

The Riddler

I kicked at the mound of dust that I had been scraping into a pile with my feet as I waited for Ryan to catch up to me. I twitched as I heard the sound of sirens in the not too far distance coming closer with each high pitched wail.

“Hurry up slow poke or we may as well handcuff each other and give ourselves o’er to the Pigs right now.” My words induced the expected burst of energy and my little brother finally caught up to me.

“You...ran...so...fast,” he panted trying to catch his breath as I hauled him along the back alley keeping a sharp look out for Riddlers.

“I only let you come along because you promised that you would be able to keep up. If I had known that you were telling falsies I’dve left you back at The Court with The Gov’ner.” A stricken look passed over Ryan’s face at the mention of our boss and sponsor Jared ‘The Gov’ner’ Millsey. Ryan was scared silly of the 30-something-year-old crook and with good reason, Jared was a Riddler and not one that thought themselves a hero, no, Jared was rotten-to-the-core-evil and he used Orphies like us to do his dirty work.

“Psst.” A hiss seemed to come out of the wall behind us and it rippled slightly. “Get over hear you idiots before someone sees you running.”

“Blender, I didn’t see you there.” I casually pulled Ryan towards to voice I knew belonged to Cory, another Riddler, but he was also an Orphie like us. He worked for Jared too, his job was to make the get away clean by shielding us from view. I felt a hand grab my arm and I watched as my body slowly faded invisible as Blender concentrated on blending me and Ryan in with the background. Not a moment later a pair of uniformed policemen ran passed us, casting their gaze about for anyone in hiding behind the rubbish bins and doorways.

“Did, you have to bring Twitcher?” Blender complained as he released us from his grip causing us to pop back into view. “It’s so much harder when there are two of you.”

“The Gov’ner thought it was time that Twitcher learnt the trade that keeps us fed and safe, so I brought him along to show him the ropes.”

“Yer? What was it this time, theft, kidnapping, murder?”

“Come on Blender, you know I only Hack these days, I’m the best Cyber The Gov’ner’s got. Not to mention he only sends Riddlers to do the other kind of big jobs.”

Blender frowned at the two of us before realisation spread over his face.

“That’s right. I forget that yous two are plain as Jane and not Riddler’s like the rest o’ us.” He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. “Wanta change that Twitcher?”

Ryan made a move to pluck one of the long thin sticks from the box but I smacked his hand back.

“Don’t you dare!”

“Aw but Bethie.”

“You know I’d never let you do that.” I stared him down until he nodded and then whirled around to face Blender. “And you should know better than to offer! You know the reason why I swore we’d never be Riddlers.”

“Aw come off it Bethie, when are you going to get over that.”

“Get over it? It was because of brainless drop-kick Riddlers like you that we are Orphies! If everyone stopped trying to mess with the natural way of things then my parents would never have died!” Ryan gasped and looked back and forth between Blender and me nervously, Ryan knew my hatred for Riddlers but I hardly ever expressed it in public, it was too risky. Blender placed a hand on my arm but I jerked it off.

“You know I wasn’t a Junkie before I turned.”

I sniffed and turned away, not letting either of them see the tears that had pooled in my eyes. Today was the tenth anniversary of my parent’s death. It didn’t affect Ryan as much since he was only a baby when they died but I had been eight and I can still remember all the happy times.

“Find your own way back,” I muttered to Ryan and I stalked off leaving behind my brother and Blender to make the report to Jared without me. Once I turned the corner and was out of their sight I ran until I found a ladder and then I climbed up the side of the alley way until I was on top of the roof of a lower level building. Around me were the roof tops of all the low-rise buildings and also the open air gardens from the skyscrapers that kept on going up before disappearing into the dense smog above. I checked my filter readout that hung on a cord around my neck 4.9 not too bad, I’d have to ask Jared for a replacement cartridge soon. It would mean a week on meds because of the surgery but after today’s success, I think I would be able to wheedle it out of him. I cursed the smog and all it represented, I focus most of my contempt on Dr Orgau and his discovery that led to all of this.

It had been a little over 10 years ago, the world was on the brink of eco-sustainability, renewable energy was clean and efficient, everything was recyclable and we were making sufficient ground in treating fatal illnesses, that was until Dr Orgau revealed the findings of his 20 year long project. Dr Orgau had been monitoring and studying cancer patients to see how cancer formed and adapted so we could make a vaccination for it. What he had found had shocked the world. Cancer caused superpowers.

At least that is what the headlines had screamed from every newsblog and live feed. Somehow for no particular reason, the cancer cells in some patients would mutate so much that they would re-write the patients DNA and give them special abilities, abilities that my dad said they

should never be allowed to have. After the news broke hordes of people went out and bought cigarettes, or wine, or anything they could think of that would give them cancer. The smog was actually all the smoke that the Junkies blew out on a daily basis as they tried their hardest to get cancer.

They completely ignored the fact that it was only in 0.03% of cases that these mutations led to powers. The masses, so fuelled by their hungry lust for power over each other, dropped like flies. Most of them dying slow horrific deaths that were long and drawn out. But those few, those 3 in every 10,000 who survived and gained powers kept the spark alive for the power hungry. Those odds were the only reason Jared maintained the filters that Ryan and I wore and let us off smoking. He didn't want to risk his best Cyber becoming a Riddler on such slim odds, even if it did mean that at times I was more a liability than an asset.

Riddlers were what the survivors were called, as their bodies were riddled with cancer. It was cancer that kept their powers working, once they underwent treatment to kill the cancer, they lost their powers.

Mum and dad had died from cancer, they weren't Junkies, they were too smart for that but unfortunately everyone around them was stupid and they got cancer of the lungs from passively inhaling everyone else's fumes. They were the ones that had invented the filters after they had discovered that they had gotten sick from other people's smoking. Ryan and I had been among the first to have them implanted, they were surgically attached to a ring in the back of our mouths and they filtered the air that we breathed in. They lasted for a few years before the filters had to be surgically replaced. They came with a read out that spoke to them wirelessly so you would know how well they were working. 0 meant that they were fully operational and 5 meant that they needed to be replaced as they were no longer filtering properly.

A faint breeze ruffled my hair and I knew that I had company, there were no breezes anymore, the world's obsession with cancer had caused all of the hard work on our environment to go down the drain.

"Not today Liam." I sighed at the breeze playfully tugging at my clothes and I slowly felt it solidify as it brushed across the back of my neck.

"Why not?" Came the reply from a voice that moved from a whisper to a deep rumble as it spoke. Next to me the body of a man formed seemingly out of nowhere.

I didn't reply, but just sat there basking in his calming presence. "The Central Tower are on alert from a terrorist attack on their mainframe. Was that you?"

The question came in a half mocking, half disappointed tone as Liam went back to playing with my hair.

“What do you think?”

“I think Jared doesn’t give you the credit you deserve.”

I looked at the expression on his face and read the sadness and disappointment there.

“No, you think I don’t belong with Jared and want me to leave my brother behind while I run off with you.”

Liam tensed beside me as I spat out the truth, he had been seeking me out for years trying to get me to join him and his band of Riddlers. They were a small group of five that went around the globe trying to do some good with the lot they had been given. While Liam was keen for me to join them, he said that it was too dangerous for me to bring Ryan with us. I would not leave my brother, especially in the hands of Jared, I was the only reason that Ryan wasn’t a Junkie, it was my services in exchange for our health.

“You know your skills aren’t the only reason I want you to join us.”

Liam’s voice was silky smooth as he altered it to try and coerce me.

“And *you* know that I would never leave my brother, not while there is breath in my body.” I turned my face away from Liam and looked towards the central cluster of towers that rose out of the city ominously. Liam sighed and I slowly felt his presence fade from my side.

“Ask Jared about Ryan’s tests...” He whispered in my ear as he left.

“Tests?” I tried to grab Liam so he could answer my questions but it was too late and he was gone.

I was furious. Was *everyone* going to toy with me today? First Jared had to threaten me with the removal of our filters to get me to do a Hack that was against everything I stood for, then Blender tried to get my brother to smoke, right in front of me and now Liam was messing with my head. I just wanted to scream.

I made my way back to The Court making as much noise and mess as possible, letting all my feelings out on the rubbish bins and stray cats. When I finally got back, just as sunset was leaking over the city, Jared was waiting for me, a frown on his jagged face.

“Now Bethie, you know I don’t like it when you treat me this way.” His oily voice was a dangerous warning but I was too emotional to take notice.

“What do you want? I did the job and got away, no one can trace it to us.” I didn’t look at him which made him even more irate.

“I’m talking about you treating me as if I’m just another Riddler you despise rather than the saviour that I am.”

I laughed a short laugh that was more a bark than anything else.

"Whatever, *Gov'ner*." I moved to push past him and into The Court but he shoved me back all pretence lost.

"Now listen 'ere missy! I don't care who you are, or how good you are Riddler or no. You will respect me and you will follow the same rules as everybody else!"

"Rules! Don't talk to me about rules! What tests have you been making Ryan take?" Jared knew that I would never let him run any kind of test on my brother, at least not without my knowledge, presence and permission. I saw the look of frustration cross his face as he saw the determination for answers in my eyes. He sighed.

"Don't get mad Bethie, I was just doing what's good for the boy."

"What have you done to my brother?" I ground out, trying to keep control over the emotions churning in my gut. I could feel the heat rising.

"Yours and your brother's filters stopped working a long time ago Bethie, I didn't tell you because I knew you would stop workin' for me and I couldn't have that. So I just falseied them so you wouldn't know any better."

The blood drained from my face and I felt faint as what he was telling me registered in my brain, all that time I had thought us safe we had been breathing in the smoke and muck that was floating all around us from the Junkies in The Court. I looked at Jared willing the wretched man to go on, dreading the rest of his answer.

"Ryan knew that it stopped working, one of my men let it slip while he was around and I had to promise to let him smoke ciggies so that he wouldn't tell you."

"No, he would never--"

"He want's to be a Riddler Bethie, just like you."

"I'm not one of those vile creatures!" I shrieked. "What have you done to my brother? Tell me Jared or so help me I will leave now and you will never be able to use me again."

"He's a Riddler, through and through. He's a Reader."

"No..." My head pounded almost as hard as my heart, Ryan had cancer, all through his body. One thing that they didn't like to mention, the Riddlers and normal people alike, is that the cancer still kills you, slowly over time the mutation spreads and takes over until all that you are is your power. Liam was in the final stages, he used to just be able to control the wind, now he was the wind, though at present he could still have a solid body, soon he would be just a breeze. Blender was starting to experience it too. It was becoming harder and harder for him to turn himself back to normal, eventually one day he would just blend right into the background and never come back out again. Being a Reader is the worst, you start out being able to read thoughts and emotions until it

consumes you so fully that you lose who you are among the millions of thoughts that you hear around you. Most readers kill themselves and now my brother would share that fate.

“No, you promised. You promised to keep us normal.”

The look of sadness in Jared’s eyes was so genuine and out of place that I choked up and couldn’t utter another word.

“Bethie, it’s not just Ryan, you’ve been a Riddler since I met you, you just don’t remember.”

“How?”

“When you came to us, you were a Riddler, a Cyber Riddler, one of the best and you promised to work for me in exchange for your brother’s care. You’d been a Riddler for so long already that it was only 2 years after you joined that you noticed the change. The first thing you noticed was that you never bled anymore, then organs started to become chips and boards and finally you became fully Cyborg. A job went wrong and wiped your memory, you went back to thinking that you were normal, we had to get another Cyber to write some memories for you, so you wouldn’t run off.” Jared trailed off and shrugged his shoulders but I took no more notice of him, he must have seen the look on my face because he stretched out to grab me but it was too late, I was gone. My feet pounded down the roads and alleyways, I was single-minded in my mission. If I was going to succumb to this disease then I would make my last act one that would make Dr Orgau and every other Junkie regret everything they had ever done in their pursuit of power.

I found myself back where I had been this morning, gazing up at The Central Tower, the building that contained the servers for the Global Government’s systems. This morning I had been here to plant a worm, but now I was back to plant so much more. I stretched my conscious out as I had heard other Cyber’s did and found myself connecting wirelessly with the mainframe. Overriding security protocols like they were nothing but thoughts, I allowed myself access to the building and made my way to the server room. Once inside I scanned the nest of terminals and screens to find the best point of access. I found a giant server that was hooked up to the system by a bunch of cables and pulled off the side of the case. Slowly I found myself breaking down and attaching my parts to the terminal. Piece by piece I broke off limbs and body parts until I was fully integrated into the system, they would never detect me, I would be just a series of zeros and ones that would flit through the cyber world destroying those who destroyed my family. My last thought was that of Ryan.

‘I hope his end is as quick as mine.’

Then I was gone, into the system a ghost file, a virus a vigilante that would plague humanity till the end. *The Riddler.*