



FROZEN



BY ARDATH REKHA

Frozen

By Ardath Rekha

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Frozen

“I was always with you.”

In that moment, he realized she was right.

Staring down at the dying Kyra, as she slowly went still below him, Riddick realized that nothing around him was real. Nothing.

Jack could never have become this girl. Not really. Not in such a short period of time, without help and protection. Who had taught her? Who had protected her? Who had made it so that she would be able to flaunt her femininity in such a dangerous place as Crematoria? Maybe, if *he* had actually still been in her life, this was what she could have become —

—*my worst nightmare*—

—but without him, there was no way that a teenage girl with no combat experience could have become such a fighting master. In some ways, she’d fought like she was an extension of him... and she *had* been. She was a fabrication of his own twisted mind.

She wasn’t real. She was a hallucination. All of this was a hallucination.

He staggered to his feet and over to the throne, ignoring the illusory people around him as they knelt before him, calling him their lord.

He was living his worst nightmare. A nightmare in which everything he touched died or was defiled, the girl who’d crept into his heart turned into something corrupted and then died that way before he could fix her... and evil, bloodthirsty people turning to him for leadership. A world in which Carolyn Fry’s sacrifice had been for absolutely nothing.

*Wake up! Wake up! You have to **wake up!***

For a moment he saw it. For a moment, the false, hollow, horrific world around him melted away and he was in another place. A room. A huge, cold, echoing room, filled with statues. A room he knew he’d seen before, if only he could remember how and where...

It was gone, and he was back in the snow. Back on Planet UV, gloating at Toombs once more, as a slim figure *didn’t* flicker in the corner of his vision...

Toombs smiled as he finished counting the reward money out, inordinately pleased with himself. Everything had worked out exactly the way he’d wanted it to.

“I trust everything meets your satisfaction?” asked a soft voice behind him.

“Money’s all here. Both rewards, in full.” He rose and turned to smirk at his employer. “Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

He’d never met Aereon Chillingsworth prior to her sister’s death, and had never realized that he’d been dealing with the *nice* sister until she went on her vengeance quest. If he hadn’t already made off with the security files at that point, the reward would have been a lot smaller. But everything had gone exactly the way he’d wanted it to.

“Thank you, Mr. Toombs, for bringing Antonia’s murderer to justice,” she said, her arch, cultured voice hiding a bloodthirsty glee behind it. He could *feel* that glee coming off of her, and wondered if she would spend a lot of time in this room gloating over Riddick’s frozen form.

Actually, your sister’s killer is still free. But you’re never going to know that.

Toombs, and Toombs alone, knew that it was the girl who had shot and killed Antonia Chillingsworth, and it was a secret he intended to keep forever. After all, she *was* just a kid — seventeen now, but still just a kid — and it *had* been in self-defense...

And the only way to flush out the bigger, more rewarding game, was to barter her safety for Riddick’s, anyway.

Threatening the Muslim had worked like a charm. There had been no hesitation in the man when he was offered the choice; threatened with the girl being sent to prison for murder — Toombs hadn’t even needed to add what sort of prison it would be — he’d immediately surrendered the information about Riddick’s

whereabouts. And Aereon had agreed to pay both rewards: Riddick's normal bounty *and* the one she'd put out for her sister's murderer.

I win, on every side. He'd destroy the security footage tonight, as promised. And then he'd go start living the high life. And Riddick...

He turned to look at the living statue again, wondering how much time had already passed for the man trapped inside. Once, his former employer had threatened him with that very fate.

"It is a living hell, Mr. Toombs. Trapped inside your body with nothing but your mind for company. You dream. But these are not dreams of joyous things, Toombs, these are the nightmares that your consciousness always held at bay. You see your world torn asunder, all of your deepest, darkest fears realized. Nothing good survives in your dreams. Nothing beautiful goes unperturbed. It is a living hell, and an hour of it is like an eternity. Anger me again, and you will experience it yourself."

Toombs almost felt sorry for Riddick, until he remembered the way the man had taken apart his whole crew until Eve stepped in. He hoped the bastard suffered.

A lot.

*He stared in horror at the dying girl below him, wishing again that he hadn't found her so disappointing, wishing that he'd had time to draw back out the sweet girl he'd actually **cared** about before it was too late, knowing that now he'd never have the chance. Her lips moved as she spoke her painful final words.*

"I was always with you..."

In that moment, he realized he was in Hell.