



# under a new star

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Except for the aliens.

UNDER A NEW STAR

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First Printing: May, 2011.

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: May, 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# **UNDER A NEW STAR**



by Phoebe North

For Jeff, who was right about the whole "writer" thing.

MY NAME IS VADIX, and I was a man this moon. In six more, when I complete my schooling, I will be wed. But it's been hard for me to focus on my studies lately.

It's my foster siblings' fault. While I pore over scrolls in foreign tongues, they lie together as adults. Their lust makes their skin go dusky. By the time they surface in our sunroom, giggling, they've already turned the color of the sunset over the dome.

But I'm still as blue as ever. And alone.

Velsa reminds me that we made these sacrifices for a reason. Every night, as the moons make their progress through the sky, shrinking, swelling, shrinking again, I hear her voice in my mind:

*I will be a diplomat and you, a linguist.*

*Yes, yes, I tell her. I know that. But we have lost so much time together already.*

*We'll have our whole lives together, Vadix.*

It's summer, and so I don't sleep yet, not really. But I still try to nap, hoping to escape the moans that fill my dormitory. Half a world away, Velsa's wishing for the same thing. She comes to me as soon as I squeeze my eyes shut.

The air is fragrant with the scent of her. She's all lanky limbs; blue-purple skin; a sweet, toothless smile. Her clothing sticks to her curves, which have changed these past moons, swelling. Her black eyes now hold a fire behind them. We walk through the dome clutching hands. I recite guardian poetry in southern tongues. She doesn't understand. She laughs at me for wasting her night. She cups her hand under my chin, fixes her hungry mouth on mine.

I awake aching with desire. No matter how many nights I coax dreams of her into existence, it's never, ever enough.



THE XOLLU LIVE on the northern continent. This is how it's been for as long as history has ribboned back. Foster father reminds me of this.

"We have many cities. What need do we have for southern homes?"

"The domes are crowded. We've outgrown them."

Foster father gives a snort. I watch him drain down his cup of sweetwater. Even he is red-skinned, fertile.

"The northern guardians might be civilized enough to watch over us in winter while we sleep, but the guardians in the south? Little more than beasts."

"They're not," I protest, lifting up a scroll. It's covered in dense text, glyphs whose secrets I've spent a decade learning. "We can talk to them if we try. They say in school—"

He curls his lip. It's glossy, painted gold from the sweetwater. "You and your mate dream big, I'll grant you that. But your dreams are still the dreams of children."

He pushes up from the counter, pausing only a moment to drop his hand down against my shoulder.

"When you finish your studies, and return to your city to begin your life with her," he says, "you'll understand."

Foster father starts down the hall. He's left his cup of sweetwater on the counter. I pick it up, staring down at the gold that's scattered across the clay bottom. I wonder if it will cool my tempers.

"Don't drink that," foster father calls to me. "You're too young."

"I was a man a moon ago!" I shout back. But he doesn't answer, and when I look, he's already gone.



*ALL THIS TIME spent studying, kissing my teacher's feet, clawing my way to the top of my class. And he tells me my ambitions are worthless, I say, my anger flashing bright inside me as I wander the streets that night.*

Overhead, the triplet moons scatter their light through the dome glass. The streets are dappled, quiet—the guardians all snooze fitfully in their underground homes, unpaired, solitary, probably dreaming of meat. At this hour, only few Xollu stroll by, holding hands. They go quiet at the sight of me, and I can nearly read their thoughts ("Alone? Why? Where is his mate?"). I blush bright at the sight of them, my temper a summer storm inside of me, but I'm not sure why. After all, this is how it's always been.

*Not your ambitions, Vadix. Ours, Velsa says, gently reproachful. We're in this together, you know. I let a grumble go through my mind at that.*

*We made our plans so young. I wonder sometimes . . . And then I hesitate. My thoughts ache within my mind. But I can't hide them from Velsa.*

*You're not the first Xollu to leave home to complete his studies, she says.*

My answer comes before I truly consider it.

*No. But sometimes it feels like I'm the only one to ever leave home without my mate.*

Velsa doesn't answer. I know that somewhere in Axinite City—the city where we both were sprouted—she's doing her best to ignore the hole she feels in her body. A hole that's shaped like me. We're both like that. Empty. But, by some sort of silent agreement, we've never spoken of it before. We were afraid that naming it would make it real. And after all, we chose our fates. No one forced us into this.

*Vadix, I need to get back to my studies, she says at last.*

*Yes, I say. Of course. Of course. I love you, Velsa. Has the fourth moon risen yet in your dome?*

*No, is all she manages to say before she adds a terse, good night.*



BUT EVEN IN ANGER, she comes to me. I see how her skin pulses at the thought of me. I see how she lifts her hands to mine. Her fingers hold no malice; they are infinitely patient.

She can't resist these thoughts any more than I can.

If we lived in the same dome, our bodies would already know these pleasures. But we were children when I made the decision to leave. Though, like all children, we'd gone around with our fingers laced, we had no knowledge of the electricity that buzzed beneath our skins. Now we know, but it's too late. A thousand miles lie between us. All we can do is dream and dream.

I wake from my nap with the blankets knotted around my legs. My body glows bright, but blue, revealing my unfulfilled lust. I'd be embarrassed but to my left and to my

right, behind their sleeping curtains, my siblings are all moaning, writhing shadows. They embarrass themselves more than I ever could, though they don't even care.

And I know that if I were in their place, I wouldn't either.

I rise, leaving our restless dormitory behind me. I fetch myself a cup of sweetwater, and sit at the sunroom window. As I drink, I count the stars. The gold-speckled liquid dulls my senses, sure.

But not so much that I don't notice the extra star, burning steady against the horizon.



THREE MOONS REMAIN until I complete my studies, and the new star above shines on.

It has become a matter of debate. My brothers and sisters all laze around the sunroom, draped over one another, spouting their theories.

"It's a god. Come to watch over us."

"Don't be stupid. If it's a god, where's the goddess? We need to look to science for the answer. Perhaps it's an asteroid, bound for the surface."

"I think it's just a lost satellite. I don't know why the mayors haven't made an announcement yet . . ."

I should think before I speak, but my answer comes from over the top of my scroll before I can reconsider. "I don't know why you're all so excited about some dot in the sky," I say. "It's not as if half of our own planet isn't shrouded in mystery."

There's a hiccup of silence, and then laughter.

"You're so wrapped up in your little obsessions, Vadix," one of my foster brothers sneers at me. And then his mate chimes in.

"Yeah. I think your sense of humor must have withered and died." She pauses, listening as my brother whispers into her ear. Then she gives a nod. "That's what comes from living like a *lousk*."

A *lousk*. A widow. They never last long—rushing off to the funerary fields so they can scatter their seeds over their partners' bodies. A *lousk* isn't a person so much as a shadow, a living ghost.

I'm up from my seat before her syllable can die.

"Is that what you think of me?!" I cry, gripping her hands in mine. Her eyes are huge pools of black, fear shining in them. She wrenches her reddened fingers away from me. I snatch for them again, but before I can, my arms are pinned back. The others have dashed from their own seats to restrain me.

"I'm not a *lousk*!" I scream. "Velsa waits for me in Axinite City!"

Her mouth becomes a little o. "I was only joking, Vadix," she says, as her mate puts his hand on her arm to reassure her. Meanwhile, my brothers and sisters hold me tight. Snickering.

"It's not funny!" I give one final shout, twisting from their grasp. When I do, my body crumples against the floor. I feel a note of concern reaching for me from across a great distance. Velsa. But I lock her out.

"Vadix?"

I look up. Foster mother and foster father stand in the doorway watching. They hold one another.

The only person I hold is myself.



"WE KNEW you would have trouble when you came to us."

Foster mother perches on the edge of my bed. She's worried—I can see that in how she passes her hands over my covers, smoothing the wrinkles down over and over again. Part of me wants to comfort her, to embrace her like a child.

Another part of me—the part that blazes purple within—wants none of that. That part of me is disgusted at the thought.

"It's such a difficult life you and Velsa have chosen," she says. "Oh, don't get me wrong. We've always supported your goals. But few Xollu have ever made such a sacrifice."

"We want to make a difference in the world."

"I understand," she says, "this is why Father and I chose the path we did, raising you children. But . . ." Hesitation wells in her eyes. ". . . we did not have to train apart for that."

"I suppose you think your love is greater, then?" I spit my words. She grimaces, but doesn't argue. Every Xollu thinks her love the greatest.

"You don't understand," I tell her. "When we were children in Axinite City, we saw how the streets were crowded with guardians. There was no space for us. There were four dozen pairs in our foster home. Even the gardens were choked with people. I promised her I would find her someplace big and empty and quiet. Someplace that would belong to us alone. I promised her that."

The voice is firm and tearful in my mind. *I remember.*

Foster mother gives my foot a squeeze through the blankets. She's just parted her lips to respond when foster father appears at the dormitory door. He holds a cup of sweetwater in his fist.

"Here," he says, handing it to me. I sit up and take it from him, but I can't help but scowl as I swallow the first mouthful down.

"I thought I was too young," I say. His eyes flint as he lifts his hand, setting it on foster mother's shoulders. She leans into the touch.

"You attacked your sister," he says. "Mother and I have made a decision."

I sit forward, cradling the cup of sweetwater in my hands. Watching him. He's slow to go on. "What?" I say.

Foster father squeezes his eyes down to slits. "Mother and I have decided that it's time for you to return to Axinite City."

*No!*

"No!"

"You've been apart from Velsa for too long. It's time for you to begin your lives together."

*But your studies!*

"But my studies! They're nearly done!"

Foster mother reaches out a hand for my cheek. "Vadix, it's not safe. It's time for you to mate, to be a man. You attacked—"

"No!" I twist my face away. Then I thrust the cup into her hands, scrambling to untangle myself from my blankets.

"Vadix . . ." There's a warning in foster father's voice, but he doesn't stop me. Neither of them do. I stalk toward the window, glaring out of it. It's day. The sun is pale and bright. Two layers of glass—the window, the dome—sit between me and the sky. But I can still see that infernal star, gleaming up there.

"We can't have you intermingling with your siblings anymore," foster mother says. She's drawing toward me. Like a guardian stalking prey, I can sense her approach from behind. "It's not safe. Not until you've mated."

I spin on my heels, turning to face her before she can reach me. She shrinks back, afraid, and no wonder—my hands are balled into angry fists. It seems the sweetwater's done little to temper my emotions.

"You worry about me walking among my siblings?" I snarl. "Well, then, I'll go into isolation. Find me a guardian domicile on the outskirts of our city. And lock me in it, and leave me be."

Foster mother brings her hand to her mouth. Behind her, foster father does the same, a perfect shadow of her.

"But Vadix . . ." she says, before her words putter off.

"I am a man," I say, "And in three moons, my studies will be done. You won't grant me this?"

It's foster father who answers. He drops his hand to his side, revealing a pair of lips flattened into a thin, grim line.

"Yes," he says. He speaks as if he's been thinking about this for a long time, though I'm sure the notion has only just occurred to him. "You are a man. We'll grant you this."



THREE DAYS LATER, foster father secures lodging for me just outside the Copper City dome. The guardian domicile was once a moisture farm, but the fog fences have all worn down, their metal mesh turned to rust. There's only a small sunroom near the entrance, barely big enough to hold my body. In the center, a ladder sinks down into the earth, leading to a series of dank rooms with floors either made from dirt, or so rarely swept that they might as well be.

"I don't know how the guardians abide by such conditions," foster mother says, crossing her arms tightly over her as if to shield herself from the vermin that probably lurks in the dark corners.

I regard her sidelong, realizing for the first time how our relationship has changed in these last few days. She doesn't like my plan. She still thinks I should return to Axinite City.

*She's an idiot*, Velsa says. I smile to myself at that, folding the covers of my narrow bed down.

My teacher comes by with boxes of scrolls for me, her own mate in tow. They've worked together at the collegium for years, linguists and teachers both. He taught me when I was very young, though my abilities soon surpassed his. Before they leave, he gives me a mold-dotted scroll with intricate, carved handles.

"It's supposed to be a book of laws belonging to the southern guardians, but I've never been able to make any sense of it," he says, pressing it into my hands. I feel a small, irrational flame of anger at his touch. It seems I'm changing in ways I hadn't even anticipated, though I do my best to force a gracious smile.

As they climb the ladder, foster father appears at the bedroom door.

"The water tank has enough left in it to sustain you for three moons," he says. "But you'll likely have to spend a good deal of your daylight hours in the sunroom. Don't forget."

I give a nod, not sure whether I should embrace them, or thank them. Foster father nods, too. He's holding an iron key in his hand.

"If anything should go wrong," he says. He passes it to me, "we won't be able to reach you."

"Nothing will go wrong," I say, clutching it tightly. "And if it does, I'll let myself out." I shrug. There's a long, stuttered breath of silence.

“We should be off,” foster mother says. Foster father inclines his head to me.

“Yes. Good luck in your studies. We’ll see you in three moons.”

And then they’re gone, up the precarious ladder, and I’m left in my little hole alone.



I BURY THE KEY in the dark earth beneath my bed. I can't be tempted with the distractions of the outside world, I tell myself, and Velsa agrees.

*There's too much to learn*, she says, as I heap soil over soil and then pat it smooth.

During the first moon everything goes fine. I organize the rickety old bookshelves, lay out my scrolls and papers on the insect-chewed tabletop, and set myself to work. Most of my evenings are spent puzzling over the scroll that my teacher’s mate gave to me. The text is small and garbled, and, outside a few frustratingly familiar characters, they don't resemble any guardian glyphs that I’ve ever seen.

During the day, while the sunlight still rages, I climb the ladder and wedge myself beneath the dome glass with my reading. Here, far from the city, the sky is red as lust. I can see the distant dome shining beneath it, all purple from the trees inside. On the outskirts, everything is dusty gray and brown. I see small animals scurry by, but never any people.

Perhaps I would be lonely, but my routine fills my days. I nap in the evenings, draw myself water, drink deep, scribble notes, and read and read and read. Besides, all I have to do is reach out, and Velsa's here. In the daytime, she only touches my mind briefly back, the smallest greeting. But at night? Our minds tumble together no matter how great the distance that lies between us. After, she whispers to me, telling me of the things I’ve missed: the latest gossip about her siblings, about school, about that star that shines above. Some say the council of mayors has been hiding something from us, some greater truth. But Velsa is skeptical.

Meanwhile, I begin to puzzle out the text. I’ve seen these phrasings before, though I can’t quite remember where. It feels as if my mind is stretching, straining around the shape of this new knowledge. I’m on the verge of something. I just don’t know what.

That damned star still burns on. Meanwhile, the moon swells, then wanes.

It’s only after the second moon begins to wax that everything falls apart.



I WAKE from my nap not knowing that this day will be different from the others. I draw myself water, spilling it over my head and shoulders and drinking in great gulps of it. I climb the ladder and sit beneath the dome to let the sunlight dry my skin. After a few moments in the morning's warmth, I begin to grow drowsy again. So I start back down, to where my studies wait for me in the cool, damp air.

I'm three quarters down the ladder when it happens. I see it all in a single thunderclap: Axinite City, the crowded main road. A commotion in the distance. Velsa and her siblings are on their way to school. One moment, she's laughing, only faintly aware of the brawl up ahead. There's a rush of bodies. The guardians in the crowd brandish their knives; they sense the scuffle, the scent of meat on the air

*What sort of prey is that?* someone screams. Velsa cranes her neck, gazing forward. There's another wave of movement. She's distracted. She feels it before she sees it: a sharp tear of pain through her body. She clutches her hands at her belly. There's a knife handle buried there. A blade. And torn flesh.

Velsa falls. And so do I, stumbling down the last rungs. I see through the distance of a thousand miles these last moments through her eyes, how her head cranes back, how she sees the dome above her, how she sees someone in the periphery of her vision. She hears noise, but it's becoming fainter.

She reaches out for me. *Vadix!*

I reach back, but it's like trying to grab melting handfuls of snow.

She's gone before I can reply.



TIME PASSES in terrifying sparks. One moment I'm tearing the scrolls to pieces, another I am transported to the top of the ladder, where I pound my hands against the dome glass.

No one comes.

I rake my fingers through the hard-packed dirt. There was a key there once, but I can't remember where I left it. I dig and dig and dig, until my fingers start to ooze.

Then I destroy the wooden furniture, wrench nails out with my fingers, snap the table legs into splintered stakes. I drag these over my body. I don't know why. I've lost something. A key. A person. There's pain, and I'm sure that the blue sap that bubbles up from my body will help me remember.

I forget to drink. I forget to lie beneath the sun. There's nothing left to study. There's only the cold ground, loose, damp and iron-rich, and I lie myself in it.

I used to think a *lousk* was haunted. Now I know the truth: *alousk* is possessed. Stripped of his reasoning. Compelled to thrust his seed to soil, even if his body has lain fallow for all these years. When the wounds begin to heal, I open them again. I speak gibberish. I press my face into the dirt.

Once there was a hole in me and it was shaped like Velsa. That hole is changing, becoming more like a circle burned through paper. Singular. Simple. Charred around the edges.

I think I've lost myself completely. Once—night or day, I don't know when—I see a creature. An animal. With a yellow mane and fierce eyes of scattered blue and brown. The creature speaks to me, but I can't understand. Later, when I've regained some sense of self I think that this must be a primal memory, long buried, of when the Xollu lived like guardians. Hunting. Eating flesh. I think this is the only explanation for the starving lust I feel within.

Or maybe I'm simply mad. In the black hole I've carved in the dirt, I rest my body. I feel the loss of her in every cell. It's so much bigger than me. It sucks out every speck of light from my underground home.



MOVEMENT. Daylight. Pouring through the space at the top of the ladder. Then, weight on the rungs. Someone is speaking. To me? I can't be sure. Who would speak to me? I'm nothing. I'm a shadow.

“He's alive!”

What a strange lie. I feel fingers grip my shoulders. They pull me to my feet. Someone shouts for water. It's only the echo of a sound.

They douse me. Hold their cupped hands to my lips. I drink and drink. There. Now. Refreshed. I need to go now. I need to go to the funerary fields, tear my body open,

set down my seed. Of course I'm fallow. We never mated. There will be no children. But I suppose that's what comes from pride, from thinking we could own the world.

I begin my journey, putting one foot before the other. Every cell aches. But someone stops me. Hands on my shoulders again. Is it Velsa? No, she's gone. It's someone else. My teacher. My old teacher. I begin to smile.

"Don't," she says. "Don't move. When's the last time you were in the sun? You look starved."

I look down at myself. See my skinny, wasted body, the thick lines of scars over it.

"I have to go," I say. "I need to go to the funerary fields."

My teacher sighs. She looks back. That's her mate there. And foster mother and foster father, too. And another pair. Strangers. Once all those tangled fingers would have made me angry. Now the sight of them only raises an urgent lump in my throat. Leave. I have to leave. I have to go to Velsa.

"I have to go," I say again. "Velsa is waiting for me."

"Vadix." It's foster mother who speaks. She winces her words, like they pain her. "The Mayor has asked something of you. A great sacrifice."

Mayor? I look to the strange couple. Yes, I guess that one of them watches over Copper City. But what need do I have for mayors right now? I need to take the underground train, make that long, lonely journey, and return to the city where I was born. To Velsa.

The Mayor steps forward. "The star in the sky," he begins. Was there a star? I guess there was. Velsa spoke of it. "It's a vessel from another world. A ship. A pack of passengers was captured outside of Axinite City last moon by a retinue of guardians. They're animals. The guardians thought them meat."

"Prey." I say. My own words ring an echoing bell in my mind, but I can't quite touch the memory.

Now it's my teacher's turn to speak again. "Yes. Prey. We've tried everything we could to communicate with them. But we . . . we don't know what they want. The guardians are calling on us to slaughter them. They say prey can't be trusted."

“Axinite City.” My voice is faint. “That’s where the funerary fields are.”

“Please.” Foster father draws close. “The council of mayors has asked that you postpone your sacrifice. We need you, Vadix.”

“Postpone,” I say. I can see it then: moon after moon after moon with this hole punched inside of me. While everyone else around me goes paired, as if the planet still turns, as if everything is normal. I draw my head sharply up. My eyes sear into foster father’s. “Do you know what you ask of me?”

I see him look to foster mother. She gazes back. Beside them, the mayor and his mate lean into one another. My teacher reaches for her mate’s hands.

“Of course we do,” foster father says.

I look at him and know it’s true.

“I suppose this is really important, then,” I say. No one denies it. I begin my journey toward the ladder. My legs ache with every step.

“Okay,” I say, gripping the bars in either hand. I look back over my shoulders. “I’ll do it. But then you leave me to my mate and my death.”

Nobody answers. But it doesn’t matter—I’ve walked alone before. Now, drawing in a deep breath, I pull my body up the ladder, into the feeble pool of burgeoning light.