

THE GRIM REAPER

He saw Death clear as day, felt him too, as a cool summer breeze. He was coming to get him. Grim Reaper standing tall and floating on an impenetrable black cloud of deception. He wasn't meant to survive and yet he did. And here he was. Alive. The man pulled himself up and swung his legs down from off the bed.

'You up, Solomon?' It was a young nurse. She walked into the room and watched him.

'You see I'm up,' he replied, and he spat between the gap in his two front teeth.

'You fixing to go anywheres?'

'Only where I'm supposed to be at.' He tested his legs on the ground and stayed there a minute as if expecting to fall over. When he didn't he walked over to his backpack and swung it around his shoulders.

'You never did say which side you were on.'

'There was no need to tell it.'

'Huh.'

The man called Solomon bent his knees and squatted on his hunches and grimaced in pain and massaged the shinbones of each leg and spat again. He turned and looked at the nurse. His eyes were bloodshot and there was no humour in them.

'I need a smoke.'

'You might could say it nice, Solomon.'

'Do you have a smoke on you?'

'You know these things will kill you dead?' However, she consulted her pockets, and her hand came back up with a packet of cigarettes. She hit the carton

twice and opened it and drew a single stick out and closed the box and put it back in her pocket, and then she put the cigarette in her mouth and lit it with her lighter.

Solomon watched her all the while.

She took the cigarette out of her mouth and went to him and put it in his mouth. Her lipstick had got on it and he could taste it, smell it like she was so close to him, and they had locked lips in a lover's embrace. Solomon took a long drag and closed his eyes.

'A man shouldn't be in such a state where he can't have a cigarette,' he said.

'You were in bad shape, Solomon.'

He blew smoke out of his mouth and his nostrils and threw his head back as though deep in thought. He sat there for a long time.

'You fixing to do some hurting, Solomon?' she asked finally. She was leaning against the wall and watching him, with one knee bent and her leg trailing backwards so her foot could rest on it.

'What's it to you?'

'Nothing, I guess. 'Except when you boys get through with your killing we the ones who get stuck with all the damage you leave.'

'You got no cause to worry on that.'

'Why? You don't intend on leaving anything left of him, do you?'

Solomon opened his eyes and turned his head slowly.

'Oh, you don't need to have said nothing,' the nurse said. Her eyes shone with concern, and there was great sadness in her face, the kind of sadness that comes from having seen too many people die. 'It's been all over your face since you

got here. You planning on some mischief, ain't you? Figured it had to be the guy that put you in here too.'

'He'll get what's coming to him.'

'And then what?'

Solomon looked away and then he spoke as though to someone far away:

'Can't tell you true that I know. Figure I'll end up someplace and start up a farm or something.'

'Were you a farmer before the war?'

'My daddy was,' he said. 'That was long ago. Now...'

'Now what, Solomon?' she asked, leaning forward to search his face. But he didn't reply. Instead, he got up.

'Where's my gun at?'

'We don't allow weapons in the hospital.'

'That's not what I asked you. I said where's it at?'

She retreated in fear, seeing the menace in his eyes, hearing it in his voice. That's how it always was with these fighters: they'd be placid one moment and then suddenly turn into something dreadful the next.

'The old man across the street,' she said quietly. 'He owns a store.'

Solomon started out. He stopped when he was beside her. He bent his head trying to find some words, but they never came. Solomon stamped his feet on the ground twice, nodded and walked out the door.

Outside, he'd started to walk at a brisk pace when he heard her calling his name. He stopped and turned around, seeing her running to catch up.

‘What is it?’ he asked in a growl, thinking she wanted to upbraid him some more. But she only pulled open his shirt pocket and then she slipped the carton of cigarettes inside. ‘Hope they kill you before you get the chance to kill someone else,’ she said.

And he smiled. She’d never seen him do that before. He now said, as he threw the butt in his mouth to the floor and took out another from the pack she’d just given him, ‘Highly unlikely I’ll get got before I get to fix things.’

‘Fix things?’

‘There was people hurt who wasn’t supposed to be,’ he said to her.

‘It’s war,’ she started, but he raised his hand to stop her.

‘I thank you – if I’ve not said that before. Don’t think I ain’t grateful to y’all back there for all you did for me. I am. I was brought up to say thank you. So, I thank you.’

The nurse nodded and headed back and left him in the street watching after her. When he’d smoke his cigarette to a small butt he stomped it out on the ground with his foot, and then he headed to the store.

‘You took up some guns from some soldiers about 2 weeks back?’ Solomon asked the proprietor.

‘What’s it to you, nigger?’

‘One of ‘ems mine.’

‘So, what of it?’

‘I aim to get it back from yer.’

‘You aiming wrong then.’

‘No, sir. I’m taking what’s mine.’

‘And who’s to say I don’t run you off with nothing to show for your audacity.’

‘I’d invite you to try,’ he said, and he bent his head and spat through the gap in his front teeth. Solomon leaned back and returned the storeowner’s gaze.

‘What side you fight for, boy?’

‘It don’t matter none.’

‘It does to me. You all did some great damage here, damage we only just started fixing. I give you this gun how do I know you won’t get back to plaguing the country?’

‘You don’t.’ He didn’t lift his gaze from the storeowner.

‘You know I come by these guns justly,’ the storeowner said, gritting his teeth.

‘And I’ll allow that the parting will equally be as just,’ Solomon said.

Finally, the storeowner hissed and walked off to the back of the store. When he came back he had 3 rifles with him. Solomon tensed and his right hand reached behind him for the knife he carried, but the storeowner saw him and raised a placating hand.

‘I don’t want no trouble.’

‘Then trouble’s bound to walk on out of here as soon as it gets his gun.’

‘Which one is yours?’ He extended the rifles to Solomon who took one look and collected a carbine. The strap had come loose, and so he tied it securely to the frame and slung it across his shoulders.

‘Don’t I get so much as a thank you?’ the storeowner called to him, but he was already going and didn’t turn back, never again to return to these parts.

His way took him across the prairie, and the grass bowed to the passing wind even as the sun traced its path across the sky until it stood on top of him, as though in judgement, and he wiped a hand across his brow and felt his tongue cleave to the roof of his mouth, and he continued on till the land rolled before him in dips and crests and through this wilderness of green there was still no water. And then he came to the lip of the jungle. He found a path used often by riders on motorcycles and walked on it, sweating and thirsting.

Not long afterwards he saw an old woman with a gourd on her back using the path as he was. Her back was bent so thoroughly she could almost touch her feet.

‘The load seems mighty heavy for you, mother,’ Solomon said to her.

She stopped walking when she heard his voice and waited for him to catch up. When he did he stood next to her.

‘Might I trouble you for some water?’

‘That you can,’ she said in a raspy voice full of age, ‘if I can trouble you to get this thing off me.’

He helped her bring the gourd down and she took the top off and used it to put the water in. She leaned the gourd forward, with her whole bent body straining with the effort, and poured him a drink of water. The water was very cool and tasted sweet. He drank deeply and when he was done he handed the cup back to her.

The old woman puckered her thumb in and wiped the whites off the corners of her mouth with it and then turned the cup around so she wouldn’t drink from the same spot he had and then she also drank. When she was done she replaced the lid. They both stood, underneath the trees, watching the leaves ruffle in the stifling heat, and were both glad for the shade.

'You fixing on doing some hurting?' she asked him finally.

When he seemed surprised she gestured at the gun he was shouldering.

'I'm a soldier,' he explained.

'Ain't everyone now these days.'

Solomon shrugged. 'I wouldn't know, mother.' He stood in silence until she spoke again.

'You know the war's been did, don't you, sonny?'

'Mine ain't over yet,' he said. 'There's things need to be settled before I aim to quit.'

The old crone sighed aloud. 'Ways I sees it is you been lucky to come out of all that mess.'

'Yes, mam.'

'Had me 4 boys myself,' she said. 'They got took by natural causes. Of that I'm thankful, let me tell you. But if one of 'em stood here with me now just as you standing there, and if such an un was to tell me he was aiming to go back to a war that everybody else says been done with: I don't know that I might could allow that.'

'Don't know that you'd be a good mother if you did,' he said.

They stood there a while still and then she suddenly grunted and bent to her load again. He helped her strap it back behind her and watched her bending trembling frame start off again. As she left she said:

'There's death on you, sonny.' Solomon said nothing. 'I knowed it from the first I laid my eyes on yer. You've been given a gift of life but you still playing with that death, ain't you? Way I call it is if you alive then live. Ain't nothing worth the grief of vengeance. Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, that's what the good book

says. Think he means leave that bad blood business to me 'cos only me can handle it.'

Solomon watched her disappear into the distance, like she was some spectral spirit that had suddenly melted away into a solipsist's ephemeral non-world, so that he wasn't even certain that he'd experienced her just now. Or maybe it was just in his imagination.

The night had finally begun to assert itself over the sun's persistence and pushed it away violently until the heat gave way to bone-shaking cold. Solomon hugged himself and clenched his insides against the freezing night breeze.

It was just past midnight when he finally walked in on them. They sat in front of a fire and were staring directly into it as though transfixed. They didn't see him until he was before them.

'What'd I tell you before about looking directly into flames?' Solomon asked them. 'You'll never give your eyes time enough to adjust to see what's around you. You two always did make bad sentries.'

'That you Solomon,' one of them asked, smiling, and showing off his rotten brown teeth. He looked at his partner to confirm, but the other looked away as though bored. 'My, my, my. I thought you was dead.'

'Not yet.'

'Ah,' he said, and looked at the other one. They were both young men, but the second man looked to be in his teens. The first man watched the second stretch out on the jungle floor. Then he spoke again: 'A mighty injustice was done yer, I know. But the war been done for at least 2 weeks, ain't that right boy?' The second

didn't answer him and continued to stretch out on the floor and look up at the canopy of leaves on top of them.

Solomon didn't let a single gesture slip past him.

Finally, the first one spoke again. 'Seems to me that this'n here's a good place to die. Wouldn't you say so, Solomon?'

'Doesn't have to end like that for you,' Solomon said, and the man started in disbelief. Then suddenly he was laughing into the night, and the wind carried his voice through the mighty jungle.

'Never did figure you for the forgiving type,' he said to Solomon.

'I'm a realist,' Solomon replied. 'Like you said, war's over. It'd be a real shame to have you boys die after the fighting's been done.'

'You think you the one to do the killing, Solomon?' the first one said, furious as his eyes bored holes into this man in front of him.

'Never was the sort for words and boasting,' Solomon said quietly. 'Always let my actions do the talking for me. So, I'll ask you, what do you think.'

Then the man smiled. He nudged his partner with his feet.

'You hear that? That's why you were the one we was so scared of. Figured if we got to you and the others there'd be less bodies to share the money with. Kofi always reckoned we could do it too, but only if we turned you. But I said I been with that one all through the war – since it first started. Ain't that right now, Solomon?'

'True. We been together since the beginning.'

He smiled. 'So, I told Kofi, told him you always keep your word and if at first we said when we found the suitcase of money that we'd share it equally that you'd

not be the man to go back on it. Said it to him too, didn't I?' He nudged the younger man again with the tip of his boot, but the other remained as lifeless as ever.

'Just tell me where he's at,' Solomon said to the man. 'It don't need to go past this with us.'

'And if I don't, what then?'

Solomon said nothing, just continued to stare, unblinking, until the man laughed and stood up and walked to the fire to warm his hands. 'You'll find him in the next village,' he said finally. When he turned to speak again Solomon was already gone.

He arrived at the village early the next day and immediately set about asking around for Kofi. He found out from some mothers nursing their children under a tree. They eyed him and his gun suspiciously after he left them.

He got to Kofi's and shouted his name out. 'Kofi, it's me, Solomon. Come on out here. Where you at?'

But Kofi didn't come outside. Instead, a young woman opened the door and peeked out shyly. 'You Kofi's friend?' she asked Solomon.

'We got business to discuss,' Solomon said. And when the young woman was fully out the door he saw that she was beautiful and also very pregnant.

'Well, I got business too with him my own self,' she said, pouting stubbornly, and with her hands akimbo, bracing her hips. She watched him now, as if seeing him for the first time, and she was suddenly afraid. 'What you want with him anyway?'

'Like I said we got business.'

'What kind of business?' came the suspicious reply.

'The kind that's none of your business,' he returned sharply.

She eyed him. 'Don't recon you to be the type to quit on your first try,' she said.

Solomon leaned his head down and spat into the ground. 'You recon right. I got all od eternity to wait on him. Now, where's he at?' He'd tried to speak to her as softly as he could on account of what she had in her.

When she'd regarded him some more, she cocked her head to the side, no longer obdurate, and said, 'He went out with 2 others. You must of seen them in the forest last night if you was to have come up that way.'

Solomon didn't say anything for a while. Finally, he turned his head and spat on the ground again and looked his feet, and said, 'I've got the itch something fierce. I've a mind to smoke while I wait.'

'Quit that; I'm pregnant!'

'I'm sure he'll be back soon,' he said, putting his smokes away, which he'd begun to bring out.

But she shook her head. 'Don't think so. Ever since he been told to expect a young un'— she patted her swollen stomach — 'ever since he been looking for a way to run off.'

'I'm sure that's not what this is,' he said.

'It is too. Them 2 had the look of Satan about them. Told him too, like they was fixing to hurt someone. But Kofi just shrugs and says they're his friends and he'll see them off and be back. Well, he ain't back.'

Solomon nodded. 'I can see that,' he said. 'You mind if I wait a while.'

She eyed him and then shrugged noncommittally. And he waited with her that day, and all through the week. Then he found he'd waited with her until the

baby was born, and afterward when the baby was now a grown man and called him father. And through it all, as he waited with her by his side, he lived: alive.

THE END