

1. The Twisted Strands

I'd almost forgotten that I'd arranged to meet her. But as soon as I saw a beautiful girl pushing open the door, I remembered I'd told her where I hang out. Francis, the owner, often let me sit here in the Twisted Strands, a back-street café for losers, nursing the same drink for hours.

She shook off the street as she paused in the doorway, trying to spot me in the shadows. Compared to everyone else in the place she stood out like a sixth finger. Way too beautiful - Oriental eyes - designer clothes - a sense of style. Watching her, I felt in my genes that something was going to change. A rush in my circuits that said 'opportunity knocks'.

But I was scared of change. Change was not my friend.

Before I could compose myself she'd sat down opposite, and was trying to peer under my hood.

"Johnny Online?"

I grunted through my speakers.

"Am I late?"

"I wasn't keeping track of the time." I could see her getting used to the sound of my electronic voice and my 'face'. "It's ok to stare," I said. "I'm used to it."

"I'm sorry," she blushed. "I'm a bit nervous. I've never met anyone I've chatted to online before. Papa told me never to. But this is an emergency."

"So you said," I replied, putting a flashing exclamation mark icon on my monitor that reflected off her own face. I observed her confusion in its light; it was one of a number of reactions people have to the way I look. "Why not buy me another coffee and tell me all about it?"

She went to place an order. Francis handed her an all day breakfast - juice, sausage, egg, toast - which she came back with and placed in front of me.

Too bad I couldn't eat it. I took out my flask, poured the juice in, connected my tube and began to suck it down. She didn't gawp like some.

"Don't worry" she said, "I'm used to it."

"Oh yeah?" I asked.

"See?" She gave me a quick flash of her left arm, slipping back the sleeve of her Gucci coat to reveal a mobile phone emerging from her hand. "I'm like

you. Except I'm a Blue -"

Now she let me see her transition point: the way the flesh changed colour, texture and substance where her hand stopped being a hand. "OK," I nodded. "I've seen a few of that type." I was suddenly sad for her. "Problem when you want to upgrade to a newer model, isn't it?"

She bit her lip.

"Sorry. Tact isn't my best feature." I tried to put a reassuring smile on my monitor.

She began to tuck into the breakfast she'd bought me. "Look, I'm trusting you, just by being here. And you can trust me, so relax, Johnny. It's not as if I'm a Gene Police agent or anything. You know my name - Kestrella. It's French after my mother. Gosh, your own point looks bad."

She'd been staring at where the monitor came out of my head. I pulled my hood forwards.

"I don't have a mother," I blurted.

"But everyone has a mother!" she cried.

"Mine did a runner. When she saw what I'd become."

She put her pale little hand on my mittened grubby one. No one had done that for years.

I jerked away. "I don't want to let you down, but... I-I have to go now."

I hurried out onto the tired street. Beneath the orange lights I pulled my hoodie tight around me. Keeping my head down, I dodged the few pedestrians who were out, aware of her following me. I turned a corner onto the Walworth Road, my shoulders hunched. I was striding as fast as I could, but she was faster.

"We must fight this'," she panted as she drew alongside me. "The God of Pain is our god. We will unleash him onto those who deserve him more."

The words seemed strangely familiar. Then I realised she was quoting something I'd written back at me. "His creators?" I asked her, to check.

"That's right," she responded, smiling. "It's from your web site, isn't it? Hybrid Nation? See - I've done my homework." I stopped and put her face on close-up to see how earnest she was. So small. What kind of threat could she be either to me or to them? I was nearly 6 feet tall, but diminished by my stoop and by my charity shop rags. Kestrella, on the other hand, was tiny but like a fashion model. "How come you can afford these clothes?" I asked.

"Find out," she said.

“Give us a clue,” I protested. “I need something to go on.”

She told me a name. I began an internet search.

In the doorway, out of sight of passers-by, she read a new text on her mobile. Now I could clearly see where her transition occurred: the inflammation, raw like a weeping burn, and the strips of dead skin peeling off. It wasn't pleasant, but mine are worse.

I offered her my nearly used-up can of De-Morph, but she declined.

“I have one better,” she said. “From Papa.”

I examined the search results. She was Kestrella Chu, daughter of Sim Chu, Marketing Director for the pharmaceutical giant Mu-Tech. It was the same name as on the tube from which she was now squeezing ointment onto her crying skin. “Field testing a new product, huh? So does Daddy know about... uh...?”

“Naturally.” She fixed me with her eyes, big and brown, as if it was a challenge to my idea of reality. “But he chose not to give me up.”

“Hm,” I said. “A real live guinea-pig for him to experiment on in the comfort of his own home?”

She left the doorway. “You really are a horrible cynic, aren't you?” It was my turn to try to keep up with her as she sped back the way we'd come. “Did life make you this way or is that the real reason your parents walked out on you?”

I laughed for the first time in ages.

Running to keep up, the wind blew the hoodie off my head, revealing the monitor where my face should be. Two passers-by saw it - they recoiled in fright, turned tail and ran the other way. It's nice to be popular. I hurriedly pulled the hood well over my head and hoped they weren't off to call a Gene Police wagon.

“Look,” I was panting as I caught up with Kestrella. “I'm fifteen years old, I should be in school, or losing my virginity, binge drinking, skateboarding, or whatever it is boys my age do. But instead I've been living on the streets for two years, always on the lookout, trying to avoid things like that happening.” I jerked my head back, one hand tugging my hood down tight over my monitor. “It's not surprising if I'm lacking a few airs and graces.”

“You agreed to this rendezvous,” she fixed me with a gaze. “And I need your help.” She handed me her tube. I squeezed out a dollop of cream and gingerly applied some to the side of my head where it hurt most. It felt good.

I looked at her, and how soft she was.

I followed Kestrella to a chauffeur-driven Humvee with smokey windows. As we pulled away from the kerb and into the night she began to feed stuff into my tube I hadn't tasted in years. Swirls of vitamin-enhanced fruity smoothies skirled into my stomach. I gazed at this girl who had everything, including acceptance, wondering if she could really be trusted, and what on earth she could want from me.

There was a block of ice in my heart and I had to stop it melting.

2. Exit from Nowheresville

I watched Johnny with an amused smile as he reacted to being inside Papa's vehicle: the smell of upholstered leather made supple with nap oil, the luxury of the satin cushions, the fridge containing energy drinks laced with spirulina and ginseng root. In short, a womb of mercy.

I leaned forward. "Dominic," I told the driver. "We're going to see Cheri."

He steered north across the river. I told Johnny not to worry. No one could see us through the tinted windows.

To say he looked odd would be an understatement. With that giant hoodie over his head he looked like a rucksack containing a picture frame, a collection of right-angles concealed by brown folds. It was shocking at first to see someone with no face, and instead a flat screen just a few centimetres across. But I'd already got used to it. I felt sorry for him. I'd got off lightly by comparison.

I liked the way that as he had no face he used the monitor to display his feelings in an ironic, witty way. When he'd removed his tube from the third bottle, a bloated smiley face appeared on his monitor. I blew my own cheeks out and smiled back. I asked him if Johnny Online was his real name.

"No, it's something they gave me in a game when I was 11 and it stuck. I don't want to remember my real name. I'm not the same person anymore, know what I mean?" His voice was like a train announcement. He'd chosen

one that was neutral, mid-tone, with only slight inflection, perhaps deliberately to make himself like a robot. He continued: "When Creep hit I was 11 and I caught it when I was 12. I was 13 when I left home. I'm 15 now."

I nodded. "Me too. But what a terrible story. You're a Gray aren't you?"

He reached in the fridge again and started on a strawberry yogurt. I couldn't believe how hungry he was. I tried to see where the tube went - it seemed to disappear into his throat through a hole in his neck.

"It must be terrible being a Gray," I prompted.

"How would you know?" he said. "If you're a Blue, who's your minder?"

I tilted my head towards Dominic.

"Lucky girl," he said. "Well, being a Gray's probably better than being a Red. The Gene Police take 'em away and they're never seen again."

The streets passed by outside: Russell Square, Camden High Street, all quiet. Dominic pulled over to let by an armoured ambulance with its blue lights flashing. Johnny ducked instinctively.

"I do know I've lived a rather sheltered life," I began, hesitantly. For some reason I felt the need to apologise. "I can't begin to know what it's like to be homeless at our age."

I told him how I'd been protected by my parents' money and status, and until recently lived a life of careless indulgence. Then I too got the plague and began to find out how awful the world could be.

He listened to my story without comment. Then "Why pick me?" flashed on his screen with a picture of a blue face in a sea of yellow faces.

"I found your blog on the net. I-I thought you might be able to help me."

"Help you what? Find a cure?!" he snorted and flashed on his screen a cartoon of a detective with a giant magnifying glass, then smashed it with a hammer. I smiled.

"No, that's Papa's company's job. But I'll tell you later. First, we're going in here. Dominic?"

I'd timed it nicely. We were in West Hampstead, and the car pulled up opposite a rambling, warm-stoned Victorian house with brown, smoked glass extensions, surrounded by a few trees and a high security wall.

"Where are we?" asked Johnny.

"Don't you know?" I was surprised. "It's where they can help you."

"Hey. What makes you think I -"

"Oh, I'm sure you can remain anonymous if you like. A troubled soul

checking in briefly from out of the cold. This is Salvation House.”

“No way,” he said petulantly.

“Oh, come on Johnny. This is a hospice. It’s run by my aunt. Everybody’s heard of it. It’s the most hybrid-friendly place in the country. They’re always threatening to close it down but they can’t because there’d be a riot.”

“Not interested,” he intoned in an annoying, flat voice. His screen had gone blank.

“They’ll clean you up, give you a medical -” I sighed. I didn’t think he’d be like this. “Look at the state of you. You could die on the streets any day. The vigilante gangs, no money -”

“I can look after myself.”

He kept saying this until I got the message. But Sally House was so nice. It was cosy and right at the heart of the struggle for the rights of Creep victims. My aunt, Cheri, saw it as her family, her cause. Her heart was as big as London.

He’d no right to turn down my offer of help. It could only be because he didn’t know how marvellous it was. He registered my disappointment. His screen came alive again with a picture of wild mountains and clouds. A wolf howled at the sky. Was this how he saw himself, really?

“Very well,” I said. “Can we drop you off somewhere?”

He told me.

“Home?” I didn’t think he had a home.

He fed the location to Dominic, who impassively restarted the engine and sent the car away from West Hampstead, back, back towards the river.

I was trying to hide my disappointment. I felt hurt about his lack of curiosity, his cynicism. I’d been wrong about him. Perhaps he was now more machine than boy. There was no heart beating beneath his plastic casing. He’d been claimed by the creeping inorganic world. No amount of care could warm a heart that didn’t exist.

I walked with him from the car down the side street. We were in a nowheresville, the anywhere of a 1930s suburban estate.

It had seen better times; the hedges straggled, untrimmed. Grime sucked the colour from all surfaces. Lace curtains drifted ragged and unwashed. Litter snagged in the weed-claimed flower beds. Grey pebbledashing, like an old mask, had fallen from walls to reveal the shame of naked brickwork.

“You live here?” I asked.

“Sure. I like it. It suits me. See? Leaky houses once full of happy young families. The only ones living here now are ghosts.” And he explained how what he called their old comfort blanket had changed into a blanket of fear. “Who knows when this happened? Sometimes I think it began when they tarmaced the front gardens for their second or third cars, or p’raps it was when the kids and their mums and dads stopped playing together and disappeared into their bedrooms for hours on end to play computer games, watch tv, press buttons. Anyway, conversation stopped. Then I imagine how the children left, sucked down telephone wires or satellite cables into another dimension. Hear it now? No sound, no wind, no movement, no people. Just planes passing overhead, and the distant complaints of sirens. Here we are,” he announced.

I held my nose against the smell of blocked drains. We clambered through a hole in a fence at the back of a dark, semi-detached house. The windows were boarded up. He threw a connection switch on an electricity meter, telling me he’d wired it to a streetlamp outside - free electricity. “Don’t know why everyone doesn’t do this.”

The lights came on and the blackness receded into sharp shadows. I couldn’t hide my shock. He took my hand as I stumbled over rubbish on the floor - broken plaster, broken floorboards, plastic bags, empty bottles. He led me upstairs: there were no carpets and our footsteps seemed too loud.

Suddenly he froze. He signalled me to be silent. I could see daylight coming in from a bedroom. We continued slowly. Now there was smashed glass underfoot. He rushed into the back bedroom. I followed.

The room had been ransacked. Shit was smeared on the furniture and I was forced to hold my nose. Graffiti on the walls shouted “Bye bye shithead”; “We’ll get you next time”; “Hybrid patrol - mission accomplished”. I saw him stagger and rushed to support him, eased him onto a chair.

“My computers... back-ups... all gone...” he said. Some equipment like a tv was smashed on the floor. Papers were everywhere,

“What a mess,” I said. “Do you know who did it?”

He looked at me as if he’d forgotten I was there.

“What does it matter?”

“Did they take much?”

“All my files - writing. My databases, programmes, all my hardware... No, not much.”

“Haven’t you got it backed up somewhere?”

“Well, yes and no. Some of it, almost, a bit.” On his screen a picture of an underground cave system momentarily replaced his standard screen saver of a stoned smiley face.

I began to poke around in the mess. “Good riddance to bad rubbish, no?”

“Yeah, but it was my rubbish.”

“At least you weren’t here when it happened.”

“I can look after myself.”

“I don’t think so. Come on,” I took a last look round, picked up a few papers and marched out of the bedroom.

This time, he followed.

It was when we got into the front yard that they pounced. I think there were three of them. They must have only just left the house when we arrived, and seen us, returning for an ambush. With a yell they ran at us from the side passage, waving crowbars.

I screamed, grabbing Johnny’s hand instinctively. We ran towards the gate, hotly pursued just a few feet behind.

But Dominic had seen what was happening from across the road. The Humvee’s lights flashed on and with a scream of tyres he swerved it across the road onto the pavement to illuminate fully the front garden.

Startled, our attackers paused, shielding their eyes against the glare.

Dominic leant on the horn. We didn’t need a second summons. Racing through the gate we jumped into the open door, and Dominic crashed the gears into reverse, lurched back into the road, and then, with another squeal of tyres, sped off down the street, leaving the vigilantes, empty-handed, staring at our tail lights.

3. My worst enemy

The thought briefly occurred to me that she’d set this up on purpose just to make me homeless so I’d do whatever she wanted. Girls, I’d heard, can be devious like that.

I don't believe in luck, fate or destiny, they're all comfort words that humans have. It's just you, what you're like, that makes certain kinds of events happen to you rather than others. Me, I attract trouble, 'cause I am a hybrid. People like me give a new meaning to the word 'dysfunctional'. So I knew it wasn't her really.

This time, as Dominic drove, she told me more about herself. She was certainly different from anyone I'd met before. She'd seen the world, met all kinds, except dregs like me, and grown up in the type of universe where people fly to their own private island in the sun in their own jet for a four day party attended by tycoons, politicians and actors. In such a world, nobody asks too many questions, and everyone feels safe. She said even I would fit in - with the right clothes.

"A hybrid?" I said. "Aren't they afraid they might catch Something Nasty?"

She shook her head causing tangled black curls to wave around her face, and I began to think how pleasant it might be to lose myself inside such soft complexity.

But that was a stupid thought.

"They think their wealth makes them immune from anything," she said.

"Didn't help you, did it? How come you're part of that set?"

"Maman. She used to be a top model. She is still the most beautiful person I've ever seen." She went silent for a moment and her lips curled inwards as if she was swallowing something that she didn't want to let free. "She was on the front pages of glossy magazines and in the gossip columns. But she's not what you think -" I'd said nothing "- she's smart too."

I was wondering what to say when her phone rang. It was a slender model in the style popular a couple of years ago. The keypad was where her palm might have been and the screen was in place of her fingers. It was one of the most common types of rewrite. I filed a picture of it alongside the dozens of others I kept in one of my databases.

I'd already sensed that the vehicle we were in had a built-in wireless satellite system, probably for her father's work given the nature of the passwords I'd picked my way through, and I uploaded the database onto a remote server. I'd actually not lost much except hardware from the attack on my place. I was always careful to copy work files onto several servers, sometimes splitting them up and distributing the pieces on servers across the world so that nobody picking up one of them would ever be able to tell what it