

*“Now, now, come on, or else I won’t do this again tomorrow,” Mom warns me. I giggle and scramble into bed, not risking the chance that Mom will leave me to fall asleep on my own due to the absence of her story. I curl onto my side and look up at her expectantly. She smiles at me and strokes my hair back. I return the smile and blink up at her, waiting patiently for her to start. Mom laughs and gets into her storytelling position. “I won’t keep you waiting any longer.” She pauses, searching for the right place to start. “It begins like always, deep into the enchanted forest...” Mom weaves her tale of fairies and dragons, adding hand motions to enhance the storyline. She soon reaches the part I know all too well, where the rebellious hunter encounters the strict and cruel fairy. She’s just gotten to a new part when my eyes begin to feel too heavy. I will myself to pay attention as she talks of the hunter meeting the princess. I manage to hear the first part of the meeting before my eyes succeed in convincing me with their protests, and I let my eyelids fall closed. As Mom takes in my steady breathing, she pauses her story, rubbing my head as I doze off. She continues to do so until she is pleased that I’ve fallen asleep and have begun to dream. She bends down and kisses the top of my forehead, whispering goodnight to me as she exits the room, gently closing the door behind her.*

I blink, staring up at the roof of the tent I share with my friend. I bend one of my knees beneath the covers and try to guess what time of morning it is by the brightness of the white sheet hanging overhead.

“Hey, you overslept again,” someone informs me, sitting down on the foot of my bed with two plates in her hands. Rowan waits for me to sit up before handing over my plate.

“Everyone’s already had breakfast? Why didn’t you wake me?” I ask, picking up a piece of breakfast that she retrieved for me. Rowan shrugs, smiling.

“I couldn’t bring myself to do it. It was another one of those dreams. you had such a happy smile on your face. I didn’t want to pull you out of it,” Rowan explains. “Plus, I just told people that you weren’t feeling well last night and that I wanted to let you get some more sleep. As long as we get to training on time no one will know,” Rowan points out. “So, what was this one about?”

“I... Rowan... I don’t want to talk about it. I’ve told you, they’re memories of when I was little... and it hurts to look back.”

“Oh, come on, we both know you’ll be thinking about it all day anyway... and they’ve been happening for weeks now. Whether you like it or not, you’re gonna have to look back. You don’t have to tell me but maybe it would help to talk about it, even just a little bit.” I sigh, setting my plate down on the bed.

“Ok... but I don’t want to go into too much detail. I’m back home in each dream... with my family. Just doing normal everyday things. They’re so simple... but all of them are some of the best times I spent there. It just... hurts a lot to watch what I used to have.” I tell Ro; I don’t really give her much more information, but it’s enough for her to understand how the dreams are affecting me.

“Oh Callie, I... just know that if you ever need me, I’m here ok? Do... do you want me to wake you the next time it happens?”

“No,” I say a bit too quickly. Ro gives me a sideways look, and I silently condemn myself for giving her a clue as to the fact that I wasn’t being entirely truthful with her. It did hurt to look back, but I wasn’t ready to give the memories up. “I don’t feel any pain when I’m in them... it hurts yes, but I feel like I need to see why they keep taking over my dreams. It just... I don’t want to lose them yet. I’m strong enough to deal with them, Ro.”

“I never said you weren’t.” Rowan studies the tent a bit before sighing. “Callista... there’s something about them you don’t want me knowing, isn’t there? That’s why you won’t talk about them.” I don’t answer. Rowan knows me well enough to figure out that she’s right. There’s no point in trying to persuade her into believing she’s wrong; it’s a losing battle. “No matter, we all have secrets, don’t we? No one knows everything about everybody, and I suppose it’s the same between us.” Rowan gets up and takes our plates, taking off to the meal area of our camp to return them to be washed. I stare at the opening of the tent even after she leaves. She spoke the truth of how life works at this camp, but left out the part about how she thought we were closer; that we wouldn’t keep things from each other like the rest of those in the camp did. I really don’t like doing it. But there’s just some things that are better kept private.

Rowan returns and stands in the doorway of the tent. While I was so wrapped up in my thoughts, I forgot that I was supposed to be getting myself ready for training. She waits patiently for me but doesn’t miss the opportunity to express her annoyance with her new revelation. She’s usually extremely patient, but she continues to frown and tap her foot as she waits for me to change out of my pajamas. I dress as fast as I’m able to and quickly slip on my shoes before slinging my bag over my shoulder.

I stand up in accomplishment, looking Ro in the eye defiantly. She gives me a small smile; she hates staying mad at me, not when we’re so close. Her expression softens but I know I won’t be able to fix that tiny wound I etched into her heart. I suppose it was better I slipped early on than later though; it would save me the trouble trying to dig myself out of a hole I could have potentially gotten myself into. I hope she learns to accept that I just can’t give up the truth. Even if she is my best friend.

“Time for training.” Rowan declares, grabbing my arm and dragging me out of the tent. There are several other people scrambling to get their act together to arrive to training on time. Ro and I start walking and pass by Alicia, our leader’s second in command, walking with her eyes analyzing her surroundings and the people lagging. Her expression brightens when she spots Ro and I. We aren’t as close to her as we are with each other but Rowan and I are a bit more than just acquaintances with our leaders. There’s a small group of us that don’t have formal titles but still discuss important matters with the head of our camp.

Alicia jogs up to us and gives me a smile.

“Callista, it’s nice to see you’re feeling better. Wouldn’t want to miss you at training or our meeting tonight.”

“Yeah. I’m much better than yesterday, thanks. Sorry we’re so late for training,” I apologize, not liking being so far behind. I wanted to relive the memories, but not at the cost of my current life. Alicia gives me a look and smiles.

“Callie, you don’t need to apologize. We know that sometimes people don’t feel well; we can’t hold that against you. Now come on, we do, in fact, need to be at training in the next couple minutes.” We follow Alicia to the training area and set down our bags as we wait for instructions. Alicia goes to join Oakley and Sienna in the front. They converse for a moment before Sienna whistles sharply, calling everyone’s attention.

They begin with a run through of the day, a routine part of our mornings. Alicia is in charge of making sure everyone knows what they’re doing and goes over jobs, while Oakley informs us of this day’s routine. Training, followed by daily jobs, lunch, break hour, daily jobs, dinner, rest hour, campfire. A typical Tuesday for those used to living in the camp.

As Oakley finishes with a more detailed list than the one I recited in my head, Sienna steps forward to start training. There’s a girl standing on her left, Ashlyn. That means this will be a training focused on developing our sorcery rather than our strength. Ashlyn smiles at us and then walks us through the exercise we’re doing, while Sienna walks around to observe us.

Today we’re working on our levitation, and are in pairs. Ro and I sit across from each other and close our eyes, channeling our mental energy to push us upwards. I open my eyes to see how far off the ground I’ve gone. When I realize I’ve gone a bit higher than normal, I lower myself.

“Nice job, Ro! Much better than last week,” Sienna praises. Rowan opens her eyes and smiles after realizing her accomplishment. I press my lips together. Had Sienna been standing there the whole time..?

“As for Callie, you don’t need to lower yourself just to make us feel better. This is to test your limits, not everyone else’s.”

“You’ve been holding back?” Ro asks confused, tilting her head. “Why?”

“I haven’t been holding back. I just don’t want to push myself too hard since I wasn’t feeling one hundred percent yesterday.”

“Of course, Callista,” Sienna smirks at me, walking off to the next group. I sigh inwardly. I played the wrong card. I force myself to look Rowan in the eye, expecting to be met with a glare. But instead I look up to find a cool and collected expression spread across her face.

“Ro?”

“Callie?” She asks innocently.

“I… I’m really sorry Rowan. I have been holding back. It just… it doesn’t feel comfortable trying to push myself past my own limits. I’d rather stay inside of them. I know it’s cowardly.”

“No, not at all Callie, it’s not cowardly to care about others people’s feelings,” Rowan replies coldly.

“I’m not ready to let anybody know how much I’m not like them,” I say quietly.

“What?” Rowan’s expression finally changes and she looks at me for a moment in disbelief, trying to figure out if she’s heard me right.

“We’ve only known each other for a few weeks, Ro. There’s still so much we don’t know,” I tell her truthfully.

“I guess you’re right about that.” She hugs a knee to her chest and props her head on it. “... that was the first thing you’ve truthfully told me, isn’t it? The one statement you haven’t tried to hold back with or cover up?” She concludes. I don’t need to answer. “You’re afraid. That’s why you won’t tell me,” She realizes. “You don’t need to be afraid of me,” she says uncertainly.

“I don’t want to be... and it’s not you... I just... my past is something the people here will never understand.”

“Can you at least try?” Ro pleads softly. “I’ll keep your secrets,” she vows. I shake my head.

“Let’s not talk about this anymore Ro, please,” I beg her. She presses her lips together, forcing herself not to protest.

“Ok,” she breathes. We break our gaze away from each other and back to Sienna and Ashlyn who are giving us more instructions. We manage to finish the exercises and once we’re done, we return to the camp and enter our tent. Ro pulls out her water bottle and raises it to her lips, gratefully drinking the cool liquid.

Neither of us have a daily job today so we sit against our beds.

“I’m sorry,” I admit softly.

“I know,” Ro says, looking at her lap. “I hope one day you’ll trust me enough to trust that I’ll understand.”

“Ro---”

“Look, let’s just drop it, ok? Forget I said anything.”

“Ro...”

“Let’s work on the stuff for tonight’s meeting.” Rowan gets up as she reaches into the chest on her side of the room. She pulls out a few papers and sets them in front of me. I try to talk to her again, apologize as many times as it takes, but she brushes me off, so I reluctantly give in as we discuss the preparations we’re creating. We’re responsible for one of the trickier parts of the supply run at the end of the week. And it needs our full attention, less we ruin the chance for our camp to restock.

“May I come in?” Ro and I look up to see Oakley at the entrance of our tent. We nod and she sits across from us with her precious book in her hands. We never see her go anywhere without it.

“What can we do for you?” We ask together; it’s the standard greeting expected of us when we get a private visit from one of our leaders.

“You’re both aware of the event occurring at the end of the week?” We nod as she continues, “Well, it’s presenting itself as riskier and riskier the more we look into it.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Ro asks.

“Potentially. We aren’t canceling it yet, since it’s extremely valuable we pull it off. But because of the potential threat, we are asking that everyone involved goes through an hour of training at our extended meeting tonight.”

“Do we need to do any preparation ahead of time?” I ask. Oakley shakes her head and stands up.

“You’re already reviewing your plan. That should be enough. Have a solid outline and draft by the discussion tonight.” Oakley gives us an approving nod on her way out, and Ro and I share a look. “Oh, and there will be extended meetings taking place all week. Your presence is required at all of them.” With that, Oakley leaves Ro and I back to our task. Extended meetings all week... that does not sound promising... but if we’re still going through with it... the supply run must be extremely worthwhile. Which means Ro and I have a lot of reviewing to do. We look back at our notes and discuss further the means of smoothing out the more challenging areas.

We work through lunch, only stopping when the bells throughout the camp signal that it’s break hour.

“Phew,” Ro sighs, plopping down on her bed. “I’m exhausted.”

“Maybe you should take a nap? I’ll wake you before dinner. You know, return the favor after this morning?”

Ro looks over at me gratefully, reaching for the blanket at the foot of her bed. After her steady breaths fill the room, I quietly reach into my own chest and uncover a secret compartment, pulling out my journal. I’ve had it for years, ever since the incident at my old village...

It kept me sane while I was on the run.

And stayed with me when Sienna recruited Ro and I for the camp.

I steal a quick glance over at Ro, who’s stirred a bit. I panic for a moment, thinking I’ve either woken her or that she tricked me, but then she stills again, and I quietly close the compartment and sit on my bed, journaling whilst also flipping through past entries.

As I do so, I catch bits and pieces of conversations outside. To my dismay, one of the groups stops in front of our tent. A girl’s voice complains,

“This place is too bare. And in the middle of nowhere. No wonder the leaders are thinking of cancelling the supply run. It’ll take multiple hours to get to the area in the first place.”

“Yeah. I miss our old camp. That freaky storm was an unreal phenomenon. It should’ve never happened. And to think of what we lost that day...”

“Don’t bring it up!” Another girl snaps. “It’s bad enough we have to be here. I don’t want to think of the incident nearly a decade ago. It was a fluke. And at least no one will ever find us again.”

“I hope so,” a different boy mutters. “I’ll die happy if I never have to witness an unreal storm again.” They finally move on as I freeze, my gaze on one of my very first entries in the notebook.

The ‘raging storm’... what have I done?

I snap the journal closed, nearly cursing myself for doing it so loudly. I smooth the blanket on my bed, quickly thrusting the journal back into the chest as Ro moves, sitting up.

“What was that?” She mutters.

“Sorry. I dropped something.” It isn’t a total lie. I missed the chest. I push it behind my bed, rubbing my hands together nervously.

“Uh... ok...” Ro trails off, laying back down. “Be careful,” she mumbles.

“Will do,” I promise. I put my head in my hands, gently opening the chest as I search for the hidden compartment. I close it, breathing a sigh of relief. That was a close one...

Too close. I can still feel the ominous breeze floating through the room. No, go away, I demand. Not again. I don’t want to be brought back to the day of the storm. I have better control now, I try to tell myself. But I didn’t even make the chest. And the breeze still won’t leave. I lay down, closing my eyes, begging it to go away. I haven’t used it so abruptly in nearly eight years. I’m such an idiot. I could’ve thrown the journal under my bed and she would’ve never known. She didn’t even turn around or look at me.

Breathe, Callista. It’s ok. Ro’s asleep. And your secret is still safely locked away... from the world and from the entirety of this camp.

They don’t know you caused the storm.

“Hey, Callie, you ok?” Ro asks as make our way to the meeting. “You’ve been off all afternoon.”

“Yeah, just an off day, I guess,” I force a small smile.

“Well... your ideas are awesome. They’re going to love what we came up with,” Ro assures me, trying to guess at what’s making me behave so strangely. I give a weak nod and let Ro take the lead when it’s our turn to speak at the meeting.

“It should work,” Oakley agrees.

“I’ll see about the logistics tomorrow. I’ll ride over to the village next to us,” Sienna declares. “Callie, get Fabel ready for tomorrow. We leave at noon, ok?” I nod and the meeting continues, eventually leading into our extra training session. I sum up all the mental energy I can muster at this point and perform Ashlyn’s skills. Then we’re participating in Oakley’s physical strength exercises. By the time it ends, I’m completely worn out. “Callie?” Sienna asks as I Ro and I get ready to leave. “Maybe you should go on an early morning ride, too? They help me when I get stuck in my head.”

I nod and follow Ro out of the tent, who immediately promises to make sure I’m up for Sienna’s personal request.

“Ro, can we please talk?” I insist as she starts storming off in front of me. “Ro!” I call, chasing after her.

“Talk about what, Callie?” Ro snaps. “It’s not like you’re gonna tell me the truth. Let’s just drop this. We can talk next week, when we don’t have something so important hanging in the

balance. I will not let your dishonest tendencies ruin this. I'm done with your lies, you pathetic excuse of a friend! You're just a stupid, self-centered liar." Ro runs away, rushing off to our tent.

I stand there for a moment, shocked. I've never heard Ro speak to me that way before. But... she's right. I deserve it. I've been a crappy person. And I am a liar. I just... I really hope I don't lose her. She's the best person I've met at this camp. I can't lose my first friend.

I take a few breaths and try to calm myself down, willing myself to not cry. I take an extra long walk, going the long way so I give her some space. When I finally decide I can't stall any longer, I tentatively make my way into our tent, avoiding her side. I climb into my bed, looking at the side of the tent. I eventually let myself listen to her breathing, and I can tell she's still awake, but she doesn't bother talking to me.

Despite Ro's promise, I wake up on my own the next morning. No happy dreams for me. I didn't deserve them. I quietly make my way toward our stables, climbing onto Fabel's back and she starts galloping over the campgrounds. I keep our ride light, not wanting to tire her out for later.

I don't see Ro during the beginning of the day, since I don't have training due to the day's mission. I eventually find my way by Sienna. She's on her horse, Crescent. She nods in my direction as we start the long journey to the village. Our journey starts in complete silence, and it continues that way until we get about an hour in.

"So... bad day?" Sienna eventually asks.

"W-what?" I ask.

"We... we all heard your fight with Rowan... after the meeting," Sienna admits. "Are you two good?"

"I haven't talked to her today, but we won't let a fight get in the way of the mission."

"I'm not worried about that right now. I'm worried about you, Callie. You've been off lately, and you just don't seem like yourself."

"I'd rather not talk about it. I guess I'm just kinda stressed after what's been happening with Ro."

"I'm sure you two will work it out," Sienna assures me. "Your friendship is strong."

"I barely know her," I mutter.

"Friendships get stronger over time," Sienna agrees. "But that doesn't mean it's not strong right now. Ro's reasonable. You two will fix this, I'm sure." I give a weak smile and nod at the assurances. Sienna leaves me to the comfortable silence for the majority of the ride. Occasionally, she'll tell me stories or tales, to make the extensive ride more entertaining. "Well," Sienna eventually sighs, pulling Crescent in the other direction. "We're here. Keep an eye out for a wagon. We're looking for one with a cardinal etched on the side. We need to figure out how often it comes here and what it brings. Our intel says that our scheduled day should be their biggest shipment, so hopefully that gives us a lot of room and options, and they don't notice a few missing crates," Sienna whispers. I nod, and we both keep watch for the next hour or so, eventually spotting our target. We watch, hidden in the cover of the forest.

Sienna gives the signal for us to head out a little after the wagon leaves. We ride in silence most of the way before she declares,

“That was definitely promising. We should be able to pull this off, after all,” she tells me confidently. By the time we make it back to camp, it’s just after dinner, and just before our meeting. We report our findings, and Oakley finalizes the plan for our mission. Tomorrow will be the last day of preparation and we all leave Friday at noon.

The training after the meeting isn’t entirely tiring, so that gives me a bit of hope for a good night’s sleep. I dream more when I don’t have anything super stressful going on. I’m so focused on trying to get the dream to get back that I don’t register Ro calling my name.

“Sorry, what?” I ask, shaking my head as I sit down on my bed. She looks down at the floor before eventually spilling out,

“I’m so sorry for what I said to you. I was done... and I was stressed. And frustrated. And I took it out on you. I can’t expect you to tell me everything. I was a jerk to you. That was far from deserved. I’m so sorry.” I blink at her apology. I didn’t expect her to say sorry to me. I was still mustering up the courage to apologize, myself.

“I’m sorry too. Not for... well... it’s just I knew I wasn’t being fair to you.” Ro shakes her head.

“It wasn’t fair of me to expect you to spill all your secrets. You’ll tell me when and if you’re ready, ok? No sooner. Now... we should probably get some sleep. Thursday is our busiest day and we’ve got that meeting.”

I nod and we share a smile before laying down.

“Goodnight,” Ro says, turning off the lamp in our tent.

“Goodnight,” I repeat.

“Alright, we should be good. All the training is just a precaution in case we get caught, but the plan is solid. There’s just one issue.”

“What?” Sienna asks Oakley. “I thought we did everything.”

“We did, but Ro and Callie have some personal stuff going on that I’m worried is going to jeopardize our mission. Now, why did Ro call you a liar, Callie? Care to explain? We don’t bring liars on our missions.”

“I...” I trail off, trying desperately to come up with an excuse.

“I was exaggerating,” Ro jumps in. “She’s not a liar, I just snapped on her. She was giving me attitude all day and I had enough. But we’re good now, and it won’t interfere with the mission. Everything I said was out of anger, and not true to Callie’s character. She’d never jeopardize our mission. You can count on that,” Ro insists, coming to my rescue.

“Alright,” Oakley leans back. “I wouldn’t want the failure of this to come down to a petty fight between camp members.”

“It won’t,” Ro and I promise.

“Good. Now go get some sleep. We leave at noon.”



Ro and I wait until we're out of earshot of everyone else this time before we start talking with each other.

"You didn't have to cover for me," I tell her.

"Of course I did. You're a horrible liar, and Oakley nearly broke you. You completely froze. Plus, we aren't going to disrupt anything tomorrow. And we are good. So I didn't completely lie," she shrugs. "And we are going to ace the mission tomorrow."

"I hope so."

"Breaktime," Oakley instructs. Though Sienna and I made the journey the other day without stopping, some of the other horses have lower stamina. We all comply, climbing off our horses to chat and view our progress. Oakley also utilizes the time to give us one last run through of our roles. "Ro distracts; Sienna, Ashlyn, and I stop the wagon, and Alicia and Callie pass the crates to the three of us when we get back to our other spots. If anything goes wrong, we run for it. Do you all remember the code?" We nod and she continues. "The back up plan is similar... try to revert to this if we mess something up or encounter anything unexpected. But our security is most important. Abort if necessary."

With that, we get back to the path, eventually leaving our horses at a spot a little ways away from the village; Sienna and I scouted it out the other day. We stop, hidden in the cover of the trees, waiting patiently for the wagon. As soon as we spot it, Sienna, Oakley, and Ashlyn are to use their mental energy to 'magically' stop it.

"Ro, now," Oakley instructs as the wagon comes into view. Alicia and I glance at each other as the others do their part. As soon as Ro pulls the confused rider to the side, Alicia and I make a run for it. She opens the back of it and we quickly grab what we can. Alicia tells me to take a few back to the others while she grabs the last of it. I return with four of them, using my mental energy to bare some of the weight. Alicia returns soon after as Ro rushes up to us,

"Abort. Abort now. He figured us out. And now they're getting the town's guards. There's another village that way. We have to move now." We all nod, quietly making our way back our horses. We hide the crates in some bushes to hopefully return to later, and Oakley starts us off in the direction Ro pointed out. As soon as we exit the outskirts of this village, Oakley insists,

"We should probably go a little farther. They'll be looking at surrounding villages for us, especially if the man saw Ro come up to us." Oakley scouts out a path, eventually leading us a few villages past our target one. After several hours, we find ourselves camping out just outside a village. Sienna whistles, calling her owl to give a message to those back at our camp. We won't be returning tonight.

Alicia and Ashlyn work to start a fire and I settle down next to Ro.

"Thanks for getting us out of there so quickly," I commend her.

"Well, it was supposed to be risky for a reason," she lets out a small laugh. She trails off, eventually putting her hands up in the air. "Do you feel that?" She asks.

"Feel what?" Oakley asks.

"It's raining," Sienna sighs. "If it gets worse, that fire won't last much longer. And we didn't bring a tarp. We didn't account for a three hour getaway." Oakley groans and looks around at the people we have with us.

"Callie," she eventually decides. "You didn't use any mental skills that they'll be able to detect, considering we hid the crates. Alicia has already been to several villages before. They'll notice the rest of us. It has to be you. Go into that village and act your way through getting us a tarp or a heat source. Here's some gold coins. Don't stay out longer than a half hour. Worse comes to worse, we'll endure."

I stand up, accepting the order, taking the coins from her hand. Ro gives me a few words of encouragement as I make my way into the village. I try to make myself as noticeable as possible, looking around for a stand that's still open at this point. I've just spotted something promising when a man locks eyes with me. He gives me a friendly smile, and shockingly, walks up to me.

"You look like an interesting girl wandering through a village."

"I'm just passing through," I insist, trying to move past.

"Oh really? I don't suppose you'd be interested in this?" He asks, making me pause. He's holding up an old pocket watch, and he studies my face as I gaze at it. I won't give him the satisfaction of knowing I recognize it, though. I keep my face neutral, shrugging. "You know... I'd be happy to give it away for nothing at all. But, I do have a small, tiny request." He leans in closer, whispering, "I heard about your little trip to the village a few paths over. I don't know... well, it's silly. But it seems like the kind of thing you and your friends would like to keep secret?" I try to keep my face straight, but he must've seen right through it, because he adds, "I'd be happy to hand this over as long as you admit or return the things that you stole," he declares. "You have fifteen minutes to decide with your group. Then meet me back here, or the deal's off and everyone will know about your little stealing event." With that, he walks away, as if he hadn't just threatened or spoken to me at all.

I hurry back in the other direction, wondering how the heck he knew about it. I was barely in the open for more than twenty seconds. And if he's been here when it happened... and how does he know that the watch used to belong to my father? So many questions... and an important deal. Oakley will know the cost of accepting, but is it worth a watch? We could still easily get away, and it won't matter if people know we stole or not. We have the power to cover our tracks. Oakley will likely decline, refusing to admit to anything. And we need those supplies... but if I change the offer... and we get supplies either way, she'll have to accept.

And it's not like we can't just steal the crates back at another time when they realize the man lied about his deal.

Oh, Callie, you stupid idiot. They'll never believe you. You can't lie.

But I need that watch. I didn't know it survived the fire.

And maybe if I agree, he'll tell me more about how he has it. Though that is risky in it of itself. I don't know if he had anything to do with...

But if I don't ask for any other information, I'll still get the watch. And they all knew that the supply risk had a high chance of failing anyway, so they're already prepared to reschedule it...

"Callie, you're back early?" Oakley asks as I show up with no heat source or tarp.

"We have a bit of an issue. A man cornered me and said he knows about what we did. He says he'll keep quiet... but we have to give the crates back or admit to it."

"Absolutely not," Oakley immediately interjects. "They're too important. Who cares if one guy knows? He probably just guessed at your identity, you were barely out in the open. He's likely in it for something else... he probably is practicing his mental energy and sorcery on you. No way. It's obviously a bluff."

"He said he'll replace the supplies himself," I add, willing myself to pull off the lie. That sentence pauses Oakley's retorts.

"Really?" She eventually asks. I nod and she pulls Sienna and Ashlyn off to the side to discuss. They converse for a minute or two before she walks back over to me. "Tell him it's a deal. We return the supplies tomorrow morning." I nod, immediately going back to the spot where I ran into him. He's there, waiting for me, giving me a knowing look.

"Deal. We return them in the morning. Now, hand it over."

He smiles darkly, handing it over, immediately disappearing.

I let out a sigh of relief, immediately checking to see if he did bluff, but it's the exact watch I have in my memories. I slip it into my pocket, finding a tarp and an enhanced lantern for heat, heading back to the group. I give Oakley the coins that are left and Ro and I get everything set up as it starts to drizzle harder. Oakley is deep in discussion with Ashlyn, trying to figure out how much we can secretly take out of the crates that no one will notice before we return them. She eventually pauses, turning to me,

"So when do the other supplies arrive? And where did you agree to pick them up?" I freeze, realizing I hadn't thought that part through. "Oh, Callie!" Oakley quickly catches on. "You don't make deals with creepy guys and not go over things like that. We probably just got bluffed. But on the rare chance this is an actual deal, I'm willing to go through with it to have one less crime on our records."

"This would be so much easier if the world wasn't afraid of us," Sienna mutters, setting out her sleeping bag.

"Yeah. Too bad we're the freaks with enhanced sorcery skills. But whatever. Callie, I really hope you knew what you were doing. Or else we have another supply run to schedule..." Oakley sighs, sitting down as she flips through the remaining coins. "This better be a good lantern and tarp for how much they were worth."

"At least we got out pretty easy," Ashlyn says. "And more supplies, too. We got lucky tonight."

Or you got lied to tonight...

“That stupid ugly excuse of a man backing out of his end of the deal!” Oakley exclaims a week later, after a second---and successful, supply run. “That jerk! I knew it was bluff! Callie, we gotta teach you how to spot it. I swear if this happens again...”

“Oakley,” Sienna glares. “Pull it together. In a way, it worked out. No one caught us this time.” Oakley groans, looking over at the crates in our meeting tent. “Anyway...” Sienna says, looking over at her, ending the meeting instead. “Goodnight guys, and good work.”

“Did you buy that?” Ro asks me later, spotting the watch I’m looking over. I’ve been hiding the entire past week, but I finally decided that after everything... I could trust Ro with a little bit of the truth.

“Yeah... on our failed run. It belongs to my dad. Belonged.” Ro’s eyes widen and she quickly moves over to me.

“No way. What a lucky find. Why do you keep studying it, though?”

“I...” I trail off, not sure how much I can give away. “I’m trying to see if it has any clues to where my mother is.”

“Your mother?” Ro repeats.

“Yeah...”

“Callie, that’s incredible! You have to let me help you.”

“Sure, but I barely know what I’m looking for.”

“Then we’ll figure it out together,” Ro promises. I give a small smile as a breeze of air enters our tent. My eyes widen and I let go of the watch in surprise, which Ro quickly reaches out to catch. “What is it?” She asks me, confused. The breeze moves around the room, nuzzling everything with it’s gentle touch, lingering for a moment, eventually leaving. It leaves me mesmerized for a moment before I remember exactly where I’ve seen it before.

The night right before the fire and the storm.

“Callie?” Ro asks. “Callie?”

“Yeah, what?” I ask, looking over at her.

“What is it? You just totally spaced out on me.”

“Nothing, just got stuck in my head, I guess. Where were we?”

“Looking at your watch... but perhaps we should get to sleep. We’ve both had a long day.” Ro insists on tucking me in as I hide the watch. I appreciate the gesture, but there’s no way I’ll be able to sleep.

It’s nearly morning by the time I finally doze off. I’m woken a few hours later by Ro, who looks at me concerned.

“Callie? Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” I lie. “I just need some food.”

It helps. But it’s not enough. Even by dinner I’m still off, waiting for the worse. That breeze isn’t an accident. It’s the calm before everything goes crazy. Before the storm rages, the fire spreads, and the wind screams. It’s going to happen again. But how? I’m not at home this time. It’s a clear day. There’s no breeze.

But I know what I felt last night.

“Callie?” Sienna asks me, pulling up a chair to where Ro and I are sitting. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Callie, you know I don’t buy that.”

“Well, it’s nothing.”

“Is it about training? You’ve been doing really well. Better than any sorceress I’ve ever seen. You’d almost think you had the gift.”

Gift?

“Oh, I just mean that sometimes people are born with more mental energy than others. Which allows them to develop strong powers, and not just spells.”

“Oh,” I realize, looking up at Sienna. “Sorry. I’m just a normal girl.”

“That’s what I love about you,” Sienna smiles. “Exceptionally ordinary. Extraordinary. You know, I don’t think you give yourself enough credit, Callie.”

“Oh... thanks.”

“She means it,” Ro encourages. “You’re too humble for your own good. Live a little. Be proud of what you can do.”

“I don’t think I’m someone to be proud of,” I mutter, walking off to the washing area just as the breeze changes slightly. Suddenly, a scout rushes into the dinner area, yelling,

“BREECH! CAMP BREECH! AT LEAST ONE OR TWO HORSES. MAYBE A WAGON. REPEAT. BREECH! PREPARE YOURSELVES. WE’VE GOT COMPANY!”

The sky darkens. The wind gears up.

I feel it inside my bones.

Oakley rushes to get everyone inside, keeping the strongest of us on the front line as our visitors approach.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” a man greets as he steps off his horse, walking closer. “I thought I’d stop by and talk about that little supply run a few weeks ago. I don’t suppose you remember a certain deal?”

The man’s face finally fades into focus. I shrink back in the crowd as Oakley approaches him.

“What’s it to you?” She demands.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, I fear you’ve been lied to. I got wind of a letter you left, asking for the supplies? That was never my deal. I just figured I’d let you know about a traitor inside your forest.”

I brace myself, expecting Oakley to give me away or explode on me, but she holds the man’s gaze, replying,

“We don’t have traitors. Whatever the ‘lie’ was, I’m sure it was not one of my people. That, or there was a bit of a misunderstanding.”

“No misunderstanding. I know exactly what I offered. A watch, and protection. No supplies.”

“The watch was ensuring the rest of the supplies. I’m done talking to you and your bluff and your lies. If you don’t leave in the next minute, my scouts and guards will escort you out themselves.”

“Actually, I prepared for this sort of response. Which is why I brought a little something to convince you to give back all the supplies you stole. You see, you’ve been taking from a dear friend of mine. And he would very much like his hard work back.”

“No can do. Guards!” Oakley calls. They charge forward, but then the man snaps and a person appears in front of him. A body... it’s impossible to tell if it’s alive or dead. Everyone freezes in their tracks. He pulls out a knife, holding it up to the person’s neck, smiling up at us.

“You may not know this person. I covered their head for that purpose. But if you don’t agree to my terms, they will die.”

Oakley freezes as everyone stares in shock. Rain begins to drizzle, and the clouds continue to darken.

“I’ll give you fifteen seconds.”

Why is he threatening someone’s life? We stole supplies.

I stare at the scene in shock. This man is insane.

What the heck do we do?

“Ten,” he continues.

The rain starts falling harder and the wind feels like it’s brushing against my bones, begging me to let go. Last time I did, I spread a fire during a storm. But I’ve practiced several times in the past few years. I have enough control to steadily move objects.

What if I can take the knife?

Fear pulses through me, because last time I did this, my mom was yelling at me to run. But my breeze gave her away, and I’ve never seen her since. And then afterwards I found out that my horrible control resulted in a half burned village. And I later found out that the burned trees gave away this camp’s last hideout. All my power does is cause problems and hurt other people. It’s unreliable and it ruins people’s lives. My mother could’ve died because of me... I gave our location away to one of my family’s enemies.

“Five.”

I can’t let this person die because I’m scared.

Oakley’s frozen, staring blankly at the person, conflicted. Sienna and Ashlyn aren’t much help either, but they’re probably attempting a spell.

“Three.”

I give in. I let the wind take me over and become a part of it. We are one and the same. I brush through my camp, forcing the knife up in the air, careful to not accidentally move it so it hurts the person. I carry it backwards and thrust it into a tree, grateful for my spot on aim. Training has helped my accuracy and concentration.

“The wind spirit,” the man determines. “I thought I might find you here.” The sentence snaps Oakley back to her senses and she yells for our guards to charge, but before they can, the

man disappears. The sky finally cracks, rain pouring down. Oakley shouts orders at everyone. Some to help the person, the others to track down the man.

The clouds turn black, and the rain threatens to break down my wind form. I push through, trying not to make the storm worse. But I feel him chasing me. I suddenly understand multiple things at once.

The storm eight years ago was no accident.

He caused it to target my family and whoever else he wanted to hurt.

My mom knew I could make things worse, but her motherly instincts took over. Even though I was inexperienced, she knew forcing me to use my power was the only way to keep me safe. The man didn't recognize me because of the supply run. He remembered my face from years ago. He suspected me of being the child.

The question is now, does he know I'm the wind?

He's certainly trying to find out. The storm follows me as I brush through the forest, breezing past every tree in sight. The storm continues to rage, but I lead it around in circles, begging him to give up.

"I will find you. I will hunt you down. And I will be taking my watch back."

His voice echoes through the wind.

"You may have won this time, wind spirit, but I will be back."

The storm retreats and I gently make my way to a clearing, trying to remember how to transform back. I can only settle down, hoping the grounding feeling means that I'm doing the right thing. The wind lets go, leaving me to stare at the sky again, which is clearing up.

The sudden use of my power is draining, and the sky begins to darken again. Though this time it's because my eyes are closing and my mind is trying to retreat to sleep. My mind wins, and the wind gently lulls my exhausted mind and body to sleep.

I vaguely feel motion beneath me, groaning as I try to sit up. The motion stops and I squint, trying to figure out where I am. I glance at the brown coat beneath me, realizing I'm sitting on Fabel's back. She nickers, leaning down so I can try to stand up, but then I notice my body is faded. I shake my legs, trying to get the rest of the wind to leave. It nearly works, but my panicked reaction made me forget the skills I've been learning. I concentrate, and then I'm finally back to my human form. I climb back onto Fabel, knowing it probably isn't smart to walk right now.

"Take me back to camp," I tell her, and she starts galloping now that I'm secure on her. "Thank you for following me," I whisper. I don't know how she knew, but I can only be grateful that she did.

It's a long ride, but it gives me a chance to get my strength back and to mentally prepare for what I might be coming back to. I have no idea how long I've been gone, if people know what I've done and what I did, and if anyone realizes I'm the wind spirit. Sienna was right. I do have the gift.

I hope I saved that person.

“OAKLEY!” The scout shouts as I approach the camp. Oakley, Sienna, Alicia, Ashlyn and Ro rush up to me.

“Good job, Fabel,” Sienna approves, giving Fabel a treat.

“What happened with you?” Oakley asks. “Where did you go?”

“What’s going on here? How long have I been gone? Is the person alright?” I ask, trying to get off Fabel’s back. Ro helps keep me steady when she realizes my balance is off.

“It’s been about a day and a half. The woman is fine, and she’s awake now,” Oakley assures me. “What happened with you?” She repeats. “And what deal did you agree to? What watch was he talking about?”

“I’m so sorry. That was the deal. He was telling the truth. I only took it because I thought it was worth the cost. And the watch belonged to my father. But it’s gone now... he took it back...”

“How do you know that? He disappeared?” Oakley presses.

“She’s the wind spirit,” Ro answers for me. “You saved the woman’s life!” I look over at her, eyes wide.

“I did?”

“Of course! You took his weapon away and lead him away from the camp. You prevented the storm and gave Ashlyn and Sienna enough time to get inside his head with their mental energy and cover the location of the camp. You saved all of us.”

“I...” I trail off, not sure how to reply to that.

“You’ve got the gift?” Oakley asks me and I nod. “Why haven’t you said anything? We train people with the gift. Sienna has it.”

“She does? And... I couldn’t. I helped with the storm that gave away your other camp. My wind form spread the fire. I couldn’t take the responsibility for all of the chaos I caused.”

“Callista! He caused it. He just revealed to us he created the storm. The fire was an accident. Eight years ago... you were a small child. You couldn’t have known...” Oakley insists. “We aren’t going to punish you for that! It wasn’t your fault. Do you hear me? It wasn’t your fault!” I blink at Oakley, having never expected to hear those words.

“Callie, we should have one of our nurses look at you. You seem exhausted. And the woman has been asking to meet the one who saved her life,” Sienna informs me.

“Ok,” I breathe. Ro and Sienna help me to our medical tent and I prepare myself for whoever this woman is. You shouldn’t be nervous. She wants to thank you, I remind myself. Sienna and Ro open up the tent and set me down on one of the beds, Sienna telling me she’s going to go get the woman. Ro sits with me as the nurse starts examining my condition. By the time she finishes, the tent opens up again. Sienna walks in, followed by...

My eyes get misty as I gape at the person in front of me. Tears start to fall before I can stop them as my mother says,

“I was hoping it was you, Callista. I figured after everything I’ve heard.” The tears only come harder at the sound of my mom’s voice after so long. She sits down next to me and uses her thumb to wipe my cheeks.



“Mom?” I ask and her eyes too get misty as she lets out a small laugh, nodding. She reaches out to give me a hug. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to get you taken... and...” Mom pulls back, forcing me to look up at her.

“That was never your fault. He was after me, not you. I told you to get away. You did not give us away. And you have nothing to apologize for. You saved me, Callie.”

“But... I didn’t even know it was you. I barely convinced myself to give into the wind.”

“It takes fear to be brave,” she insists. “And you did act. I’m so proud of you, Callista. And you have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”