Revenant

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Smashwords Edition

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Chapter 1

Ossen surveyed his reflection in the mirror, brushing imaginary lint off his sleeve. He saw nothing overtly wrong with the trim gray jumpsuit or his light brown hair, brushed back neatly for once, but would Lee like it? Or would she just see the body beneath, the typically scrawny and nearly fleshless build of a born-and-bred spacer, someone who could never survive even an hour on a full-grav planet. . . Lords knew he couldn't compete against the visitors here, and she'd been planet born herself, even though she'd spent half her life on stations. The low gravity on a station did weird things to developing human bodies, with effects like stunted growth, underdeveloped muscles, and porous bones. But there were benefits, too, like complete immunity to space-sickness and claustrophobia. . . he could only hope Lee wasn't hung up on physical beauty.

"And if I keep standing here worrying, I'll never get to find out her reaction," he told himself, frowning at how thin and nervous his voice sounded.

Before he scared himself out of his plans, he turned decisively away from the mirror and gathered up his file folder and the all-important rose. He'd gone through a lot to find that flower. He'd wound up special ordering it from the hydroponics division, for quite a hefty price. But it was absolutely essential that he have it.

"There you go again, trying to put this off." He squared his shoulders and adjusted rose and folder to a more comfortable hold. Then he walked out the door.

He wondered for at least the hundredth time how Lee would take the discovery that he was the one behind the notes.

He could see her in front of his mind's eye as clearly as though she stood there, enigmatic and beautiful. Sh'lia Nagrossy, Lee to her friends, had created quite a stir when she arrived on Copernicus Station, newly assigned on a long-term contract. She'd been born on Bandor, a rather secretive planet. It was rare for a Bandoran to take up a life in space. No one on the station had ever seen anyone quite like her before, with skin the color of dark amber and short, wavy hair that shifted with the light from dark brown to nearly red. And she created even more of a stir when she smiled politely and turned down the offers of no less than five of the station's most eligible bachelors.

Ossen was so caught up in thoughts of Sh'lia and her exotic beauty that he didn't even see Dylan until he'd run right into the man. He dropped the rose and the folder, and papers scattered everywhere.

"Watch where you're going, micro," Dylan snarled, then gave Ossen an extra shove for good measure. "You spacers, always think you own the whole damn—what's that?"

Ossen ducked away, hunched protectively over the rose. "Nothing," he muttered, then scrabbled at the scattered notes, trying to collect them before Dylan saw anything. Great. Of all the people to run into, why'd he have to pick the one with the biggest attitude? And how'd he manage it, anyway? The corridor was deserted, even in a daze he should have been able to avoid a collision. Maybe the man had rammed him intentionally.

"Those look like love letters. Let me see." Dylan made a grab at the folder and Ossen backed away, clutching the folder, but unable to prevent the larger, planet-bred man from plucking a sheet of paper from the disorganized mess. "Aw, now isn't this precious," he sneered, "little space-runt has himself a girlfriend. Lee?"

Ossen made a futile grab at the paper. He'd gotten the rest of them secured, and the rose was still intact, now if he could just get that all-important piece of paper he'd be on his way. Dylan kept it away from him with contemptuous ease.

"This can't be the Lee I think it is," Dylan said, face darkening dangerously.

"Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't," Ossen managed to find his tongue. "Either way, I need that paper, and I'll be on my way."

"That's where you're wrong." Dylan took a step forward, note clenched in his hand. "Is this Lee of yours Sh'lia Nagrossy?"

"Maybe," Ossen replied, instincts screaming *caution!* "May I have my paper back? I really have to go."

"You're not going anywhere," Dylan growled. "It is her, isn't it. There's only one person goes by the name Lee on this entire station."

"Brilliant deductive reasoning," Ossen murmured.

"Knock it off, runt! How's a pathetic little worm like you get off thinking he can have someone like her?"

Lee had made a real ass out of Dylan, Ossen remembered. He'd come on to her quite strongly one night at the lounge and she'd refused him point blank, leaving him standing speechless and embarassed while she went off to join Ossen and some mutual friends. They's all had a good laugh about the incident.

"Say something, damn you!" Dylan, eyes wild, lunged forward and shoved Ossen back against the wall.

"Let me go!"

"Forget it. Is it my Sh'lia you're after?"

"She's not yours," Ossen snapped. "And as far as that goes, I've gotten a lot closer to her than you ever will."

"That's not what I wanted to hear. She's mine, I tell you, and if I can't have her no one can!"

Ossen pushed at Dylan's hands, with about the same effect as trying to push a hole in the space station wall. "I told you, she's not yours, she's not mine, she belongs to herself!"

Dylan let go with one hand long enough to smack Ossen, an open-handed blow that would have been an insult to a planet-bred man, but was nearly enough to knock Ossen's head from his shoulders. "So what's the plan, worm? Bet she doesn't even know it's you behind these stupid notes. And you're on your way to meet her, aren't you? Aren't you?"

Dylan was shaking him now. Ossen didn't say anything, just held to his folder and the rose for all he was worth.

"That's it, isn't it? And you think that bitch'll give it up for you, when she turned me down." Dylan laughed, a crazed sound. "It's not going to happen, oh no it's not. I'll go, that's what I'll do, and she'll think it was me all along."

"No!"

Dylan ignored him, eyes darting about the featureless corridor and coming to rest on an access panel to the outer shell. He laughed again, sharp and chilling. "Perfect! In you go, runt," and he wrestled Ossen effortlessly over to the hatch, opening it with one hand. "You can just stay in here until I'm ready to fetch you out again. She's mine, I tell you, and you can't have her."

Ossen struggled and swore, with no effect. He lost his hold on the folder and the rose first, then he felt more than heard a small tearing sound, nearly lost in the struggle. A small jagged edge on the hatch caught at him, just enough to do some serious damage to his safety field—he had to stay out of that hole!

"In you go, runt!" Dylan gave a final heave and shoved Ossen the rest of the way into the dark compartment. The door slammed shut and Ossen heard the lock engage with horrible finality.

"Let me out of here, you bastard!" he yelled, pounding futilely at the door.

No response. Not that he'd expected one, of course, but he had to try. He felt the damaged spot in his protective field already, a patch of cold on his thigh. The fields provided safety, a precaution against potential hull breach or systems failure, generated by a small device every person on the station wore on his or her belt. The field kept off the intense cold of space and maintained a breathable atmosphere within its confines by molecular conversion. It could keep him alive even in vacuum for hours, if intact. But now. . .

Ossen decided not to worry. It would last. It had to last. For now he'd concentrate on getting out.

He groped around in the blackness, trying to find the hatch release. It had to be there somewhere. . . ah, there. He pressed it. Nothing happened. *Defense feature,* his mind whispered, a holdover from when pirates were a common threat to the space stations. Once the interior lock engaged, the service doors did not open from the outside. Great.

The cold spot grew more intense. Ossen pounded on the door again, aware it was hopeless, but

still trying. He couldn't give up, couldn't let Dylan win that easily.

Bastard. Ossen shifted, then quit moving when he felt the tear widen and more cold rush in. How long would he make it, with his body warmth escaping through that little hole, and the cold of space seeping in. . . and in such a small space, too. He wasn't claustrophobic, true, but he was still susceptible to muscle cramps. The space he occupied was tiny. True enough, he could probably open up the outer access door and get out into space, work his way around to the dock area, but what good would that do? His field was damaged. Put it in true vacuum and his air would be sucked out that little hole in three seconds or less. At least in here there was still atmosphere, frigid though it was.

He could do nothing, nothing at all, except wait, and feel that cold spot expanding. It was numb now, around the tear itself, but the ring of cold was growing painfully. It sucked the warmth and life out of his leg as it spread. He imagined what his skin would look like when he got out, dead and blackened, the worst case of space-freeze anyone had seen since the protective fields were made mandatory.

He tried to get out again, but it didn't work, because he couldn't really move. The hatch was small, only intended to serve as an airlock for one man at a time to get out onto the station's skin. There was no room to move.

The tear got bigger. Now he could stick his fingers into it in the dark and feel the rent in his protection. He could fit his entire hand through, but trying to plug it up did no good because it only grew again.

Dylan would pay. Just as soon as he got out of this place, this tiny corner of frozen hell he'd been locked into, Dylan was going to pay for what he'd done. First he'd go to Lee, explain everything. She'd understand. She'd see right through that phony planet-born ape, she'd believe Ossen's story, and together they'd get him back somehow. He had to suffer, to make up for what he'd done. . .

Thoughts of revenge kept him warm for a while, but the cold was taking over. It hurt, the cold did, terribly badly as it crept through his leg and into the rest of his body. He tried to move, couldn't manage it. Too close, too confined, couldn't even stretch his arms all the way out.

Air was running short, or was that just his imagination? He was thirsty, too. He understood the reason behind that all too well. Moisture escaped from his body along with warmth, through the hole in his protective field. Pity understanding the process destroying him didn't help anything. He panted, panic taking him by surprise and making him thrash in his tiny space. No way out! And Dylan was with Lee. He could visualize it far too clearly in the blackness, how surprised she would be to see Dylan with the rose, and the smile on her face. She would be happy to see him, damn her, she'd be glad her secret admirer wasn't some scrawny spacer geek.

A small voice somewhere deep inside whispered that the scenario was illogical, that Lee had already shown her dislike of Dylan very obviously, but it wasn't heard against the growing tide of pain and rage.

Cold... so cold in here. He tried again to open the access panel, with no more luck than before. His hands fumbled at the controls with no feeling, awkward and frozen. The thought that formed within his mind was even colder than the leak in his field: I'm going to die in here. How long would it take?

Wedged in, can't breathe. No doubt about it now, the air was running out. *Damn Dylan*. Cold. Getting colder. Can't breathe, can't move, gotta move gotta get out. . . Then the pain again. Pain and airlessness. Cold and hot, needles, fiery needles stabbing relentlessly. Muscles clenching, would convulse if there was room. Never knew cold could be so fiery hot.

One thought: *Dylan must **pay***.

Then nothing.

Blankness flickered, became real, then vanished. He saw Lee. Sitting with Dylan. He'd gone and done it, the bastard, had convinced Lee he was the one, and now she would believe him and love him and. . .

Rage.

Chapter 2

Sh'lia woke, gasping, momentarily uncertain if she was awake or not. The dream had been so real, so vivid, for all that there wasn't much to it, just pain and fear and death. Freaky.

She struggled out of bed and found her uniform without much effort. She checked the clock and swore. Great, she was going to be late to the Core. Another day without breakfast.

She bolted into the Core and found her station. She got her computer fired up and logged on to the network only five minutes late. It was only then that the quiet sunk in to her conscious mind. She snuck a surreptitious look around the Core.

Only about ten of the thirty-three control personnel occupied their stations, and none of them looked particularly alert. Her partner, Brook, was just now coming onto the floor.

"You're late," she greeted Brook, who slid into her seat with a groan.

"Couldn't sleep worth a damn," Brook grumbled. "Kept having—"

"Nightmares?" Sh'lia finished, with a shiver.

Brook gave her an odd look, then logged onto her computer. "I'd say no, but that'd be a lie. What, you too?"

"Cold, dark, can't move," Sh'lia started.

"Can't breathe, must get out, then dying," Brook finished. She gave Sh'lia a long look, then turned to her computer. "Too weird, girlfriend. Ain't it bad enough we have to be attached at the hip for ten hours straight, without sharing our nightmares?"

"Yes. Yes, it is." Sh'lia returned her attention to her own computer thoughtfully. The functions of the station spread out before her on her screen, everything from life support down to emergency back-up lighting. She ran a diagnostic, relieved when all systems came back normal. She didn't think she could deal with a crisis right now, not even a minor annoyance.

"Lee, do you think it happened to anyone else?" Brook kept her voice casual, eyes on her own screen.

"I have no idea," Sh'lia replied.

The entry portal hissed open. Both women turned at the sound of the Commander's voice.

"I'm well aware of the hour," Commander Banks said, striding into the Core, followed closely by the security guard on duty. "And if you think you're going to keep me from my post at the Core with your ridiculous security checks when my prints have already cleared, you can think again. I made that fifteen-minute rule, and I can countermand it. Late or not, I'm on duty, now get back to your post."

The security guard shrugged and retreated from the Core. The Commander turned and surveyed his crew.

"There's been a rash of complaints already this shift," he began, striding to his station. "Apparently, people are finding themselves unable to report to their duty stations on time, due to nightmares." Several people twitched and looked around at each other, seeing confirmation in other startled glances. "This is most likely due to a malfunction in the food creators. I've got engineering on it already, all late arrivals will be overlooked this shift. Now get back to work."

"Yes sir, o captain my captain," Sh'lia muttered, turning back to her console. Actually, the Commander's statement surprised her. Usually he wasn't so lenient. Maybe his tolerance had something to so with the fact that he was late too.

Whatever the reason for the nightmares, the shift passed normally, once the last stragglers passed through the late arrival security check. The only sign of anything out of the ordinary came afterwards, when the infirmary experienced a run of people requesting mild sedatives.

Sh'lia sought out the lounge after she'd eaten. She paused in the doorway and scanned the faces within. She noticed one absence immediately, and smiled with grim pleasure. Dylan Arthman was nowhere to be found. Imagine that. She'd be surprised if he was in any condition to go anywhere at all after last night. More troubling was Ossen Guyl's absence. She couldn't find her friend anywhere, and that really disturbed her. If anyone would have an opinion about last night's weirdness, Ossen would. He'd told her before about his interest in supernatural myths and legends. There was no sign of him, though, so she settled at the bar alone. The infirmary was out of

sedatives, but a bit of alcohol could do the same job.

Chapter 3

The nightmares grew worse. They weren't confined to just one shift, either. Rather, the entire station complained of the same dream, over and over again. Engineering had tracked down a problem in the electrical system, an unidentifiable and untraceable power surge, but they had no idea how to isolate and fix the problem. The Commander was irritable enough to begin with, before the voices started.

Murderer.

The first time it happened, no one acknowledged it. The elusive power surge blipped on the monitors, but no one paid it any more mind than the whisper.

Murderer.

This time it felt louder. Sh'lia glanced around, meeting other uneasy gazes. Across the room, at his station, Dylan gave a violent start and looked up.

Killer!

"What in the name of the Lords is that?" Commander Banks snapped.

"Whatever it is, it's causing a fluctuation in the power grid, sir," Sh'lia reported. "The sounds correspond to dips in the current, but don't register on auditory monitors."

Traceable?"

"Negative, sir."

"I want you to find the source," the Commander snapped.

Murder in the dark!

"If this is someone's idea of a joke, I'll have their hide on my wall," Banks growled. "Traffic? I want a hold on all arrivals and departures until further notice. Specify code yellow-three."

"Understood, sir," the traffic controller responded.

Death!

"Be quiet!" Dylan jumped from his seat, eyes wide and focused on nothing.

Murderer!

"You're not real! You're just a voice! Get out of my head!"

"Arthman! Get ahold of yourself," the Commander started, then stared for a brief moment in amazement when Dylan started pounding his head against a nearby wall. The traffic controller leapt up and tried to stop him. Banks slapped the call button for Security. "Security? This is Banks. I need a pair of men in here on the double. Seems one of my crew is becoming violent and needs a trip to the infirmary."

"On their way," the calm voice of Chief Suyan replied. "Commander, while I've got you on the comm. . ."

"Yes, Suyan, what is it?"

"There's a new rash of complaints, sir, of waking nightmares and mysterious voices. Has there been any progress made on the technical aspects of this matter? And what should I tell the concerned citizens?"

The Commander sighed and rubbed his forehead. "No progress as yet. Tell them the disturbances are under investigation, and we're all working towards solving the problem as quickly as possible."

"Understood. Security out."

The security team arrived then, too late to save Dylan from himself. Despite the best efforts of the traffic controller, Dylan's forehead bled from a large split.

The security men took Dylan by the arms and led him out of the Core. He resisted all the way. When he passed through the portal, everyone winced at an angry psychic screech. The power dipped visibly.

It wasn't just a voice, now. Emotions filled the air, the ones from the nightmares of the previous two nights, pain and terror and helplessness. The voice felt louder, too, and more insistant.

"What the hell?" Brook jolted Sh'lia out of her frozen position. Seeing Dylan crack up had been a disturbing thing, not nearly as upsetting as it should have been. Rather, it had been almost nice to

see the man suffer. . . she shook off the unpleasant feeling and focused on Brook.

"What is it?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Brook said, reloading the info on her screen. "Damn. This makes no sense."

Sh'lia did her best to ignore the voice and the emotional onslaught. "What am I looking at—oh, sweet Lords."

"Yeah, my sentiments exactly," Brook nodded. "Commander?"

Revenge!

The Commander turned a harried gaze on them. "What is it?"

"There's a threat to life support," Brook reported, wide eyes still on the data. "The power surge has localized and is centered on the environmental generators."

He will pay.

Inexplicably, Sh'lia found herself thinking of the rose. A white rose, it had been, with a blush of red at the tips of its petals, the prearranged signal to let her know its bearer was her secret admirer. But she didn't want to think about that right now. She had a crisis to concentrate on, she didn't need thoughts of the other night's disaster disrupting her concentration.

"Engineering, get on it!" Commander Banks turned to face the main screen array. "Put the relevant info on screen, Systems."

Brook tapped keys rapidly and sent the data to the main array. Twenty screens lit up to form a huge composite image of the dangerous fluctuations in life support.

"Commander!"

The voice of Chief Suyan over the comm made everyone jump.

"What is it, Chief?"

Murderer.

"That man you wanted us to pick up. He's broken free of my officers and is heading back to the Core."

"So apprehend him again, dammit!"

Sh'lia thought she'd never seen the Commander so rattled before. It was a sight she could have done without. Just then, the voice let loose a bloodcurdling shriek and the lights flickered.

All will die!

The power pulsed in time with the voice, dipping dangerously low at each word: *Vengeance. . . vengeance. . . vengeance. . .* **confess!**

Lights blacked out all over the station at the last word. They flared dramatically back into full brilliance in time to illuminate the staggering form of Dylan Arthman as he came through the open portal into Core.

"It was me," he cried, raising wild, unseeing eyes. Blood trickled from their corners, from his ears, from the contusion on his forehead, starkly contrasted against his unnatural pallor. "It was me! I didn't mean to, I swear I didn't, but it happened and it was me!"

A shrieking laugh wrenched minds nearly inside out. *Yes, yes, tell them! Tell them all!*

"Show you, must show you," Dylan babbled, lurching forward to grab the Commander's arm. He started to tow the Commander out of the Core and was shaken off.

"Is this true? Are you to blame for all this?" Commander Banks scowled, the effect spoiled by his wince of pain at another angry shriek. "Somebody, get me Suyan!"

Follow, follow, follow!

"Follow!" Dylan echoed desperately. He scuttled out of the Core, hunched over but moving rapidly, Commander Banks right behind him.

Sh'lia saw the rose inside her mind again. The rose, followed by Ossen's face. The rose. . . Ossen. . . She darted after the Commander and Dylan, gripped by suspicion. *Oh sweet Lords of the Nebulae, let it not be true. . .*

The waves of emotion and pain tormented her all the more now that she suspected their source. Not Ossen, not poor sweet Ossen. . . The pain of death and cold ate at her like acid, battering her viciously.

"Ossen!"

She cried out, she couldn't help herself, and she felt the psychic storm slacken for a moment. Encouraged, she pushed on and found the Commander and Dylan just ahead, surrounded by a crowd of other people, drawn from their rooms by the commotion. Dylan was scrabbling frantically at the inside buffer wall, fingers digging at an access seam.

"In here, in here, in here," he chanted, rocking in time to his words. The Commander searched the crowd and urgently signalled Suyan, who shoved through the crowd and peeled Dylan off the wall.

Commander Banks rubbed his head at a fresh onslaught of pain but managed to unseal the access panel. Sh'lia shoved her way through the crowd in time to see the panel reveal what was left of her friend.

"Ossen!" Suddenly crying, nearly blind with tears, she covered the last few steps seperating her from the pathetic shriveled body, freeze-dried and utterly dehydrated. His belt must have malfunctioned, allowing the slow and horrible death the entire station had experienced repeatedly. She touched the dead face gently, and was catapulted into a world of madness.

Nothing made sense anymore. Up was down, and down was sideways, and something hung in front of her, glowing blue-white and wispy against the shifting chaotic swirl of darkness, with red eyes. Somehow, she recognized Ossen in that incandescent red gaze and reached out.

You! Betrayer of hope, destroyer of dreams, how dare you come here to mock my pain—

The spectral form reared back, ready to lash out. "No!" Sh'lia shrieked. What remained of Ossen hesitated. "No," she repeated, softer. "I didn't betray you. I had no idea, I never suspected—"

Liar! Ossen's shade rippled. *I saw you with him. He told you it was him, and you believed him!*

Suddenly, it all made sense. The rose, the notes, it had all been *Ossen*, not Dylan, and somehow Dylan had killed her friend. . . "No, Ossen. I didn't want it to be him. I only believed him because he was there. I would have rather it was anyone but him! I had no idea it was you, not until just now. . . I never thought of you that way before. But I wish you had come."

I was dying, Ossen replied, with grim humor. *Should I believe this convenient story. . . hmm.*

Suddenly, Sh'lia felt something cold slide into her mind, shuffling through her thoughts with careless ease. "Ossen," she whispered, "what are you doing?"

There was no answer, just a firm jerk on her memory, and suddenly she was reliving moments she would rather have forgotten forever. There was Dylan, holding out the promised rose with that irritatingly bright smile. She felt her heart sink once again, realizing that she was stuck with the man until she could get a word in edgewise to tell him she wasn't interested. Then came the sneaking suspicions—if he was the one who had sent all those lovely notes, then why couldn't he remember half of them?

And then came the part she wanted to forget most of all.

"Bitch!" He snarled, like an angered beast of the wildlands back home. "Nobody turns me down twice and gets away with it!"

He forced her back into her room, wrestling her down onto the small bed built into the wall.

"No!" She cried out and struggled, but he only laughed. "Don't do this—I can hurt you—"

That only served to make him laugh harder and fumble at her clothing. "No you can't. All you can do is take it. Come on, girl, you know you want it."

Sh'lia twisted around, managed to get a hand free and to her belt. "No!" She thrashed wildly, trying to keep his attention off what her hand was doing. And then she had it. One press of a hidden button, and the repulsor field she'd had wired into her utility belt was activated. Not really legal, no, but she'd promised her mother never to leave home without one...

Dylan howled and pushed violently away from her—

Abruptly, Sh'lia broke free of the memory. She staggered back, away from the spirit.

Lee. . . Oh, Lee. I'm sorry. Ossen's voice was filled with compassion. His eyes, or what passed for eyes, had dimmed from angry red to cool blue. *I believe you now, Lee. Did he hurt you?*

"You should know, you dug up that vile, disgusting memory easily enough," she muttered, rather resentful. "He didn't stand a chance, once I got that repulsor field activated. Mother was right

when she told me to get one, no matter what the cost."

He must suffer, Ossen said. *Not so much for what he did to me, but for his mistreatment of you.*

Sh'lia shuddered. "Ossen, don't you think you've done enough already? I saw the man try to beat his own head in, for Nebula's sake. The entire station has paid for what he did to you. I'm sorry, I really am, and if I could undo what happened I would. . . what can I do, though? And what are you going to do?"

Lee, I'm dead. The spectral voice sounded almost surprised. *I died in pain, agony, only wanting revenge on him. . . and on you. I saw you with him, somehow, saw you smile at him, and thought you must have been happy it was him all along and not me. And I wanted you both to suffer. But now,* and the spirit trailed a misty tendril down her face, *I know better about you. All I want is for him to pay for what he did to you.*

"If he confesses to the Commander, everything will be fine," Sh'lia started to say, then everything got weird again. The swirling chaos around her flashed brightly and Ossen's spirit winked out in an instant. Then she was back in her body, with a spritzer pressed against her neck and worried voices sounding overhead.

"She's coming round. Back off, people, give her some room!"

Sh'lia sat upright and the world abruptly returned to normal. "Let go of me," she said, brushing off a medic's helpful hands and standing. "Commander, that man killed my friend!"

"Careful what you say, Nagrossy," the Commander warned. "That's a serious accusation, and this man may not be fit to stand responsible for his actions, in any event."

"It's true. He killed Ossen. Didn't you, Dylan?"

Dylan turned away from the body and stared at her, small flecks of sanity showing through the crazed horror in his eyes. "I didn't mean to," he said, in a small voice. "I thought he was wearing his belt, and it was working. The worst that should have happened was that the little snot got a little lonely and bored, until I let him out." But then his voice changed, from the almost childlike tone to the one she rememberred from two nights ago. "Serves him right, though. Thought he was good enough to get a woman who'd already turned down almost every man in the station. Little punk needed to be taught a lesson, thought he was better than the rest of us—"

"Enough," the Commander interrupted. "Dylan Arthman, are you saying before witnesses that you are responsible for the death of Ossen Guyl?"

"Yes, and what if I am? I stuffed the little bugger right in there and when I came back he was dead. What's there to do about it?"

Dylan glared at the Commander defiantly, then crumpled slowly to his knees, eyes wide and fixed on something only he saw.

"No! No, no, no!" Dylan raised his hands, protecting himself from unseen blows.

"There's more, isn't there, Dylan," Sh'lia said, voice hard. "Are you going to tell the Commander how you tried to take from me what I wasn't willing to give?"

The surrounding people gasped in unison, even as Dylan cried out in pain and tried to batter away his invisible attacker.

"Yes! Yes! I did it, I did it all. . ." Dylan collapsed against the outer wall, utterly defeated, with tears washing the blood from his face. "Leave me alone. Just leave me alone."

"I think that can be arranged," the Commander said, voice hard and unforgiving as the station wall itself. "Security Chief Suyan, take charge of this man, please. And don't let him get away this time." Suyan nodded and spoke rapidly into his comm before clamping binders onto Dylan's wrists. "Sh'lia? Ossen was your friend. Can you convince him to leave us all alone?"

Sh'lia summoned up a weak grin at that. She'd wager down to her last quarter credit the Commander had never believed in ghosts before today, much less had to ask for help with one from a very junior staffmember such as herself. "I think it'll be okay, Commander," she replied. "I spoke to him. Or at least, I think it was him. . . anyway, all he wanted was to make Dylan *pay* for what he did. And now he's going to pay."

"Indeed," was the Commander's grim reply. His piercing gray eyes shifted from her to the body in the wall, and then to Dylan's back as Security led him away in binders. "Right. I'll get someone to

see to a proper capsule for your friend. Is the uncanny business over, then?"

"I think it is," Sh'lia replied, grateful in her very bones. "I think it is."

Chapter 4

"Well, Ossen, you've got what you wanted," Sh'lia said, leaning against the starport. The view outside was magnificent, with the galactic arm dominating the sky, and just the tip of the Nebula visible near the top of the port. "Dylan's gone. Jury found him guilty of everything, from murdering you and assaulting me, to causing a situation that endangered every life on this station. And you may already know this, but they determined the punishment should fit the crime. They locked him in the same section of the outer ring he'd put you in and left him there, although they were merciful enough to trank him first. One vengeful spirit on Copernicus was more than enough, thank you very much."

She sighed and spread a hand against the chill starport. "And now he's dead, and you're dead, and there's no one to send me sweet little notes any more. I suppose you already know they took care of your body, launched it in a proper capsule and all. But did you know most of the station turned out to see you off? You were far better liked than you feared. And you're far more missed than you would ever believe. Especially by me." She sighed again, then stood up. "But I'm still alive, and I can't just sit here talking to the stars and hoping you're listening, or wondering if you're even still around. So. . . you know how to get in touch with me, if you need to. I think you do, anyway. Until then. . . it was nice knowing you, and I wish I could have found out if I really loved you. Maybe I'll see you around someday."

Sh'lia turned away from the starport and gasped. She reached forward with a trembling hand to pick up the rose laying on the low table in front of her. It was a creamy white blossom, with just a hint of red around the edges of the petals.

"Thank you," she whispered around the lump in her throat, then left.

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