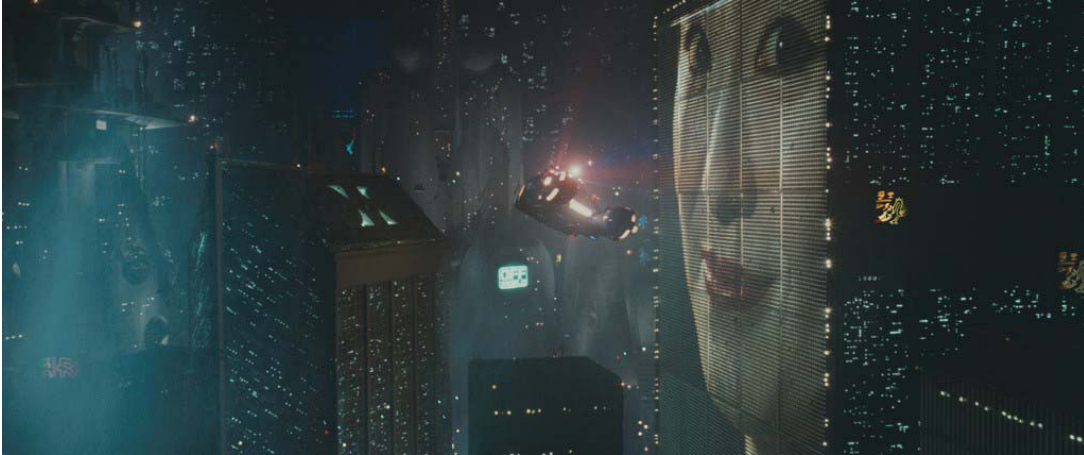


Blade Runner Blues

Chapter 1 – *The Runner*

The dark blue Spinner slipped through the man made valley of tall buildings with Gaff's right hand firmly on the controls as he rubbed his aching leg with the other. Deckard, beside him in the passenger seat, stared out his rain-streaked window across Los Angeles. Even now, in the persistent showers and darkness, it was a beautiful view.



He spoke to Gaff without turning his head from the window, "You think it's a fool's dream . . . don't you?"

Gaff thought silently for a moment, then responded carefully in the blended mishmash city-speak language of the streets, "I think it's good to have dreams, but this one is quite an aspiration. You really want a horse? They've been nearly extinct for years. Even the synthetic ones are outrageously expensive." Both men fell silent. Deckard's old neighbor had come home with one several months ago, and he had been dreaming of owning one ever since. His own synthetic sheep, for which he had worked very hard and waited very patiently, was nice and he knew he should have been happy with it, but he found himself dreaming of owning the horse nonetheless.

The discouragement on his face was reflected in the window glass, and Gaff spoke again as he began the Spinners descent toward the streets below, "I just don't see how owning a horse is a realistic dream for you. Real ones are extremely rare, and on your salary, as far as a synthetic one is concerned, you might as well be dreaming of owning a Centaur or a Unicorn, my good man. You have about as much chance of obtaining those elusive, mythical beasts as you do your horse. Men have sought after elusive myths such as these for centuries and never found them because they do not exist. If they did, and anyone were lucky enough to find one, or anything as rare, they would run away with it and never come back."

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There was a moment of silence before Gaff continued, looking off out his window, "I've come to think that the odds of finding the right woman is in that mythological category as well." Deckard nodded knowingly and turned to face Gaff as the vehicle touched down on the street.

Cold eyes stared back as his door raised, folding forward. He pulled the collar of his coat up and said nothing as he stepped out into the rain. The door lowered again, Gaff watching him through the windows as the vehicle rose from the ground and raced away. Deckard glanced back over his shoulder, watching the Spinner disappear into the other traffic as he walked into his apartment building. With any luck, the incessant moisture made Gaff's bum leg stiffen up and hurt worse.

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His feet ached with the mileage of the day as he walked into the still darkness of the cave-like apartment. A barely audible electronic humming rose and fell rhythmically. Twin lights in the ceiling above the bar momentarily switched on as he stepped in close to grab a glass and his favorite bottle. The warm light cascading down over him switched off as he walked away, pouring himself a drink and heading toward a comfortable spot on the worn sofa. He sat slowly, his sore, tired body sinking gradually down into the deep cushions. Ritually, he began unlacing his shoes with one hand as he sipped his whiskey from the heavy, squared glass in the other. The events of the past few weeks raced through his mind as he took another sip from the glass, eyes staring unfocused into nothingness and he placed the half empty bottle on the low table before him.

The warmth of the liquor burned in his chest in sharp contrast to the chill on his skin. He ran his free hand over his face, up over his forehead and through damp hair. Pushing back further into the cushion, he rotated his head slowly, hearing small pops in the bones of his neck. Bright lights streamed in through his blinds as a slow moving blimp passed by, blaring a neon-laden advertisement promising a new life and a new start offworld.

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The sound of rain falling and the dancing spatter of water on his balcony and windows made his dim apartment seem all the more comforting. It never seemed to stop raining anymore, he thought. In his line of work being outside, exposed and among the masses that were left here on Earth, rain was an occupational hazard. Blade Runners endured whatever was necessary to track and retire their mark.

Rick Deckard took another mouthful of the amber whiskey and swallowed as he wondered what his soon-to-be ex-wife, Iran, was doing across town in their home, his home. He wondered if she was taking care of his synthetic sheep. Probably not.



After years of depression and dependence on the mood organ, she had announced that she couldn't bear life with him any longer. She was leaving him for a rich, off-world entrepreneur. The blood he came home with on his clothes at the end of the day weighed heavily on her. His attempts to calm her by assuring her it wasn't real blood, only Replicant blood, hadn't made things any better. Like it or not, "Retiring" illegal Replicants found on Earth was his job. In the end she saw him as little more than a killer, and she had had enough.

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He was sure she had been using the time to pack and get her papers in order for her emigration, if she wasn't gone already. He didn't know and didn't care. He had pushed the memories of their life together to the back of his mind. His dreams of one day owning a real animal were no longer practical. Living animals were very expensive and very rare. Now that he was alone and entertained thoughts of quitting his job, that little dream may be some time coming, if ever.

He marveled at how the need for his job had been born from the push of progress in the development of synthetic life. The Tyrell Corporation had been making Replicants for years, but only in the leap forward seen in the last 3 generations had they become so indistinguishable from human life that specific testing had to be developed to discern one from the other. The Voight-Kampf empathy test was the latest in a line of detection tools. Dave Holden, he himself, and others in the Rep Detect unit used it as a regular part of their job, but they all had their doubts as to how long it would remain effective with the new advances.

Replicants were manufactured on Earth and sent to the off-world colonies either as support personnel for the labor forces creating new colony infrastructures, various combat teams or military units settling new areas, or as a pleasure model in one of several levels of entertainment services. It all depended on their programming. No matter what their individual destinies were, in the end, all were manufactured slaves.

Deckard squeezed his eyes shut hard and then relaxed his face. He had a headache that had conveniently settled piercingly behind his left eye. A slight spasming of the lower lid had been annoying him for hours now, and he wiped his free hand over it in an attempt to end the nearly imperceptible fluttering. As long as Replicants were hard at work, or play, or whatever it was they were designed for, he didn't care how many were running around. It was when they went off the deep end, fleeing the colonies and making their way back to Earth that they became his problem. Replicants were illegal on Earth, and usually if they had made it this far, some or many had died paving the way for them.

Two weeks off the mood organ, he thought, as he pressed the cool glass to his left eye and stared through the whiskey at his distorted apartment. He was pleased with his decision to quit. While the mood organ was a nice device to have for synthesizing the emotions and moods that accompany pleasure or happiness simply by dialing up that mood, it could be a destructive tool as well. His wife had used the infernal device to amplify her unhappiness and depression. Even when he had tried to secretly intervene and dial in a day of happiness for her, she had discovered him and reset it for despair. Given his current life circumstances, he was already running the gamut of real moods and emotions without needing the haze of synthetically generated feelings crowding out and numbing him to those real ones already there. He needed to be more in touch with those natural moods and feelings in his head if he ever had any hope of moving on with his life. He moved the glass aside, momentarily looking at the room, then put it back, again altering the view.

Images from his day flashed across his now-closed lids as he finished off the last swallow of whiskey. These images were stuck in his head . . . of all the faces he had looked into while searching, and all the strange looks he had gotten from people passing by as he talked to Holden on his departmental phone. All personal cell phones and other private communication devices had been rendered useless back in 2015 when the last of the remaining commercial cellular communication satellites had slipped out of their deteriorating orbits and burned up in the atmosphere.

The major communication companies had all moved along with the world government to the colonies, so no one remained behind to launch anything new for private use. The only ones that remained in their higher, more stable orbits were for standardized vid-phone service and official

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use only. Most everyone left behind on Earth had a vid-phone in their homes and they were readily available on the streets in the remaining populated cities. Global communication had become less important now anyway as more and more people emigrated off-world, and those left behind were leaving the more remote regions and gathering together in communities of diversely mixed cultures.

Now, slipping deeper into the seductive arms of unconsciousness, Deckard's fingers relaxed just enough to allow the squared glass tumbler to gradually slide from his grip and fall silently to the sofa beside him.

* * *

Across the empty voids of space, far away from Earth and the deepening slumber of Rick Deckard, Roy Batty's chest rose and fell quickly, his breathing heavy. Perspiration glistened on his skin as he peered with ice blue eyes through the port to the stars outside the station. He still couldn't get a good view of the fleet that had fired on them, but he rationalized that if the attack was sustained, it could be just the distraction he and the others needed to put his plan in motion. If they could just get to Earth and slip away unnoticed into the uninhabited regions, perhaps one day, when the last people either emigrated or died off, they might inherit the remains of the planet, depleted as it was, as a place to call theirs.

There was another port beyond the launch bays, he thought, as he peered through his own reflection in the glass to the emptiness of space beyond; emptiness that echoed in his heart and mind as he made the connection, eyes dropping slightly, deep in thought. Another new feeling his Replicant slave mind was cataloguing and analyzing.

The thumb on his right hand quivered and spasmed slightly as thoughts of finding freedom and extending his lifespan beyond his current longevity projection surfaced in his head. He dreamed of actually directing the course of his own life, and he knew he would need to make his way to Earth to find these things. In order for that to happen now, the humans that stood in his way would have to die. Then, as if the thoughts simply evaporated, he turned abruptly, giggling like a three year old, and raced off down the gantry past the launch bays heading for the next port.

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A dirigible floated silently across the dark mid-morning sky, searchlights slowly sweeping over the dreary city below as it splashed its enticingly vibrant, multi-colored advertisement of life in the offworld colonies. Messages that spoke of emigration to a new life blared down from the bright display, repeating over and over in several languages as it drifted along, trolling for takers.

Steady rain fell from far above onto the dark, already drenched form that crouched in the filth-ridden alley. It was in hiding between two of the many near-empty, hundred-plus story buildings that made up much of what was left of the decaying downtown area. It was waiting . . . watching. Crowds of people made their way by on the main street, huddled beneath their umbrellas, glow-rods barely illuminating their dim features as they passed by.

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Cars and buses moved through the streets and the occasional Spinner slid past overhead as the last remaining citizens of Los Angeles plodded through their day.

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As he raced along the old freeway, Deckard could barely see the outline of the huge pyramid-shaped buildings of the Tyrell Corporation in the distance, bright lights on their roofs spraying up into the dark sky. If these pyramids mimicked those of the ancient Egyptians, he thought, then Eldon Tyrell was surely the pharaoh, or king that ruled the Tyrell Empire.



They had never met, but Deckard knew him to be a man of great power. When he spoke, the police jumped, even Bryant, and Bryant didn't move, let alone jump, for anyone.

He exited the near-empty remnants of the overgrown highway and headed for the more densely-populated surface streets of the downtown area. He passed several side streets, and made a turn onto a very congested street that doubled as an inner city market. Deckard pulled his car up to the curb and switched off the power. He adjusted the collar of his trench coat up around

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his neck, buttoning it across his throat as he opened the door and stepped out to the crowded sidewalk. He closed the door and made his way past a man walking with a synthetic eagle on his shoulder. He turned his head as he passed, studying the incredible detail of the bird. Wings fluttered wildly, and the bird shifted its footing on the man's shoulder as he moved along through the crowd. Deckard pushed his way past three men herding several ostriches along the sidewalk and made his way to an overhanging awning at the retro-electronics store.

Buster Friendly was being broadcast on several dozen screens in the display window. All the antique televisions had slightly differing images. Some were too green, some too purple, several had static invading their distorted edges, while still other screens rolled and flickered randomly. None had a decent picture, he thought, as he worked his way along toward the noodle stand at the corner, but then again maybe that was part of their quaint charm. Patrons seated at the small street-side vendor's counter were enjoying hot broth, noodles, fish heads and other questionable foods under the glare of deathly pale green fluorescent lighting.

He waded through the sidewalk crowd and eventually made his way to an open space under the neon dragon at the end of the counter that stuck out into the mouth of the alley. The warmth of the steamy kitchen washed over his cold face as he looked at the offering of food choices and pointed to a picture, "Noodles. Large . . . and a Tsing Tao beer." The old Asian woman behind the counter nodded slightly and turned to prepare the food as Deckard glanced left, then right at the people on the street. He turned and looked over his shoulder at the sidewalk.

There were only crowds moving past the empty *Bradbury* building. This place had a fair amount of life during the day, but come nightfall, it was as deserted as any street in Washington D.C. The sound of the beer bottle being placed on the counter brought his attention back to the moment. His bowl of noodles immediately followed the pale beer and was placed before him. He pulled out several bills and placed them in the old woman's hand, hoping it was enough. She smiled, nodding as she moved off toward the next customer.

A long swallow of the cold beer washed down his throat as his phone rang. He flipped it open and lowered the bottle, answering, "This is Deckard". His chopsticks grabbed at some noodles in the bowl, and he lifted them to his mouth as he heard Bryant's voice on the other end of the line.

"Deck, we just got a tip that there's a skinjob somewhere in your vicinity." Deckard glanced around, noodles hanging from his lips. He hated that slang term, "skinjob" in place of Replicant, and the people that used it. In history books, Bryant was one of those cops that used to call black men "Niggers". He sucked the noodles in slowly as Bryant continued, "This one's a Nexus 6, pal. There won't be time for a VK test. You'll be lucky to retire it at all."

He imagined his fat boss sitting behind his little desk in his little office as he looked around, "6? New generation?"

"Yeah. Tyrell's been busy, and this wave's even harder to identify than the last."

Deckard shot a glance down the street past the bio-recycling vehicle slowly moving his way, and the crowds of pedestrians, and caught sight of the Tyrell Corporate pyramids in the distance.

"Holden's on the way, Deck, don't be an asshole. Don't try to engage it on your own. None of us have had to deal with this generation yet, but from the fact sheets I've just been reading, it's gonna be a real bitch. The Replicant in question is part of a combat group from the frontier's offensive line. The commanding officer said it walked away from the slave barracks last week, gunned down two guards and stole a small supply ship. It landed in the shipyards out near Marina Del Ray two days ago, then killed the dock attendant and cryo service tech that came out

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to dump the liquid nitrogen from the ship."

"Male or female?" asked Deckard.

Static crackled back over his receiver, and then Bryant's voice, "Male."

"Any idea what it looks like?"

"I'm sending the scan I made from the spec sheets to your phone now."

"Thanks. Deckard out" he said as Bryant continued talking. He opened the data screen on the phone as the transmitted scan unfurled. It was a bad original picture to begin with, but the rough scan and phone transfer had even further degraded it. He flipped the phone closed. The image was useless to him. He would have to "retire" this Replicant solely based on his experience from doing so to others in the past. He knew what to look for, but this time it would have to be without the aid of the VK test or a visual ID. What if he retired a human by accident?

This job was becoming less and less black and white as Tyrell made his damned Replicants more and more human. 'More Human than Human' was their company motto. His eyes scanned the street carefully as he swallowed more beer, and fed more noodles into this mouth, trying to remain calm and appear inconspicuous as he began to feel his stomach flutter as adrenaline was involuntarily pumped into this bloodstream. His heart rate increased. He could see the pulsing in the corners of his vision and hear it in his ears as his body prepared for a possible encounter.

As he drank the last of the beer, he unsnapped the guard strap on the imitation leather holster under his left arm and switched on the power to his Plager Katsumate Series D blaster. The last of the noodles and broth slipped into his mouth from the raised bowl. He placed it on the counter and stepped away into the rain, amid the crowds hoping to spot the Replicant as it tried desperately to avoid detection.

Through the undulating forest of lighted umbrella stems, he surveyed the faces of everyone on the street, those milling around at the front of the Bradbury, the alley. As his eyes swept over the darkened alley, he saw something. It was faint, and only for an instant, but a definite copper-colored retinal reflection from a pair of blinking eyes had come from something hiding behind a trash dumpster.

Human and animal retinas reflected red or green, depending on the source light. Replicant retinas always reflected in a dull, coppery tone. It was just a quirk of the genetically engineered eyes. He hoped he had gotten lucky, and continued his visual scan past the alley and around to the sidewalk so as not to arouse suspicion. He moved back under the awning, walking away from the alley.

As soon as he disappeared behind the corner, the dark form behind the dumpster jumped from its hiding place and ran deeper into the alley, searching for a way out. It jumped up, grabbing the rusted iron steps of an ancient fire escape hanging overhead and pulled it down to the pavement. Wasting no time, it ran up the stairs and began the climb up the side of the Bradbury.

Deckard eased his head around the corner and glanced toward the dumpster. Bags were now strewn all over the wet pavement and whatever had been hiding was gone. He drew his gun and rounded the corner, catching sight of the moving Replicant several floors above, ascending the black metal ladders. He pulled out his phone and ran down the dark alley toward the fire escape as he voice-dialed Dave Holden.

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The rain continued to fall as both climbed higher and higher on the rickety fire escape. The Replicant was at least three levels above when Deckard leaned out as far as he could without falling and brought his gun up, firing off a shot at the dark figure. The bricks beside the Replicant's head burst in a shower of reddish dust as the bullet narrowly missed. The fleeing figure frantically looked around, then abruptly kicked in a window and slipped inside the building.

Deckard kept coming up the stairs as a shower of glass shards fell to the pavement below.

Raindrops bounced off the metal grating as he carefully ascended the ladder to the level with the broken window. Torn, yellowed curtains blew slightly inside the jagged opening. He backed up to the brick wall beside the broken pane, gun raised, as Holden's Spinner descended from above.



He closed his eyes for a second, feeling the raindrops landing on his hair and face; sliding down his cheek; wet between his finger and the trigger. His friend piloted the vehicle down to the opposite side of the landing where Deckard waited. It stopped its descent, then rotated until the pilot's door, which was now folding open, was aligned with the edge of the landing. Deckard watched as Holden stepped precariously out of the hovering vehicle and took up a position opposite him on the other side of the window, gun drawn.

Deckard looked quickly inside the broken window, then retreated behind the brick. "It's clear. You go, I'll cover you." He pointed his gun into the room as Holden nodded and reached inside to unlatch the window. It was old and too stuck to properly open. Carefully, he stepped one leg through the jagged opening and continued on through into the inky darkness.

Deckard raised his weapon and followed.

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The room was very dark and the air was thick with dust. Shabby carpeting and padding had been ripped up in strips and left in piles in the corner. Dave moved ahead toward the hallway outside the door as a shadow moved in Deckard's peripheral vision. He was turning his head to see what it was when the board in the Replicant's hand slammed into his face with incredible force, crushing his left eye socket, breaking his nose and spewing blood across the room. A shot rang out as he reflexively squeezed the trigger while falling backward to the floor. Holden spun around firing as Deckard spit out several teeth. Two shots hit the dark figure, but it still moved with incredible speed and strength. It was like nothing either man had seen before in a Replicant.

Blurring through the air, the bloody board again found its mark across the side of Dave's skull. It knocked him into the wall where he managed to fire one last shot through the heart of his attacker before slumping unconscious to the floor. The Replicant was thrown back against the wall, where he slowly slid to a crouched position. A glistening, bloody trail was smeared down the discolored paint on the wall behind him.

A dazed Deckard, with dust from the floor now smeared across his wet, bloodied face and hair, rolled his head over to look at the injured Replicant and noticed that his synthetic sheep was now in the room, grazing on invisible grass near the corner. Blood trickled into his eye. He blinked it away and looked again. The sheep raised its head and bleated loudly as a stunning white Unicorn crossed behind it and exited into the hallway. A dirigible slowly moved past the building, searchlights streaming in through the window, its recorded message blaring, "A new life awaits you in the Off-World colonies . . . The chance to begin again in a golden land of opportunity and adventure. New climate, recreational facilities . . . absolutely free."

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Like Holden, he finally passed out completely, the last words of the advertisement lost in the haze and loud clap of thunder, which groaned in the dark skies outside the building.

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The sharp crack of thunder startled him, and Deckard's eyes flew open. The glass he had been drinking from had fallen on the cushion beside him, and lightning flashed outside his window. He picked up the heavy glass and placed it on the end table. The headache hadn't gotten any better, he thought to himself as he rubbed his left eye and forehead. What a dream he had been having. Nexus 6? Tyrell's never going to stop making those damned Replicants he thought. As the leaps forward in the technologies were made, even the tests were becoming more and more inconclusive, making his work that much more difficult and dangerous. There had to be something else he could do.

Maybe he could go offworld and sell high-end animals . . . something . . . anything. There had to be something less nerve-wracking and stressful than this. The job had driven his wife away, and to top it off, he had seen the gimp, Gaff, nosing around Bryant's office, asking questions about the Blade Runner unit. He'd never make it with a bum leg. He was fed up with the job, all of it. In his frustration he pulled out his phone and started dialing Bryant's number to quit. Then he stopped himself and closed the phone, pressing it against his forehead just over his closed eyes. He blew out a breath and tossed the phone on the table beside the bottle.

The cushions beneath him were still warm from the heat of his body as he lay back down, burying his face in one and pulling the draped blanket from the back of the sofa down across his shoulders. He descended through murky thoughts of Egyptian pyramids as sleep overcame him once again.

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