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Emma Zenthoefner

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When Lightning Strikes

EMMA ZENTHOEFER

The people of the town, deep in the desert, bustled through their typical morning - the men slaving away in the dry fields; the women corraling children of all ages. Life continued as usual, a boring, dull day under the blistering sun. Although it brought misery, the sun defined their way of life. That is, until the clouds began to form, gathering in the pale blue sky. The wind strengthened; eyes turned upwards. Before the first raindrop fell, before the first rumble of thunder shook the ground, the citizens began gathering around the temple.

Michelle, a lone mother of two, hurried to the schoolhouse to retrieve her son, who gathered with the other children outside, their curious eyes sky bound. Her daughter, who was one year too young to marry off, followed close behind. Unlike her brother, she's scared silent.

The rarity of the storm forming from the cluster of clouds above was vital to the town's survival. They believed the drops of water for their soil were blessings from gods. Normally, rain brought excitement to the children, relief to the adults, but a thunderstorm - it brought neither, for a thunderstorm meant the gods were angry, peeved by the constant pleas for rain. Their anger rumbled through the clouds, flashing light across the darkened sky. The citizens must please their gods, to spare themselves from suffering an extended drought.

Michelle and her children joined the other families at the temple, all watching fearfully as the imperative men gathered near the top, where a

long metal pole rose into the clouds. A place for their gods to channel their energy, the pole was considered the town's greatest treasure. As the men commenced their speech, the rain began. Michelle could barely hear them over the pitter-patter, though she knew their words by heart, reciting them in her head. Every thunderstorm, she heard those words. Soon, her children would also memorize those words; the words that claimed their father.

Michelle would normally have nothing to fear about the thunderstorm. After her previous sacrifice, she was immune from any more loss, her children immune from any more pain. Though, their immunity dried up with the empty riverbed, their time expired. They were just as at risk as everyone else, though Michelle believed their chances were slim. What were the odds it would once again be them?

The rain fell harder as the scrolls were brought out, already stained with the tears of both the sky and the unlucky. One of the corners was stained with blood. Michelle's daughter fiddled with her dress. Michelle took her hand to comfort her. Her son stood proud, too young to fully comprehend the direness of the situation or the suffering that would follow. He had yet to be born when his father had been stolen from him.

A name rang out over the crowd, though it was drowned out by the wind. Those in the front, those who could understand the garbled speech from the top of the temple, turned around, searching for the unlucky soul. The men repeat-

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ed the name. Thunder rumbled. Finally, a pair of eyes landed upon Michelle. Then more. Soon Michelle could hear the name chosen by the gods, selected by the raindrops upon the scrolls. It wasn't Michelle. It wasn't her daughter. It was her son.

Realizing that something was wrong, her son clung to Michelle's leg. Her daughter's hands began to shake, tears rolling down her cheeks. Not again – Michelle couldn't comprehend what was happening – Not again.

She remembered the way her husband looked when his name was called; his expression solemn but accepting. Only sixteen, she didn't know how to react. Pregnant with her son and clutching a two-year-old daughter, Michelle sobbed the entire time her love climbed the temple steps. How had he accepted his fate so effortlessly, leaving his wife and children behind, all alone? Michelle couldn't watch as her husband was strapped to the pole. As she turned her daughter's eyes away, Michelle peaked back one last time. Her last sight of her husband was him smiling, tears falling with the rain.

Lightning struck.

Michelle came back to her senses as her son was lifted and carried away from her. Her body trembled as she watched him bawl in the arms of the man dragging him to his death. He was almost halfway to the top when Michelle's heart shattered. When she lost her husband, it had cracked, but unlike then, this was unmendable.

Michelle clutched her daughter's hands, looking apologetically into her eyes before bolting after her son. Crying out his name, Michelle pushed through the crowd, people glaring at her for causing a scene. She didn't care. She must get to her son. She must save him.

The men at the base of the temple held her back, forming a barricade to block her. Screaming, she pushed against them, and, through some miracle, one of the men stumbled, creating an opening

for Michelle to slip through. She dashed up the temple stairs; her son being strapped to the pole when he saw her. Hearing him call out to her was heart wrenching, propelling Michelle forward. When she made it to him, the rain was lashing down harder than ever before, as if the gods were enjoying the show.

Michelle clawed at the ropes around her son, but, at first, they wouldn't budge. His fearful eyes stared up at her, pleading for help. Finally, Michelle tugged the rope loose from her son's waist, shoving him out of the way. He fell on his backside, tumbling down the stairs, but Michelle didn't care. All she cared about was his distance from the pole. Before her son could recover and look up at his mother, Michelle wrapped both her arms around the pole. She didn't have time to look at the shocked faces of her neighbors or the cries of her daughter below. The moment Michelle firmly grasped her hands around the pole, the gods accepted her sacrifice.

Lightning struck.

