

TRI SYSTEM'S EDGE

HUMBLE
BEGINNINGS



RON SCHRADER

Humble Beginnings

Tri System's Edge Series Book 1

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Humble Beginnings
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CHAPTER 1

Given the choice, she would have landed somewhere less middle-of-nowhere, but it was either land here or crash somewhere else. Now all she could think about was getting her ship fixed and getting off this planet, but the fog wasn't helping. It was thick—unlike anything she'd ever seen before—and seemed to go on forever across the open field, choking out what little daylight remained. Just standing outside her ship sent a chill through her bones.

"Kalla?" came the interruption from the rough familiar voice of her copilot, Dom, who stood a few meters to her right. "Way to land the ship and keep her in one piece!" he said. The fog curled around him as he spoke, rendering his smile barely visible.

She nodded to acknowledge the compliment but then quickly returned to her own thoughts. The fog had engulfed Kalla and her crew, making it easy for her imagination to run wild with visions of unpleasant creatures just off in the distance, waiting to attack. Fighting back her paranoia, she stared back at the space cruiser still barely in view. She could see the damaged steel panel—damage from the explosion that could have been avoided. The worn out stabilizer had blown and nearly punched a hole on the port side of the ship. She was lucky to have landed at all. But with no spare stabilizer on board, they'd be stuck here indefinitely, which just wasn't an option.

"We've got a hot payload to move," she said, breaking the silence, "and I, for one, am not interested in letting it sit out here in the open for the taking."

Her crew stood close, nodding in agreement as she spoke.

"With the right parts," she continued, "the damage to the ship should be an easy fix. So we find help tonight and get on our way. Agreed?"

Once again, the men nodded in favor of the plan.

"Okay, then. We'll spread out in a line a couple meters apart and start looking for buildings. I swear I saw some not far from here on the way down, so we'll keep walking until we find them," she said, pointing in the direction she'd seen what she believed to be a city.

She glanced back at the ship one last time to confirm its position before leaving it behind, but as she did, the fog billowed up and swallowed it like a great white cloud. "Not how I wanted to spend my evening," she muttered under her breath.

Twenty minutes later, with no sign of any buildings and the evening light fading fast, Kalla began to realize they should have waited for morning.

“We should probably get back to the ship,” she finally said with some concern in her voice. But before anyone could respond, a foreboding screech echoed in the distance, followed immediately by several more coming from all directions. “Let’s move,” she said quietly.

The group instinctively began moving back the way they’d come, hoping to reach the ship and avoid any unwanted attention.

“What do you think’s out there?” Dom whispered to Kalla through the wall of fog separating them.

“Almost sounds like they’re talkin’ to each other,” she heard another crew member say.

Kalla remained silent, searching the fog for any sign of her ship, but everything looked the same. Finally, after several more minutes of walking, it became clear they were lost, having been disoriented in the thick cloud surrounding them.

Still unable to see her crew, Kalla called out quietly. “Dom? Banks? Can anyone hear me?” But even as her men responded one by one, all still close by, she couldn’t shake the uneasy sensation deep in her gut. The screeches had stopped, and Kalla didn’t take that as a good sign.

“Anyone else bothered by the silence?” Kalla whispered. But just as she finished, the sounds of gunfire broke the eerie silence. Screams from a few of her men followed, but as she strained her eyes in search of an attacker, none could be found.

“Hold your fire!” she yelled, worried a stray bullet might find her. Unable to see the cause of this chaos that surrounded her, she stood with pistol in hand, wishing she’d brought more firepower as her eyes desperately searched the fog for anything that might become a target. With only a single pistol and no extra ammo on hand, she waited patiently, doing her best to ignore the fear that had come over her.

Dom suddenly started yelling as he ran toward her. “Run, Kalla!” he shouted. “It’s right behind me!”

Tense from the adrenaline now surging through her body, she stood still as Dom approached, aiming her pistol at a dark mass concealed by the low visibility of the fog, following close behind him.

With her ship nowhere in sight, she waited for Dom to run past her before unloading her pistol at the dark shape until it was only a meter from where she stood. In disbelief, she squinted as her eyes made out not one but several dark shapes fast approaching.

Kalla immediately realized that with her sidearm now empty, all but her and Dom likely dead, and her ship lost in the never-ending fog, she had no

other option but to run with the hope that she'd find safety.

She quickly holstered her pistol and began sprinting, catching up to Dom in no time.

"Run!" he ordered as Kalla ran alongside him. "You get back to the ship. I'll buy you some time!" Her old shipmate then slowed his pace, giving her a good lead. Dom's heavy feet pounded the ground behind her, stumbling and desperate. Then suddenly the pounding stopped, replaced by the sound of more gunfire, then a scream.

"Dom!" she yelled. But there was no response, just silence accompanied by the faint sound of footsteps pattering quietly behind her.

With nothing left to do, Kalla sprinted through the dark mist, trying to fight the exhaustion that weakened her legs with each step. *Should've replaced that stabilizer weeks ago*, she thought angrily to herself. Her thoughts then quickly turned to the crew she'd just lost.

Foster, her mechanic, had warned her well over a month ago that it wouldn't last much longer, but a new stabilizer meant a lot of money they didn't have yet. They just needed to get through this last big job and everything would have been fine. But now, with her crew gone, she only had her own life to worry about, and with each step she took, her body begging for rest, she began to think that even her life might end very soon. And though the tightening muscles in her toned arms and legs were those of a seasoned athlete, pushing her forward with an appearance of ease, she knew this couldn't go on forever.

From behind she could only hear the occasional screech of a predator unwilling to end its pursuit. Whether it was only one now or still several, she didn't know, nor did she care to find out. But the sound alone was enough to keep her motivated while her entire body cried out in pain echoing from the tip of her toes to the throbbing in her skull. And yet, in spite of the growing exhaustion, she ran as if her life depended on it—and it did. The burning sensation in her muscles had long ago been replaced by a deep, penetrating ache that would not be ignored, yet somehow she managed to keep going. And each time the need for rest would arise, the fear and terror still residing within would rush through her body like an adrenaline shot, allowing her to somehow exceed her physical limitations just a little longer. But, like a drug, she knew the fear-induced adrenaline would eventually have to wear off, forcing her body into total exhaustion. It was only a matter of time before she would find herself in their reach.

Running in a slightly curved line, she hoped that with some luck she might stumble across her ship again, where she'd at least be safe until help came, if

it ever did. But with the thick fog that seemed to go on forever, she had no way of knowing if her ship was anywhere near. She just knew that stopping wasn't an option unless she wanted to end up like the crew she'd just lost. So, productive or not, she moved forward with all the fight she could muster as her body continued to tell her no. If she were going to die, giving up would not be the cause.

In spite of her resolve to keep going, the fatigue her body felt eventually became overwhelming. Her mind began to accept the likely fate, a death she could not avoid much longer. The sweat that had poured down her smooth, tanned face was mostly dry now as her body had little moisture left to give, leaving her skin feeling tight and chapped. Her mouth and lips were so dry that it hurt to even inhale as she ran, panting and gasping for breath.

For a moment, she wondered how she would fare against the creatures in hand-to-hand combat. With her pistol empty, she was left with only the dagger her mentor and friend Aurelia Zar had given her, but as comforting as it was, she doubted the small blade would be of much use against the predators behind her. So she gathered her remaining strength and continued to run. Still, she realized that each step only brought her closer to the inevitable, the same fate her crew had already endured.

After what seemed like hours of pushing herself beyond human limits, the adrenaline that had allowed her to last so long began to fade, her mind quickly slipping away from the nightmare she was living. Just before her consciousness drifted away into darkness, one final muted scream passed between her lips. She was about to die, and all for nothing more than a payday, albeit a very big payday.

She tried to look back over her shoulder, wanting to face the threat head on, but the muscles in her legs finally gave out. Gravity took hold of her body and she fell into the mist, colliding with the cold, hard ground.

Her mind drifted to a place of rest and peace where her old friend Aurelia greeted her in the distance. She reached for the carved handle of Aurelia's dagger, expecting to return it to her friend, only to find herself unable to move. And in her exhaustion, she barely saw the blurred image of a large man appear just as a sharp pain pierced her back.

Oblivion finally took hold as Aurelia called out to her. Then, there was nothing but darkness.

CHAPTER 2

Gasping for air, she sat up in bed to find herself drenched in sweat from the nightmare she'd just had. All the other dreams had been an ongoing adventure, one she was enjoying, but this most recent experience had thrown her off guard.

"Are you all right, Anna? Was it another dream?" Dr. Carter entered the room, standing just over one-and-a-half meters tall and nearly a half-meter wide. His hair was sandy brown and unkempt. He wore a long white coat buttoned in the front, revealing only his pant legs beneath the coat's hem. His face looked friendly enough as he smiled, but the smile almost seemed forced. And aside from taking her blood numerous times, he'd only been drilling her with questions since she'd arrived here. Was he even really a doctor? She didn't know for certain, but something about him didn't feel right. He rarely made eye contact with her and always seemed to twitch when he spoke to her. She didn't trust him.

"Yes, just another dream," she lied, still covered in perspiration from the intense nightmare she'd just had. "I'm fine, Dr. Carter." But she wasn't fine. Up until now, the dreams had been a pleasant release from a reality that didn't feel real to her. But this most recent experience was quite disturbing. The fact that her dreams had been taking her on a continuous journey had never crossed her mind, picking up each time where the last one ended. But now, after this most recent experience, she couldn't help but wonder if this was something more. She felt a hint of guilt as though she was responsible for what had happened in her dream. It felt a little too real, more like a memory than a dream.

Awake in her reality, she spent her days in a gloomy white room, stuck in a bed she never left, her arms and legs restrained. The doctor just said she was ill, dying of something she'd never heard of, and this was all for her own good. But she didn't feel sick, not like she figured she would with a terminal disease. "I think . . . I just need something to drink, please," she asked politely.

"Yes, of course, Anna. It's time to take your pills anyhow. I'll send the orderly right in."

She watched as Dr. Carter turned and left the room. Every time she mentioned her dreams, he gave her more medication. How could she know for sure that he was even being honest with her? After all, he did seem to go out of his way to avoid answering her questions whenever she asked. And

then there was that twitch. He always seemed nervous around her. Something just wasn't right about him or this place, but chained to this bed like a prisoner, she was helpless to do anything about it.

Not five minutes later, the orderly walked out of the room leaving her to rest once more, having given her the daily round of pills to go along with yet another shot. As she lay in bed, the drugs now beginning to take effect once more as they moved through her system, she hardly noticed the restraints holding her arms and legs, allowing some free movement on the bed but preventing any escape. She couldn't even remember how long she had been in this place, just that for some reason it didn't feel right here. But as the drugs took hold, she could only hope that no more nightmares were waiting in her dreams as another forced sleep came over her.

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As the darkness of night slowly faded and the warmth of the sun spilled into the opening of the room where Kalla lay, a peaceful calm spread over her entire body. She could feel the warmth from the sunlight on her skin as she opened her eyes to the blur of light. After allowing her eyes time to acclimate to the bright light, she stared out into the beautiful morning sky, feeling briefly at peace. But her instincts quickly woke her from the moment as she began trying to figure out where she was and how she'd gotten here. She jumped to her feet, fists clenched in preparation to defend herself should the need arise. Frantically surveying the room Kalla discovered she was alone.

Looking around she observed that uneven rock walls surrounded her, except for the large opening where sunlight spilled into the room. It was obvious she was inside a cave, one that couldn't be more than four or five meters in diameter.

The walls of the cave were mostly straight until just before reaching the ceiling where they gradually curved upward, making a bowl-like shape above her. The texture of the rock in the entire room, while still bumpy and jagged in places, looked smoother than she expected a cave to look.

The air in the cave was cool and dry, but the sunlight shining in the opening provided sufficient light and warmth, making it a quite comfortable place to be for a cave. And the only sounds Kalla could hear came from the distant whistle of birds outside, and the breeze against the outer rock wall.

A ragged blanket lay on the rock slab protruding from the wall where she'd been sleeping, and across from the slab was an old wooden chair that sat alone. The room looked otherwise empty. It was mostly clean too, except for

some trace amounts of dirt that could be seen scattered randomly on the floor. Kalla concluded that this must be someone's home.

"Where am I?" she breathed softly, only wanting to hear her own voice as proof she wasn't dead. Unsure where she was or what to do, Kalla backed toward the opening to find that she wasn't just standing in an ordinary cave.

Looking outside the entrance, she found that the cave rested several thousand meters above the valley floor in the side of a cliff. Her heart began to race as she wondered how to get out of here. Knowing logically that this couldn't possibly be the way out, she turned her head toward the room, expecting to find something she'd missed before. Instead, she caught a glimpse of a large shape approaching from behind her.

She turned in midair and jumped toward the stone bed, preparing to fight for her life. "Where did you come from?" she demanded, standing defensively with both fists clenched in front of her as she faced the man who'd entered the room. But as she stared at the calm figure before her, a rough-looking man, large in stature with the rugged appearance of someone who'd been living primitively, she was somewhat surprised by his lack of aggression.

He just stood quietly, leaning casually against the rock wall of the cave with his arms folded, staring blankly toward her.

Although he appeared calm enough, the man did not put Kalla at ease. Instead, she stood frozen with fear, not sure what to expect.

"Either you're not from here or you're just really stupid," he said.

A bit taken aback by the comment, she remained motionless, holding her breath. After what she'd already been through, she was not about to let her guard down. Her right hand instinctively reached for the handle of the dagger at her side, but in spite of the rest that had been forced upon her by her complete exhaustion, she suddenly realized how little energy she still had.

Trying to stay on her feet, she released her grip on the weapon in order to prop herself against the wall, the room appearing to move on its own while she desperately tried to keep her balance. A noticeable burning sensation in her eyes accompanied the headache that was now very apparent, mild but constant, while a fever began to slowly come over her. "Where am I? Who are you?" she asked, staring at the blurry figure standing before her, unable to fully overcome the dizziness that had taken hold. In her daze, she struggled to make out much detail as she examined the man standing in the small room with her, the burning in her eyes now causing tears to cloud her vision even more.

"I'm Jarek," he said, "and you're safe."

Kalla pressed her head against the wall in pain.

“I know it hurts, but it’ll pass. You just need more rest.”

“What will pass?” Kalla asked in confusion, wondering why she felt so ill.

“You’re just lucky I found you last night,” he replied. “And I’ll explain it all later. But right now you need to rest.”

“Thank you,” she said, recognizing that he’d saved her from whatever had killed her crew.

“Here, you need some water,” Jarek said softly as he walked toward her holding a dented metallic cup in his outstretched hand.

She hesitated for a moment before finally reaching for the cup and emptying the liquid. Logic told her she needed to stay on guard. *Trust no one!* were the words that echoed in her pounding head, words Aurelia had told her over and over again. And yet, as she looked into Jarek’s eyes, her fear of him began to fade, and she gave in to an inexplicable sense of familiarity and safety.

“Thank you. I just thought—I thought it was over for me. I ran until . . .” She suddenly felt the room spinning. Her host caught her as she fell; his skin felt cool. She shivered and realized the fever had blurred her senses and dulled her logic. Still, she couldn’t fight it. She had no choice but to trust him as her mind went dark.

~

Another dream had ended as she awoke to a blur of movement surrounding her. She could see a bright light from above and an IV rack to the side of her with a tangled mess of tubes dangling from it. Unable to make out much more due to the spinning in her head, which she figured must be a side-effect of the constant regimen of drugs, she just laid there and tried to relax. But something was very different about this place, more real than the dingy white room she usually woke up to. For starters, she was pinned down by cold steel, completely unable to move, in a room she’d never seen before. Yet the sense of reality she felt in that moment was a powerful one, even more real than the dreams she’d been having.

With her eyes still too blurry to make out much of anything, she closed them and began listening to the noises in the room until she finally discerned two voices talking in the distance. One sounded vaguely familiar, like Dr. Carter’s, but the other was a gruff voice she’d never heard before, at least not that she could remember. She tried to make out the words but only managed to pick up bits and pieces before finally hearing the first clear sentence as the voices moved closer.

“Is she waking up?” The question came from the irritated-sounding voice she didn’t recognize. Footsteps rushed toward her, followed by a cool sensation that seemed to flood her entire body, quickly forcing her back to sleep. Suddenly, her eyes opened to the familiar surroundings of her pale white room.

Was it another dream? she wondered. Only it felt more real than anything she could remember.

She sat in up in her bed and stared at a wall in front of her for what seemed like hours before an orderly finally opened the door and entered the room.

“Just here to give you your meds,” he said with an eerie smile that looked forced, as though he were hiding some secret she wasn’t supposed to know. She watched as he prepared the injection, then she laid back down and closed her eyes, waiting for the familiar sting in her arm that would inevitably send her back to her dreams.

~

Kalla slowly opened her eyes to find Jarek sitting in the chair across from where she lay.

“It’s about time,” he said with a hint of relief in his voice.

Kalla attempted to sit up only to be stopped by a pounding headache. “How long was I out?” she probed, holding her head in her hands.

“You’ve been out for a couple days now,” Jarek replied. “I was starting to wonder if you’d ever wake up.”

“A couple of days?” she asked in disbelief. Fighting the headache still hanging on, she sat up to find herself on the same stone bed, only this time Jarek sat near the opening of the cave, bathed in sunlight. For the first time, she got a good look at him. Was he her captor or savior? Though she still wasn’t completely sure, she no longer felt threatened by him as she fixated on his eyes. Something about him brought her comfort, a sense of peace.

“You barely stayed on the bed. Thrashed around in fits every two hours or so. Not much else I could do but watch and hope you’d come out of it. But I think you’re past the worst. Fever’s gone now. How’s the shoulder feeling?”

Kalla slowly reached her arm around to her shoulder to find nothing more than a couple small holes in her shirt. Aside from the dull ache she felt in her head, there was no other sign of injury.

“What happened?” she began to ask. “I remember falling and then a sharp pain, then nothing.”

Jarek stared at the rock wall bathed in sunlight. “Looks like I saved your life.” He hesitated, looking away.

It seemed odd. If she’d saved someone’s life, she would at least look them in the eye, proud to have done something good. But this guy, he acted as though he was ashamed of something. “What aren’t you telling me?” she said, trying unsuccessfully to make eye contact.

He continued looking away. “So are you feeling any better?” he replied as though attempting to change the subject.

She just nodded, still confused about everything, but during the course of their short conversation, the sunlight flooding the cave had been slowly making its way across the room. As the bright light made contact with her face, Kalla suddenly found it difficult, even painful, to keep her eyes open. The pain was so overwhelming at first that she felt like a fire was consuming her mind, and she wanted to curl up into a fetal position and cower in natural response to it.

“It goes away,” said Jarek, now looking straight at her.

Kalla shot a confused look in his direction, still struggling to focus.

“Well, not completely, but you get used to it,” he said as he stood and walked closer to the bed where she lay. “We’ll talk later,” he added, his voice quiet with a tone of regret. “I’ll tell you everything when you’re well.”

Unable to get her eyes to focus, she lay there until another restless sleep finally took hold.

~

Waking to an unusually bright light, her eyes burned for a moment, as if she’d been staring at the sun. This pain felt familiar until she realized it had lingered from her dream. Kalla—the girl in her dream—she was sensitive to light.

She blinked several times, trying to focus, but all she could see was the IV rack next to her and clouded shapes in the distance, some moving and others standing still.

After several minutes of this deliriousness, she finally closed her eyes and relaxed. She’d dreamed about Kalla for so long now it had become her preferred reality. Seeing life through Kalla’s eyes was the only thing keeping her sane.

Wishing she could stay there forever, she focused on sleep, allowing the dream to begin once more.

~

Awareness tingled through Kalla's skin as she sat up. She could see the setting rays of sunlight fading into another dark night. Her senses seemed all at once to be more focused than she could ever remember. Her body felt new somehow as she recognized that she had never felt so rested, so alive, or so strong. It was as if she had been rebuilt into a machine that would tire no more. She stood with an alert sense of everything surrounding her in the small room of the cave where she had now lain for days, fighting for her life.

As she peered through the opening of the cave, she was taken aback by the realization that something wasn't right. The sun's rays were no longer present in the cave, only it wasn't dark like she believed it should be. It was obvious to her that the day had ended, the moon now making its first appearance, and yet, looking around the cave and into the night sky, she could see clear as day.

She also noticed another opening that had been disguised before, an unlit hallway near the back of the cave that angled to the right, blocking her view of where it led.

With the room empty, save herself, she stood from the bed and moved toward the opening. She cautiously entered the hallway in an attempt to explore the strange dwelling, but as she was about to take her first step inside, Jarek appeared from around a corner as if he'd been waiting for her. Slightly startled, she backed away and moved toward the opening of the cave.

"Good. You're awake," he said calmly as he entered the room. Pointing to the familiar rock slab that had been her bed since arriving here, he continued. "Go and sit. We need to have a chat."

She obeyed without hesitation, which bothered her slightly, but she also realized that the fear she'd felt just days ago was no longer present. Instead, she felt a power inside of her, almost as though nothing could harm her. So she sat to hear what he had to say.

As she walked to the rock slab, she also noticed for the first time a cracked mirror leaning against the wall and paused for a moment, wondering why she didn't notice it before. But that thought soon vanished as she stared at the reflection of herself, a slender yet muscular woman with auburn hair curling toward the back of her shoulders. She wore a crimson long-sleeved tunic that tapered out from the thick leather belt at her waist and dark brown leather pants that tightly hugged her hips and thighs, disappearing halfway down her lower leg, where they were tucked beneath black leather combat boots. On the right side of her belt, a holstered pistol could be seen, and the decorative handle of a blade just behind that. She reached down and grasped the handle briefly as she stared into the mirror. Finally satisfied with her

healthy appearance, she sat down and turned to face Jarek.

He nervously looked away, as though he'd been staring at her, before regaining his composure and beginning to speak. "So would you like to tell me what you were doing down in the valley, especially at night?" he asked calmly but with a serious tone. "Probably safe to assume you don't know anything about this planet, do you?"

"Wait a minute," she replied. "Before you start drilling me with questions, I'd like to know what's happened to me and how I'm even still alive." Her tone was polite yet demanding as she spoke. "How were you able to save me from those . . . those things?"

Whatever had been chasing her in the fog that night had wiped out her entire crew with relative ease, and in spite of her best efforts to escape, she remembered the exhaustion and the attack just before blacking out. She also remembered the glimpse of a man, and she wanted to know how he could have possibly fared better than she and her entire crew had. And now, she recognized her heightened senses and emotions and just wanted to know what was going on. She felt confused and anxious, and she wanted answers.

"I'm sorry," he said as he looked downward and paused for a moment before lifting his face toward her to continue. "I wanted to tell you before, but . . . you weren't . . . well . . . all there, so I didn't get the chance. You . . . you needed some rest. You were hurt worse than you know. If it weren't for me . . ."

"I . . . I know, you saved me. Thank you," she interrupted, now a bit more calm as she did her best to contain her emotions.

Silence filled the room for several minutes as Kalla studied her host, careful not to be too obvious. She quickly paid close attention to every detail she could take in, from the worn-out military-grade black leather boots he wore to the hilt of what she guessed must be a sword partially buried in the tangled dark brown hair flowing down past his shoulders. He wore dirty green pants with several pockets down the side of each leg that all seemed to contain something hidden from her eyes. At his waist he wore a two-inch-thick black leather belt with several sheathed knives, ammo pouches, and a pistol at each side. His black shirt, worn and faded, was tucked neatly in his pants and hugged him tightly, exposing his muscular physique. The short-sleeve shirt he wore left his arms bare, revealing his tanned skin. His face was leathery and unshaven, but she could see a kindness in his eyes. Still, an uncertain feeling grew inside of her as she looked at him. *He's got to be a soldier*, she thought to herself as a final assessment.

She'd never trusted or cared much for military types, and logic still insisted

that she shouldn't easily trust him either, and yet, she couldn't deny the calm she felt as he sat in the room with her. He'd done nothing to indicate any desire to harm her, and he had saved her life, so she decided to give in for once and give Jarek a chance.

"So were you going to tell me why you were down in that field?" Jarek calmly asked again, breaking the awkward silence. "And do you have a name?"

She looked out into the night sky, gathering her thoughts. "I'm Kalla—Kalla Zar," she finally replied, looking back at Jarek. "I'm . . . I was the captain of a small trade ship. We ran into some mechanical trouble on our way to . . . to a meeting. I landed my ship hoping to get some help and be on my way. Had I known what was going to happen . . ."

"And your crew?" Jarek questioned politely.

"Do you really have to ask?" Kalla said, a single tear running down her cheek as her thoughts drifted to the fate of her crew, her friends.

"Thought maybe they stayed on your ship. Too bad I didn't get to you sooner. Too bad you landed down there to begin with." Jarek stood and walked toward the opening of the cave as he finished his last words, then peered out into the darkness of the night.

"I had no choice. Had to just pick the closest planet, and this was it. Besides, how was I supposed to know that would happen anyway?" Her emotions beginning to get out of control again, Kalla looked down and reached for the handle of her dagger, squeezing it tightly while drawing deep breaths. "What are they? The things that took out my crew," she asked as she released the tight grip on her knife and looked back up at Jarek.

"Well . . ." Jarek paused in thought, not quite sure where to start. "Believe it or not, they were once people."

A mixture of disbelief and anger engulfed her. "Those things that killed my crew were not people!"

"You're right, they're not human anymore. Just monsters now. But they used to be part of a group of settlers who came here to start a new life." He turned and looked her in the eye. "Vie," he said. "They're called Vie."

"Vie." Kalla whispered the name. It tasted bitter in her mouth.

"Things were good for a few years, up until the meteor showers. Beautiful shows in the night sky, from what I was told, but the dust that fell as the meteors entered the atmosphere brought something with it. The dust covered the valley floor and polluted most of the water before it finally settled, but it reacted somehow with a lake in the valley. About a third of the settlers were using the lake for drinking water, including my father. The first people infected

went into a comatose state, then eventually woke feeling fine. But whatever was in that meteor dust, it was doing something nasty inside of all those people. My father and grandfather were among the first to turn.”

Before he could begin again, Kalla stood abruptly. “You were here when this all happened?” she asked, trying to make sense of what he was telling her. “How long ago was it?”

Jarek stared blankly at the floor as if in a trance for a moment. “Please, sit,” he asked in a hushed tone. As Kalla slowly relaxed once more and sat down again, Jarek continued. “I wasn’t even born yet when it happened, but my mother told me stories about the meteors and what happened to all of those people.”

Confused yet intrigued by what she was hearing, Kalla prodded him to go on while Jarek walked back toward the empty chair and sat down, staring again into the open night as he began to replay what had transpired.

“I don’t look it, but I’m forty-three years old.”

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Tri System’s Edge Humble Beginnings

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