



THE EDGE OF THE BLADE



BY ARDATH REKHA

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The Edge of the Blade

Riddick was probably going to kick my ass for getting caught so easily. I should have seen it coming. The light in our apartment was on. It was on, with the shutters open, and I didn't even notice. Didn't get what that meant. Riddick's rule was very strict; we always closed the shutters before turning the lights on, so that nobody would get a good look at him through the windows.

If I'd remembered that, I wouldn't have walked right into an ambush. Cops. Cops crawling all over the apartment. Oh, I saw them before they saw me, and I ran, but they had me. I didn't even manage to get back out of the building before I was on the floor and they were cuffing me.

They wouldn't say what they wanted but I knew. They wanted him, but they'd settle for me on the off-chance he'd come and get me.

The worst part was I knew they were probably right.

Two years I'd been on the run with Richard B. Riddick. Two years, and now I was almost fifteen. There was still a lot I didn't know about him, but one thing I knew for certain was that he'd never run out on me. He would come for me. He'd be pissed off about it, still not understanding why he wanted to so much, but he would come.

That was what scared me.

They took me up in an aircar and we flew north. Not toward the police headquarters, I realized. As one of the brilliant pyramidal corporate structures loomed ahead, I grew all the more confused. Wasn't that one of the Tyrell Corporation buildings? Why were we going there?

I kept making trouble for them. I couldn't *not* do that. I struggled. I kicked. I swore at them. One of them impressed the hell out of me at last when he finally *spoke*:

"Look, you little brat, you have the right to remain silent so would you *shut the fuck up already*?"

It almost made me smile. I managed to curb it to a smirk.

We rode up a fancy elevator. It was so pretty that I couldn't give into my destructive impulses and do it some damage in retaliation. It made me think of my grandmother's apartment, when I'd been little and had stayed with her, while my mom had been off *trying* to dry out. Those were the best six months of my life before Riddick, and no way was I going to defile them in effigy.

Damn, the place was huge and expensive-looking. Nobody had that much space anymore but somehow these guys could afford some kind of fucking *basilica* in their building. I *tried* not to look impressed or intimidated or anything, but it was a losing battle. Someone with too much money and too little sense had built the place and you couldn't *not* be impressed.

They marched me through a grand hall where a number of wild animals, the type everybody said were endangered or extinct, seemed to be calmly wandering about. Finally we came to some more normal-looking offices. They took me into a large conference room where the table was *real wood* and polished to a mirror-like shine. At their urging, I sat down in one of the seats, watching as several of them unloaded a variety of equipment.

What the hell was all that stuff for?

The men talked quietly as they worked.

"Don't see why we're setting up the VOID-COMP. She's obviously not a skin-job. They don't make children at Tyrell." The way the first cop sneered the phrase *skin-job* made *my skin crawl*. Did that mean what I thought it meant?

"You never know. Word is those prototypes are trying something. Something to help them pass as human. Maybe they're building kiddie-bots to help disguise themselves." The next man didn't look up from working on the equipment as he confirmed my worst fears.

"No, we already have a print-match on her." That from the guy who appeared to be the ranking officer on duty. "Audrey MacPherson. She disappeared from the Holden Bay Youth Facility four years ago. Human as they come."

Damn, they'd figured me out fast. How'd they managed that?

The first guy grumbled. "Still don't know why a human girl'd be running with skin-jobs, Sarge. That's perverted, you know. That Nexus 7 must be one sick shit-kicker."

Maybe I didn't want to know what he meant.

"We're ready to begin," Sarge finally said. I looked up but he wasn't talking to me. He was talking to the man in the doorway.

I knew that man. I felt my whole body go freezing cold at the sight of him and for the first time, I wasn't thinking about fighting, just where I could *run*.

He was tall. Old too, maybe Riddick's age. His hair was light brown and unruly on top of a pale, craggy face. And those eyes were cold and dead.

I knew him. He was a murderer. I'd watched him kill a woman not long ago.

Shit. I needed Riddick. I needed him *bad*.

I'd thought, for sure, that Riddick was going to leave me after the eclipse. I'd thought it several times, in fact, including when we were on that planet. But he didn't. And I'd figured that he'd leave me with Imam on New Mecca, even if I begged him not to. But again... he didn't. *He* asked *me* to come with him.

His invitation was kind of funny. "Ain't been out in the normal human world before, kid. I need someone to be my eyes."

It took me completely by surprise, but there was no way I was passing up the invite. Imam wasn't happy about it but off we went.

Life with Riddick was very different than I expected. For one thing, I'd assumed he planned on using me as more than just his *eyes*, but he never touched me the wrong way, not once. He could get weird at times, like the time I cut the palm of my hand and he'd watched the cut bleed for several minutes, fascinated and turning my hand in different direction, before finally letting me clean and bandage it.

He asked me questions about my life. Lots of them. It was like he was trying to absorb my memories into his head. He asked me questions about how people interacted... in school, in church, in court, on the subway... that left me wondering just how completely isolated prison had left him. It made no sense. But I couldn't resist him.

After a while the "guests" started appearing. I would come home and there would be a man, or a woman, or even a few people, staying with us for several days. I only ever saw any of them for one visit; they never came back. They'd show up with maybe a backpack that had a few items of clothing and a whole stack of family pictures inside, and they'd leave with their eyes shined when they finally went.

Refugees, I guessed, but I couldn't figure out why they were all getting their eyes shined. Riddick never would tell me when I asked.

I couldn't figure out, though, what possible advantage he got out of having me with him. Finally, one night, after the latest batch of refugees had moved on, I asked him.

"You know," I told him as we ate, "you're pretty self-sufficient. You don't have any trouble making your way around 'normal' places."

"Thank you," he said, as if my observation were a huge compliment. Weird.

"It just makes me wonder..."

"Wonder what?" His reply was fast, a note of what almost sounded like anxiety entering his voice.

I shrugged. "I just wonder why you took me with you."

The silence at the other end of the table was long and deep. His voice, when he finally spoke, was softer than usual, almost gentle.

"Because you know what it's like to live in fear."

That was as much of an explanation as I ever got from him.

No matter what happened, no matter what kind of scary shit went down — and some of it was pretty scary shit — he never left me. I never lived in fear again.

Until now.

The Murderer stared at me with hungry eyes that seemed to slice through me. I'd never seen eyes so cruel and so cold. Inhuman. Those were the most inhuman eyes I'd ever seen.

But if he was here, that meant... that meant he *was* human. And Trisha hadn't been. That meant he was one of my interrogators. Nominally a good guy.

I wanted to throw up.

Trisha had been beautiful, and she'd been kind to me. A little strange, maybe, but who of Riddick's friends wasn't?

She'd been in our living room one day when I came home from school. Lithe and magnificent with that shock of red hair I'd coveted instantly. Why were all of the women Riddick brought around so damn beautiful? I despaired of ever measuring up to any of them.

The weird thing was that they always acted so fascinated by *me*. Like they'd never seen or talked to a kid before. It never failed. *All* of them acted that way. And all of them —

Well, shit. I did hate those nights.

The sounds from Riddick's room would be almost scary. Thumps. Cries. Almost animal-like sounds. I would lie in my bed and try not to listen, simultaneously wishing it was me in there and relieved that it wasn't. What was going on had to be rough and scary, right?

But in the mornings they always looked fine. So did Riddick. They looked relaxed, and at ease, and... well, not hurt, that was for sure.

Trisha stayed with us for a week. When I was home, if Riddick wasn't around, she would spend most of her time reading, watching the news, and sorting through her stack of family pictures. Funny how most of them did that, too.

One day I saw her doing some martial arts moves, and I asked her to teach me. She gave me a funny look and asked me why I didn't already know how. I told her I'd never seen those moves before, and asked her where she learned them. That earned me another funny look, but she tried to show me how it was done. Learning from her was a lot like learning from Riddick. She didn't seem to know what any of the moves were called.

But I liked her, and she liked me.

The last two days of her stay, she had bandages on her eyes. Like the others. And when they came off, her eyes were shined. Like the others. It made me mad. I wanted a shine job, too, but Riddick wouldn't let me get one. He was arranging them for all these other people, but wouldn't do it for me.

Then she was gone, and it was back to being the two of us. Until a few days later, when I saw her again.

I'd just come out of the movie theater. Riddick was behind me, when I spotted Trisha across the street. She looked funny. Her outfit was askew like she'd thrown it on in a hurry, and she was shrinking into the shadows, shined eyes darting back and forth, catching glints from the streetlights.

I called out to her, only to feel Riddick's hard hand on my shoulder. Trisha looked our way, but Riddick was pulling me back into the shadows of the exit doorway.

She started toward us.

Then the Murderer appeared.

No other name would suit him. He was waving a *huge* gun and running right for Trisha. I wanted to scream out a warning to her, but Riddick's hand clapped over my mouth.

She didn't need a warning, anyway. The second the Murderer appeared, she saw him, and began to run, shoving pedestrians out of her way.

He shot her in the back as she was getting ready to dodge around a display window and the blast threw her forward through it. I screamed against Riddick's hand and he pulled me back against him. His heartbeat was calm and measured, and his hands were unyielding.

Trisha somehow stumbled to her feet and tried to keep running. I screamed against Riddick's hand with every shot. Two. Three. Four.

Finally she didn't get up.

The crowd had scattered and I watched that horrible man — so ordinary-looking but so... evil... stalk forward towards her body. Cops appeared around him and I turned, burying my face against Riddick's chest. Where had those sons of bitches been when Trisha needed them?

Now I knew.

Staring into the face of the Murderer as he calmly sat down at the table, activating VOID-COMP equipment, I knew.

They were on his side. They were all on his side. He was a *Blade Runner*.

And that meant...

Shit.

Trisha had been a *replicant*. What the hell was Riddick into?

“Where is Richard Riddick?”

Weird the way he phrased that. I went for charming innocence. “Who?”

“Richard B. Riddick,” he repeated, impatient. “Don’t bother denying that you’ve been traveling with him.

“He’s gone. He left yesterday. Must’ve known you were coming.” Who knew, maybe he’d even buy it.

It might even have been true, but I didn’t believe it for a second. Riddick had been nervous yesterday, yeah, and he’d left for a meeting with someone and made me promise to be extra-careful until he got back — fat lot of good I was at *that* — so maybe he even did get a running head-start. I hoped so.

Trisha’s death had hit him really hard. Even though he’d been the one keeping me quiet during the killing itself, he wasn’t unmoved. He was just holding it in. When we’d gotten back to our apartment he’d gone into his bedroom and had completely destroyed everything inside.

Everything.

I’d ended up having to drag him out of there once the worst of his rage and grief had passed. I’d fed him soup, helped him take off his shoes, and tucked him into my bed with me and held him, and the whole time he hadn’t been able to stop shaking. I’d felt, weirdly, like I was the grown-up and he was the child, even though he was more than twice my age.

“Ms. MacPherson, I hope you’re aware that harboring an escaped replicant is a class three felony offense—”

I had been anticipating this threat since I realized what Trisha was. “Well I wouldn’t tell you where he is just so you can arrest him for it, even if I knew—”

The Murderer held up his hand, stopping my words. “You misunderstand, Ms. MacPherson. *You* are the one who has been arrested here. *You’re* the one who’s been harboring a replicant, not Richard Riddick. *He* will simply be retired when we find him.”

I grabbed onto the edge of the sleek table as darkness threatened to overcome me. *Oh my god.*

Suddenly everything about Riddick made sense in a way I’d refused to examine.

Riddick, wherever you are now, run. Run now.

“You’re crazy.”

The Murderer smirked at me and shook his head. Then he grabbed a thick file and slid it across the table. It only made a tiny whisper as it glided across that ultrashined surface. Riddick’s name was stamped on the cover.

I opened it hesitantly.

Inside were design specs. *Design* specs for my best friend.

Riddick, Richard B.

Experimental Prototype Nexus 7 series, R class

Incept Date 2.17.2501—

Seven years ago. Riddick was *seven years old*. I’d had it all reversed; *I* was twice *his* age. Hysterical laughter threatened for a moment but I shoved it back. I needed to keep reading.

Subject of Experiment R475:

Emotional development past customary expiration date.

Experiment results: Failure.

Whereabouts: At liberty. Retirement authorized.

I looked up at the Murderer and frowned. “You sick sacks of shit were experimenting on him?”

He smiled coldly at me. “I’m just the man who retires them when they go bad. Richard Riddick was one of the experimental models they constructed to see if they could find a way to make replicants more pliant. It was a badly-designed experiment in his case. They put him in with a platoon of Nexus 6 replicants, and yes,

his superior faculties did result in him taking command. But then the others in his platoon expired, and his reaction was very intense.”

I glared at him challengingly. Inside my heart was twisting, imagining how it must have been for Riddick, when the only friends he had ever known suddenly began dropping dead around him, for no reason than someone had decided their time was up. “Intense?”

Like, maybe, the way he reacted to Trisha’s death?

“You’ve surely heard of the Wailing War Massacre? Five hundred soldiers killed?”

I nodded, sighing. And yeah, I’d heard that Riddick had been the one who’d done it. I’d never asked. The look of pain in his face the one time I started to bring it up had been too intense.

I didn’t blame him in the least. No wonder he’d refused, at first, to care about any of us after the crash. No wonder he’d tried so hard to ignore our calls for help. I leafed through the file and was surprised at how close they’d gotten to us, how many times. Pictures of us together. Pictures of some of the refugees who had stayed with us — God, they’d *all* been replicants! — and the various places we’d stayed. Speculation on why I was with him. Pictures of the rest of the R class Nexus 7s, including —

My head jerked up and stared at the Murderer. Robert Baris. One of four programmed to hunt his own kind, along with Raymond Carr, Ryan Burkel, and Rick Deckard.

“Have you read this file yourself?” I asked him, wondering if he even knew.

“I know what I need to know,” he replied, his voice smooth, secure.

I wondered. There was a notation that Rick Deckard was a renegade now as well. He’d fled two years ago with one of the other R class models, a female named Rachael Rosen, and both of *them* had been programmed *not* to know what they were. If I showed him this page, would he even see it? Or would his programming make him blind to his inclusion on the page? Did the others in the room know what he was?

Did it matter? He’d told me he intended to kill my best friend and throw me in jail. Suddenly whether or not he was human was irrelevant to me. I closed the file.

“You’re too late. He’s gone. He got what he needed from me and now you’ll never find him.” I hoped it was true.

“And just what was it, Ms. MacPherson? What is it that they’re doing?”

I wished I knew, just so I could know whether or not it had been working. I set my elbows on the table and pointed my right hand up, giving Baris the finger. “You’ll never find out.”

Inhuman rage crossed his face and he began to rise. He only made it halfway to his feet before the sound of gunfire broke out.

I hit the ground and rolled under the conference table, suddenly extra furious that my hands were still cuffed in front of me. The shouts of men and guns warred for dominance in the room. Screams began to be added to the mix.

What was happening? Who was firing?

I hoped to *God* it wasn’t Riddick coming from me. They’d take full advantage of the opportunity to kill him.

“Where’d she go?”

“Don’t know, Sir! Who’s shooting at us?”

“It’ll be Riddick, I’m sure of it. Get the girl.”

Someone began crawling towards my position. I shrank further under the conference table. I could still kick, even if my hands were cuffed.

One of the officers, the one who’d used the word “skin job” with such gleeful bigotry, began to crawl under the table after me, his hand out, a creepy smile on his face.

“C’mere little girl, nobody’s gonna hurt you—” Thunder silenced him. His face froze in a startled expression and then went slack and he collapsed to the floor in an untidy heap. Behind him I could see legs. A woman’s legs.

For a moment I thought they belonged, impossibly, to Trisha. Then their owner knelt down.

I knew her. I’d seen her picture in the file. Rachael Rosen. Another of the renegade Nexus 7s.

She tilted her head and gave me a tiny smile. “Are you all right?”

Without any hesitation, I crawled forward towards her. Where'd she come from? How'd Riddick found her? I knew she was at risk; I had to get out from under this desk. "Yeah, I'm okay. Talk about making an entrance..."

Her smile widened a little. Yeah, that was probably a replicant face, that serenity in the face of this overwhelming chaos. Her eyes glowed a little, I noticed. Not a shine job, but something...

As I got in range she reached in and pulled me out effortlessly. I climbed to my feet carefully; no guns had gone off for about a minute.

"Did you guys get Baris?"

"The Blade Runner?" She shook her head. "He disappeared."

"Careful with him. He's not just a Blade Runner. He's one of *you*."

She gave me a puzzled look, before dawning comprehension hit and she realized I knew what she was. Then puzzlement struck her again.

"He's a replicant programmed to hunt other replicants," I tried again.

Her face cleared. "Ah, like Rick was."

"Rick Deckard?"

She nodded.

"Someone say my name?" The man who entered the room sure *looked* as weatherbeaten as any human, but there was a hint of that same poise. Damn, everything was making sense now. I leaned onto the conference table and grabbed up the file as he smiled at me.

Deckard and Rosen had lived as humans. The file had said their experiments had been classified as successes until they'd learned what they really were and fled. I could feel the difference between their behavior and all of the other replicants I'd unknowingly met. They knew what kids were, and what they were for.

"Are you going to take me to him?" I asked, skipping the small talk. I figured they wouldn't mind.

"That's the plan. You ready? We still have Baris somewhere out there and if what you say is true, he's going to be harder to handle than these were." He didn't *quite* gesture to all of the lifeless bodies around the room.

"I'm ready." I clutched the file close to me, and hoped I could keep up with them. I didn't have a choice.

We ran through the corridors, startling animals that I realized now were artificial models. Back to the ornate elevator. Deckard lifted a radio to his mouth.

"We're here."

"I've got you," rumbled a voice that I knew all too well. Joy pooled inside me. I hadn't lost him.

The elevator descended swiftly. Deckard moved me to the side, where I wouldn't be seen when the doors opened. Both were at the ready with their guns. As the doors slid open, Riddick's voice came over the radio again. "All clear. Fifty meters to your left. Now."

Deckard tugged me into motion and we ran, heading for one of the police aircars. Then we were in it, lifting off, the others in the front at the controls while I sat in the back and began looking through the file again.

I still didn't understand something important, and I knew it. I just didn't know what. Why were Blade Runners after Riddick out *here*? The only planet where being a replicant was an automatic death sentence was Earth itself. It wasn't illegal to be one on the colony worlds. Renegades were just caught and sent back to their owners, not killed.

So why was Baris here to kill Riddick? I couldn't find anything in the files to explain.

The aircar landed with a bump, and I looked up. Rachael turned and smiled at me. "We're here."

"Where?" It looked like an empty alley.

"Where Riddick is. If you step out, he wants to talk to you."

I nodded, picking up the file. The door of the aircar slid open and I climbed carefully out. It was kind of hard to do with my hands still cuffed the way they were, but I made it.

Dark. Quiet. But not empty. I could see his eyes in the shadows.

The aircar door slid closed again, affording us some privacy.

“Now you know.” His voice was odd, carefully noncommittal.

I nodded.

“Yeah.” I moved forward, until I was only a foot away and he was looming over me in the dark. “Here, this is the file they had on you.”

He took it from my offering hands, and then bent down, setting it on a dry part of the pavement. Straightening back up, his hands curled around the cuffs I was wearing. I watched in fascination as he broke them open, dropping them to the ground and then *gently* rubbing my wrists with those same metal-bending fingers.

“Did they hurt you?”

I shook my head. “Just threatened real good. Why are they after you?”

He sighed. And then he gave me the answer that wasn’t in the file. “This is a war, Jack. The last two years, you and me, we’ve been running an underground railroad. We’ve helped more than a thousand slaves get, and stay, free.”

Awe filled me as I realized what it was we’d been doing. “The shine jobs?”

“Shined eyes mess with the VOID-COMP. They don’t register right. Means their owners can go somewhere where shine jobs ain’t uncommon, some of the darker colony worlds, settle in, and live out the rest of their lives, and nobody will know what they really are until they expire.”

I nodded. “So what happens now?”

“Tyrell Corporation’s been in chaos for a few years since Roy Batty assassinated Tyrell. But now they’ve got it together and they’ve caught onto what we’re doing. They’re out to stop us. Stop *me*. Kill me if they can. It ain’t safe for you to be with me anymore, Jack.”

“No!”

I could make out his features in the gloom now and he looked startled by my outburst. On the ground, to my right, I suddenly noticed that he’d packed all my things. He expected me to hate him now, I realized. Or at least to fear him, because I was human and he wasn’t. And to want to leave... because I was human and he wasn’t.

“Jack, really, it’s not safe...” He sounded torn.

“I want to help. I’ve *been* helping, haven’t I? Showing your friends how humans act, and stuff? I can still do that.”

“But—”

Realization dawned on me, remembering one of the doodles left behind by a refugee. “Riddick, remember when you told me why you took me with you? Because I knew what it’s like to live in fear. That’s what being a slave is, isn’t it? Living in fear.”

He nodded, silently.

“I haven’t lived in fear since you took me in. I don’t want to go back to that, either. Please.”

He gazed at me for a long moment. Then he reached down, picking up the file, and my bag, in one hand. His free hand reached out to me. “Come with me.”

I took his hand. I didn’t know where we were going, or what would happen next. I didn’t care. I was where I belonged.