



Chasing the White Light

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"This sucks!"

Grady hovered in the corner of the hospital ER, totally ignored by the doctors and nurses buzzing around and shouting at one another as they furiously worked to save the drugged out teenager sprawled across the gurney. They'd given up on Grady thirteen minutes earlier when he'd continued to flatline and had converged on Rat as soon as his ambulance had screamed up to the emergency doors. "Blood pressure's rising," a nurse called.

"Come on, Erwin," a doctor encouraged. "Hang in there, bud. You can do it."

"Rhythm's stabilizing."

"Yeah, Erwin," Grady mocked. "You just hang in there." He stalked over to his friend's side, ignoring the doctors and nurses who moved all around and even through him. He'd forced himself to get over the initial panic and horror of having the living passing through his spirit form shortly after he'd realized he was dead. That had happened not too long after he'd frantically tried to talk to the doctors and nurses and had seen his pale, still corpse staring blankly at the ceiling and lying abandoned on the table.

"Don't even think about leaving me over here by myself, Erwin," Grady muttered. "You mixed the batch, you stinkin' weasel. You damn well better die right along with me. I am not going down for this by myself. So you just give it up and get your ass over here."

Grady watched the beeping pulse on the EKG grow steadier and noticed the glowing light around Rat's body begin to hang more closely to the skinny tattooed teen, molding itself to his bony physique. Rat's gang colors had been ripped off him and dropped on the floor to make way for paddles, needles, and tubes. His skinny ribcage expanded under his clammy skin more confidently with every breath he took, ensnaring his spirit within his fragile looking frame. Color began to return to Rat's flesh and his eyes fluttered lightly under his bruised lids. He moaned softly and moved his head ever so slightly from side to side.

"Oh no you don't," Grady said, realizing his homeboy was bailing on him. He climbed up on top of Rat's gurney and straddled his skinny body. Grady had planned the ultimate drug trip and Rat had screwed it up. They were supposed to have a near death experience, not to fucking die, and Grady wasn't going on the one way trip to hell alone. No sir. He'd stumbled off to call for help as soon as he'd realized they were on a bad trip. He'd even managed to tell the EMTs where to find Rat. The least Rat could do was suffer the consequences right along with him.

"You just come out and play with me, Rat. Right now," Grady ordered, reaching into Rat's chest and pulling on the dim glowing substance that nestled there. "Die already," he growled. The gossamer glowing veil resisted him, clinging to Rat's pale body. It was like pulling slimy taffy from a cage. Only this taffy felt warm and vibrant and it throbbed and hummed in his hands. It had an electrical current all its own.

"Come on, Rat. Be a good boy and die already," Grady grunted, pulling even harder on Rat's soul. Panic streaked up his ghostly spine as Rat resisted his attempts and continued to grow stronger. The palms of his hands felt clammy and weak. Grady bit his lip and tugged with all his ghostly might.

"Respiration and heart rate are stabilizing," intoned the nurse to Grady's right.

"No they're not," Grady said, taking another tactic. He grabbed hold of Rat's heart and felt it pulsing in his hands. It squished and slid between his fingers. It refused to behave and hold still, even as he exerted more pressure on it. He



could feel the warmth of the blood pumping in and out between his hands. The rhythm matched the blips on the machine, which jumped and faltered as Grady squeezed Rat's heart. Grady stuck his knee into Rat's chest and leaned heavily on Rat's lungs. As his organs gave out, Rat's soul dislodged from his body; easing away from the flesh as it rose up to meet Grady.

"We're losing him, sir."

"Damn right you are," Grady grunted. "My boy's not going to let me die alone. No siree. Are you, Rat?"

Grady felt the doctor reach through him to pump Rat's chest as soon as he'd flatlined. Pandemonium broke out in an organized dance to save Rat's life as Grady pulled and grunted and snarled at Rat to let go of his body. As the doctor pumped Rat's heart, the soul tightened its grip on Rat's body and resisted Grady's efforts. Grady was really beginning to sweat it when all of a sudden Rat's soul sprung free, sling-shotting them across the room and back into the corner where Grady had earlier observed the doctors and nurses trying to save Rat.

"Bout damn time you gave it up, Rat," Grady snarled. "Thought for a second there you were going to have some punk-ass idea of leaving me to cook for this alone." He smacked Rat's dazed spirit for affect.

"Wha-what happened?"

Grady watched Rat looked around him as if unsure of what he was seeing. They both watched the huddle of doctors and nurses converged over a still form on the gurney for several moments before Rat slowly got up to go see what they were doing. Grady smirked when he saw Rat look down at his feet when they didn't feel like they were striking the ground. He remembered what it had felt like the first time that he had found himself floating a foot above the white tiled floor, discarded clothes, and medical packaging. When Rat looked around him in a panic, obviously not wanting to comprehend the meaning that was beginning to sink in on him, Grady waited for him to whirl around before flashing a shit-eating grin of smug superiority.

"That's right, Rat," Grady said. "You killed us you stupid son-of-a-bitch. You fucked up the mix and now we're dead. If we weren't, I'd kill you."

"But I can't be dead," Rat protested. "My mama..."

"Your mama can't help you now," Grady smirked. "It's just you and me, Bro." Grady shook his head in disgust when Rat stumbled over to his body and desperately tried to grab hold of it, but his hands kept passing through it. Rat looked to the doctors to save him just as Grady had in those first frightening and sickening moments after he'd popped out of his body. But just like when Grady had tried, they were already giving up and covering Rat's body up with a sheet. "Mark the time of death," the doctor ordered and scribbled some notes and his signature on a clipboard.

"But, but..." Rat pleaded. Grady hated the way Rat looked helplessly about him for someone to help. No one could see him except for Grady, who tried to forget his own desperate and pathetic attempts to save himself. Rat's fear made Grady uncomfortable. It tightened his belly with shame and made him look down at the ground for several minutes before he could regain his resolve.

"You're dead, Bro. Get over it. You killed us," Grady said. "We're ghosts, spirits, whatever. So get used to it."

"Grady, man, I didn't mean to," Rat sputtered. "Sam must've given us bad shit. Honest. The mix was good."

"Yeah, whatever," Grady muttered. "We're dead now and I don't suppose we can do a whole hell of a lot about Sam and his rotten brew. Let's get out of here." Grady led the way out of the ER and into a long hallway where they found their families waiting for them. Rat's mother and father were leaning on one another, talking to the ER doctor and crying copiously. They looked broken and haggard with despair, the loss of their eldest son too much to comprehend. Rat's younger brothers huddled near, the babies too young to understand what was happening.



Grady saw his aunt sitting to one side, weary and overworked. She'd left her job cleaning houses when the call had come about her delinquent nephew, but he knew she was worried more about her lost wages and the cost of the hospital's attempts to save Grady than she was of his death. On top of everything else he could hear her mentally tallying the cost of his funeral and wondering which would be cheaper - cremation or burial. He'd hoped that his death would at least earn him some loving, if belated, attention from her, but he was robbed of even that small show of affection or grief. His eyes burned watching her sit there so wrapped up in her own thoughts and he had to blink several times to keep them clear.

She didn't care that he had died a horribly painful death. She wasn't thinking about how he'd been aware of his organs shutting down one by one and the rescue methods of the EMTs and the doctors, which had included having tubes shoved down his throat and nose and having needles stuck into various parts of his body. She wasn't thinking about how alone and scared he might have been while he died or how much he might have wanted her to be there with him if only to hold his hand or to whisper something comforting, something that might have given him the strength to live. The only thoughts he could hear were her plans for cleaning up his mess, how she was going to pay for it, and how much easier her life was going to be without him in the way.

Grady turned to see Rat trying to comfort his parents and to gain comfort from them, but he couldn't make the connection. His hands passed through them and his pleas fell on deaf ears. Grady just stood near his aunt and witnessed her disinterest in the doctor's news as he had so many other things, with the sick and painful realization that he meant as little to her in death as he had in life. It weighed heavily on him as he looked over at Rat's family and saw the raw emotion welling up within them over their loss. Rat wasn't an inconvenience that had been thrust upon them when his junkie mother had wandered off never to be seen again. He was their eldest son and their pride and joy, even if he had hung out with the wrong crowd. They were emotionally devastated and he could see by the dimming and blurring of their auras how overwrought their spirits were as well. Grady watched the sharp contrast between his and Rat's family and he felt it burning deep inside.

"Come on," Grady ordered, grabbing hold of Rat's arm and dragging him out of the hospital. "There's supposed to be some sort of white light or something. Let's find it before someone drags us down the other way."

"But I want to stay with them," Rat tearfully protested.

"You can't, dummy," Grady spat. "You're dead. Dead people either go to heaven or hell, white light or fiery pits. I'm finding the first one so's I don't end up in the other one. You with me?" Rat stared dumbly at Grady, his eyes swollen and bruised where they sagged above his fine dusky cheekbones. His thin body shivered in the fluorescent-lit hallway and he reflexively dodged orderlies, nurses, and paramedics passing through their section of the hall. The horror on his face each time Grady let one pass through him disgusted Grady, but he refused to show his true feelings. Grady was the leader and Rat was the follower. Even in death some things just weren't meant to change.

"Come on," Grady said. He turned and walked down the hallway. Out of the corner of his eye, Grady saw Rat follow in his wake. He refused to acknowledge the wash of relief he felt. It just confirmed what he had always said - your gang brothers would stick by you even when your family wouldn't and that's all a guy really needed to get by.

They were nearing an intersecting hallway when Grady heard the growling and weird guttural noises. He frowned in confusion, but continued on.

"Do you hear that?" Rat asked nervously. "Hey Grady," Rat called when Grady didn't respond. "Hey man, did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I heard it," Grady muttered. "Keep moving."

Grady reached the intersection and looked both ways without seeing the source of the noise...at first. It was the movement that caught his eye. It was as if the light bent and writhed against the walls and the tiled floor, coming toward them. The nearer the movement came, the louder the noises became. Like the grinding of rocks, mixed with clicks and whistles, the sounds crawled toward them. Then they paused, and Grady was sure that whatever was making those noises had spotted them, though he still couldn't really see what that was. He could only feel them in the way the hairs at



the back of his neck tingled and crawled and in the way his stomach twisted while his skin felt clammy. He swallowed hard and tried to see what was there.

"What the-?" Rat exclaimed.