

Windspark: An Excerpt

It was the low rumble of thunder that woke Madeline from her stew-induced stupor. But had it not, the raindrops that began to fall through the treetops above certainly would have. She groaned, sheepishly kicking out the embers of the fire before realizing the task was redundant. A glance upwards only rewarded her with a faceful of rain. A thick mist was now cascading through the forest cover. *Where were these storm clouds earlier today?*

The girl held up a hand against the wind. Her clothes billowing around her and the onslaught of water blurring her vision such that she couldn't be sure what direction she was facing. When she finally cleared her eyes, she saw that the lean-to shelter was gone.

Rather, parts of it were still there, nailed to the tree as they were. But the carefully knitted fronds and cardboard cover were nowhere to be seen. As it stood, the structure offered no cover at all. And she was drenched. The miserable conditions prompted Madeline to let out a frustrated scream, but it was quickly snatched away by the shrieking winds. Not even she could hear it above the din.

*This can't be happening*, she thought. But it was. So Madeline pulled her slick hair back with shaking hands and got to work. Grabbing her soaked backpack from where it lay against a wind-battered log, Madeline made for her tree hollow, desperate for shelter against the sudden onslaught.

Her heart skipped a beat as for moment, Madeline could find no sign of the tree trunk looming out of the darkness. She suddenly had a vision of intense winds ripping up the tree by its roots and all. But she relaxed when a few moments later, the hollow tree became visible in the pale moonlight that trickled through the forest canopy.

She reached the hollow, tearing off the makeshift door. Dragging a wood carton of collected nuts and berries from the cavity and spilling it out on to the ground, Madeline attempted to squeeze herself into a space that had only ever been intended to serve as a pantry. She pressed herself into the back of the hollow, the oak wood here still damp but considerably dryer than the forest outside. The space did not offer her much lateral movement, forcing her to contort her limbs unnaturally in order to snag the wooden shield she'd ripped from the entrance in her haste. But just as she was about to close herself inside the hollow, reflected moonlight caught her gaze once again.

On the other side of the clearing, thick tendrils of dark gray mist extended into the campsite. It was propelled by some unknown force, seemingly unperturbed by the violent winds. The tendrils snaked around tree roots and fallen logs, choking the vegetation that crowded the forest floor. In seconds, the edges of the glade were filled by a wall of darkness which not even the moon could seem to penetrate. Madeline breathed heavily, watching as the shadows grew nearer.

She drew a sharp breath as one long wisp winded towards her hollow, twisting around the trunk of the tree before entering the crevice. Before Madeline could wrap her mind around what was happening, her little crevice was filling up with thick, dark smog.

Madeline coughed, a taste like burnt ash and plastic creeping into her throat. Her chest heaved, struggling to breathe properly as the air grew thicker and thicker. Panic welled up in Madeline's chest, her mind searching for some explanation for this phenomenon even as her lungs gasped for air.

More coughing, and she couldn't take it anymore. Madeline burst from the hollow, bringing her scarf up to her face as a mask. The glade was slowly filling, nearly surrounded now by the encroaching dark smoke. She whirled around, trying to find a path away from the danger. But the moonlight was fading and everywhere she turned seemed to be a blur of smoldering fumes. Tendrils of smoke were beginning to wrap around her again, infecting the air she breathed and irritating her skin. She willed her legs to run but they felt for all the world as if they were sunk in molasses.

And then light began to shine out of the smoke. Two points of red fury blazed through the smoke. Eyes. They pierced through the smoke like daggers. Madeline swallowed, finding herself unable to take her gaze off of those hellish eyes. Her legs were still frozen, her feet sinking further into the mud. The eyes grew bigger. There was no accompanying shape visible through the smoke yet, but a low growling began to sound, close enough as to be right on top of Madeline. Pure terror struck her heart. She imagined that at any moment, long jagged claws would reach out to shred her.

That thought alone spurred Madeline into action. She spun on one foot, and pulling her heels out of the mud, sped off into the impossibly black forest, hacking up ash as she ran. Her scarf failed to protect her from the smoke that chased her as she stumbled and careened past wickedly sharp branches and thistles. Something hard grazed her cheek but she kept running. Running away. Away from the fiery eyes and the smoke that chased her. Away from that intense feeling of evil. Still, she could hear that low growling. Like stone grinding against stone.

Slam. Madeline hit the tree trunk face first, the rough bark offering little cushion. She squinted her eyes against the rain, trying to make out her surroundings as a dull throbbing now echoed through her skull. Dazed and exhausted, she clutched the trunk behind her for balance as she turned towards where she came. The advancing force made her heart drop to her stomach. Still it was there. Two red eyes. The roiling smoke. The grinding grew louder.

Madeline gritted her teeth. Whatever this was, she would be damned if she went down without a fight.

"Stay back!" She cried. But the words were snatched away from her by thunder booming in the distance, and the smoke continued to advance.

It had reached her once again, advancing at a steady, unrelenting pace. The smoke kept low to the ground, surrounding the tree she'd found herself making a stand at. Then it rose,

winding up and around and through her. All the while, the red eyes grew closer. The growls, now intermixed with a faint cackling, grew louder. Madeline choked, that moment of bravery quickly evaporating as she found herself unable to breathe. She put her hands up against the smoke, desperately trying to latch on to any hope, trying to find some way to fight back against the endless smoke that surrounded her. Her own screams surrounded her, frustration filling her to the brim and overflowing. Tears mixed with rain as they cascaded down her face.

But then the air began to electrify. Madeline's own fingers began to tingle. Through her blurred vision she could make sharp blue sparks running up and down her fingers. And at this strange sight, Madeline screamed again. She screamed loud and hard. Every last ounce of breath left her body as the smoke smothered her. The blue electricity at her fingertips grew more intense. Tendrils of light arced over her hands, crackling in the surrounding smoke. There was nothing but fear and panic and dread and that strange arcing lighting.

Then the whole world exploded. Lightning raced out from Madeline in all directions, burning and devouring the smoke as it went. All around her the forest turned bright as day as the smoke was pushed back by spider webbings of electro-blue. The evil eyes were nowhere to be seen in that blinding light. Her fingers burned painfully. but the lightning did not stop pouring out of her, flowing from her hands, an unstoppered fountain of pure energy. And then, just as suddenly, the flow stopped. The forest returned to darkness, the air breathable once again. Rain continued to beat down.

She gasped. Every muscle in her body seemed to relax all at once as her eyes rolled back in her head. Just one thought lingered in her mind as she collapsed in the mud from sheer exhaustion. *Was that magic?*