

Goose on Your Grave

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Rodger awoke in confusion. There was someone in his bed—several someones, actually. There was a hairy arm across his forehead, a slender leg across his stomach, and someone's stiff hair on his leg.

Rather than panic, Rodger looked over at his hated alarm clock blaring its irritating purpose: 4:45 AM, waah, waah, waah, waah. And why should he panic? He'd waken to a similar situation every morning of his life.

He slapped the off button and slithered out from beneath his bedmates. He was not rough, nor gentle: long ago, he'd learned that he possessed no power to disturb, harm, help, or affect in any way these things he called "Symbiants."

Rodger pushed past a screaming Irishman with beef stew in his red beard, a naked black woman who was crying and bandaging a gaping, pink wound on her calf, and a tall man with a handlebar mustache rehearsing a political speech on the virtues of socialism. In the bathroom, he relieved himself with a large Mexican who was pissing blood and shared the mirror while shaving with an obese white woman with dyed black hair who was removing nose hair by jerking it out with her chubby fingers and sneezing until snot slid over her top lip.

Every day, the same old thing, Rodger thought as he brushed past a slick insurance salesman in a black-and-white checkered suit.

"Cut back on the Aqua Velva, dude." Rodger smiled, though; he knew he would receive no response.

Stepping off the bus, Rodger narrowly missed poking an ancient, toothless woman while opening his umbrella. "Apples 5 cents," the full-length placard read. He wouldn't have hurt her, anyway: He could see the shimmering outline marking her status.

Rodger made his way through all the people milling about on Main Street, being careful to avoid the dim pedestrians who wouldn't appreciate a bump as they rushed along trying to stay dry. The Symbiants were oblivious to the downpour, with the exception of a few who were dealing with storms long passed.

Joe's Deep-South Music loomed in the shadows to Rodger's left. The bell rung, ta-ting, ta-ting, as he entered the building. Behind the glass counter, a bearded man in his forties looked up crossly. A Jimmy Hendrix lookalike, dressed in paisley, complete with American flag headband, was handing a twenty across the counter.

"How do you always manage to be five minutes late?" Joe stood ignoring Jimmy. Joe could be a jerk or a joker, and knowing which was a trick.

"Screw you." Rodger had learned that this response seemed to work on whichever personality Joe had chosen for the day.

Jimmy's twenty vanished into thin air and he held his hand out for his phantom change. Rodger didn't know why he only saw bits and pieces of these scenes from the past—or another dimension—or whatever they were. He had never given the matter much thought. This was his life as it had always been.

"It's not like we're swamped, Joe." Rodger shook the water from his green umbrella and leaned it against the counter.

Jimmy picked up his drumsticks and walked through the barred glass door. Rodger knew the sticks wouldn't be missing at monthly inventory, because they didn't exist in this time. They were cracked and rotting in a landfill somewhere, most likely. Rodger resisted the urge to poke his head out the door and suggest to Jimmy that he try the guitar.

"Bull-hockey," Joe grunted, "You didn't know it'd be dead till you got here." Joe bit his lip, attempting to mask his ivory smile. "If you brought me some friggin' coffee, we'll forget it."

Rodger smiled. This was the Joe he could deal with.

"Sorry, dude. I had to clock in first."

Joe stopped biting his lip and smiled full force. "We don't have a time clock, you jackass. You can buy the coffee today—to make up for being late—again."

"I'll need a raise for that." Rodger lifted an eyebrow.

"Fat chance, Fats. Cream and sugar."

"Gotchya." Rodger wheeled around towards the door and nearly walked into a boy of about twelve with a large hunting knife protruding from his neck. Bright blood flowed down the boy's red lumberjack shirt and dripped to the floor before disappearing.

Rodger stopped dead in his tracks. The boy continued walking and passed through Rodger, the cash register, Joe, and the cinderblock wall.

"What's up, Junior? Goose on your grave?" Joe puffed.

"Yeah, I guess so." Rodger walked to the door and ta-tinged his way out onto the sidewalk. He was never hurt by internal contact with a Symbiant. It tickled a little, but it always made him feel like a peeping tom—or maybe a grave robber.

Rodger turned left and strolled past Murray's Drug Emporium and Candyland before realizing he'd forgotten his umbrella and was getting soaked. The unexpected encounter with the boy had thrown him a bit. Sometimes the Symbiants had missing limbs, severe injuries, or other seemingly mortal wounds. Maybe the history Rodger witnessed was a little mottled or out of sync. He didn't know and didn't care. It just was.

He didn't really mind the rain: It made him feel clean, refreshed, and somehow alive.

Mande Davis' Java House was warm, comfortable, and brightly lit, but it was the smell that Rodger loved the most. When you opened the door, your nose snatched up the air automatically. When you closed the door behind you, your nose quivered in ecstasy.

"Mornin', Rog." Crystal Thompson called in her Loosiana drawl. "C'mon up here, and I'll get ya goin'. Ain't had much business today in this squall."

Rodger smiled, half in response to the smell and half in response to the pretty brunette's greeting. "I believe you, babe." Rodger winked. He was only being friendly, not flirtatious. He knew his league and what happened when he tried to rise above it. Crystal was a sweet girl though. She always made the Java House a little brighter.

Rodger surveyed the room. Business might be slow today, but the room was packed if you counted shimmering forms. Six tables were crowded with unshaven construction workers in yellow hard hats with "Union" stamped in red on each side. Four privates in Class A uniforms were seated at the bar slurping and dripping coffee. This was followed by cursing and pounding on the bar. Rodger walked to the end of the bar where there was room, in spite of its empty appearance to the girl.

"Two, please. One with cream and sugar, sugar." Rodger smiled.

"Duh, of course, Rog." Crystal smiled, her brown eyes squinting. "It's not like you an' Joe don't get the same thing every mornin'."

Rodger was staring at the private closest to him at the bar. His face was gone. It was probably a wartime wound, Rodger knew, but it looked like something with big teeth had simply taken a bite. Brains, blood, and bone made a mangled mess that turned Rodger's stomach.

Rodger turned back to Crystal trying to remember what she'd just said.

"Ya look a little pale, Rog. You okay?"

The faceless private was lifting his coffee to where his lips should have been. The result was a brownish-red mixture soaking his uniform and forming a sickly puddle on the counter.

"Goose on my grave, I guess." Rodger managed a weak smile.

"Well, you're gonna be under that goose real quick if you don't start carryin' an umbrella out there."

"You're a sweetie, Crys. Thanks."

Crystal handed two Styrofoam cups with printed steam on them to Rodger and smiled. "No charge. Just don't tell Mande I gave 'em to ya. And you get yourself outta that rain, Rog."

"You're a doll, doll." Rodger took the cups, savoring the brief touch of the girl's slender hands and walked reluctantly towards the door.

"See ya tomorrow, hon." Crystal smiled and waved.

"No doubt. Have a good one." Rodger nodded and backed into the door to push it open and reeled uncontrollably backwards onto the sidewalk. "Ugh!" Hot coffee went flying over his head and splashed onto the watery street. Rodger looked up into the face of a wide-eyed young girl of about twelve.

"Golly, mister, are you all right?"

Rodger was rainsoaked, embarrassed, and probably dealing with a bruised tailbone, but he answered mechanically, "Yeah, I'm okay." He rolled over, rose to his knees, and finally to his feet before realizing something was wrong.

"I'm really sorry, sir. I didn't know you were coming out of the shop backwards. Please don't tell my dad what happened. I'm supposed to be at piano class, but I do so love to come down here to look at all the pretty dresses." The girl was wearing a plaid wool skirt, a white cotton blouse, and had her hair tied in a pair of childish ponytails with red ribbons. Her eyes were pale blue and her hair was deep auburn.

She was shimmering.

Rodger stood staring, unable to find words. Had he hit his head when he fell? The girl was not wet in spite of the pouring rain. The girl stared back with the strangest expression on her face—a mixture of shame, wonder, and fear.

"You're a Glimmer!" she coughed.

"You're a Symbiant!" Rodger muttered.

The two stood staring at each other as pedestrians passed, both wet and dry, shimmering and dim. Several of each variety stared curiously as they passed, wondering why a wet man or a young girl would be muttering alone on the street.

"I ... I've never been able to talk to a Glimmer before," the girl said. "You can hear me?"

"Yeah." Rodger answered. "You can hear me?"

"Yup."

"I've never been able to talk to a Symbiant before. Do you see some kind of shimmering glow around some people?"

"Yes, sir. You've got one. That's why you're a Glimmer. I see them all the time. All my life, I have. They wear strange clothes, do weird things, and walk right through walls. But I can't touch them or speak with them."

"Me too." Rodger gasped, "All my life. I can't touch or speak to them either—until now."

The girl dropped her eyes and stepped back. "Are you dead? I've always thought Glimmers were ghosts, but they've never hurt me."

"Not that I'm aware of." Rodger smiled. He didn't want the girl to run away. This was something he never thought could be. "I guess you're not either. Or, neither of us is from our own point of view. I have a

question for you, if you don't mind?"

"Sure, mister."

"Is it raining where you are?"

The girl looked to the sky as if not sure. "No, sir. Sunny as it should be on a warm June day."

"Thanks. It's pouring rain on me, and it's April. But I don't mind. It always makes me feel clean and alive."

"Me too." The girl examined Rodger's eyes. "My name's Chloe. Pleased to meet you." She did a small curtsy and extended her tiny hand.

"Rodger. Pleasure's all mine."

Rodger reached out with his own hand and grasped the girl's. Her hand was soft, warm, and very alive.

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