

Ardath Rekha's Fan Fiction

Book Editions

*Queen of Air,
King of Darkness*



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: Mere moments after Kyra and the Lord Marshal's deaths, a slip of Aereon's tongue reveals to Riddick just who Kyra really was, and who Jack really is.

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Queen of Air, King of Darkness

Loss consumed him. Loss as he'd never felt before. Richard B. Riddick sank into the throne, dizzied by it, and knew that this was why he'd always refused to let anyone get close to him. Why he'd spent five years hiding from *her*.

She'd changed so much, into something only barely recognizable, and yet still her death left him reeling. Why was that?

Why was everyone kneeling before him?

He listened, still dazed, as they told him that he was their Lord Marshal now, for that was the Necromonger Way – he who killed the Lord Marshal *became* him. Thus did they go on; thus did they flourish. For only a truly gifted killer could hope to take the throne.

Like me. If there's anyone who ever deserved the title of Necromonger – death dealer – it's me.

Death had come out of his hands for countless years, and in time he destroyed everything he touched. Fry was dead. Imam was dead. And now the little bit of Jack that hadn't been destroyed before, by his contact with her, was dead as well. His eyes moved to Kyra's limp form and he felt that paralyzing loss keen through him again. He'd hoped that, once he got her free from Slam, and somewhere safe, the sweet girl he remembered would come forward again and overwhelm the bitter harridan who had taken her place. But now his hopes were crushed as they'd always been. Jack had been perverted and destroyed, and his hands dealt only more destruction. He hadn't been able to save her. He should have known it from the start.

Suddenly, with crystalline clarity, he understood the Necromonger Way in its fullness. The death they visited, on those who would not follow them, was the kindest mercy they could mete out. It was the only real mercy in the universe.

When the Witch spoke beside him, he was startled. He hated the way she moved, as though immaterial. He hated the way her footsteps made no sound unless she wished them to, something that at least the chains had put a stop to. He hated the way she'd pulled him out of his isolation just so he could watch, firsthand, as the only people he cared about were annihilated.

He hated her.

"Now," she said, with something akin to satisfaction in her voice, "the darkness can finally lift."

If he'd thought he could actually get his hands around her neck, he would have strangled her for that. His hatred bloomed and deepened. Didn't she know that there was nothing *but* darkness?

"It never lifts," he growled. "It never ends."

She stared at him, her eyes widening as she realized what he meant. "You cannot be serious!"

He stood, slowly, fixing his glare on her. "You're the psychic. You tell me."

The look of horror on her face intensified. "But *why*? Why become the very thing that destroyed all you care about?"

"I always *was*. Got nothing left to lose now. Nothing left to care about." He wondered how the chains holding her to this reality worked, and whether they'd also let him kill her slowly.

"But—"

Deep wells of poison were opening within him and he spat them at her. "You know, it occurs to me that you could have saved her any time you wanted. You knew where she was, and you knew how important she was to me. You let her rot there. A fraction of the money you spent on those bounty hunters to find me would've gotten her out, but you didn't. So you're to blame, too."

"Mr. Riddick, I don't know what to—"

"That's *Lord Marshal* to you, bitch!"

A ripple of approval and excitement went up through the crowd.

Desperation and slyness warred over Aereon's normally serene features. Calculation was in her eyes. "Surely there's still peace to be had. As you said, all you want is to be left alone. Now that you can end the Necromonger threat forever, you *can* be."

"All I wanted," Riddick grated out, "was to be left alone in my quiet place, secure in the knowledge that the Holy Man and the girl were better off with me gone, and that they were having happy lives. You fucked that up good. So unless you can hand Jack back to me—"

"No, you can't have her!" It flew out of Aereon's mouth so quickly that he could tell that *she* was as startled by it as he was. And he could tell that she wished it had never come out.

Can't?

Interesting that she hadn't said it was too late. Interesting that she hadn't said there was nothing anyone could do. Instead, she'd *refused* him, as though it was within her power to grant what he wanted and she was choosing not to.

"And why not?" he asked, his voice dropping to the quiet of a hurricane's eye. "Think hard, *Aereon*. 'Cause it's the reason they're gonna go on killing." He gestured at his kneeling army, feeling a rush of power at the way they bent to him.

He could also feel a rush of hope. Could it be possible to get Jack back? To repair the damage years of neglect had done to her psyche, and turn her back into the beautiful person she'd once been?

Aereon turned and gazed at Kyra's fallen body. "She told me it wouldn't work. She said I was a fool to try to fight evil with evil, and that my lies would cost me. She said that, although I couldn't see it, you were a man of truth and that deception would only make things worse with you... it is very distressing to discover that your grand-daughter is wiser than you are. All I wanted to do was keep her safe..."

"Your grand-daughter?" He followed her gaze, seeing no resemblance between her and the still form on the floor. "Kyra's your grand-daughter?"

"No. Jacana is my grand-daughter. Kyra was... a decoy. I hoped you would accept her in Jacana's place and forget the girl you once knew."

Excitement and fear warred within Riddick, making his belly light. Did she mean what he thought she meant? "You'd better explain yourself."

Aereon sighed. "First, I must tell you that these events are... older than you. My people, the Elementals, live far longer than ordinary humans, although we are their cousins as much as the Furyans are. I am... a few hundred years old."

"I really don't care *how* old you are. Get to the point."

Aereon looked like the picture of tested patience. "The prophecy that you would defeat the Necromongers was centuries old, but that is not all it said. It spoke of the final peace, as the fiercest warrior of the Furyans subjugated the Necromongers and took the queen of the Elementals as his mate—"

"No fucking way. We are *not* mating. I wouldn't do you on a bet even if you *weren't* dried up and untouchable."

The witch's eyebrow arched at him. "I am not the queen, Riddick. I am an ambassador, nothing more. I am part of her family, but I am not She."

"Well, *She* had better be a lot better looking—"

"You *can't* have her!" Again that sudden rage. "Not after what your people did!"

He stared at her, waiting for an explanation. Slowly her face calmed.

"Go on," he prodded, when the silence began to annoy him.

"Thirty years ago, there was a fragile peace between our people, the Furyans and the Elementals. We agreed that the threat of this... horde... was more pressing than our differences. There was a truce... and talk of an alliance." She glared at him, suddenly, rage filling her face and voice. "But you Furyans are deceivers to your core. Your ambassadors were not what they claimed to be, and one night they infiltrated the Palace and began murdering the royal family, one by one. My daughter, her husband the King... and their children... only one of them escaped the slaughter and fled."

Riddick frowned, trying to work it out in his head. Thirty years ago... no way...

Aereon must have seen his doubt. "I told you, we are a long-lived race. Jacana was ten at the time, but to the reckoning of my people she was still a small child. It takes forty of your years for us to reach adulthood, and then we live for centuries."

"Assuming nobody ghosts your half-there asses."

The impotent rage in her eyes gave him enormous satisfaction. "Your people took advantage of our kindness and left our world in shambles, and our brightest star in hiding. But we repaid you in kind. If peace could not be had with you, I knew who could strike back at you with the strength you'd taken from us. I told the Lord Marshal about the prophecy, and in his fear he ordered the deaths of every male Furyan!"

And this bitch actually thought she had the moral high ground here? He wanted to laugh in her face, but she was still holding out on him. After he got his answers, though, he was going to teach her a few object lessons. "So you scragged my people as revenge for someone taking out a few useless Royals, and now the only strength left in the galaxy is this army?"

Aereon's mouth pressed into a bitter line. "No. The prophecy says that there will be a union and peace... when the Furyan Warrior conquers the Necromongers and brings them to heel..." Now her mouth

twisted as though tasting something revolting. "...and takes the Queen of the Elementals as his wife."

Now he was starting to get it. "That'd be this Jacana? Your granddaughter?"

Aereon nodded. "She was missing for a very long time. She stayed in hiding, living as a human child and moving around often enough to keep people from remarking on how slowly she grew. She was clever, and left false trails that fooled even me. And when she reached adolescence, she disguised herself as a boy—"

"And called herself Jack," Riddick realized aloud.

The look on Aereon's face could have spoiled milk on sight. "And thus your paths crossed. I think she knew who and what you were from the moment she laid eyes upon you, but somehow she doesn't see or understand. She thinks you're *worthy* of her. She believes there's *good* in you. She fought me when I came to Helion Prime, saying that if I just let her talk to you, you could be persuaded to help Al-Walid's people defend themselves."

But Jack hadn't been there, had she? "I'm guessing you didn't listen to her."

Aereon looked affronted. "That place was far too dangerous. I had her taken back to our world immediately. But on the off-chance that she was right about the bond between the two of you, I imbued the girl, Kyra, with Jacana's memories of you – and her scent since your kind has the noses of dogs – and sent her to Crematoria to wait for you. It was easy to alter the Imam's memories so that he believed she'd been there for a while, and that Jacana had never been with him."

Riddick swallowed and walked over to Kyra's still body, kneeling down beside it. He frowned, conjuring his memory of Jack's face.

No, this was not the Jack he remembered, he realized. The forehead was too low, the nose too short, the chin too small. The sightless blue eyes staring up at the ceiling ought to have been green. And Jack's hair, before she'd shaved it off, had been lighter and straighter. A few choice phrases and a familiar scent, and she'd fooled him.

"So you just tossed some poor kid into one of the roughest prisons in the galaxy. Was she at least in on it?"

"She believed she really *had* been Jack, although you were late enough in arriving that her natural personality had begun to reassert itself. But she still believed the past we wove for her, and made you believe it."

"What... the *fuck*... gives you the right to do that to someone?"

"The girl was a multiple-murderer. Just another of your kind's psychotic brats. She'd been condemned to death; we gave her a reprieve. She knew, before the memory implantations, what was going to happen, and consented to it."

"Wait, you're saying this kid was a Furyan?" He stared down at her, understanding at last how it was that she'd managed to keep up with him as well as she had.

"She'd have been a perfect match for you, too," Aereon grumbled.

Riddick rested his hand on Kyra's cheek, feeling another wave of regret move through him. Now he understood why he'd been so... disappointed by her. He wondered if, in the first days of the memory implantation, her personality had more closely mirrored Jack's, but if it had, that had eroded away. Her native rage, the rage he wrestled with every day, had reasserted itself and she'd gone feral once more, knowing that he was somehow to blame for her misery but not truly understanding why. She'd never had a chance, he realized, and wondered if the only good memories she'd ever known were the ones that had come from another girl's mind. Kyra had been used, and used up, and tossed aside, the way people had always sought to use him.

Two can play that game.

"You want peace with the Necromongers, Aereon? You want them to stop rampaging?"

"Of course." Now she was talking to him like he was a small child or something, the bitch.

"Then you'd better get Jack here."

"What? No!"

Riddick rose, standing over Kyra's body. "You will get her here. Or my new friends, here, are gonna come for her and for your whole fucking planet. And on the way, we're gonna wipe out every single inhabited world we run into. Do you understand?"

The fear in Aereon's eyes made it clear that yes, she did understand. The impotent hatred told him that she would obey him at last. "Maybe now she'll finally see what you *really* are—"

"I already know," a soft voice cut in. Aereon whirled, staring in shock at the entry to the great hall.

The young woman standing in the archway, flanked by uneasy Necromonger guards, was clad in robes similar to Aereon's. But where those were pure white, hers were a mixture of colors, blending into each other. Airy white melted into the blue and green of water, crackled into the reds and oranges of fire, and shaded into the soft brown of earth. Her straight, light brown hair fell loosely around her shoulders, framing a gamine face that made Riddick's heart lurch. As she began to walk forward, the kneeling throng parted for her, a low susurration of excited comments rising with her passage. Riddick was vaguely aware that Aereon had dropped to her knees.

Queen Jacana. *Jack*. Riddick could only stare as she came closer and closer to him. This... *vision*... was the feisty kid he'd once known?

He watched, speechless, as Jack knelt down beside Kyra and gently closed her sightless eyes. His amazement grew as she bent even closer to the still body.

"I'm sorry," Jack whispered, and left a gentle kiss on Kyra's forehead. Then she looked up, her eyes sparking a little as they fixed on Aereon. "I told you it was a stupid idea."

For the first time since he'd met the bitch, Aereon responded meekly, lowering her head in a nod of acknowledgement. "It is as you say, Your Majesty."

"I hate it when you do that," Jack snapped. Then she turned her head and rose, locking eyes with Riddick. "Looks like you got into quite a mess here."

There was nothing aloof or imperious about this Queen... not now, anyway. The girl looking at him was the Jack he remembered. The look in her eyes was the look he'd vainly searched for in Kyra's, and not found.

Unfamiliar emotions threatened to stop his throat. He concentrated on managing nonchalance. "Guess you got here just in time."

"I said I'd find you, didn't I?" She grinned and reached out, taking his hand and drawing him back towards the throne.

No, he irrationally thought. *Everything I touch, I destroy*—

But there she was, he suddenly realized. Jack, the girl he remembered, looking radiant and beautiful, as much a force of life as she had been when he first met her. Unperverted... and suddenly for a second he found himself *agreeing* with Aereon. He had no right to touch her, to bring her down to his level—

She quirked her lips at him, as though sensing his thoughts. The sparkle of humor in her eyes seemed to ask if he really thought she was that weak.

Unbidden, this time summoned by no one and nothing, his memories of the Jack he'd first met rose in his mind. Jack calling to him amidst the bones, trying to get him to return – not for her, he abruptly realized, but for the three others behind her who were struggling to catch up. Jack belting herself in beside him, in the skiff, and uttering those prophetic – *psychic* – words about merc ships. Jack in the arena, pulling the shryll back before it could sting him, and tossing him his knife. Jack staring in shock and horror at Chillingsworth's remains, a moment after shooting her to save him. Jack, who was always somehow right where she was needed most.

Jack, he realized, who had been hiding from her grandmother's vindictive statecraft for thirty years until she would be strong enough to depose her. Jack, who had deliberately boarded the *Hunter-Gratzner* five years earlier so she could meet her future mate and help him find his humanity again. Jack, the only person who had ever looked at him like this, with no doubt or denigration in her eyes.

"So," she asked him, those eyes sparkling with warmth and affection, "where the hell can I get eyes like that?"

Son of a bitch, he thought, realizing how much Kyra's memories must have eroded, *How'd I ever fall for that whole act?*

He leaned forward and put his mouth to her ear, reflecting that maybe there really *was* a place for him in the light, and Jack had been keeping it warm for him this whole time. "You already own them," he whispered.

Dimly, he was aware of activity around him, people backing out of the room, bowing as they went. Some of the troops were carrying Kyra's body from the room – *Gotta make sure to give her a good send-off* – and Vaako was leading his reluctant wife out. Even Aereon, after a long moment of hesitation, was departing. He ignored them all. He was busy, basking in the restoration of something he'd thought, only a short while ago, had been lost forever... his soul.

"Got a question for you," he managed a while later.

"Oh?" Jack's hair was now disheveled and her lips were a little puffy from the way he'd been mauling them, but she looked even more wonderful than ever. And unlike her grandmother, she was still fully

substantial; he'd have to ask about that sometime.

“Does it... bother you that I really did come to care about Kyra?”

Her smile was radiant. “No, Riddick. I'm glad you did. It proves what I said all along, you know.”

“And what's that?” he asked, drawing her closer.

She put her arms around his neck, and murmured her next words against his lips. “You're a good man.”

And I thought it was weird when Chillingsworth called me an artist, Riddick thought, before surrendering to the light of Jack's kiss.