

## Grim To The End

The dusty, crusted land that once thrived with crops and livestock stretched out to the horizon in all directions. Over three hundred miles to the north, a relatively new Massive Super Ocean covered the area of three continents and bubbled warmly in welcome to the empty world. And on a cliff edge yet further away still, the last lemming held its nose and thought, *Why did none of us realise this is just pointless...but what the hell.*

Grim Fandango Reaper, Grim to his friends and Death to his business associates, had seen all this before. Many, many times before if the truth be told.

The Business of Life specialised in the creation of worlds and the evolution of life upon those worlds, but every so often the life forms decided that they knew what they were doing and proceeded to systematically guide their planets towards extinction in blissful ignorance.

The time had once again come for Grim to collect the remaining souls of a dying breed. His list, usually producing a continuous roll call of names, contained only seven, and for once this could not be put down to a system failure in the bowels of Creation. It simply meant time had run out for the humans again as well as the other life forms on their planet.

Protocol demanded that in the last collection Grim had to show himself to all those gathered for the final parting. He much preferred one to one service, mainly as it reduced the number of questions and irate spirits around him at once. Multiple collections seemed rather rude and impersonal. That was not the way to run things.

The remaining humans, who, following the death of the last lemming, were also the only remaining beings on the planet. The List confirmed that the small group were huddled up in a cave that had no business being in the centre of what had many years ago been a major city, but when times and climates change dramatically enough to catch everyone off guard it rarely matters. All that mattered right now was that the cave was there, so were the humans, and now, after more wrong turns than he wanted to admit, so was Grim.

The interior of the cave grew dark as Grim materialised in its mouth, causing seven pairs of eyes to turn in his direction as one.

“Come in if you’re coming,” said an unidentified pair of eyes.

“I AM HERE FOR THE END,” Grim said in his official voice.

“I don’t care if you’re here for the Avon book, but I know you’re blocking the sodding light and I can’t see my cards.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” Grim said, lowering his hood and his tone at the same time. There seemed little point in being official any more on this world. “Do you mind if I take a seat?”

“You can have that rock,” the eyes, which with light proved to be attached to a face, said. “We couldn’t bring the sofa with us.”

Grim, being of a sombre profession, struggled with most forms of humour. He found it much easier to simply add in a “ha ha” when everyone else did rather than attempt to learn the reason why they said “ha ha” in the first place. He was quite sure this was a “ha ha” moment, but none of the seven humans seemed to agree.

During this moment of internal debate, the arrival of light and the adjustment of 14 pupils revealed Grim in all his glory to the gathering. The resulting realisation proved to be somewhat flatter than Grim had experienced during his time.

“Oh,” one of them said. “It’s you.”

“Does this mean we’re dead yet?” asked another.

“Don’t think so,” said another. “I’ve still got my hand to call.”

“Do you think they play poker much in the afterlife?”

“Well I don’t think would be much call for it really...er...”

The seven looked at Grim, who looked back at them.

“Is something wrong?” Grim asked, wondering if he had something stuck on his face.

“Well...erm...are we dead? I mean if you’re here then...well?”

“You are not dead yet,” Grim said, the word “yet” inadvertently leaving in its wake an unspoken promise that they soon would be.

“Oh,” the group’s main speaker said. “Right, well. I suppose we better...What exactly should we do?”

Grim moved forward to take a seat on the earlier offered rock. The group became visibly nervous but remained in their place, primarily as a wall prevented escape on three sides while a seven feet tall skeletal immortal being blocked the final exit route.

“You should wait,” Grim said. “I think it is right to say that you have done enough already.”

“Playing cards?”

“I am speaking more in general human terms.”

“Oh. What does that mean?”

Grim lowered himself onto the cold stone, turning to look directly at the man as he did.

“Don’t feel like you need to answer that,” the man said quickly. “Or anything else. Sir.”

“Please do not call me “Sir”,” Grim said. “It makes me sound uptight. But I will answer your question. I meant that humans have brought all of this on themselves. It was your planet and you should have looked after it better.”

“You mean we shouldn’t have built as much and chopped down as much, don’t you?”

“That is a very insignificant part of it,” Grim sighed. “Humans have spent many years slowly polluting this world, and like anything that becomes sick, at some time it must die.”

“Global warming, then,” said another of the group. “My great-grandma used to tell everyone that they shouldn’t be filling the air with crap and smoke. She wouldn’t even use a car because of it.”

“But plenty of others did,” Grim said. “That is still not the sole reason why this planet has died.”

“So it wasn’t our cars?”

“Of course it was,” Grim said. “But everything that lives must die. All that changes is when the final breath is taken. The original plans estimated that this planet and its inhabitants would not perish for another forty thousand and six years. Your persistent experiments and creations in technology simply advanced the demise.”

“Well that’s a bit of a pisser,” said the youngest of the group.

“Am I right in thinking that is a popular human phrase meaning it is bad?”

“Er..yes.”

Grim nodded, pleased with his advancement in the understanding of human language. Maybe in the fifth evolution of Existence he would finally have collected enough information about humans to understand at least something other than they could breath and frequently brought about their own destruction.

The conversation seemed to run out of steam following Grim's bestowing of information, and all thoughts of continuing the poker game had departed the cave.

"I can tell you there is not much time left," Grim said, his lack of emotional capacity removing any awkward feelings that should have accompanied the statement.

"How long is not long?" asked the smallest possible voice to ever come from a human mouth.

"About two minutes and thirty three seconds of your time."

"Not that long of all, then. So what happens next?"

Grim pulled a small booklet from his robe. "I issue you visas to your respective afterlives. Then we begin again."

"Begin what?"

"The next generation."

"But...you said the planet is about to die."

"It is," Grim said. "Just as it has before. The new generation of the Arth Project is only minutes away from creation."

"Arth? You mean Darth."

Grim shook his head. "I usually say what I mean. This was generation D of the Arth Project. The next generation is version E. Hopefully they will be able to last longer than your generation."

"So, that's it, is it?" one of the group asked.

"For now."

"And if they destroy...Earth?...then Farth will be made to replace it?"

"Ah, not quite," Grim said, checking the time. "There are only so many times you can watch the same thing happen before it becomes boring. If the next generation fails, then the Business of Life will declare the Project a failure and move on to a more intelligent race."

"Well that's a shame," said the man who had first spoken to Grim on his arrival.

"Perhaps it is," Grim said. "But on a positive note, you will not need to worry about it."

"Wh-?"

The cave disintegrated in a gush of burning air as the ground vanished into the ether. The land that had moments earlier been dead but there had now ceased to be along with everything else that had been Darth.

"That was quick," said the soul of the man, floating in shimmering blackness.

"It is usually best not to drag these things out," Grim said as he began working on the first visa. "Now if you will let me know which of you is which and I will get you on your way."

"Do you think the next lot will be better than we were?" asked one of the other spirits.

"Probably not," Grim said. "But they will have their chance just the same."

And so ended the final moments of Darth after a lifespan of one hundred and four million years.

Somewhere in the void left behind, a small spark of creation was being forged and being officially named Earth by Johnny B God, MD of the Business of Life. And Johnny had already decided that this generation of the Arth project would be different. This time he would send someone in to teach the humans how to look after the project. Someone they could look up to for moral guidance.. Where its four predecessors had failed, the Earth would be a billion year success. If not, there were always other projects to work on.