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Ghosts

by Jeanne DeVore

Avon was bored, which wasn't too unusual. He was not a social creature by nature, so spending time in a bar watching Vila get drunk was not his idea of fun. Yes, he was staking the place out as well, but quite frankly, nothing much seemed to be happening. A rumor that this place was a hot-bed of rebellious intrigue had brought him here, but he'd yet to see anything intriguing. Calling it ice-cold was more apt. Perhaps this was just a quiet night, Vila had speculated at one point, coming up for air between drinks. Not likely, Avon thought. If nothing was happening here now, nothing much would be later.

He was about to tell Vila that they were leaving when he saw something that made his breath catch. A woman had just entered and walked up to the bar. Avon blinked twice to clear his eyes, positive that what he was seeing was a hallucination.

"It can't be," he muttered under his breath. "She's dead. I saw her body. She's dead ..."

"What are you mumbling about?" Vila said, looking at his partner sideways through a drunken fog.

"Just a minute --" Avon said distractedly, and headed to the bar and the mysterious woman who so intrigued him. Vila let his gaze follow Avon until it rested on the object of Avon's alarm.

"Oh my God --!" Vila gasped.

The woman's back was to Avon as he approached. He hesitated going up to her -- what could he say? Perhaps she wasn't who she seemed to be. But no -- she looked exactly the same: the same brown wavy hair -- only now it was longer -- the same long legs and slender figure. The woman turned slightly at the bar and Avon saw her profile. He swallowed hard. It was the same -- the same soft brown eyes, the same nose -- slightly turned up at the end, the same wide, gentle mouth, the same strong jawline, the same long, graceful neck. It was her.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, almost hoping that she would have disappeared in the interim. But she was still there. He hated mysteries. He had to find out the truth. So he took a deep breath and stepped up to her.

"Cally --" he said hesitantly.

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were as beautiful as he remembered, but she showed no indication that she knew who he was.

"I -- I'm sorry," Avon stammered, turning away. "I thought you were someone else."

"Wait --" she called him back. Even the same voice. How could it not be her!

"You're not Cally -- are you," he said to her.

"How do you know Cally?" the woman asked.

"Are you Cally?" Avon pressed. He was growing more and more unsure. The resemblance was eerie.

"Who are you?" the woman asked.

"I'm trying to find the same thing out from you," Avon replied.

"Are you friends with Cally?" she asked.

"How do you know Cally?" he countered.

"Where is she?" the woman asked.

Avon paused. "I think this would work better if we answered each other's questions for a change rather than asking more." The woman smiled. The same smile. Avon shook his head slightly, trying to clear it. Then she nodded.

"You're not Cally -- are you?" Avon began.

"No, I'm not," she replied.

"But you know her."

"Yes. Who are you?"

"My name is Avon. Who are you?"

"Maren. Where do you know Cally from?"

"She -- was a member of my crew."

"You're not Blake," the woman said.

"Blake?"

"I thought Cally was with Blake."

"She was," Avon replied. "We both were. How do you know about --" Then the light dawned. "Of course! You're Cally's sister."

Maren smiled. "That's right. Though I don't suppose she ever mentioned me."

"I knew about Zelda. I should have realized there would be others."

Maren gazed at Avon. "Cally's dead, isn't she?" she asked softly.

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"I assumed she must be. It was about five months ago, wasn't it?" Avon nodded. "That's when I heard her cry. And afterwards -- nothing."

"It was my fault, really," Avon stated. "I led us into a trap."

"If it was a trap, then you couldn't know about it," Maren answered matter-of-factly.

"I knew that it might be. And I was prepared to take the risk myself. But I didn't want her -- any of them -- involved."

"But what about Blake?"

"What?"

"Wasn't he there?" she asked.

"What made you think that?"

"It's just that -- no, never mind. I must have been mistaken."

"I doubt that. What do you know about Blake?" he demanded.

"Nothing, really," she said. "But that last cry I heard from Cally -- she was calling for Blake, so I assumed --"

Avon reeled backward. "Blake --!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Isn't he the leader of your group?" she asked.

"Blake disappeared more than a year ago," Avon said. "We walked into that trap looking for him. I wonder what Cally knew --" he mused. He looked at Maren.

"I don't know," she answered as if she'd read his thoughts (she probably had). "She didn't tell me."

Avon smiled. "I'm sorry -- I don't think I ever got used to her being telepathic," he said.

"Yes -- it's a difficult concept for most humans to comprehend. They still tend to think of it as sideshow tricks."

The bar was filling up now and it was getting noisier.

"Do you have some deep sentimental attachment to this place," she asked, "or shall we go someplace quieter -- where we can talk?"

"Yes, of course," Avon replied. She paid for her drink and together they left the bar -- ignoring Vila, who was desperately trying to get Avon's attention.

"Avon!" he cried. "Where are you going? What's happening? What about me!"

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"Dayna. This is Vila. Come in!" came Vila's voice over Scorpio's communicator.

"Yes, Vila, what is it?" Dayna replied.

"Bring me up."

"What about Avon?"

"Avon left."

"What do you mean, left?" Tarrant cut in. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know -- he just walked out!"

"Vila, what's going on down there?" Soolin asked the thief.

"You're not gonna believe me," he sighed.

"Try me."

"Avon left the bar -- with Cally."

"What?!" Dayna exclaimed.

"Vila, you're drunk!" Tarrant snapped.

"No, I'm not!" Vila shot back. "Well -- yes I am, but it was Cally."

"Cally is dead, Vila," Dayna said.

"That's what I thought too, but there she was, plain as day. It was Cally, I tell you!"

"Why don't we bring you up, Vila, so we can get this story straight," said Tarrant.

"That's what I asked for, isn't it?" the thief sighed.

"Alright, stand by," Dayna called to him.

"I'm standing, I'm standing," he answered.

"Teleporting now."

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Avon and Maren walked through the half-empty streets and talked. He told her of meeting Cally, of their time together on the Liberator. She told him of her life -- who she was and what she did. She'd left Auron shortly after Cally had -- not for any cause, but simply out of boredom.

"My people aren't -- weren't -- the most exciting in the galaxy," she said.

"What did you do after you left?" he asked.

"I wandered around for a while, then I hooked up with some free traders."

"You're a smuggler?" Avon asked incredulously.

"I didn't think you would find that objectionable," she said.

"I don't, it's just that --"

"It's just that Cally wouldn't have done it," Maren completed the sentence for him.

Avon smiled wryly. "No, she wouldn't. But then -- you're not Cally."

"No," she stated. "I'm not."

They walked a while longer in silence.

"I'm sorry if I'm being foolish about this," he finally said, "but it's hard to look at you and realize you're not her -- you look exactly the same."

"We all look alike, but our personalities are very different," she said.

"How many are there?" he asked.

"Of my people?"

"No, Callys -- Cally's sisters, I mean."

She laughed. "Five of us."

"You, Cally, Zelda --"

"Beryl and Tania."

"I know Zelda is dead -- what about the other two?"

"Dead as well -- at least I think so. They were both on Auron and I don't -- hear -- anything from them anymore."

"You must feel as alone as Cally did," he said quietly.

"Well, I feel a loss, certainly," she said. "But then, I was never as receptive as she was."

"It would have been a great comfort for her to know that you were alive -- to know she wasn't the only one left."

"I tried to contact her at first -- right after it happened. But I've never been as skilled at telepathy as she was. I couldn't reach her."

"I always assumed it was a skill present in all of you," Avon said.

"Well, it is, to a certain extent -- those of our generation. But it can be developed if you want to. I just never bothered."

"But if you're not telepathic -- or as telepathic as Cally -- how did you know she had died? How did you know about Blake?"

"I can receive messages much more easily than I can send them," Maren answered. "Like Cally, I was always aware of the presence of my people. Once they were gone, it was only Cally -- the only one I could sense. But her signal was weak -- she assumed I was dead, so she stopped trying. I couldn't reach her. She may have been distracted -- simply not concentrating. I know as time went by and I realized I was completely alone, I stopped trying as well. What's the point -- there's no one there anymore."

"I'm sorry," Avon said quietly.

"Why should you be?"

"You know how your home planet was destroyed, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "I felt them die."

"Did you also know it was all a trap to capture the Liberator?"

"Oh, I see. So now you're going to take on the guilt for an entire civilization as well as for the death of Cally. For pity's sake, Avon -- use your common sense and think. You can no more take responsibility for the destruction of Auron than you can for the death of Cally." He stopped and stared at her. "Do you really think you could have kept Cally away from Auron?" she asked.

"No," he admitted.

"Nor could you keep her from following you into the trap which killed her. Could you?"

"No," he repeated.

"You spent how long with my sister? And you still didn't learn that you couldn't rule her," Maren stated.

Avon shook his head sadly. "I knew it," he said, "but I tried to pretend I could -- tried to pretend that she was just like all the others. But she wasn't. She knew me, Maren, sometimes I think better than I knew myself. I couldn't hide things from her -- she knew."

They started walking again and Avon continued. "After the destruction of Auron, Cally had a very rough time of it. She was so alone -- I felt completely powerless -- knowing there was nothing I could do to make it easier. I tried -- but what she needed I couldn't give her. There was a part of her that I could never reach. And that was the part of her that was hurting."

"Aloneness is something that is difficult for a telepath to understand. There are always -- I hesitate to call it voices because there are no words to speak of -- but presences. A community awareness." Maren struggled for the words to explain to Avon what it was she felt. "Imagine the sounds of your ship -- the power drives are constantly humming, but most of the time you never hear them, right?" Avon nodded. "But if they suddenly cut out, the world would stop and you would instantly be aware of the presence." Avon agreed again. "Well then, think of the sound of the power drives as the presence of the people of Auron. They were always there, but most of the time I was never aware of them -- until they were gone. Then the silence became almost unbearable. As if --" she stopped and Avon saw her get a far away look in her eyes -- a look he'd seen in Cally's eyes when she was receiving a message. "--as if the protection and love which had supported me all my life had been ripped away," she finished, barely audible.

Maren stood perfectly still and Avon stepped up to her and gently put his arm around her shoulders. She shuddered and squeezed her eyes shut -- as if to block out the terrible vision in her head. She was trembling. He reached out with his other hand to steady her. With a heart-breaking sob, she turned to him, put her head on his shoulder and wept -- each sob sending a shudder through her slender form. And Avon wrapped his arms around her and held her close -- unable to do anything that would make the pain go away, just as he had been with Cally.

After a minute she recovered herself sufficiently and pulled away.

"I'm sorry, Avon," she said shakily. "I seldom cry. In fact, this has been the first time I've cried about this. Of course, it's also the first time I've talked to anyone about how I felt."

"Perhaps if Cally had been able to talk about it, it would have been easier for her to bear."

"Who could she have talked to?"

"Me."

"Did she know that?"

"She should have."

"Did you ever tell her?"

"I didn't think it was necessary."

"Cally couldn't read your mind, Avon, even though it seemed at times that she knew

exactly what you were thinking. That's as much intuition as anything else. If you were willing to be there for her, you needed to tell her so."

"But I could talk to her --"

"Friendships aren't always reciprocal, whether they should be or not. Did you always confide in her?"

"No," he said. "I couldn't. I --"

"You value your privacy too much. Yes, I know. But then, how was Cally to know that you were willing to listen to her -- to help her through her struggles? Unfortunately, some things still need to be said -- even between friends."

Avon held Maren out at arm's length and gazed at her -- at her very familiar face belonging to a very different person. "You are very wise," he said, wiping the remnants of a tear away from her cheek with his thumb. She smiled slightly and her eyes sparkled in the dim moonlight. Then he put his hand behind her head and drew her to him, bending his mouth to hers. She slipped her arms about his waist and responded to his kiss. He ran his fingers up through her hair and with the other hand held her close to him -- feeling her body pressed against his. One of her hands trailed up his chest, coming to rest behind his neck where she toyed with his hair. She turned her head slightly and he kissed her cheek and hair and she let out a shaky sigh.

"Cally --" Avon murmured. It was already out of his mouth when he realized what he'd said. He pulled away as if she burned to the touch. She had a look of blank surprise on her face. "Oh God, I'm sorry!" he exclaimed. "Maren, I --"

Her laugh cut him off. "Living a fantasy, Avon?" she said. "Doing with me what you could never do with Cally?"

"No, I --" he paused. "Well, perhaps, yes." He gazed into her soft brown eyes, feeling himself starting to drown in them again. "I'm sorry, I know I'm not being fair to you. But it's very hard to look at you and not think of her. I don't think I ever realized how much I cared for her -- until this moment."

She reached up and gently kissed his lips again before breaking from his embrace. "Well, perhaps you'll better be able to appreciate what you had by knowing me." She took hold of his hand and they started walking again. "We're almost home," she said. "Will you come up with me?"

"I don't think I'd better -- for both our sakes."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes," he said after a pause of consideration. "I will walk you the rest of the way home, however."

"How gallant," she smiled.

"At your service," he said with a slight bow.

"If you were really at my service, you'd come home with me."

"That's manipulation."

"That's right."

They walked on in silence until they reached a tall, drab building.

"Here it is," Maren announced, stopping before the door. "Are you sure I can't convince you to come up?"

Avon smiled and shook his head. "No, I don't think so," he said.

"Not even if I tempt you with a hologram of the five of us?"

"All of you -- together?"

"It was done many years ago, but it's still interesting. It's the only one we ever had done."



"This I have to see," he grinned.

"I knew I'd get you!" she laughed and she led the way up to her small flat.

The flat, little more than a single room, was as drab as the rest of the building. It was sparsely decorated and dimly lit, but it looked like she'd been living there for some time.

"Please sit down," she said, kneeling in front of a trunk and rummaging through it. "It'll just take me a minute to find it."

Avon watched her as she rooted through the trunk. Part of him was wondering what the hell he was doing there with her, and part of him was thinking that there was no place he'd rather be.

"Ah, here it is!" she exclaimed. She flipped on the lamp and sat down on the bed. "Come and see." He sat next to her and she showed him the hologram. She was right when she said it was old -- the girls in the picture looked to be no more than 18. They were in a group, some sitting, some standing -- all smiling. Five young girls, all with the same face, but all very different. Not just their hair and their clothes, which were different, but their attitudes as well -- their smiles. One was lively and vivacious, one was mischievous, one shy, one bored, and one which Avon could only describe as a quiet smile.

"Can you tell which is which?" Maren asked.

"I don't know all of you," Avon answered.

"Alright, then, which am I?"

"This one," he said, pointing to the girl with the laughing eyes.

"Why?"

"Am I right?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"It looks like you."

"They all look like me!"

"But this one more than the others -- I think it's the eyes."

"And what about Cally?" Maren asked.

Avon took the hologram from her and studied it intently.

"That one," he said, pointing to the quiet smile.

"Right again. How could you tell?"

"The smile. Cally seldom laughed, but she did smile. And her smile conveyed wisdom -- strength. Her smile -- calmed me. Her strength gave me strength."

Maren let him reminisce silently before she spoke again. And when she did, it was to say, "You loved her." The statement took Avon by surprise. He was about to protest that it wasn't true when he stopped himself.

"Yes," he nodded. "I believe I must have. I didn't realize it at the time, but upon reflection, I suppose it was love. I -- don't allow myself the luxury of sentiments like love. I've been -- betrayed -- too many times before."

"A man who trusts can never be betrayed ..."

"... Only mistaken, yes, I know. That was a saying amongst your people. But I don't believe it. And I told Cally so. I have trusted. And I have been betrayed by those I trusted. So now I trust no one. I believe -- in no one. Except myself. And even that is sometimes in question." Avon looked down at the hologram he held in his hands -- looked down at the five girls smiling so innocently at him -- before life could sour them. They

were all dead now -- except one. "No," he said looking back at Maren. "I do not allow myself to love. If I loved Cally -- and I think I probably did -- then I did it without realizing it. And if I didn't know it, I'm sure she didn't either."

Maren smiled gently at him -- a smile very close to Cally's -- but not quite the same -- and took the picture from him, returning it to the trunk.

"I'd better go," Avon said, standing up. "I -- Vila!"

"What?"

"Vila. I left him at the bar!"

"Who's Vila?"

"One of my crew. I came down with him but when I saw you, I forgot all about him."

"You mean you just left him sitting there?" she laughed.

"Yes, that's what I mean. And knowing Vila, he's probably under the table by now."

"Well, then, you'd better go back and collect him."

"Yes," he nodded. Just before he reached the door, Avon stopped. "Maren --" he began.

"Yes?"

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"All -- this --" he indicated the flat, "seems rather permanent for a smuggler. What are you doing on this planet?"

"Biding my time, mostly. I left the last group I was with because of a -- disagreement. Since then I've just been weighing my options -- trying to decide what to do next."

"Would you want to come with me -- with us?"

"I'm not a revolutionary, Avon," Maren smiled.

"Neither am I."

"Oh no? Then why are you still fighting Blake's war? No, you believe in something, Avon, even if it's just in not letting Blake down. Cally believed in a cause and I always admired that in her. But for all that admiration, I still can't believe in it." She put her hands on his arms. "You're still looking for me to take Cally's place and I can't do that. I'm not the same person -- I don't want to be." She let her hand travel up until they rested on his shoulders. "Acknowledge your ghosts, Avon, but don't let them rule you. Get on with it and eventually they'll stop haunting you."

Avon slipped his arms around her, pulled her to him and kissed her tenderly. And when they broke from the kiss, he simply held her in his arms, his face buried against her hair, gathering strength from her presence -- as he always had from Cally. And in his mind he heard, *Be strong. She will always be with you. I will always be with you.* He broke from her embrace and stood back, holding her hands in his. He gazed at her, still amazed at how much like Cally she was, but also aware of how different as well.

"Goodbye, Maren," he said quietly, letting go of her hands. "And thank you."

"Goodbye, Avon," she replied. "I wish you strength in adversity and courage in silence."

"Another saying amongst your people?" he asked. She nodded. "I like that one," he said and he turned and was gone.

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Vila was getting pretty tired of the interrogations of his fellow crew members. And they, in turn, were getting pretty tired of what could only be the crazed imaginings of Vila's drink-addled brain. But he was consistent, if nothing else. He kept maintaining :

that Avon had seen Cally at the bar, and then the two of them had walked out together. And no amount of persuading, threatening or sobering could make him change his story.

So Avon's call to request teleport came as a relief to everyone.

Avon appeared in the teleport back to see the crew staring expectantly at him.

"Ah, Vila," Avon said, noticing the thief. "Glad you made it back. We can get out of here then. Prepare to leave orbit."

"Just a minute, Avon," said Tarrant, stepping across to him. "I think you owe us an explanation."

"He damn well owes me one," Vila muttered.

"Explanation of what?" Avon asked as flatly as possible.

"Where were you?"

"What do you mean? I was on the planet, of course."

"But not in the bar."

"No, not in the bar."

"See, I told you," Vila exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you?"

Avon shot a sideways glance at Vila, then looked back at Tarrant. "Would you mind telling me what all this is about, Tarrant?" he asked.

"Vila came back up with some ridiculous story," explained Dayna, "that you abandoned him and left the bar -- with Cally."

"Don't be absurd, Vila," Avon countered drily. "Cally is dead."

"Then if you weren't in the bar, where were you?" Tarrant demanded.

"There was nothing much worth noting in the bar -- except for Vila getting drunk and that's not noteworthy in itself -- so I took a walk."

"A walk?" Soolin asked.

"Yes. I walked down several of the streets, but it was dark so I didn't see anything terribly interesting. Then I returned to the bar, found Vila gone, and came back here."

"What were you doing while you were simply walking, Avon?" Soolin asked.

Avon paused before answering. For some reason, perhaps a reason he couldn't even explain to himself -- he didn't want to tell them about Maren. So instead he smiled slightly and quietly said, "Conquering ghosts." Then he turned on his heel and said, "Prepare to break orbit. Slave -- set course for base."

And Scorpio moved out of orbit and headed home.