

THE MONSTERS BELOW

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BRAI walked the uneven stone path carefully. The last thing he needed to do here was stumble. He'd done that once in training, his gun and the various clips and buckles of his climbing harness rattling against the stone so that it echoed down the long tunnels and into the monstrous caverns that defined Sub-Kestia.

But this wasn't training. He wasn't following some bitter old soldier with a blinded eye down a cliff face marked with safety bolts and yellow markers. He was walking a narrow precipice above a deep crack in a line of soldiers harnessed together for safety on this dangerous battlefield. Because this was his first mission, he was designated Fox fifteen, the center man on a line of thirty soldiers, with more experienced warriors in front and in back of him. Fox five and Fox twenty-one were the other newbies—fresh meat on a line of battle-scarred warriors.

“Full stop, three life signs,” a voice called over the commlink, and Brai immediately dropped to one knee and used a percussion charge to drive an anchor deep into the rock. The vamps loved to sweep entire units off these narrow ledges, laughing as human bodies crashed and tumbled against the stones, accelerating at a rate that Brai should know since the gravity of Kestia was a constant, but physics had always escaped him.

He was pretty sure his teachers had passed him because he was the sweet one in class, the one who would show them how to use the antiquated computer input or where to find fruit that wasn't half-rotted. Rick had always told him that he was cute enough with his large, dark eyes and sweet enough with his dimpled innocence that he could charm anyone. Of course, it had been Rick who had been smart enough to use

that for their advantage. But now Rick was gone, and cute and sweet wouldn't help Brai calculate the rate of a falling body or survive this war against aliens that hid under the ground.

“Vamps?” a breathy voice asked into the commlink. Brai flinched. Yeah, he thought of the monsters as vamps in his own head, but out loud, wherever others could hear him, he called them Subs—a sub-human, sub-intelligent sub-species. They lived in the subterranean labyrinths of Kestia. They certainly weren't the mythological creatures of human imagination and distant human worlds. However, Brai understood the urge to use that word. Vampires were monsters that hid in the dark and flinched from sunlight and God, and that described the monsters who had stolen Rick from him. The thought of Rick made Brai's guts clench, even now.

His knee was starting to ache, the thin, regulation kneepad not up to the prolonged position, but still the commander didn't order them forward or give them a target. Water dripped over the rocks, and the faintly florescent glow of the Kestia blue mold created an eerie lighting that mimicked one too many horror vids Brai had watched. He clutched his gun tighter, mentally reviewing every lesson some bitter old soldiers had ever tried to drill into his head. He could almost hear Rick, like a ghost, telling him to relax before he shot himself in the knee.

“Three signs, vector up, neg-three, fifteen, neg-seven.” The commander's voice barely finished before Brai snapped his gun up to his shoulder so fast that the butt of the gun bruised flesh. Fifteen, neg-seven was too damn close for comfort. He squinted into the small green window of his weapon, looking for any movement. The commander said the vamps were vectoring up under them, but he couldn't see anything.

“Anders?” Brai called softly, his comm still off. Yeah, he might want a little reassurance, but he sure as hell didn't want an officer hearing him call for a friendly voice like some sort of kid.

“Got nothing,” Anders said, and in the dim light, Brai could see him shift uncomfortably, the safety line between him and his clip pulling taut.

“Three signs passing, vector out neg-three, twenty-five, four,” the commander said. The numbers meant that these three were going on their merry little way, doing whatever Subs did when they weren't busy trying to eat soldiers or colonists or dark-eyed lovers.

Brai blew out all the air he'd been holding. They wouldn't go chasing three of them through the tunnels and cracks. No, they wanted a nest of nice, sedentary monsters, all nicely lined up and waiting to get blasted into so many pieces that even their amazing powers of healing couldn't help. That's what Brai wanted. He wanted to feel his gun jerking in his hands and see some vamp torn apart by shrapneling bullets.

"Scan clear of signs. Move out."

Around him pressure valves hissed as soldiers released the pins that held their safety anchors in the rock. Brai twisted at the ridged cap, but his fingers couldn't quite get the damn thing to release.

"Danner's luck," he cursed softly, but others were already standing, and in a second, the whole line was going to be caught on his anchor. Brai ripped his glove off so that he could get fingers around the cap. Anders stood up and looked down at him, his disgust evident even in the dim, blue light of the luminescent mold that crept down the damp rocks.

"Press down as you twist," Placette offered as she knelt next to him, her helmet clunking against his as she crouched down. Brai felt a drop of sweat tickle down his backbone as he scrambled at the anchor.

"Hey, just slow down," she said, reaching out and pulling his hands away. She reached out for the anchor as Anders pulled the rope tight.

"Hurry it up." Anders sounded impatient, and Placette said something under her breath that Brai didn't catch. Then the darkness lit up with flashes of gunfire that made the pyrite and crystals sparkle in the dark Kestia rocks. Fox twenty-four, a short woman with a harsh voice, cried out an unnecessary warning. Brai grabbed his rifle, swinging it around to the rear when Placette was ripped away, her body flying back so fast that her gun swung free and caught him across the cheek. Tears and the flash of muzzle fire blinded him for a vital second, but the feel of weight pulling at him was familiar.

Brai reached for the safety cord and pulled. Placette had been swept off the narrow ledge, and he had to get her back. His ungloved hand stung as the rope dug into flesh, but he ignored that as he put all his weight behind pulling her up. He couldn't. The line was as solid as if the far end was tied off.

"Anders, the line!" Brai called over the echoing rattle of the guns. Keith Anders looked at him with great frustration for one second, and then a dark shape darted across Brai's vision. The ricochet of bullets

sounded like a line of piston belts failing in an engine that was running at full speed. Brai dropped to the ground, the warm spray across his face a mystery to him until the salt and copper of someone else's blood touched his lips. He thought he might vomit; only he didn't have time. Check perimeter. After fire, always check perimeter.

Brai looked around and saw Anders sliding away from him, his gaping mouth gurgling blood as the safety line dragged him toward the edge of the path. Brai reached out and caught the man's wrist in his ungloved hand, holding on as he was pulled toward the edge too. The difference was that he still had his anchor in; Anders didn't.

"Fox sixteen, off path, off path, multiple dangle!" Brai called right before Anders slid over the edge of the crumbling rock, dragging Brai with him. From a distance, the crevasses of Kestia were a wonder. Pyrite and quartz and silver threaded through black rock heavy with carbon and littered with a sort of mold that grew everywhere on the planet. With his nose pressed to the dark rock, Brai didn't think they were nearly as pretty. Below him dangled half of Fox division. Placette was closest to him, twisting as she tried to reach around and grab her own anchor.

Already Brai's fingers ached with the weight of holding Anders, but instinct made him hold on, even if, logically, the line between them was stronger than Brai's frail hold. Looking around, he wasn't getting pulled up any time soon if the guys on either side of him were dangling with him. Three guys from Anders's side of the line were off-path too. One, like Placette, was struggling to get another anchor in. They looked like dim, blue shadows wiggling against the black rock. One shadow, the man just past Anders on the line, slowly spun so that Brai could see his face.

It was the first time Brai had seen death up close. He'd imagined it a thousand times. He'd imagined Rick's face at the point death had caught him. His lover's dark eyes were wide with fear in his imagination, but the image was thankfully vague. He'd seen Rick blissful and playful and angry, but he'd never seen him afraid. But now, looking at the body dangling from the line, Brai recognized the utter terror frozen on the dead face.

"Hang on, Anders," Brai said, trying to focus on his training and not his body's sudden and almost irresistible urge to vomit up everything, including his own stomach. Looking down toward Anders, he caught a glimpse of inhuman eyes staring up at him, inhuman hands

gripping Anders's body, inhuman teeth pulling out of Anders's leg. Brai suddenly realized that he wasn't holding Anders... he was holding a body that a vamp was feeding on.

"Sub! Zero, zero, neg-one!" he cried out as he dropped Anders and grabbed for his weapon. The Sub scrambled away across the sheer rock face, his body performing inhuman deeds of athleticism, and Brai got off two shots before Anders hit the end of the safety line, and it jerked, throwing Brai's aim off. His bullets echoed into the impossibly open spaces of the crevasse he was dangling over.

"All hold, all hold," the command came over the commlink. "Solid anchors, report in!"

The comm went silent. For a second, Brai's brain whited-out, the fear and the panic erasing his ability to even understand the question. Even more than that, he couldn't comprehend the lack of responses from others. "Fox fifteen, solid anchor," he finally said into the horrifying silence. Thirty men and women, and he had the only solid anchor. His guts twisted in fear because it didn't take a genius in physics to figure out that wasn't going to hold for long. They were going to fall and end up at the bottom of this fissure as one big pile of meat for the Subs to pick from.

"Secondary anchors, report in!" the commander called when it became obvious that no one else was going to speak up. Even Brai could hear the stress in his voice.

"Fox two, secondary anchor," the commander's second-in-command quickly called. "Fox ten, secondary anchor," a second voice reported after a pause. The silence after that voice was as loud as a windstorm howling against the rocks of Upper Kestia. Brai felt like if he screamed, the silence would swallow up his voice and leave nothing behind. Underneath him, Placette twisted more energetically, contorting her body to try and reach her own anchor. The men under her were all dangling from Brai's anchor, and given the distance some of them had fallen, Brai guessed they were already dead, their bodies dashed against the rocks. And Subs would already be crawling out of their holes to feast on those tasty, bleeding bits of meat on a rope. Brai could feel the laughter bubbling up, threatening to push his food up and out along with any sanity he might still have.

Above him, his anchor gave an electronic warning chirp. The

silence didn't swallow that—that was loud enough to fill all the caverns on the planet. That one sound silenced very bit of shuffling and sniffing and moaning Brai could hear on the whole line.

“Fox fifteen, cut downline.” The words were said with the same clinical precision as every other word that came from the commander's mouth, but they sank into Brai, sweeping away reason and leaving a cold fear behind. Placette looked up at him, her struggles momentarily still, a cut on the side of her face bleeding slowly. For some reason a bit of training popped into his head, and he thought that someone had to get that wound covered before the vamps thought she was ringing a dinner bell. His throat tightened, and he had an image of Rick's face in that same twist of panic and despair that Kaitlyn Placette wore right now.

“Fox fifteen, cut downline,” the commander repeated.

“Fox sixteen is working on a secondary, advise cutting downline of sixteen,” Brai answered. His anchor chirped again.

“Fox fifteen, cut downline.” The commander was terse.

Brai's hands moved to the release, but he couldn't do it.

“Fox fifteen, cut downline!”

Brai held the cut-line release, but he couldn't feel his fingers. His hands weren't real. He wasn't real. He was a stupid little boy playing war games with a stick for a rifle. He was chasing Rick behind the sand-blasted and sagging house where they'd been sent, supposedly so that a good family could raise them to be good men. In reality, a sad old couple just needed cheap workers.

“Fox sixteen, cutting upline,” Placette said with a remarkably calm voice. Brai watched as she reached up and hit her cut-line. She didn't scream, but someone under her on the line did. It gave them all a nice sense of scale as the voice faded and faded before it ended in a startlingly sudden silence.

“Report in,” the commander ordered. Brai figured as soon as they all got up onto solid ground, the commander was going to throw him in after that half of Fox unit. The line called off by numbers. Fox twelve, thirteen, and fourteen were all hanging dead on the line, but Brai waited the appropriate time for them to fail to make call in before he gave his own number. After him was silence.

The orders became frighteningly routine for a time. Brai dangled

from his line and scanned the rockface with his weapon, watching for any Subs that tried to snatch the unit from the side of the cliff, but with the feast below, it was a task without any real danger. They had what they wanted. Others placed secondary anchors and moved with a preciseness born from practice and drill and cold terror.

Most of Fox had been out before, and they'd told the fresh-meat stories of mass attacks, of being swept off ledges and trapped in tunnels. Brai had heard every story with equal amounts of terror and skepticism, but he supposed he'd be the one telling the stories after this. Thirty soldiers on one solitary anchor, and that still in place because a piece of fresh meat couldn't get it to release in time. It was a good story.

Fox ten got a solid anchor in, and Fox eleven, Charlie Yu, cut downline. Brai followed the order to cut upline, and three more bodies joined the feast. Brai hoped they landed on a couple of Subs. It took more than a body dropped from a great height to kill one of the monsters, but hopefully it'd hurt... if they even felt pain.

The rest of the unit scrambled back to the ledge, and Brai leaned back into the warm rock, the heat of Kestia's lava carried through the black stone all the way to the caverns below Paradise City. The sounds were familiar, the rattle as lines were checked and repositioned, the clink of soldiers yanking their line guards to make sure the fall guards and clamps still held, the soft curses as men and women who had managed to survive complained about the various injuries they'd suffered. Brai felt weirdly distant, dangling like a baited bird trap as he waited for the others to pull him up.

A gun burst to life, spraying the rock on the far side of the crevasse with bullets. The metal hit the cliff face and threw sparks that lit the bluish cavern with a brilliant yellow light. Brai stopped breathing as a dozen Subs rushed up the wall. More guns went off, and then the whoop-whill sound of the flame thrower sent Brai scrambling for face protection. The flames raced out across the void, but Subs threw themselves at the cliff face on Brai's side. Brai covered his eyes with his arms and waited for the feel of hands tearing at him, greedy to rip out the soft parts inside.

It didn't come. The Subs scrambled up the cliff, sending rocks crashing to the ground below. One gave a hoarse cry and fell, but none of his friends seemed to care. More guns went off, the vibrations rattling the chamber and echoing until Brai thought he was going deaf, even with the

ear protection.

“Full retreat!” the commander called. A tiny part of Brai’s brain pointed out that he should report his position. He couldn’t retreat. But hands that had been too big and clumsy for his gun couldn’t readjust his commlink, and he’d knocked it aside when he’d tried to cover his face from the coming attack. The firing of guns grew distant, and Brai reached up for his cutline. If he was going to die, he’d rather do it like Placette. According to the report, Rick had been pulled away by Subs. He’d survived long enough to know the fate he was going to suffer, and Brai wanted to choose his own death. He’d followed Rick into the service, but he wouldn’t follow him into the torture of a slow death by Sub. A body hit him, hands clawing at his shoulders, and Brai hit the cutline release.

The sensation of falling made his abused stomach finally give up its contents, and his face was slimy with vomit. But even though he wanted to die, his body wanted to live. Brai grabbed at the Sub, his hands catching onto something around the monster’s waist, something strong enough to bear his weight. Brai held on as the creature made a wordless cry and grabbed for the rockface. The thing caught one protrusion, only to have it crack and crumble, so they fell again.

Brai closed his eyes and waited for the bottom. The Sub would survive, but he wouldn’t. The fall suddenly changed directions, and Brai found himself swinging sideways in a large arc. The beast had caught a large crack, shoving his hand deep into it and swinging them both around to the side. When he let go, Brai tumbled onto a ledge, his feet finding solid footing that didn’t crumble under him.

The Sub fell to the ground next to Brai, his blue, glowing eyes floating in the near-perfect darkness this near the bottom of a fissure. Brai opened fire, his bullets ripping holes in the Sub’s stomach and sending the thing flying backward and off the ledge. For a half-second, Brai knew success, and he felt a perfect, sharp-edged joy. He’d killed a Sub. Maybe. The things were pretty hard to kill, but a full round of shrapneling bullets point-blank in the stomach should do it. The surest way to kill one was to completely destroy the head, but enough body damage would work too, and Brai had put a good quarter round into the beast.

Slowly, he smiled. He did it. How many guys got a kill first time out? He’d done better than Rick. That thought made his smile fade.

Maybe he hadn't done that much better than Rick. He was alone, in the bottom of a crevasse, and he had no idea how to navigate out.

"Fox fifteen to Fox command," Brai tried. The rock was heavy with minerals that bounced the signal around, but as long as they were in the same ravine, Fox unit should pick up his signal. "Fox fifteen to Fox command."

Nothing.

Brai rubbed his hand over his face, feeling the remains of the vomit and Anders's blood. "Fox fifteen to Fox command." Silence answered him.

His legs trembled and refused to hold his weight, so Brai sagged to the ground, his arms resting on his knees as he tried to think his way around this problem. He wasn't a planner; he never had been. Even as children, the government woman had told those who fostered him that he was a good boy as long as Rick Uncha wasn't around. A good boy. That was government-speak meaning he didn't cause trouble or do too much scheming on his own. And sadly, he didn't. Rick was the thinker, the one with plans and a sly smile, the one who knew with supreme confidence that the service would give him a chance at promotions and money and the education needed to rise out of the poverty and misery of Kestia's slums. Brai just followed behind.

Reaching up, Brai flicked on his shoulder light, watching the yellow reflect off the veins of silver and granite and quartz while the black stone soaked it in. It looked like this was a fissure or canyon, so he had options. Yep, he could start walking until some vamp found him and ate him, or he could just sit here and wait for some vamp to come find him and eat him.

Well, he'd never been good at sitting still. Pushing himself up with a gloved hand against the warm stone, Brai turned his back to the deep fissure where the rest of Fox company had their graves, at least metaphorically. In reality, their bones were probably going to be scattered across miles so that other companies would be finding splintered bits for months.

Brai climbed higher, climbing up ledges so narrow only his fingertips could find purchase, inching over stone arches spanning cracks running so deep into the planet itself that Brai could imagine he saw the orange of a lava flow below. Of course, that had to be imagination. If it

were true, he'd be boiling and choking in the poison gas. That might be a better end, because now every horror story he'd ever heard returned to haunt him.

He turned up the volume on his commlink. The closer he got to the surface, the greater the chance it would pick up some sort of communication. He'd set it for general reception, all wavelengths, but so far it was just a quiet hum in his ear, the pitch changing slightly as it scanned the different frequencies. That was all he had to keep the horrors away.

He started imagining faces in the mold that trailed over rock. Sub faces. Rick's face with Sub eyes glowing in the dark and that odd blue stain they had around their mouths. Everyone knew that the Subs rose from the bodies of the dead and dying. Sometimes a soldier or a farmer would fall down into a cave or crevasse, and what stood up again wasn't human. This, more than anything else, gave rise to the rumors that the Subs were vampires who would drink a human's blood and turn him.

He'd always thought fear was a hot emotion, something that made men run when they faced their first vamp or fire on their own line in panic. But his fear was cold. It made him keep his ungloved hand tucked under his arm to avoid touching a rock. He knew it was nothing more than a stupid superstition, because every Kestia child snuck into caves and touched the rock with his bare hand and whispered horror stories. He'd done the same. He'd run into a cave and touched the rock before running out into the sun, into Rick's arms, half-convinced he was about to turn into a monster. Now, those old fears seemed so very real. And with the growing awareness that he was going to die in these caves, his fear grew colder until it was an ache in his guts.

A rock skittered across a cliff face, and the sound echoed in the small tunnel where he'd taken refuge.

"Lookie, lookie," a voice called. At first, Brai reached for his commlink, but the sound of an all-too-human chuckle didn't come from the receiver.

"What's the matter? Lost your way, little lamb?" Brai gripped his gun and put his back against the warm rock, panic making his heart thump painfully and his lips twist in terror. Maybe it was a soldier. Maybe it was a miner on an illegal snatch-and-carry. Maybe there was a gold vein near, buried so deep in Sub territory that only a few dared

come here. Maybe it was a teenager trying a more daring version of touch-the-rock than Brai had ever dared.

“Who’s there?” he called out when he finally regained control of his mouth.

“I thought I smelled you. You’re bleeding, you know.”

Brai reached up and touched his cheek where Placette’s gun had struck him across the face. His cheek was hot and swollen and sticky.

“Who are you?” Brai asked again, bringing his gun up to his bruised shoulder. He was in the mouth of a tunnel, and he backed up slightly, wanting the protection of rock at his sides and over him. A small part of his mind conjured images of vamps swarming up sheer walls, of their bodies dropping down from high above only to land with an inhuman grace. His logical mind pointed out that Subs didn’t talk. He was probably facing off against a pirate-miner or some rescue party who decided to have a little fun with the fresh meat before bringing him back in for a quick court-martial for failure to follow orders at risk of life.

A low laugh answered him. “You already know,” the voice offered confidently. “I would recognize your smell anywhere. The others are just going to smell meat, but I remember you. I remember your big, brown eyes looking at me with such trust.”

Brai stopped breathing as he edged farther back into the tunnel. His heart pounded so fast that sharp pain lanced his chest and his vision grayed.

The unknown voice chuckled. “You know me.” A nightmare appeared at the end of the tunnel, and Brai backed away.

“I’m imagining this,” he whispered, not because he believed it, but because he wanted to believe it.

The monster at the opening of the tunnel shrugged. “Are you? I never thought your imagination was that good. I came up with the big dreams, and you followed behind.”

A name slipped out on his breath. “Rick.” Giving this monster his lover’s name made Brai’s guts twist in pain.

“The one and only.” The thing leaned against the wall in a familiar pose. Its ash-colored hair was longer, the ends starting to curl under around darkened shoulders. Lips stained with blue smiled wickedly, and inhumanly blue eyes glowed like the mold that traveled the walls of the

cave. It took a deep breath through its nose. “You smell good,” he said, his eyes falling half-shut in obvious pleasure. The statement turned Brai’s legs to water. Without even asking permission of his brain, his finger pulled the trigger on his weapon, spraying the tunnel and the chasm beyond with bullets that reverberated against the stone.

Brai had to fight his own body, ordering his finger to loosen on the trigger before he ran himself out of ammo. He couldn’t afford stupidity, not now. Brai held his breath, watching the end of the rock tunnel for some sign of movement. For long seconds, there was only the faint rumbling of Sub-Kestia as the minerals in the rocks carried the distant sounds of lava flows from the Palma Mountains.

The contemptuous chuckle returned; the sound echoed through the tunnels and chambers. “Remember when we were stuck on Mailai? You would have rolled around in the mud forever. You would have worked yourself to death for those people and never asked for more than a bed.”

Brai sucked in air at the familiar accusation. “A bed was more than most people had.” Brai repeated the old arguments. This wasn’t Rick. He wanted to believe that Rick, who had survived so much, had found a way to survive this half-death that terrified every soldier. But he hadn’t. Rick was dead, and this monster with Rick’s voice... Rick’s words.... It had to be coincidence that they were a twisted mirror of Rick’s darkest moments.

“THEY owe us,” Rick said as he stood in the morning light, the sun making his sandy hair look like a halo. “Don’t let them use you.” Rick moved closer, his callused hands reaching up to stroke Brai’s cheek tenderly. No one else ever saw this side of Rick, but his dark eyes were warm with worry as he moved in until they could rest foreheads against each other. “I won’t let them use you,” Rick whispered.

“They aren’t,” Brai protested even though he already knew the truth. The older couple who had taken them in just wanted the free labor from having two “sons” on the farm. They didn’t care about either Rick or Brai.

“They are. Stick with me, though, and we’ll get through,” Rick promised with a secretive smile.

EVEN then, he'd had plans. Back when they were little more than kids exploring each other's bodies, Rick had always been the one to take the lead, and Brai had always followed because he knew Rick loved him. He knew it as sure as he knew the sun would rise tomorrow. If either of those two things didn't happen, the world would end. When Rick hadn't come back from his first mission, Brai's world pretty much had ended.

"You were worthless, working yourself to death for a bed. A bed is nothing." This new Rick was contemptuous and cold. He appeared at the end of the tunnel again, not a mark on him.

Brai felt hysterical laughter sitting in his stomach like a coal ready to burst into flame with one puff of air. "They owed us." The anger flowed from Rick, his blue-stained mouth and dark skin making that anger inhuman and terrifying. "Our parents died in their idiotic war—our parents died so they could lose their idiotic war—and they wanted to throw us away like garbage." Rick shook his head sadly, and his voice grew so soft that Brai had to strain to hear him. "You wanted so much to belong somewhere. But they didn't want you." The twist of Rick's mouth and tone of voice was cruel, more so than it ever had been in life. "I bet the other guys on that line didn't want you either. You're no soldier. You don't fit in with them. I bet they whispered to each other that you were going to get them killed."

Brai's hands sweated so much that his weapon felt slick. The officers said that the soldiers who turned into Subs were mindless monsters, intent on only destruction and feeding. They were wrong. This was Rick with all his promises and schemes and pretty words and none of the love they'd once shared to temper his darker side. And sadly, Brai knew Rick was right. Anders had thought Brai was an idiot. He hadn't hidden that. And Placette.... Brai's throat grew tight. She'd been assigned to Fox seven, but she'd moved so that she was behind him. She'd chosen a place where she could keep an eye on him, and she was dead. Placette was lying at the bottom of a ravine being fed on. Or she was one of these monsters. Brai shivered as that thought came to him.

Rick breathed in deeply, scenting the air like a beast—but that is exactly what the government said Subs were. Beasts. Rick rolled his head to the side, and the expression on his face reminded Brai of the way

Rick used to sniff the air on baking day when the scent of oven-fresh bread filled the air. However, Rick was looking at Brai. “You do smell good.” He smiled, his white teeth shining against his dark lips and the blue stain.

“You want to eat me?” Brai coughed as his voice slipped up an octave. “You aren’t Rick. Rick would have protected me.” Brai brought his weapon up again, pointing it at the monster that threatened to steal his memories of the man he had loved.

Something flashed across Rick’s face. He blinked, and for a second, he looked almost confused. Then he shrugged and that same cockiness returned. This was the Rick the rest of the world had seen: cold and calculating and determined to dig his way out of poverty. However, Brai knew that had only been a part—a small part—of his lover. “Let’s just say I’ve had my priorities reorganized.”

“Yeah, because you’re a monster,” Brai said. His finger tightened on the trigger, but he hesitated. Rick moved closer, but he looked so hurt at the accusation that Brai could almost believe this was his Rick.

“I’m not the invader who came hunting for you.”

Brai sucked in a breath as he tried to not cry. “I wasn’t looking for you in particular,” Brai said. Why did it hurt that Rick hadn’t come looking for him? When he’d believed Rick was dead, he’d grieved and hurt and hated the world, but now, he felt like his heart was ripping.

“I bet you were happy to get rid of me, huh? No more Rick to get you in trouble. You could go back to being the nice boring cog in the government’s wheel. Brai, the good little boy with his big brown eyes.” Rick had a derisive sing-song to his voice that cut Brai.

“Don’t say that.” Brai stepped forward with the butt of his gun against his shoulder as he aimed at the monster.

“Don’t say what? That you’re just a tool the government is using?”

“Don’t say that I was happy to lose you. I’d give anything to get you back.” Brai shouted the words, well aware of the irony of pointing a fully automatic weapon at the body of a lost lover he was claiming to still love. His heart ached so badly that Brai was starting to think he really might need medical assistance—not that he was going to get it down here.

“Well, here I am.” Rick spread his arms in a mock surrender and

tilted his head to the side. “You could always drop your weapon and come give me a big hug.” Rick’s smile was toothy and cold. Even so, a tiny part of Brai was tempted. He remembered the day he’d finally admitted he loved Rick.

THE fireworks exploded against the black night. Rick leaned back, his head resting against Brai’s stomach as they lay on the hill over the celebration. “I love you,” Brai blurted. It wasn’t his most romantic moment.

Rick twisted around to look at him. Brai thought he said, “What?” but an explosion lit the sky with red and swallowed Rick’s word whole.

Brai stared at this lover with an open mouth, horrified that he’d let that slip. “You what?” Rick asked again as red sparks rained down over the town.

“I.... “ Brai stopped.

“Brai?” Rick reached up and traced a finger over his cheek. “Tell me I’m not hearing things.”

“I love you.” The second time, Brai whispered the words. Rick’s smile was slow and so joyously real that Brai nearly cried with relief. Rick was happy.

“I love you too. You know that I’m horrible for you, though, right?” Rick asked.

Brai rolled his eyes. “No, you aren’t,” he said even though everyone told him exactly that.

“I am,” Rick said quietly. “One day I’m either going to get off this hell-world or I’m going to die trying, and most everyone thinks it’s going to be the second. You don’t want to hang around me.”

Brai’s joy turned to a sudden terror that Rick was going to leave, that this was the opening he’d been looking for to escape their relationship. It had only been a few months since friendship had turned into something more than just bumbled hand jobs and explorations under the covers. Overhead fireworks exploded, and the sky turned a brilliant shade of royal blue.

“Hey, are you okay?” Rick rolled off him and sat up. “You look a

little weird.”

“Are you leaving?” Brai asked.

Rick’s eyes went large. “I tell you that I love you, too, and you think that means I’m leaving? Man, you need therapy.” With that, Rick lay down again, his head resting against Brai’s stomach, and Brai took that as some sort of commitment.

“WHAT? You don’t want to give your old friend a hug? Maybe you’d rather spread your legs and catch up on all the great sex you’ve been missing,” Rick suggested with a leer.

“I love you,” Brai whispered, but he didn’t lower his weapon.

At first, Rick froze; even his leer was stuck on his face. Slowly that faded to be replaced by total confusion.

“I miss you and I still love you, but you have to go away.” Brai tried to sound firm about that.

Rick leaned against the wall of the cavern. “If I do, you’re going to die. The only reason the others aren’t here is because there’s enough meat that they won’t fight me for one little lost soldier. I go away, and you’re going to look like one more piece of meat.”

Brai nodded, his eyes hot with tears he didn’t let himself cry. He couldn’t. “I know.”

“What, did you discover a death wish?”

“If you stay here, you’re going to eventually attack me, aren’t you?” Brai could see the truth in the way Rick’s arms were wrapped around his stomach. He was holding himself back, and sooner or later, his control would slip.

Rick just shrugged.

“I thought so.” Brai lowered his weapon a little. “I don’t want to shoot you. I don’t want to kill you, so please just go away.”

“And let the others eat my tasty little morsel?” The words were cold and evil, but Rick’s tone of voice sounded more confused than anything else. The malicious glee he’d had when he’d first showed up had vanished.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Brai agreed. “They’ll come for me, and I’ll shoot as many of them as I can, and I don’t want to kill the last living piece of a man I loved more than life. Please don’t be one of the Subs I shoot.”

“You can’t have that much ammunition left.” Rick glanced at Brai’s weapon.

“I don’t,” Brai agreed. He reached up with his free hand to wipe his nose. “But I figure I have enough to take a few Subs out with me, especially if a whole group comes at me in a feeding frenzy.”

“If they eat you....” Rick stopped and cocked his head to the side. For several seconds, he stood frozen, his glowing eyes focusing on some distant point. Then he looked at Brai. “I would make it fast.” It was an honest offer, one that suggested Rick had more of his humanity left than Brai would have ever guessed.

Brai shook his head sadly. “It’s not in me to go down without a fight. Please. Please don’t make me fight you. Not you.” Brai’s face felt cold where a tear left a trail over his cheek.

“Brai.” Rick choked the word out, but after that one word, he fell silent.

“Please.” The whispered plea must have worked, either that or someone had finally decided to answer just one of Brai’s prayers, because Rick slowly backed away. His blue eyes watched Brai until he stood at the open end of the tunnel. And then, with an inhuman leap, he jumped straight up into the air. Brai closed his eyes and imagined Rick scrambling over the rock faces, his body twisting into impossible shapes as he leaped from crag to crag and raced down vertical surfaces.

“LOOK up,” Rick said as they stood in the shade of the recruitment office. Brai looked up toward the rising moon that was barely visible since the sun wouldn’t set for another hour. Vapor rose from the ground in great billowing clouds. A second later, the ground shook as the booster engine slammed into the ground. A long silver rocket started to push off from Kestia. The ships that flew between worlds were beautiful and graceful, but these planet pusher rockets were just stripped down arrows that struggled to push through the atmosphere.

“One of these days, we’ll be on one of those,” Rick promised. Brai leaned back into his lover’s strong arms. “We’ll get out of here.”

Rick’s arms tightened around his waist, and Brai believed him. It didn’t matter that Rick was repeating the same wish every poor farmer and worker on Kestia held. It didn’t matter because this was Rick, and Rick could do anything. The rocket finally pierced the clouds, disappearing except for a faint shadow that flickered across the cloudy sky.

“One of these days,” Rick repeated. Going into the service was just one step toward the freedom they both wanted. “Together.” That one word, whispered in Brai’s ear on a cloudy afternoon, was the vow that held them together. Assigned to different units, they snuck away for a few minutes here and there in some side tunnel where they could have some stolen privacy. But that one whispered word kept them together.

THE rocks blurred, and Brai could taste the salt on his lips as tears slid over his chin to cling to the skin of his neck. Rocks clattered over the stone walls, and the tunnel echoed the sound of death coming for him. His eyes couldn’t quite focus on the weapon’s display, but if the Subs were coming in numbers, it wouldn’t matter. Brai just had to point his weapon in any direction and he’d hit something.

Blue eyes appeared in the darkness at the end of the tunnel, and Brai turned so that his shoulder light swept over the area. An emaciated form skittered toward him like a spider on spindly legs. Brai screamed in fury and opened fire, running straight at the beast. Maybe he surprised it, because it stood up, and Brai raised the muzzle of his weapon an inch so that the bullets caught the Sub in the head. The monster exploded, and Brai kept running out onto the ledge.

Bodies rushed down the rockface, and Brai pointed his gun, the bullets hitting the rock and echoing back again. Bodies slipped from the rocks, some landing on the shelf to dart off in a new direction and some falling silently into the deep crevasse. A dozen Subs charged right at him, and Brai pointed his weapon in the middle, feeling the weapon vibrate as it fired round after round, and then it fell silent.

Brai fell back against the rock shelf as the Subs hit him en masse.

Teeth caught his unprotected hand, and he screamed in pain. Kicking out, he caught something hard enough to make it grunt, and then he was just in the middle of a writhing ball of grasping hands tearing at his clothes, desperate to get to the flesh under the protective armor. Brai screamed again, fear erasing all rational thought as he faced his end.

The ball of living flesh suddenly dropped into empty space. Brai flailed. Some subs clung to him while others fell away, throwing themselves at the rockface where they clung like lizards. One of the Subs caught Brai by the gun strap, and then the strap tightened, nearly choking him. Even though that would be a better death than being eaten alive, Brai still struggled to pull the strap away from his throat as he swung through the air.

A second ago, he'd been terrified by falling; now he just wanted to finish that long fall and very sudden stop on the rocks below. He tried to unclasp his gun strap. Unfortunately, with his weight hanging from the strap, the buckle wouldn't unclasp. The Sub that had him was moving along the underside of a stone arch. Its fingers found impossible holds that allowed it to swing along like Tarzan. Brai dangled below him, caught by the Sub's leg in his gun strap. If he reached up, he could touch the monster's knee where it had its leg bent to hold onto the gun strap. If Brai could only reach his knife and really stretch up, he might be able to stick the Sub in the thigh and force the thing to let him go. Then he could have the fast death he wanted.

Squirming, Brai tried to reach his weapon, but they were moving so fast that Brai twisted helplessly below the Sub. Another Sub raced after them, and the one who had caught Brai couldn't move fast enough to get away from this blue-eyed rival. With horror, Brai realized the Subs were fighting over their food. Desperate now, he twisted and reached for his leg where he had his knife strapped to the armor.

He'd almost reached it when he was suddenly falling through the air. By simply straightening his leg, the Sub had dropped him, and terror ripped yet another scream from Brai as he helplessly windmilled his arms.

Far sooner than he expected, he hit solid rock. The fall had been enough to drive the breath from him, but he didn't think anything was broken. He lay on his back and watched the two Subs fly into each other ferociously. With fingers weakened by shock and fear, Brai pulled at his knife. He'd told Rick he wouldn't go down without a fight, and he

wouldn't.

The leaner Sub finally put both its feet into the larger one's stomach, forcing it off the rockface. The large one fell and landed near Brai. Bringing his knife up, Brai scrambled to his feet and prepared to get his ass kicked.

The leaner Sub threw itself off the rockface and tackled the big one. With clawlike hands, it ripped at the big Sub, its fury utterly terrifying. The big Sub snarled and snapped its teeth, but the leaner one growled and then slashed at its rival. Three trails of purplish blood appeared on the large one's face and with a scream, the big one leaped to the side, catching on the rockface and hanging there as it glared at the leaner Sub through narrowed eyes. The lean one gave a scream of its own, and then the large Sub dropped out of the beam cast by Brai's light.

Brai watched the leaner Sub's shoulder's heave as though it was trying to catch its breath, but the scientists said that the creatures didn't use their lungs at all... that's why they survived the poisonous gases in the deepest cracks and caves. However, Brai could see the curls on the Sub's head move with each gasp.

Slowly the beast turned, and Brai sucked in a breath. "Rick."

The Sub didn't look like Rick right now. The hands were claws and the anger made his movements jerky. "He can't take you," Rick hissed the words, and a sob slipped out of Brai. Rick always had been a possessive bastard, but for the possessiveness to outlive the love—it just hurt too much.

"He can't take you," Rick repeated. His hands slowly uncurled, and he took a step forward.

Brai wiped the back of his hand over his cheek, brushing away tears. "It didn't matter," Brai said. None of it mattered. He wiped his hand over his face again as the tears tickled his skin.

Rick cocked his head to the side and moved closer. Raising his hand, he reached out to touch or to grab or to tear—Brai just didn't know anymore. How much of this was Rick? It didn't matter because if any part of this monster was Rick, Brai couldn't hurt him. The knife fell from Brai's hand as he stood waiting.

Moving closer, Rick touched his shoulder, and Brai turned to look off into the distance. Rick couldn't help himself. If Rick was going to

kill and eat him, Brai didn't want to see these last moments. He wanted to remember the Rick he'd loved and lost.

"YOU worry too much." Rick looked so handsome in his uniform. It was clean without a single patch. Some of the fresh meat liked to sew patches onto their uniforms just so they didn't look like they were going out on their first mission. Rick never hid who he was or what he wanted.

"What if you don't come back?" Brai felt uncomfortably like the spouse in some ridiculous holo-vid about a hero going off to war.

"Do you really think I'd ever leave you on your own? You'd get yourself in too much trouble." Rick's face twisted into an ironic smile. He knew just as well as everyone else that he was the one more likely to get into trouble. Of course, the military was the first place where Rick actually fit in better than Brai. Brai was being held back for an extra round of training while Rick had his first real uniform and was ready to go out on his first mission.

THE memory blurred with reality. Was he remembering Rick's hand stroking over his cheek, or was he feeling Rick's hand now?

"Just make it quick," Brai asked, his eyes still focused out into all that rock and darkness. Warm breath tickled the back of his neck, and more tears slipped free.

"It's so hard to remember at times." A hand slipped around Brai's waist. Brai looked at Rick. He rested his chin on Brai's shoulder so they were nose to nose. Reaching up, Brai pulled his chin strap loose and tossed his helmet to the side.

"Do you remember me sometimes?"

Rick nodded. Brai didn't even try to control the sobs that came, and suddenly he was pulled close into familiar arms that cradled him.

"I'm sorry. It's all my fault," Rick crooned, and he was rocking Brai back and forth. Brai clung to Rick. Ignoring the reality of the whole situation, he closed his eyes and just pretended they were sitting under the night sky making all their plans for the future. They sank to the

ground, and Brai lay his head on Rick's chest, his body tense with fear even as he cried. Eventually the tears ran out.

Still lying in Rick's arms, Brai asked, "How long?"

Fingers stroked his hair. "How long until what?" Rick sounded so normal. The bitter anger was simply gone.

"Until you can't hold out against the hunger?" Brai lay in the monster's arms, and even knowing how this was going to end, he was grateful for this last illusion and these last few minutes or hours.

Rick ran his fingers down Brai's arm. His uniform was shredded over the elbow and the armor was missing on that side. He shivered as Rick's fingers brushed over his exposed skin. When Rick's touch finally reached his wrist, Rick closed his hand around Brai's wrist and lifted his hand. Brai tensed.

Brai's hand was purple with bruising, and a half-circle had been neatly bitten out of the back of it. Blood crusted and dried along the edges, and only now did Brai realize how badly it hurt. Rick turned Brai's hand from one side to the other, turning it like it was a precious jewel to study... or like it was the main course he was trying to decide how to start on. A little flash of panic made Brai pull on his hand, squirming, but Rick held him tightly. After a short struggle, Brai realized the time to fight was over. Sagging into Rick's arms, he turned his head into Rick's chest and just waited.

"It's happening."

Brai looked up, but Rick was still studying Brai's hand. Brai looked over, but all he could see was a pretty badly damaged hand.

"What is?"

Rick carefully put Brai's hand back down before he reached up and stroked Brai's hair back away from his face. "You're smelling less and less like food. You're turning."

"I'm..." Brai stopped. He felt like he had been hit in the stomach.

"I could end it quickly. You're not far enough along to survive a broken neck." Rick ran his fingers over the curve of Brai's neck, the touch surprisingly gentle. "But if I don't do it now, you're going to change."

Brai lay still in Rick's arms. A day ago, he would have said he

preferred death to the horror of being one of the monsters that lurked below the surface, one of the half-human vampires with no more intelligence than a common beast.

“It’s hard,” Rick whispered. “It’s so hard because it hurts, and the way you think... it changes. I’m angry so much. I see people coming into the caves, and I can’t forgive them for hunting me... for being lucky enough that they have what I want—they have lives. I hate so much that I hurt, and I can’t fix any of it. They’ve taken everything, and I’m left alone, struggling just to stay alive. I hate all them,” he concluded softly, his hands still gentle as they stroked Brai’s neck.

“So, you’re saying you’re still exactly the same?” Brai asked with a sad smile.

Rick blinked at him, not answering for several seconds. Then he shook his head, a twisted smile coming to his lips. “Maybe I am. I still love you.”

Brai reached up and traced the edge of Rick’s lips where the blue stained the skin. When Brai finished tracing all the way around them, Rick reached up and caught his hand, placing a kiss on the fingers. Then he looked down at Brai. “Well?”

Brai lay in his lover’s arms. “Together. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Rick closed his eyes, the bright blue lights vanishing for a second before he opened them again. “Together,” he promised. Pulling Brai close, Rick started rocking him again. For a long time, they just lay there on the rock shelf, the glittering mineral rock sparkling like stars around them. Then the first cramps hit Brai. With a pained groan, he clung to Rick.

“Shhh. Just a while, and then we’ll be together,” Rick said. “I know it hurts, but it passes, and when it does, we’ll be together.”

Together. It was a promise that made the pain worth bearing. Brai cried out as another cramp hit him, making him arch his back in agony. Rick held him tightly. “Together, I promise,” he muttered over and over, the words becoming a mantra that followed Brai into the darkness.

Together.

LYN GALA started writing in the back of her science notebook in third grade and hasn't stopped since. When she found the Internet and the world of gay romance, she found her true calling. When she isn't writing stories of happy men doing very dirty things, she's teaching in New Mexico.