

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Wizard: Firefly

Michael Chu

I ask your forgiveness, for there is much to speak of the wizard, and I am the only one who can tell all there is of her story. This is my burden, as is what awaits after. The ending is no great mystery. It is written in the shattered stones and broken walls that surround us, and whispered in the rumors that tumble from every mouth.

But on the subject of magic, nothing is so simple, and be certain that what you may have seen and heard is not the whole tale.

While I convalesced here in my bed, assured by the physicians that I would live, I had little else but to sift through the fading recollections of days past, searching for the pattern that portended this great catastrophe. I know her better than anyone, better than she knows herself, though she would never admit to the truth of that. She may be the most powerful mage of our time. She is pure of heart and wants nothing but to do good, but she is possessed with the foolishness and invincibility that come of youth and brilliance. There is no rule she would not break, and she has never understood the words *cannot* and *should not*. That has been so ever since the first time we met years ago.

A day much like this.

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Isendra the sorceress swept into my chambers, herding a young girl before her. The two were as different as fire and ice. Isendra was regal and resplendent in her fine green robes and gold jewelry, while the girl reminded me of a bird, her head swiveling back and

forth and her eyes darting, fascinated by the things around her: the books on my shelves, the rows of bottles that were filled with strange liquids and powders, and arcane devices whose uses were a mystery to me. The girl's robes were little more than rags tattered and stained with sweat and dirt. She could have passed for one of the roaming beggar children who preyed upon rich merchants in the Caldeum bazaar. Her long dark hair was a tangled mess, dry and brittle, and as caked with dust and mud as the rest of her. Her skin was browned by the sun, and her lips were cracked and peeling.

"So, this is the girl?" I asked Isendra, looking at the disheveled child standing in front of her.

Isendra regarded the girl dubiously. "I found her in the courtyard, dueling with Mattiz, Allern, and Taliya." The sorceress's voice dripped displeasure. "They were eager to accept her challenge."

"She seems no worse for the experience," I said. "The others?"

"Mattiz and Allern are being tended to. Taliya suffered injury only to her pride."

The girl grinned at that recounting.

"Perhaps it is for the best," I said. "Those three might benefit from a lesson in humility. I will deal with them later."

"But you will deal with me now, old man," said the girl. She had a precise, imperious voice bolstered with the confidence born of a child's surety.

"She speaks." I shared a smile with Isendra.

"That she does," said Isendra drily. "And at great length."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded. "Why have you brought me here?"

"I am Valthek, high councilor of the Vizjerei and master of the mage clans of the Yshari Sanctum."

The girl was silent for a long moment as she regarded me.

"You?" she asked finally.

I laughed. "Tell me, girl, who are you and why have you come? Surely you must have greater purpose than to send my apprentices to the infirmary."

"My name is Li-Ming. And I am not a girl," the girl said. "I am a *wizard*."

"A bold claim," I said. It took an effort to hide my amusement as the girl invoked the style of *wizard*, a title saved for the most notorious mages in history, whom common people spoke of in fear and those familiar with the arcane named with dread.

"It is more than words," Li-Ming said dangerously.

I put up a hand to calm her. "Then show me."

I had barely finished speaking when a powerful gust of wind blew across my desk, sweeping up all the papers, books, bottles of ink, and other odds and ends atop it, clattering them to the floor in a messy heap. My expression remained neutral, and the girl took it as an invitation to do more. Li-Ming spread her arms to either side, and in her upraised palms she produced twin gouts of flame that licked up toward the ceiling, the explosive blast of hot air causing her hair to blow out and away from the columns of fire, whose reflections flickered in her brown eyes.

I shrugged. "A conjuror's tricks."

Li-Ming's jaw set in frustration. She closed her hands, and the flames disappeared, though the feeling of heat remained. With another movement of her arm, ribbons of incandescent red and orange burst into life and danced in serpentine shapes at the center

of my desk. She waved her arm again, and the rows of books slid from my shelves, hanging in midair. She floated them in a line across the room until they spiraled around her as though they were caught in a whirlwind, then one by one she stacked them in the shape of a throne. She sat down in it, facing me.

Li-Ming raised an eyebrow, and I responded with slow, measured applause.

"Is that your best, girl?" I asked. I waved my hand dismissively, and the flames on my desk went out and the books she sat upon collapsed into a pile. Li-Ming sprang to her feet before she fell with them. "People feared the mages they named wizards. Wizards drove the world to the brink of destruction time and time again, mages of such untamed power that the earth trembled at their machinations. They treated with the demons of the Burning Hells and made pacts to give us all to ruin. They cheated death and tore the very fabric of creation. You have mixed up an old man's things and set a fire to his desk."

"I can do more," she said defensively. "Someday, I mean to be the greatest wizard of all."

"In my experience, one can wait a very long time for someday and still be disappointed when it comes."

"Have you heard of the miracle of the Heron River Valley?" she asked.

"I have heard a story of that place. Some business of a drought and a young girl who tried to set things right," I said offhand. "I believe they called her a wizard."

"I am that wizard," Li-Ming said proudly. "It had been months since the last rains, and the Heron River had dwindled to a trickle, and the fields had gone dry and brown. The people of the valley thought there was nothing to be done but to wait for the gods to save us. But I knew I could do what the gods would not."

"You may find it prudent not to blaspheme the gods so lightly," I said.

She ignored my interruption. "I looked for what water I could. I drew it from pools deep below the ground and gathered the last thin stream that inched along the cracked clay of the riverbed. I took it all and cast it into the wind and tried to create a storm. Nothing happened at first, and people said I was a foolish girl waving my arms and praying for rain. But I knew. Hours passed, and the clear sky darkened. Faint gray clouds appeared where before there had been none, stretching across the horizon and growing until even the sun was hidden behind them. They turned to the color of night, looming clouds heavy with rain, drawing their shadows across the valley. Those who had laughed began to believe. The sound of thunder echoed from every direction, and flashes of lightning lit the clouds from within. The air grew wet, and I could feel the damp on my skin as mist crept down from the mountains. The mist became a drizzle, the drizzle a shower, then a downpour. The earth drank it all, and the Heron River flowed again. That is what I can do."

Isendra was incredulous. "No child could have done that."

"That it is beyond your abilities does not mean it is beyond mine," Li-Ming said to the sorceress, who was two decades her elder.

"I was once as skeptical as you," I said to Isendra, "but I have had the truth of it, and it is as she says. Though she has left out certain details."

The grin on Li-Ming's face faded, though her chin still had a defiant set to it.

I continued. "After the rain came and went, the months that followed saw the drought return, and worse than before. The people pointed their fingers at the wizard who had brought the rain, putting all blame upon her shoulders."

Li-Ming said, her voice soft, "Those who had praised me demanded I be sent away. My father and mother agreed. I only wished to help. I did not know what would happen."

"People do not trust mages. They fear what they do not comprehend. Any mage trained in the Yshari Sanctum would have known the danger of what you attempted." I offered a smile. "And yet, had those mages tried what you attempted, I have little faith that they could have achieved a piece of what you accomplished."

Li-Ming sensed the change in my demeanor. "Then teach me."

"I had considered it, but now that I have your measure, I do not know if it is within you to be a student here. You have much to learn, more to unlearn, and I wonder that you have the will to see it through."

"How can you say that? I am stronger than any of your apprentices. Bring them here, and I will show you! I will fight you if that is what you wish, old man. It does not matter. I came across sea and desert to study here, and I will."

"It is not for you to decide. The decision rests with me," I said.

"Let me teach her," said Isendra abruptly.

"What?" I asked.

Li-Ming looked dubiously at the sorceress.

"There is something about this girl. As you say, it may be fruitless, but I can see as well as you that she has potential, and the time may come when we will need her and regret that we sent her away." Isendra smiled. "And perhaps I see a little of myself in her."

Li-Ming shook her head. "I do not want you. I want the old man to teach me."

Isendra scowled. "You should be pleased. I went to war against the Lords of Hell while you were nothing more than a thought in your parents' imaginations. I have not done

all that I have so I could teach a disrespectful child magic, but that is my offer."

"And my answer is no," Li-Ming said.

I had been silent as I considered whether to agree to this partnership. Isendra was peerless in her ability, almost my equal, and she had experience that might intrigue the girl and keep her attention. But I had my concerns.

"Quiet, both of you," I said as I stood. "Isendra's knowledge of elemental magic rivals mine, and I believe that you and she will find you have much in common. For you, there is no better teacher. Were I you, I would hope that I had not convinced Isendra to reconsider. You will have her, or we shall see how you fare on your own. History is littered with forgotten wizards who amounted to nothing."

Li-Ming chewed upon her lip. "Have I no say in this matter?"

"No," I said. "You do not."

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That was our first meeting, and I still remember it vividly. Isendra embraced her role in teaching Li-Ming. She became a mentor to the girl, and Li-Ming gained a deep respect for the sorceress. They were more alike than Isendra or I had suspected. But Li-Ming quickly exhausted the extent of Isendra's knowledge. Their relationship changed, and Li-Ming began to treat the sorceress as an equal rather than a teacher. Isendra was changing too, and that worried me as well. She was far too permissive with Li-Ming's

behavior. With nothing to learn, Li-Ming followed the vein of curiosity that had always driven her, and that was when the trouble started.

When I caught Li-Ming nosing about the sections of the library that held forbidden texts considered to be too dangerous for study, I knew something must be done. I took over Li-Ming's training against Isendra's protests and put a watchful eye over her. I tried to introduce structure to Li-Ming's life and present a course of study that would turn her interests toward more acceptable pursuits.

Without the responsibility for teaching Li-Ming, Isendra had little to keep her at the Yshari Sanctum, and she spent few of her days here. She remained a great friend, however, and I always found her advice to be invaluable. When we three were reunited several years later, Isendra had settled into life away from the Sanctum and away from her former student.

I wish I could seek her counsel now.

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The summer ought to have given way to the cooler days of fall and winter, as summer always had, but after a year had passed, the sweltering heat remained, from the empire's southern reaches to the Dry Steppes in the north. It was still early in the reign of Emperor Hakan II, and the superstitious whispered about what they perceived to be an ill omen for his rule. Even for the desert, the weather was like nothing that had come before.

Unrelenting heat covered everything, while sandstorms and dune twisters scythed across the face of the burning wastes. The vast sand seas were true to their name. The dunes moved, creating an ever-shifting landscape, unearthing massive rock outcroppings with edges sharp enough to tear flesh and bone like monstrous teeth rising from the sand, which had turned from yellow to red as though tinged by blood. The desert swallowed villages whole, leaving bare stone foundations or a handful of mud bricks where homes had once stood.

Another year passed, and summer showed no sign of ending. The empire withered. I sent a message to Isendra, asking her to investigate possible causes for the weather while I took Li-Ming and set out from Caldeum, plunging into the heart of the desert to see what we could discover for ourselves.

But several months after we began our journey, we were returning home with more questions than answers. Li-Ming and I rode upon camels as Lut Bahadur slowly came into view over the horizon, one of the largest towns in the Borderlands, where desert habitation was possible though not easy. The heat was something alive. It burrowed into you, seeped beneath your skin, and eliminated all memory of cold. I wore a light cotton robe with a hood pulled up over my head, and had a cloth wound across my face to protect myself from the howling sandstorms, leaving my eyes uncovered. Li-Ming had grown to a young woman by then. The traces of girlish innocence had faded away, and she was now often possessed of a serious expression that gave way at times to a well-practiced smirk. She wore her finest robes despite the heat, drawing upon a trickle of magic to sustain herself.

"The end of our search approaches, Li-Ming, and yet it seems we are no closer to puzzling out the mystery of this unending summer," I said as we rode.

"I cannot explain it, Master. I believe that something is consuming the desert. It feels as though the edges of reality weaken, like when you look into the distance in a dream," she said.

"Perhaps you perceive the ocean of fire and molten rock that lies beneath us."

"Or the sun that looms above us?" she asked testily. "You make light of what I say, but I am certain this weather has no natural cause. When I searched the archives in the city—"

"Quite a feat when you are forbidden to leave the Yshari Sanctum."

She gave me a withering look. "I examined the records of the weather. We have never known a period of such interminable heat. The Dahlgur Oasis might go dry if it does not end soon."

"On this I do not disagree."

"But it is more than that," Li-Ming said. "There is something in the air that is unlike anything I have ever felt before. It should be cool, and yet it is not. The winds should be calm, and yet they are not."

"Is it possible that you grasp for an explanation where there is none to be found? Despite all we know of this world and of the stars beyond, it may be that this is as natural as an age of snow and ice. You have not lived as long as I, and the mysteries of the universe must seem new to you."

"If you believe that, then why are we here, Master?" she asked.

I laughed. "You have me there."

Li-Ming looked toward the town that crept up before us. "Ours is a world of great magic. Consider the Dreadlands. An entire land destroyed, and who is to say it did not start

like this? It has been near twenty years since the Lords of Hell walked this earth. Isendra told me of the invasion that never was. Perhaps now it is coming."

"Sometimes I wonder if you are so eager to make your destiny that you would welcome ruin upon our world," I said.

"It is my destiny. And it will come sooner than later," she said.

This was Li-Ming's notion, and one that Isendra shared. Li-Ming believed that she would protect the world against an invasion of Hell as Isendra had done before her. It came from a book Li-Ming had read, a prophecy hidden in one of the library's tomes, detailing the signs portending the return of the Lords of Hell. Isendra had often tried to convince me that the prophecy was true, and though I was not blind to the danger that might await, I remained skeptical.

Li-Ming had many talents, but her greatest was in the reading of magic. She was a perceptive girl, and finding the hidden structures of spells came to her with ease. I once asked Li-Ming what it was like to see as she did. She described the invisible threads of magic and how auras of arcane power swirled around mages as they cast their spells, and how there was an afterimage, like the green and red spots burned upon your vision after you gaze into the sun. She could smell, taste, see, and feel magic. So if Li-Ming told me the endless summer was guided by some mortal hand or other great power, I was inclined to believe her, for that was my own opinion as well. But I held it to myself, for if it was true, I worried about what it could mean.

Caldeum was situated atop a long, flat plain that rose above the rest of the desert. The plain ended in sheer cliffs, and at their base was Lut Bahadur. Above the town's walls, windmills turned placidly in normal times, but many of them had been ripped and torn by

the fierce winds. Bleached and tattered canvas awnings had been pulled across wooden beams that stuck out of the mud roofs to offer some protection against the sun. But it mattered not, for in the shade there was little respite. Almost all of the people had taken to wrapping their faces as I had, so I could see nothing other than the expressions of their eyes, eyes filled with fear, or without hope when they were not.

The town was dying.

Li-Ming was using an enchantment she favored, a thin layer of frost that circled around her. The ice in the air melted as fast as she created it, and so to the eye it appeared as though Li-Ming was surrounded by a light mist. When she dismounted from her camel, she ignored the stirrup, instead drifting down on unseen currents until she landed softly upon the ground. That drew looks from the few people who were on the street.

"Must you use your magic so carelessly?" I asked, vexed.

"This heat is unbearable, Master. I do not see how you can stand it," she said.

"I endure it because I must," I said as I climbed down from my camel. "You will win us no friends with your behavior."

"You only concern yourself with my behavior when it is convenient to reprimand me," Li-Ming said.

"Can I be held to blame when it is such a frequent occurrence?"

Despite her protests, Li-Ming let the spell dissipate as she walked over to me. The faint moisture that surrounded her faded into nothingness, drunk by the desert air.

"We are here to observe and ask questions, nothing more," I reminded Li-Ming.

"Observe and ask questions. Nothing more," Li-Ming echoed.

"See to the camels," I said, not rising to the bait.

"I thought I was observing."

"After you see to the camels," I said. "I will go find Isendra."

"Isendra is here?" Li-Ming brightened.

"She is. Now, stay here," I said. "And Li-Ming?"

"Yes, Master?" she asked solicitously.

"Try to stay out of trouble."

Li-Ming grinned.

Sheltered against the side of a canyon, the town was protected from the scalding wind when it blew from west to east, but when it blew from another direction, Lut Bahadur was exposed. There was evidence that the townsfolk had tried to build a windbreak, but it had long since been toppled. On that day the wind was blowing from the east, but it was not so fierce that it was dangerous to be out of doors. Li-Ming tethered the camels near the well, and then she peered over the edge. I did not need to look to know that it was empty. Any water would be stored in jars, though there was little chance they had much left. I went to one of the men sitting in the unhelpful shadow of a tattered awning, light leaking through the holes and tears, to ask where I might find the sorceress.

Suddenly the earth heaved, rolling like waves beneath us, and then with a violent lurch I was knocked to the hard-packed dirt. As I looked up, I saw Li-Ming with her arms raised to her shoulders, her fingers moving as though she pulled the strings of puppets in a play.

This was her work.

"Li-Ming! What have you done?" I shouted as the shaking continued.

"Come here and see for yourself," she said proudly, pointing to the well. I stood and walked to the lip while the ground still shuddered. When I leaned over the edge, I saw the faint shimmer of water seeping over the dry crust at the well's base. Li-Ming had brought water to the town, water it would need to survive.

"I found water deep below, perhaps an underground river that feeds into the Dahlgur Oasis. I diverted its flow to fill the well. This town—"

"Enough," I said sternly. "I told you that we are here to observe and ask questions. Nothing more."

"We could do more, Master. We could build a new windbreak or repair what has been destroyed by the sandstorms. You always say we should do nothing. Why else were we given these abilities but to help people?" she said. "I have been thinking, Master, that perhaps with our magic, we could reverse the heat and bring an end to this summer."

"We will do nothing. It is not our place, and you better than most should understand what could happen if we attempt to alter the weather to such a large scale," I chided her.

"Have you already forgotten your failure?"

"I am not the girl I once was. I have learned. And I will never leave people to suffer!" Li-Ming said. "Tell me why we cannot help them. Tell me why it is so wrong."

I pointed to the well that now gurgled with water. "Where does this water come from? Where did it go? Will the water that flowed to the oasis flow here without cost? You cannot create from nothing. You solve one problem and make ten more." Li-Ming was young, and she did not concern herself with details. She acted on impulse, seeing only what happened in the moment.

"The water was there, Master. The people could have dug the well deeper themselves. I made it easier."

"Your altruism is a credit to you, Li-Ming, but we mages cannot do this. Yes, there are times when we can use our magic to aid people, but it cannot be every time, and we must weigh the costs carefully before we act. This is not a matter of argument. You will listen to me."

"But Li-Ming is right," came a woman's voice in response.

"Isendra!" exclaimed Li-Ming as she ran over to the sorceress, who embraced her fondly.

"This is not our concern, nor is it yours," I said. "Li-Ming, let me talk with Isendra. Alone."

Li-Ming frowned and opened her mouth to speak, but she acquiesced and left us, joining the men and women who were fetching jars and other vessels to fill with the newfound water. I watched as she went among them.

"If these people's troubles are not our concern, why are we here?" asked Isendra.

"Sometimes you and she are too much alike," I grumbled. "She said the same."

"And how has she been?"

"The years change little. She is as impetuous as she was the first day we met her. I wonder if we made the wrong decision by teaching her anything."

"She is not content to leave matters as they are. She wants to give people a better life."

"Li-Ming has no thought of the price. She lives in the here and now, while those like you and me must look farther. That is our burden, to lead the mage clans."

"Li-Ming may be right. We three are the most powerful mages who live today. Between us, why should we not be able to end this summer and restore the seasons to their normal order?"

"That is a thought moved by emotion, not reason," I said. "We cannot change the weather. It will not work."

"Li-Ming would not say that," said Isendra.

"You are not Li-Ming. She is a foolish girl."

"You see a girl. I see a woman who might save this world."

"Prophecy. Destiny." I shrugged. "Who is to say what the next day will bring? If all that comes to pass, you and I will face it, and perhaps Li-Ming will fight with us. But she is not the only one who can. And how are we to know that those prophecies are true? The Lords of Hell should have struck twenty years ago. Our greatest fear must be of ourselves."

"You have become a timid man in your old age," said Isendra.

"And you have become reckless in yours," I said. "You will not interfere."

"I will do what I must," Isendra said as she made to go. "As will you."

After Isendra had left, I watched Li-Ming. She was tending to a child who had collapsed from the heat. He was feverish. His cheeks were red, and sweat beaded upon his skin. Li-Ming cast a spell, and the air around her hands grew cold. When she held them above the boy's face, he sighed peacefully as the faintest of breezes whispered against the strands of hair matted to his forehead.

"Thank you," said the boy's mother. "I hear the others talk, but you have restored our well, and you have saved my son. That does not seem so wrong to me."

Li-Ming smiled as she stood, but her expression was grim by the time she reached me.

"These people will die," Li-Ming said.

"They might. But our interference might not prevent that."

"We will never know, will we?" Li-Ming said, her brown eyes searching mine. "Will you see their faces in your dreams?"

"Theirs and more. It is our curse, Li-Ming, and you will come to know this pain greatly." I placed my hand gently upon her shoulder. "Let us go."

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I know that I told you much of that story when last we spoke, but I left out Li-Ming's part in it, for it was Isendra who concerned me then. You will no doubt agree that my actions were correct, but I am no monster. As always when faced with such situations, I felt a great sadness that I could not do as Li-Ming wished and help the people of Lut Bahadur. It was a familiar argument, and one that we had often. I sympathized with her more than she knew.

It was a short while later when you and I first met, for I worried over Isendra and what course of action she might undertake. In my heart I was certain that the matter was not closed.

I suspect you know some of what came next, details that I may not. This, I think, was where Li-Ming began to turn to the decision that led us to this disaster.

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It was months after when, in the deep hours of the night, my door creaked open and Li-Ming entered. It was not her habit to knock, a peculiarity of her character that I had come to live with, though she had visited little enough of late. Li-Ming looked as though she had been roused from sleep. Her normally impeccable robes had been thrown on in haste, and I could see in the furtiveness of her eyes that something troubled her.

"Did you feel it?" she asked.

"I felt nothing."

"A great spell was cast to the east. Not far from here. We need to go," Li-Ming said.

"Something has happened."

"We can go in the morning," I said.

"Do you have such a great need for rest, old man?" she said irritably, then grew serious. "It was Isendra, Master."

I was silent, not trusting myself to speak, but I relented.

We left the Yshari Sanctum to head toward Lut Bahadur. It should have been winter, the third since the summer began, but the night air was as dry and hot as the middle of the day, with only the absence of the sun providing the smallest measure of comfort. I felt as

though I were standing next to a glassblower's kiln. Sweat dripped down my body, and my robes clung to my skin.

Li-Ming said nothing as we rode.

Lut Bahadur was quiet when we arrived. Other than the wind, which even at this hour blew sand and dust across the desert, there was no sound but the faint flapping of hides and clothes that were hung on lines next to every hut. Not a soul walked the streets, though lanterns still burned. But something else seized at my thoughts.

The air was cold.

A shiver ran between my shoulders and along my arms as we entered the town. The chill wind brushed over me, and I had not felt it for so long that at first my body rejected it. But I could feel my muscles slowly relaxing as though the tension caused by the endless heat could now, by the soft caress of the gentle breeze, be undone.

Li-Ming summoned orbs of light that she sent across the town, and as they disappeared from sight, their flickering illumination lit the ground and the sides of the buildings that they passed. That was something new. I had not seen that spell before.

"What is that?" I asked her.

Li-Ming ignored my question. "Do you feel the air?"

"It is cold," I said.

"No, not that," Li-Ming said. "Electricity courses through it. I have never felt it so strongly, so I did not know if it was a spell that was the cause, or something else entirely." She fell silent, and I sensed nothing but the worry that emanated from my student.

I followed her as she made her way purposefully down the curving roads, turning every so often. Though it was late, it was too quiet for a sleeping town. The cloth awnings

drifted soundlessly as the wind faded. There was no sound at all but that of our footsteps against the hard earth. In my ears, I could hear the beating of my anxious heart. Li-Ming and I walked along the abandoned streets until finally she approached the slatted door of a house and pushed it open.

"What are you doing?" I hissed as I ducked through the doorway after Li-Ming, all too conscious of the crunch of my boots on the dirt.

As I opened my mouth to lecture her and extended a hand to grab her shoulder, the words died with my breath, and my hand froze. Inside the house, it was as though time had stopped. A man, woman, and child were seated around a large table, but they did not acknowledge our sudden intrusion. Instead, they were as cold and unmoving as statues. The woman's lips were parted around a word that hung in the air half-spoken, never to be heard. At her side, the man had turned to regard the child, who was reaching an arm across the table. The food appeared to have been recently cooked and served, but there was no heat. It was as though the moonlight had leached all color and life from the scene before me.

"What happened here?" I whispered.

"I do not know for sure," Li-Ming said as she paced through the room, her eyes seeing but not seeing as she traced the invisible weaving of arcane energies that I could not. "The shape of the spell fades with time. It is like trying to learn the size of a storm after it has passed, with only puddles upon the ground and the lingering clouds in the air to judge."

I stepped outside, not wishing to see any longer, and waited for Li-Ming to emerge. A few minutes later, she did.

"She tried to take the heat from the air to make it cool, but she lost control of her spell. The cold broke through and the air froze."

"She?" I asked, though of course I knew the answer.

"Isendra. I recognize the pattern of her magic, just as I know yours. And there are few mages who could have attempted to perform the spell that was cast here."

"How did it happen?"

"She was not strong enough. It may have worked in the beginning, but when it became too powerful for her, the structure of her spell grew weak and unraveled." Li-Ming's voice wavered. "This is my fault."

"Isendra may need us," I said. "We must look for her."

Li-Ming cast her floating spheres of light to aid us in our search, but in all the houses, the same sight greeted us: every soul frozen as though we had come across some strange statuary, some silent graveyard. And no sign of Isendra.

It was an hour later when we found her. The hut looked much the same as the others, but Li-Ming was sure. She stopped for a moment before she pushed open the door of wooden slats. I followed after her.

Inside, this house was different. Whereas the others sat in eerie stillness, it was clear that a violent struggle had unfolded here. There were large black scorch marks on the walls where the mud bricks had been burned by fire. The tables and chairs and other furniture had been burnt and toppled, and the smell of ashes was thick. Here I could feel something, but it was not the evidence of magic as Li-Ming felt. It was a primal, instinctual reaction that made the hairs on my arms stand. Then I saw what I had feared to see: Isendra, her body splayed out like a doll that had been carelessly cast aside. Blood pooled across the wooden

floor from wounds on her arms and her stomach. Her skin was blackened in places, and her head was turned unnaturally to one side, her eyes looking vacantly at the floorboards.

Li-Ming rushed to Isendra and knelt next to her. She cradled the lifeless form of the sorceress in her arms while tears spilled from her eyes.

"What happened here, Master?" she asked.

I shook my head. We stayed there in silence and grief until Li-Ming delicately released Isendra's body and stood again.

"Not all of this fire was created with magic," Li-Ming said. "The magic from Isendra's spell is already fading, but some of this is newer. This happened after."

"When a mage loses control of a spell, the results can be chaotic," I said. "I have seen it many a time."

"She was not killed by magic, Master," Li-Ming said.

"Perhaps not, but her magic surely led to this. This town is destroyed, and she is dead. Whom has she protected? Whom has she saved? Answer me that!" My voice was loud in the unnatural silence.

"You are blind," Li-Ming said angrily. "Isendra tried to help them. That is better than anything you have ever done. I will not stand by and watch people suffer. Not any longer, and not when the time comes that the world needs me."

"Will people pay with their lives for your failure as this town has paid for Isendra's? Are you to sacrifice innocents for your own thoughts of heroism?" I asked.

"No," Li-Ming said softly.

For a moment my brilliant student seemed very much a girl still. I gazed sadly at the fallen shape of my friend, who looked like someone else in death, and said nothing more.

When it was time to go, Li-Ming set fire to the hut with her spell, Isendra, who was once her master, lying peacefully upon the floor. Isendra's eyes were closed, her duty done. As the fire grew and the flames rose higher, water beaded and dripped down her face like tears. I led Li-Ming away from the house by the arm.

Li-Ming's eyes met mine. The sorrow and anger were still there, but what I saw most of all was a grim determination. "But I will not fail."

We passed through the silent town, lost in our own thoughts. The knowledge of what each home contained within, hidden from view, unsettled me. I looked back upon Lut Bahadur as we rode away, the narrow hilly roads illuminated by the light of a thousand flickering lanterns that faded into the night like a swarm of fireflies.

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I believe that was when Li-Ming began to understand the danger of her actions and what failure could mean. We did not speak again of Isendra's death until the last time I saw her. Did Li-Ming know why Isendra had died? Did she know how Isendra had been killed?

The events in Lut Bahadur did not dim Li-Ming's desire for knowledge in the least. She was obsessed with learning more so that she might succeed where Isendra had failed. She spent most of her hours in the library and always found her way to where she was forbidden to go but, despite my efforts, it was impossible to keep her from. She learned temporal magic from the writings of mages who had extended their lives far beyond those

of normal men, and read of others who had so empowered themselves that death's gaze passed over them, mages like the mad wizard Zoltun Kulle, who replaced his blood with the sands of time and could not be killed, only imprisoned. With her understanding of the unseen web of arcane power, she taught herself the ability to project from one place to another with teleportation magic. She mastered the trick of shaping living illusions and was able to create two perfect images of herself that mimicked her actions. There were scrolls and diagrams that showed how to defy and bend the invisible forces of the universe. Her power grew great, as did my concern.

The first time we met, I told you only to watch Isendra for fear of what madness she might choose to undertake. I do not question the decision you made.

It was not long after that Li-Ming made her own choice.

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The great hall of the Yshari Sanctum was a massive octagonal room with vaulted ceilings painted with the history of the mage clans. Eight sets of doors led to hallways and other chambers, though none as grand as this one. Every inch of the walls was covered in spectacular tapestries, and the stone tiles of the floor were quarried from the lands beyond the Twin Seas.

When I entered, Li-Ming was standing at the center of the room, regarding the patterns on the floor. The chamber was empty but for the two of us.

"I did not wish to depart before telling you that I was going," she said when she heard my footsteps. "I believed that I owed you that much."

"And where are you going?" I asked.

"A star streaked across the heavens today and fell to the west. It is the sign I have waited for. You have read the books of prophecy as I have. You know what this means. We expected the invasion of Hell twenty years ago, and it never came. The stories of grim tidings I hear every day in the bazaar have made me certain. My time has come."

"Your place is here as a student at the Yshari Sanctum. You are a dangerous spark, and the world is dry and given to the flame. You cannot control yourself, and if I allow you to leave, what you might do is worse than any other doom I can imagine."

"There is nothing left for me to learn from you," she said.

"Do you remember the day we first met, Li-Ming? You know more than you did then, but you have gained little wisdom. If you leave, you will only be a wizard."

"Your wisdom I do not need. I *am* a wizard, and I will protect the world if the mages will not." She turned away from me. "Let me go to my fate. You will be safe here with your books and your fears."

I raised my hands and, channeling a thin trickle of the arcane, pulled the doors leading from the Sanctum shut. One by one, they crashed closed until we were trapped within the hall.

"Then I must stop you." I carefully rolled up the long sleeves of my robe. "You were my greatest student, Li-Ming, and I believed that in time you might succeed me and lead the mage clans. I believed you could surpass me. I am sorry that it has come to this. Perhaps it is I who has failed."

"You were a good teacher, Master. And I did learn your lessons. But you will never understand the gift we were given. That is why I will surpass you," she said, her words echoing in the room.

I saw her eyes narrowing as she focused inward. The torches in their sconces high up on the walls flickered as we began to draw in the energy around us. Li-Ming's hands went to either side, her fingers curling as we stood facing each other like two immovable rocks in the middle of a river. I lowered my staff and held it before me, using it as a focus for my own power.

"Have you ever wondered, Master, whether I was stronger than you?" she asked.

"No." I smiled. "I have not."

I waited for Li-Ming to act first. She conjured balls of flame that absorbed the light from the torches and seemed to dim the light from outside, but that was just a trick of my eyes as they adjusted to the darkness. She flung the burning orbs at me. I pushed them away and threw them to the tiles, where they scorched the marble but did not touch me. The air ignited, and I felt a shortness of breath. Li-Ming looked at me with an amused expression, but she readied her next attack. She tore massive pieces of stone from the ceiling, setting them ablaze and showering them toward where I was standing. I raised my staff above my head and unleashed a wave of force that grew outward, forming a shimmering dome that expanded and caught the falling meteors, shattering them into a film of dust and some larger fragments that pinged against the floor. The translucent shield had protected me from the attack, but the reverberation of it echoed painfully through my body. In my younger days, it would have affected me less, but now it drove me to a knee.

Around me the marble tiles cracked and tore from the shock like a broken mirror, and even Li-Ming was driven backward.

"You will have to do better than that," I said.

Li-Ming growled in frustration, and this time fire shot from the palms of her hands in thin beams of iridescent flame that carved toward me, and it was all I could do to dodge and avoid their scything arcs. Where they struck stone, they sheared clean through like the cut of a knife. They rent the marble tiles, and I could feel the floor begin to fall away. I extended my grasp outward, finding the stones that threatened to crumble and binding them with invisible thread. If I released it, the floor would collapse, and I with it. Below the great hall are catacombs, not solid earth, and I did not believe I could survive that fall. The strain of holding everything together was great, and my knuckles turned white as I gripped my staff.

Li-Ming looked to my side of the hall, where the floor was cracked and broken. She moved her hand, and the stone beneath my feet gave way, shattering into nothing. Isendra had taught me a trick once, and it came to me unconsciously. One moment I was standing on the collapsing tile. The next, I appeared a few feet away with surer footing. The agony of teleportation, even across such a short distance, was immense. I felt as if I had been torn into a thousand pieces, then sewn back together with burning thread. It was hard to know which had caused the greater pain. Li-Ming methodically destroyed my new perch, and I moved again. We repeated this dance for a while longer, but my reactions were slowing with each exchange, and I could feel the battle taking its toll upon my old, frail body.

I drove my staff down to the floor, and thunder rumbled from the impact. In the blink of an eye, arcs of lightning shot through the hall, and where they struck, the floor

exploded, throwing up shards of the marble tile. The lightning burst with a percussive explosion and lanced toward Li-Ming. But it never found her. The jagged streaks of light were frozen in the air, while Li-Ming had her arms extended, concentrating intensely. Undeterred, I continued to summon the lightning, and the storm grew worse and worse. The lightning hung over Li-Ming like an unfurled fan until she could hold it at bay no longer. The electricity arced through her, driving her to the floor and exploding around her in a cascade of sparks and white light.

Li-Ming disappeared.

Unsure of her intentions, I ignited the storm, which turned from electricity to a raging inferno that filled the entirety of the great hall and seared my own flesh, threatening to exhaust the last of my strength. When Li-Ming blinked into view again, she was engulfed in flames. I heard her scream as the fire burned her. The tiles shifted beneath my feet as I approached. Clinging to the spell that kept the floor from falling, I leveled my staff at her crumpled form.

The ground felt solid as I stood before Li-Ming, and I was relieved that it supported my weight.

"You still have much to learn, Li-Ming."

I thrust my staff at her, but where I should have struck flesh, Li-Ming's body dissipated into nothing.

I turned just in time to see her behind me. I opened my mouth and tried to grasp a spell, any spell, but an explosion rocked my vision. I lost control of the spell, lost my hold on the broken floor beneath me. It heaved and shattered, and everything fell away. I fell and fell, tumbling into darkness, until I crashed into the cold stone floor of the catacombs.

As I lay there, my body battered, I was surrounded by the smell of fire and dust. Li-Ming floated down from above and landed, kneeling next to me.

She said, "You believe that I have not learned your lessons, but I have. I learned the lesson of Isendra's death. But I was given my power for a reason, and it is my burden to use it. I will use it, not fear it as you do."

"What if you cannot control it?" My voice came in a rasp. "With your power, you could break the world."

"Then the world will weep." She turned her back to me. "There is one thing I must ask you, Master."

I was silent, for I knew what must follow. There was nothing else that Li-Ming had to learn from me.

"Why did Isendra die? Tell me the truth," she said.

"I know no more than you."

Li-Ming nodded and stepped into the air.

I opened my mouth to speak again, but the shadows consumed everything.

* * * * *

When I woke days later, Li-Ming had left the city, and none knew where she had gone. They have told me that it was impossible to hide what had occurred, for all

throughout Caldeum the column of smoke that rose from the Sanctum could be seen, and from the outside the scars of our battle were obvious in the sheared and shattered stone.

Here my knowledge of the wizard's story ends, and my decision awaits. When mages threatened to tear our world apart, a Vizjerei master founded the order of the assassins, the mage hunters, who would ensure that we could not grow so powerful that all would be imperiled. He stood here in my place, speaking to the first assassin just as we speak now, and consigned many a great mage to death.

For my part, this will be the second time I have done so.

I believe she knew that it was I who sent you to watch Isendra, and despite what that must mean, she let me live, knowing that as I once sealed Isendra's death, I might do the same to her.

But understand this: Li-Ming did not lie. There are tomes within our library that describe the events that may now be coming to pass. It all begins with a star falling from the heavens, and such a star did fall the day I fought Li-Ming.

I know the true nature of magic and of who and what I am. Li-Ming knows these things as well, but she has come to a different course. This is the puzzle put before us, assassin. I am not blind to the evil that stalks us, but I fear for what Li-Ming might seek to undertake. Thus I consign to death my brightest student, perhaps the world's best hope for salvation, and pray that I have chosen rightly.

But I remember a girl who stood before me in this very room and feared nothing. I remember a selfless young woman who wished to do good, to whom no task was too great and no feat lay outside the realm of possibility. A woman who looked to me for guidance.

She has made her choice, and I have made mine.