



A XITHILENE MATES NOVELLA

STEALING SAMANTHA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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PREFACE

Stealing Samantha takes place in the same world as my series the Sons of Kukulcán, but it isn't necessary to have read the series to enjoy the story. I would suggest first reading Samantha's younger sister Kayla's book, *Unyielding*, as *Stealing Samantha* builds directly upon that storyline.

The events in the Sons of Kukulcán books begin in the year 2232. Pollution, overpopulation, and climate changes have left Earth in dire straits. The rich and powerful have abandoned the planet to colonize Mars, and the only signs of sentient extraterrestrial life seem to be the ruins of a primitive civilization that went extinct long ago on the red planet.

Earth's population is suffering, and the majority of humans' financial resources and opportunities have followed the leadership to Mars. Political unrest, large migrations of climate refugees, and limited resources combine to leave Earth a planet approaching a tipping point. Little do the humans know, they will soon learn they are not at all alone in their galaxy.

Stealing Samantha occurs approximately two and half years after the first book in the series, *The Feathered Serpent*, begins. Humans encounter an alien race known as the Xithilene for the second time in their history. While their first arrival among the Mayan people was long forgotten, no one on Earth or Mars can ignore their existence upon recontact.

The Xithilene may have been less than a footnote in human history books, but Xithilene culture and religion were

profoundly influenced by the events that occurred fifteen hundred years ago when they first discovered the fascinating beings known as humans.

That long ago group of Xithilene travelers didn't return to their planet empty handed. They intermarried with Mayans and returned to their own planet with their mates, bringing plants and animals from Earth, while racing to get back to Xithilene once their unauthorized exploration of the planet was discovered.

For their crime, a council of advanced species prohibited any travel to or from Xithilene for several hundred years. Without contact from other species or outside influence, the Xithilene built a new culture that merged their own beliefs with those of the humans who joined them on their planet. Now the Xithilene honor one of those Mayan women for her wisdom, and she is known as the Lady among their pantheon.

Just like before, the Xithilene are still fascinated by humans, and many humans return their interest. In response, Xithilene leadership created the Mate Portal Program, allowing interested parties from either species to search for a mate among their allies.

SAM CHANG HAD ALWAYS HAD A KNACK FOR SNEAKING OUT OF the house—she just never thought she'd still be dodging her mom's nosiness at twenty-five years old. She was stuck living back home, and the transition certainly wasn't an easy one. The snow crunched under her boots as she stepped outside and carefully shut the door, holding the knob turned all the way to the right so that it wouldn't click and give her away. Very slowly, she let it release and started to walk.

The cold definitely had a bite to it that evening, but it wasn't too bad with all the layers she was wearing. Just a couple of weeks ago she'd been on the balmy planet of Xithilene. She was supposed to still be honeymooning with her alien almost-husband right about now. Too bad it'd all gone so terribly wrong. Instead, she was back in Cherry Ridge, taking melancholy moonlit strolls while she relived the whole awful failure of her attempt to make a new life for herself.

Xithilene. It'd seemed like such a good idea at the time. She'd liked the capital city there, Verkissat, but then her no-good fiancé had abducted her and taken her to the most remote corner of the planet, an arboreal village composed entirely of Uvaess' own family. No wonder he'd used the Mate Portal site to try to seek out some fresh blood. She doubted that his family tree had branched out recently. Maybe that was why they'd been so different from the other Xithilene she'd met. It was just her luck she'd ended up with an alien whose family had her hearing the strains of banjos playing in the tropical breeze.

Sam let her head tip back. She could already see more stars when she looked up than she would've a year ago. The Xithilene had kept the promises they'd made about providing environmental assistance to Earth. She blinked up at that twinkling sky. She should just stop dwelling on it. She'd had her chance with an alien man, and she'd gotten a bad apple—the rottenest apple. Why was she thinking about it all again? She hadn't even liked touching him. Why would any other Xithilene be different? He wouldn't, and that was that.

She lowered her gaze and stared blankly off into the gray distance. The stars were pretty, but there wasn't enough moonlight to make the snow glitter and glow white, and the covered plains appeared like large swaths of shadow laid out before her. If Sam blocked out the sounds of the neighborhood behind her, she could almost imagine she was all alone there, as isolated as she'd been in the heart of the alien jungle.

Verkissat hadn't been that bad. T'xith wasn't bad either—her sister's new Xithilene man slash sort-of-husband. Sam frowned. Her baby sister was gone now. A little sliver of jealousy worked its way beneath her skin and she just couldn't seem to stop it from burrowing deeper. She was happy for Kayla—she really was. She just couldn't help but wish that she'd gotten her own happily ever after, too. She was the one who'd put in the work, who'd written to Uvaess for six long months. She'd done everything right, and still it'd imploded on her. Sometimes life just wasn't fair, but it seemed like it'd been going that way for her for a long time.

Sam tucked her hands beneath her armpits and kept walking. Her gloves weren't keeping out the chill, but she didn't want to turn back yet. She'd been restless since she'd returned to Cherry Ridge—to Earth. She was more than thankful that she hadn't been stuck in that remote alien village, but that didn't mean that it wasn't disappointing to be back. As much as she loved her family, she was supposed to have already left this life behind. Now she was practically homeless, jobless, manless, and just plain out of luck.

She stopped moving and looked up at the night sky again. If she squinted, she could imagine she saw it out there in the

distance—Xithilene. That big, Earth-like sphere of green and blue. She was supposed to have had a future. Now she was just picking up the pieces.

JAESS OF VASTISS SCOWLED AS HE COVERED HIS EARS WITH HIS hands and stalked over to his bed. The incessant drumming from below on the settlement's central platform was making his scales itch with irritation. In fact, everything seemed to be annoying him lately. He released a high-pitched warning rattle. There was no one to hear it there—no one who might be alarmed at such a sound issuing from his throat—and it felt good to let it out. He wasn't used to this feeling of discontent, and he wasn't sure quite what to do with it.

A senior hunter of his clan, he'd always believed he'd belonged in the forest, but lately, all he could think of was how to get away. He didn't want to just leave the boundaries of Lisseethi—he wanted to go to Earth. He let his rattle sing freely again, attempting to purge himself of these unaccustomed urges. He could search the Mate Portal and find a human to contact. Perhaps in time he might be granted access to that far away planet the humans called their home.

Jaess closed his eyes and let out a low hiss. He didn't want just any human. He wanted *her*. Sam, sister of Kayla, who was the mate of his cousin T'xith. He'd been there as they'd rescued her from the Sa'isthess clan. He'd carried her in his arms all the way down the trees and away from the rival clan's village. She'd been unconscious the entire time, but it didn't change the way he felt. Her scent still came to him from time to time, filling his nostrils and his lungs with her tempting sweetness.

He'd guarded her until she woke, and then she and her sister had left the settlement behind only hours later, but it'd been time enough to hear the sharp lash of her voice, to lose himself in those molten, dark eyes. Perhaps T'xith would visit Vastiss again with his new mate, but the sister wouldn't be

with them. No, the only way to see her again was on Earth, and there was only one person he knew who could assist him.

Jaess turned around and opened his wardrobe. He possessed little enough, but he'd never needed more. He removed one of his game bags from an outer hook and began to fill it with a few additional changes of clothing. Some feather oil, the soap he preferred, and his viewscreen completed his packing. He slung the bag over his shoulder and let his fingers glide over the hilts of the blades he wore at his hips. Perhaps just a few more would be better. Two daggers later and he was headed out the door of his hunter's cabin.

As much as he wanted to just leave, he knew he couldn't go without informing the family. They'd object. He already knew they would, but he had to try. He couldn't go on in this way—not even if there was the smallest chance there was a way to Earth. He'd been born to hunt, to pursue. He'd caught the scent of the lovely Lady Sam, and now there was no forgetting it. He wouldn't be able to rest until he'd at least attempted to catch her, too. No, he couldn't let it go, not when it was the Lady's own daughter who called to him.

That familiar burn in his gums made his lips twitch in a grim smile. She'd have to accept him first, yes, but a true mate? She was worth every risk. He closed his eyes as he imagined again how she'd felt in his arms, and he relished the sensation of his venom building, readying itself for release. He let the burn intensify, remembering the taste of her fragrance on his tongue, the softness of her skin beneath his grip, and the way her graceful body had fit against his own.

When he couldn't bear it any longer, he pulled an eelish berry from his pocket and bit down hard on the fruit, letting his fangs plunge deep into its sweet flesh. He groaned in mingled bliss and exasperation. Every time he released his venom, pleasure rushed through his body like the current of the V'isslath, the great river. Unfortunately, he felt himself extruding from his mating sheath as well, and he didn't have time to deal with his body's inconvenient desire—especially not out in the open where anyone could watch him.

Jaess opened his eyes and pulled the eelish berry free from his fangs. The poor fruit would serve no further purpose now. He unfastened his firestarter from his belt and set the berry on top of one of the barrier posts that marked the edge of the platform where he stood. Then he activated the flame and held it to the fruit, watching as it caught fire and began to burn and smoke. Acrid and pungent as it was, nonetheless that smoke carried the scent of his sacred venom. He breathed deeply.

“Who has called your venom, son of I’ovik?”

Jaess looked back over his shoulder. Past the ridge of his wing he could see Akithe, T’xith’s sire’s sire, grinning fondly at him. “She doesn’t reside in this village,” he said. Perhaps it would be easier to inform the clan of his departure than he’d thought. “I’m leaving to pursue her. Will you tell the others for me, i’eenish?”

Akithe frowned. “I’eenish? I’m not so old that I can’t dance. Save your titles for those old ones who require them, youngling.”

Jaess turned around to face the other man, who certainly *was* old enough to require the traditional honorific. “As you wish, Akithe. Will you notify the clan? I don’t know how long I will be gone, but I will send word when I plan to return.”

“Another new mate for Vastiss,” the older man said as his crown feathers rustled and he grinned again. “It is a good time for our clan, isn’t it? First T’xith’s homecoming and mating, and now you will bring home your chosen as well.”

Jaess felt his wings start to lift in discomfort. “I must claim her first before we celebrate the mating, i’een—Akithe,” he corrected as the old one began to scowl. “Tell the others that I’m taking the flyer to Verkissat. It will return home once I land.”

“Verkissat? You’re leaving Lisseethi?”

“Yes,” Jaess admitted as Akithe gave him a dark look. He wasn’t about to tell him that the flight to Verkissat would be the smallest portion of the journey he intended.

Akithe made a rough sound of disapproval in his throat before he snapped his wings out and then tucked them back again with a cascading ripple of feathers. “Watch yourself, young one. Northerners aren’t always kind to our folk. Remember that you are Vastiss—don’t let those wingless ones insult you. You should seek out T’xith,” he added with a satisfied nod of his head.

“I’d already planned to consult my cousin,” Jaess replied. “I’m sure all will be well. Lisseethi visit the capital city every day, and many live there. I don’t anticipate any trouble.”

Akithe inclined his head and took Jaess’ hand, pressing their arms together. “Well met, Jaess of Vastiss, son of I’ovik. Lady’s blessing over you and your quest.” Akithe smiled widely then. “Bring home your mate, youngling, and bless our clan with your offspring!”

Jaess released Akithe’s arm with a forced smile. If only his task were so simple. If he were somehow able to reach Earth, he suspected that the journey would be the easiest part. Getting Sam to consider him as a mate? That would be the challenge of a lifetime.

“So, THE MAIN TASKS OF THE POSITION WOULD INCLUDE answering voice and vid-comms and replying to any written inquiries. Winter is a little slow here, especially now that the holiday season is over, but work picks up as soon as the growing season starts again.”

Sam nodded along and tried to look interested. The last place she'd ever wanted to work was at the cherry packing plant, but she needed to do something, and the options in town were limited. If she ever wanted to leave home again, she needed credits, and that meant a steady job. Maybe it'd be good for her to do something a little more stable. She'd attempted to live a less structured life before—one that left time for her music—but she'd never been able to do more than cover the bare necessities. If she wanted to move to Seattle one day, she'd need to be able to save up and get some more reliable sounding work experience under her belt.

“So, can you tell me what would make you a good candidate for this position?” the man in the slightly creased khaki pants asked, giving her a look as if she'd already dallied too long in replying.

“I like being busy and talking to people. I think I'd thrive in this position, and that it would be a good fit for my high energy personality.” That sounded like a load of horse shit, but what other kind of reply did these people expect? Ask stupid questions, get stupid answers.

“Well,” the man said with a heavy sigh and a glance at her outfit, “thank you for coming in today, Ms. Chang. We’ll be in touch soon.”

He held out his hand, and she reached out to shake it with a tight smile. “Thank you for speaking with me. I look forward to hearing from you,” she replied. As she brought her hand back and turned to head down the hall that’d take her back to the plant’s customer facing entrance, she focused on keeping her back straight and her walk steady. It wouldn’t do to run out of there like the place was on fire, even if she wanted to hurry.

It’d really come to this. She was here praying she’d get an offer for a job she’d never wanted, all so she could move out of her mom’s house. Uvaess’ narrow face flashed before her eyes. Could she have learned to love him like he’d said? *No*. She held back a shudder. She’d tried. At first, she’d put her all into it, even though the moment she’d seen him towering over her in person had left her scared shitless. Kayla had been right. Knowing a person through comms wasn’t at all the same as being with them for real. Not for the first time, she wished her little sis had been wrong. It would’ve all been so much easier if she could’ve stayed.

She nodded to the woman sitting at the reception desk—a desk she might be gracing from time to time herself if Jerry with the pit-stained shirt saw fit to offer her the position. Sam opened one of the outer doors and wrapped her coat tighter around her chest. She should’ve buttoned it before she stepped out, but she’d been too eager to leave to stop and mess with it. Now the cold wind burned against her skin and sent its chill beneath her blouse like it’d ripped right through the delicate fabric.

The transport was parked a few blocks away in the free lot downtown. Despite the cold, she didn’t mind the short walk, so she didn’t bother calling the vehicle to her current location. At least it gave her more time away from home.

She headed down the sidewalk and almost tripped when her wrist-comm vibrated against her skin. She pushed back her coat sleeve to see who was contacting her and saw her sister’s smiling face on the screen. Sam hit accept and watched as a

small hologram formed above the screen. She wouldn't be able to talk long. Walking with one hand holding back her sleeve the whole time wouldn't be easy, and the last thing she needed was to fall and break her leg. Then she'd be stuck even longer with her mom and Aunt Emily.

"Kayla, hi!" she said cheerily, hoping her agitation didn't show on her face.

"Oh, wow—you're outside. What are you up to? That doesn't look like the section of town you'd choose for an afternoon stroll," Kayla said with a faint frown.

"I'm by the cherry processing plant. I just had an interview."

Kayla's face fell. "Oh, Sam. Really?"

"Yes, really," she replied, her voice coming out clipped and a bit too sharp. She was doing what she had to do, after all. Her sister didn't need to sound so disappointed. "I need a job if I want to reach any of my goals. Sitting around the house isn't going to get me where I want to go."

"Of course, that makes sense," Kayla rushed to reply with a bright smile. "I was just a little surprised, but I shouldn't have been. You'll be in that apartment in Seattle before we know it, and then it will be even easier to visit you when T'xith and I stop by your region."

Sam raised her eyebrows. "My region?" she asked playfully. "You've only been living aboard the ship for a month now. Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself, or have you renounced your lower northwest quadrant NAA heritage already?"

"I haven't renounced anything," Kayla replied with an exasperated little head shake. "I'm just trying to communicate clearly. The North American Alliance—and Earth—will always be my first home, but the truth is, I'm really settling in here. I never thought I'd like Xithilene so much either, but I've been loving our leave time in Verkissat. Maybe next time we stop in Seattle, we can get permission to bring you aboard and

we can spend a little time together. K'avith won't like it, but T'xith's the one in charge. If he can convince—”

“Don't worry about it, Kay,” Sam interrupted. Her sister wasn't going to stop talking otherwise. “I can't wait to see you next time you're in the area, but don't go asking for special favors for me. You have to work with K'avith now, Miss Interspecies Relations Coordinator. I'm good. You'll see—next time you're here, you'll see I'm doing just fine.” Sam shivered as another especially icy gust of wind snapped her jacket apart. She really should've buttoned it.

Kayla gave her a sad puppy face and sighed loudly. “Okay. I'm looking forward to it—and I won't let you weasel out of it. Next time we land in Seattle, I'm dragging T'xith off of that ship, and we're going to have a great time together in the city, just like we always used to talk about.”

“Sounds good, Kay. I've got to let you go. I'm almost to the transport and it's pretty cold out here.” She stretched her thumb back to turn off the comm device, but her sister spoke again first.

“You'd let me know if there was something wrong, right?” Kayla asked, her eyes flashing with concern.

Sam gave her a brittle smile in return. “Nothing's wrong. I'm freezing my butt off out here, that's all. Talk to you soon, Kay!” Her thumb flicked across the screen, shutting down the comm.

Sam released a heavy sigh and let her chin dip towards her chest as her sleeve fell back over her wrist. She didn't like lying, but she didn't need her sister to worry about her. The last time Kayla had thought something was wrong, she'd hitched a ride on a Xithilene warship and crossed the galaxy to check on her. Suffice it to say, her sister was prone to rather extreme reactions. In that case, it'd been warranted, but not today. No one could rescue her from a case of the winter blues. The only person who could fix what ailed her was Sam herself.

She shrugged her shoulders as she crossed her arms over her chest and tucked her gloveless hands between them. There

was no point in bothering with the buttons on her coat. She was already back to the transport.

JAESS CAUTIOUSLY OPENED THE FLYER'S HATCH AND immediately winced at the lights striking against him from seemingly every direction. He'd never been somewhere so bright in his entire life, and he'd not even taken a single step out of the flyer. Something like excitement had hummed through his body as he'd traveled north that afternoon, but now that he was here, an unfamiliar, uncomfortable emotion was making his feathers lift instead—fear.

The air smelled all wrong. Artificial, stale, unnatural. He clutched a hand more tightly around the strap of his game bag. It was sliding back, resting uncomfortably beneath his right wing. If he didn't exit the flyer soon, someone might come to investigate. He didn't want strange northerners gawking at him, hissing softly at his foolishness.

Jaess forced himself to step forward. The lights grew even brighter. He jumped to the left, forgoing the ramp so he could allow his wings to partially extend. It'd been a long journey, and he'd had to keep them tucked down aboard the flyer. It felt good to have air beneath his feathers again. Wings were not meant to be kept locked tightly against one's back. As he drifted down with his eyes closed, he could almost forget where he was.

His feet hit the ground. It was harder than a platform, and far less forgiving than the forest floor. Jaess frowned again as he felt the jolt of that small landing rock through his body. When he looked down, he saw that instead of healthy ground, the surface below his boots was completely flat and smooth. He hit his heel against the dark material, and it didn't give at all.

He blinked again as he lifted his head and looked out at his surroundings. He could no longer stop his crown feathers from rising or his wings from tensing. This place—the

transportation center as it was called—was like nothing he'd ever imagined. He'd seen a few vids showing Verkissat and some of the other regions of his planet, but they hadn't prepared him for the reality of standing in this strange, sterile space.

No plants or trees could be seen. It didn't matter which direction he faced. On every side he was surrounded by a similar hard, artificial ground or tall, solid buildings, their color so bright they seemed designed expressly to call attention to themselves. Shimmering, shining—they were a painfully bright white. Far, far in the distance, he could see the comforting dark green of a forest. Verkissat was as awful a place as the elders had told him.

He heard the hatch closing behind him. He turned as a soft beep came from the flyer, a warning to step back. He'd already engaged the autopilot system to send the craft back to his people's landing circle. Now it would leave him behind, and he would have to hope his cousin was easily accessible, because the capital city was far worse than he'd ever anticipated. He looked out doubtfully at those countless buildings and a shiver overtook his body, rippling outwards to his feathers. This was no familiar village. A few simple questions wouldn't have someone leading him to T'xith.

Before he could let his mind convince him he'd just made the worst mistake of his life, he thought of her. *Sam*. Shining, dark, fluid human hair pressing softly against his scales, its fragrance still lingering on his chest hours later. Sharp-tongued words in the most enchanting voice he'd ever heard. A lovely woman the goddess had marked just for him. *Any trial is worth it*, he reminded himself.

The flyer began to lift from the ground, and he hopped away to give it room for takeoff. Then he turned back to face his first challenge—leaving this cursed place and finding T'xith.

“Are you lost, landsman?” An amused voice caught his attention as he watched the flyer lift away and turn back towards Lisseethi—towards Vastiss.

“Maybe. Perhaps you can assist me,” he said as he shifted his feet and pivoted to the side. A tall, winged man was staring at him. When he saw that Jaess was looking back, he smiled and held out his arm.

“Well met, brother. Is this your first time out of the forest?” he asked.

Jaess took a hesitant step forward before he placed his arm over the other man’s. Unlike a v’ith of Lisseethi, this man wore dull black pants and a shirt of the same color that covered his entire chest and the top of his arms. Jaess could see the man’s birthchain, but nothing else. He had wings. Had the man forgotten all else that made him a son of the forest?

He pulled back his hand. “Well met. I am Jaess of Vastiss. I have left my settlement to seek out my cousin, T’xith of Vastiss, Captain of the Fleet. Can you tell me where I might find him?” Jaess asked.

“Your kinsman is a Fleet captain?” The man laughed lightly. “He has flown high, indeed.” He looked down at his strange shirt with a little twist of his lips. “I’m only an enforcer, but I can take you to Fleet Headquarters if you’re willing to wait until my shift is over. It isn’t much longer, and I can tell you a bit about the city while we watch.”

“What are we watching?” Jaess asked. “What is it, exactly, that you do as an enforcer?”

“Here? I make sure there are no disputes over takeoff protocols that could endanger other passengers’ and pilots’ safety. Sometimes I help those who are lost, as you seem to be. In general, I do my best to assist our people, in whichever manner that may be.”

Jaess inclined his head towards the man. “What was your name, v’ith? You never told me.”

“I’m Yanish of Fassalhti. I’ve never heard the place name Vastiss before. Where’s it located?” asked the man.

“We live in the far south near Lake V’issa,” Jaess replied.

Yanish’s feathers snapped. “Truly? I thought that region was deserted.”

“Ours is a private settlement. We enjoy our homeland’s beauty.”

“And you don’t wish to share it, if I’m understanding you correctly.”

“We simply value our peace,” Jaess replied. “I would appreciate the assistance you offer, Yanish of Fassalithi. Finding my cousin is of the utmost importance.”

“Do you know anyone else in the city?” the other man asked.

“No. He was the only one of us to leave. I have traveled within Lisseethi, of course, for clan meets and the like, but I’m unfamiliar with Verkissat. I did not expect it to be quite so...” Jaess paused, not knowing how best to express himself.

“So large? So impressive?” Yanish prompted.

“So lifeless,” Jaess replied instead. “How can you live in such a place?”

He let his wings stretch out to the sides and extend. The breeze catching on his feathers was at least a small reminder that despite its unpleasant appearance, the Xithilene here hadn’t been able to rid the land of all of its elements. The wind still swept past those hideous buildings the same way it could rip through a wide clearing. He’d been to some of the coastal areas before, where the winds off the water were powerful enough to let a man glide the currents with his wings.

“It is strange at first, but you soon grow accustomed to the differences. I like it here now, although at times I do miss our great forests. It is much better now after the discovery of the Lady’s Temple in Lisseethi. Most no longer expect us to hide our wings, except for a few of the bronze-scaled, but they are in the minority now,” Yanish told him, just as if the words made sense. *Hide their wings?* He’d never heard of such a thing. Had his brethren truly obeyed such insulting rules? “You appear outraged, but I promise you that in the past it was so—there are far less of us here than the wingless ones.”

Jaess inclined his head. “It is simply difficult to believe. Our wings are our glory. Do the women here not judge a v’ith

by his display?" he asked.

Yanish tilted his head. "In private, perhaps, or in the dancehalls, yes." The man's expression brightened. "You should have your cousin take you to dance. There the Lisseethi always lead our wingless brethren, and all who come are eager to see our abilities."

Jaess inclined his head again in lieu of a verbal reply. He was ready to leave this place, but he doubted he would encounter another offer of assistance if he left Yanish behind. It was best to appease the man to ensure his willing cooperation.

"Just follow me. We'll finish the final patrol circuit and if all is well, I'll escort you to Fleet Headquarters," Yanish told him with a faint smile. The man parted his lips and then closed them again, looking Jaess in the eyes before he spoke. "It can be difficult to adjust to the city, but it isn't as bad as you believe, just different. Give yourself a chance to enjoy it here before you make your judgments."

Jaess bent his head for a third time. "I will," he said. Then he looked out at the stark, desolate city, and up at the crowded, noisy sky. He would no longer share his opinions. He needed this v'ith's help.

“COME, JAESS. YOUR COUSIN MAY STILL BE GONE, BUT MY brothers await us at the dancehall. You’ll see—it will feel good to leap and stretch your wings again.”

The visit to Fleet Headquarters had proved fruitless. Well, not entirely. Jaess had learned that T’xith was aboard his ship and not expected to return for five revolutions. Luckily, Yanish had decided he liked him well enough to offer him hospitality while he waited for his cousin to return to Xithilene. They were about to leave Yanish’s small dwelling. The other man seemed certain that Jaess would enjoy this building designed for dancing, but again, he had his doubts. How could his movements be truly free if he was confined? Dancing was meant to be practiced in the open air as the leaves of the great trees mirrored a man’s own motions. Trapped within walls in the heart of a city—he couldn’t imagine that it wouldn’t feel unnatural.

“I anticipate the evening’s pleasures,” he replied with a slight tip of his head towards the other man.

Yanish’s light hiss of amusement let him know that he’d spoken strangely again. He hadn’t found T’xith’s conversation so different from his own, but apparently Jaess would need to adapt his way of speaking if he wanted to be at home in Verkissat. He tugged at his belt, finding it unaccustomedly light that evening. He’d been told that the number of weapons on his person would be unwelcome at the dancehall, but at least his normal garments seemed appropriate for one destination in the city. Yanish was dressed much like himself

in an open vest designed to accommodate wings and well worn leather trousers.

“Shall we go now?”

“Yes, I am ready,” Jaess said, eager to leave now that there was no more avoiding the supposed entertainment.

He no longer reacted when they took the conveyance from Yanish’s sky-height dwelling all the way down to ground level. The tech didn’t bother him, and most of it wasn’t even surprising. Although they chose not to engage with the greater world in Vastiss, they weren’t entirely ignorant. He still had to admit that the first time he’d experienced the ride up, it’d forced a hiss of alarm past his lips.

The sky was unnaturally bright that evening, and once more, the wrongness of it was like a blow, leaving him unsteady and pained. He missed the forest at night, her shadows and depth, the calm despite the never ceasing noises of her creatures.

“Four other landsmen will be meeting us there. We’ll have to walk once we reach the Scale District, but it isn’t really that far,” Yanish was telling him, his words running together as Jaess remained silent while he observed their descent.

“I’m sure it isn’t,” he replied absently. Jaess had spent his life running the skybridges of Vastiss. A short walk through the city didn’t worry him.

“You do dance, don’t you?”

Jaess inhaled slowly and stifled the rippling of his feathers, keeping his wings as still as he could manage against his back. He owed Yanish a debt, and visibly expressing his annoyance would be unacceptably rude to his host.

“Yes, I have always danced,” he replied evenly, even as some small part of him pulsed with giddy life at the thought of truly being able to move his body again. He hadn’t tucked his wings away or moved unnaturally during his time in Verkissat like some of the other winged he’d seen, but there were no daily leaps from branch to branch or languorous descents to

the forest floor as there were at home. Perhaps Yanish's entertainment would prove satisfying after all.

"Good," Yanish said, and Jaess glanced his way guiltily, knowing he'd barely been listening to his companion. Yanish had been kind. He was duty bound to be grateful to the man.

The rest of the journey to the dance hall was similar to the many they'd already undertaken before as Yanish had shown him the different facets of the city. Just as he'd accustomed himself to the rapid descent from Yanish's dwelling, the speeding cross-city hover pods had grown ordinary after a few days. When they disembarked and passed the transportation center, entering a series of narrow walkways between the buildings, he felt more comfortable than he had since he'd first arrived in Verkissat.

"This is the Scale District—where landmen can go when they're missing home. The true dance halls are here, food from the forests, garment merchants, and anything else you might want is available if you don't mind the slightly less impressive surroundings." Yanish's wings lifted lightly with a little ripple as his mouth flattened. He was glancing at the rather shoddy looking tile work on the roof of a building they were passing on their right.

"I like it. It's darker here and the colors are more natural," Jaess replied. He was telling the truth. He still found the white and silver toned buildings of the main city sterile and unpleasant, and at least here he could feel a bit of the sense of shelter he missed from the forest. The way the buildings leaned in over the walkways cast comforting shadows, and he realized how exposed he'd been feeling since he'd arrived.

Yanish just glanced at him with another of his uncertain smiles. "Well, even if you didn't want to dance, you're sure to attract attention tonight."

Jaess flicked up his crown feathers in question.

"Your wings—your coloring is quite unique," Yanish continued, rushing out the words as his own wings tightened against his back. The other man almost sounded...jealous.

“They’ve caused me enough trouble over the years,” Jaess said. “Blending in was often more difficult on our clan hunts, but I found my own ways around that in time.” He’d put it mildly. His pale green, gold marked wings had always glowed like a beacon in the night.

“You were a hunter then?”

“Yes. It was always what I did best. Is that the dance hall ahead?” he asked. The low thump of recorded drums rumbled outwards from a building on his left.

Yanish seemed to perk up again, his feathers lifting as he grinned. “Yes. Let’s hurry—I’m already eager to dance.”

When they stepped through the wide entryway, Jaess winced as a wave of sound overwhelmed him. It wasn’t that he was unfamiliar with recorded music, but his people hadn’t often bothered with it. When they danced together, it was always to the beat of their mothers’ drums, and it had never been so loud. When he’d chosen to dance alone, he’d moved without any music at all.

Yanish angled his head towards him, but Jaess couldn’t make out any of his words through the noise. It wasn’t just the heavy drums and rapid notes of the many flutes that filled the air—what seemed like hundreds of voices crowded the close space between himself and the others, and the fluttering and rustling of feathers was like a constant itch beneath dry scales.

Yanish grabbed his forearm and urged him away from the entrance. Jaess hoped he wouldn’t let go. It would be easy for him to be swallowed up in the mass of writhing Xithilene that surged around them. He could smell the sharp tang of excitement in the air, and the musk of countless other v’iths clogged his senses as foreign wings pressed and brushed his arms, face, and sides. He needed to breathe clean air again, yet there was none to be found here. Jaess closed his eyes and let his companion pull him forward as he tried to shut out all the rest of it. Yanish’s fingers around his wrist, the solid floor beneath his feet—that was all that he could allow himself to feel if he wanted to endure this place.

Finally, they came to a stop.

“Wonderful, isn’t it? No one can be lonely in a Lisseethi dance hall.” Jaess opened his eyes and watched the other man’s animated features. Yanish grinned as he glanced down at his comm device. “The others are already here. They’ll be joining us here shortly. Shall I get you a glass of mezal’el, brother?” His grin turned sharper. “You look as if you need it.”

“Thank you, Yanish, but no.” Jaess knew he’d disappointed the other man, but his body was already overheated from the dense crowd of people in the building. He didn’t need the alcohol to intensify the sensation.

Yanish walked to the bar in front of them and requested a drink. Jaess watched as another v’ith approached and clapped his forearm to Yanish’s—one of the friends, he assumed. Jaess turned back to take in the spectacle of the dance hall. Now that he was no longer attempting to push his way through, he could take his time observing the place. In the center of the large, open chamber was a circular stage. Small, cylindrical platforms had been placed above it at varying heights, leading up to the domed ceiling.

He wasn’t the only one watching the stage. A man was using the platforms to propel himself upwards, his feet following the relentless drumbeat that vibrated through the frame and floor of the building. Others were clicking their nails together and letting their rattles loose in appreciation. Several of the women in the crowd hissed their pleasure as the dancer extended his wings in display.

Jaess experienced a fresh surge of heat beneath his scales as his own feathers began to lift, the urge to respond to another male’s challenge difficult to repress. He didn’t know if it would be possible for him to dance properly in such a place where desire flowed like the priests’ sweet wine, where those hidden parts of him might be laid bare in an instant—in the wrong flick of a feather, the careless sweep of a wing.

A heavy hand clapped down over his shoulder. “Jaess of Vastiss! Meet your landsmen.” He turned back, shifting on the balls of his feet to pivot towards the small group of Yanish’s friends.

“So this is the mysterious houseguest from the lost Vastiss clan you’ve been telling us about,” said the man standing to Yanish’s left. He tilted his head and fixed his gaze on Jaess. “You don’t look much like a hunter.”

The insult took root, and now more than the strange heat of the place burned beneath his scales. “You don’t think so?” Jaess asked, holding his arm relaxed and hand unclenched, although his fingers itched for the hilt of one of his blades.

“You’re too pretty.” The other man flashed him a brittle grin. “Maybe I should travel to your village. If the women there share your bright feathers, it might be worth enduring the lack of civilization. Yanish says you’ve never visited Verkissat before. Do you plan to stay in our lovely capital?”

“I’m waiting for my cousin—a captain in the Fleet. We have business,” he replied curtly. He didn’t relish an evening of similar conversation. Perhaps he would dance, after all, if only to avoid more of the same.

“Ignore Ma’keth. The rest of us do,” said one of the others. He had rich green scales, far lighter than his own, and he gave Jaess a welcoming smile. “Do you plan to dance tonight?” he asked, inclining his head towards the stage.

“I’m not certain I wish to perform.”

“I prefer to stay with the crowd myself,” the friendly man said, glancing at the swaying, writhing bodies filling the floor.

“Yanish, what about you? Will you dance upon the stage?” Jaess asked, turning back to his host. He watched him swallow, the thinner scales at the hollow of his neck undulating, catching the dim lights as they moved.

“I’ll join you if you do.”

Jaess inclined his head towards Yanish. “Must we wait then?” He glanced back at the stage, at the v’ith preening, displaying his feathers for the nameless women who hissed and called to him from below. “How is it done here?”

“We just go. The people will let us know their pleasure once they see us move.” Yanish grinned, although Jaess

thought he could still see a hint of trepidation in the other man's keen eyes. "I'm ready if you are, landsman."

"I am ready," Jaess replied.

He began to walk towards the stage, weaving through the crowd with Yanish at his arm. It didn't feel as if he were about to dance. It was more akin to the start of a tracking mission with one of his cousins back home—this sense of sparking anticipation mixed with sharp edged fear. *Only a dance*. He needn't display himself in the manner of the previous v'ith. There was no one here he wished to impress, yet Jaess was Vastiss. He would show these smooth-feathered males of the capital what it meant to be a true son of the forest.

This time the press of the crowd seemed weaker, the throb of the drums distant. When they approached the stage, he took the first step and then leapt past the rest, extending his wings to give him extra lift. His feet hit the stage with a satisfying thump. The man who'd displayed for the others froze, his gaze set on Jaess. He felt his mouth turn up in a faint smile before he caught himself and forced his expression blank again. It was beneath him to acknowledge the other man's reaction.

He could hear Yanish's quieter steps behind him, and Jaess moved forward, turning towards the lowest platform. It required barely a jump for him to land upon it and begin to move. The snap of rapidly opened wings, the slight flutter of vibrating feathers, the heaviness of the night's darkness—he breathed in those sensations and ignored all other sounds, placing himself back in the embrace of the forest. He would dance for the Lisseethi of Verkissat, but he would only do so as himself.

His feet moved quickly as he imagined running the length of a branch. He shifted his hips and moved his wings in tandem, keeping himself perfectly balanced before he spun with a small jump, just barely tasting the air, the faintest hint of the freedom of the fall. A brief glance to his left allowed him to fix the position of the next platform in his mind. A few steps later he extended his legs, pushing off with a great flap of his wings as he thrust his body towards the next artificial landing post.

He kept his mind closed to the music and the crowd, working his way upwards, never letting his gaze fall upon the people below. The rapid flash of Yanish's dark feathers occasionally caught his eye, but the other man was dancing several platforms down, and there was no danger of sharing the same airspace.

Jaess landed atop the highest platform. He let his head tip back and the matte dark of the ceiling was close enough he knew he could touch it if he tried. No sky, no shadowed leaves, no creatures of home here. He took one step forward and let the moment stretch. All of his weight was balanced on the ball of one foot, and he knew there was no stopping himself now, but he savored it—that instant of transformation, where he was neither an earthbound creature or in flight. He let the anticipation build until it released with a snap.

He dove downwards, his wings tucked close against his back until he passed the first platform below him. Then he forced them open, still falling head first, but he felt his outer feathers catch the air, and he knew he was in no danger. Only at the last moment did he tilt his body to glide out in a lazy circle, drifting around the outside of the stage. Jaess almost stumbled as his legs came back under him, as his feet hit with a bit too much momentum. The unforgiving bones of Verkissat were tripping him up again, it seemed. He still couldn't accustom himself to the hard surfaces, the dead places that made up the city.

Jaess looked up, flicking his crown feathers at his clumsy landing, and then he froze, rather like the v'ith who'd preceded him. No one waited to challenge him, to take his place, but every face was turned to him, and every pair of eyes fixed him in place until he felt his feathers begin to vibrate at the perceived threat.

The music played on. He heard it again now that he no longer attempted to block it out. Soft drums and the quick, bright notes of a flute tempted him to move his feet, but otherwise, the dance hall was silent. Jaess' feathers began to clamp down close against his body, and he glanced back anxiously, searching for Yanish. A brief shudder ran through

the other man's body before his dazed expression cleared and he hurried to Jaess' side.

“Come, friend. Perhaps you've changed your mind about that glass of mezal'el?” Yanish asked softly as he urged him off the stage.

Jaess smiled faintly and pressed his arm to Yanish's. “Yes, I think you're right,” he replied.

His foot touched the first step when the sound of his people shook through the air. Raucous rattles from the men, trilling hisses from the women, and the harsh snap of feathers and dark nails lifted to the ceiling filled his ears until he thought the noise might bury him. Jaess allowed Yanish to pull him back through the crowd towards the long bar at the side where they'd stood before. Once more he felt the press of unfamiliar feathers, his senses overwhelmed with the pungent scents of the endless mass of bodies. He closed his eyes as the other man led him, only surfacing when a cool glass was placed against his hand.

“Thank you,” he said, his voice unsteady in a way he'd rarely experienced. “I think I would like to leave after this.” He saw Yanish part his lips to speak and rushed to stop him. “Stay—I can find my way back. Don't end your night's pleasure on my account.”

Yanish frowned and his crown feathers wavered. He would've spoken again, but someone approached from behind, sliding their lithe body between them. It wasn't Yanish's ill-tempered friend as he'd half expected, but a dark scaled woman, her petite red-tipped feathers lifted up above her forehead as she grinned at him.

“Hello, landsman. You've astounded us all. I've never seen anyone dance quite like that before.” She reached forward and slid a long nail around the rim of his glass. “Are you new here?”

Jaess pulled his cup away as he met the woman's dark red eyes. “I'm not from Verkissat, if that's what you mean.”

Her smile grew sharper. “I can tell. You’re adventurous then?” she asked with a dangerous little sparkle in her gaze.

“No, not really.” Jaess took a sip of the mezal’el.

“Are you sure? I don’t think I believe you.” The woman lifted a graceful hand above her head and clacked her jewel adorned nails together. He forced himself not to flinch. Jaess knew she wouldn’t have to wait long for a glass of the same mezal’el to appear on the bar in answer to her demand. “In fact, I think you’re the type of man who wouldn’t be afraid of anything,” she said as she stepped closer. He closed his senses to the thick taste of her perfume. “Have you ever considered going to Earth?”

Jaess blinked. His wings lifted and his crown feathers rose despite himself. “Earth?” he repeated.

The woman’s smile was bright enough to cut now.

“Yes, Earth.”

“I NEVER WOULD’VE THOUGHT TO SEE YOU HERE, JAESS.” His cousin, the Fleet Captain T’xith, was giving him another one of his penetrating glares, like he might be able to see directly into Jaess’ thoughts if he stared hard enough.

Jaess looked around the glossy jade walls of his cousin’s ship. “I didn’t hope to be here so quickly either, but I couldn’t turn down Lithi’s offer.”

“But a dance troupe? I hadn’t even heard that such a thing was planned.” T’xith was frowning darkly now, his serious face drawn in even more morose lines than usual.

“Lithi told me it was a recent development—a suggestion from the human princess, Lady Kat, and one of many recent cultural initiatives, as they’re calling them.”

“Recent?” T’xith hissed. “I received the orders yesterday.” He made a dissatisfied noise in his throat that wasn’t quite a rattle. It sounded uncomfortable.

“It’s surely the Lady’s will. I came to Verkissat to find you, to find a way to Earth, and here I am, already on your ship. I may not be Fleet, but I’m smart enough not to spurn the Lady’s blessing. She has accepted my offerings and granted my prayers.”

T’xith simply frowned again. Now that he’d spent a little time with his cousin aboard his ship, Jaess was quickly realizing that the T’xith who’d returned to their village had been much different than *the captain*. T’xith may have been

older than Jaess, but he hadn't remembered his cousin being so bossy—and nosy—before.

T'xith narrowed his eyes at Jaess. "Kayla said that you requested to speak with her privately. What's this all about, Jaess?"

He swallowed down his sudden nerves. Jaess hadn't planned to keep his true intentions from T'xith—in fact, his plan relied on his cousin's assistance—yet now that it was time to reveal his goal in traveling to the human origin planet, he felt as uncertain as a youngling facing their first bleeding.

"Lady Sam—Kayla's sister." The rest of the words he'd meant to say got caught in his throat as he watched T'xith's green eyes flare brighter.

"You've taken a position among an Earthbound dance troupe, leaving behind your village, vocation, and life, hoping...what?"

"She could be my mate. She called my venom. If the Lady offers her gifts, I'd be a fool to not even attempt to take them," replied Jaess. T'xith led them around the sharp curve in the hallway, his lips flattening into a disapproving grimace as he listened.

"Perhaps you were mistaken," T'xith said stonily.

"Mistaken? About my venom?" He'd never believed his cousin stupid before. Strange, yes, confusing, maybe, but not stupid.

T'xith's wings rustled behind him as a hint of his rattle bled past his lips. "You don't understand, Jaess. Earth is—" T'xith bent his head forward and shook it side to side before he turned his face back towards Jaess. "If you thought Verkissat different from Vastiss, that provides you only a minuscule idea of how very foreign Earth is from Xithilene. You don't simply land on Earth and find the person you seek. They cover their planet like a S'i'ith hoard, leaving no land untouched. Nothing about finding humans on Earth is simple."

"Sam is Kayla's sister. You both know where she lives. Surely it won't be so difficult to meet with her," he insisted.

“Yes, but the purpose of the cultural initiatives is to introduce all of Earth to our ways and art forms. You’ll be starting off on an entirely different continent from Sam—and I can’t tell you how long it will take until you’re anywhere nearby.”

Jaess felt his own expression grow stern. “I’ll speak with Lithi. Send me the information on the region where Sam resides and *I* will tell you how long.”

T’xith just raised and lowered his crown feathers and grunted. “Fine, cousin, but don’t complain later if the wait is longer than you wish. You can remain here aboard the *Bite of the Fa’asath*, and I’ll take you back home—make your excuses to Lithi.” He exhaled heavily. “I know the joy of having a true mate, but you barely know Lady Sam. As rare a gift as it is, it’s possible that more than one woman may call your venom. Ask yourself if you can truly imagine a life outside of the forest before you decide. You have two days until we land.” T’xith’s fingers closed warmly around his shoulder. “I wish you the Lady’s wisdom, Jaess. You’ll need it.”

JAESS HELD BACK ANOTHER GROAN—BARELY. HIS ARMS ached and his legs burned, but his back hurt worst of all. “*It’s simple. We dance for the humans, explore their world, learn their ways. You must say yes, my adventurer. Come, Jaess of Vastiss, and join us.*”

Jaess scowled at the remembered words—Lithi’s invitation that night at the dance hall in Verkissat, where she’d enticed him with false promises. He’d already been on Earth for close to a moon cycle, and they were finally approaching the region where Sam lived, but his time there so far had been anything but easy.

“Oh, Jaess of the sacred lake—get up!”

He let his head fall back to rest against the top ridges of his wings as he glanced up at Lithi, but he stayed with his legs

sprawled out in front of him on the stage. She was on one of the few wide platforms meant to accommodate multiple dancers at the same time, and she was tapping a large viewscreen with her now crimson and gold painted nails.

“It’s been four hours,” he said instead.

“I need you to mark the duet with me again. You’re just not getting it, and it’s supposed to be the climax of the show. Get up here or I’ll take away your leave permissions.”

Jaess’ sore muscles clenched as the threat rolled through him, and he did groan that time, but he forced himself to move. “I’m coming,” he said quickly, even as his battered body resisted.

Lithi hadn’t mentioned the hours of practice and rehearsals she expected from her dancers in addition to the actual performances they put on for the humans. As active as he’d been as a clan hunter, the movements of the dances used different muscles and stressed his wings in new ways. He was still attempting to adjust.

“You need to work harder, Jaess. The others are starting to talk,” said Lithi, her voice echoing from above.

He climbed the first platform, not in the mood to strain himself by using his wings again. There’d be plenty of that to come, he was sure.

“I am working hard,” he said as he started to run the length of the first platform. He’d use the momentum to make the jump to the next easier.

“Don’t make me regret plucking you from the dance hall,” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “Vasith has already complained that it’s unfair for you to have so many solo parts when your technique is so poor, and as much as the crowd loves you, I’m afraid he might be right. We have two more moon cycles left here on Earth—I can’t have this kind of discord among my dancers.”

He landed on Lithi’s platform with a graceless thump.

“At least you remember that it was you who picked me,” he said before he could stop himself.

Lithi raised a precisely shaped eyebrow—another human fashion like the new style of nail embellishment—before she smiled lightly. “True, but that doesn’t mean I’m not serious about your leave permissions.”

Jaess didn’t shiver, but he felt a chill nonetheless. “Don’t. I’ll do better. Not now, Lithi, please.” He’d already given away too much, he could tell, but he was almost there, almost to the performances in Seattle, the closest population center to where Sam lived. T’xith and Kayla had arranged everything—he just had to show up, and unfortunately, his ability to do so was entirely within Lithi’s perfectly manicured hands. “Punish me later if you need to, if it will keep the troupe in line, but don’t take away my leave now.”

“I’ve never heard you desperate before, Jaess. I think I like it.” Lithi flashed him her cut glass smile before she put him out of his misery. “Fine. I’ll punish you later—if I see fit, although I’d prefer you just take me up on my previous offer of extra training.” She gave him an appreciative appraisal before she hissed slowly, letting her tongue dart between her lips just a little. “Those wings. Vasith will never charm the people the way you do. Don’t prove him right.”

“Whatever you wish, Lithi,” he said with a quick inclination of his head.

“Then let’s run it one more time—the dance of the Lady and her consort.”

Jaess just bowed his head again. Only days now. Only days until he’d see whether all he’d remembered of Sam was proven true.

SAM KNEW SHE'D PRACTICED TOO LONG THE NIGHT BEFORE. She'd gone on far past the point of usefulness, until her fingers had become clumsy and her high notes had been coming out squeaky and sharp. She wiggled her fingers in their gloves, hoping she hadn't messed everything up.

Today was the day. She'd accepted the offer of the job at the cherry packing plant, and she'd be starting next Monday unless her luck turned. Today she was auditioning for every musical act looking for a flutist in the greater Seattle-Vancouver Corridor, and at least one who wasn't. It was no surprise to her that her particular instrument wasn't in high demand, but Sam was hoping to convince someone that she was exactly what they needed. Four auditions—four chances to change her life, to keep going before she was forced to resign her dreams to the dustbin.

Sam had her flute case wedged between her thigh and the side of the train. Her first stop would be coming up soon. She was only passable at Classical pieces, and she wouldn't be making it in a real symphony or orchestra, but she felt like she was proficient enough for the quartet she'd be playing for first. If she got the job, it'd be weddings and parties, fancy dinners and that sort of thing, not exactly what she'd hoped for when she'd imagined rapt audiences awaiting her music, but at this point, she'd take it. At least she'd get to play—and to leave Cherry Ridge.

The train turned and began to rise as the tracks soared upwards. The bridge they were on crossed above one of the

old interstates, and she could see the sun reflecting off some of the newer buildings by the sound, the water calm and dark at the feet of the city. To the west, the tallest structures circled the burned out shell of the old downtown like a jagged crown, and they only looked more forbidding in the morning light.

Sam smoothed her gloved fingers over her black slacks, unable to feel the texture of the fabric. She was wearing her responsible, dependable outfit now. Conservative, forgettable, so that no one could complain she was too noticeable. She was auditioning to be part of the scenery, after all. She might as well look like it.

She'd be playing different roles all day long, and she had the additional clothing packed away in her briefcase to prove it. Her music folder, her alternate outfit, and some makeup. All she had to do was make it through the day, and she'd receive her reward no matter what happened. Kayla and T'xith were landing in Seattle today and staying long enough to visit. They'd be sharing dinner together that evening. It didn't feel real, but not much did lately.

The train tracks lowered, descending back towards the thickly built towers of the new downtown. The cars shuddered to a stop at a platform nestled between the second floors of two buildings. She looked out her window as she waited for the doors to open. The day was clear, not a cloud in the sky, and she could see a brisk wind snapping back the open coats and scarves of the people waiting to board.

The doors parted noisily, and Sam stood, clutching her flute case and her bag against her side. She followed the stream of people as they stepped down to the platform. The cold was just as bitter as she'd thought it'd be, even if there was no snow on this side of the mountains to show for it. She shook her right arm to slide back her coat sleeve, activating her comm device so that she could check the time. As long as she moved quickly, she'd make the first audition with plenty of time.

The streets were full that morning, she noticed as she took an escalator down. When she reached the bottom, she kept her gaze focused straight ahead as she made her way towards the

address the first group had provided. Sam was waiting at a crosswalk when she heard the whispers start.

“Look!”

“Are they really coming here?”

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Beautiful?”

“Snake.”

Sam swallowed over her dry throat, her eyes watering from the sting of the wind. She shouldn’t look. She knew she shouldn’t. She shivered as she glanced at the last speaker. The man was scowling at a building to their left, and that pain in her throat burned down to the pit of her stomach when she followed his gaze.

The person they were looking at *was* beautiful. Beautiful and undeniably alien. The entire side of the building glowed with the advertisement—*Dancers of the Forest; An Evening of Xithilene Myth and Music*. The words floated beneath a video loop of a winged man leaping through the air as if gravity had never tethered him. Scales just as dark and inky vivid as Uvaess’ had been, but wings so broad and bright that they didn’t make her wince. She couldn’t look at him and see Uvaess—not with that coloring.

“Don’t just stand there in the middle of the road. Do you want to get hit?”

Sam turned her face away from the advertisement, heat flooding her cheeks at the reprimand, but the man who’d delivered it had already merged back into the fluid crowd of pedestrians.

Before she’d arrived on Xithilene, the wings were what she’d looked forward to seeing in person above all else, the alien characteristic she’d found most fascinating. Uvaess had changed that. Now the sound of feathers rustling had her skin tightening with gooseflesh and bile rising to her tongue. The way he’d trapped her beneath those blue black wings, shrouding her in their weight, pushing out all the light until

she'd felt as if she might suffocate from the smell of him—down and powder and musk. Heavy, stifling, thick and wrong.

She couldn't think about that any longer. Not today.

Sam's fingers tightened around the handles of her flute case as she saw the street name she'd been searching for—Pine. It didn't take much longer for her to discover the short flight of steps leading up to a nondescript olive green door with a slightly faded street number affixed across the lintel. She pressed the buzzer and smiled at the entry-camera as she hoped for the best. Four chances, four opportunities. She only needed one.

SEVEN HOURS LATER, SAM WATCHED HER FACE IN THE reflection of the train station bathroom mirror. She was scrubbing at the edgy eye makeup she'd put on for the last audition with the corner of the self-cleaning tissue she kept stuffed in a small pocket in her bag. The geometric patterns she'd drawn were stubborn, and the blocks of bold color left behind hazy patches of red and blue around her eyes. Just great, and she doubted she'd gotten the gig anyway. Despite her best efforts she hadn't really fit the punk aesthetic. She'd been able to change her outfit easily enough, but she was still going to look like a mess for her dinner with Kayla and T'xith.

Her life was in shambles, but she didn't need her sister and her brother-in-law to know it. She wanted to pretend—just for tonight. Two of the groups had told her outright that she wasn't a good fit, and the other two would “get back to her,” but Sam didn't have high hopes. She'd played well, but she could just tell from their faces that there would be no callbacks, and she wasn't going to tell Kayla, even if there was a little girl part of her who wanted to spill out all of her worries. Her sister had already done enough for her, and Sam was finished with being rescued. If she let Kayla know the half of it, it would be tantamount to begging for her help.

Sam smiled shakily at the girl in the mirror. It'd be fine—she'd be fine. A few failed auditions and a dead end job weren't the worst things that could happen to her. She straightened the strap of her bag across her chest and slid her gloves back on over her fingers before she closed her hand firmly around the handles of her flute case. She gave herself a firm little nod and left the bathroom.

The dinner reservations were at some fancy restaurant Sam never would've dared to go to on her own, but T'xith was either paying or having it'd be comped, so at least for tonight she didn't need to concern herself with the price tag. She had twenty minutes left to kill, so she decided to walk instead of bothering with the train or a bus.

She headed out of the station and ducked her head against the chill breeze. She could taste the hint of water on the air, almost masked by the scent of the city. As she wove her way through the streets, she saw another ad for the Xithilene dancers. The same man with the bright wings was featured on this vid-loop, too, but this time he was dancing with a red feathered woman. She watched their graceful movements with a crooked smile. It really was something, like some sort of aerial ballet. She couldn't imagine Uvaess ever moving like that.

Sam had almost turned the corner when she glanced back. There was something about the man that was almost familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on what, and she knew it wasn't just from seeing him on the billboard earlier.

The sun had almost set by the time she reached the right block. Lights flickered to life as dusk's gray mantle blanketed the city, glowing only faintly still. Sam saw the sign for the restaurant and headed towards the building ahead on her right. She hoped that T'xith and Kayla were already there. She didn't think she could bear any more tense waiting in a single day. She already felt a little bruised around the edges from the series of auditions she'd completed. No one had warned her that trying to be an artist meant continually offering up the best parts of herself and hoping no one trampled all over them. Today had certainly provided a few kicks while she was down.

She took the low staircase that led up to the main entrance of the restaurant and stepped inside. Soft voices and relaxed laughter filled the air with a pleasant hum. She quickly removed her coat, gloves and scarf and handed them towards the droid waiting for them with outstretched metallic arms. It wasn't an intelligent AI, of course, just a parlor trick for the rich and bored. Maybe they liked not having to tip a living worker. It wasn't as if she understood their preferences, but she got a kick out of seeing one up close. She was pretty sure there wasn't a single restaurant in Cherry Ridge with a service droid.

The decidedly non-automated hostess was watching her with a slight lift to her sculpted brow. "Reservation?" the woman asked.

"I'm meeting some people—Captain T'xith of the *Bite of the Fa'asath* and his companion. Do you know if they're already here?"

The haughty look faded as the woman's lips parted. "Oh, the Xith—"

Before she could complete the thought, Sam found herself wrapped up in her little sister's surprisingly strong arms. Kayla just about lifted her feet from the floor. "Sam! Finally—it feels like forever since we've seen each other."

Sam untangled herself from Kayla's vise-like grip and smiled lightly as she took in the sight of her sister. "You look good, Kay. Where's T'xith? Is he waiting at the table?"

"Yes, come along. We're all anxious to catch up." Kayla was practically pulling her along as Sam gave the now amused looking hostess a nod.

Her feet were already moving before her mind caught on the phrasing Kayla had used. *We're all anxious*. That wasn't what someone said when there were just two people involved, so who else was waiting at their table? Before she could ask, Sam's breath was stolen by the sight of T'xith—and the man who sat proudly at his side. Those shuddery exhales that drowned out the sounds of their fellow diners couldn't be coming from her. She couldn't believe that. She had no reason

to feel as if a freight train had taken up residence beneath her skin, thudding across her ribcage as she forced herself to smile, to meet those alien eyes as if there was nothing the matter.

“Sam, get it together. You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Are you okay?” Kayla whispered fiercely with a sharp tug on her elbow, urging her to move forward enough to take a seat.

He wasn’t Uvaess, even if his black-green scales were dark enough that they reminded her of him. She didn’t recognize him from the vid-ads throughout the city displaying his pale green wings either, although it was certainly the same man. She couldn’t quite place how she knew him—her time in Xithilene had become dreamlike and blurry with distance, but she knew she’d looked into those eyes before.

“I’m Samantha, Kayla’s sister,” she said, unable to stop staring at the man.

He made a deep sound in his throat that wasn’t quite a rattle as he lowered his forehead in a slight bow. She’d heard enough growly rattles during her time on his planet to recognize their distinctive music, and this man had himself firmly under control. His eyes remained fixed upon her face, and the intensity in that gaze should’ve been just as unnerving as Uvaess’ unflinching regard had been back in Xithilene, but although her skin felt prickly and flushed with anticipation, she didn’t experience the heavy, suffocating anxiety she had then. She might not stink of fear, but Sam wasn’t willing to lie to herself and say that the man didn’t put her on edge.

“Lady Sam,” he said, his voice deeper than she’d expected, deeper than any man’s had the right to be. The sound of it practically melted into her bones, shaking her more thoroughly than that train she’d imagined storming its way over her heart. “I’m Jaess—Jaess of Vastiss, T’xith’s cousin.” He waited a beat, as if he thought that his name would spark some type of reaction, but she couldn’t honestly say it meant anything to her, even if everything else about him was vaguely familiar.

“Have we met?” she asked.

He tilted his head sideways towards his shoulder, his pale green eyes focused on her in a way that made the small hairs raise from her body, as if the simple force of his gaze was sufficient to make electric tension crackle in the air between them. She would've sworn she caught the scent of ozone.

“Yes. I carried you down from the Sa’isthess settlement, away from—” He stopped speaking, cutting himself off and swallowing down the icy tone that made his words sound hard and sharp. He smiled slightly before he continued with irritating composure. “I participated in your rescue, Lady Sam, and then I guarded the cabin you shared with your sister until you left Vastiss. I’m a senior hunter of my clan, a protector—”

“A dancer,” she cut in, feeling herself blush as he stopped talking and the feathers lifted out from around his face. “I saw the advertisements all over the city today. Is that why you’re here?”

She watched him swallow, the first sign he’d given that he was at all affected by their conversation. She liked seeing him shaken, even if wanting such a thing made no sense. “One of the reasons,” he replied in that too smooth way he had.

“The other?”

He smiled as his wings shifted softly behind him, the curved talons along the top ridges catching the lights. “A secret, lady.” His grin grew broader as he reached for his glass of water and sipped, holding her gaze before he finally dropped his eyes to his free hand as if the slim rings on his fingers had suddenly become infinitely fascinating.

“Jaess dances tomorrow evening. He’s invited us to the performance,” said T’xith.

Sam smiled tightly. “I’m sure that will be lovely.” She was still holding her flute case in her right hand, and it knocked clumsily against the side of her knee.

“Yes. A room is already prepared for you aboard the ship for tonight. Kayla wishes to spend time with you, and it will be easier for you than traveling home and then back again tomorrow.”

Sam glanced at her sister. “I’m included in the invitation?” she asked.

Kay sighed and shook her head with a grin. “Of course.” She nodded towards Sam’s instrument case. “Why do you have your flute with you?”

Sam bent down to set the case beneath her chair. “Just a couple of auditions earlier today,” she said as she sat back up.

“Oh, Sam,” Kayla said, her eyes shining with enthusiasm. “How wonderful.”

“It was only a few auditions, Kay.” Sam gave her a tight-lipped grin. “It’s no use getting excited yet.”

“You play an instrument, lady?”

Sam looked across the table at the sound of Jaess’ voice. “Yes, a flute.”

“I’d like to hear you play,” he said with another solemn dip of his head.

“Maybe sometime,” she replied before she reached for her menu.

Sam wasn’t even quite sure what she ended up ordering, but the rich food was tasteless in her mouth. She couldn’t seem to focus on the people in front of her. There was nothing wrong with Jaess—he was unfailingly polite—but the whole evening just felt off. She’d imagined a comfortable dinner with Kayla, but although the men seemed content to speak amongst themselves, Sam couldn’t ignore them. She was unpleasantly aware of Jaess’ presence without even having to look in his direction.

“What really made you want to come to Earth?” Sam asked as she set down her fork. She felt more than heard her sister shift in the seat beside her. Even T’xith was looking at her strangely, but pretending Jaess wasn’t there certainly wasn’t working.

He wasn’t shy about meeting her eyes. “I’m chasing my fate, lady.”

Her mouth started to turn up at the corners despite herself. She liked that. It was what she'd always been trying to do herself. At least it looked like it was working out better for Jaess. "From the ads I've seen, you seem to be the star of the show. Have you always performed for people?"

His low hissing laugh startled her, and T'xith's feathers rustled as he gave his cousin a stern glance.

"No. I'd danced for nothing other than my own pleasure before I was recruited for the cultural exchange initiative," said Jaess. "Tell me of your life here on Earth, Lady Sam. I've spoken enough of myself."

Kayla cleared her throat. "Yes, I'd like to hear about everything. You've been hard to get a hold of lately."

Sam reached for her glass of wine, buying herself a moment's delay. "Just busy," she said with a brittle smile. She could sense Jaess still watching her, and when she stole a glance at him, she saw his head was tilted to the side again like he was some oversized, curious hawk.

Unlike T'xith in his captain's uniform of black shirt and matching trousers, Jaess was dressed like a typical Xithilene. He wore an open, supple leather vest and gold dripped from his wrists and neck, glinting on almost every finger. Her eyes landed on the unique yellow green color of his wings. Some of his feathers leaned more towards blue-toned, but from what she'd seen of the Xithilene, his coloring was remarkable.

"You should come to the rehearsal tomorrow," Jaess said. He was looking at her when he spoke, and he didn't turn his head to include the others.

"No one will mind?" she asked.

"No. They'll accept you—bring your instrument. T'xith will bring you."

Sam glanced at Kayla. Her sister shrugged and smiled lightly.

"Thanks," she said before she took one last sip of her wine.

They said goodbye to Jaess outside of the restaurant. He took one transport, and Sam found herself sitting tucked in against Kayla and T’xith in another. She looked back out the window and watched his transport disappear into the night, a strange feeling between regret and relief keeping her frozen in place until the vehicle’s lights were entirely gone.

“I hope you don’t mind that he was there with us. T’xith hasn’t seen him for a month, and it’s Jaess’ first time leaving the forest,” Kayla said with an awkward little smile.

“It’s fine.” Sam swallowed. “We’ve got the rest of the night to catch up, right?”

She was glad when they left the densest parts of the city behind and the transport’s cabin became dim enough to hide her face. It should’ve all been easy now. Sam shouldn’t have been dreading their arrival back on the ship, where she’d be forced to really talk to Kayla. She shouldn’t have kept looking back and wondering what he was thinking, wondering what sort of fate he thought he was chasing. She shouldn’t have been thinking of Jaess of Vastiss at all.

“HE WASN’ T JUST BEING POLITE?”

T’xith gave her a hard look. “No.”

Sam shrugged and stretched her neck side to side as she waited for the transport to deliver them to the venue where Jaess and the other Xithilene dancers were rehearsing. People said things all the time they didn’t really mean. She didn’t know Jaess well enough to tell whether he’d actually wanted her to come, and she didn’t regret asking.

She rubbed a hand across her forehead. The night before had been harder than she’d hoped. Kayla had wanted to talk for hours. The only relief was that her sister had so much to tell her that Sam didn’t have to pretend her life had been any better than it was. Kayla was so busy updating her on her work on Xithilene that she hadn’t even seemed to notice how quiet Sam had been. It was better that way—it really was. Sam had no way to explain the sort of blank feeling inside that she hadn’t been able to get rid of since she’d returned, and she didn’t want to try.

“We’re here,” announced T’xith. His low, rolling voice wasn’t as deep as Jaess’. If she closed her eyes and listened to him speak, she could imagine he was still human.

“Thanks for the ride, T’xith. I’ll catch the train back to the airport after I’m done here,” she told him.

“No need. I will wait.”

“It’s really not necessary,” she said as she pressed the button to open the side door. “I promise I’ll come back to the ship if that’s what you’re worried about.” Her right foot hit the concrete of the sidewalk as T’xith hissed.

“Your sister cares for you.” He always sounded so stern. It still surprised her sometimes that this was the man Kayla had chosen.

“I know.”

“I will wait.”

“Fine,” she said with a grim smile before she stepped all the way out of the transport. “Thanks for the ride.”

Sam headed towards the entrance to one of the city’s theaters. If she hadn’t trusted T’xith to deliver her to the right place, the thirty foot placards hanging on either side of the wall of doors would’ve removed any doubts. Jaess’ flying body filled one, and a Xithilene man’s black and jade wing was pictured extended out to the side in the other. She grabbed the bronze handle of one of the doors and stepped inside.

She’d entered a grand hall meant to hold crowds of well dressed people. The red and gold carpeting swallowed the sound of her footsteps, leaving a silence so thick the air seemed to ring with it.

“Ms. Chang!”

Sam looked up and saw a man about her age walking briskly in her direction. He stretched his arm up in a brief, imperious wave before he glanced down at a device he’d pulled out of his pocket. She heard a click from the doors behind her and assumed the man had locked them again.

“Hi—that’s me. I’m here to observe the rehearsal,” Sam said as she nodded towards one of the many posters featuring the Xithilene dancers.

“Yes, follow me.”

She didn’t miss the once-over he gave her, and she knew he was probably wondering why she was here. She was wearing half of her outfit from yesterday evening along with

one of her audition shirts, and although it wasn't an awful combination, the look didn't exactly scream theater aficionado, and although she carried her flute case at her side, she knew this probably wasn't how hired musicians entered the venue.

"You're the only guest the Xithilene have requested. We have press teams coming in later this afternoon to take vids and some more stills, but that's fairly standard." He didn't come outright and ask, but she knew what he was wondering.

"I spent a little time on Xithilene earlier this winter. I'm... acquainted with one of the dancers. My sister is in a relationship with a Xithilene captain," she told him as they walked. The place was a bit eerie when it was empty like this. It was almost a relief when he took her down an unmarked hall and she was able to hear the sounds of people talking and a faint drumbeat.

The man just made a noncommittal sound in his throat and opened a black painted door, motioning for her to enter first. She could hear that the voices were speaking in Xithilene. Another familiar noise made her hesitate long enough that her guide jostled into her back with a bit-off exclamation.

"Sorry," she said, even as she tried to shake off a sudden chill. If she hadn't known she was here in the heart of Seattle, she'd have thought she was back in Uvaess' forest village. Wings—rustling and snapping feathers—that sound overwhelmed everything else.

The man moved ahead and walked her right across the stage towards the group of about twenty Xithilene men and women. She hurried to keep up, her low heels clicking noisily and drawing every glimmering, jewel-toned eye her way. Every single one of them was winged, and the way they tilted their heads as they inspected her felt sickeningly familiar. She clenched her hand around the flute case and felt the slickness of her sweat.

They'd be able to smell it if she let herself get scared. Uvaess had made sure she knew it—that she couldn't hide

anything from him, that her body would betray her no matter how she tried to deny its signals.

“Lady Sam.”

Her eyelids fluttered closed as that voice broke through the rising panic threatening to overwhelm her.

“Jaess,” she replied. Her own voice barely shook. “Thank you for inviting me. I’m so glad to be here,” she added with a smile towards the rest of the Xithilene watching her. “I’ve never seen any formal performances of Xithilene dancing, just what people in the village chose to do while I was visiting Lisseethi. I’m looking forward to observing.” She felt as if she’d done an admirable job of pretending her time in Lisseethi had been as simple as a pleasant visit to the countryside.

That admission and its implications brought on a new flurry of rustling as inquisitive crown feathers twitched and lifted around her.

“You’ve visited Xithilene then, lady?” one of the other men asked.

She dipped her head slightly in his direction so she didn’t have to meet his eyes. “Yes, that’s right. A failed mate portal match,” she told them, hoping the shock of it would keep them from asking for more details. “I can understand Xithilene,” she said as she tapped the area behind her ear where the alien doctors had inserted her translation device after her arrival in Verkissat.

Her guide cleared his throat, a distinctly human sound as he glanced at her as if he’d tasted something sour. “If that’s all, I’ll return to my duties.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly before she turned back to the dancers. “I don’t want to be a bother. Where do you want me to go while you rehearse?” She pretended she couldn’t feel the weight of Jaess’ gaze as she waited for their directions.

Jaess stepped forward, but before he could get any closer, a tall woman with short, red-tipped green feathers approached her.

“Hello, Samantha Chang. I’m Lithi, the director of this branch of the Cultural Exchange Initiative. Welcome. We are happy to have a guest of Captain T’xith among us. Why don’t you go sit down. My dancers and myself will be happy to discuss our work with you after the completion of the rehearsal.”

“Thank you—I can’t wait to watch,” she said, giving the other woman a brief smile before she scanned the edges of the stage for a stairway down.

She’d almost made it to the far side of the stage before she glanced back. He was turned away from her now, his large wings relaxed, the outer tips almost brushing the back of his knees. Xithilene wings weren’t supposed to be quite that big or that long. Could he feel her watching? Was that why he chose that moment to stretch them out? Did he understand the way it’d transfix her to see their full span and the faint patterns made by the shifting colors of his feathers?

His markings were as distinctive as his coloring, halos of brighter golden green blossoming amid the celadon streaked feathers that made up the majority of his wings. Jaess still possessed the black crest of bone that edged the top of each wing, tipped in scythe-like talons, but those dark lines only served to give his feathers a more ethereal glow in contrast.

He didn’t turn back. She shouldn’t have expected him to.

Sam made her way down the steps and took a seat a few rows back. Her fingers curled around the edge of her seat, catching on the velvety red fabric. The lights were still on in the auditorium, and the dancers seemed to have recovered enough from the surprise of her arrival to go back to their light chatter. It was all very typical, incredibly normal.

She set her coat and gloves in the seat beside her and nestled her flute case over them before she bit her lip. She couldn’t leave now, even if it was starting to feel like an awful decision to accept Jaess’ invitation.

The noise coming from the stage gradually faded. Sam glanced up and saw a human woman with her head bent towards the leader of the dance troupe. The woman turned and

gave a thumbs up towards the back of the theater and the lights dimmed around her. The dancers spread out in small groups around the strange set pieces she'd only briefly noticed earlier. Flat topped tubes of different sizes and heights were placed throughout the open space.

She didn't have to wait long to learn their purpose. The music started with a simple drumbeat. At first, none of the Xithilene moved. They all stood like living gargoyles, their heads bowed, wings slightly lifting and lowering above their shoulders with each breath. It wasn't until the first notes from a mellow flute joined the drums that she even heard the flutter of feathers.

The women stepped forward and began to move with rapid steps and turns so fast she could barely see their feet touch the stage. Not long afterwards, several men ran forward, their wings extended as they leapt towards the tube shaped platforms. More joined them until there was a dark feathered man dancing atop every platform, but she still didn't see Jaess' pale wings.

The tempo shifted, and the dancers' feet moved faster. More Xithilene appeared from the wings as the men on the platforms all jumped down simultaneously. There were so many feathers on display that she could barely see the back of the stage. Each man settled into place behind one of the women, and just as they lifted their partners, sweeping them into the air as if they were weightless, their scales in every shade of green reflecting the harsh stage lights, the music stopped.

It left Sam breathless, as if she'd been running towards the edge of a cliff and somehow managed to stop just in time. She felt as if she should still be falling, as if she were still waiting to be released so that the moment could finish playing out.

She clapped, even though she was the only one watching. A few of the dancers smiled in her direction as the music resumed and they continued with the next number. The discomfort she'd felt earlier dissipated. She'd been worried, but this was just one more performance, albeit a unique and enthralling one. Watching Xithilene on a human stage was an

entirely different experience than seeing them dance in one of their own villages. Nothing about being here made her think of the stifling dark of the Lisseethi forest. Sam smiled softly and finally leaned back, determined to enjoy herself.

JAESS WAS NOT A GOOD DANCER.

Closing in on two hours of rehearsal, there was just no way around it—Jaess of Vastiss was the worst dancer of the bunch. It wasn't at all what she'd expected. If she hadn't spoken with him easily herself the night before, she might have wondered if he had some type of hearing impairment. The other dancers stomped and twisted to the rhythms of the ever present drums, but Jaess was always a beat behind or ahead. He almost looked clumsy, and his bright wings were like a beacon that emphasized even further his failure to match his fellow dancers.

Sam was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. She could tell that the rehearsal was nearing its end, and she wasn't sure what she was going to say to him. She didn't believe that Jaess would be content to let her go without a single word, and she wasn't rude enough to try. At this point, she would've preferred another hour of rehearsal to facing him at the end of it.

Several dancers cleared the stage as the music shifted to a slower tempo. Jaess was standing on the lowest platform, still holding the ending pose from the last dance. The director, the woman who'd introduced herself as Lithi, spun towards centerstage. Then he drifted down from his perch and landed only a few steps away from Lithi. One outstretched hand met another, and then Jaess was pulling the woman into his arms, the graceful line of her spine curving into a dramatic arch as she surrendered to his embrace, the trailing tips of her much smaller wings almost touching the floor as she leaned back.

It didn't take her much longer to realize that this must be the reason Jaess had been brought into the troupe; the raw

passion, the electric buzz in the air so strong she felt the hairs on her own arms raise—the reasons humans would pay hand over fist to watch their alien brethren, even as much of Earth still muttered their species' name with foreboding and suspicion.

Jaess and his partner moved effortlessly together, the tension between them pulling taut and then unspooling, again and again as each spin and leap grew faster, wilder than the last. She could taste the beat of her heart thudding against her tongue. The air caught in her lungs as her hands curled so tightly into the loose fabric of her dress pants that it was a wonder the fabric didn't rip under the strain. Swallowing was an impossibility. The hot lick of fire that burned its way from her chest downwards was as unwelcome as the rest of her feelings. The slide of scales over skin, the stinging slap of a feather's edge cutting against her arm as she turned away from another monstrous man—desire danced with memory in the most maddening way, turning her inside out and back again.

Jaess wasn't U'vaess. She knew that, but it didn't stop the way shame followed the heat that flared beneath her skin. That was over and done, a closed door that she'd promised herself would stay shut. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

They were dancing on one of the platforms now, the small surface below their feet too little for two grown adults, alien or otherwise. He held her too closely, not a breath of space between them.

It took her too long to realize the sudden ringing in her ears was silence. The duet was over, and Jaess jumped down, slowing their descent with his broad wings as Lithi clung to him. Then she left the stage and the lights darkened until Jaess stood alone, his body caught in a single spotlight.

A low drumbeat rumbled its way across the theater. Sam could feel the heavy thrum vibrate through the soles of her shoes until it tingled up to the tips of her fingers. Like before, Jaess moved independently of the rhythm, but he no longer appeared clumsy—simply detached, as if the music were occurring somewhere else, as if it were only a distraction from what really mattered. *Him.*

During the last dance, he'd moved like Lithi's lover. Now his body was a vessel, one that spun and flew as its secrets spilled out like blood upon the stage. She knew what it felt like to be that vulnerable before an audience, and she'd tasted the power in it, too. She didn't know what Jaess was imagining when he flung his body carelessly from one platform to the next, higher and higher, as if gravity were only a small inconvenience, as if he'd never known the flavor of fear, but she knew he was a world away. She wanted to see it, too—whatever he saw at that moment as he dove headfirst towards the stage.

Sam bit the inside of her cheek, the pain barely registering as she waited for him to break his fall. Her heart resumed beating the moment he finally veered sideways, his wings extending out with a shuddering snapping sound that cut through the haze of all that beauty and grace. It was as if a painter had slashed a streak of bright red across a masterpiece, shocking and infuriating at the same time. She'd wanted to stay in that place where she could just sit back and observe, but now she was off-balance and unnerved, even if she couldn't explain why to herself, much less anyone else.

He didn't bow. The drumming stopped and the theater grew quiet. Someone raised the house lights and the rest of the troupe trickled back onstage from the wings. Sam heard voices behind her and to her right. When she turned her head, she saw she was no longer alone as she'd thought—around a dozen or so men and women had joined her, many of them with recording devices in hand. She swallowed. Press stills and vids. Of course.

How foolish to imagine that the connection she'd felt between them just moments ago had been due to anything more than the skill of a talented performer. Sam knew better than to believe in such tenuous bonds. She'd already tried love at first sight, and no one needed to remind her how hard that had crashed and burned. Her mouth was still bitter with the taste of its ashes.

The reporters had all begun to migrate towards the stage, and she saw that Lithi was right in the thick of it. The

Xithilene had chosen well to make her one of their cultural ambassadors. The musicians in the pit were packing up their things. There were only a few of them, maybe four or five, but it wasn't too surprising. The music accompanying the dances was fairly simple, just drums and flutes. She glanced down at her own instrument nestled towards the back of the seat beside her. Jaess had asked her to bring it, but it didn't look like there'd be an opportunity to play.

Another quick look at the stage made it clear that it'd be easy for her to slip out now if she felt like it. The dancers that weren't talking to reporters were chatting amongst themselves, and no one was paying attention to her. Sam stood and shrugged on her coat, made quick work of wrapping her scarf over her shoulder, and grabbed her flute case. She walked to the aisle and turned towards the back of the house. T'xith would be waiting for her, she knew. Nothing else was holding her back, and she'd be returning in another couple hours. She'd just thank Jaess for his invitation after tonight's show.

A large hand wrapped gently around her upper arm. "Wait," he said as she paused. He released her arm and she heard him step back. "Please."

Sam turned around and gave Jaess a weak smile. "Hey, I didn't want to interrupt your interviews. Thanks again for having me here. I see why they chose you to come to Earth—your solo at the end was something else." She'd tried for carefree, but she had a feeling that a bit too much honest enthusiasm had bled out there at the end.

Jaess folded his wings back tighter, making them seem smaller. "Thank you for coming." He looked down at her flute case. "I was hoping you would play for me. The other humans will leave soon—it's the same in all of the places where we perform. They ask their questions and then they're gone, and the other dancers will be eager to return to our accommodations before tonight's show."

Sam hesitated, the fingers of her free hand tapping against her thigh. "Sure, if you have time. It's no big deal if you want to go with the rest of them—you know, relax before the show. Just because you asked earlier doesn't mean I'll be offended if

you don't really feel like staying to listen to me play. I don't want you to feel obligated."

He smiled then, thin and quick, as his eyes seemed to darken. "I'm not as generous as you, Lady Sam. I asked you to play, and I still want to hear it." His gaze flashed up to hers. "But if you want to leave, I won't stop you."

Sam glanced up at the stage. Like he'd said, it was already clearing out. "Here?"

"Yes. I can't think of any place better," he replied.

"Once the reporters are gone. Sure, why not, right? Just don't expect anything like the music your people play," she told him. "And no more Lady Sam, all right? Just Sam, please. Just Sam."

The smile he gave her in return was no longer faint and fickle. It bloomed and spread with his satisfaction until she felt as if she'd just walked into the hunter's lair, offering herself up to its open jaws. Sam swallowed hard. She'd run through the gauntlet yesterday with back to back auditions. What was one more short performance between acquaintances?

SHE'D BEEN ABOUT TO LEAVE. SHE'D ALMOST WALKED AWAY before he'd been able to stop her. Jaess forced his wings to remain locked in place, to keep his body under strict control. He'd noticed how Sam had flinched before at the sound of his people's feathers. It'd felt simple enough back in Vastiss—find a way to Earth and then pursue the promise of a mate. Now Sam stood in front of him, close enough to touch, and he hadn't the first idea where to start.

“Sam.” There. He'd done one thing that she'd asked, even if leaving out the lady before her name felt unnatural. He smiled and motioned towards the stage as they began walking back.

Even speaking her name had him on edge. He could feel the heat in his voice, could taste the sound of promises he had no right to be making, and he only hoped that she didn't hear them, too. Humans weren't like his people. Their men had no venom, no fangs. She wouldn't understand why he was compelled to come searching for her, and if she did learn, she would misunderstand. Even as he felt the bite of pain begin to burn in his gums, even as his body tightened in recognition, he knew that he'd need to ignore it all, to show her that there could be something between them besides simple attraction. From what he knew of the Sa'isthess clan, he wouldn't have been surprised to learn they'd told her of the bond and had diminished it to an animal need. She hadn't yielded to them, and she wouldn't yield to him without something more.

If Jaess ever had the chance to claim Sam, he'd have to tempt her heart first.

“Despite Lithi’s promises, I’ve learned far less of humans than I’d hoped during my time so far on Earth,” he said as they took the narrow steps up to the right side of the stage. “I’m curious to see your instrument. Back in Vastiss our people used several types of flutes.” He flashed her a smile, lowering his left wing a bit so that he could meet her eyes over his shoulder. “I’ve heard your music is different. I’m glad.”

The color of her face shifted slightly, as if she momentarily glowed brighter, and he found himself once again taken aback by the intriguing strangeness of humans. He wanted to learn what caused all the slight changes in her color, to be the one who could call the flush to her soft skin..

“I didn’t get a good look at the flutes your musicians were using today, but honestly, I had my eyes on the stage, not the pit. Still, from the sound and what little I did see when I was in Uvaess’ village, I think mine is quite a bit different. Even if the instrument weren’t, the type of music I’ll play for you is.” They’d reached the stage, and she stopped moving forward as her teeth pressed into the tip of her tongue. “It’s probably different from most typical human music, too.” Her shoulders lifted and fell and she looked away from him as she scanned the stage.

He followed her gaze. He inclined his head towards Vasith, who was watching him sternly from the edge of stage right. Jaess waited for the other man to leave before he spoke. “I think it’s almost safe for you to play.” He tipped his head towards the knot of reporters who were being led out towards one of the backstage exits.

Sam didn’t look comfortable, and he wished he knew how to put her at ease. That part of him that scented her and sighed *mine* hated her agitation and ached to soothe her, but he knew she wouldn’t accept comfort from him—not yet. She barely knew him at all. She hadn’t even remembered him on her own, and that had stung.

She huffed out a heavy breath and bent down onto one knee. She unsnapped the case she'd been carrying, and he watched her remove three parts, sliding them together until they formed one unit. Her flute was made from a shiny metal and was longer than most that his people used.

She rose back to her feet and bent her neck side to side before she looked back at him. "Here it goes, I guess," she said.

He didn't like the tremble in her voice. He wanted her fire, the anger he'd seen in her back in Vastiss. That was preferable to this almost-fear. He didn't expect her to raise the flute sideways, but his confusion over the instrument vanished as soon as she began to play. She still faced out towards the empty seats, looking away from him, but he didn't mind. At first, it didn't sound much different from his people's music. She played a short melody with fast, light notes. Then the music stopped and he watched her shoulders move as she breathed deeply, her instrument held lengthwise, pressed against her chest. He was tempted to walk in front of her so that he could see her face, but something told him to remain where he was.

She lifted the instrument back to her mouth, and this time the first note lingered, sustained yet somehow changing as the seconds passed. It grew louder and then receded like a wave cresting and then dissipating. When the song continued, working its way into his blood, sliding beneath his scales until it thrummed deep inside, he felt its undertow, the way it snuck up on him before he realized its strength.

He may have been thinking of waves and the open waters of Fassalhi Bay, but something about the sound made his eyes close as his vision filled with the green of home. Those living notes spun through the air and he saw the dance of leaves, the swirling flight of the yahvi as dawn's first light penetrated the canopy. Jaess could smell the sweetness of familiar flowers, could taste the fleeting coolness of morning dew.

He knew he wasn't the kind of dancer the others were. Jaess wasn't an artist. He didn't care about performing, and in fact, he did his best to imagine the audiences were never there

at all. He rarely felt compelled to dance, but now he did. He wanted to absorb Sam's music and let it flow outwards from limb and feather. He wanted to make his role here true, to show her what she did to him with her song that had sunk its talons into his flesh.

Jaess opened his wings softly, not wanting to startle her with their noise. Even though she couldn't see him, there was a wholeness to displaying for her, the only woman he'd yearned to do this for since she'd first awoken his desire in Vastiss. His body lifted, his feet rising as if he was pulled upwards by a string anchored in his chest, one that she only had to tip her head to control. He forgot the dull ache in his muscles as he let his body follow her song.

Before he knew it, he found his feet moving rapidly over one of the middle platforms, and he wasn't even quite sure how he'd arrived there. She continued to play, and he danced in answer to her call, determined to prove to her in the only way he knew how that he heard her—he saw her.

Jaess' movements had been off during the rehearsal. He'd been aware of her presence from the moment he'd stepped on the stage that afternoon. That sense of recognition had only grown stronger, but now it powered him, no longer an obstacle that made him clumsy and slow.

Rippling, extended feathers—*see me, know me, take me*. Reckless, uncontrolled leaps that veered towards dangerous—*don't look away, let me in, let me learn you*.

She watched him now. He wasn't sure when she'd turned towards the stage, but her eyes followed every motion of his body, every dip and flare of his wings, and he gloried in her regard. He never looked away as he let the dance become more frantic. She was playing those long, throbbing notes again, the ones that straddled the edge of beauty and tipped towards pain, that he felt like a sharp ache in his soul. She did something with her mouth that made them tremble, like drops of water beaded on the underside of a leaf waiting to fall.

When he stepped off of the highest platform this time, his wings were spread from the first, although he barely resisted

the fall. Halfway down he began to turn, catching the air beneath his feathers, feeling its rough caress, imagining that her music wove itself around him like a hungry vine, fastening itself against his scales, claiming him as he wished to one day claim her.

Jaess' feet hit the stage with a thud that would've had Lithi frowning and then scowling, but he didn't care. Sam was still watching, and as she lowered her flute, she stepped towards him, moving as if she'd been caught in her own magic, enthralled by her own song. Whatever it was that pulsed between them, at that moment, he was certain that she felt it, too, that she knew at least a portion of the same yearning.

Before their hands could touch, the harsh noise of clicking nails broke the Lady blessed silence. Jaess turned his head and saw Lithi walking towards them, her arms still raised high, nails meeting in a loud, messy rhythm to signal her approval.

“Jaess of Vastiss, I've learned you're capable of following an accompaniment. Lady,” she said with an exaggeratedly deep inclination of her head towards Sam, “you've accomplished what no Xithilene musician has—you've forced him to dance to music, not in spite of it.”

He saw Sam's fingers tighten around her flute. “Maybe he just needed a new kind of music,” she replied with a slight tilt of her head as she looked back at Lithi. “If you were watching, you must realize my style is quite a bit different from what you normally dance to.”

Lithi's short crown feathers rose, but she smiled. “Yes, that's true.” She fixed her penetrating gaze upon Jaess then, and he waited to see what would come next. Lithi wasn't pleased, he could sense that, but she wasn't exactly angry either. The emotions cycling through her eyes were unclear even though he'd known her now for multiple moon cycles. “You should come with us—on our tour,” she said as she turned back to Sam.

“What?” Sam asked before her expression cleared and she tilted her flute diagonally across her body. “Are you serious?”

Lithi let her wings rise and extend partially, puffing herself up to create a larger presence. “Yes. The purpose of the cultural exchange initiatives is to bring our peoples closer together, to strengthen the bonds between our planets. It’s entirely appropriate to include a human musician, and the fact that you can force Jaess to dance like that only makes it a better idea.” She was looking very pleased with herself. “You have no objections, do you, Jaess?”

“No.” The answer came out as more of a whisper than the confident reply he’d planned to give, and Lithi continued speaking as if he hadn’t said anything at all.

“Are you willing to join us?” she asked, stepping closer towards Sam.

Sam caught his eye as if she hoped to find some sort of answer there. If anything could be read from his face, it’d be telling her that the idea of sharing the next two moon cycles with her was his greatest desire. He could barely force himself to breathe as he waited for her to respond.

“What sort of compensation can I expect?” she asked instead of giving the resounding “yes” he’d hoped to hear.

For a moment, Lithi looked as disappointed as he felt before she tilted her head to the side and then smiled. “Ah, yes, the human obsession with credits. I will need to consult with our human relations liaisons before I give you an official offer, but I can have that information available for you after tonight’s performance. You’ll be attending with Captain T’xith and his mate, correct?”

“Yes, I’ll be there tonight,” Sam replied. “I’ll think about it, and I look forward to your offer.” She shifted her weight on her feet, swiveling slightly so that she faced him again. “Until tonight,” Sam said, and then she backed up before she turned away again, lowering herself down to the stage to disassemble her flute.

Jaess was about to follow her down when he felt Lithi grip his forearm and hold him back. She hissed softly. “The others are waiting. We must leave now—you’ve already delayed long enough. Come.”

He didn't want to go. He wanted to stay in place until she looked back at him, until her lips curled up in that small smile he was already longing to see cross her mouth every time their gazes caught.

Jaess walked backwards under the sharp tug of Lithi's grip as he watched Sam, but her hands were busy at her open instrument case, and the sharp set of her shoulders told him she would stay occupied. He let Lithi pull him away, consoling himself with the promise of seeing Sam again later that night. It didn't stop him from waiting for a glance that never came, not until he reached the wings and he watched her walk away. The stage was empty, quiet, and hollow now. He didn't think it would come back to life for him until she played once more, until her song echoed through him again—his mate.

THE DEMAND FOR COMPENSATION HAD BEEN A BLUFF. SAM WAS honest enough to admit that to herself. She wasn't going to be receiving any callbacks from her performances the other day, and despite her initial wariness, there was an excitement she felt at the idea of playing for the Xithilene—for *Jaess*—that she hadn't experienced at the thought of providing background music for weddings and corporate parties.

They'd be leaving again soon for that evening's performance. She was back aboard the *Bite of the Fa'asath* with Kayla. Sam was fussing with her hair, pretending that she cared about the reflection looking back at her in the mirror. She didn't see herself when she lifted her head. She saw Jaess and the intoxicating way he'd moved to her music, as if he'd thrust a hand beneath her breast, cupped her heart and squeezed.

Sam had played her own music that afternoon.

She hadn't played her own songs for any of the auditions, not even the punk band who might've actually wanted to hear something original. She hadn't dared.

"I don't think pulling it again is going to change anything," Kayla said with a light laugh as she tipped her head towards the loose curl Sam had been tugging. A quick glance at her sister made it clear that Kay knew something was up. She had that concerned look—the look that meant it was time to tiptoe around Sam again.

“I’m ready,” Sam said with a forced grin. “The rehearsal this afternoon was pretty amazing.” She hadn’t said anything about Lithi’s offer, and she wasn’t planning on it until after she received the official version, yet she couldn’t imagine she’d say no.

Kayla’s smile was too bright, too eager. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.” She looked down at her lap. “It didn’t remind you of—”

“No.” She was tired of being fragile. Nothing had even happened. She’d had a week of forced vacation in a forest village. Big deal. Uvaess hadn’t hurt her. Not really. “If I’d thought it’d be a problem, I would’ve declined the invite—simple. You and T’xith don’t have to take care of me. I’m an adult, in case you’ve forgotten. One rescue doesn’t mean I can’t function anymore. Enough, Kay. Let’s just go.”

Sam kept her head down. She didn’t want to discuss it further, and she didn’t want to see Kayla’s face right then; she knew it’d be full of hurt.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. I just worry about you.”

“I know. I’m sorry for being bitchy. I just can’t dwell on that time anymore, you know?” Sam stood up and joined her sister where she waited by the door, bumping their shoulders together. “Sometimes I miss being your big sister. I’m the one who’s supposed to be taking care of you.”

They stepped out into one of the ship’s nondescript jade corridors and headed towards the front exit hatch where she assumed they’d be meeting T’xith and some of his men. Sam hadn’t noticed any signs of hostility in the city, but apparently a Xithilene captain and his mate could be a potential target. She fell back so she was walking a few steps behind and looked at Kayla, really looked at her. Her sister had ended up being the strong one, the adventurer of their family, and Sam couldn’t say it didn’t suit her. Sam swallowed hard over an ugly emotion that tasted like disappointment but burned like envy.

“T’xith!” Kayla sped up when she saw T’xith pass through the now closing double doors of the bridge. Sam nodded and

gave him a brief smile.

“Kayla, Samantha,” he said as he moved towards her sister. He slid his arm against hers, taking Kay’s hand as if it were as natural as breathing. They really did make a pretty pair. “Our escort will meet us inside the transportation center.”

“Airport, babe—airport,” she heard Kayla whisper under her breath.

She needed to get off this ship. She didn’t know what was wrong with her. Sam wanted Kayla to be happy. She needed to breathe fresh air and clear out all this bitterness—this wasn’t who she was. She hated feeling this way.

“You must’ve watched the entire performance already, Lady Samantha,” said T’xith. “I didn’t expect you to stay so long at the theater. I hope you won’t be bored this evening.”

She didn’t know T’xith well enough yet to be able to tell whether that was an attempt at humor or a serious observation. “I doubt it,” she replied with a brittle grin. “It was beautiful. Besides, there’s a special magic to opening night—no rehearsal is ever quite the same. I can’t imagine being bored tonight.” That was no lie.

Would they find it odd that she wanted to see Lithi afterwards? She might not even need to say anything herself. T’xith was probably already planning on taking them backstage to congratulate Jaess. She let out a slow exhale, hoping they wouldn’t hear how loud it sounded in the empty hallway. Everything would be fine. *Chasing fate*. That’s what he’d called coming to Earth, but it felt like the words belonged to her now, too. Her luck had finally turned. She couldn’t let this chance get away from her.

Somehow she made it through the drive to the theater without ringing any of T’xith and Kayla’s alarm bells. She must’ve replied to their polite questions, but she couldn’t remember what she’d said. Sam only knew that she finally felt as if she could breathe again once she stepped out of the transport. It pulled to a stop at an alternate entrance, and two Xithilene soldiers waited by the door while another followed them out of the transport.

She nodded away the offered alien arm as T’xith led her sister forward. Someone else took their coats, and they didn’t walk long before the expectant murmur of the rest of the theatergoers droned through the air. Anticipation tingled against her skin, dancing electric as they moved towards the crowd. She could practically feel the warmth of the keys beneath her fingertips that she’d played for Jaess earlier that day. Her hot breath had coaxed out the notes of a song she’d never shared before, that he’d taken and thrown it back again—better, deeper, richer—reflected in the grace of his dark body.

“Are you okay, Sam?” Her sister’s soft voice wavered in the air.

“Fine.” Another quick smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

They’d turned down a hallway leading to the boxes on the right side of the theater. Her gaze fell to the plush carpet beneath her scuffed heels as they descended, and the first genuine grin of the night tugged on her lips. It figured they’d have the best seats in the house. How was this her life? None of it felt real. *You’re a long way from Cherry Ridge*. The grin faded.

One of the soldiers escorting them opened a door and she slipped into the private box and took one of the seats to the left. They had a fantastic view of the stage, and from the rehearsal earlier, she knew it’d be easy to follow Jaess from their position.

“You’re sure everything’s fine?” Kayla whispered as she settled in at her side.

“I’m sure. Drop it, Kay. I’m just looking forward to the performance.” She added a smile to temper the bluntness of the words.

Luckily it wasn’t long before the lights began to dim. Dark fell, voices hushed, and she breathed in the comfort of anonymity. Now she could finally stop pretending. That was the thing about performances, whether she was part of the audience or the one giving the show—she could just be, no pretense, no masks, just Sam.

The drumbeat started, and it was just as she remembered. She didn't even try to avoid looking for Jaess among the other dancers. The familiar flash of his bright wings brought a tightness to her throat, and she fought not to curl her hands into fists. She shouldn't have played for him. She couldn't look away anymore. Sam couldn't tell herself there was nothing there, even if it was just a fragile cord that only she could sense.

Maybe it was stupid to accept Lithi's offer, but what was the alternative? She could do it. She could bear the brush of wings and the snap of feathers. It'd be a way forward, the type of opportunity that might never come again. She'd be playing *her* music in front of hundreds of people, soaking up the energy from stages across the continent, maybe even the world. Lithi had handed her a dream, even if she'd been too stunned to fully realize it that afternoon.

Jaess was doing better than he had earlier. He no longer seemed to be a step behind the group as they spun and jumped their way through the opening numbers.

"What are you smiling about?" Kayla asked softly, nudging her with an elbow.

Sam turned her head towards her sister and realized she really did have a grin on her face. "Nothing," she whispered back, still feeling an unaccountable lightness as she looked back at the stage.

She gave herself over to watching the performance, shutting off the swirling thoughts that only seemed to pull her back down. Instead, Sam let herself soar with each leap and crash again each time their glinting scaled feet hit the stage. When Jaess took his place for the final number, it was her song she heard playing. No drums, no pan pipes and fifes—her notes were the ones that filled her mind when he danced.

He'd seen her. She was almost positive he had. It was easy to imagine each lunge, each flare of his wings was for her, just like it'd been earlier that afternoon. He'd almost reached the end of his solo. Jaess' feet touched the highest platform as he landed lightly. He looked out across the sea of people

watching, and she would've sworn their eyes met. Then he plunged from the platform like he was taking a dive—sleek, dangerous grace. Kayla gasped at her side and she heard the other Xithilenes' feathers rustling.

Foolish. Dangerous. Impossible. The soldiers T'xith had brought spoke the words low in Xithilene, and she took in their stern expressions as the audience broke into riotous applause. Sam glanced at T'xith. His lips were turned up at the corner of his mouth despite the disapproval of his men.

"I take it that he's always enjoyed testing limits," she said.

T'xith stiffened slightly before he turned to look at her, but his voice was relaxed and warm when he spoke. "Yes. My cousin has always been the first to seek trouble, but I understand now why he was chosen to represent us."

"He's amazing, but none of the others jumped like that. Is it safe?" Kayla asked.

T'xith grunted. "It's Jaess. He can handle it. He's expecting us to meet him backstage."

Sam shifted in her seat. It was coming now—the moment of truth. She knew she didn't want to see Kayla's face when she realized what Sam's plans were. At least she had a few more minutes of peace before the incoming lecture.

The crowd was calling for an encore, but Jaess had stepped into the back row of dancers, and it was Lithi and another man who performed a short number amid the continued clapping. When it was finished, all of the Xithilene dancers bent their heads towards the audience in unison, and then they filed out in neat lines towards the wings. The stage lights darkened, and only seconds later, the house brightened. The theater was full of the rustling of human clothing and comm device alerts pinging as their silence modes were deactivated.

"Let's go. Someone should be waiting at the door to guide us," said T'xith as he stood and held out a hand for Kayla.

A human woman in an usher's uniform motioned for their party to follow her once they stepped out of the box. After that, it was just a rush of sound and motion. Sam held her head

high, but she was looking through everything in front of her as if it weren't there at all, until it was all just a blur of tastefully dim hallways and rich, red carpet.

“Does our demonstration meet with your approval, captain? I've heard that you're from Lisseethi yourself.”

Sam's world clicked back into focus at the sound of that sly, feminine voice. She was standing beside Kayla, and Lithi was addressing T'xith with a flirtatious slide of a smile. Her fingers began to twitch by her thigh, and she realized it was the same feeling she'd experienced while watching the other woman cling to Jaess. Not jealousy—not exactly, but the desire to put Lithi in her place, to remind her that she had no right to either of the men. She doubted T'xith would thank her for her interference if she were to say anything, and she made herself relax her hand and wait for Lithi to notice her.

“An excellent performance—I didn't know our dances could look that way. Maybe we need a similar tour back home among the continents.” T'xith smiled easily as he tucked Kayla closer beneath his arm. “Jaess! Come,” he called out over Lithi's shoulder.

Sam looked and saw Jaess watching them, his arms braced against the frame of an open door to the right. His bright wings were all tucked away behind him, and he bent his head to them with a grin. Then his body seemed to snap to attention as he dropped his arms and moved forward, each step sinuous and sure.

“Well met, cousin,” said Jaess as he reached for T'xith's arm.

“Samantha Chang, I have something for you.” Lithi had moved in close beside her and held out the inside of her delicate wrist. She wore what looked like a thin gold bracelet with a smooth medallion in the middle, but Sam recognized it for what it was—a Xithilene comm device. “The tech should be compatible for a data transfer,” Lithi continued expectantly.

Sam pushed back her sleeve and lifted her wrist, pressing the face of her own human-made device towards Lithi's. She waited to hear if her comm would give the slight notification

buzz for an incoming file. When she felt a hum against her skin several seconds later, she nodded to Lithi as she swiped the accept icon on her now active device.

“I’ve got it. I’ll just take a moment to look it over, if you don’t mind,” she said as she stepped back from the others. She caught Kayla giving her a look and shook her head, silently telling her it was nothing to worry about.

Sam quickly read through the offer, pressing her lips together to hold back a whistle when she saw the number of credits indicated. It wasn’t anything crazy, but it was definitely more than enough to buy her a few months’ time once the contract was up. Two months—that was how long she’d be expected to play for the dance troupe’s performances. Afterwards they’d all be returning to Xithilene. It was a good offer. She should take it before Lithi changed her mind.

“I’ll do it,” she said before she could chicken out. “When do I start?”

“WE HAVE SIX MORE PERFORMANCES HERE BEFORE WE LEAVE again. That’s four days—I assume that’s adequate time for you to prepare,” replied Lithi. Jaess watched as the Xithilene woman gave Sam an assessing glance. “Now that I have your comm ID, I’ll have one of the humans assigned to us contact you about arranging appropriate garments for you. I hope you have more of your music ready for us. My superiors were pleased with the idea of incorporating a human musician, and they’ll want to hear multiple options for the performance.”

Sam nodded her head vigorously, very unlike the way of his people. It seemed to denote agreement. “I have plenty of music, don’t worry, that won’t be a problem, and four days is plenty of time.” Then she smiled, exposing her blunt, white teeth, even as her body seemed to vibrate and tremble.

“What’s going on?” Sam’s sister grabbed her arm and leaned close to speak, but Jaess could still hear her. “Prepare for what, Sam?”

He held himself still. Jaess wanted to let his crown feathers ripple with pleasure and approval, but he knew she still reacted poorly to the sounds they made. He observed Sam’s face as he waited for her to answer. Maybe that’s why he missed T’xith’s approach. His cousin’s large hand clamped down around his wrist and squeezed.

“I’ll be accompanying the dance troupe.” Sam smiled again, but it’d gone shaky, as if it might slip at any moment. “I

played this afternoon—for Jaess. My music was a good fit.” She lifted her shoulders and let them drop again.

The sister looked worried as she frowned sadly at the floor, and T’xith’s grip grew tighter. He was certain it’d bruise beneath the scales.

“Sam is very talented. We work well together,” he said, knowing it would probably only enflame his cousin’s irritation.

“Did you plan this?”

The sister sounded angry, but he didn’t understand her reaction.

“No. How could I? I wished to hear Sam play, but Lithi was the one who decided to offer your sister the position. You should be proud of her. Don’t you value musicians among your people?”

Kayla curled her red lips into a formidable scowl before she turned back towards Sam. She was preparing to say something, but Jaess shook his wrist free from T’xith’s fingers and stepped past him. Then he extended his arm and held out his hand to Sam, ignoring her sister.

“Welcome, Sam. I’m glad you’ll be joining us,” he told her, unable to resist pressing their arms together in a warrior’s clasp. Her hand was small and soft in his, and she didn’t pull away until he released her. He could feel T’xith radiating disapproval at his back, but he ignored it in favor of meeting Sam’s gaze.

“Me too,” she replied. “It’s going to be an adventure.”

Jaess felt the thud of his heart pound like a drum. She’d accepted Lithi’s offer. *An adventure*—that was one way to describe it. To him it sounded more like destiny. Two human moon cycles were left before they’d return to his planet. He’d been lucky to receive a single day in her presence. Jaess couldn’t help but feel as if it were truly the Lady’s hand which had guided him here to her home, to the woman who had the power to claim him.

LITHI SLID FREE FROM HIS ARMS AS THEIR DANCE ENDED, BUT Jaess didn't look towards the gathered humans seated in the theater. Even so, he knew it the moment that Sam stepped onto the stage. A sudden breathy hush, as if the entire crowd had inhaled in unison, signaled the change. He didn't let himself move, not yet. He held the final pose from the last dance. He needed to wait.

He and Sam hadn't yet been able to replicate their first impromptu performance during rehearsals, but Lithi had been pleased enough with them. As those first notes of her song spun sweetly through the air, he knew that tonight would be different. He could feel that familiar, trembling joy descend as Sam's music unfurled and pulsed within him, and he extended his wings, displaying in a way that was solely for her. She stood towards the front of the stage, slightly to his left, facing out to the audience. He wanted her eyes on him, but he knew that wasn't the human way.

The notes swelled and ebbed, carrying him towards the first platform as he leapt. She wore a human garment, a dress that revealed the lines of her strong arms. It brushed the floor and accentuated the bold curve of her waist. He moved faster as her clever fingers flew, and Jaess danced higher and higher, taking the platforms as if they were truly just the wide branches of the home forest. He couldn't think past the perfection of this moment. Only with Sam's music did his movements become blessed, transcending his simple hunter's tricks. Together, they gave the people watching a glimpse of the Lady's face. He didn't delude himself that his skill belonged to him alone.

He was diving towards the stage before he knew it, pulling up in anticipation of his landing as the last soaring notes hung in the air. His feet touched down, and he bowed his head. After a lingering moment of silence, the loud hand claps of the humans made his body go stiff with tension. He still hadn't accustomed himself to the sound, and tonight it was louder

than it'd ever been before. Sam bent in half from her hips, and the swell of human noise rose still higher. Other dancers flooded the stage, and he felt Vasith bump his elbow.

“Incline your head! Stop standing there like a mute keelis beast.”

Jaess glanced at the other man and took in the tight set of his jaw, the way his crown feathers rose spiky and disorderly above his face. Vasith had been there the night Lithi had watched him in the dance hall. He'd thought she'd made a mistake asking Jaess to dance with them then, and his opinion hadn't changed in the interim.

Many of the humans were standing again, calling for them to add one last dance to the performance—an encore, they called it. They wanted more of Sam. Jaess knew it, and maybe for the first time since he'd begun to dance before these crowds, he felt borne up on the people's pleasure, their exultation. Of course they wanted Sam to continue. He longed for the same thing.

“Aren't you going to claim your spot above all of us?” Vasith's whisper bit, and Jaess had to work hard to keep his arm still against the force of the rough shove of a wing.

“No. Claim it for yourself.” Jaess didn't bother looking over at the other dancer again. He'd ask Sam to practice more of her music with him so that next time they'd be prepared. If in the future, she wanted them to take their place in front of the crowd and accept more of their praise, he would do it, but not tonight.

Vasith strode towards Lithi and snatched up her hand, pulling her past the others. Jaess watched as Sam stepped back, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the way was clear. Somehow he found his way to her side, and the butt of her flute nudged the side of his thigh. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest and the brightness that seemed to expand outwards from her smaller frame. Something pinched deep in his chest. Back in Vastiss, it had been a relief to see her fight; here on Earth, he was blessed to see the fierceness of her joy.

SAM RUBBED HER EYES. SHE COULD FEEL SUNLIGHT STREAMING past a gap in the blinds, but she didn't want to move from her warm bed.

“How can there be so many places to go? Still almost two entire moon cycles until we go home!”

“Stop moaning, X'tha. I think perhaps I'll stay.”

That's right. She had roommates now.

“Good morning,” she called, croaking a little as the unfamiliar syllables of the main Xithilene language rolled out roughly over her tongue. The translation devices helped—in fact they were pretty damn miraculous—but she still had to pronounce the alien words, and she was never at her best first thing in the morning. Still, she thought it was a good idea to remind the girls that she could understand them. Sam had no interest in overhearing any unsavory gossip about herself.

“Lady! You're awake. Do you prefer that we speak Xithilene?” The one with the lower voice and black, green and gold feathers was speaking. She was pretty sure that was X'tha, but this was only day three with the troupe—otherwise known as the morning after her first performance.

“Xithilene, English, whatever you like.” Five or six months ago, she would've been thrilled at the prospect of speaking Xithilene as easily as she could now. She'd expected it to become as natural as breathing during her new life in Verkissat. *“So, what do our days usually look like? Do we normally get any time to explore?”* she asked.

“Sometimes, but only during approved excursions. There are safety concerns—that’s what Lithi’s told us,” replied the other roommate. It probably made her weak that she was glad the woman had chosen to reply in a human language instead.

“Has anything happened so far?” Sam asked. Despite the presence of T’xith’s men the other night at the theater, she hadn’t really taken the threat seriously. She hoped that Kayla would’ve told her if she knew something concrete.

“No. I think Lithi just wants to make sure none of us enjoy ourselves too much in your human cities—she doesn’t want to lose any of her dancers, even if it’s just temporary,” said X’tha. “Do you dance at all, lady?”

“Just Sam,” she found herself replying reflexively. She huffed out a half laugh. “Not like you. I’ll stick to playing my flute, thank you very much.” Sam grinned at the other women. “So, I have an important question for you both—have you discovered the importance of coffee?”

“SAM—WAIT.”

Sam had just finished cleaning her flute and was snapping the case closed when she heard Jaess call her name. She hadn’t been avoiding him, but she’d been anxious about running into him after their first show together the night before. Even now, she still wasn’t sure how to properly express what it’d meant to her to be up there in front of such a crowd, and to know without a doubt that they’d been transfixed by her music. She’d been coasting on that adrenaline high for hours until she’d finally fallen asleep in her room with X’tha and...nope, she still didn’t recall the other one’s name.

“How’s it going, Jaess? Do you feel good about the music for tonight? Any questions?” She tried to keep her tone relaxed and easy.

“The song is perfect.” He came to a stop about two feet away and tucked his hands into his pockets. How there was room when he was wearing those buttery soft, way too tight

leather pants, she had no idea, but he somehow managed to do it and make it look incredibly right.

“Perfect?” She barely kept herself from heaving a sigh when she heard the teasing lilt in her own voice. Her and her smart mouth—*no flirting with the alien*.

There was something seriously wrong with her. She’d sworn off Xithilene men for good after Uvaess. The simple sound of crows settling in to roost along their neighbor’s back fence had been forcing her shoulders to shoot up to her ears since she’d come back to Earth. She shouldn’t even be tempted.

Too bad she’d never been good at making the right choices.

“Perfect.” There was such finality in the way he said the word. It felt heavy, solid—immutable. As if she could argue, but nothing would change his mind. “Would you come with me?” he asked.

“Where?” *Space? Verkissat with its gleaming towers? A village that balanced on the apex of the world?* The yes almost fell from her mouth before he answered.

“Coffee. Humans enjoy it, correct?”

Sam laughed. “I do, at least. Have you been speaking with X’ta?”

“Who?” he asked blankly.

“It doesn’t matter.” She shook her hair back behind her shoulders and stepped closer. “Coffee sounds great.”

The theater here was different from the one in Seattle—newer, brighter. She supposed it made sense. Everything in Calgary seemed shinier and fresher than home. It was another one of those older cities that had doubled and then tripled in size after the great storms and the early waves of climate migrations.

“Have you visited here before?”

Sam glanced at Jaess as they made their way towards the doors where they’d entered earlier that morning. “No. I never

had the opportunity to travel much. It was part of the reason I signed up for the Mate Portal Program,” she admitted.

“You weren’t looking for a mate?”

“No—yes? I mean, isn’t everyone looking for love? I guess I was just hoping to have it all: adventure, love, the kind of life I could never manage to make for myself at home.”

Jaess’ laugh was deep and raspy. “Adventure? I thought you didn’t like Xithilene.”

“I loved Verkissat,” she said. When she didn’t continue, Jaess’ jaw clenched, and Sam could see his wings tighten back against his shoulders. It made their black edged ridges rise higher, and there was no pretending that he was just a strangely colored man as it was so easy to do when she was around T’xith.

“Would you have stayed? If the Sa’isthess male who took you had remained with you in Verkissat, would you have chosen differently?” They’d gone down a short series of stairs and were approaching the exit. Jaess had slowed down, almost to a stop, as they reached the last step.

Sam didn’t see any point in being less than honest. “No. Maybe I would’ve stayed longer, but eventually it would’ve ended the same way. Uvaess and I just—we just didn’t work.” She didn’t understand why it hurt to admit it even now, why the failure of it weighed on her so heavily. She could feel Jaess observing her, probably wondering if she’d only been using his people from the start.

“Had you thought it would? When you left your planet?” he asked.

Sam looked at his dark scaled hand as he reached for the handle of the door that would lead them towards the frigid outdoors. Her voice came out as a whisper, holding all of that shredded hope she’d clung to just a short time ago. “Yes,” she said.

Jaess somehow opened the door and slid his arm beneath hers at the same time. Her gloved hand tangled with his, and she let him pull her closer to his side. “Then I’m sorry it was

not what you'd hoped, but I don't regret that I was able to help you leave," he told her. Their breath was forming soft, billowy clouds in front of them, the cold far more bitter than it'd ever seemed in Cherry Ridge.

"Thank you." The other night, amid the dreary green of the Xithilene ship, Kayla had described how he had carried her down from the great trees of Uvaess' village, how Jaess had run faster through the forest than anyone she'd ever seen before—all while holding Sam safely in his arms. "Thanks for everything back in Lisseethi, too. If I didn't say it before, I want to make sure you know that I appreciate it. I could never have stayed there. I can't even explain how grateful I was to leave it all behind."

"Such words are unnecessary. If you are happy now, that is thanks enough." Jaess' voice had gone even deeper. He slipped his arm free and pulled his jacket tighter across his chest. His body shuddered.

"Do you know where we're going? You mentioned coffee, but from what the others said, I didn't think Lithi wanted us to go out on our own." They were staying in a hotel nearby, but he'd led them in the opposite direction, and it looked like he was freezing. She was eager to get him back indoors, especially when she recalled the tropical climate he'd lived in back on Xithilene.

He let out a half choked hissing noise. "Lithi. The worst she can do is curtail our leave time—if she even notices we're missing, and I don't believe she'll hold you to the same rules. You're human, after all."

"Come on. This way," said Sam as she walked faster. It looked like there was a cafe up on the corner. Her fingers were starting to feel numb despite her gloves. It'd be worse for Jaess—the jacket he wore had been altered to fit his wings, but it looked like it'd been a rushed job, and even a quick glance revealed several openings across the back. The cold air would easily be able to seep inside.

They didn't talk until after they entered the building. She held the door open for him, and he followed her to the order

screens.

“I can’t read your script,” Jaess told her. He looked embarrassed, but he shouldn’t have been. Xithilene translation devices did a great job with spoken language, but she’d had to learn what little written Xithilene she knew the old-fashioned way. It wasn’t as if he’d have had much time to learn how to read English, especially since she knew now that the dance troupe had spent most of their time so far touring the major Asian cities before they’d arrived in Seattle.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s simpler than it looks. There’s plain coffee—we call that black—and then other drinks that include steamed or frothed milk, and others that are sweet. There’s even hot chocolate, but it’s not like yours,” she added with a grin.

“Choose whatever you’d order for yourself, but don’t tell me what’s in it. I think I’d prefer not to know,” Jaess said with a grim frown. That’s right—the milk. The idea of drinking animal milk wasn’t exactly popular on Xithilene. It was downright repulsive to them according to what Uvaess had told her.

“Got it.” Sam quickly selected the code for a basic cappuccino and ordered two. If he wanted to sweeten it, he could do it himself.

“I have credits.”

Sam looked away from the ordering screen. She’d just waved her comm device over the payment icon. “You can get it next time,” she replied easily.

“Next time?”

Sam felt something small and warm curl inside her stomach as she watched a slow smile spread across his lips. “Yep. Next time.”

She wanted a next time, she realized. She *liked* being around Jaess. Her throat seemed to thicken as she searched for something else to say to break the silence between them as they waited for their drinks to appear at the ready window. She wasn’t supposed to like him. Not like this, not so soon. She

made herself stare at his wings, but she couldn't bring back the familiar fear. Not with Jaess.

“What’s wrong?” His voice had gone softer, gentle, but it was still undeniably alien. It wasn't enough to shake any sense into her. Wasn't this what she always did, the reason why Kay had always scolded her? She leapt before she looked, and it always landed her in a new mess.

“Nothing. Just cold,” she said, smiling tightly before she lifted her head towards the ready window. Two steaming mugs waited for them. “Looks like our coffee’s ready. Let’s go sit down.”

Jaess picked them both up with a smile. She saw the dark, heavy black of his thick nails as he curled his fingers around the handles that were too small for him to do so gracefully. He flashed her a grin that revealed the tip of his left fang, and what she felt as she watched him almost knocked her off of her feet. *Desire*. She wanted Jaess of Vastiss, and she hadn't realized it until she was already airborne. She'd just have to hope the landing was a long time coming, because she wasn't ready to crash again—not yet.

EARTH CITIES STANK. HIS NOSE AND MOUTH WERE SO FULL with the excess scents that he felt as if he'd choke on them. Jaess looked down at his hands. Even with the new gloves he'd acquired for warmth, they still shook. If it weren't for Sam, he didn't think he'd be able to bear it.

Although he hadn't expected everything to suddenly become easy once he saw her again, he certainly hadn't anticipated it turning so terribly difficult. Before he'd been able to focus on the moment in the future when he would finally see her again. The time no longer passed in a haze as he counted down the days until he could be in her presence. Now everything was painfully immediate.

He couldn't ignore all the small details anymore. The human cities were so much vaster than even Verkissat, and this Earthan winter—he'd never experienced anything like it. The bright whiteness of the snow, the glare of ice—not a scrap of green was visible. Sometimes he felt as if he'd be buried beneath the emptiness. The human buildings extended out on every side of him without end. Terrifying, infinite pressure.

Later that day, he sat inside his shared room at the lodging by the theater. The other dancers staying with him acted as if he weren't there. He didn't mind. If he looked hard enough, past the blurry borders of the city, he could just barely see a ridge of mountains through the clouds in the distance. At least it was an assurance that there was still someplace on this planet that wasn't conquered by the humans. Someplace wild enough to survive them.

“I’ve requested my own solo.” Jaess didn’t turn his head, even though Vasith had made sure to raise his voice. He knew the other man had wanted to upset him with his words, but Jaess simply didn’t care. The dancing had only ever been a means to reach Earth—to find Sam. “I’m going to request that the human woman accompanies me, as well,” Vasith added in the same loud voice.

Jaess’ hands flattened so quickly upon the desk in front of him that his fingernails scratched against the fake wood surface.

“What was that, Jaess of the unknown pond?”

“Vastiss,” he replied, willing the other man to hear the threat. “Jaess of Vastiss.”

“Do you believe you’re the only one who deserves to have a human musician play for them? If it weren’t for her skill, the humans wouldn’t cheer for you as they do. It is her music that makes them raise their hands together.”

“Do you think I mind? I know it is her music that enthralls them.” Jaess half smiled. “It is a privilege to hear her.”

Vasith shot him a nasty look, his crown feathers rippling with distaste, but he didn’t reply. Jaess turned his face back towards the window. He had no interest in engaging with the others. Tomorrow they’d be able to visit a place in the mountains before they took one of the archaic human flying machines to their next destination. He’d already promised himself he would take the opportunity to be alone with Sam again. Their stolen coffee breaks weren’t enough.

They’d gone to the same building to talk two more times before Lithi had stopped them and forbidden it. Sometimes when they rehearsed, she’d turn to face him as she played. Those moments were even better than the shared coffee. He’d never spent much time in conversation. When he danced for her, it was somehow purer than words. Words could be so confusing, so easily misconstrued.

She didn’t flinch anymore when she was around him, even when he forgot and shifted his wings or let his crown feathers

move naturally. He no longer felt as if when she looked at him, she saw another man's face hovering over his own. That would change if she really knew what he felt in her presence, if she could scent his desire, the urge to claim, to press his fangs within the softness of her beautiful body. If she truly understood, what little there was between them would all end. She wasn't ready. Maybe she no longer feared all of his people, but she was still skittish, still wary.

"I don't want to go to their cold mountain. I've had enough of human cold. I can't wait until we leave. They say the next places are more like home." Vasith's friend whined like a youngling. Jaess inhaled slowly, willing himself to be patient.

"Then stay here. They can't make us go to their mountain," Vasith said with a shudder, ruffling his wings. "They should send the priest clan here to build one of their strongholds. They would be the only ones to relish such a desolate place."

"It isn't desolate. Millions of them reside in this city alone." He hadn't meant to speak, to call attention to himself.

"You should hate it most of all. Had you ever even left your forest before you came to Verkissat and tricked Lithi with your foolish performance at the dance hall?" asked Vasith.

"What does it matter? Maybe I wanted something different." He lied. He didn't.

"Our people are not as gullible as these humans. If you stay in Verkissat after we return, they won't call your name or lift their hands. You will be nothing. You've always been the worst of us all."

Jaess didn't reply. He had no interest in spending the rest of his life this way. If he returned—when—he'd go back to Vastiss. Vasith and his friends continued to talk, but he turned away from them and faced the window again, looking out at the faded mountains that seemed so far away. There, only a day distant, waited the promise of freedom.

EVERY NIGHT THE APPLAUSE SEEMED TO GROW LOUDER. HER music was something beyond any he'd ever known. At home in the village, people often played, but even the death songs of the s'kavi flute didn't transfix him the way Sam could. There was something divine in it. If his faith had been weak, seeing her perform every night would have strengthened it. Watching Sam made it easy to understand why his ancestors had seen the Lady and known her as their goddess.

This time when the crowd begged for more, Jaess was the one to step forward. He stopped at Sam's side and she gave him a small nod and a breathless smile. They'd practiced this. She lifted her flute, and the humans began to sit again. She waited until it was completely quiet before she started to play. This piece was faster, and it made him think of the long days of his youth when he'd explored past the outer bounds of their territory. The wonders he'd seen then revealed themselves in every note, in the unfamiliar rhythms of her song. She was a mystery. She was not even from the same world, but somehow he felt as if she knew him better than any other ever had, and it hadn't even required a word from his lips for her to have such mastery over him.

He didn't take to all of the platforms. It wasn't meant to be a full dance, just a last reminder of who they were for the audience to savor before they left the theater and enjoyed the rest of their night. When he would've jumped to the next cylinder, he twisted his body and spun, keeping his knees loose and ready for a landing. After his feet touched down, he moved towards Sam, taking long, sweeping strides.

Sam kept playing, but he saw her shoulder blades tighten when she realized he was there beside her. He waited for the moment when she turned to face him, and then opened his wings in display before he held out a hand to her. He wasn't sure what she would do. The low note she played wavered, elastic and living like the flow of water. Her people and his, they both disappeared from his field of vision until they were the only beings on the black blankness of the stage.

Her hand when it touched his was too perfect, too fragile to be real, yet his rough and scaled fingers closed around it

anyway. “Sam,” he whispered, and then he pulled her close, his opposite hand pressing into the arch of her spine, just as he’d held Lithi before. He felt it the instant she let go and leaned into his palm, and then he pressed them together, hip to hip, and they began to spin. He let himself grow dizzy with the movement before his gaze locked with her deep brown eyes. Her black hair spread loose and wild, flung out behind her in the air. She smelled like river water and the strange metal of her flute and the sweetest fruit, the rarest flowers. He never wanted to let her go.

Maybe that was why he made such a foolish mistake. His wings had been fully extended, but with every revolution of the spin, they slowed, and he wanted it to last, to stretch until eternity. He closed his wings around her, covering them both in the shelter of his feathers, hiding them away from the world and lengthening the spin. Her body went stiff and tense, and he could feel the frenzied speed of her breathing through the press of his palm against her bare back.

“Jaess! Jaess,” she pleaded. “Let me go—let me out!” The words all came out in frantic, shaky whispers, and he understood then what he’d done wrong. He snapped his wings open and then back again, letting the spotlight flood its vivid brightness over Sam’s face like a small sun. Her head fell back as her body trembled. She basked in it, because now she was free from him. The shelter of his wings, the protection every mate offered his k’lallsa—to her it was no gift. He knew then he’d misunderstood. The Lady hadn’t blessed him; he’d cursed himself all on his own.

SAM SAT ALONE AS THE LARGE TRANSPORT TOOK THEM PAST the last bit of Calgary's sprawl. Banff and its legendary scenery were waiting for them up ahead, largely unspoiled in a way few places were any longer. She'd looked up the vids and images as soon as she'd seen their performance schedule on her viewscreen. Yesterday she'd been looking forward to this excursion more than anything she could remember since her trip to Xithilene itself, but that morning, Jaess had boarded the transport before her, settling in between two other Xithilene men. He hadn't even looked back at her, although she knew he'd had to have felt her staring.

Everything had been going so well. She didn't think she'd ever get tired of the energy fizzing through her veins when the audience clapped and smiled, standing and asking for more of what she'd given them. Not just Sam—alone it'd never been the same. People had never stopped everything just to listen to her play. It was Sam and Jaess together—that was the difference, the magic. When he'd held out his hand to her, she hadn't thought of Uvaess or anything that had come before. She'd taken it, ready to fall along with him. The heat of his palm against her skin, the impossible way they'd spun, had left her all off balance in the most wonderful way.

Then she'd gone and ruined it all. Only a few seconds of panic had taken that fragile thing they'd been building between them and shattered it. She'd been left on the stage, willing him to look back, but even though he stood at her side

throughout the rest of the applause, waiting there silently until the lights went out, he'd never met her gaze again.

Sam rubbed her eyes. She'd barely slept. She glanced back towards Jaess. He was leaning on his side, his wings folded and tilted awkwardly away from the edge of the seat. His eyes were closed, but he looked too still for sleep. *Look up*. His face scrunched up, the line between his brows growing deeper, as if he were trying to shut his eyes even tighter.

"How long until we arrive?" *Are we there yet?* Asking Lithi made her feel like a bratty kid, but she was going to go out of her mind if she had to stay in the transport much longer.

Lithi tipped her head towards her shoulder, her gaze unblinking as she observed Sam like she was an interesting specimen laid out on a tray for dissection. "I thought humans were accustomed to long periods of travel," she said in her smooth, ice sharp voice.

"Not this human," Sam muttered under her breath.

"Don't let Jaess dance with you again. It's one thing for you to play your music for us, but our performances are meant to display Lisseethi artistry. What he did last night—" Sam glanced up and saw Lithi pursing her lips as her long, talon-like nails twisted in the fabric of her skirt. "It wasn't appropriate for an audience. We both know he barely listens to me. Make him follow my rules, or I'll send him home early."

"What? Why?" She'd thought she'd felt panic the night before. She'd been wrong, because it seized her body now, making her heart beat too fast and her vision go cloudy.

"You desire him?" She made herself focus on Lithi's face, on her elfin, bird-like features. She still felt as if she were floating, disconnected from her too tight body. Lithi tilted her head again and frowned as if she'd tasted something bitter. "Give him my message and then leave him in peace. He longs for the forest. He will never leave Xithilene permanently—not even for you, and if you care for him at all, you wouldn't ask it of him. I saw the way you rejected his mating clasp. We all did."

“Mating clasp?” She shouldn’t have spoken. Lithi’s red eyes went even sharper. Uvaess had done it so many times, but she’d never known that was what it was called. Every time she’d pulled back when he reached for her once she’d told him it was over, he’d trapped her beneath his feathers, and he’d told her it would change, that it must.

“Yes. You claimed to have spent time among our people. Surely you knew.”

“It wasn’t like that—for me, on Xithilene. I didn’t know. Not really.”

Lithi was still frowning when she snapped her short feathers up and back. “Do as I told you. Stay away from him. Work with Vasith—he has requested to dance to your strange music.” She turned away when she finished speaking, acting as if Sam were no longer there at all. The urge to glance at Jaess was like an itch between her shoulder blades, but the other woman had made herself clear, and Sam didn’t delude herself into thinking Lithi wouldn’t be watching.

She made herself look out the window, but the scenery faded away to nothing. She didn’t want to remember, but the old feelings came rushing back. Uvaess hadn’t gotten desperate until after he’d spirited her away to his village. Even after she’d tried to make love to him, and everything had felt wrong, he hadn’t held her like that until later. That smothered, buried feeling was one she’d grown to hate. He’d cover her with his wings, shroud her in their inky darkness, and she’d want to scream until her lungs gave out. Sometimes she had, but it’d only made him hold her tighter. He’d been so convinced that if he just waited long enough, everything would change.

At first, she’d wanted the same thing, so badly she was willing to fake it. It was only now that she felt like a fraud, like her emotions were as shallow and changeable as everyone had always said. Her family loved her, but she knew what they thought of her—flighty, impulsive, that she was always looking for the next best thing. She’d wanted to love Uvaess. She’d spent six months convincing herself that she could—that she did. Was it her fault that the feel of his fingertips on

her arm had made her recoil? That his lips had tasted bitter, that the touch of his feathers had caused her shoulders to turn inwards, as if she might have been able to escape it all if it'd just been possible to make herself small enough?

When she looked out again through the wide viewing area of the transport, the buildings were gone. She saw swaths of white and stands of tall, narrow trees, boughs heavy with snow. It was beautiful in a way that reminded her of home, but that didn't make it comfortable. Maybe she'd always been broken. She'd known Jaess for only a couple of weeks, yet she felt more for him than she ever had for Uvaess. What kind of person did that make her? That she liked the deep, alien timbre of his voice, the slide of his scales against her hands, when she hadn't been able to accept the same from the man who should've been hers?

They were still several hours away from dusk, but the light had that faded, thin quality that made her think of dying days and destinations just out of reach. Sam swallowed hard and made herself watch the trees as they continued on. This was what she'd wanted after all; the chance to travel and explore, to share her music with the world. She should be grateful. She'd rejected her mate and gotten everything she'd dreamed of delivered up to her on a silver platter. She was free, so far from that lonely village that the distance was incomprehensible to her frail, human mind. She had no excuse not to be happy. Jaess had wanted to come to Earth. He was looking for something, although he'd never told her exactly what, but she couldn't be the one to take away his chance at it.

She fixed a hard, small smile on her face and told herself she was going to enjoy herself. She'd take it all in, fill up the empty parts of her with views of trees, mountains, and sky and hope that it'd be enough, because she was lucky to be here. She didn't deserve any of it at all.

The transport moved more slowly than usual. Human hover-tech wasn't anywhere near as advanced as what they'd used in Verkissat. They'd been delayed by drifting snow until the transport operator engaged the lift option, but even then, they couldn't go as quickly as the vehicle would've moved on

the ground. Maybe another half hour passed before she saw the faint lights of a touristy looking town ahead. The bold face of a mountain filled most of the window, the view cut off by the roof of the transport. There was something claustrophobic about it, as if that wall of rock might just tip and crush them like so many tiny ants. All around her was beautiful perfection, but it was simultaneously remote and unreal.

The transport veered off onto a side street. It looked like they'd ended up behind one of the many hotels. "Stay in the transport. I will meet with one of our human contacts inside. Wait until I return," ordered Lithi. She stood up and wrapped herself in a long, altered coat, pulled on gloves and two scarves—one wrapped around her neck and the other covered her head.

Five minutes later she came back followed by several humans. Lithi motioned for them to get out of the transport. Some of the humans were removing their luggage from the outer storage compartments, while the others helped Lithi shepherd them inside. It was strange how they were shuffled about in all of the hotels where they'd stayed. She'd never been important enough to be kept secret, and it seemed like useless precaution anyway. As soon as anyone saw the first Lisseethi wing, there'd be no keeping their presence here under wraps.

They'd been assigned to a block of rooms along the ground floor hallway. She followed the bellhop pulling the hovercart with her suitcase to a room at the end of the corridor. She bent her head in greeting towards X'tha. It looked like they'd be sharing again.

"Welcome to Banff. We have tour guides available for you waiting in the main lobby. Once you've settled in, please assemble there if you're interested in exploring," announced a middle-aged woman standing near the area where they'd entered. Sam assumed she was Lithi's human liaison at the hotel. She looked friendly, like she was probably somebody's mom and she might make good cookies, but from the way the woman was wringing her hands, Sam thought she was feeling a little unnerved by her new guests.

“Thanks. That sounds great,” she said, giving the lady a broad smile when no one else said anything. A few of the Xithilene made noises of assent, soft rattling in their throats and easy hisses, but Sam could tell their vocalizations had the opposite effect on the hotel worker. The nice looking woman smiled tightly and hightailed it out of the hall. Sam smothered a laugh, but then she realized it might not have been too long ago that those same noises would have set her on edge, too.

“I don’t know why we couldn’t just leave for our next destination,” grumbled X’tha as she pulled open their door.

Sam stepped inside after her and yanked on her suitcase’s hovertab, drawing it back and moving her hand as if she were throwing a frisbee. It landed right on the foot of her bed, and Sam grinned. “Oh, come on, X’tha. They’re trying to be good hosts. You’re one of the few Xithilene lucky enough to come see my planet. You should try to enjoy it.”

X’tha snapped her wings and raised her arm, performing some sort of complicated gesture with her long fingers. Sam was pretty sure it wasn’t complimentary, but she ignored it and opened her suitcase and pulled out a few extra layers. “I wish I had some real boots with me,” she said as she looked down at her feet. She’d have to double up on her socks and hope for the best. The boots that’d been fine for city streets weren’t meant for mountain wilderness, but then again, the Xithilene who chose to go on the tours wouldn’t have hiking gear on hand either.

As soon as she’d redressed, she grabbed her hat and gloves and waved goodbye to X’tha before she left the room. She walked back down the hall and turned left, following the sound of voices into a cozy looking lodge-style lobby. Big picture windows looked out onto the street. She rubbed her hands together and walked over towards a large fireplace. She smiled at the groups of Xithilene who’d gathered around three humans holding viewscreens.

It looked like they were still waiting for stragglers. Sam pulled on her gloves and hat and retightened her scarf. She turned so that her back faced the warmth of the fire, and that’s when she saw Jaess. This time he wasn’t able to look down

fast enough to avoid meeting her eyes. She gave him a tentative smile, and a small portion of the ball of worry that'd lodged itself in her stomach that morning disintegrated under his matching grin. Jaess walked over to her side, hands in his pockets, looking entirely too good in some sort of pinned together cardigan, his altered smart-tech coat draped over his shoulders.

“Hey, I missed you earlier,” she said quietly.

“You did?” He was giving her a sidelong look that teetered between teasing and hesitant.

“I did,” she confirmed. “Go on the same excursion with me—please.”

His hand stretched towards her just enough so that their gloved fingers could brush. “Of course,” he told her.

One of the human guides cleared his throat, and they angled their bodies his way to listen to the descriptions of the outings.

“What do you think?” she asked when the man had finished talking. “I think I'd like to skip the skating, but I wouldn't mind walking on the lake he mentioned.”

Jaess shivered, his big wing feathers rippling. “Sounds dangerous.”

“If they thought we'd fall through, they wouldn't take us. Too much liability,” she replied with another grin. “Let's go.” She looked for Lithi's red feathers before she took his hand, but Sam didn't see the director anywhere.

Their group piled into another transport, a smaller, self-driving vehicle this time. It was a beautiful drive, and the time sped by faster with Jaess at her side. Their hands touched across the space between them on their seat. A center aisle divided the bench seats, almost like in a train car. There were six others with them in addition to their guide. They'd gone towards the back, and the Xithilene at the front were keeping the guide occupied with their questions.

“I'm sorry about last night. I should've known better.” She wished that his perfect voice was saying anything but that.

None of what had gone wrong the night before had been Jaess' fault.

“Don't apologize. I should've made sure to talk to you afterwards. I'm sorry I froze up. It was just something Uvaess—my failed mate—used to do. I know you didn't mean anything by it,” she said quickly.

Jaess already had to sit awkwardly to accommodate his wings, so he could hardly hide it when they shifted roughly, pushing squeakily against the back of the stiff bench. “It was wrong of me. I won't do it again.”

Part of her wanted to tell him not to make that promise. “Okay,” she said instead.

The road they took cut through the uniform pines, and it was easy to lose track of time as the view outside remained unchanging. When the transport turned just right, she saw the mountains rising like black swells above them. Nothing about this place reminded her of what she'd seen of Xithilene. How strange it must be for Jaess, like walking on one of the settlements on Mars would be for her. She wasn't sure if she still possessed the same hunger that'd driven her before. The old Sam would've jumped at the chance to see any new planet, and she would've plastered her viewscreen to the transport window at the opportunity to capture a vid of this drive. Maybe she didn't miss her as much as she'd thought.

Sam turned away from the window and caught Jaess watching her. His lips tipped up in a soft smile. “I don't think there's anywhere like this on my planet. Could you imagine living here?” he asked.

“No. It'd be like a dream, I think. There's so much beauty here, all out in the open. It's too raw, too much, and wouldn't you hate it if there came a day when you woke up and didn't even notice it any longer?”

Jaess didn't look at her like she was crazy when she said things like that. He just absorbed it all in his quiet, sure way. It was funny. When she played for him, he was the one who flew, but the minute they stepped off the stage, he was the one

who grounded her—her anchor, the touchstone she hadn't known she needed.

“That's why I love the forest. She hides her treasures. There is no forgetting the beauty there—it's always taking me by surprise, over and over again,” he said, his green eyes glinting.

“I wish I'd been able to enjoy it.” The words just came out. She would've never have expected them to be the truth, but they were. She'd been in an almost virgin rainforest full of alien life, and she'd seen practically nothing. What kind of explorer was she? “I'm not sure I could though, after what happened.” Another truth.

“I know.”

She believed he did.

Jaess' eyes widened as the feathers around his face lifted slowly. He was looking out the front view window of the transport. Sam leaned forward to see what had caught his attention. Another massive wall of stone awaited them up there, not so far away now. She liked seeing that awe on his face. Uvaess had been unable to appreciate anything about Verkissat, about anywhere that wasn't his village. He'd lied to her through their comm messages, but Jaess wasn't pretending.

The transport made a few turns, and the traffic grew thicker, although it was nothing compared to what it'd been in the city. Their transport came to a stop near a large, old, stately looking building. Their guide stood and ushered them out of the vehicle, and the Xithilene all sort of grouped together, looking like an oversized flock of birds preparing to roost.

“None of you are dressed for walking through the snow, but stay on the paths and you should be fine. Don't worry, the ice is safe. There's no danger,” the guide said with a smile for some of the Xithilene standing at the front of the pack. “I've arranged skate rentals for those who want to try.”

Jaess took her hand. “Unless you've changed your mind, I'd prefer not to balance on bladed shoes. I need to be able to

dance, or they'll send me back on T'xith's next voyage.”

“I don't mind just walking. It's so lovely here, and it'd be difficult to concentrate on skating and looking around at the same time. Besides, I was hoping we'd have a chance to get away from the others.”

Jaess briefly tightened his hand over hers before he pulled her towards the path down to the lake. She could already see the skaters tracing beautiful shapes onto the ice, graceful circles and long, fluid lines. She'd never been much good at skating herself, but that didn't mean she couldn't appreciate watching. It wasn't very busy. They would have plenty of room to move without encountering anyone else if they wanted to be alone.

He glanced sideways at her once they reached the lake. “We're here. Are you ready?” he asked.

Sam let go of his hand and stepped onto the ice. It was smooth like a real rink, not like the small lakes she'd attempted to skate on as a kid, and the snow had been pushed away, too. Sam laughed. The ice was slippery beneath her feet, not enough to make her fall, but too slick to feel like walking on normal ground either.

“It's really thick—sturdy—not like some of the places we went to when I was growing up. Sometimes when we went too early in the season, you could see the water beneath us,” she told Jaess, smiling over her shoulder as she watched him slowly move out towards the spot where she'd stopped to wait for him.

His wings lifted high above his shoulders and his mouth went tight. “Your mother and sire approved of such activities?”

She just grinned back at him. “We were always careful. A little danger is exciting. Isn't that why you take those dives that you do off the highest platforms? You can't tell me that there isn't part of you that's a bit of a thrill seeker—an adrenaline junkie.”

“If you’re trying to say that you’ve noticed I often make ill-considered choices, you’re right. I came to Earth on a whim, didn’t I?” The second part came out quieter, and from the look on his face, she guessed that he hadn’t meant for her to hear it.

“Come on—let’s go further out, past more of the skaters.” She held out her hand for him again. They walked slowly, and Jaess kept his eyes on the ice as if simply watching it would ensure they didn’t fall through. “Why did you come here? You only gave me half an answer the first time I asked. Chasing fate—what’s that mean to you, Jay?” The nickname came out naturally. She gave them to everyone who mattered to her. Kay for Kayla, Aunt Em instead of Emily—just like she was Sam, not Samantha. “You don’t mind if I call you that, do you?” she asked quickly.

“It sounds very...human. I don’t mind.”

Of course, he didn’t. She couldn’t discover much that she didn’t like about Jaess of Vastiss anymore. She’d even caught herself staring at those wings, wondering if touching him like that would be different. The air was bracing, the cold like a rush of ice down her throat each time she inhaled, but she liked it. She felt as alive as she did facing down the audience each night they performed. There was nothing like it, and she wouldn’t have ever had this chance without Jaess.

Sam smiled at him again. “There’s nothing wrong with your name. I don’t need you to sound more human for me—just so you know. I like you just the way you are.”

“I wouldn’t change you either, Sam.” He released her hand and stepped further away. His back was to her when he spoke again. “I came for you, Sam.” There was no mistaking those low words. She felt them vibrate up her spine, sensed them tingling their way over her shoulders as they raced towards her heart.

“I’m your fate?” She moved closer, hoping her voice would carry. She couldn’t manage to speak loudly. The words felt like a secret, something that should be whispered.

“I thought so.” He turned around then, looking even more otherworldly than usual. He was a creature of tropical color, every shade that shone in his scales and feathers plucked from the lush jungle from which he came, and here he was, set upon this place of ice and snow. Somehow the contrast made him appear even more beautiful, heightening the intensity of his features.

“You’re not sure anymore?” She shouldn’t push and prod. *Don’t ask questions if you don’t want to hear the answers, Samanatha.*

“No.” The word trembled, deep, rough, quiet thunder.

“Is it because of what happened last night?” She’d come even nearer without realizing it. She had to look up to meet his eyes, her nose level with his chest. She wanted to touch him, to reach up and place her palms over him as if that would keep him in place until he gave her all the answers she needed.

“Yes. I was foolish. I thought that because you no longer flinched at the sound of my feathers that you might be able to forget. I carried you that night in Vastiss, took in your scent, learned the shape of you in my arms. I didn’t understand how badly he’d hurt you—your false mate. I should never have come.”

Sam hated hearing those words from him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, tucking her hands beneath the base of his wings, and pressed her cheek to his chest. “Please don’t say that. Don’t let him take this from me, too.”

She held him too tightly, but she couldn’t bring herself to let go. Sam looked up at him, and she couldn’t imagine ever having thought that they looked alike. Jaess’ scales may have been the dark jade of Uvaess’, but that was the only similarity. The generous curve of his mouth, the clear, pale green of his eyes, the nose that had what her mother would have called “character”—all of it added up to a face she would never forget again.

She’d never let fear stop her before Uvaess; she wouldn’t allow it to take Jaess from her now. Sam rose up on her toes, sliding her hands up the sides of his body, pulling him down to

meet her. She needed to taste him, to know what made him distinctly Jaess. She crushed her mouth to his, bold and messy. She felt the drag of his fangs against her lips and she liked it, just like the shape of his forked tongue tangling with her own brought a flash of heat racing down her body.

She'd avoided this, worried that those unearthly parts of him would repulse her, that the feelings she had for him would crumble in the face of their physical differences, but she'd been wrong. So blessedly, wondrously wrong.

The heavy thrum of his rattle transferred to her body through the thick layers of fabric that covered his chest. The vibrations danced up his tongue, and kissing him became like swallowing down a song, a mirror of what they did every night on those stages. He was copper and metal and alien air, unlike anything she'd ever known, and it mixed with her sweetness, at once foreign and familiar. All she could taste was the flavor of them together, and she couldn't tell if they truly moved on the ice, or if the motion was only in her mind. She didn't want to come up for air when the world was so beautiful without it.

Sam raked her hands through his feathers, wishing she wasn't wearing gloves. She wanted to feel their stiffness, their satiny texture between her fingers. She wanted to know that she'd claimed each part of him that she'd rejected on Uvaess, and that she'd found it good.

He pressed his forehead against hers. *That* she could feel—scales to skin. They shared the cold air between them, only the barest space between their lips. “Sam,” he whispered in that voice that carried storms and stars in its depths.

“Don't regret it. Don't regret coming for me. I don't think I could bear it,” she told him.

She felt his broken laugh hit her mouth. She shared it with him.

“I could never—never regret this,” he said.

And then he was the one to kiss her. She had only the barest glimpse of the mountains, forbidding and dark beneath

their lacy mantle of snow, and then they faded away, replaced by the taste, the feel, the intoxicating dance that was Jaess.

SAM DIDN'T SEE THE SUNSET. SHE DIDN'T FEEL THE COLD. THE drive back was an evergreen blur of white noise, just the thump of his pulse against hers, wrist to wrist. When they arrived at the hotel, they left the others behind beside the transport as he pulled her inside and then towards his room. A cursory glance showed that it was empty, and then Jaess pushed the door shut and slammed the deadbolt home.

“Are you certain?” He asked even as he stripped off his mangled outwear, shaking off the snow as he did so.

“Entirely,” she replied, shedding her own jacket, flinging her hat and gloves onto the armchair in the corner. She unzipped her boots and pulled off layer after layer, until she shivered, not a thread left to cover her.

He was staring. His wings pulsed outwards like they had their own heartbeat. He couldn't have looked more Lisseethi if he'd tried. She could call him Jay, but he was all Xithilene, and nothing could change that. He must've kicked off his shoes. His feet were bare, his chest naked but for the thin tangled chains of gold nestled below his collarbone. She saw the green gleaming of his birthstone amid the knotted metal, the perfect reflection of those sharp eyes. He wore only those pants, the ones that looked as if they'd been designed expressly for his perfect body, and for all she knew, they had.

His over-large wings spread out behind him, and she didn't think he realized he'd done it. He was always so careful with her when he wasn't dancing, so insufferably aware of the

vulnerable points dotting her psyche, so reluctant to push. Right now she didn't want that caution between them. She wanted the full, unleashed complexity of him, all of his desire and hunger without barriers.

“You're gorgeous, Jay.”

Maybe she should have felt self-conscious, walking up to him bare as the day she was born, her body not so perfect by a long shot, but she had no room in her mind for useless doubts. Sam came up to his left side and did what she'd imagined earlier at the lake. She stretched out her arm, reaching up, up, up until she could touch the ridged line of bone along the top of his extended wing. She traced her way over the smooth, curved talon, feeling the soft vibration as he worked to remain still beneath her fingertips. The light fluttering of his feathers betrayed him. He couldn't hide what she did to him.

She spread her hand and trailed it over them like she was drifting her fingers over the surface of the ocean, luxuriating in the gentle pressure against her hand, yet not daring to plunge too deep. His feathers were stained glass satin, costume fantasy yet so much more, a living part of him as integral as his hands, his taut stomach, his thumping pulse. She wanted to taste it, to press her mouth over that place where his blood beat against the thin scales of his neck. Sam turned, sliding her back into the silken cocoon of his wing. Her hair slid against the barbs, weaving them together in the subtlest way. His feathers started to shake, and she knew he wanted to clutch her close, to pin her against his body, holding her down beneath the strength of his wing. She knew he wouldn't.

She turned again, tumbling into his embrace as if they'd choreographed it. She took a moment to savor the feel of him, the lovely slide of his scales as she moved against him, knowing the velvety softness of her own skin, experiencing her beauty as if she'd never recognized it before. It seemed as if together they always became more, each of them the mirror that brought the brilliance of the sun, the whisper of perfection, down over the other.

Her hands smoothed over his firm hips, closing around the hard, leather encased muscle that powered those heart-

stopping jumps, that made him the beautiful predator he was. She didn't need to be in his forest to see how he must've moved there, gliding like a shadow but too extraordinary to ever blend into the dark with those light stained feathers. He was hard against her, pressing against her stomach behind the closure of his pants.

She sucked a kiss to the deep line marking a trail down the center of his body, that snaked between the sleek muscle of his chest and stomach. He made one of his storm soaked noises low in his throat, a rolling thrum she felt down to the soles of her feet, and his hands came around her, threading through her hair and landing firmly on her back. She felt him laugh against the crown of her head, warm and breathy. Then he pulled her up, her legs parting instinctively as he brought her tight against him. Her feet locked around his lower back, the downy feathers there tickling her toes.

“Jay, Jaess,” she breathed out as each step he took towards the bed had his scaled stomach shifting against the most sensitive parts of her. She gasped down the moan that wanted to throb its way free. They fell back onto the bed. Her weight settled onto the mattress, but he held himself above her. “Come here,” she said, slipping her fingers beneath the chains at his neck and curling them so she could pull him back down.

Jaess let her, his mouth closing over hers in a maddening kiss. He was too gentle, too sure, too controlled. She wanted him to fall along with her, to know the same urgent need that had her body squirming beneath him for more contact.

She turned her head to the side, breaking the kiss, and slid her foot over the back of his thigh. “Take these off,” she ordered. Sam was done with waiting.

He lifted his hips and then pressed his hands into the bedding, pushing his chest away from hers, pausing to glance down at the way one of her fingers was still caught in his chains. She turned it, wrapping them tighter, tugging him back down for an instant before she pulled her hand free. He stood with his familiar easy grace, unfastening the pants and pushing them down in one fluid motion. Her eyes dropped to his hips and she shivered. He was large and hard, with the same

velvety looking, flat, sail shaped spikes encasing his shaft as Uvaess' had.

She bit her lip against the distance she felt forming between them. She wanted Jaess. He was watching her with his wings tucked back, a keen look in his bright eyes. She didn't want him to worry about her, to second guess whether she was thinking of what had come before, even if it was the truth. None of this was fair to either of them.

"Come back to me, Jay," she told him, pressing herself up onto her elbows and reaching out a hand. She waited for him, just as he'd done the night before. Part of her said she was selfish to want him like this. She wanted to take, to drink the sweet heat from his lips, to feel him inside of her, to swallow that spark that would make her ignite. She wasn't sure that what she could give in return would be worth it.

His hand closed around hers, his big body engulfing her in his warmth. Even before she felt his hardness nudge between her legs, the worry had fallen away. He was Jaess, simple as that, and there was no room for anything else. Her thighs opened and her hips canted upwards, urging him to sink into her. Just like his kiss, he was sure and slow. She felt every second of it as he worked his way deeper. Her body welcomed him, and she savored the velvety resistance of each soft spike, she marveled in how he made her feel so full, so complete. When his hips met hers and they were flush together, he stopped.

"Sam," he said in his voice of sin laced promise, "look at me."

She saw the ragged way his chest rose and fell above her before she lifted her face to meet his eyes. She knew it cost him to hold himself so still, to wait for her. "I'm looking."

He didn't say anything back, just scanned her face. *Searching for red flags, for cracks in the ice.* Fuck that. Sam pressed her mouth against his at the same time as she thrust her hips, forcing him somehow even deeper as she took what she needed. She'd always known she was willing to take.

His slick tongue teased her, flicking against her lips, twisting and twining its way inside the warmth of her mouth. When he pulled back and took her again in one smooth, hard motion, he made it clear that although he might play with his kisses, he planned to give her exactly what she craved. She dug her fingers into the feathers near his face, the down soft against the heel of her hand while the length of them remained inflexible and firm.

He still had his wings pressed to his back, as inoffensive and unnoticeable as he could make them. She'd done that to him. She knew what it felt like to make herself small, to hide, and she couldn't let him do the same. Sam leaned into the kiss, claiming that skilled tongue of his, sucking on the pointed tips. Her bottom lip pressed against the sharpness of a fang, and she ground her mouth down harder, wanting the piercing clarity of the pain as the faint taste of copper mixed with Jaess' sun-soaked sweetness, the coolness of shadow streaked earth.

She didn't let him take control. Her body moved with his, matched, the perfect harmony to his melody. "Open your wings," she gasped as he kissed the corner of her mouth. "Show me. I want to see you—all of you." She felt his hips stutter as he hesitated. "Damn it, Jay. I'm not scared. Not with you."

And then he spread his wings, putting all the glorious vivid brightness of them on full display. He was beautiful. He was perfect. And she wasn't scared. She wasn't. They moved faster, each thrust more frantic than the last. She had one arm curled around his back, her fingers digging into the meat of his shoulder, while the other was pressed to his chest, as if her palm could somehow capture the echo of his heartbeat. She could sense the pleasure building, a wave ready to crest, but she wanted to wait, to encase this moment in amber, to make it stretch like honey gold sap. She wanted him to crash to shore along with her, to finish their song the way they'd started it.

His low hiss filled her ear with static, and then she felt it—the instant that last barrier broke and he let go. He filled her deeper, harder, over and over again. Sam cried out as she clenched down around him accompanied by the rough whoosh

of air as his wings moved in tandem with his hips. There was something obscene about it, as if an angel held her in his iron grip, his release a hot stain inside her as the force of his climax had him lifting them up off the bed, those wings still pumping like great bellows stoking a fire. She would've thought she'd imagined it, drunk on the rolling pleasure that left her limp and pliant, but the cool brush of air against the damp skin of her back let her know that it was all real.

He froze, arrested by pleasure, just as she'd wanted. He shuddered inside her, that last sip of completion coaxing another shiver out of her, and she tightened around him, arms and legs and inner muscles all holding him close. It was inevitable that they'd fall, that she'd feel the slight roughness of the quilt beneath them again, that it would end.

“Sam. K'lallsa.” She knew what that word meant. *Beloved*. She had a translator after all. Uvaess had tried to use that word on her, but it'd always been a lie. It sounded so much sweeter when it was the truth.

“K'lallsith.” She whispered the male form of the endearment back up at him, hoping time wouldn't make her a liar, too.

Jaess just shivered against her, his breath coming out in a ragged exhale at her temple. He stayed like that until they both grew cold. She still didn't want to unclasp herself from his body. She didn't want to ever let him go. He pulled back his hips, and the emptiness he left behind made her want to claw her fingers against his shoulders—to do anything to keep him there. He rolled onto his side and closed his arms around her. When the solid weight of his wing spread out over their entwined bodies, she didn't fight it. He kept it low, covering her like a blanket, his feathers staying clear of her shoulders and face. Maybe it should have felt smothering, but it wasn't. It was just Jaess. Just perfect.

HIS MIND WAS MUSH, HIS THOUGHTS FLOATY FRAGMENTS HE couldn't quite force himself to grasp. Jaess held Sam in his arms, their bodies still slick from their lovemaking.

“Lithi warned me away from you. She thinks I'm bad news.” Sam's voice was raspy from their kisses, still rough with pleasure. She'd never sounded better.

“Bad news?” he asked, his lips curving in a smile against the veil of her hair. It fell across her cheek and over her shoulder to pool between her breasts, the ends curving into a perfect little spiral like dark smoke.

“Yep. She thinks I'm bad for you.”

“You're not,” he said. She still thought she was broken, that her failed mating with the Sa'isthess male meant something deeper. “Lithi thinks I'm a pretty prize she can win. She's wrong—about everything. You shouldn't listen to her.”

He felt Sam tense beneath his wing and resisted the urge to hug her tighter. “She said that if we danced together on stage again she'd send you back to Xithilene.”

Jaess hummed against Sam's hair, letting the sound of his rattle tickle his lips before he pressed soft kisses along the side of her neck, easing his body down so he could fit better against her. “Fine. We don't touch onstage, but don't let her scare you. She can't send me back for this—for us.” He nuzzled her cheek with his nose. “You smell so right,” he said with a sigh.

Sam turned in his arms, but she was grinning when she faced him, so he knew she wasn't trying to leave. "What time do you think it is?" she asked.

"What time? Does it matter?"

She glanced towards the door. "Maybe if your roommate comes back soon. Who's staying with you tonight, anyway?"

"You," he said before he leaned in for another kiss.

She was all softness to his hard edges, her lips plush and smooth. Her tongue was more textured than his, and broader, but just like everything between them, their differences worked, fitting together like the matching pieces of a puzzle. That made him think of the elders sitting around the central platform in his village, the way they'd carve such games for younglings. Even as his rattle sang his pleasure in Sam's sweet taste, part of him ached for all he'd left behind.

It'd be so easy to roll them up, to let his wings trail back over the side of the bed so that he could sit comfortably. He already felt his cock pushing up against his mating slit again. He could wrap his fingers around the tight flare of her hips and lift her until he was poised at her entrance. One motion would be all it'd require for her to take him. Now that he knew exactly how incredible it'd feel, it was difficult to fill his mind with thoughts of anything else.

Sam caressed the top edge of his outstretched wing. She was smiling softly, her fingers fluttering along the length of it like li'esthi settling in among the flowers, listing slightly on their delicate feet as they sought more honey sweet nectar. She grew more confident, the tentative dance of her fingertips transforming into long, thorough strokes. She was petting him, like the animals humans raised for companionship. He dipped his chin towards his chest to hide his grin. He didn't mind. His k'lallsa could touch him whenever, however, she wished.

Sam's hand suddenly stopped, and she turned her head back towards the door again. "Do you hear that?" she asked.

"No," he replied, but as he spoke he clearly heard someone shaking the handle.

“Jaess,” Sam admonished with a frown, a slight furrow between her eyes. “It’s probably your roommate. Hurry—we need to get up,” she whispered quickly, already attempting to pull away. At that moment the person at the door began to bang on it.

“Stay—he’ll leave,” Jaess told Sam as he reluctantly drew back his wing, tucking it alongside the other. He swung his legs off the bed and walked lazily to the door. Once he was close enough to open it, he leaned forward and hissed loudly. It didn’t take long for the noise to stop. “Find another room tonight, Vasith. This one’s occupied.” He laughed when he heard the other man’s high-pitched rattle.

“You find this funny, beast of the forgotten forest? I’ll tell Lithi, you preyless hunter born from the mouth of the water refuse-eater, you ill-fated progeny of the lord of eternal night!”

Jaess had to admit that Vasith’s cursing abilities were more proficient than he’d expected. It didn’t stop his grin from broadening with each angry word. *“I’ll speak with Lithi about making alternate arrangements,”* he replied calmly in their mother tongue. *“In the meantime, you will need to wait.”*

He stood in place until he heard a rushing snap of feathers followed by Vasith’s thudding footsteps. Jaess turned towards Sam and walked back to the bed. “I guess we must dress, at least until we can settle Vasith somewhere else for the night,” he said as he pressed one knee into the mattress for balance as he leaned towards Sam, eager for another kiss.

She shoved his chest instead.

“You’re awful—in a really good way,” she added with a grin, in case he’d misinterpreted her teasing. He smiled back, happy she was comfortable enough with him to no longer be so careful with her words. “Hey, do you remember the guide talking about the northern lights on the ride back?” she asked.

He did not.

“I’d like to try to see them. What do you think?” she asked.

“I’m happy to do so if it pleases you,” he replied, gliding the back of his hand from her shoulder to elbow in an idle caress.

Sam grasped his wrist and pulled his hand away before she brought it up to her face. She turned his arm so the inner side touched her lips, and then she smiled. “Then let’s get dressed,” she said, dropping his hand and sliding off the end of the bed.

He pulled on his trousers first and then bent down to search for his shoes. He missed Vastiss for many reasons, and he was smart enough not to dwell on those that caused him genuine pain, but among the inconsequential things that he found irritating about being so far from home was the necessity of footwear. He couldn’t even blame that aggravation on the humans; sandals of some sort had been required in Verkissat, as well. Maybe he could pretend he hadn’t seen the second shoe lying halfway under the corner chair. Surely no one would notice if he walked barefoot to the warm room with the large fire pit.

“Here,” Sam said as she swept the shoe up off the floor and handed it to him with a smile.

Jaess took it and scowled at it as he forced his foot inside its confines. He hurried to pull on one of the human-style shirts with sleeves that had been altered for him. It had magnetic closures that brought the fabric together above and below his wings, but so much cloth felt unnatural on his body. Still, he was glad enough for the extra warmth in this climate.

“I’m ready,” he said as he turned to face Sam. She gave him a strange look, pinching the area at the bridge of her nose.

“We’ll be going outside.” She glanced at his chest again with a little frown and grabbed her heavy jacket.

Apparently the shoes wouldn’t have been optional. Jaess put all of his layers back on, wondering if he should have said no to these northern lights. By the time he’d worked the last robe-like garment around his wings, Sam was sitting perched on the edge of one of the chairs arranged around a small table.

“It’ll be worth it if we get to see them,” Sam said with one of her half-hidden, warm little smiles. “I think it’s fairly likely here, but there are no guarantees.”

She took his hand and they left the room. It didn’t take them long to pass through the pleasant front room with its inviting fire. He gave it a swift, longing glance before he followed Sam outside. She tugged on his hand, urging him along, but it only required a few more steps before he understood why she’d insisted they leave their room.

The sky in this place had already been majestic, so open and wide as it never was among the deep forests, but now it was streaked with curving bands of vivid green. He’d thought this was a colorless land, but he’d been proven wrong.

“You know, when I was little I thought alien planets might look like this—if we ever found any, I mean. Back then we didn’t know about any of you. We really thought it was just us out there.” Sam’s head was tilted back, her scarf bunched low around her collar, revealing the graceful line of her neck. How odd it was to see the very air she breathed turn into small clouds when she spoke. He understood what she was attempting to express. Everything about this region made him feel like an outsider. When he danced at night with his people, it was easy to forget how far he’d traveled.

“I know it was not what you’d hoped, but what did you think of Xithilene, of my home?” He hadn’t planned on asking her again so soon, but here, in this place with its unfamiliar beauty, he longed for sheltered skies and the softness of warm shadows.

She glanced away from the entrancing waves of color to look at him. She moved closer so that her back settled against his chest, and she pulled his arms over her shoulders, cradling his hands in hers. With the dark gloves they both wore, there was no telling how different they were, that they were from two separate species. He liked that reality, the one where they were the same.

“When I first stepped off of T’xith’s ship, I thought it was the most beautiful place I’d ever seen,” she finally said. Then

she sighed, heavily enough that he could feel it as her chest sunk beneath the weight of their joined hands. “The air in Verkissat was so pure that I thought someone should bottle it. You’ve spent enough time on Earth now to know it’s different here. Even places like this that we try to preserve still aren’t *clean* like that, so alive. It was supposed to have been my home.” She leaned her head back against his shoulder, tipping her face so he could see her dark eyes. “It wasn’t a disappointment. You said it wasn’t what I’d hoped, but that isn’t true. Uvaess and I—that hurt, that it wasn’t the same, that’s true, but Xithilene—” She shook her head. “It was dreams of a future and six months of anticipation that were stolen from me, but it wasn’t a disappointment.”

He bent his head to brush his lips over hers. The heat of their mouths burned against the bitterness of the dry, cold air that surrounded them. “Thank you for showing this to me. I never believed I’d leave Vastiss, much less Xithilene, but I don’t regret it, Sam. I don’t.”

The cool leather of her glove made him want to recoil when she reached for his face, but he let her pull him back down, and he didn’t hesitate when she pressed another kiss against his mouth, one with tongues and teeth and the ghosts of memories neither of them wanted to face.

“SIR—SIR, I’M TALKING TO YOU.”

Jaess glanced across the aisle where one of Vasith’s friends was ignoring the man checking whether their flight restraints were correctly fastened.

“*V’nesik, show the man you’re ready for us to ascend,*” he said sharply. They were leaving Banff and Calgary, and although he looked forward to warmer weather, just like the rest of his fellow dancers, he would not forget this place where he and Sam had first come together. If they had to leave it behind, he wanted it to be already over. He didn’t want time to think about how things might change.

Sam leaned into his side and ended up with her face pressed into his wing instead of his shoulder. He smiled when their eyes met, hers flashing with amusement. Not too long ago a face full of feathers would've had her starting back in alarm.

"I must admit I don't enjoy human air travel. It wasn't meant for people with wings like mine," he said, whispering the words against the top of her head.

She laughed, the sound muffled as she covered her mouth with her hand. "Honestly, I don't know who these seats were designed for. I'm not even that tall and my legs barely fit." She gave his slightly outstretched wings a glance and turned her lips down in a little pout. "That does look extra miserable though, I've got to hand you that."

"It's not pleasant," he agreed. To sit back far enough to use the restraints, he had to force his wings forward at an awkward angle so that the ends of his flight feathers weren't crushed beneath him. They'd already learned that the attendants lied when they said they were free to walk through the cabin later during the flight. The first time they'd traveled in a human aircraft, he and his people had filled the aisle to stretch their wings and had been promptly reprimanded. Lithi had told them there'd been complaints that they'd been disturbing the other guests.

He settled into his seat as best as he could, glad that this time Sam would spend the time beside him. A little discomfort was easier to bear when he had the company of his k'allisa. He felt the aircraft begin to move at the same time as Sam took his hand. Despite the cramped quarters and the archaic technology, his body still thrummed with anticipation. They shot into the sky, climbing higher and higher through Earth's atmosphere. Clouds streaked past them until the cabin darkened. When they had that first view of the planet from above, his breath caught and Sam's fingers squeezed down hard over his.

"This is really space, isn't it?" she whispered. Maybe it was irrational to speak in hushed tones when no one could hear their neighbor over the dull roar of the machine that

carried them, but he understood why she did it. “I’ve never seen it—not like this before,” she said as she stared down at Earth, something hungry and desperate in her expression.

When he’d first heard the word homesickness, Jaess had flicked his crown feathers back, dismissing it as just another strange human turn of phrase. That had been ignorant of him. Watching Sam right now, he knew that if Xithilene were the beautiful planet floating beneath them, his face would reflect the same relentless yearning. It burned just like fever, like the illness humans named it.

“You returned to Earth on T’xith’s ship. Surely you had the opportunity to see Earth from the viewing windows there,” he said. He could feel the stiff discomfort in his voice, even if it wasn’t audible to anyone else.

“A little, yes, but from much further away.” He turned his head when he felt the heat of her gaze. “It’s different like this, Jaess.” She smiled faintly and did her shoulder lift—a shrug she called it. Sam looked away. “I could’ve done this before. I should have.”

She didn’t look back up or seem inclined to keep speaking, so when silence fell between them, he did nothing to stop it. These flights were uncomfortable, but they were rapid. He still found it temptingly easy to imagine that instead of arcing back down to Earth, they were traveling far from the Lady’s planet, heading back to Xithilene—together.

All too soon, they began to descend and the fantasy faded as quickly as the darkness. They hadn’t lost much time—the humans only counted it a few hours differently in this new region—it would only be early afternoon when they landed.

He removed his small viewscreen from a pocket on his shirt and brought up the schedule Lithi had provided them before they’d left Verkissat. Well over half of their tour was complete. His mouth tightened. Since they’d arrived in Seattle, time seemed to have accelerated. He drew the edge of his nail over the dual-planet calendar beside their performance list. One and a half moon cycles—a little less, maybe a little more. Once he returned to Xithilene, it was doubtful that he’d ever

have another opportunity to visit Earth. He'd been so foolish before, besotted by the scent of a woman and his own aimless dreams. He'd imagined he could simply show up and his fate would unfold. Now he knew her so much more deeply, yet a true future together felt even farther out of reach.

Jaess let the back of his head rest against the seat and closed his eyes. He wouldn't look. He didn't need to gaze outside that small port window to learn how far he had left to fall.

SAM PLAYED THE LAST NOTE TO THE SONG ACCOMPANYING Jaess' solo. She let it ring in the air, just savoring the fullness of the sound, until she cut it off and slowly lowered her flute. She'd begun to expect the hushed moment of silence before the audience erupted in applause. Tonight was no different. Sam thought that might be her favorite part of the entire performance. There was something painfully pure about it—just her and that brief, ephemeral stillness.

She bent her head and smiled, letting herself enjoy the acknowledgment. Córdoba had been a fun city to play. It was strange how normal this whirlwind life felt. Little Sam Chang in Argentina. She probably should've been having the other dancers take vids for her to commemorate the occasion. Instead she'd been spending every free moment only half aware of the scenery.

Sam quietly moved back to blend in with the dancers for the curtain call. Lithi and Vasith would come forward if the audience demanded an encore. The corner of her mouth lifted in a secret smile as she settled into place. She could feel Jaess standing to her left, just like every other night. A reckless brush of their fingers had that jittery, directionless post-performance energy spiraling back and forth between them. She already knew what would come next; the frantic rush to escape, to touch, to meld themselves together until there was no coming down until the rising of the sun.

It was summertime in Córdoba, and a heatwave had blanketed the city in heavy, pregnant warmth. She'd heard

people talking about it in the streets, that the thunderstorms would be building, and the heat would break amid the heady crash of thunder. She wanted that. A wild, tempestuous night, elemental and cleansing. She looked out one more time at the audience with a bright smile that was too much and too broad for anywhere but beneath the lights of a stage, and she lowered her head just like a Xithilene.

She never wanted this to end.

They slipped away from the others before they headed back to their hotel that night. People stared like they always did—especially once the city lights came up, no one could look away from Jaess. She sure couldn't.

The city was beautiful; sleek modernity butted up against baroque relics, threaded with the decay of neglect that spilled from the cracks of every Earthan metropolis. She could taste the pressure of the coming storm in the air, and when Jaess turned them off of the sidewalk to pull her close beneath the shadow of a nameless building, the same expectant energy sped from his lips to hers. She no longer hesitated before she raked her fingers through his feathers to cup his scalp, to pull him tighter against her. She'd never tire of the taste of him, of the way the soft stroke of his tongue had her spinning in place, how he shifted the earth right out from under her, leaving her boneless and stunned.

“Jay—take us back to the room,” she said as she looked up at his face. His pale green eyes glinted, that distinctive shade of celadon that she'd never seen on a human. When she looked at him now, there were no memories of Uvaess or anyone else to obscure the view. She saw him, this otherworldly man who would never melt into Earth's shadows, and part of her knew she couldn't keep him, but she'd be damned if she wouldn't try.

He gave her that look, the one with the wicked smile and its sharp promises, and she felt only relief that for tonight at least, they were both willing to continue pretending.

A flash of white in the sky froze her in place, leaving her to blink away the brightness. “Hurry, Sam.” He took both of

her hands and tugged. “Unless you want to get caught in the storm.”

“Maybe I do.”

He took her hand and spun her before he urged her to follow along after him. She laughed as he grinned back at her. They only made it another block before the first drops of rain began to fall. Jaess brought them to a stop at the next intersection, and then he turned back to face her. Her hair was damp and sticky, the little wispy hairs plastered to her neck and cupping her jaw. The rainwater ran slick against their clasped hands, working its way between scale and skin. Jaess’ expression turned from teasing to solemn in the moment it took her to look back up.

“Tell me to stop if you don’t like it,” he said. Then he stretched out his wings, wide and bright like a butterfly. The rest of them were like a squawky flock of birds, always ruffling and rustling, but Jaess, he was something else entirely. He curved one wing around her, angling it to shield her from the rain. “Is it good?” he asked.

Sam felt the brush of his feathers and caught the faint scent of the oil he used on them. *Y’valla*. That’s what he’d told her when she’d asked. A hint of sweetness wrapped in mahogany, in the ancient wood of his forest—she didn’t think it could smell better on anyone but him. Sam lifted her face and felt her tentative smile grow bright.

“It’s perfect,” she said.

His other wing closed off the rain from the opposite side, but he didn’t bring it in tightly. He reached for her face and guided her mouth to his. The summer rain had never tasted so sweet as it did from his lips. Her hands clasped his shoulders as the rain poured down over his outstretched wings. The sound of it muffled all else, and she surrendered to the thrill of it—their own private world, a place untouched by any but them.

Sam was still smiling when they made it back to the hotel, dripping wet. The smile quickly fell away, sharpening into something hungry and wanting once they were inside their

room and Jaess stripped away his wet clothing. She caught the taste of the rain anew as she pressed her hand to his shoulder and brought her mouth to his chest. She kissed her way up to his neck as he tugged frantically at her soaked shirt. It bunched up around her arms and it shouldn't have been comfortable, but with Jaess, nothing worked the way she thought it should—it was all better, brighter, more beautiful.

She freed herself from the rest of her clothing, leaving it in a sodden trail behind her as she approached the bed. She'd only placed one knee on the mattress before she felt the heat of his body above her. He closed his arms around her, tangling their legs and tucking his wings as he rolled them. They slowed to a sideways stop in the center of the bed, and then he smiled again as his rattle thrummed to life beneath her palm. Sam's eyes closed briefly at the feel of the vibrations emanating from his chest. She wasn't supposed to have this—not with him. Would they even let him stay? Or allow her to leave again?

Jaess didn't give her time to think about it. The pinprick glide of his fangs over the shell of her ear had her shivering before that same skilled mouth coaxed loose her gasps and sighs as it traveled from jaw to neck to shoulder. Her back arched as her body responded to each teasing caress. He rolled them again and then he was there, thrusting deep right where he belonged—easy, effortless, natural.

They left the next morning.

They danced in Santiago, and during the days, Jaess marveled at the sight of yet another mountain range. São Paulo and New Rio came next, and then a series of smaller locations where they stayed a day and left before she had time to memorize the names. If Jaess and the Xithilene had seen much of Earth's greatness during their time on tour, now they saw her people's talent for destruction, too. They didn't fly so high on their way to Bogotá that anyone could miss the barren patches of land beneath them that should have been forest.

“It looked like Lisseethi once. That's what people say. There are old vids that show what it was like,” Sam said as she leaned towards the window of the plane. She would've let

Jaess take her seat for the view if it wouldn't have been even less comfortable for his wings. She saw the pained lines of sorrow on his face as he watched the land pass beneath them.

“Why would they do this? What possible cause could any clan have for such devastation?” he asked.

She didn't have an answer that he'd accept. She already knew that, but she couldn't just shrug her shoulders and be silent. “People on Earth have been desperate for a long time, Jay. You must have some idea how many of us there are now that you've seen our cities. Life here is harder than on Xithilene. People were just trying to survive, but we've lost a lot, too.”

He extended his tongue as if he were scenting her and let out a slight hiss. He stared out the window again before he finally looked back at her. “That doesn't make it right.”

“I didn't say it did,” she replied, but she felt a sense of deep relief when he placed his hand over hers and kept it there, heavy and firm.

She knew that sadness in his expression hadn't been solely for what humans had done to their own planet. Jaess had been trying to hide it, but she could tell that he was homesick. It was the worst at times like this when they had a moment to breathe—then he couldn't run from it any longer. He gave her his beautiful smiles and his body, he danced for her on so many of their nights, but she knew both of them were feeling a bit too reckless now, too unsteady. The days on the performance schedule were disappearing fast, and then there would be no more pretending.

That first night in Bogotá she stepped on the stage and her hands trembled. She'd faced audiences like this countless times now, but somehow the kiss of the lights, the heavy hush of expectation, felt new again. Vasith was the one who waited behind her now. He'd been granted a solo. She wouldn't play for Jaess until the last number. Sam prayed her sweaty fingers wouldn't betray her and lifted her face with a slight smile, letting the people blur together, her gaze soaring above them all. She raised her flute and started to play.

The notes began to flow and her body relaxed as the hours of practice took over. It was different with Vasith. She still played her own composition, and there was still the high of performing, that heady exchange of energy between herself and the audience, but that's where it stopped. She didn't feel every leap and step Vasith took behind her like the sequence was imprinted on her own body. There was no pulsing cord between them.

Sam finished her song and quietly left the stage. Jaess caught her eye as she slipped through the wings and her hands tightened around her flute. She bent her head towards him, somehow unable to return his easy grin. She was still wound too tightly, off-balance from the stage that evening.

Normally the time went quickly during a show, but that night the numbers seemed to drag. Sam found herself pacing and fidgeting, acquiring a few puzzled looks from the Xithilene dancers backstage along the way.

X'tha walked up to her and flicked the top of her arm with a long fingernail. "You're being strange tonight, human," the other woman told her with an imperious tilt of her head.

"I'm just feeling a little restless, I guess," said Sam.

X'tha gave her another appraising glance before her feathers rippled and she dipped her head. Then she left Sam behind to wait for her next entrance. There was one more ensemble number, Lithi and Jaess' duet, and then finally his solo. She needed to feel that magic between them tonight, especially after the dull feeling in her chest after she'd played for Vasith.

Sam's stomach twisted with nerves as she watched from the wings while Lithi and Jaess danced together. She'd spent too much time looking at that calendar again, counting down the days until the troupe would return to Xithilene. Once they were done with the shows in Bogotá, they'd have two days off for an excursion to see a selection of Mayan ruins. Afterwards, only nine days remained. Neither of them had spoken about what came next. It was too big a risk to take when the wrong

answer might end it all, but now he'd be leaving her regardless. She'd say something—tonight.

Soon. She'd say something soon.

The applause was more than polite as Lithi and Jaess finished. The fiery director was headed her way, crown feathers lifted as she basked in the adoration of the crowd. This was her cue. Sam lifted her chest and tightened the muscles of her back, shimmying a little so that the folds of her skirt lay smooth. Then she walked past the curtain and the lights fell upon her skin. She looked up at the wrong moment, blinking as her gaze crossed with the beam of a spotlight, and the afterimages dazzled like stars speckled across a dark sky. She didn't miss a step, her feet stopping right where they should, and she lifted her flute. She breathed shallowly as she waited for the right moment to begin. The metal was warm against her chin as she counted down the seconds.

Her knees almost went weak when the first note came out steady. Her traitorous mind was telling her that she'd never be able to play this piece once he was gone since he'd wound himself so deeply into the very core of it. She'd expected to fail, for the melody to come out tortured and thready. She continued to play, willing herself to give into the music, but something was holding her back.

Sam didn't think about it before she turned, angling her body so she was at least halfway facing Jaess. *There*. This was what she'd needed. He watched her as he leapt through the air, extending his large, powerful frame. She didn't dare look away.

Sam played for him like it might be the last time, because she was going to risk it all when she spoke to him afterwards. It felt like that first afternoon in Seattle all over again, back when she'd barely known him, yet something inside her had recognized him, like calling to like. Sam forgot the audience and the other dancers. Tonight this song belonged to them alone. Jaess seemed to fly higher, to spin faster—every move he made was sharper and stronger, as if all the nights before had only been a prelude to this one.

Maybe that's why she decided to play it—a new refrain, one that spoke of dense jungles and impossible creatures, of the way his pale eyes flashed when he looked out at the wonders of her world. The song had always been theirs, but now she'd carved out the heart of it and given it to Jaess.

He didn't miss a beat. He moved as if he'd always known the notes, as if the melody was as familiar as anything else that she'd played. It wasn't until he took that last swooping dive that she felt the stirring of the crowd behind them. She held the final note through his landing. Before she could even lower her flute, he was there at her side, one strong arm slipping around her waist to pull her close. Their bodies turned together, the movement slow and sensuous. He had her half off her feet again, ready to fall whenever he willed it.

They held the pose just a count too long to continue. The audience was already clapping loudly, chasing away the echoes of her song. Jaess lowered her back to her feet, his hands firm and steady over her hips. There was a moment when they both could have stopped to face the crowd and bow. When Jaess lowered his face to brush her lips instead, she didn't even think of turning away.

She could still feel the warmth of their shared breath as they stepped back to take their places for the curtain call. Sam floated on a pleasurable haze that not even Lithi's most intimidating glare could penetrate. The woman wouldn't send Jaess away early. Not when he was the poster boy for the troupe.

When they finally stepped into their hotel room that evening, she promised herself she'd say something. Jaess was giving her a sated, pleased smile as he beckoned her over to the bed. Sam knew she should resist, but her legs were already moving, taking her exactly where she wanted to go. She settled over his lap, her knees balanced on either side of his hips as she took his face in her hands.

“What do you want, Jaess?” she asked.

He rubbed his cheek against her shoulder, turning his head to place a kiss in the same spot. “Sam,” he breathed against

her skin, before he kissed his way up her neck. “K’lallsa.” Another kiss, softer than the others, against her mouth, stealing the words she’d meant to speak next. “Everything” he said. “I want everything.”

JAESS HAD KNOWN WHAT SHE'D BEEN ASKING THAT FIRST night in Bogotá when she'd flouted Lithi's rules and played for him, ignoring their audience entirely. He just didn't want to give her an answer. So few days were left to them as it was, and the truth would tear them apart just as surely as the ship that would take him home to Xithilene. If it had to end, he would enjoy every day with her.

So when she pressed her supple lips into that firm, thin line, or she blinked up at him, worry spilling from her lush, dark eyes, Jaess kissed her before she could speak, stealing away the words that would surely come. Once she said them aloud, he would have to answer, and he would never lie to her.

Such cowardly methods worked through the rest of their performances in Bogotá. Now they were disembarking in a new region, the birthplace of the people who had produced their Lady. They had taken a different type of air transport designed for landing and ascending in small spaces. It was too small to hold them all, so half of their group would arrive after them in a second craft and follow with their own guide. The machine's engine was horribly loud, but the land below had still beckoned to him over the noise. Although he would never regret seeing the wonders of Earth, in general he didn't crave exploration in the same way as Sam. This place—this place was different.

The jungle below didn't look like home. The canopy was a dense, rich green, but when they passed patches of developed land, he could tell the trees weren't as tall as those in the

Lisseethi forests. Still, there was something about it that was an echo of the home he'd left behind. When the door to their craft opened and their guide motioned for them to step outside, he was able to articulate it more clearly.

Their arrival had stirred up the creatures of the forest, and their chirps and calls were a welcome, joyful noise. It was like the constant hum of his own territory, that unceasing song of life, only it played in a different key. He walked forward, not waiting for the human guide, his brethren, or even Sam herself. He breathed deeply of the thick, fragrant air that carried a familiar heat. He stood beneath an alien sun, but for this brief moment, it felt like his own, and he ached. A place so akin to home, yet not—it drew tears from his eyes despite himself.

Sam's graceful hand slid over his arm, and he glanced at her guiltily. How easily could she read his face? Jaess had no talent for deception; he'd never cultivated that skill.

"What do you think?" she asked quietly, her gaze roving over the forest around their clearing. She'd half rotated back towards the group when she let out a little gasp.

"What is it?" he asked, turning quickly to discover what she'd seen.

She smiled as she pointed to a small group of birds roosting in a nearby tree. One had spread its tail, and it fanned out beautifully, rather like his own crown feathers in full display. Jaess admired the shimmering teal and green feathers covering the creature's body. The spread tail was dull in comparison, gray but for the eye markings of deep blue and burnt orange. So he shared markings with the small animal, too, he thought as he extended a wing in kinship, displaying his own round eyed markings of deeper gold. The birds flapped their small wings and fled.

Sam took his arm again, curling into him until she was pressed against his side as she laughed into his chest. "You scared them."

"I didn't intend to," he replied, still watching the spot where the birds had vanished into the forest.

“We should join the others,” she urged, pulling him forward to where the rest of the dancers waited. Looking ahead, it was hard to imagine that the massive ruins they’d seen from above lay only a short hike away. He wouldn’t have guessed the tree lined path before them led to such structures if he hadn’t seen it for himself.

“Welcome to El Mirador,” said the human male assigned to guide them to the site. “You revere the Lady and her culture, but what you’ll see today was built hundreds of years before her city, well before your people ever found Earth.”

Jaess inclined his head respectfully towards the man. He understood the implied rebuke. The humans had achieved their rich cultures long before the Xithilene—that was what the man meant. The Xithilene might claim the Lady as their goddess, but she and her people had belonged to Earth first. As much as he loved his own people, he couldn’t argue against it. The Xithilene had valued tech, had honed their spacecrafts until they’d been able to travel far beyond the bounds of their own solar system, but there had never been enough of them to create the type of monumental architecture that humans had left all over their planet. The very bones of the land weren’t soaked with the remnants of their lost languages. Maybe their peoples were more different than he wanted to admit.

Jaess took Sam’s hand as they began to hike. It felt strange to stay on the ground this way. He wondered if the others felt it as he did. If he were home, he’d already be among the trees leaving this hard path far below.

He couldn’t help his excitement. The sight of each new Earthan animal made his wing feathers vibrate with delight. As they walked deeper into the forest, he noticed Sam kept glancing at him strangely, and there was a slight trembling to her pretty lips as she tried over and over to fix them into a smile and failed.

“What’s wrong?” he finally asked.

“Nothing.” She stole another furtive look at him before she shook her head. “No. That’s not true.” She tugged his hand and pulled him towards the side of the path so that the others

could pass. Then she took a deep breath before she lifted her head and met his eyes. “You miss it, don’t you? No, stop,” she said, placing her free hand between them, “of course you do. I know you miss home.”

“Yes, Sam. I do miss it. Do you feel it too, then?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“This place—it feels like home, or a different version of it, at least. It’s like enough that I can’t pretend anymore how much I want to see my own forest again.”

Sam’s eyes widened as she took a sharp little breath, just as if he’d slid a dagger beneath her ribs. “You want to go back, don’t you?” she whispered.

He’d known he would need to give her the truth. He’d thought he would’ve had just a little bit longer.

“Don’t answer—not yet,” she said, placing two fingers softly against his lips. “I don’t want you to go. I don’t. I know I shouldn’t ask.” She looked up at him, her dark eyes soft and glassy, and he knew he should try to stop her, but he couldn’t make himself speak. “Could you stay? Is there any way you could leave it behind?”

Distantly, beneath the pounding rush of blood in his ears, he could hear the sounds of the rest of their group growing fainter as they progressed without them. Jaess froze. *No*. The answer was no. He opened his mouth to tell her, but although his lips parted, the air caught in his throat and no sound came out. He stood there, paralyzed as he watched her expression transform, helpless to explain himself. That furrow between her eyes had made a reappearance as she blinked back tears. She couldn’t seem to look at him any longer, and he knew he needed to speak to have any hope of keeping her at his side.

“I—I can’t,” she said. “I can’t do this. Not now. I’m sorry. I know it’s not your fault, Jay, but I need to go.” She backed away from him as if she feared he was a venomous beast, moving with quick, darting steps, her eyes cast downwards. “We’ll talk later at the tents—enjoy the ruins.”

Finally, whatever had kept him motionless and mute released its hold. He lunged forward, intending to reach for her.

“Stop. Please, Jaess. Just give me the afternoon. I need some time to think.”

And then she left him, just as he'd always feared she would.

He barely saw the majesty of the ruins when they reached them. No matter where he went, he was conscious of her position, although he tried not to stare, to respect her demands. When he reached the summit of the greatest of the pyramids, his mind cataloged the beauty of the view and the way the vast forest undulated like a great ocean in the distance, hazy with heat. His mind acknowledged this sacred place with awe, but the animal creature and the soul at the core of him, they cried out for his mate, the pain an unending note that blocked all else.

SAM HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO LOOK AT HIM ANY LONGER. SHE'D known what the answer would be before she'd ever asked, yet some small part of her had hoped he might say yes. Instead he'd said nothing at all. She looked around. She was surrounded by beauty, in a place that was right out of holo-vid. This was the kind of adventure she'd always wanted, and she couldn't even enjoy it. Just like before, the taste of her dreams was like bitter ash.

Someone tugged on her sleeve and she almost lost her footing, her shoulders jumping in alarm.

"Are you well?" She breathed easy when she saw X'tha's nostrils flare in distaste as she looked Sam over. At least it wasn't Jaess—not yet. "You don't look well," X'tha continued. "Come. The man told us the sun will set soon and we must make camp. I will show you your tent."

"Thanks, X'tha," she said. She didn't sound well, either.

X'tha gave her another sidelong inspection. "You were not with Jaess. He ascended the pyramid without you."

The woman didn't come right out and ask anything, so Sam just shrugged her shoulders and smiled tightly. "I didn't feel like making the climb," she replied. She wasn't in the mood to pour out her heart a second time that day, especially to a woman she barely knew. Luckily, X'tha left it alone, only remarking upon the ruins and her favorite aspects of the site as she led Sam towards the area where their tents had been pitched.

“You and Jaess are there.” X’ta pointed to one at the edge of the small clearing. Their tent was a bit smaller than the rest, presumably since it was only meant to sleep two people.

“Thanks,” she said again, and she headed over to the lone little tent, hoping that Jaess wasn’t there. When she unfastened a flap and saw that it was empty, her heart fell all the same.

The afternoon had been torture, and she knew it’d been her own fault. She’d already resolved not to ask him to stay. Sam had known his ties to the forest were too strong for him to cut, and she didn’t want to be the one to force him into that kind of sacrifice. A year ago, she might have thought it’d be worth it, but she couldn’t bear to see him wilt away, longing for a place he’d never see again.

That didn’t keep her from hating this place now. It’d reminded him of home—she’d seen it from the first, and the selfish, small part of her had wished that they’d never come here at all, even though she’d seen how much joy it brought him. She hated feeling this way.

She settled down on one of the cots inside and watched the flaps at the entrance, alternately hoping and dreading to see Jaess’ winged shadow. What if he never came at all? What if she had to sleep here alone, wondering if the night before was the last time they’d ever share a bed? How would she bear it?

There would be a dinner before they slept, but she wanted to wait for him here. She’d told him to meet her at the tent, even before she’d realized they’d have their own. She’d figure out something to say. There had to be something she could do, a way to make things right.

Her knees were bouncing as she waited for Jaess to appear. She couldn’t stay still, and the sounds of the jungle had her on edge. There was this droning noise that came in waves, a suffocating buzzing that crescendoed over and over, yet never fully receded. Some sort of bug, the guide had told her when she’d asked—cicadas.

Could she do it? Could she go back?

Sam swore as she bit her lip and made her hands into fists. When she straightened out her fingers, she saw that they shook. That was exactly why she'd told herself not to ask Jaess to stay. She'd already known the answer to both questions. The place Jaess loved best in the galaxy was the nexus of her nightmares, the one place that stole her confidence right from under her. She didn't want to think that the scared, sniveling version of herself she'd been there had been the real Sam. She didn't want to go back and learn that this life that felt so good, so right, was only pretend.

The bug noise was louder now. It grated on her nerves as she waited, and she could see that someone outside had turned on lights to ward against the coming night.

When the tent flap opened, the sound of it hit her like a slap. She froze, just as Jaess had done on the path. She watched him duck down and push his wings through the opening. He was looking at her, and she couldn't turn away. Was this how he'd felt then, when she'd wanted to curse him for staying silent? Like he was choking on all of the competing thoughts that raced to the surface?

"Sam? Are you all right?" he asked. He walked towards her slowly until he knelt down in front of her, pushing into the space between her legs. He didn't touch her yet, but she felt trapped nonetheless. "Look at me Sam. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you what you wanted to hear earlier, but we still need to talk."

"Bite me," she said. His crown feathers flicked up and down before he tilted his head to the side. She swallowed hard. She knew she was pulling out the big guns, even though she shouldn't. That was what Uvaess had always wanted from her—the claiming bite. Maybe, just maybe, even if the bite couldn't make him stay, it would keep part of him here with her. They said it was some sacred bond, that it changed things. She wanted that—she wanted it all with Jaess, whatever she could get.

He spread his large hands out over her thighs and pressed down, just enough to command her attention. When she met his eyes again, he answered her. "No." She felt hot, jittery, and

ashamed. “You’d expect me to claim you and leave half my heart behind? No, Sam. It can’t be like that.” He shook his head, adopting the human gesture before he looked back up at her. “You gave me an afternoon to think. I wish I could lie to you and say that I could stay here and we could be happy, but I must be honest. I wouldn’t ask you to return to Vastiss and the forest. I know why I couldn’t, but Sam, why not Verkissat? When you spoke of it, it sounded as if you still loved it. You were ready to leave Earth for the promise of Verkissat before. Why not now? Why not with me?”

Her lips moved as she fumbled for speech. “Verkissat?” she finally repeated like a slow parrot.

“Yes, Verkissat,” he said, grabbing her hands with excitement. “You could have the life you wanted before, but this time it would be us. Ask me for the mating bite then, Sam, and I’ll give it to you. Let me make you happy there.”

She could feel her heartbeat start to race. Her pulse seemed to get caught in her throat as his enthusiasm took fire. Why not Verkissat? Shimmering, fantasy towers, hover pods speeding to and fro—her magic city of dreams. She pushed back against the excitement. This was exactly what got her into trouble the last time.

“What if it changes?” she asked softly. “I’m scared, Jaess.”

“What if it doesn’t?” He leaned in and pressed his forehead to hers. “What if it doesn’t, k’lallsa, and you could have everything you want?”

“But if it does? What if I can’t do it and I want to go home?”

“Then you go home,” he told her firmly in his strong, steady way.

“That’s just it. Jaess—with you, I don’t think I could ever leave, even if I were unhappy. It’s never been like this for me before. I’ve never wanted someone the way I want you,” she told him, the words coming out in a rushed, messy tumble.

“I wouldn’t let you stay if you were unhappy. I promise you.” He snapped his head up, his wings flaring partially open

behind him, cloaking him in their bright, beautiful colors. “My people make a vow to their mates. The traditional words are my heart is yours, my tongue is yours, my arms will hold you, my wings will shelter you. I would give you my vow, but it will be different, it will be a promise given to you alone.”

He watched her face, searching for any sign he should stop. Sam tightened her fingers around his hands and waited. Jaess bent his head in a small nod, and then he spoke again, his lips curving first in a soft smile.

“My heart is yours, my body for your pleasure. My arms will hold you when you need my strength, but my wings will always lift you up. I will always choose you first, Sam. I will never keep you from your fate, wherever it may be.”

She kept tightening and loosening her hands, unable to control it. The words were beautiful, but could they be enough? He’d never lied to her yet, and the dream—the dream was still just as lovely as it’d ever been, except this time, it wouldn’t be built on translated written messages and a few lone vid-comms. She *knew* Jaess. She loved Jaess.

Sam looked deep into those sharp, celadon eyes, and she remembered all of the risks they’d already taken together. She couldn’t believe Jaess would ever let her fall. She couldn’t let Uvaess take this away from her—she was Sam Chang, and she was meant for more than a life lived small.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes—why not Verkissat? Why not?”

“You accept my vow?” he asked urgently, his hands sliding free to cup her shoulders.

“Yes, I do. I trust you, Jaess. I’m ready.”

Then there were no more words, just the soft press of his mouth against hers, and the first taste of a promise fulfilled. With Jaess, she knew she’d never forget how to soar.

EPILOGUE

THE LOW COUCH ON THE ROOF WASN'T EXACTLY A LOUNGE chair, but it felt similar enough. Sam was stretched out on the colorful cushions watching the smaller spaceships humming above the transportation center. Of course, she had to look past a good swath of green canopy to see them. Compromise hadn't been as painful as she'd feared. The express hover pods to center city meant that she could be amid all of the bustle and excitement in ten minutes if she wanted, yet the narrow, sleek, multi-story house was far enough out from the city to satisfy Jaess.

He was faced the opposite way, humming tunelessly, the sound more of a smoky rumble than a melody. She didn't expect him to never go back to visit his clan, but he'd assured her that he was happy to go alone—or not, if she ever decided it was something she wanted to do.

It'd all seemed so hard back on Earth, but in reality, life had been easy since they'd returned to Xithilene. Almost too easy, but she wasn't about to complain. She'd come to realize a few things since then, too. Even if Uvaess had been different and they'd managed to suit each other, her dream had been all fantasy and no substance. She'd planned to come to Verkissat and then...what? She hadn't thought past that first meeting.

Sam crossed her ankles and leaned back into Jaess' lap, looking up at her handsome Xithilene man, wings and all. Her life might look like a vacation right now, but this time around, it was a true partnership. Jaess had no desire to perform every night any longer, but that didn't mean he wasn't happy to

watch her onstage. She'd played for some of Lithi's dancers in the city, but most evenings, she didn't accompany anyone at all and the crowds here still loved her. Sure, the size of said crowds may have been a step down, but the energy was the same.

"So, I was thinking," she said, waiting to make sure she had his attention, "there's still one promise you made me at El Mirador that you haven't kept."

His crown feathers rustled suspiciously as he looked down at her face. "Is that right?" he asked.

She nodded, a mischievous smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Yep. You told me you'd give me the claiming bite." She lifted her eyebrows and grinned. She started to get uncomfortable when his face went blank and his body tensed.

"Now?" he asked hoarsely.

"Now," she whispered back, all the teasing gone out of her voice as bone-melting heat overtook her limbs.

"If you don't want me to claim you right here on the rooftop, k'lallsa, you'd better run." *Promises, promises.*

She hopped to her feet. "Like this?"

She took off towards the opening that led to the ladder inside. When she heard the sound of his wings opening behind her, the last thing on her mind was fear. Sam was laughing as she scrambled down the ladder, and soon enough, Jaess' own low, hissing laughter followed her down. Chasing fate was infinitely better than chasing a dream.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Stealing Samantha*. When I first began writing this novella, I just wanted to give Sam a chance at her own happily ever after. Once Sam and Jaess met again on the page, it became clear that for Sam to have that happy ending, she would need to do a lot more during the story than just fall in love. I'm so happy with the way both of these characters grow into a more mature, lasting type of love, and I hope it was a satisfying progression for you as well.

El Mirador is a Preclassic Maya site located in northern Guatemala. The city was abandoned by the Maya nearly 2,000 years ago, probably due decreasing crop fertility and ecosystem damage caused by their building methods. The Maya called El Mirador the Kan Kingdom, or Snake Kingdom. Some archaeologists believe that the people who left El Mirador would later settle Calakmul, whose kings referred to themselves as the lords of Kan. I thought it would be fun to have the Xithilene visitors get to see what might have been an even more ancient piece of the Lady's heritage.

PREVIEW: UNYIELDING

Unyielding: A Christmas Alien Mate Portal Romance

Can you bribe an alien with a pumpkin pie?

Kayla Chang would've been just fine staying on Earth without ever encountering a Xithilene warrior, but when her big sister Sam goes missing after traveling to Xithilene to meet her prospective mate, Kayla is almost certain that there's trouble in paradise. When no one else will listen to her, she takes matters into her own hands.

Fleet Captain T'xith of Vastiss has transported countless humans to his home planet, but hardly any of them ever seem to notice him. Even his crew doesn't know the real man behind his rank. A soldier trying to navigate his new peacetime identity, T'xith feels as if he's approaching a crossroads. He just never expected it to arrive in the form of a determined human woman.

When Kayla shows up on his bridge requesting assistance, he has a decision to make. Helping Kayla will mean returning to a place that he promised himself he'd left behind for good, but if he doesn't confront those bitter memories, they'll have no chance of finding Sam.

A trip deep into the remote jungles of Lisseethi pushes T'xith and Kayla even closer together. Add in a flower laden treehouse in the middle of a secluded forest village, a convenient lie about how Kayla might be his mate, and Christmas on the horizon, and they just might have the recipe for a real romance. T'xith and Kayla just need a little holiday magic to discover what really matters—and how to make a love between two planets work

Chapter 1

“Are you really in love with him? I mean one hundred percent sure.” Kayla watched Sam’s face carefully as she waited for her sister to answer the question.

“Of course, I am! How can you even ask? We’ve been together for months now—”

“Not together,” Kayla interrupted quietly.

Sam’s mouth pressed down into a thin line as the color bled from her lips. She’d done it now. Sam would kick her out of her apartment next if she couldn’t figure out how to get the conversation back on track.

“I don’t mean it like that—don’t give me that look. Please, Sam, just listen to me for once. I hope it all works out with Uvaess, even if that means I’ll be losing you, and do you know why? Because I do want you to be happy. Please just promise me that if things change when you get there, and in person together isn’t the same as online together, you’ll come back home.”

Sam shook her head. “It’s not like that. You just don’t get it, but that’s not surprising. You never take a chance on anyone or anything. Life has to be all planned out for you, doesn’t it?”

“All I want is for you to be truly happy—that’s it. I’m going to go now.”

Kayla stood up and grabbed her coat off the back of the chair, sliding it over her arm as she rushed to sling her purse over her shoulder. She didn’t look back, even though she could hear Sam start to move behind her. She’d tell her to stay and say sorry and try to pretend like everything was just fine, but it wasn’t. That had hurt—but like a paper cut where the shock of the initial slice gave you an instant to prepare before the sting. She supposed that’s how it was with sisters though; no one else knew quite so well where the other’s weaknesses lay. Too bad the knowledge didn’t leave her feeling any better.

She stepped out onto the landing and then approached the stairwell. The wind whipped her hair across her face and she fumbled with her purse for a moment as she tried to put on her jacket. It'd gotten cold all of a sudden sometime during the past week. Autumn had been hanging on, painting the fields gold and lending a delicious crispness to the air, but there'd been a shift recently. Now it went dark in the blink of an eye, long before she was able to head home after work, and crisp had turned to bitter as the temperature began to sink lower with each passing day.

Kayla tightened her arms over her chest, shoving her hands into the space between her body and her sleeves. It barely helped. She was so, so cold. It was probably a good thing that Uvaess wasn't coming to Earth and that Sam was going to his planet. The man would probably hate it here. He lived in the capital city there—Verkissat, on Xithilene. She'd seen the vids and images. The alien city looked like a tropical jungle paradise. Sam had shown it to her enough times after she'd first gotten the idea to find a way to go.

Maybe Kayla could stand to be more adventurous, but Sam had always been impulsive enough for both of them. One evening they'd been watching vids released by previous visitors to Verkissat, and the next day Sam had been telling her how she'd signed up for the Xithilene Mate Portal Program. *Mate portal*. That made it sound like it was as easy as opening a door and stepping through, and then “poof,” open it again and step out on an alien planet—with a side of true love to sweeten the deal.

The truth was that it took six months of constant communication for a couple to even receive permission to meet in person. Maybe at the beginning, the whole thing had been about getting out of their shithole town, but Kayla knew it'd changed for Sam somewhere along the way. Her sister really did love Uvaess—at least the version of him who wrote pretty comms and made pretty promises, too. So what if Kayla was less trusting than her sister? She was always the one that ended up picking up the pieces, after all, and yes, part of her was tired of it. Sam was the older one, but it had never really felt like it.

Kayla hopped off the last step and jogged to her transport—the one she shared with the rest of the family at home, and she got inside as quickly as she could. Even before she activated the engine, she felt warmer being out of the wind. She hit the ignition button and the transport hummed to life.

Kayla glanced back at the apartment building. A soft glow came from a window on the third floor. She knew she was looking at Sam's one-bedroom. The truth was, she envied her sister. Kayla had been so busy taking care of everyone else, that somewhere along the way, she'd forgotten to get on with her own life. Here she was at twenty-three, and she was still living in the family home, still postponing all of her plans as one obstacle after another arose.

She reached forward to enter her destination into the auto-nav system, but her hand stopped before she pressed a single control. She glanced up at that window again. It wasn't Sam's fault that Kayla had grown too comfortable right where she was. She dropped her hand and grabbed her purse again. She could stay in her predictable life and complain about it as she used her family as an excuse to stay, or she could do something about it. Maybe she wouldn't be booking a trip across the galaxy, but a move to the nearest city might help. *Baby steps.*

She opened the door and got out, pushing it shut behind her as she hurried back to the stairwell with her head bent against the wind. At this rate they might have snow any day. She took the stairs two at a time, and by the time she reached the top landing, she wasn't feeling the cold any longer. Kayla pressed the doorbell and waited. She could hear Sam inside as she walked towards the door. When her sister opened it, Kayla raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

“Will you forgive me? Show me the last vid he sent—the one that shows the view from his apartment in Verkissat. Please, Sam. I promise I'll be happy right along with you.”

Sam stood perfectly still for an excruciating moment before she smiled. “Everyone's always said you're the smart one in the family. At least you're finally lending some validity

to that claim.” Sam laughed as she grabbed her by the arm and pulled her inside.

Kayla smiled. She didn’t need to have blind faith in Uvaess, but she wasn’t going to ruin things with her sister—not when this might be the last week they’d see one another for a very long time. There was some travel between Xithilene and Earth and Mars, but at this point it was all still highly regulated and monitored. This might be one of the last times for a long while where she’d get to sit and laugh with Sam, and she wasn’t going to waste it—not a single minute.

Kayla was staring at her viewscreen, waiting for the little glowing ball on the screen to resolve into her sister’s face. The vid-comm was in process, but it was taking a while to initiate. Sam had left three days ago. She’d received a short text notification that her sister had arrived safely on Xithilene, but this would be the first time they’d be speaking since Sam had landed on the alien planet.

Sam’s sunny smile suddenly filled the screen as her sister waved excitedly. “Kayla! It’s amazing here—you would not believe—” Sam turned in her seat, giving Kayla a close-up view of her shoulder and not much else. “*Yes—my sister, like I told you. What do you mean?*” Kayla assumed Sam was talking to Uvaess. She couldn’t think of anyone else who should be there with Sam. Her sister turned back to the screen. “Everything’s great and I’m so glad to see you. Are you guys still enjoying the leftovers?” Sam’s lips turned up in a wistful grin.

Kayla patted her stomach and smiled back. “Yep. I don’t think I could give up pumpkin pie. It’s a good thing you waited to leave until the day after Thanksgiving. How are you settling in? Where’s Uvaess?” She knew he was lurking there in the background, but she was trying to be cordial. If her sister was really going to end up with this man, she needed to get to know him, too.

“I am here, Lady Kayla.” Uvaess leaned down over Sam’s shoulder and stared. His yellow eyes gleamed like some predator in the night—like an owl. Uvaess had owl eyes. Kayla held back a shudder and smiled.

“Hello, Uvaess. It’s good to see you. How is it finally meeting in person? I’m so happy for you both,” she said, keeping that false smile pasted on her face.

Uvaess tilted his head. He had dark green scales covering his face and neck, and feathers of the same color covered his scalp. They were folded down flat against his head right now, but she’d seen images of Xithilene with their feathers extended—it was an impressive sight. She gulped as she saw more feathers poking up above his shoulder. Feathers and a talon. That’s right—the man had wings.

“I have hungered for the presence of my mate,” he said in his rumbling bass voice. One scaly green hand snaked behind her sister and curled around her opposite shoulder. Once more she was reminded of a bird of prey. Those fingers with their black nails were pressing in hard enough to leave indentations on Sam’s bare arm.

Kayla cleared her throat. “Well, I know she was really looking forward to meeting you as well.” *Cultural differences*, she told herself. Just because that’d sounded incredibly creepy didn’t mean she should take it that way.

“Do you plan to find your mate among our people, as well, Lady Kayla? Many males of my clan would be eager to claim a female like you.”

Now she was a *female*? And claim? Definitely crossing over to the creepy side.

“I’m good, thanks,” she replied quickly. Sam gave Kayla an exaggerated frown and narrowed her eyes at her. Kayla shrugged lightly as she made eye contact with her sister. What was she supposed to say? Sign me right up? “So, what do you think of the city?” She’d made small talk with the guy, but now it was time to focus on Sam. These vid-comms were expensive, and their time was limited.

“It’s so beautiful, Kay. The views from this apartment—” Sam broke off and shook her head with a light laugh. “I’ll send some images. Those vids we watched didn’t do it justice. Uvaess will be taking me to visit the temple later. There’s an honest to God pyramid there, and we can see it from here.” She smiled brightly. “And it’s so clean here! The cleanest city I’ve ever seen. There’s not a speck of litter on the streets here and the air smells so pure. It’s practically paradise.”

“Wow,” Kayla said with a faint smile. “It sounds incredible. I’m so glad, Sam. We all are, but of course mom has been fretting about you being gone for Christmas. Just know that you’re missed—lots.”

Sam beamed back at her. “I miss you, too. Tell the others I’m ecstatic to be here and I’ll send more comms soon. I love you, Kay—take care, okay?”

Kayla smiled so hard it hurt. “I love you, too. Don’t forget those comms!” She waved at her viewscreen as she waited for her sister to end the connection. Her eyes caught on a solemn face in the corner of her screen—Uvaess. He was watching her, even as the feed flickered and faded.

She shut off the viewscreen entirely and slid it inside the top drawer of her desk. She tried to shake off the unease she felt, but she kept seeing Uvaess’ sharp yellow eyes. She was being silly. The man was just curious. She would be too if she were him. Kayla closed her eyes and pressed her fingers down over her eyelids. She should go tell the others how the vid-comm had gone. Her mom and Andy would want to know—Aunt Emily, too.

Kayla stood up and walked over to her door. She opened it and immediately a combination of jarring football whistles from the main viewscreen and raised voices filled the air. *Home, sweet home.* It really was time to make her own escape plan. Her mom had already had her chance at adventure. There was no reason for Kayla to stay here taking care of them all any longer. Just because Andy was a deadbeat who couldn’t hold down a job didn’t mean it was her responsibility.

She stepped inside the living room and saw her mom sitting on the recliner, her bad leg up on the footrest, and the old familiar guilt settled in her stomach. The accident had been six years ago now. She couldn't let it steer the course of her life. She smiled weakly when her aunt nodded at her and lifted a beer.

“Hey, girl! There's a boy at work—Jace. I'm giving him your comm ID when we go back to work tomorrow. He's a cute little thing. If I were ten years younger...” Aunt Emily grinned wickedly. “You need to get out more, honey, but you should stay right here. I don't know what Sammie was thinking. Have you heard anything else from her? It's not natural, that's what I say. Aliens,” she added under her breath with a dramatic shiver.

Hadn't she just had the same reaction when she'd seen Uvaess on her viewscreen? Somehow hearing the same sentiment from her aunt had her bristling with indignation for Sam.

“Sam loves Uvaess. She's really happy. I just got off of a vid-comm with her, actually—that's what I came out to tell you.”

“Really? She's happy?” Her mother's soft, affected invalid voice. How many times had she used those gentle words to trap and bind?

“Really, mom,” she replied before she turned back to the rest of them, even though Andy had barely shifted his head in her direction. “She's loving it all so far. She's going to send images over the comm-link as soon as she gets a chance. I'll let you know when I get them. Apparently Verkissat is everything she'd dreamed it'd be.”

“Well, Sammie was always the type to go after what she wanted. You could use a little of her gumption.”

Kayla gave her aunt a tight smile. That's exactly what the lot of them wouldn't want. The day she showed them some “gumption” would be the same one the guilt trips started.

“I think I’m good,” she replied. “Enjoy the game,” she added with a nod towards the wall mounted viewscreen.

Kayla turned back towards the hall. Sam was gone with no return date in sight. Now it was time to take a long, hard look at her own life and what she wanted.

Chapter 2

Kayla stretched her arms out over her head and yawned.

“That bad?”

“Russ!” she said as she quickly dropped her arms and straightened her back. She used the balls of her feet to slide her chair back into place so that her legs were tucked beneath her workstation desk again. “Everything’s fine,” she added with a polite smile.

Russ proceeded to prop his hip against the side of her desk as he leaned over. He nodded towards the screen in front of her. “I got behind with grading, too. I decided to actually enjoy my Thanksgiving break, but now I’m regretting it. You want to get out of here and grab a bite to eat at McMahon’s?”

Kayla looked around her classroom. The kids had all left long ago, and she’d still had another virtual class to teach right after their dismissal, but everything looked to be in order. She glanced back at her viewscreen. She was almost caught up on her grading anyway.

“Sure, I’d love to,” she said as she logged out of the school’s admin interface. “I’m ready to get out of here.” She smiled at her coworker as she stood up and walked over to fetch her coat off of its hook. “We haven’t really had a chance to chat all week.”

“I know. I want to hear all about Sam and her crazy ass. She really went to Xithilene?” Russ looked ready to hear all of the juicy details, but the question had Kayla scrunching her shoulders together with uneasiness.

“Yeah, she really went. I’ll tell you all about it when we get to the restaurant.”

Russ just grinned back as they walked out to the parking lot together. They headed for their separate transports and waved goodbye. Kayla sighed as she sat down in the driver’s seat. She was probably just worrying for nothing—the fact that Sam had neglected to either send a text comm or attempt to

contact her again since their last—and only—conversation since she'd arrived in Verkissat wasn't necessarily cause for concern. It was Sam, after all.

Russ was waiting by the door when she got out of her transport and walked up to the restaurant. He pulled it open with a flourish and a mock bow and she grinned back at him. “Thanks,” she said. “You're always the gentleman, aren't you?”

“I aim to please,” he quipped back.

Kayla breathed in the fragrant scent of delicious food she wouldn't have to cook and basked in the welcome warmth of the indoor air. “Quick—shut that door. The breeze is following you inside,” she told Russ. He just nudged her forward towards the hostess stand.

As they settled into a small booth towards the back of the restaurant, Russ took an exaggeratedly loud breath and fixed his gaze upon her. “Okay, I've waited long enough, now spill. Do you think this is going to work out? I mean, really, Sam in an alien city *not* causing an interplanetary incident?”

She supposed the skepticism was fair. She and Russ had been working together for two and a half years now. The first year she'd only been student teaching, but they'd still hit it off, and he knew all about her tumultuous relationship with her sister.

“It sounded like everything was going great,” she began before she bit her lip.

“But...” Russ shot her an expectant look, waiting for her to elaborate.

“No but—not really. She seemed happy when I spoke to her. We shared a vid-comm on Sunday and she was in his apartment in the city telling me how beautiful everything was. I saw the guy—Uvaess.” She couldn't repress her little shiver as she spoke his name. “Anyway, everything seemed to be fine, but she promised to send a text comm with some images of the place and I haven't heard from her since. It's almost been an entire week, and she hasn't responded to any of my

messages either, not even to tell me to stop pestering her so much. Honestly, I'm starting to feel a little worried."

Russ glanced up as a serv-bot deposited two glasses of water at their table. He slid them over so a glass sat in front of each of them. "I understand you're worried. If it were my sister, I'd probably feel the same way, but this is Sam we're talking about. She's not exactly dependable. This wouldn't be the first time she fell off the face of the Earth—or I guess in this case, Xithilene—during the honeymoon phase with some guy." He shrugged. "She'll probably comm you soon. Just wait—they'll have their first fight and then she won't stop writing."

"Maybe," Kayla replied as she traced her finger around the rim of her glass. "I know you're probably right."

"I usually am," Russ said with a bright grin before he spun the menu screen her way. "Here—let's order."

Kayla tapped in her selections and settled back into her seat. She took a sip of her water and gave her friend a faint smile, but despite his reassurances, she couldn't quite shake the sense that something was off. But what could she do if there were a problem? Who would she contact? How? She smiled again as Russ launched into a spirited story about the latest woman he'd met in the city. She should've been laughing at his description of his hot date gone terribly wrong, but Kayla just couldn't get her mind off of Sam. She nodded along and pretended anyway.

They sure made it hard to find any useful information on their page. Kayla was squinting at the Xithilene Mate Portal main-interface searching for any way to contact, well, anyone. So far she was having zero success locating anything remotely useful. No convenient "Contact Us" or FAQ section. Not that she expected there to be a "Missing your sister? Click here," option front and center, but she'd been hoping for some way to reach out. There had to be, right?

Another week had passed with no contact from Sam. Maybe she could've brushed it off before, but her sister wasn't that flighty. Going halfway across the galaxy wasn't the same as getting wrapped up in Danny from Tacoma for half a month. Sam had to know that they'd be worried if they didn't hear from her—well, that Kayla would be worried. Her mother had smiled faintly and told her that her Sammie would be just fine, and no one else seemed to share her concern either, but she wasn't going to let that stop her from getting to the bottom of things.

There. *Finally*. Down in the fine print, she'd spotted a link to an inquiry page. She quickly wrote out a message with her sister and Uvaess' information and the date of her pickup voyage to Xithilene. Kayla stared at what she'd written for a long moment, making sure she hadn't left anything out, before she hit send. Then she forced herself to close out her viewscreen. There was nothing else she could do—it was time for a little distraction.

Kayla got up and brushed her hair. Then she grabbed her purse and headed for the mud room for her coat and gloves. She was going out. Maybe a little Christmas shopping would help her reset her mind. She'd always loved spending time looking at the lights in their little downtown during this time of the year. It wouldn't be the same without Sam, but still, Christmas was in two weeks, and she hadn't bothered to do anything at all to prepare. Maybe this was just what the doctor ordered.

Kayla slid on her coat and grabbed her keys off the hook by the back door. Luckily no one else had taken out the transport. She hurried over to the vehicle, opened the door, and hopped inside as she pressed the ignition button. At least it started without any hiccups. The last thing they needed was to have to take it into the shop again. She entered in the destination code for a parking lot downtown and the transport began to back out of their driveway. Kayla was fiddling with the music console when she felt her wrist-comm vibrate.

She pushed back her sleeve and then sighed as she read the holo-alert. Just a message from their principal reminding them

they'd be staying late tomorrow for additional staff development. It'd been too early to expect a reply anyway. Kayla looked out at the road. It'd already grown dark, but if she wasn't mistaken, those were snowflakes beginning to fall, highlighted by the blue glare of the transport's headlights. She smiled despite herself. The first snow always retained a bit of magic.

Kayla leaned back in her seat and held her hands up to catch the hot air from the transport's heating vents. It was a good thing she'd brought the gloves. It wasn't nearly warm enough to ride without them. Even on full blast, the heater was on its last legs.

The transport's speed began to decrease as the glittery lights of their quaint two blocks of downtown came into view. Cherry Ridge didn't have a lot of charm, but the little it did possess could be found right in front of her. Evergreen wreaths with bright crimson bows hung from the street lamps, their lights catching the newly falling snow in their glow. She wasn't the only one who'd decided it was a good night for shopping. A laughing family passed by as her transport slid into an open space across from the main street.

Kayla buttoned her coat before she opened her door. She braced herself for the sting of the cold on her face as she stepped out. Even with the gloves, she still tucked her hands into her pockets and dipped her chin beneath the collar of her wool coat. It wasn't just families that were enjoying the picturesque scenery—several couples were strolling aimlessly along the sidewalks, their eyes on each other more than the storefronts they passed. Kayla dropped her eyes to the ground and watched the snowflakes land on her boots.

She wasn't jealous. No, that wasn't what this was all about. She was worried about Sam. Still, although she might not have wanted an Uvaess, her heart gave a little pained stutter when she saw those happy couples holding hands and sharing lovestruck glances. It wasn't always easy being the lonely one. She blew out a huff of hot air and watched it condense into a wispy cloud in front of her face. Kayla turned

towards the nearest store window and tightened her jaw, not really seeing the display.

She'd just do her shopping and go home. It didn't matter that even the snow couldn't make it feel like Christmas. She'd do what she was supposed to do and swallow it all down—that persistent dissatisfaction that rode her hard in the early hours of the morning when she couldn't sleep, the ache when she let herself consider that maybe her life would simply continue on like this with no changes, no disruptions. Kayla buried it all and showed the world a smile, because that's what she'd always done. No one ever noticed the frown, anyway.

Chapter 3

“Earth again?”

T’xith glanced up as his friend grinned at him, showing a bit of fang. “Yes, K’thiss. Earth again. If they don’t give me any other assignments soon, I may just have to retire as you did.”

K’thiss flicked up his green and red crown feathers and lifted his arm, signaling to the barkeep with his fingers that they’d like another round. “I’m not retired—not entirely. And what would you do if you were no longer a Fleet captain? Do you have aspirations you’ve never shared? You were the most ambitious of us all, if I recall correctly.”

T’xith reached for his glass, frowning slightly when he saw it was inconveniently empty. He’d wanted the delay taking another drink would provide—he had no good answers for his old training brother.

“I don’t know,” he replied, not meeting K’thiss’ gaze. He didn’t want to see pity there. It was easy to be happy when a man had a mate and a new child—a purpose. K’thiss had probably forgotten what it felt like to know loneliness. Even as a captain, he’d had T’kalinth. T’xith’s latest first officer was adequately qualified, but they weren’t friends.

Their glasses of mezal’el arrived at the table before K’thiss ever responded. T’xith picked up his new glass and brought it to his lips, enjoying the warm burn of the liquor as it slid down his throat.

“You could enter your own profile into the Mate Portal.”

T’xith snapped his head up along with his feathers, unsure if he’d heard his friend correctly or whether his imagination had misled him. “You think I should use the Mate Portal to find a human woman?” The words tasted ashy and unpleasant in his mouth.

“Why not? You go to Earth often enough. Do you not want a human mate?” K’thiss frowned. “I haven’t seen you put

much effort into enticing any of our own women lately.”

“I have nothing against humans. It’s the Mate Portal itself that I find distasteful. If the Lady wills it, I would be happy to find my k’lallsa, be she human or Xithilene, but searching her out so deliberately feels...wrong. For me, at least. I have no ill will towards any of the others who use the portal, but I don’t wish to force a connection. That isn’t how it should be between mates.”

K’thiss was grinning at him again. “You’re a romantic, T’xith. How did I go so many years without guessing the truth? But really, brother, you haven’t been yourself lately. Perhaps you should speak to Verkor about a transfer. Although there are no current conflicts, the Council is still conducting many scientific and patrol missions. You should speak with the general if you are unhappy.”

“Perhaps. I will consider it,” T’xith replied, unwilling to concede more.

He couldn’t really say he was unhappy. Unhappiness would require bouts of sadness or despair. Lately, when he saw the joy of the couples who’d found their mates, he simply felt numb. Not indifferent—he knew that intellectually he was glad for them, but inside, it didn’t touch him. He carried out his required flight plans. He did what he was supposed to do. And that was...it. He wasn’t unhappy, but he certainly wasn’t satisfied with his life either. A Fleet captain with no war, no true missions—yes, he would need to consider his options soon.

Prospective mates Samantha Chang (human) and Uvaess of Sa’isthess (Lisseethi) completed a successful initial post-meeting compatibility screening. Mate Portal personnel have no influence over the personal communication preferences of participants.

Kayla stared at the message displayed in the air above her wrist comm. *That* was it? They had nothing else to tell her?

Her fingers itched to type out a response, but she wasn't sure what else to say. She'd already indicated that she was seriously concerned about her sister, but they'd only seen fit to respond with the same type of bureaucratic bullshit she would've expected from a human run corporation. She needed to talk to someone—preferably in person.

She shut off the display holo and rapped her fingernails against her desk, her lips pressed together tightly. They weren't going to get rid of her that easily. It wasn't unreasonable to expect that Xithilene would provide some level of safeguarding for the humans that chose to visit their planet. An interplanetary alliance went both ways after all, and a woman shouldn't be able to go missing under their watch. Someone was going to give her answers. She just had to figure out how she'd make it happen.

Continue Kayla's story in [Unyielding](#). Sign up for my [newsletter](#) to stay up-to-date with all of my newest releases.

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Reading has long been one of the author's favorite pastimes, no matter what the genre, but she's always had a lifelong love for Sci-Fi and Fantasy and the way they can hold up a mirror to our lives and our world.

The author earned her B.A. in German Studies, minoring in Art History, at Bryn Mawr College and her M.A. in Germanics from the University of Washington.

R.L. Olvitt is the author of *Unyielding*, *Unblessed* and *Unexpected* in the Xithilene Mates series. She's also the author of the Sons of Kukulcán series, which includes the books *The Feathered Serpent*, *Son of the Evening Star*, *Inferior Conjunction*, *Prince of the Night Sun*, *Under the Eyes of the Night*, *Master of the Forest*, *Kingdom of the Snake*, *Heart of the Sky*, and *Blood of the Jaguar*. She is also the author of the *Land of Velvet Night* and *Bringer of Stars* series.