



Lost Boy



By Ardath Rekha

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Jack found Riddick sitting in the garden, gazing up at the starless sky. Clouds obscured everything from horizon to horizon, leaving the world below in darkness only slightly alleviated by distant street lights. Only her complete familiarity with Imam's garden let her see him at all.

He looked up at her approach, mercury eyes fixing unerringly upon her, but didn't say a word as she sat down next to him on the bench.

"We missed you at dinner," she told him, unable to think of any other way to start. She wanted to ask him about the last week. He'd become strangely moody, impossibly more taciturn than ever.

"Hmm." He turned his head a little, gazing out into the night again.

Jack took a deep breath and pressed forward with her questions. Two years of Riddick in her life had taught her to be direct, both in what she asked and what she answered. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah..." He certainly didn't *sound* okay. "Everything's fine."

Jack found herself taking another deep breath, this time in annoyance. Okay, yes, she was still only fifteen, but she understood the world pretty well, and she was perceptive enough to know when "it's okay" meant things were anything *but*. To her knowledge, this was the first time Riddick had lied to her since she'd first met him.

So what would *he* do if their roles were reversed? He'd force the question. You didn't get away with dodging around him, after all.

"No it isn't. C'mon, what's wrong?"

He looked over at her, his expression suddenly wary. For a long moment he seemed to consider her, as though weighing a heavy option. Then he let out a long, deep breath. "Been thinking about my life."

That was more introspective than she was used to from Riddick. "What about it?"

He shrugged, eyes sweeping over the garden. She wondered, as she often did, how it looked to his strange eyes. She imagined it looked fey and magical, lit with colors ordinary human eyes couldn't even see—

"Where it's going. Where it's been. I'm thirty, and... the thing I'm proudest of, in all that time, is that I didn't run out on you."

Jack was stunned, both by his sudden open frankness about his feelings, and...

"When did you turn thirty?"

A hint of a sad grin ghosted Riddick's lips. "Today."

Jack stared at him in astonishment. "You asshole, it's your birthday and you didn't tell me?"

"Wasn't much point. Birthdays don't mean anything." He seemed morose now.

"Bullshit they don't. If they don't mean anything, how come you buy me five presents on mine? You know, I'd have returned the favor if I'd known..." She glared at him, mostly to hide her profound embarrassment at not having known, or realized, or *asked* before now. *Why didn't I ever ask?*

"Okay," he said, his voice taking on a hint of irritation. "Let me rephrase that. *My* birthday doesn't mean anything."

"It does to *me*!" Jack protested. "Shit, now I need to get you a present! And for the last two years, too! So come *on*, it means something, and if it didn't you wouldn't be out here *moping*."

She had her hand on his shoulder. He reached up and took it into his hand, his thumb skimming her palm. "Moping? Thinking."

"Same difference."

He looked both touched and annoyed. "You think it's easy to just start your life over at this age? I look back at who I used to be and it makes me sick. Makes me wonder if my mother had the right idea, trying to dump me and move on."

"Like hell." A sudden intuitive flash hit Jack, making things clear to her. "Is that what this is about? Her?"

Riddick shrugged but she could feel his unease.

"Look, just because she didn't love you for some reason, doesn't mean that you're not loveable."

Riddick's answer was a humorless snort of laughter. "Who'd ever love me? A convicted murderer."

"Are you stupid? *I* love you, dummy!"

The startled look on his face, supplanting his usual ironic deadpan, was something she would treasure forever. She'd never managed to provoke a completely unpoised response from him before.

He took a breath as if he was about to speak, paused, and then released it. Again. Finally he managed to answer her. "You don't understand."

"What, you think I don't know what love is? Because I'm a kid? Kids know how to love. My family gave me lots of practice, you know, before the accident. *I* probably know more about love than *you* do."

She watched as he thought about that one, considering the truth in it. The sad smile reappeared. "You're right."

Holy shit, he thinks I'm right! She was amazed by the lift it gave her.

After a moment, he continued. "But you know... that wasn't actually the kind of love I meant."

Jack chuckled. "Oh, you mean the kind of love a girl half your age can't give you. You're probably right. Can't help you there. But hey, you'll find someone. A guy as hot as you? No question."

Another startled look appeared on his face. "That wasn't what I meant either."

Okay, now I'm confused. "What kind of love were you talking about?"

He still seemed a bit astounded by her last words. Why was that? Suddenly it came to her that she'd told him he was *sexy*.

Oh shit. Well, he hasn't run off screaming or anything.

Riddick took another deep breath. "Jack, sometimes I envy you so much I have to remind myself that you're my *friend*."

"Huh?"

"The way Imam... dotes all over you. Nobody's ever felt that way about me. I never got to have that. Sometimes when I watch him, like when you bring your report card home and he gets all excited about your grades... I want your life. I want to steal it."

The sudden sorrow that filled Jack's chest almost overwhelmed her. "You've never had that, have you? Not even now."

Imam *liked* Riddick, and wanted to help him become a better man, but... there was no love or affection involved. How strange to realize that Riddick coveted Imam's fatherly behavior, wanting it for himself. He'd never had real parents. He'd never had the experience of being the foremost person in another person's heart.

Oh Riddick... She climbed into his lap and wrapped her arms around him before either one of them realized she was moving.

He stiffened for a moment and then his arms came around her.

She couldn't think of a thing to say now. Neither, apparently, could he. She didn't know what to tell him. He'd never had parental love, and that was something he would probably never find. But maybe... maybe she could at least show him what some of that love was like. Funny to think of taking on a motherly role towards a man twice her age. *A nurturing role*, she told herself. You didn't have to be someone's mother to be the one who helped them grow.

Finally, after a long while, he spoke at last, in a soft whisper unlike anything she'd ever heard from him. "Thank you, Jack. Thank you."

It suddenly reminded her of a tale in which an ageless rogue, with the body of a child and the determination to stay that way, sought out a girl to become mother to him and to his family. Only in Riddick's case, it was more the reverse. The body of a man, but in some ways he was younger than she was.

"Guess we should go inside, huh?" He sounded almost embarrassed.

"I put your food in the warmer. It'll keep, if you want to stay out for a while." She gave him an inviting smile. "We can watch the stars."

He barked with laughter. "The sky's *completely* clouded up, kid."

Jack laughed and grabbed his hand. Standing up, she pulled until he rose to his feet. "Come with me." She dragged him out of the formal garden and out into the field behind the house.

"What are you up to?"

"This is a good spot. Lie down." She smiled at him.

"Lie *down*?"

"Yeah. You've done that before, right? On your back."

He gave her a dubious look, but obeyed. "No kinky shit, kid. You're only half my age."

"Eww! As if. Do you know how many bugs are in this grass?"

"And you want me to lie *down* in it?"

"What are you worried about? They can't crawl into your hair or anything."

He laughed, and that lightened her heart. She'd broken through his despondency at last. "Okay, kid... you lying down too?"

"But of course." She sat down beside him and waited until he was reclined before putting her head on his chest. "Now, close your eyes."

"This is getting weird..."

"Trust me. You got your eyes closed?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Now... right up above you is a big one."

"Big one what? I have my eyes closed." He sounded annoyed.

"Jeez, you need to use your imagination for once, Riddick. See it inside you, okay? A big star."

"Ohkaaay... a big star."

"It's white, and bright. Now, on its left... there's a little blue one."

Riddick chuckled. "How many degrees away?"

"There you go... I was hoping you'd catch on." Jack snuggled closer to him. "Now, *you* tell *me* what else there is."

She felt him chuckle again. "Okay, Jack... we're gonna tour the Pleiades."

She smiled and listened as he began to describe the stars in one of the parts of the galaxy he'd traveled through. She knew he was seeing them, and, slowly, she began to see them too. His voice was hypnotic, riveting...

"Jacqueline. Wake up, child."

She opened her eyes to see Imam smiling above her. "Wha?"

"It's time for you two to come in. It's almost midnight."

She sat up, rubbing her eyes and wondering when she had fallen asleep. She'd dreamt of flying through the stars with Riddick beside her. He groaned a little behind her, sitting up too.

"Come, both of you. It is late." Imam turned and headed for the house.

Jack looked back at Riddick, catching his wry grin. "Sorry I fell asleep."

"No, that's okay. It was nice." Riddick stood and offered her his hand.

She climbed to her feet, glancing at her watch. "It's five to midnight."

He raises his eyebrow at her. "Yeah?"

"Means I have time to give you one more birthday present." She grinned at him, feeling impish.

"What's that?"

"Close your eyes."

"*Again?*"

"Trust me, Riddick. Close your eyes."

He chuckled and closed them. "Okay?"

Jack rose on her tip-toes, putting her hands on Riddick's shoulders. She pressed her lips to his cheek and felt his breath catch. "Happy Birthday, Richard B. Riddick," she whispered into his ear.

When their eyes met, he looked deeply touched. She smiled, taking his hand and leading him back towards the house. Somehow, she was going to make sure that it felt like a home to him, too, from now on.

Note: This is for a very special, beloved friend, who didn't have the birthday she ought to have had. Love you!