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Opening extract from

Blade: Running Scared

Written by

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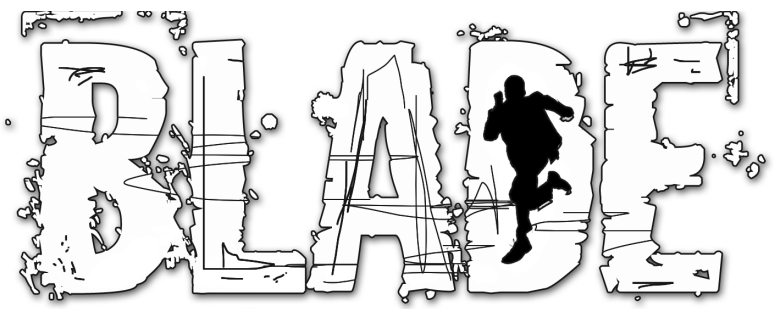
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tim bowler



RUNNING SCARED

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The night, the motorbike, the twisting lane. The beam from the headlights stabbing the dark. It might as well be stabbing me. Cos I'm dead all over again. I know it. I'm hurtling through blackness, perched on the back seat.

And I'm dead all over again.

I don't even know the rider. I heard his voice, caught his eyes under the helmet. That's all. But I know enough. I jumped on like he told me to. Right thing to do cos it got us past the grinks. But it's only putting death off for a bit.

Cos this guy's a grink too.

Trust me. I got too many enemies. And no friends. So work it out for yourself. This gobbo's trouble. Big trouble too, dangerous. You don't risk your neck like he did for nothing. He gritted it big time to get me away. So what does he want?

Whatever it is, Bigeyes, it'll be messy.

I'm guessing a contract job. I told you before there's different types of grinks. There's the ones who want me for stuff I know. Once they've tortured that out of me, they'll stiff me. And there's the ones who want me for stuff I've done. I'm hoping they'll just stiff me quick and sweet.

But I don't suppose I'll be that lucky.

I'm guessing this gobbo's one of the second kind. Sent by some spike from the past who's got a grudge against me. There's enough of 'em. I turned over too many slugs to have a quiet life. Maybe I turned over one of his crew. So he sent this gobbo to get me.

And now it's payback.

Going to be bad, Bigeyes, whatever happens. And I'm weak as piss now. Wound in my head's slamming me, body's blasted after all the chasing, and my mind's

stuffed after seeing Jaz and talking to Mary. What's left to fight another grink?

Not much. Maybe not anything.

But I still got some kind of a chance. That's why I jumped on the bike. This way there's just two of us. For the moment anyway. Won't be for long but right now it's him against me. Better odds than before. So I'm clinging on and hoping. He's got to stop some time.

And that's when I'll know what to do.

Fight or run.

Or both.

We're still moving fast. This is some machine, I'm telling you, and the gobbo's some rider. I'll give him that. I'm checking him best I can. Big guy, solid. More beef than your average dronk. Glance behind me.

Thought so.

Headlights coming after us. Only they're not motorbikes. They're cars. And there'll be more coming the other way in a minute. The grinks back there'll have mobiled their mates. Second wave, case I got through the first.

Like I just did.

So this motorbike gobbo's in trouble too, whatever

he wants from me. And he'll have to do something soon cos the motorway's just ahead, and there'll be a reception committee. Only wait a second . . .

He's switched off the lights and we're slowing down. We're still moving but there's darkness all around now. I don't like this. Can't see a thing hardly. Glance back.

Headlights getting bigger. They're racing after us but they're still some way off. Lights ahead of us too now, coming from the direction of the motorway. But we're still running through darkness.

Only now we're turning off the lane. We've slipped through an open gate—I can just make it out—and we're bumping down a track with a field to the left and a fence to the right. Peer at the rider.

He hasn't looked round once, hasn't checked to see what I'm doing or who's following. He's bent forward like he's been from the start, his helmet gleaming. But that's all the light that's coming from us now.

The bike's as dark as the night.

We're still bumping along the track, and now there's another gate in front, open too, and we're through that, and we're on another track, heading

towards some trees. Maybe that's it, Bigeyes. Maybe that's where his mates'll be waiting.

Where it all ends.

A club, knife, bullet. Cute little grave. No one'll find me if they do it right. Look behind me again. Lights flashing down the lane, both directions. None of 'em coming our way.

But they will. They'll know we haven't got as far as the motorway. They'll regroup and come looking. They'll search every gate and every field. Yeah, Bigeyes, they want me that bad. But I got other problems now.

Check round. Still too risky to jump off the bike. We're going slower but not so slow I won't hurt myself if I try and bunk it. Got to wait a bit longer. Track's come to an end but he's driving on. We're in among the trees, bouncing along, lights still off.

Then suddenly he pulls up.

We're in a little clearing. Nobody else around, nobody I can see anyway. I scramble off the bike, scuttle back a few steps. Guy glances round, climbs off, clicks the bike onto its stand. Stares at me through the slit in his helmet. Then he moves.

I edge back further, but not too far. Got to watch this gobbo every second. If he's working on his own, that's better for me but it's still bad. He's big and strong and I won't get away by running. Even if I wasn't weak, I couldn't outpace him.

Got to wait, watch, see what he wants.

He's stopped by the back of the bike but he's still looking this way. I'm watching him cute. There's something about this guy. I've only just noticed. Something in his manner. I've seen him before somewhere.

But I can't work out where.

We're both still now, both staring hard. Behind him, where the lane cuts towards the motorway, I catch the flash of headlights. I can't see the cars. They're hidden below the rise of the land. But I can see the beams. And this gobbo must know they're there too. But he's not looking at them. He's keeping his eyes on me.

I call over.

'You're either brave or stupid.'

He doesn't answer, just goes on staring at me. I peer through the darkness at the slit in his helmet. Can't make out his eyes from here but I got a sense of

'em. Maybe if I could see 'em better, I could work out where I've met him. But that means trigging closer and I'm not that big a dimp.

I nod towards the lane.

'They're going to want you now. Not just me.'

Again he doesn't answer. Just reaches out, opens the panier at the back of the bike and pulls out another helmet. Then, without warning, he flings it over. I don't try and catch it. Just let it land close to my feet, then bend down and pick it up. He closes the panier, steps in front of the bike, faces me across the clearing.

'What do you want?' I say.

He nods to the helmet in my hands.

'Put it on. You need to look legal.'

And then I get it. The voice. It wasn't enough before, when he told me to get on the bike. It was gruff and hurried and there wasn't time to think. But now it's different. Just those few words, but I can hear the drawl. And I know who it is.

He doesn't need to do any more. But he does anyway. He pulls off his helmet and let's me see his face.

It's Dig.

* * *

Dead Trixi's brother. Twenty years old and tough as two men. The guy who sliced my head with his knife. And there it is again. He's pulled it out. The blade looks even bigger than it did when he slashed me. Maybe it's still got my blood on it.

I reach in my pocket, feel for Scumbo's knife.

It's there, ready.

Only I can't pull it out. It's no good, Bigeyes. I got those feelings back, like I had with Paddy, and that other grink. Only it's worse now. I can't even pull the knife out. If Dig throws his, he's got a free plug.

And he does. He throws it.

I watch it skin the dark as it streaks towards me. Don't know why I haven't moved. Maybe I want it to slam me. But it doesn't. It dips at the last moment and stabs into the grass between my feet.

I look down at it, then up at Dig.

He didn't miss. He aimed it there. He could have slotted me easy. I'm near enough. But he didn't. Why not? I already know, Bigeyes. It's cos he's confident I can't hurt him back. Even with his own knife.

I lean down, pick it up, study it. One mean blade. No wonder I got hurt when he slit me. Heavy too, much heavier than Trixi's flick-knife, or the one in my pocket. Once upon a time I'd have liked this shit. Squeeze my hand round it, look at Dig, size him up. Move my arm back.

He stiffens.

I hold still. I want to see him scared. He owes me that. But he doesn't flinch. Just watches me for a moment, checks me over, then settles his body, lounges, waits. He's got bottle. I'll give him that. I hate the guy but he's crack-hard.

I take a step towards him. He stiffens again. Now he's not sure. Now I've got him. But still he won't move. I want him to step back, step aside, something. But he doesn't. Just waits like before, watching me in the darkness. Then he speaks, same low drawl.

'You ain't going to do it.'

I take another step forward. Still he doesn't move. I wait, watching him. I'm so close now I could hit him blind. He gives me the drawl again.

'You ain't going to do it. And you know it.'

I got pictures flooding my head again, and they're

all faces. Paddy's face, and the scumbo in the hospital, and those two grinks I saw on the old dunny's staircase. All mocking me the same way. Cos I can't do it any more.

Can't kill.

And now Dig's face. How come he knows? Is it the grinks? Did they tell him? Or is it just me, standing here, showing it in my face? We're close enough now. He can see my eyes dead clear. Just as I can see his. Dead clear.

They're watching me cute, but they're quiet eyes, relaxed eyes. Not scared at all. I drop the helmet to the ground, whip the knife right back over my shoulder. Still he doesn't flinch. Still the eyes go on watching me. Then he shakes his head.

'Ain't going to happen. Cos you ain't standing much longer.'

He's right, Bigeyes. I'm swaying on my feet and the world's spinning again. I got pain blacking me over, and fear, and exhaustion. And there's more pictures splitting my head—sweet Becky, her dead face peering up, and all the others, the faces I can't bear to see. The faces that never go away.

And Dig's among them, watching.

I feel myself drop the knife. The faces start whirling, the blackness deepens. I don't remember falling, just waking up, I don't know how much later. I'm staring into Dig's face. He's holding me and I hate it.

'Let go,' I mutter.

He doesn't. I scream at him.

'Let go! Let go!'

I got new pictures flashing, pictures from the past, pictures that freak my heart.

'Let go! Let go! Let go!'

He still goes on holding me. I spit into his face. He twists his head away, carries me over to the motorbike, dumps me on the passenger seat, wipes the gob off with his sleeve. I glare at him but I'm losing it again. I'm upright, sort of, but my head's still spinning and I can feel the blacko creeping back.

Dig speaks.

'Blade.'

His voice has turned into mist.

'You got to hold on,' he says. 'Got to stay conscious, you understand? Cos we got to start riding again. And if you lose it, you'll fall off.'

I can't see him at all now. I feel something over my head. The helmet, he's putting it on me. Now my hands. He's grabbed hold of 'em.

'Don't touch me,' I say.

He takes no notice, moves my hands behind me, closes the fingers round something cold.

'It's the bike rack,' he says. 'Hold onto it.'

I grip the rack.

'Now your feet,' he says.

'Don't touch 'em. I know where they go.'

Again he takes no notice. Just plants my feet, climbs on in front of me, speaks again.

'Don't let go, boy. Or you're dead.'

He pauses, like he's waiting for me to say something. But I can't speak, Bigeyes. I can't even think. I'm losing everything. I got a little bit left in me. Maybe enough to hang on, maybe not. I don't really care now.

I just want him to ride.

Somewhere, anywhere.

Doesn't matter where it is now. Or what he wants from me.

'Ride,' I mutter.

He starts the engine. It brays like a monster. I can't

believe the grinks on the lane won't have heard it. But he's not heading their way. Even in this state, I can tell that. He's kicked off the stand and we're bumping on through the trees, lights still off.

I don't know where he's going, Bigeyes.

And you know what? I don't give two bells.

My eyes are closing and it's like I'm gone. I'm not Blade. I'm not a fourteen-year-old kid clinging to the back of a motorbike. I'm not anyone. I'm just a thought moving through darkness.

I like that.

A thought moving through darkness.

The world's gone, life's gone. Blade's gone.

I just hope he never comes back.

But he does. Course he does, damn the bastard. He's like a curse. Even as I flake, I feel him hovering. Like you, Bigeyes—hovering. And there's others too. And I'm not talking about Dig.

Something's happened. There's more nebs round me. Bike's gone. Don't know where. I remember the trees but that's it. Don't remember the journey after

that or getting off. Just know I'm somewhere else, it's dark in my head, and I can't move.

And I'm scared.

I can hear voices but no words. And something else, kind of a drone. Keep thinking I should know what it is. But my head's bombed and my thoughts are sprung. They got no shape, no sense.

Like me.

Then a word. Clear as sky. And someone's speaking it.

'Jaz.'

And now a picture. The little girl's face. She's looking at me with those fairy eyes. Not smiling or crying, not telling me it's all right. Just watching. I don't know if she's real or in my head. Voice comes again.

'Jaz.'

It's not Jaz talking. It's some girl, older. I'm getting more pictures now. I'm starting to remember. I'm guessing where I am and who I'm with. But I still can't see 'em. All I got is Jaz. But that's OK. Cos she's all I want.

I try and speak.

'Jaz, I'm sorry, baby.'

She doesn't answer. Don't know if she heard. The other voice comes back.

'Jaz, come on.'

Jaz disappears and all I got is darkness again, and the blur of voices, and the drone in the background. I know what it is now. I know what's happening. I'm in a van. And Blade's still here, locked inside me. He'll never go away, Bigeyes, no matter how much I want him to.

Think I'm losing it again, going blacko like before. I can feel it swimming over me. And I want it now. I want to forget again. For a while I wasn't me and it was plum. The black tide washes in, sweeps me away, rolls me up.

But not for long.

I'm soon back, dumped where I was, like a piece of driftwood. And that's how it feels now. I'm floating. I go with the current. I got no control over anything. And I know the nebs I'm with, even if I can't see 'em. Engine's getting louder, and now there's other sounds.

Sirens.

Must be porkers everywhere. All these murders in the city. Maybe the sirens'll help a bit, keep the grinks

back. Getting louder, one of 'em. Louder, louder, louder. Dead close now, blaring over us, and light from the headlamps flooding the van.

Sound of voices nearby. I recognize 'em good this time.

The trolls talking.

'They're getting too close.'

'Might not be after us.'

'They is.'

'Might be turning off.'

'They ain't. They're checking us out.'

Another voice, a guy in the front.

'They're turning off.'

And the light fades away, taking the siren with it.

Something's touching my head, dabbing at me, something soft. Doesn't feel like a hand but I can't make it out.

'Stay still.'

Tammy's voice. No missing that. She's taken over as leader, now Trixi's dead. Don't ask me how I know. Sash won't like it. Nor will Xen and Kat. But they won't challenge her. She was always the strongest after Trixi.

Not that any of that's going to help me. Trolls are

trolls and this crew's always hated me. If they're patching me up, it's only so I'm fit for something worse.

'Stay still,' says Tammy.

I didn't know I was moving.

'Open your eyes,' she says.

Didn't know they were closed either. I open 'em. Still blackness all around me. No faces, just shapes. Then one, clear. Not Tammy or any of the other trolls. It's Jaz again. And she's real. She's right next to me.

'Jaz,' I whisper.

I can feel my mind splitting again and the blacko coming back. Got to keep it away. Got to keep my eyes on Jaz. She reaches out, pats at my forehead, and then I know what's been dabbing me. She's holding an old sweater. Tammy's voice again.

'Your wound's bleeding.'

And now her troll-face, glaring down. I always hated it. Spitty eyes, no friends of mine. She looks me over, growls.

'Keep still.'

Glances at Jaz.

'Give me the thing.'

Jaz hands her the sweater. Tammy nods towards the front of the van.

'Go back and sit with Riff.'

Jaz disappears. I close my eyes, feel the sweater on my brow again.

'You should be dead,' says Tammy.

'Why aren't I?'

'Good question.'

Yeah, Bigeyes, good question. She's right. I should be dead. Breaking free should have cost me my life. But maybe it has. Maybe the next blacko'll be it. The one I don't come back from.

I thought I was dead before. In the ambulance, in the hospital, in Scumbo's black arms. And then later—on the rooftops, in the streets, running, running. But how long can you run when you're hurt that bad?

Cos I was, and I still am. I know that.

'Bleeding's gross,' says Tammy.

I don't answer. She's not talking to me anyway.

'Tam?' says Sash.

'What?'

'Can't you stop it?'

'I'm trying, aren't I?'

'I was just asking.'

'You wasn't. You was telling me I'm doing a shit job.'

'Hey!' calls Riff from the front of the van. 'Shut it, you two!'

'You shut it,' says Tammy.

'You babes are always rowing.'

'So what?'

'So don't,' says Riff. 'You know Dig hates it.'

'Well, he ain't here, is he?' says Tammy. 'So piss off!'

Riff says no more. Sash speaks, low voice.

'Bleeding's getting worse.'

No answer from Tammy, just the feel of the sweater again, and the blood flowing down my face. The sirens seem far away now. I can still hear 'em but they're like voices from another world. Here comes the blacko again.

At last.

Come on, mate. Fold me up. I've had enough of this. And I don't mean the trolls slugging, or the pain, or the stuff they got waiting for me. I mean everything. Every thing. Let the blood flow all it wants.

Cos you know what, Bigeyes? I owe it. Too right I

do. I owe more blood than I got in my body. Maybe if it all drains away, I'll have given something back. Not enough for what I owe. Not by a long way. But maybe enough to get a bit of peace.

And there's something else too.

I'll be dead.

And you don't get more peaceful than that.

Light. Consciousness. A new movement. A new kind of fear.

I'm on water.

I can tell. I'm alive and I'm on water. Wound's stopped bleeding but something else is running down my cheek. It's sweat. Got my eyes wide open but all I can see is a blur. Light's clear but nothing else is. Just the feeling of water.

And my fear of it.

'Drowning.'

I'm murmuring. I can hear my own voice. Doesn't sound like me. Sounds like some dungpot with his head banged in. But it is me. I know it. More sweat. I can feel the beads on my neck now.