



# ASTRAY

By Nevrra

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## Chapter 5

# Thirr

The sound of metal against the tiled, sandstone floor echoed down the hallway. A gentle breeze filtered in through the small, paneless windows in the ancient building's adobe walls. It occasionally caused the flames of the lanterns hanging on the opposite wall to flicker, and Nevrra's shadow to rapidly warp and stretch as she stalked the shrine. Every time she was there, or in any of the other ancient buildings that dotted Thirrik, she felt as if she'd stepped back in time—and as if she were under the watchful gaze of Thirr who once lived in those times, and who yet lingered.

The tapping was the only sound. The pads of her feet were near silent as she moved, and no other kethirr were in sight. But behind each arched door she passed, there may well have been kethirr in silent meditation or in the midst of deeply personal ritual. It had been a long time since she was last there. It brought her some ease—something she was in dire need of—but each step still felt like effort, and her stomach roiled in protest.

At least the pain in her shoulder had mostly faded. It hadn't taken long to get there, but she did need take a second tram after entering the Vrrithkarik. It was the largest ward of Thadkrri, and the small shrine was located on its outskirts, where it stood before the vast expanse of the Thadkrri'ik. Open, packed sand surrounded it for a dozen meters on each side, which in turn was surrounded by walls

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with open arches that greeted any who wished for the peace offered there. Nevrra wished she'd felt a little more of that offered peace.

Before her was a large, arched, red-hued sandstone door. Her hand raised and the pads of her fingers pressed against it. The stonework was immaculate, even though the door itself was ancient. It had been well-maintained, and she could have glided her fingers over the surface with little friction. There were no designs etched upon it, and no gems or jewels embedded into its surface. It was plain, but perfectly so, and it was welcomingly cool to the touch.

She hesitated. Why meet here of all places? She tried to push the door open, but her body fought her. Her arm refused to move, no matter how hard she focused on it. Her green eyes locked onto the back of her hand as it pressed against the stone. She concentrated, but she couldn't will it to move. Nevrra closed her eyes and gave herself a long moment. When they opened again, her vision had widened. She hadn't even noticed the dark that had crept into its edges.

Her hand withdrew from the door and she let out a long breath through her nose. Then, Nevrra's palm pressed against the door again and she pushed. Slowly, it cracked open and she was greeted with the heavy scent of incense and wood fire. Scent-sparked memory caused something to well up in her throat and her vision to haze, before she blinked it away and clear again.

"Nevrra?" The voice came from inside. It was deep, but not greatly. It was calm, but uncertain. It was gentle, but rumbled like fine gravel, just like it always had.

She pushed the door open and stepped inside to join her former mentor. When she met him, he had been Sarriq Sa-Vrrithkar, a renown Errant Blade with connections across Thirrik. Now he was Sarriq Zur-Vrrithkar, an elder and guide for all Vrrithkarvah. It wasn't a unique title, but it was rare and desperately hard to gain. Even with her status as an Errant Blade and the honor of being Sa-

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Vrrithkar, Nevrra's connection to Sarriq was her single greatest social asset. But she could hardly think of him in that way.

Though he was nearing a century and a half old, he didn't look it. Vasrril gave kethirr extended lives, even before modern medicine was factored in, and he still had long ahead of him. His mane was thick, well cared for, and adorned with beads woven into it. Even in the dim firelight, his fur was rich and golden. His frame was narrower than Nevrra last recalled, but it was obvious that, even if he no longer lived as an Errant Blade, he had not hung up his coilblade. She couldn't imagine a reality in which he did. The only sign of his age was his black nose.

His clothes were colored for day, but layered enough for night. The robe he wore was a silken cream. It paired well with the black, gold, and burgundy pattern on the thick fabric that hung over his shoulders and down his front and back—not dissimilar in style to Nevrra's outfit. Like her, a sash wrapped around his waist to hold everything securely together.

It was a small room, but even if it wasn't, his presence would have filled it. Kethirr had no kings, yet most would have thought him regal. But Nevrra just saw the wisest and kindest kethirr she had ever known; her greatest teacher, even if a hard one at times; the core of a vah who did more for her than the one that raised her; and the reason, even more than Zarnik, that she was an Errant Blade.

He regarded her with eyes like amber in firelight. Then, with a small gesture, Sarriq beckoned her in and indicated next to him. "It has been too long. Come, come."

Nevrra gave a polite incline of her head. Before she approached, she closed the door and rested her coilblade next to it, and next to Sarriq's.

The chamber was only two and a half meters wide and not quite as deep, but it was sparse enough in its contents that they both fit comfortably inside. The walls were completely unadorned. There was

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no splash of color, just bare adobe, but the corners were rounded in contrast to much of the local aesthetic. Sarriq sat on a burgundy floor pillow, a few shades darker than the burgundy in his outfit. Another, that he was offering her, was next to him. Both were before a low alter opposite the door.

The alter stood no higher than twenty centimeters and was made of dark sandstone, much like the tiled floor. It was nearly as wide as the width of the room, but it curved so that both ends connected to the back wall. It had a flat-topped lip around the outer edge, atop which were small, narrow, flat rocks. A few small tools, like a jeweler's delicate chisels, hammers and tongs, rested near them. A small pile of rock dust was gathered near the tools with fine brush next to it.

The lip ran along the edge of a narrow basin built into the alter. Water didn't fill it, but fire did. Wood kindling, scented with indirect-burning incense, layered the bottom. Live flame provided the only illumination and smoke rose from the basin. It drifted out of the square opening in the chamber's ceiling, through which a few pinpricks of stars could be seen.

The opening served more purpose than allowing smoke out. It also allowed the light of Zha in during the day. At the back of the alter was another basin. It was filled with rich soil from which a vine grew. It coiled around a thick wooden log that stretched to the ceiling. Tendrils gripped at the back wall and small, dark green leaves sprouted from them. Life. Hardy life. In the heart of the Thadkrri'ik, plants struggled—but some, like that desert vine, eked out an existence despite the harsh, barren environment. Its roots ran deep, well below the shrine, where they searched for the scant traces of water the desert hid.

Though Sarriq was regarding her, Nevrra stared toward the alter and hoped her peripheral vision returned again. When she sat next to

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him, she felt his hand between her shoulders. He gently kneaded at her through the fabric of her outfit.

"I thought I was going to have to bribe you to get you here," Sarriq said. There was a rumble of amusement in the back of his throat, but Nevrra's ear flicked. She knew him too well. She didn't miss the tension in his voice; the concern.

"Bribe me?"

"With information. You never fail to respond when I hear about something Errant Blades can help with." His hand stopped kneading and slipped from Nevrra. Instead, Sarriq began to collect the flat stones. "But only to those messages lately, and you never come by anymore."

Nevrra's ears splayed back. She had no response. Much like she had neglected Sairra, she had neglected Sarriq. She had neglected everyone. "Why are we meeting here?" she asked while she watched Sarriq place the flat stones in a line along the altar's lip.

Her former mentor shrugged, but continued to lay the stones down. He treated each delicately, carefully placing them one after the other. "We used to come here often," he responded. "So why not now?"

"We could have met in your vahik."

"Mm, we could have," he said. He placed the last stone and then sat upright. "Everyone would have been glad to see you, and maybe it is cruel of me to deny them—though Mrri'ai is off in the Krrizithkarik tonight to spend time with her karvah friends."

"So, then why are we meeting here?"

Sarriq regarded her once more. She dared to look back at him but was greeted only with the warmth in his eyes. It helped Nevrra settle a little, as did the aroma of the incense that filled the room. It also caused the guilt-ridden pain in her chest to return.

"Choose the stone."

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“What—” Nevrra started, but she cut herself off. She let out a long breath through her nose and shook her head. She reached down to pluck up the stone closest to her.

Nevrra started to reach for the tools, but Sarriq tugged the stone from her grasp. “I said choose *the* stone, not *a* stone,” he said, but not ungently. He set the flat stone back where Nevrra had taken it. “You know how this works. Pick the right one; a willing one. Don’t just needlessly mar one at random.”

Her jaw tensed, but the muscles loosened almost as quickly. As before, Nevrra reached down, but this time she held her hand above the line of stones. Her fingers were outstretched and her palm faced flat down. She studied each, looking for whichever spoke to her. She tried to feel each, but without touching them. After a long sigh she lowered her hand to her lap. “Do you even believe any of this?”

Sarriq’s ears perked and a thoughtful rumble sounded from his throat. “In the ritual or in the Thirr?”

“Either,” Nevrra said. “Both.”

“I don’t see why that should matter.”

Nevrra half pivoted where she sat to better face Sarriq. Her head tilted to the side and she stared at him. “How could that *not* matter?”

Sarriq didn’t even so much as flick an ear. “How would what I believe matter to what you believe?” Nevrra started to respond, but he preempted her. “You’re asking about yourself, not me. Don’t pretend otherwise.”

A rumble of her own left Nevrra, mixing acknowledgement and irritation both. Her ears flattened and she looked back toward the fire.

“You used to,” Sarriq said, as if he were musing. “But, even for you, I don’t see why it matters if it is real or not.”

“Why not?”

Sarriq dipped his head to the side. “If Thirr is real, but the ritual is not, does it not still fulfill its purpose?” Nevrra didn’t mistake the question as anything but rhetorical. “The whole point is to commune

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with Thirr, but Thirr is all things. We are ‘kethirr’ for a reason, no? You need the stone’s permission, because it is also Thirr. The plant is Thirr, the shrine is Thirr...”

Her eyes were on the crackling fire, but she could feel Sarriq’s attention focused on her. “Our ancestors are Thirr, too,” he continued, then added more pointedly, “so are those we loved who are now gone. They are all Thirr, and there is no need to summon them. They are either already here—the stone, the plant, the shrine—or they are already watching you; already connected to you. Since we, too, are Thirr, we are always in communion with them.”

Sarriq held his hand over the stones, much like Nevrra had. He, too, focused on them; studied them. “But if the ritual has no true power, if it does not summon them, does it have no point?” He reached down and placed his palm over one of the stones and closed his eyes. “No. It lets them know we are being intentional. We are being serious. We want them to pay just a little more attention to what we have to tell them. That is the point of ritual.”

Nevrra lowered her head. Her fingers curled. For the moment, she won the fight to keep her claws from extending despite the pain rising within her.

“Now, if there is no *Thirr...*” Sarriq dipped his head to the other side. He took the stone he palmed and picked it up from the alter. He raised it and bumped his forehead against it. “Even then, there is a point.”

“And what point is that?” Nevrra’s voice was flat, as it so often was.

“It is for ourselves,” Sarriq answered, “so that *we* may know we are being intentional. So that we remind ourselves to keep them in our memory and in our hearts. They do stay with us, Nevrra, even if not as Thirr.”

Nevrra’s fingers curled tighter. Even without the metal of the coilblade to grasp onto, the tension in her hands made them ache.



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The tips of her claws began to bite into her palms. Her ears splayed back and she stared ahead, once more into flame. She could no longer see Sarriq. He was lost to the abyssal black at the corners of her vision.

But she felt his hand at her back again. Once more, it kneaded her with a gentle touch. Then, it moved to her far shoulder and he pulled her into a long embrace. Nevrra gave into it and, not for the first time, pressed her head into his shoulder and closed her eyes to the world. She fought to keep any semblance of control over herself, even though deep down she knew she shouldn't.

"That is why we are here," Sarriq said softly. "Here, in the last place we saw each other; where we said our farewells to Zarnik, where you sent your messages to Harriq and Surrha, and where we last spoke as just people who cared for each other. I am not ignorant of why you stopped responding."

Nevrra held around him and his arms held tighter around her. She felt his mane against her head and his cheek rubbing between her ears. He let out a soothing rumble from deep within his chest and Nevrra allowed herself the stillness of the moment.

"It has been a long time since you apprenticed with my vah, and with me most especially. It has even been a long time since we were vah." The rumble persisted into Sarriq's words. "But know I am always here for you. I always will be."

They remained that way for a short time, but Sarriq helped Nevrra sit back. He placed his palm against her cheek and ran his thumb in small, comforting circles against her fur. Then, with a gesture of his head, he said, "Why don't you pick the stone."

Nevrra nodded and his hand left her. She reached over and held her palm over the stones, and a long, slow breath left her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to experience the moment—something that had been such struggle for Nevrra for so long. However, the ritual did give her a sense of familiarity, and that made it easier.

## *Nevrra*

Sarriq was not the one who had taught it to her. She'd learned it as a cub, Nevrra Vir-Vrrithkar, while she was taught the traditions of the Vrrithkarvah.

She knew her arm was moving, but there was barely a sense of control over it. She felt it lower. Against her palm was a chill; a cold stone, despite the warmth of the fire nearby. Her hand raised again—a cold stone was not right for what, in her heart, she needed. That had been a stone, not *the* stone.

On her second attempt, she closed her fingers around another. It was warm, and she could feel it warming yet more in her grasp. Nevrra felt Sarriq's hand over hers, and he gave her a reassuring squeeze. "That is the one?" he asked and she nodded.

"I brought in two sets of tools," Sarriq said. Even before she opened her eyes again, she could hear the soft chime of metal against metal as he picked up one set. The other was left for her. With his free hand, Sarriq picked up a few small twigs that were nearly hidden between the edge of the alter and the wall. He cast them into the fire and kept the flames fed.

Nevrra set her stone on the lip of the alter. She took the tools, both plain, bare metal, and regarded them. "It has been a while since I've done this."

"Almost two years, I'd guess," Sarriq mused. "You will be fine. Besides, it needn't be pretty. It is like art—the most important parts are the meaning behind it and the effort put into it."

It was delicate work, and it took time to do. The stones were not large, but Thirrqrar's written language, Thirrsca'ar, was logossyllabic. A single character carried an entire meaning of its own. With only a handful, she could convey her idea well enough. Yet, that limited space was part of the point. It forced her to keep the message short, and it forced her to consider what was important, because it was all she could convey.

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She spent time on those characters. She had to take care and could not rush it. If she did, she risked ruining the message—and marring the stone that had offered its surface to her. Nevrra needed to linger on each word and hold them long in her mind. It was meditative, and her message became like a mantra. Her heart was pained as she chiseled the stone, but the effort kept her focused. She felt the pain, but she was not lost to it.

When she was done, Nevrra took the brush from the alter and swept the rock dust into a small pile. Given the pile that had already been there, she wondered who Sarriq had communed with earlier. Even though he had, he was once again communing. While she had worked, so had he. When she was done with the brush, she handed it to him.

Both kethirr lowered their heads and closed their eyes. They touched the stones to their foreheads. Under her breath, Nevrra repeated the message she had written. She then repeated it thrice. She lowered the stone and opened her eyes. In a motion together, both former mentor and former apprentice cast their stones into the fire.

Then, together, they sat in silence. Nevrra watched the flames lick over the stone. It wouldn't burn, it wouldn't melt, but it did heat. She stared through hazy eyes at the message she sent, and she wondered if it was heard. Somewhere, in the depths of her mind, she felt it had been.

After a time, as the flames began to die down, she noticed Sarriq's hand at her shoulder. "Thank you," he said. Nevrra nodded, but she couldn't speak.

He kept contact with her, but let Nevrra have a few moments longer for herself. But it was only a few. "It has been too long, like I said. I worried, but you were still there with your vah, and I had hoped..."

"Hoped?" Nevrra managed to ask after Sarriq trailed off.

## *Nevrra*

He sighed softly. “I had hoped all would be well, that your vah would soothe you, and you were only silent because you hated me for helping you become an Errant Blade.”

Nevrra’s ears splayed back again. “I could not hate you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he replied. “I told you of the weight an Errant Blade must carry. This is the weight I spoke of, and I did not speak in ignorance. I would not have blamed you for hating me. I was an Errant Blade for a century—it is a pain I have felt too often.”

Nevrra found herself looking at the first pile of dust again. “Even once is too often...”

“It is.” Sarriq moved his hand to her opposite shoulder, but he did not pull her close again. “We are a people of close bonds. We are at once a part of our kar, a part of our vah. Yet, our kar and, most especially, our vah *are* us. They are *more* us than us alone. To lose any of our vah is a pain deeper than any physical wound we may suffer. Many kethirr, Errant Blades included, are crushed by the weight of such pain.”

“I am,” Nevrra said in a whisper. The gravel in her voice nearly consumed the words.

“I know,” Sarriq replied. He rumbled again from deep in his chest. “It is difficult to carry, and even more difficult to move forward with it upon us. I did my best to prepare you for it, but nothing can truly prepare us—and not when that pain is struck thrice at once.”

“I don’t know what to do, Sarriq.”

Sarriq’s ears folded back and he leaned toward Nevrra to rub his cheek against hers. Then, he sat back. “And that is why you wanted to speak?”

“I cast out everyone from my life,” Nevrra said. There was iron in her voice—firm, but not steel. It was too brittle to be steel. “Not just you. Everyone. Even my vah.”

“Yes,” he said, but he paused before continuing. “I’ve spoken with Durrnok over the last few years, and he keeps in close touch with

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Rihgrul. He said you were distant; that you locked yourself away and that you had become cold.”

“I am a wound to them.”

“A wound?”

Nevrra watched the dying embers of the fire. The chamber had grown dark, but the dark, too, was part of the point. Though kethirr eyes could see well enough at night, color was stripped away and the world still dimmed. Her sense of smell was keen as ever, but the incense flooded it into uselessness. She could only hear, she could only feel, and she could think—limitations, Vrrithkarvah believed, that bettered the sense of one’s connection to Thirr.

“I hurt them,” she answered.

“How?”

“My pain is too great, so I have withdrawn. I deny them my love. I deny them my support. I remind them of what we have lost, and I make myself a burden for them.”

Sarriq was silent for a long moment before he replied. “Is that what they told you, or what you have told yourself?”

Nevrra did not answer.

“Mm, then that is where I failed you.”

“Where you...?”

With a heavy sigh, Sarriq squeezed around her with his arm. “I told you that an Errant Blade must carry such weight,” he said. “I wanted you to be prepared for that. I wanted you to *know* that. To train someone as an Errant Blade—as you well know from having done it yourself—is not an act of kindness. It is not like teaching them to cook or craft. It must not be done lightly, because it is nearly an act of cruelty. It is why we were so selective, as I asked you to be, and why not all make it. But I did not stress enough *how* you carry that burden.”

“How, then?” Nevrra asked.

## *Nevrra*

“The same way you carry any burden,” Sarriq replied. “With your vah.”

“But I...” Nevrra started. Her head shook and she sat up a little straighter. “Sarriq, I couldn’t...”

He pulled her back to him. “Have you left them?”

“No,” Nevrra answered, “but I am drifting away from them. I can feel it. *They* can feel it.”

“But they have not pushed you out?”

“No, but—”

“Then they still love you. If they didn’t, they would have. If you did not love them, you would have left, yourself.” Sarriq leaned forward and picked up one of the two sets of tongs. He reached them into the smoldering ash and picked up one of the hot stones. “*Someone* would have forced the issue. No one has, so it is not too late.”

“But I *did* push them away.” Nevrra’s stomach roiled again and the pain in her chest went clear through her back. She could feel it alighting her spine. Her tail curled behind her, then became stiff as the stone.

“We cannot control how we react to pain, loss, and trauma.” There was a gentle tap as Sarriq placed each stone on the lip of the alter. One, two, and then a third Nevrra hadn’t seen, besides its dust. “We can only hope to find our way through it, and hope those we love can help us. It has taken you time to get here, but you are now. That is all that matters.”

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“I think you do,” Sarriq said. Nevrra could just make out his hand hovering over one of the stones to test its heat. “What did you ask them, Nevrra? You summoned the three of them, did you not?”

The chamber fell into silence. The fire and the trapped heat of high-sun had kept the room warm earlier, but with the fire gone and the sun long set, cool air drifted in from above. Nevrra felt the faint

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breeze against her fur, but she could hear nothing else in the sudden stillness of the chamber. She could only think, and she could only feel. Sarriq's arm had left her, but something else lingered. Perhaps it was simply the weight of the fabric she wore. Perhaps it was the residual memory of Sarriq's hand on her. Perhaps she simply imaged it. Perhaps...

"I asked them to forgive me."

"For what?"

"For not being there for the others, who they, too, loved."

"And have they answered?"

Nevrra closed her eyes, and shut out the faint remaining light. Her head dipped forward and her hands folded in her lap. The pain lingered, and so did the tension. But within herself, she felt a warmth that she had not noticed before. It may just have been because the room was cooling and that made it more evident. It may have been nothing at all. But Nevrra replied, "Yes."

That deep rumble sounded from Sarriq again. "So, you know what to do?"

"Yes."

Once again, she felt his touch. This time, it was at her upper arm closest to him. "You needn't do it all at once. But I think, now, you are ready. You may take your time, but let them know you will need it—and that you need them, as they need you."

It was likely only minutes before Nevrra could get herself to reply, but it felt like hours. "Thank you."

Sarriq rumbled again. Nevrra felt his hand at her shoulder as he pushed himself up. "Come, let us be on our way," he said. "There is time enough before low-sun. We can head over to the Krrizithkar, find Mrrī'ai, and you can join us at our vahik. It will do you some good, I think."

## *Nevrra*

Even in the dark, Nevrra could find Sarriq's hand. He helped her to her feet and rested the stone in her palm; and a lingering curiosity finally came to the surface. "You communed twice," she noted.

"Mm, yes." Sarriq clinked his two stones lightly together. "The first, before you came in, was with Cvarri Sa-Vrrithkar, *my* mentor. I asked her for the strength to be half the kethirr she was, for I knew I would need that strength tonight."

"Ah..." Nevrra breathed out. Then, she started to turn to the chamber's exist, relying more on memory than sight. "The second?"

"That was with someone I lost who, like Zarnik to you, had been vah." Sarriq said. "Iqarrl."

His answer brought Nevrra to a pause. "Iqarrl Sa-Asvarrkarak?" she asked, not that there was any point in clarifying. Of course that's who he meant.

Again, Sarriq rumbled, but this time with amusement. "Fhrri told me. Like I said, I thought I was going to have to bribe you to get you here." After they claimed their coilblades, Sarriq placed a hand on Nevrra's back and walked with her out the door. "I told him I thought his daughter would have a good home. I think you proved to him that Sairra would."