



ASTRAY

By Nevrra

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Chapter 6

Wisdom

“Am I okay?”

“Well...” Marrika dipped her head to the side a little while she looked at the readout on the screen she held. Qrreia was doing her best to lean over and peer the display, but she wasn’t sure why she bothered. She had no idea what anything on it meant. Marrika had offered explanations before, but they never seemed to sink in. “Relative to how we found you? Yes.”

Qrreia was seated on a table in the medical bay, and the one she occupied upon first boarding the *Wandering Horizon*. For as bad as her twisted nightmare made it out to be, it really was anything but. The room didn’t look all that much different from the rest of the ship. It had the same walls, the same floor, the same ceiling, and the same lights. Much like the cabins, a countertop ran along the walls, though the medical bay was larger than any of them. It was lit brighter than the rest of the ship, however. Despite it being only a few hours into the day, it nearly looked like it was high-sun.

She’d been cooped up on the ship due to the check-up, but Qrreia was dressed appropriately for day. She wore a simple, cream vest. It had a single button done up and she combined it with a matching pareo. Marrika’s thin robe was the same color, but fit her better. Kethirr fashion usually preferred looser outfits, but Qrreia’s were usually on the upper end of that. They never looked totally oversized,

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but they did allow her ample room to hide things—but Marrika still found the knife during the examination again. Qrreia hadn't yet figured out a way to hide it from *all* the required medical scans. Yet.

“So, I'm not?”

Marrika lowered the device and turned to better face Qrreia. Her ears moved, but the karinv couldn't quite make out what the expression meant. She wasn't entirely sure why, but that happened with Marrika often enough. “Your body has healed significantly, Qrreia,” Marrika answered in a calm, quiet voice. “You were badly mistreated for most of a year, had your body flooded with toxins, and sustained dire wounds. While those wounds may be long closed, everything else is going to take time.”

It was the same answer it always was. Qrreia sighed and lowered her head. “It's already been so much time...” she said quietly, more to herself than Marrika. “Can I step down my doses again?”

Marrika looked back down at the screen in her hands and gave a slow nod. “I was debating it. I think we can reduce it by ten percent, but I don't want to push it more than that.”

“Okay...”

“Qrreia,” Marrika said and placed a hand on the other kethirr's shoulder. “I've seen people with addictions before. Usually they're psychological—vasrril dependency during difficult times, most often—but sometimes, before I left my old vah, people would come by because they used something really vile. Those drugs still don't compare to what you were given. If the vasrril's medicinal properties didn't counteract the other chemicals, it would simply be a poison.”

“Which I guess was the point.” Her ear flicked. Qrreia lifted her head back up, but she didn't meet Marrika's gaze. She looked past her shoulder toward the far wall. “Will I ever get off it?”

“Yes,” Marrika replied without hesitation. “You've already made incredible progress, too. Your dose has been greatly reduced from what we started you on.”

“But I’m still taking it.”

“You are.” Marrika let out a soft sigh and let her hand fall from Qrreia’s shoulder. “You are incredibly resilient. You have been through so much, but you are still alive. Think about that.”

She did. Often.

“Anyone would have difficulty weaning off it, and it was far from the only thing you were struggling with physically. You’ve had an extensive list of ailments, and a lot of them are behind you.” Marrika flicked a finger at the device’s screen a few times. “Significant lacerations and bruises, fractured bones—and previously poorly healed ones—damage to your lungs from silica dust exposure and volcanic ash, a heavily disrupted immune system, cardiovascular complications from long-term exposure to—”

“Nakril was a bad place to live.”

Marrika’s ears folded back, but she gave a small nod to Qrreia. “It was a bad to live,” she offered. “But you don’t live there now, and you’ve made significant progress in your recovery.”

Qrreia knew what was next, and she decided to preempt Marrika, “And I’d heal even more if I focused on resting instead of helping around here.”

“There are many ways you can help and still—”

“This is an Errant Blade vah.”

“It is, but you don’t need to strain yourself. Not everyone in the vah *needs* to be an Errant Blade. We are a vah first, and that is a matter of the heart. You are here because we care about you, and you care about us. That is all that matters.”

“I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You are not.” Marrika gave a vague gesture toward the bow of the ship. “Haruna joined before me, but I know she joined because she loved everyone. She isn’t here because she wanted to be an Errant Blade.”

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Haruna also flew them into dangerous places and she took a great deal of pride in that. Qrreia didn't bother with that argument, though. She'd already been through it with Haruna herself. "And I was allowed to stay because I had nowhere else to go, and I'd die otherwise."

"Yes," Marrika agreed. Thrown off, Qrreia's ears perked and her head moved back, but Marrika kept her calm demeanor. "At first, that was so. We as a people cruelly set aside the needs of karinv. Given your condition, there were precious few places you could survive. With our connections, perhaps we could have found a vah that would have looked after you. However, such a vah would have people interested in, and practicing, medicine and psychology. You would feel the same way, if not more so."

"So, I'd just be a burden to anyone."

Another rumble sounded from the back of Marrika's throat and she shook her head. She leaned a little closer to Qrreia and rested her palm over the back of Qrreia's hand. "No," she replied. "You have a misconception of what a 'burden' is."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone is a burden when they take without need and give nothing to others," Marrika replied. "You are hurt. You take with great need, and in return, you give your love and your care to the rest of us. You are not a burden, Qrreia, and the very fact you're worried about it should be proof enough you are not."

For a long few moments, Qrreia was quiet. Her mind felt blank, but somewhere deep within her, what Marrika said echoed. Marrika embraced her, and even though she didn't let it linger, Qrreia understood it was still meaningful.

Then, Qrreia was back on her feet. She adjusted her skirt while Marrika crossed over toward the counter and set her device down. She began collecting a few bottles and vials; almost certainly to get

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Qrreia's next doses of diluted DayDream ready. That would take a while, though, and she knew she was free to go.

To her surprise, before she got to the door, Marrika asked, "How was the rest of the night?"

"Oh." Qrreia looked back over her shoulder. "Fine. Varrina ran off someone for me."

"She is good at that," Marrika replied. She held up a vial and eyed the contents.

Qrreia's ears perked. Marrika's voice hadn't changed inflection at all, and she wasn't sure if it was a joke or a condemnation of Varrina. Either possibility was surprising. "I think Grakul felt better by the end of the night."

"Did Varrina help with that, too?"

Marrika's voice still hadn't changed inflection, but Qrreia was now sure it was a joke. How many had slipped by unnoticed before? Qrreia's tail lifted along with her ears. "She was determined."

Glass clinked lightly against metal as Marrika placed the vial back down in a rack. Her tail gave a small sway. "Good."

"Was meeting a karvah good?"

"It was. Being Avqilkarvah was all we had in common, but it was enough." Marrika paused after picking up another vial and her head tilted to one side. "I'm reminded I have not talked to my old vah since we got back."

Qrreia wondered how sharing a kar would somehow be "enough" of a connection, but it was an old, familiar thought. She supposed she had no point of reference. "Does it still hurt?"

"Hm?" Marrika glanced over her shoulder at Qrreia, but then refocused on her work. "Ah. Leaving them? That was a long time ago, but yes. Sometimes it does."

"Do you ever regret it...?"

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"In those times, I do." Marrika set the vial back down and then pulled the device she'd held before closer. She flicked the pad of a finger over the screen. "It was a hard decision to make."

"Haruna said that, too." She'd had that conversation with Haruna twenty or so days after the vah found her. Qrreia wondered why she'd never asked Marrika about it, too. Perhaps, she figured, because she knew the answer already.

"And Haruna wasn't getting along with her old vah." Marrika's finger tapped at a calculator application on the device. "I did, but I had dreams and I could only choose one."

"And the dream was more important..?"

Marrika was holding a bottle, one that now contained a partial mixture of DayDream, which she had been moving toward a centrifuge. Now she just held it. "It was hard." Her ears splayed to the sides, and Qrreia felt a small pang of guilt in her chest. "But I wanted to help people. While my vah absolutely did, I was certain being an Errant Blade would let me do even more."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Qrreia reached over to the button next to the door so she could make a quick retreat.

"No, you did nothing wrong." Marrika didn't approach, but while her footsteps were near-silent, Qrreia could just make out the sound of her turning. "I didn't leave for just the dream, though. A dream is nothing if not shared with loved ones. I care very much for everyone in this vah, too. It's just that I never stopped caring for those in my old one, either."

"I hope no one leaves this one..."

"So do I," Marrika agreed quietly and then returned to her work.

Qrreia walked out into the hallway. While one of the ship's two lounges was opposite the medical bay, she didn't find herself drawn there. Aimlessly, she made her way down the hall and turned the corner that lead to the ship's lift. Her ear perked while she passed Varrina's room and heard the faint sound of voices. That she heard

anything at all meant that the conversation was boisterous. Grakul was probably still with her, but Qrreia was surprised they weren't sparring in the gym instead.

There was still time for them to, but there wasn't enough for Qrreia to leave the ship and actually do anything. Kethirr typically placed little value on time, but the vah agreed to leave Thadkrri for Rraqil before a third of the day was spent. That was fast approaching and it left her unsure of what to do with herself. The pang of guilt within her chest, despite Marrika's assurance, only made her uncertainty worse.

She knew why she'd asked Marrika that question, but that only made the guilt worse. It felt selfish. While her time with the vah had been the most loving and safe she'd ever known, she knew that was unique to her. She wasn't ignorant to the others' pain. She knew rifts had grown between much of the vah, like the gulf she saw between Kedarr and Grakul. If Marrika found their bonds weakening, would she go back to her old vah? For as much as Qrreia's nightmares conjured forth memories of her past, they just as often haunted her with visions of a future alone again.

She hoped this other wayward kethirr they were picking up would find some peace among them, even if her stay was temporary. Qrreia had loved her time with the vah, but even a broken, hurt vah was better than anything she'd ever had before. This Sairra was leaving people she'd made a life with though. Would she just be going from one uneasy place to another? What would happen if her refuge from pain ended up as another source of it?

The fur at the back of her neck was standing on end, and she reached back to smooth it. Then, she slowly ran her palms down her arms. The fur there, too, had bristled. Haruna had left a vah, Marrika had left a vah, Sairra was leaving a vah, and both Haruna and Varrina seemed so sure they would lose people.

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She jammed her thumb against the lift's call button. She did so again and again when the doors didn't open quickly. When they did, she expected to see someone in it. She hoped someone would be. Maybe Kedarr, maybe Durnnok. They both had cabins on that deck. She could hold them until the fear subsided.

It was empty. If someone had been using it, they'd gotten off somewhere else. Qrreia resigned herself to stepping aboard and hitting the button for one deck lower. It was where her cabin was. She didn't feel eager to be there, and she didn't want to be alone, but she wasn't sure where else to go. Maybe someone would be in the lounge. Maybe Larrin would be in her room.

The lift doors opened again and she stepped out into the hallway. Qrreia looked to the left, but the bridge door was closed, so she turned right to walk down the hallway. Instead, she halted. Nevrra was standing in front of her own cabin. Despite it being day, she was wearing a night outfit of black and green, and she held her coilblade like a walking stick. The door to her cabin was open, and her hand pulled back from the button built into the doorframe.

Her eyes were on Qrreia. They lingered only briefly before she started to move into the room. However, Nevrra raised her free hand and caught herself on the doorframe. Qrreia could hear a faint rumbling growl, followed by a resigned sigh. The Errant Blade stepped back into the hallway. "Qrreia," she said in her flat voice.

"Yes?" she asked, hesitantly.

"Join me?" It was a question, but its impassive delivery made it not feel like one.

Qrreia didn't immediately respond, but she managed an "Okay," after a brief pause. Slowly, she started to walk down the hallway toward a person she'd once been sent to kill—and the person who'd given her the scar along her arm and shoulder.

Nevrra watched her. One ear twitched, then fully flicked. "Wait," she said, and Qrreia stopped. Nevrra reached into her cabin and

Nevrra

leaned the coilblade against something inside—likely the wardrobe built into the wall just next to the door. She gestured to the cabin directly across the hallway. Qrreia’s. “If it puts you at ease, we may speak in there.”

It didn’t. It did, however, suggest that Nevrra *wanted* her to be at ease. That, at least, meant she hadn’t done anything wrong. Probably. Even as Qrreia reassured herself, she immediately started second guessing that reassurance. Maybe she needed her dose already? She doubted it, even if she felt the rising tension in her limbs. Maybe some vasrril would calm her? Except Marrika didn’t like her taking too much extra, and she was sure she’d already upset Marrika enough.

Qrreia reached her cabin, opened the door, and waited for Nevrra to head inside. Nevrra, at first, did not. Instead, she appeared to wait for Qrreia to head in. She didn’t wait long and Qrreia followed her. She only closed the door behind her when Nevrra prompted her to.

Unlike the other cabins on the *Wandering Horizon*, Qrreia’s was sparse. The interior looked the same as everyone else’s, but there was almost nothing on the shelf-like table built into the walls. Her bed was unmade and a shirt was draped over the back of a chair. Nevrra stopped by the chair and looked down at it. “May I?” she asked.

“Oh, uh, yeah.” She made a small gesture to the chair and then took a seat on the edge of the bed. She sat near the foot of it, as close as she could to the door.

“Your skittishness makes me certain I’m right to speak with you,” Nevrra said while plucking the shirt up from the back of the chair. She didn’t toss it aside, but instead began to fold it.

“Sorry.” The apology came as a reaction, not a conscious thought, and Qrreia quietly scolded herself for it. She *was* acting skittish. That must have been why Nevrra wanted to talk with her. She hesitated too much. She was too fearful. She was too scared of everything. She was a bad fit for an Errant Blade vah, no matter what Marrika told

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her. Nevrra was here to tell her to go away, just like Qrreia knew would—

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for,” Nevrra said, interrupting the rapid spiral. The Errant Blade carefully set the folded shirt onto the table and then took a seat. She spun the chair until she faced Qrreia. “It is my fault, after all.”

The spiral ceased, but the only thing that replaced it was near-oblivion.

“You’re uncomfortable around me.” This time it was obvious Nevrra was not asking a question.

“I...” Qrreia started, but she shook her head. “No, of course not. We are vah.”

“I thought you were a better liar.”

Qrreia was a good enough liar, at least, to know doubling down on a failed lie was folly. She just stayed quiet instead.

“You have been with us for two years, and I have barely spoken a word to you.”

“Of course you have,” Qrreia replied. “You spoke up and supported me staying, you’ve given me plenty of advice, you’ve offered training, you explained the vah’s responsibilities, and—”

“That is not speaking to you,” Nevrra said with a rumble at the back of her throat. It wasn’t a growl, but it was near enough to one that Qrreia’s ears folded back and her head dipped downward.

The chair creaked as Nevrra leaned her weight back against it and a long, slow breath left her. Her head tilted backward and her eyes closed. For a moment, she stayed that way, and Qrreia said nothing to disturb her. “As you said, we are vah.” Nevrra broke her silence, but did not change her position. “I have not spoken with you *as vah*, only as an Errant Blade.”

“We are an Errant Blade vah.”

Nevrra

“Errant Blades are still kethirr.” Nevrra’s head rightened up again and she cracked an eye to look over at Qrreia. “If we are an Errant Blade vah, then we are vah.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true...”

Nevrra’s eye closed again and she sank into the seat. Qrreia wasn’t sure what she was seeing. To her, Nevrra was the hardened fighter she met in Nakril. She was the person who cut Qrreia down and was ready to end her without a moment’s hesitation. She was the person who only showed mercy when she had what she needed—and even then, only because Surrha pleaded for it.

With some guilt, Qrreia acknowledged that she barely even thought of Nevrra as part of the vah. She was more akin to a terrifying specter haunting the ship; a presence rarely seen, but often felt. Larrin, Durnnok, and the others had told her of the Nevrra they once knew, but in two years, Qrreia saw nothing to change that impression.

Suddenly, she understood a little of how they felt. The person across from her seemed so far from that grim specter. Slumped on the seat, she looked just as lost as Qrreia felt throughout her life. It was like seeing a zhirril, a “star flower,” bloom during high-sun. Or, perhaps, seeing one wilt during the night.

Then, slowly, the Errant Blade sat up straight in the chair. She crossed one leg over the other and her arms draped over the chair’s. Her eyes stayed close. “There are things in my life that I regret.” Nevrra’s voice was quiet, but gravel bit into the words. “They are not few, either. Most are small, but some are significant.”

“True for anyone, right?” Qrreia ventured. Her tail curled around her hip and draped down next to her leg, but she resisted pulling herself inward.

There was a soft rumble at the back of Nevrra’s throat, but Qrreia couldn’t decide what it meant. “Many I can rationalize, but for some

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of those, it is hard. I can justify destroying the facility in Nakril to myself, despite knowing why I really agreed to.”

“But the cost...”

“I tell myself again and again that it would have been greater had we done nothing.”

Qrreia’s ears lifted before splaying back again. Nevrra rarely spoke to her, but aside from their first meeting in Nakril, she always sounded the same. She was impassive. Her tone was always flat, but still had a sharp edge. Now, when Nevrra’s voice strained and cracked, Qrreia couldn’t help but notice it.

“The day we met was the worst of my life.” Nevrra finally forced her eyes open. They were locked onto Qrreia, and yet, the karinv didn’t feel as if Nevrra even saw her. “But not because of you.”

The tips of Nevrra’s claws extended and pushed at the arms of the chair before they slowly retracted. “Harriq had been one of my apprentices. I had never been prouder than when he became a full Errant Blade, along with Varrina and Grakul. I loved him as I loved them, and I was glad they wanted to be vah with us.

“Zarnik was my oldest friend,” Nevrra continued. “It was through him I met Durrnok, and the three of us were inseparable. Before I met him I was lost.”

“Lost...?” Qrreia asked.

“Yes.” Nevrra didn’t move. She sat upon the chair like a statue, but she continued to speak. “I was given little mind by the vah that raised me. They were often busy attending to their own matters. It wasn’t until I began training for the Vrrithsa’khav that I began to find myself.”

Qrreia’s mouth opened, but she hesitated to voice her question. She still wasn’t sure if Nevrra could really see her, but when the Errant Blade didn’t continue speaking, she carried forward with her question. “Vrrithsa’khav?”

Nevrra

“Our coming of age trial. Vir-Vrrithkarvah, growing cubs and adopted members both, train in martial skills. Then, they compete in the honored combat,” Nevrra answered. “They are spars only, and all are accommodated. There is no way to fail but to shy from it. It is an ancient rite, but most Vrrithkarvah take it seriously.”

Avoid getting into a fight with Vrrithkarvah if you can help it. Qrreia remembered that bit of advice from when she had been a cub. She understood a little more how, culturally, Errant Blades originated from the kar.

“It is because of Zarnik that Durnnok and I became Errant Blades,” Nevrra said. “I don’t think either of us would have considered it otherwise.”

“Is one of your regrets being one?”

“No.” Nevrra’s reply to that, at least, came easily. “I would have been lost; perhaps like Larrin was. I cherish those I have been with in this life, and I think of all the good I have have done for my fellow kethirr. I could not trade that without deeper regrets and deeper guilt.”

“Life doesn’t always give you good choices’,” Qrreia quoted.

A thoughtful rumble sounded in the back of Nevrra’s throat. “I knew you spent much time with Larrin. If I did not, I would now.”

“She is smart.”

“She is wise. After all, ‘hard lives breed wisdom’,” Nevrra said. Qrreia recognized that quote from Larrin, too. “But, I wonder, is wisdom worth it?”

“I...” Qrreia started. It was the sort of question that seemed rhetorical, and yet, beneath Nevrra’s impassive tone, there was something. “Only if you make it worth it, I guess.”

“How?”

Silence settled in again. The ship was powered down, so not even the rumble of engines could fill the space. Qrreia found herself

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looking at the shirt Nevrra had folded up and placed on the top of the desk. “Share it with others, so their lives need not be as hard.”

Nevrra’s ears lifted. Qrreia looked over to the Errant Blade in time to see the distance briefly leave her. Her pupils shrank in focus and she gazed at Qrreia. “Surrha...” Then, Nevrra leaned back into the seat. One hand raised and she rubbed at her eyes. “No. Larrin. She told you that, didn’t she?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” Qrreia’s head tilted and she shifted uncomfortably on the bed. “I don’t know. It kind of feels like just coping, and I don’t know if it’s true that makes it worth it.”

She noticed as one of Nevrra’s ears pivoted a little to the side, despite there being no sound to catch it’s attention. Nevrra said nothing.

Qrreia’s head rightened up. She found herself leaning forward, while pulling her legs up. She hugged around them and gripped at the light, cream fabric of her skirt. “I guess it doesn’t matter if it is true or not.”

“Why?” It was a question, but once again, Nevrra’s voice was flat and dead. However, her head was canted just a little, suggesting to Qrreia a real curiosity.

“Because it happened anyway. Can’t change it. I was born karinv, I was left to fend for myself, I did some bad stuff, and when I tried to fix it, I ended up...” Qrreia let out a long breath and her arms held tighter around her legs. “You know where I ended up, and you were only there to look for me...”

“To look for what happened to you and why,” Nevrra replied, but no less flat. “I wish we had learned sooner that a ship came back with one kethirr too few. We assumed you dead.”

“Yeah, well, either way. Three people died because I got curious and then got caught,” Qrreia said with a rare snarl. “I don’t blame you for hating me.”

Nevrra

Again, Nevrra's eyes focused. Her ears raised and she leaned toward Qrreia. "Hate you?" A deep, resonate rumble sounded from Nevrra's chest and she slowly shook her head. "Your 'curiosity' likely saved many lives, *and* you are vah."

"Did you want me to be vah?" Qrreia asked.

"No." Nevrra sighed. "I didn't. I just didn't protest it. But not because I hated you."

"Then why?"

"The same reason I did not want Sairra here before Larrin talked sense into me." Nevrra's ears rotated forward as she focused her full attention on Qrreia. "Surrha rightly demanded I spare your life. She wanted you to live. I did not want you to join because it would be dangerous—and because you had been through enough in your life. And I..." Nevrra's focus faltered. Her jaw worked, testing speaking, but seemingly finding herself unable to. She lowered her head and Qrreia felt her mournful growl as much as she heard it.

"And...?"

"I no longer had the capacity for love. It was burned out of me."

Then, the fear dissipated. Qrreia saw who actually sat across from her. "You are a good liar, too," she said in her whisper-quiet voice. "But it isn't good to lie to yourself."

Nevrra raised her head again. Her tail had coiled around one of the chair's legs, and while she was quiet, her question had no need to be spoken.

"Every day in Nakril, I thought about using this." Qrreia reached back and, in a smooth motion, retrieved her knife and extended its blade. "Just a quick jab to the neck, or long cuts down my arms. Just... bleed out and be done. What was life to me? Torment? It wasn't worth it.

"That's what I told myself, anyway." The blade vanished back into the hilt, which flattened until it fit neatly into the palm of her hand.

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“Never did it, though. Couldn’t. Told myself I wanted to die, and I could have made it happen; but here I am.”

“Here you are,” Nevrra echoed.

“Yeah.” Qrreia shrugged. Her hold on her legs loosened and she let them slide from the bed again. “If I wanted to die, I’d be dead. If you couldn’t love, you wouldn’t hurt.”

Nevrra’s jaw tensed. Her arms slid from the chair to rest over her knees. Her fingers laced together and her head bowed down. She was quiet.

Qrreia watched her for a long moment. “So, I guess doesn’t matter if being wise is worth it. Can’t change what happened; but if we’re wiser from the pain, then maybe that lets us help other people not get hurt in the first place. I don’t know if I’d say its *worth it*—no one should have to feel this way—but it’s better than just being hurt, right?”

A sharp breath left Nevrra’s nose with a bitter humor. However, it was followed by another deep rumble, one resonate from within her chest as she sat up again. “Sarriq will like you.”

Qrreia stared back blankly. “Huh?”

“When you meet him,” Nevrra replied, but Qrreia was left perplexed with no further explanation. Instead, after she lingered on Qrreia’s scar, Nevrra settled into the seat. At least a little bit, she allowed herself to relax. “Despite it all, I think you have a good heart. Surrha would be proud of you.

“So, let me finally tell you of the person who saved your life, and what she and the others gave to mine.”