

A little Xoron girl with black hair and simple clothes on walked across the central square of the settlement with a large bag full of groceries, huffing and puffing loudly as she carried it home. There were few other people present outside and those who were seemed to pay little attention to her. Lampposts scattered across the square tried to spread some light into the coming darkness, but none of them really seemed to do the job. Once she had managed to get to the other side of the square, the girl stood in front of a house. She put down the heavy bag and pressed the doorbell. After a short while, the door slid open and a woman closely resembling her stood in the doorway. It was obvious that she was her mother.

Jessi Ruhani had been assigned to this post a few months ago, after she had applied for the position. She had been trained as a field medic and they had needed one in this area to take care of the scientists and the rest of the crew in case any of them got hurt during their expeditions. In an environment such as this, it wasn't an unlikely scenario.

She got down on one knee to level with her daughter with a worried look on her face. "Did you carry all of that stuff here by yourself?"

The girl only nodded in return, too tired to give her mother a proper reply.

The woman put a hand on her shoulder and motioned for her to come in. "Come in, sweetie, and I'll make you a nice cup of herbal tea with some milk."

She lifted the heavy bag, surprised that her daughter had carried it all the way home herself, then took her by hand. The door slid shut behind them.

The house, like much of the settlement, was simple and modular. The settlement had been built there only for the team of scientists that was sent here to research the largest volcanic area on Netherea. Most of the houses were only equipped with the truly necessary facilities, like a shower, kitchen, a bedroom and a small living room. It was enough for the two of them to live in. The kitchen was kempt, everything needed for cooking had been organized in an orderly fashion and the sink and

kitchen counter were clean. Jessi picked up a tea kettle, let some water from the tap run into it and put it back on its pedestal to let it boil. She then picked up a small can and tilted its lid, took out some tea and put it into a tea infuser that she took from a drawer.

“Did you get everything from the list, Rini?” Jessi asked her daughter, who had climbed onto a chair at the small dinner table that stood next to the kitchen's only window.

“Yes, Mommy, but it was really heavy! I nearly couldn't carry all of it...” she said, looking at her mother with a mix of innocence and accusation.

Jessi couldn't help but chuckle silently, although she did feel a bit sorry for her little girl. “I'm sorry, honey, but I had to stay with Mister Zurâk. He's been very ill and his fever's gone up quite a bit, that's why I had to ask you to get the groceries. Why didn't you ask anyone to help you carry them back here? You know the man at the supplies office doesn't bite.”

“He's scary... I didn't want to ask him,” Rini replied with the honesty only a child could have.

Jessi smiled at her and patted her on the head gently. “Next time, just ask him if he can deliver them here.”

“Yes, Mommy...”

In the meantime, the water had finished boiling. Jessi reached for the fridge, took out a large bottle of ice cold milk and poured a little into a mug, then put the bottle back in the fridge. From a canister on the counter, she took a small sugar cane and put it in the mug, then added the tea infuser and poured the hot water in. She waited a moment, then removed the infuser and put the mug in front of Rini.

“Careful, it's still very hot! Just a few minutes and then you can drink it.”

“Yes, Mommy,” Rini replied, staring through the window. Suddenly, she realized something else.

“Mommy?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Where is the other mister? Is he coming home tonight?”

Jessi looked at her daughter and shook her head, unsure when Râz would come back. Sometimes he'd been gone for a few days before returning, other times he'd returned after shorter periods of time. "He might be. I don't know, honey."

She gazed outside through the window, wondering if he'd show up tonight, but it was too dark already to see clearly. Even the other side of the square was barely visible, despite the lanterns. They were startled by a sudden heavy coughing fit. It was Zurâk, who was lying in the bed in the other room.

"Finish your tea, dear. I'm going to check up on Mister Zurâk and see if I can do anything for him, all right?"

"Yes, Mommy," Rini replied approvingly. She slowly reached for the mug, blew into the hot beverage and took a sip of her tea.

Zurâk was lying on his back on the bed, hacking and coughing heavily as Jessi rushed into the room and quickly turned him on his side to allow him to breathe easier.

"Are you all right?" she asked as she sat down on the edge of the bed, turning her face towards his.

"Urgh, not really, Jessi... Seems like the fever has returned," Zurâk replied with audible effort, his face covered in sweat and his eyes looking tired. His arms were above the blanket and covered with tribal tattoos similar to Râz'. It was quite obvious they were connected. Jessi knew it was part of their order's traditions to have tattoos to indicate rank and affiliation. Zurâk had been Râz' former master and mentor, but after Râz attained master rank in their order, Zurâk had quit his mentoring position to work in the field once again as an archaeologist. He was a lot older than Râz and although Jessi never asked him, she suspected he was close to his retirement. His white hair and deep wrinkles gave away a lot of information in that regard.

"I'll go get a wet towel to cool you down a bit," Jessi said as she pushed herself off the bed and hurried back to the kitchen. She patted Rini on the head as she walked in, took out a towel from a cupboard and held it under the tap until it was drenched with cold water. She wrung the cloth until it was sufficiently damp to apply to Zurâk's forehead. She

turned around and noticed Rini had finished half of her tea as she passed by.

“How’s the tea, honey?”

“It’s good, Mommy!” Rini replied as she played with the sugar cane.

“I’m heading back to Mister Zurâk now. You can come after you’ve finished your tea, okay? Mommy might need your help.”

“Okay, Mommy!”

Jessi applied the wet towel to Zurâk’s forehead as she gently turned him onto his back.

He smiled at her and rasped: “Thanks, Jessi, you’re too kind for this world.”

As the last word escaped his mouth, Zurâk immediately had another coughing fit. Jessi gave him some time to recover, pulled up a chair and sat down next to him, within easy reach of the towel.

“It doesn’t really seem to be getting any better. This isn’t any regular fever. If this keeps up, we might have to move you to a hospital. There’s only so much I can do here,” she said carefully.

Zurâk’s fever should have gone away a few days ago, but instead, it only seemed to have got worse. The strangest thing was that no one else seemed to have been affected by his illness. Usually fevers like this spread like wildfire, especially in such a small community. Zurâk insisted that he had not been in contact with anything that could’ve made him this ill, but Jessi doubted that. All she knew was that he had been deep in the Xarani Desert on some sort of pilgrimage – at least, that’s what Râz had told her. She couldn’t help but feel that this pilgrimage was the cause of his illness. Sometimes, Zurâk became delirious with fever and started talking gibberish. During these rambling fits, he’d speak in a voice that seemed distorted somehow, but she couldn’t explain why. She had not been given proper time to set up a medical practice in the settlement since she had arrived here a month ago. Some of the supplies, such as a medical scanner, had not been delivered yet in this desolate, remote place. When she had been stationed in the ruins of the old capital, she’d at least had a full medical lab at her disposal. Here, she needed to make do with what she had taken with her, which was

very little. It had been mostly the money that had made her choose this assignment; the Prophets knew she needed it, especially with her little daughter to take care of. Râz and Zurâk had arrived at the settlement shortly after her and initially, she had been grateful to see them, as usually the arrival of Windmasters at any given location was proof that a scientific mission was important enough for their order to send assistance. Windmasters were widely respected and would often assist the locals with their unusual talents. Sadly, she discovered that the Windmaster duo's arrival had nothing to do with the settlement's mission; they were on a mission of their own.

Jessi turned her head towards the doorway and noticed Rini standing in it. She was holding the sugar cane in her right hand. While nibbling on it, she walked up to the bed and sat on the edge, across from her mother. Zurâk's fever had receded a little in the meantime and he raised his head to see the little girl, then gave her a friendly smile.

"How are you, Rini?" Zurâk asked, glad to have some company and something to keep his mind off how he was feeling.

"Mommy sent me out to get some groceries, but they were really, really heavy," she replied in all honesty.

"But you're a really strong girl, aren't you?" he asked, winking at Jessi.

"I bet she's the strongest girl in the entire settlement," Jessi said with pride in her voice as she looked at her daughter.

"The man at the supply depot is scary," Rini said, switching the subject.

Zurâk couldn't help but chuckle at how honest the little girl was about everything. It was something he admired her for. "You don't find me scarier?" he asked, wondering what could be so scary about the man at the supply depot.

Rini shook her head. "No, I don't find you scary."

"What makes him so scary, then?"

"I don't really know," Rini replied, shrugging and looking down at the ground shyly.

"Is he really big, or does he have a scar on his face?"

“He looks at me funny,” she replied.

“Maybe he’s scared of you? Some people are just a bit weird, Rini. I don’t think he does it intentionally,” Zurâk said comfortingly.

The doorbell rang. Jessi got up and headed towards the front door. She looked at the vidcom to check who it was and saw Râz. Somehow, she felt glad he had returned, although she couldn’t quite explain why she felt relieved.

“I’m glad to see you’re back! How was your visit to the tower? Did you find anything interesting?” she asked him curiously after letting him in.

“I believe I did,” Râz replied, revealing the silver-bound tome from under his robe.

“So, is this the big find you were hoping for?”

“That remains to be seen – the tome is magically sealed. I need Zurâk’s help to crack the lock. I already tried opening it, but I ended up hurting myself.” Râz revealed the burnt palm of his right hand.

Jessi held it with both of her hands to inspect it and gritted her teeth as she looked at the blisters. Then she looked up at Râz. “This looks painful. Let me get you something to treat the burns.”

Before she could head for the kitchen to get bandages, they were startled by Rini screaming for help. They bolted for the bedroom and there stood Zurâk, holding Rini by the throat with his right hand, his left hand close to her head.

“You two! Don’t move or I’ll kill this little brat,” Zurâk shouted with a strangely distorted voice. He started charging magicka in his left hand. Black slivers of magical energy escaped, showing that he wasn’t kidding.

“Zurâk, what in blazes are you doing?” Râz shouted at him, confused and frustrated at the same time.

Zurâk pointed at Râz, then at Jessi. “You, you’re coming outside with me and you, stay put. Sit down on that chair over there.”

Jessi slowly walked up to the chair, trembling in fear of what the old man could do to her little girl. Zurâk carried Rini under his right arm and kept his left hand close to her head. Râz tried to assess the situation,

but despite years of meditation and training, there was little he could do. He needed to wait for Zurâk to make a mistake before he could strike.

“Walk in front of me and take that tome with you, now!” Zurâk commanded.

Râz moved forward after giving Jessi a reassuring nod, hoping she understood the gesture. Jessi was still sitting on the chair, her eyes filled with fear. Tears were running down her purple cheeks. Zurâk followed Râz outside, but made sure his back was never exposed to either him or Jessi.

“Stay on that chair until we're far out of sight. And don't you dare warn anyone, or I will kill your daughter,” Zurâk threatened with a dark, low voice.

Once they were outside, the door slid closed behind them. Zurâk eyed Râz up and down. “Start walking towards the obsidian tower and you, keep your mouth shut, or I'll crush your skull!”

Rini looked at Râz with pure terror in her eyes and tried hard to keep still. They walked out of the settlement quietly and unseen. Gradually they disappeared into the dusky darkness. Râz took his orb from his robes quietly, but Zurâk noticed it.

“Don't even think of being a hero,” he said with his strangely distorted voice.

“I'm only using it to create some light. I can't see anything,” Râz explained.

“I don't need any light, but go ahead. No funny stuff! Keep moving slowly.”

Râz tapped the orb, which began emitting a greenish-white glow. During their walk towards the tower, Râz tried studying Zurâk and his sudden change in behaviour. It wasn't until that moment that he noticed Zurâk's eyes had gone completely black. Nothing about his current behaviour was anything like him, it was almost as if he was being controlled by something else. Could it have anything to do with this strange fever? Whatever it was, he was sure it had something to do with Zurâk's pilgrimage. He hadn't been the same ever since he had returned from the desert.

When they were about halfway towards the tower, Zurâk stopped, put Rini down on the ground and commanded Râz to stop as well.

Râz turned around and looked him in the eyes, which were still the same deep black as when his odd behaviour had started. "We're not there yet," he said warily.

"We're too far now for you two to call for help. Put away that orb and get on your knees, with your hands on your head," Zurâk ordered Râz, who followed his commands, still hoping to get an opportunity to turn the tides. He gently put the orb down on the ground, then got down on his knees and put his hands on his head slowly, so he could study Zurâk a little longer. There was something about his eyes and posture that had changed. He seemed more vital than he was before, almost younger.

Rini started sobbing softly. She looked at Râz, her eyes filled with tears and desperation. Râz wondered why Zurâk, or whoever he was facing now, had dragged an innocent child into this situation. Whatever the reason, he feared for her life. Zurâk's blackened eyes were filled with what Râz could only describe as pure hatred.

"Your people sicken me. It is only fitting that you should be the one to singlehandedly destroy the world you hold so dear," Zurâk said, his voice full of cruel amusement.

"What are you talking about, Zurâk? What's wrong with you?" Râz exclaimed in frustration, unsure what he should do. It would take too long to reach for the orb and cast a spell. Zurâk, or whoever he was, clearly held all the trumps.

Rini's sobbing turned into crying; she was trembling with fear.

"I hope you're not too attached to this one," Zurâk said maliciously.

He held his left hand on Rini's head and released his magicka. Her skull crumbled inward at first, then exploded. Chunks of her brain and skull flew everywhere and Zurâk's arm and part of his face were covered in blood. Her small body slumped towards the ground.

"NO!" Râz screamed.

"So, you were attached to that brat after all," Zurâk exclaimed and started to cackle madly.



Although Rini's death threw Ráz off balance, his combat training kicked in and he reassessed the situation. Releasing such a massive amount of magicka would leave Zurâk vulnerable for a moment. Ráz used this flaw in Zurâk's actions by reaching for the orb and shooting a bolt of lightning at him. The shockwave pushed Zurâk to the ground. Before he fell down, slivers of dark energy shot out of his body, then dissipated into the air. Ráz ran towards him to check if Zurâk was still alive. He could still hear him breathing, but it sounded shallow and ragged. Whatever had controlled Zurâk was still close, Ráz thought, perhaps even inside his former master. The orb's light dimmed and before Ráz knew, they were covered by the darkness of the night. It took him some time to adjust to the darkness as he fidgeted with the orb; despite his best efforts, it seemed to be devoid of power. Suddenly, Ráz felt a strange tingling sensation at the back of his neck, which spread further into his body and finally corrupted his thoughts. He tried to fight it, but whatever was affecting him was stronger than him. Darkness fell before his eyes as he slipped into unconsciousness.

A few moments later, Ráz got up from the ground, his eyes as black as bottomless pits. Zurâk was still lying on the ground, unconscious. For a moment he looked down at his mentor, then picked up the orb and walked on towards the tower. The silver-bound tome was still tucked neatly into the folds of his robe. Once he reached the tower, he went inside in the same manner as before and called the lift down. When the platform had descended, he strode onto it.

"Tower balcony, top floor," he said with a voice as cold as ice.

The platform shot up towards the top of the tower. Once it reached the top floor, the doors leading outside slid open with the sound of grinding stone. He walked out onto the balcony, which circled around the entire spire. At the other end, a richly decorated lectern was placed, made of the same ebony material as the tower. Ráz took the silver-bound tome from his robe and put it down on the lectern. He held both of his hands above it and released dark energy; the tome opened with a satisfying click. A sinister grin appeared on his face as he opened the tome, looking for the correct page. Once found, he touched it with his

right index finger, feeling the subtle texture of the ink on the paper that made up a very intricate illustration. The page next to it was filled with glyphs and text. Rüz held his right hand above the page, causing it to glow. In his left hand, he held the orb, which started to absorb dark energy from the tome, causing the bright green colouration to shift to a mix of black and green swirls underneath its glassy surface. After a while, the orb was overflowing with magicka. The overflow transferred to Rüz' body, turning him into a conduit. Close to the point where he could no longer contain the magicka, he pointed the orb towards the volcano underneath the balcony and released the energy. The tome ceased to emit dark energy and the glow coming from its pages dimmed. Rüz' eyes returned to their usual white hue and he felt that the being that controlled him had released its grip on him. Confused by his new location, Rüz looked at his own hands, then at the opened tome and finally into the volcano. It had been given a massive influx of magicka and whatever the consequence, Rüz could not reverse what had been done. He felt worn out and slowly felt his consciousness slip away. The last thing that came to his mind was that he had been tricked. He stared down into the churning pit of lava. It would not be long before the volcano would become too unstable and erupt, but he was too tired to move and too weak to run away from it.