience was quite shocking, and she felt terribly certain that the tree had been brought down by her somehow, after her "failed" attempt at telekinesis. "Did I do that? B-but I couldn't have done that! How -- I -- I am so sorry!" She backed away from Nate, trying not to hyperventilate. "I -- I have to go, make sure you get back to the cabin, a-and tell Will and Ghosty that I-I'm okay, just going for a run...." She turned and bumped into a tree trunk, stumbling to the side, but she stayed on her feet and started running off. "Again, I am so, so sorry!"

Not waiting to hear what Nate had to say, probably something frightened and predictable about not running off and are you okay and how did you do that and you're weird and you're dangerous, she ran off quickly through the forest, head down, avoiding tree trunks. She just knew she had to be alone. It wasn't safe for her to be around others. She might pull down even more trees on them. She ran very fast, so fast that it startled her a bit. Looking up a bit, she saw tree trunks flashing past almost in a blur, as if she was in a car on a highway. "Too fast," she mumbled to herself. "Too fast, too weird, too dangerous...." She fought to keep back tears, and stopped running, grabbing hold of one of the tall, thin immortaleaf trees, and started climbing her way up it.

Reaching the top, clutching to the thin branches and leaves, she finally couldn't hold it back. Small streams of tears rolled out of her eyes, and little choked gasps accompanied them from her mouth, but not from exhaustion from the run. "Get yourself t-together," she told herself shakily. "You can not cry. You can **not** cry." She fought as hard as she could to stop the tears. She tried to think of something to do to take the edge off the fear and pain, and for some reason, singing came to mind. She couldn't

remember singing before -- curse her stupid memory! -- but for some reason, it seemed like it might help. So, she opened her mouth, and after a short "aahhhh" to straighten out her voice, she began singing wordlessly.

As the tears faded, she sang a bit louder, not putting any words to her melody, nor singing any particular song. She didn't care what melody she was singing, she just poured her emotions into her voice and let it out. Nobody was around to hear it, so it didn't matter what she sang. And as she let her voice ring out over the forest, she felt a little bit better with every note that left her.

The worry about what in the world had just happened with that tree slipped from her mind. Her amnesia, her wolf curse, her powers, all of it was cleared out, making room for calm and peacefulness. She closed her eyes, and breathed in the unusual but not unpleasant scent of the leaves around her, and continued her slow melody. Seconds turned to minutes, which ticked back at an undeterminable rate. She didn't care about the time, she didn't care about the place, she didn't really care about anything. All she thought of was a blank slate of calm and peacefulness.

Had she not been in her almost trance-like state, she might have heard Nate calling out from below, in a slightly unusual voice for him. She might have felt the vibrations of him trying to climb up the trunk to try to get to her. She might even have simply felt his presence, or the presence of another creature not very far away. But the thought link had been broken from her running so far from him so quickly, and not only was her song drowning out his voice, her mind was not trying to listen or feel anything, so her eyes remained closed, and she remained blissfully unaware of the boy beneath her, or the other being out in the forest listening to her music.

That all changed when the frightful, heart-stopping sound of the warg howl assaulted her ears, snapping her out of her song and nearly off her perch on the tree.

"W-what?!" Mysty cried, clutching tightly to the tree trunk. The sound died away, but it had done its trick. Her peaceful song and state of mind were entirely shattered, and she was left almost paralyzed in fear, not only of the howl, but of how incredibly high up she was. The fright was much worse than any time before. That growing fear of heights was coming into bloom, and what horrendously ugly flowers it was creating. She could hear Nate's scared voice from below.

"What was that?! That was one of the bad wolf things, right?"

"N-Nate?" She couldn't look down, her eyes clamped firmly shut.

"You need to get down! We need to get away from here before the wolf thing gets here!" She could hear him yelp as another awful howl washed over them. Louder. Closer.

Trembling in fear, and feeling her face grow red in embarrassment, she whimpered, "I, I can't!"

"Maybe you could do to this tree what you did to the other! Make it fall down slowly!"

She nearly shrieked, "I do not even know if I did that or not!"

"You need to get down!" Nate yelled up, his own voice panicking a little. "The wolf thing will probably try to eat me if you do not! And then maybe you!"

"Just go!" she shouted, holding onto the tree tighter, her claws digging in. "Leave me and go find W-will and Ghosty! They'll protect you. Just GO!"

"But they are gone! I do not know where they are!"

Of course they are, she thought. Right when we need their help most. "Just get as far away from me as you can! I-it's after *me*, just *GET AWAY!*" As she yelled this down to him, there was a crack, and then a loud thump; another tree had come down nearby, just before another awful howl.

"I am going to try to get help!" Nate yelled, and then he was gone. Part of her felt even more scared now that she was alone, but she rapidly mumbled to herself, "He's going, he's safe, he's going, he's safe," as her claws dug deeper into the tree. She focused again, trying desperately to fell the tree, but although there were several cracks and booms, none of them were from her own immortaleaf tree. She could feel the warg's presence clearly now, a dark, evil embodiment of power, which howled again,

paralyzing her even more. She couldn't open her eyes, but she feared that if she looked down, were she not instantly forced to shut her eyes from the height, she would see the green eyes staring back up at her. A distant-sounding scream followed the howl; make that two distant-sounding screams. She didn't realize they were her own.

Finally, a familiar voice yelled up to her. "Mysty!" Ghosty yelled. "How in the world did you get up there?!" There was a vicious snarl; the warg had noticed the ghost, and Mysty could feel that Nate was back as well. Despite the creature's acknowledgement, she knew it was still stalking towards her.

"I HAVE NO! FLIPPIN'! IDEA!" she yelled back.

"Ugh," Ghosty groaned, and then enunciated loudly, "Nate, stay, here. I'm going, to get Mysty, down from there." She could feel him getting closer. "Hang on, Mysty!" he shouted, just before another howl broke out, from underneath the tree. After it ended, he yelled up, "I'm gonna try what I did at the ravine, in reverse!" Mysty braced herself for even more embarrassment, but at this point, she hardly cared.

From just below and behind her, Ghosty called to her, "Open your eyes and get on! I'm right here!"

"I can't! I can't open my eyes!" she yelled. The terror was too strong.

"Aggh!" the ghost groaned, and then a bit more calmly, "Just let go then, I'm right underneath you!"

She knew she had to get down somehow, but that one of her hands was not only deeply embedded in the bark, but even as her other hand loosened its grip, it held tighter. Maybe it was cramped. Maybe it was more weirdness. She didn't know, and the reason why didn't matter much. All that mattered was getting down and getting away, from the height, and from the dark creature that she could feel clawing the tree even now. Trying very hard not to think about what she was doing, she lifted her free hand up and slashed her other arm with it. She shouted in pain, her eyes flying open, but it had the intended result. Her arm now free, she began to fall, but only for a few inches before she landed on a ghostly bowl shape. She clutched it tightly as the dizzying height sunk in yet again.

"You can close your eyes now if you want," Ghosty said in a slightly soothing voice, a hint of panic still showing through. "Just DON'T LET GO."

The ghost descended quickly, swooping away from the tree. Mysty's eyes shut again, as she whimpered in terror, holding on even tighter. "That might be a little too tight, Mysty..." he spoke with a bit of a hiss. He stopped swooping, and the bowl vanished, dropping Mysty onto the ground. She quickly opened her eyes, feeling extraordinarily glad to be back down where she belonged, not up in the air. "You two, run!" Ghosty shouted to them, as he started to whoosh off towards the warg, which was now charging at the three of them, its green eyes glaring as it let loose another howl. *"I'll try to hold this thing off for a few minutes to give you some time!"* he screamed over the sound.

Mysty and Nate ran as fast as they could, away from the scene. She'd caught a few glimpses of the fallen trees; there were at least eight trees, uprooted, lying outward in a shape somewhat resembling a star. She'd really done that? On top of the panic, was an oddly delicious smell from somewhere close by. She was horrified to discover that it was coming from her arm, which was bleeding heavily. She whispered to herself in shock and disgust, "What am I?!"

"Are you okay?" Nate telepathically asked worriedly, panting a bit. "Your arm... How?"

"It's okay! Just keep running!" Another howl cried out from behind her, but this one was more in rage, than an attempt to be spooky. It was still terrifying, but it didn't make her want to curl up in a ball.

"I hope," panted Nate, "that he can keep it back long enough for us to get away! And, that he can get away..."

"He's going to be okay," Mysty said, her mental voice still trembling. "It can't physically hurt him. I just hope that, whatever it is, c-can't smell by blood..." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she lowered her head in shame. "...as well as I can..."

Nate's breathing and panting was getting more labored as they kept sprinting away from the warg and Ghosty. "I cannot run... much longer... I hope... Yes! There is the cabin!"

Mysty shook her head at him. "Do you really think a little wooden cabin will keep out a creature like that?!" she nearly yelled to him. "It could tear right through it like I could tear through a glowerine!"

"But William said... There is protection... Right?"

"That's only for Tuners! We have to keep going!" They passed the clearing, still running, although Nate was beginning to slow down.

He started to complain, "We have nowhere else to -- "

But he was not given a chance to finish his sentence. Her conscious thought fading a bit, she scooped him up in her arms, running faster, carrying him farther and farther away. She didn't hear his stuttered shouts, or the loud thunder-like noise in the distance, or anything else, until finally, the panicked haze clearing, she realized what she was doing. With a gasp of embarrassment, her face burned bright red, and she had trouble keeping her head up and her eyes open.

"Hello?! Can you finally hear me?" Nate cried. Out loud, in his native language.

"W-what?" she stuttered. The wolf instincts building inside her because of the curse must have been triggered, she thought with dismay. And how could she understand him?

"I have been trying to tell you for minutes now," Nate thought-spoke worriedly. "There was some sort of loud noise like thunder from the place we were running from right after you, um, did what you are doing."

"O-oh."

"But you just ran and ran and ran and did not sound like you could hear me. Are you sure you are okay? Do you act like this always?"

She sighed in exasperation. "Do I really have to answer right now?! No, I do not do these things all the time, if at all, ever! And don't worry about me, worry about yourself. At least there is nothing wrong with *you*, and I am trying to do whatever I can to keep you that way." But she thought only privately that she did not think she would succeed.

"U-um," Nate mumbled, his face reddening a little, "Can you please put me down now? I think we have run far enough. I have not heard anything to tell me we are being chased."

"Oh, y-yeah, okay, okay, sorry, I, um, forgot." She slowed to a stop, set Nate down on his feet, and then sat down, her back against a tree. She clasped her hands to her face, still feeling the burn of embarrassment. Why did she do that? They were far enough away now, but did she have to carry him in her arms like a cradled baby? And how did she understand his language, once she could finally take control of herself again and hear him at all? Her blood continued to drip down her arm. Why did it smell so... **good**?! Her head hurt so much, as her mind scrambled around, trying to understand it all, and feeling like it was tripping over anvils every fourth step.

