



When I Find You At Last



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: Jack isn't Kyra. She isn't dead. She isn't weak. But what she's going to have to do soon scares the hell out of her.

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They say the brain shuts down in cryosleep.

That's a disgusting lie. It shuts down if you can afford it to. If you pay for the drugs. If nobody wants you to suffer the sensory deprivation of being trapped in a little box.

Shame nobody gives a shit about people in slave tanks.

Thoughts running through my head, no special order to them, not anymore. I'm coming apart. Being torn to pieces by my own brain.

The ramp lowering on the escape ship, and that woman... that woman with blazing green eyes that made me think of my father... pointing a gun at Riddick. The harsh crack of the gun going off and feeling like I'd been shot as Riddick collapsed to the floor. My dizziness abandoning me as I lunged for the forgotten rifle on the floor. Lifting it, aiming it at that twisted screaming mouth...

My fingers twitch on a phantom trigger in my tube. I want to be uncivilized again.

A dry, hot night on New Mecca, lying in my bed and trying not to cry. The sounds of Riddick saying good-bye to Imam for the last time, sneaking away like a criminal in the night — how ironic, isn't that what he is? — just so he doesn't have to look me in the eye.

I spent the next two months trying to hate him, but all I really wanted to do was die.

Kyra handing me a cigarette as we hid out behind a storage shed at the spacedocks.

"Tonight, huh? You got all your stuff?"

"Yeah." I took a drag off the smoke, avoiding the stains of Kyra's lipstick on the filter, and handed it back to her. To her this was just a great excuse to start the wild adventure she'd always wanted to go on. Me? I was afraid of what would happen to Riddick if I wasn't around to watch his back.

"So where do you think he went, anyway?"

I shrugged. "Probably somewhere underpopulated, where there's mining or something so his eyes don't look weird."

Kyra cackled. "Wrong! He'll be at Tremus Station, you'll see."

I laughed back at her. "You just wanna go there because it's got a hot nightlife."

"Damn right," she told me, and struck a pose. "I could pass for eighteen, couldn't I?"

She batted her eyelashes and made her face look as sultry as possible — not hard with the makeup she liked to wear, and that big mane of hair she had — and waited for me to tell her that yes, she looked eighteen, not thirteen like we really were.

"Yeah, sure. I'll be your younger brother." It was an act I preferred.

"Wuss. We can get you a wig."

"Nothing doing. Jackie's dead again tonight. I'm Jack."

Kyra... for a moment I struggle against my restraints before more paralytics are pumped into my system. I need to help her... got to get to her... help her...

The ink wasn't even dry on the contracts before the leering merc told us what we'd really signed. We were "indentured servants" now, for the next five years, and he could send us anywhere and make us do anything. His eyes skimmed over me, not really seeing anything but a scrawny boy. Kyra, though, I could see exactly what he planned for her.

We fought, or tried to, but there were too many of them and they were far too strong for us. The butt of someone's gun clipped my temple. I ended up lying on the floor, trying not to throw up and struggling to stay conscious, while I heard what they were doing to my best friend.

Kyra... got to help Kyra...

They put us on separate ships. Kyra was being sent to a brothel for training. I was just gonna be shipped off to the mines. They were trying to unload us fast because of my head injury. Their medic said it might be fatal. I could hear everything they were saying but I couldn't get my mouth to work, my body to respond to my commands. Just the silent cries over and over again... Kyra... Kyra... Kyra...

Riddick, help us...

Kyra's ship was already on its way when the prep-techs realized I wasn't really a boy. It was too late to send me off with her. They did something to my head, muttering about mishandled cargo, and a lot of the pain went away.

The pain and the paralysis. I can move, a little, in my tube. For all the good it does.

But I think I'm dying. Something keeps striking at me like a concussion, like the ship is rocking or being hit by explosions. It's got to be me. My brain is melting down at last. Probably having a cerebral hemorrhage. Something...

The light dims and I know this must be it. Now I'll die, without seeing Riddick and without saving Kyra.

"This one's in bad shape, help me get him out of the tube." A strange, harsh voice.

Hands on me, lifting me up.

"Get him to the infirmary. I'll handle the rest of these guys."

"Is it clear?"

"Yes, Private. The whole crew is either dead or in custody. Now get this kid to the infirmary."

"Yes, Sir!"

My whole body lurches. It's too much. Darkness and silence takes me for a while, deeper than what I'd been able to get in cryo. Peace... peace...

Riddick, where are you? I need your help...

Bright white light above me. Hurts. They dim it for me.

"...lucky we intercepted your craft. You were on your way to the irridium mines on Planet UV. Slaves there don't last a week before they die of radiation poisoning..."

"Kyra..."

"That name again. Jack, you need to concentrate. Talk to us."

"Other ship... brothel... help her..."

"Dear Almighty..."

Quiet for a long time. My head's beginning to make more sense. There's a tall woman in a uniform who comes to see me. Her face looks severe, almost cruel, but her voice is gentle and she never stresses me. I like her. She makes me think of Shazza.

Today she looks sad.

"I'm sorry, Jackie. We haven't been able to track down the ship your friend was on. Our investigators are trying to trace her but she could be anywhere. Slaving is a big business in the outer sectors. Most of the ships, we never even catch up with."

She rests her hand on top of mine, and then draws me into her arms and lets me cry on her uniform.

Time passes and I know a lot more about them. I can walk again now. My uniformed friend comes to see me frequently and we go on strolls.

Harkness's world is probably the most earthlike planet I've been on since I left Memphis on a freighter. Green, rolling hills. A scattering of trees. Okay, the purple woodchucks aren't earthlike at all, but I like them. Some of them will even let me pet 'em.

"It's coming, Jack," she tells me. "They're moving through the outer worlds, destroying everything good they find. One day, this place may be a lifeless cinder, too."

Necromongers. What a fucked-up name. They probably prance around in capes and laugh diabolically... but everybody here is scared. Colonies are vanishing. This one fears it might be next. All they want to do around here is farm and mine, but they might still be next. 'Specially because they're religious separatists. The idea of converting to someone else's faith sparks the most vehement tirades I've ever seen.

Me, I got no use for religion, and they know it. It bugs them but they need everybody they can get. Which is why these walks always turn into recruitment spiels. Join their fleet academy and they'll make the mandatory chapel optional for me.

They need every hand they can get.

And I gotta say, the idea of having a gun back in my hands... I like it.

"Do I have to wear a cross on my uniform?"

"Yes, but you don't have to believe in it if you don't want to." She looks sad that I won't let her save me. It's an old battle now.

"I can learn how to fly a ship?"

"Yes. We need good pilots."

Most important point now. "I get combat training? And guns?"

She hides a smile. "Yes, Jackie, you do."

I look around at rolling hills and purple woodchucks, and wonder what Kyra would think of this little slice of ordained heaven. The girl I remember would have scoffed at it. But I would have too, before the slavers. I want peace.

Even if I have to fight and kill and die for it, I want the peace of this place. I rarely even wonder, anymore, what Riddick's doing. I named one of the chucks after him, though. He's a grumpy little guy but when nobody's looking he'll sneak over and rub against my leg.

I could belong here, even if I don't want their God.

"Okay, I'm in."

Training is grueling, especially because I do still have some nerve damage. They try to be easy on me but I know the drill. Keep up or drop out. I'm not going to be useless. I'm going to be the best. Anyway, I'm not the only teen they've recruited. If things go as badly as they seem to fear — and I'm starting to understand why — they might have to put guns into the hands of their small children.

I'm not gonna let that happen if I can help it. These wackos are too nice.

Pilot accreditation. A silver medal in marksmanship. My first flight patrol and I help take down another slaving ship passing through our spacelanes. I'm seventeen now.

They've never managed to find Kyra. They keep looking, for me. I'm still not converted, and it still wigs some of them, but they consider me one of them now anyway. I consider me one of them, too.

The news came last night... and it's bad. Helion Prime has fallen. Usually nobody around here has anything good to say about the place — religion, again, of course — but everybody was crying. The darkness

is getting closer.

I cried, too. Imam was there. Ziza, his little baby girl, was there. Who knows, maybe Kyra escaped captivity and got back there.

All gone now.

Now I've seen it, seen the work of the Necromongers myself. I landed on New Mecca and stared around at the twisted ruins. Everything was so charred and blackened and torn that I couldn't even find Imam's house.

Nothing lives there. Nothing will ever live there again.

We wait, and watch, and prepare to fight to the death if we must. It's only a matter of time.

The most frightening news of all came last night.

There's a new Lord Marshal of the Necromonger fleet.

Richard B. Riddick.

That fleet was quiet for more than a month after the fall of Helion Prime... but now its predations have begun again. With Riddick at its head. And they're coming this way.

Riddick. Oh fuck.

The command council now knows about my history with him. We don't know what it will be worth, but they've given me a new mission, and I'm training hard for it. I cry myself to sleep every night, thinking of how much has changed, how much has been lost...

How much will be lost soon.

My mission is simple. Get to Richard B. Riddick, and make him recognize me... and then, when his guard drops — if it drops...

Kill him.

They don't know if I can. It's a huge long shot. But I'm probably the only one with even the slimmest chance of succeeding.

I have to kill the man I never stopped loving.

I remember lifting that gun, five years ago now. Pointing it at Antonia Chillingsworth. Ending her life to save his, and being happy that he lived.

If I succeed, I don't want to survive doing so.

I'm so sorry, Riddick... I'm going to betray you. Kyra... I'm so sorry I've never found you... I hope you got away. I hope you're living it up somewhere, far from this war...

They're coming. *He's* coming. We maybe have a week until they get here. The council says this is destiny. God's will.

I still don't believe in their God. But I'm ready.