

Death and the End

By R.A. Gregory

Copyright © 2018 Robin Alexander Gregory

All Rights Reserved

Prologue

In the beginning, there was the Light.

And from the Light came Life.

And shortly after that, there came Death.

Death's role was simple; to bring balance to the universe. As there was Life, so there would always be Death, to ensure that the scales of the Cosmos did not tip too far in one direction or the other.

And Death did his job extremely well. As Life blossomed, so did Death, harvesting souls whose time had come with a single-minded devotion that bordered on the obsessive.

As the millennia passed, Man began to fear Death, trying desperately and unsuccessfully to cling to life and delay the inevitable. Some even began to worship him, in the hope that he would be merciful and grant them a few more years than their fellows.

For a time, Death was impressed by his new-found status and began to take delight in collecting ever more souls and transporting them into the void, to find their own way back to the Light.

However, as time wore on, so Death became bored with his role. He began to tire of Mankind and the way that, in most cases, it wasted the precious time that it had been given.

Even distancing himself from the actual collection of souls, by creating a host of individual Deaths to work under his command, did little to help and eventually, his distaste turned into a burning hatred for the flimsy, two-legged creatures whose souls it was his duty to reap. Finally, hatred turned to madness and he began to plot the downfall of Mankind.

Twice he had attempted to destroy the Earth, and, on both occasions, he had been beaten by no less than a boy-child and one of his own kind.

Now, tumbling head over heels in the endless depths of the void, as a result of his most recent expulsion from Earth, only a single, blinding thought passed through his head, and that was the total destruction of everything: The Earth, the Cosmos, the Universe and finally, the very Light itself.

But first would come the obliteration of Deathville, home to his insolent collection of Deaths and the one place he detested as much as the Earth itself.

Landing at last, with barely a sound as his skeletal feet struck the grass underfoot, Death looked around. Gone were the Impassable Mountains and the great, stone tower that had once been his home, replaced instead by gently sloping hills of deepest green and a slow-running river fading into the distance. Turning in the direction of Deathville, he allowed himself a narrow grin. I'm back and aren't the inhabitants of Deathville in for a surprise, he thought, as he began walking.

And with each footstep he took, the land around him lost its brilliant colour, to be replaced instead by varying shades of grey, as all the land in his domain had once been before.

Chapter 1 – Johnny

Johnny Jenkinson looked into the bathroom mirror and grinned. Today was the start of the winter holidays. But not just any winter holidays, no indeed. Today was the day when Johnny would say goodbye to his parents and join his two best friends, Simon and Trudy, on the annual inter-school skiing trip in the Alps. It was the first time that Johnny had been to another country and he was so excited that he'd spent the last two weeks barely able to stop himself from bouncing off the walls in anticipation. Now that the day was finally here, he was raring to go. As soon as the sun had poked its head over the bleak, winter horizon, Johnny had been up and out of bed. He'd checked his suitcase and passport a dozen times before breakfast and now, with only a few minutes to go before he left, he'd finished brushing his teeth and was regarding himself in the mirror.

"Johnny, come on. We need to leave now if we're going to get you to the coach station on time," called his mother up the stairs.

"Okay, Mum. I'll be right down," replied Johnny, quickly smoothing his unruly mop of hair down with a damp hand and rolling his eyes, as a few disobedient strands immediately popped back up again. Never mind, he thought, as he turned to leave the bathroom. What my hair looks like won't matter when it's underneath a snowboarding helmet and I'm flying down the mountainside at a hundred miles an hour. And with that, he closed the bathroom door behind him and ran down the stairs to join his parents.

Johnny's mum was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs and playfully tousled his hair as he put his winter coat on, undoing all of his hard work of just moments before. Once he was dressed against the winter chill, his mum opened the front door and they stepped outside. Johnny was glad of his new ski jacket because even with the early morning sunshine doing its best to warm up the day, the temperature outside was still bitterly cold and he could see his breath rising up before him every time he breathed out. Thankfully, his dad had already started the car and had also very thoughtfully left the boot open, so that Johnny could check for himself that his suitcase and backpack had been safely loaded onboard. Quickly slamming the boot and opening the rear door of the car, Johnny was immediately enveloped by a welcome blast of deliciously warm air. Without further hesitation, he jumped into the car, shut the door behind him and as soon as his dad heard Johnny's seatbelt click, they were off.

Not that they went very fast, mind you. The early morning conditions meant that the road to the coach station was treacherous and on more than one occasion, Johnny felt the car twitch and wriggle, as one or other of the tyres hit a small patch of ice.

"Better to be safe than sorry, son," said his father, slowing the car even further. "But we've got plenty of time. We'll get you to the coach station well before you're due to ship out, so just sit back and relax, okay?"

"Yes, Dad," replied Johnny, whose anxiety was beginning to build with every passing second, causing him to start bouncing up and down in his seat, as if by adding his motion to that of the car, they would get there faster. To try and take his mind off the excruciatingly slow journey, Johnny stared out of the window and tried to imagine how the Alps would differ from the drab December surroundings they were currently passing through. Well, for a start, there would probably be a lot more snow and a lot less houses, thought Johnny, as they crawled through the dreary suburbs, the houses on either side of them decorated with small icicles that were rapidly melting as the day advanced. And the trees, being pines, would still

have their leaves, unlike the leafless, twisted and frost-burnt skeletons that lined the streets here, gripping the frozen ground for all they were worth against the biting cold. As they drove, Johnny continued to paint a picture of the magnificent, snow-encrusted mountains in his mind and as he did so, his anxiety was gradually replaced by his original excitement, until at last, completely lost within his dream world, his father called out: "We're here."

Johnny returned to earth with a bump and looked at the scene laid out before him. Lined up along one side of the low, concrete platform were ten coaches, all gleaming white and looking for all the world as if they had been hand-picked for the journey into the alpine wilderness. However, if the coaches looked serene and majestic, standing in their silent line, then they were surrounded by a sea of chaos.

Everywhere that Johnny looked were schoolchildren, either being hugged and kissed goodbye by their parents or milling around in loose groups, gossiping about the adventures to come or playing silly games with each other. In between the seething mass of parents and children, were enormous piles of luggage, being diligently stowed away inside the bellies of the coaches by equally large attendants, made even more imposing by the thick, woollen overcoats that they were wearing. In his excited state, Johnny imagined that they were the descendants of Himalayan Yetis, somehow tamed by man and put to work endlessly loading and unloading the stream of mighty white coaches that arrived and departed each day. And finally, looking as harassed as ever and trying desperately to contain and control the madness swirling around them, were the teachers, each one holding a sign for their particular school and yelling out instructions, commands and in some cases, dire threats, to the children surrounding them.

Johnny's dad pulled the car into an empty parking space and together they unloaded the luggage and began to thread their way towards the line of coaches. They were about halfway there, when Johnny spotted Simon and Trudy, standing with a small group of children next to one of Johnny's teachers. Johnny stopped and with a pleading look on his face, said: "Mum. Dad. Can we say goodbye here? I don't really want, well, you know."

"Of course, we understand, don't we dear?" replied Johnny's dad. "You're all grown up now and you can't have us making a scene, can you?" he continued.

"Of course not," replied Johnny's mum, rubbing a tear away from the corner of her eye and blowing a gentle sniff into a handkerchief artfully retrieved from her trouser pocket. "Now, you have a wonderful time, but be careful, won't you?" she said, tousling Johnny's hair once more and planting a big, lipstick coated kiss onto his cheek, which he immediately tried to rub off.

"Skiing is a lot of fun, but it can also be quite dangerous. Enjoy yourself, which I'm sure you will, but don't go taking any unnecessary risks. We nearly lost you once before and I don't think that I could ever go through that again," she continued, as she wrapped him in her arms and gave him a surprisingly strong hug.

"Yes, you take good care of yourself, my boy," said Johnny's dad, holding his hand out, but then changing his mind and embracing his son in another bone crushing hug.

"I will, I will," replied Johnny, somewhat breathlessly, as he disengaged himself from his father's arms. "Now, I'd better get going. I don't want to miss the coach, do I?" he continued, as he slung his backpack onto his shoulder and began pulling the suitcase along

behind him, its wheels rattling and squeaking in protest as they negotiated the rough tarmac of the carpark.

“We love you!” called out his mum, just as Johnny reached his friends.

“I love you too!” replied Johnny without thinking, earning himself a round of taunts and jeers from Simon, Trudy and the others in the group.

“Oh, shut up, will you?” said Johnny to Simon and Trudy, both of whom were, if anything, more excited than he was to be going on the skiing holiday. “You probably did the same and I bet you even cried when you said goodbye to your mummy, didn’t you Simon?” he continued, winking to Trudy as he said it.

“No, I didn’t!” replied Simon indignantly, as Johnny turned around just in time to see his parents pulling away in the car.

Well, this is it, thought Johnny, as he regarded his friends. Not quite the biggest adventure we’ve ever been on, but hopefully a lot more enjoyable than the last one. A lot had changed in the past three years, he reflected. For one thing, Simon had grown considerably. Gone was most of his puppy fat, to be replaced by an increasing amount of muscle, however, the broken glasses were still there. It didn’t matter how hard he tried to look after them. Somehow, within a week of getting a new pair of glasses, they were almost certainly broken, and, in the end, Simon’s parents had given up buying replacements, opting instead for the tried and tested method of using a piece of worn-out sticking plaster to hold the broken halves together.

Trudy had also changed and was fast becoming the talk of the town. While she still had her temper, which more than one young admirer had cause to regret, her features had softened considerably, giving her something of an Amazonian look, rather than the ferocious tomboy appearance that she once had. Even her wild, flame-red hair had been tamed and while the jeans and ripped T-shirts were still very much in evidence, she somehow managed to wear them with a degree of glamour and style that would have been unheard of only a year or two before.

Suddenly, a whistle blast echoed around the coach station, followed by the booming voice of one of the teachers, both of which, silenced the children instantly.

“Right, listen up you lot!” shouted the voice. “Everybody get in line behind your teacher. We’ll be going in a minute and we don’t want to leave anyone behind, do we?” the voice chuckled at what it thought was a joke and received nothing but stony silence from the massed horde of children in return.

“Right, I’ll be back in a minute,” said Trudy, as she darted off into the crowd towards the line for her own school.

“I don’t know what she’s thinking. She won’t be allowed on our coach. She’s from a different school,” said Simon, as Trudy returned to their group, a triumphant smile on her face.

Simon’s bemusement continued right up until they were all seated on the coach. At his insistence, he and Johnny had the seats right at the front, with only the teacher sitting in front of them, on the little drop-down chair usually reserved for the tour guide.

“Sorry about this. I suffer from really bad motion sickness,” said Simon sheepishly, as he squashed himself into the seat next to Johnny and clipped the lap-belt together with a grunt. “I’m alright in my dad’s car, but anywhere else and I get horribly sick if I can’t see where I’m going,” he continued, before turning around to Trudy, saying: “So, how on earth did you manage to get a seat on our coach, Miss Smarty-pants?”

“I just asked my teacher if it was alright if I travelled with you guys,” replied Trudy smugly. “She was fine about it. In fact, I think she’s really quite pleased not to have me on her coach, if I’m honest about it,” continued Trudy, still smiling broadly at the boys.

“So, it was as easy as that?” said Simon, shaking his head in amazement. “You know, I would never have thought to do something like that. Very clever, Trudy. Very clever indeed,” he carried on, as the coach’s engine abruptly started and the noise of fifty or so highly excited children subsided into a murmur of anticipation at their imminent departure.

Well, here we go, thought Johnny, with a sense of growing exhilaration, as the coach pulled away from the platform and took its place at the end of the line, heading at a slow, but stately pace out of the station and on towards the next part of their journey.

Chapter 2 – The Ferry and the Lorry

The coach trip itself was relatively uneventful and most of the children lapsed into a bored silence, as mile after mile of wintry countryside rolled by, until eventually, it gave way to a sweeping view of the sea, all white-topped waves against a grey horizon, with a few solitary boats rocking alarmingly up and down on the swell in between. And there, perched at the very end of the land, almost mocking the mighty power of the sea, was the ferry terminal. And nestled within that, its mouth gaping wide open, like some enormous metal alligator, was the ferry itself.

The roar of cheering that sprang up at the sight of the ferry was nothing compared to the chaos that erupted once the children were safely on board. No sooner had the massive, steel doors of the loading bay clanged shut than just under five hundred schoolchildren raced off their coaches and up to the deck, jostling and shoving each other in the race to be first to the railings. Teachers, helpers and several of the deckhands anxiously paced up and down the line of squirming bodies, making sure that no one fell overboard, as the thick, metal mooring cables were cast off and the ferry began to back slowly out of the terminal.

Gripping onto the plastic handhold of the railing for all that they were worth, as they were buffeted this way and that by the other children, were Johnny, Simon and Trudy. Like everyone else who had managed to secure a prime position, they were staring down at the frothing water below the ferry, as it emerged from the relative shelter of the terminal and out into the harbour. Suddenly, a large wave hit the side of the boat, tipping it towards the water below and sending up a chorus of screams and shouts, as a wall of cold, salty spray hit the children full in the face.

“Okay, everyone get back from the railings, please,” came the voice of one of the teachers, as she tried to break up the mass of damp children still lining the rails. No sooner were the words out of her mouth than another, even larger wave, hit the ferry, causing it to lurch even more alarmingly towards the sea and sending up an even bigger wall of spray that drenched her to the bone.

“Right, everyone inside, now!” she bellowed, as she tried unsuccessfully to wring the contents of the sea from her soaking wet clothes.

With an even larger chorus of moans and groans, the children began to file reluctantly into the passenger area. The last child to enter was Simon and it was with one final look of longing at the sea and a rather pale complexion on his face that he entered the lounge and took a seat next to one of the windows. No sooner was he inside, than the doors to the deck were firmly closed behind him and the ferry began to rock up and down, and from side to side, as the boat headed out into the open sea.

Now if you have ever been on a ship that is pitching and rolling around in heavy weather, along with five hundred highly animated schoolchildren that have been confined against their will, then you will know that chaos is not really the right word to describe the scene on the ferry. It doesn't even come close. Within moments of being enclosed and despite the valiant efforts of the teachers and their assistants, the children were everywhere, shouting and screaming in mock alarm as the boat rose and fell with the waves, playing silly games, such as seeing who could stand on one leg the longest as the floor shifted underfoot, hiding under the tables and chairs, ignoring every ‘Keep Out’ sign that they came across and generally causing as much disruption as possible.

Many of the other passengers wisely decided to retire to the bar and restaurant, both of which were out of bounds to school parties. Those few that chose to remain in the public area did so by huddling together in small groups, using their newspapers, magazines and books, held inches from their noses, as a defensive wall to try and block out the noise and unwanted questioning from the more inquisitive children. It was only when a small group of children, pretending to be pirates, managed to get on to the bridge and demanded that the captain hand over the keys to the boat, that a general state of emergency was declared, and the captain announced over the speakers that the next child to misbehave would be made to walk the plank. That calmed things down a bit, although the crew did have their work cut out for a while, trying to locate an offshoot of the pirate group that had decided to make their way to the engine room to see if they could turn off the propellers.

Surrounded by the gradually diminishing madness around them, Johnny and Trudy stared at Simon with increasing concern. In addition to not having said a word since coming inside, he had gradually gone from pale white to a light green colour.

“Simon, are you alright?” said Trudy, reaching out to pat him gently on the arm.

“Not really,” replied Simon, turning briefly away from the window to regard his friends. Then, without warning, he said: “Excuse me,” and claspng both hands firmly over his mouth, he leapt down from the chair and ran across the lounge towards the toilets as fast as his legs could carry him.

“Well, he did say that he suffered from motion sickness, I guess,” said Johnny, turning his gaze back towards the window, where he focused on the seemingly endless cascade of spray and foam being thrown up, as the ferry bravely battled the sea.

After a few minutes of silence, Trudy said: “Do you ever think about him, Johnny?”

“Who, Simon?” replied Johnny, somewhat surprised by Trudy’s question. “Not really. I mean I see him just about every day at school,” he continued.

“No, not Simon. I mean Eddie. Do you ever think about him?” said Trudy, fixing Johnny with one of her warning stares.

Johnny continued to look out of the window at the merciless water surrounding them and then turned to face his friend. “I’m not sure what has brought this on, but seeing as you asked, yes, I do think about him from time to time. But not as much as I used to. I sometimes wonder what he’s up to, but I tend to think that as long as he’s not right here then everything is probably alright. I mean I know that I’m going to see him again one day, he did say so, after all, but I just hope that it’s a long way off in the future, if you know what I mean. Anyway, why do you ask?”

“No reason really,” replied Trudy, shifting her gaze to avoid Johnny’s stare. “It’s just that over the past few months I’ve found myself thinking about him more and more often. It’s not a premonition or anything, at least I don’t think so, but I find myself waking up in the middle of the night with the feeling that something is wrong,” she continued.

“Well, as long as everything doesn’t turn grey around you, then you’re all right,” said Johnny with a thin smile. Then, seeing the serious look on Trudy’s face, he reached out his hand and placed it gently on her arm, saying: “Look, if something really was wrong, then I’m sure that we’d all know about it. He’d be here, or we’d be there. And even though we’ve all

met him, I've had that particular honour twice now and I haven't sensed anything out of the ordinary."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said Trudy, breaking away from Johnny's grip. "Perhaps I'm just reading too much into my dreams, that's all. As you said, you've met him twice and you don't feel that anything is wrong. I don't know, I'm probably being oversensitive," she continued.

"What, you, oversensitive? Never!" exclaimed Johnny. "I don't believe it! Now, come on. I think we'd better go and see how Simon is getting on." And with that, he jumped down from his chair and teetered across the still wildly pitching lounge towards the toilets, with Trudy following somewhat reluctantly in tow.

Trudy had to stand outside the toilets, while Johnny went inside to see how his friend was doing. Unfortunately, if anything, Simon's condition had gotten worse now that he didn't have a window to look out of and it was a very one-sided conversation that Johnny had with him, which culminated in Johnny sending Trudy to look for a teacher, while he tried his best to take Simon's mind off the journey.

"Not long to go now. Soon, we'll be back on dry land and on our way to the Alps. You'll be fine," he said to Simon, in what he hoped was his most light-hearted and reassuring voice. "Now, Trudy and I are going to leave you with Mr Perkins, who is going to look after you and we'll see you once we dock at the other end, okay?" he continued, as Mr Perkins, the woodwork teacher, knocked on the door and entered the toilet block.

"He's all yours," said Johnny, giving Mr Perkins a thankful smile.

"Wonderful. It's just what I've always wanted. A seasick schoolboy," replied Mr Perkins sarcastically, holding the door to the toilets open, so that Johnny could make his escape.

"Poor old Simon. I do hope he feels a bit better once we're off the ferry," he said to Trudy, as they resumed their seats by the window and stared once again at the shifting sea around them.

A short while later, Trudy piped up and said excitedly: "Look, over there. Land ahoy!" With that, the entire horde of schoolchildren took up the chant, much to the extreme annoyance of the, by now, completely exhausted and brow-beaten passengers, teachers and crew.

What seemed like hours later, but which was, in fact, less than thirty minutes, the children were back on their respective coaches and the ferry docked at its destination with a shudder and loud thump as it made contact with dry land. Shortly afterwards, the massive steel doors of the loading bay opened, and the coaches disembarked into the waiting arms of the local Customs officials. While they were busy checking all of the passports and sifting through the busloads of assorted luggage, the captain of the ferry took his entire crew down to the bar, where he bought them all a very stiff drink and vowed never to carry a school party again as long as he lived.

After what seemed like hours and was, this time, indeed well over an hour, the inter-school skiing trip was at last cleared for entry and, at last, the coaches were allowed to make their way into the country proper. As the last coach to be loaded on board the ferry, Johnny's was the first one to be unloaded and so it led the way, trundling down the city streets on the

wrong side of the road, much to Johnny's growing disappointment. He'd been expecting snow-capped mountains and endless forests of pine trees from the beginning. Instead, the town looked pretty much like the ones he'd seen at home and although he couldn't fully understand the signs on the shops, he could quite easily work out what they sold.

When he raised his disappointment with his friends, Simon, who was gradually returning to his normal colour, told him: "Wait until we're out of the city and into the real countryside. Then it gets a whole lot better, as long as you don't mind narrow, twisty mountain roads, that is. I did a similar trip with Mum and Dad years ago, so I know what I'm talking about."

"I hope you're right," replied Johnny glumly, turning to look out of the side window, while Simon continued to stare fixedly ahead, looking through the windscreen of the coach.

Sometime later, it turned out that Simon was absolutely correct. A few miles after having left the town behind them, the bare fields of the winter countryside began to give way to gently rolling hills, which in turn grew steeper and steeper as they made their way up into the mountains. As the coaches clawed their way higher and higher, the temperature began to drop and as they turned a particularly sharp bend in the road, they got their first glimpse of the Alps.

"Wow!" said Johnny, as the hills briefly parted to reveal an enormous mountain range, its rugged peaks gleaming almost silver-white, as the snow reflected the late afternoon sunlight. "Now, that's more like it. Exactly how I'd imagined it, in fact, and just look at all those pine trees. There must be thousands of them up there," he continued, as a wide smile crossed his face.

As quickly as they had appeared, the Alps vanished from view, as the coach turned another corner and the rocky, alpine hills engulfed them once again. Satisfied at having confirmed for himself that the Alps were actually real and not some kind of bad joke played on innocent schoolchildren by mean teachers, Johnny began to relax and lost himself deep in happy thoughts of the holiday ahead. He was almost asleep when Trudy tapped him on the shoulder, jolting him from a daydream in which he'd just won the Olympic gold medal for freestyle snowboarding, and said impatiently: "At the rate we're going, it will be time to go home again when we arrive at the resort. I mean, it's starting to get dark and we've still got a long way to go before we're up in the snowline."

Johnny looked out of the windscreen and saw that Trudy was right, about the growing darkness at least. Although the steep valley that they were passing through did cut out a lot of the sunlight, giving the place a rather cold and gloomy appearance, when he had last looked, the sky was still a clear, brilliant blue. Now, however, it had turned a dark, inky grey and if he peered into it really hard, he thought he could just about make out one or two early evening stars starting to shine far above them.

He was about to reply to Trudy, when the coach driver, as if reading her mind, shifted the coach into a lower gear and put his foot down heavily on the accelerator pedal. As he did so, the coach lurched forwards, twitching left and right, as the tyres struggled to find a grip on the narrow mountain road and throwing the children back into their seats in the process. Suddenly, one of the wheels hit a patch of ice hidden in the shadows and the bus began to skid across the centre line, straight into the path of a supply lorry coming down the hill from the ski resort. The driver of the lorry flashed his headlights and blew his horn, while the coach driver desperately snatched at the steering wheel, trying to bring the wildly sliding

vehicle back under control, but it was too late. Moments before the lorry and coach collided, Johnny glanced across to Simon, sitting next to him, his eyes wide with terror and his mouth making a perfect 'O' as he readied himself to scream. Then there was a loud thump, the sensation of flying and everything went black.

Chapter 3 – Eddie

When Johnny came round, he was lying several feet away from the coach. Simon was lying next to him, moaning softly and rubbing his head. As he picked himself up off the ground, he saw that Trudy had also been flung from the coach and was standing up, regarding herself with a strange look on her face. As she turned to face Johnny, her look of bewilderment turned into shock and she pointed at him, her face draining of all colour. Johnny looked down at himself and saw that he was completely and mysteriously unharmed. Oh, no, he thought, before spinning around and looking once more at Simon. There beside Simon's body, lay his own, twisted and crumpled on the ground, as it had been almost five years before. He felt the colour draining from his own face, as Simon rose and said: "What happened? Are we alright?"

Johnny was momentarily lost for words. Then he regained his senses and replied as steadily as he could: "No, Simon. I don't think that we're alright at all."

"What do you mean?" said Simon. "I feel absolutely fine. I've not even got a mark on me. That was a lucky escape we had."

"I don't think we had a lucky escape at all, Simon, and I don't think that you should turn around either," replied Johnny, gazing at the still form on the ground next to his, a thin trail of dark, red liquid pooling slowly underneath the body.

"What about Trudy? Is she okay? Oh, there she is, and she looks fine. A bit pale if you ask me, but otherwise alright," gabbled Simon, still confused by what was going on.

"Trudy, come over here, please," said Johnny, reaching out his hand towards the still shaking Trudy. It was then that he saw the crash and knew for sure what was going on.

The lorry had ripped through the side of the coach and then bounced off, tearing out most of the front passenger side, including the seats where they had been sitting. Fortunately, the teacher, who had been sitting on the little drop-down seat in front of them, had got up just before the accident, to sort out a group of children who were misbehaving at the back. Otherwise, there would have been four of them standing out there on the road.

The driver was slumped over the steering wheel of the coach, bleeding from a gash in his head, but groaning in pain, so he wasn't too badly hurt. Several of the other children had started to join him with cries of panic and distress of their own, and as Johnny listened, he could make out the growing sound of sirens coming down the mountain road from the resort above.

Trudy grabbed Johnny by the shoulders, jolting him from his silence and said in a small, frightened voice: "Are we dead?"

Johnny looked down and rolled back his sleeve, to reveal a narrow, leather bracelet encircling his wrist. A thin smile crossed his face as he saw the life-band hanging there and he looked back into Trudy's eyes and replied: "Yes, I think we are."

"No, you're not!" came a strangely bright voice and from around the side of the crumpled lorry, lying on its side, came a thin figure all dressed in black. "You're half dead. Well, fifty-fifty at least," the voice continued, as the figure came closer to them before pulling back the hood of its jacket to reveal a thin, pale face, smiling with a mouth containing far too many teeth.

It was Simon who broke the stunned silence first. “Eddie, is that you?” he said in shock and surprise.

“Correctamundo!” replied Eddie, as he reached the group and gave Simon a hearty slap on the shoulder. “Absolutely right! And it’s great to see you all again. I would have preferred it to have been under different circumstances, but then you know how it goes, well, Johnny does, at least,” he continued happily.

“Eddie!” cried Trudy, wrapping her arms around him and giving him a bone-crushing hug, which was rather unfortunate, seeing as how Eddie was now mostly comprised of bones. “Wow! You’ve changed!” she blurted out, as she released her grip, wincing in pain.

“Well, I’m a bit taller, a bit thinner and a lot more bony than last time we met, but I haven’t changed as much as you lot have,” replied Eddie, as he clicked and massaged his dislocated bones back into place. “I mean, look at you,” he continued, giving Trudy an appreciative stare, which made her blush fiercely and then turning to face Simon. “And you, look at you. Where’s all that puppy fat gone?”

Johnny, who had been silent throughout the preceding reunion, suddenly interrupted. “So why here? Why now? I mean, I know that you said we’d meet again one day, but to be honest, I wasn’t expecting it to be quite so soon.”

All of the humour vanished from Eddie’s face, to be replaced by an unusually serious expression, as he turned to look at Johnny. “Yes, I know and I’m really sorry about that. Really, I am. The truth is that I needed you. We all needed you, in fact. Something’s happened back in Deathville and we don’t know what to do about it,” he said somewhat cryptically.

“So, you mean that this wasn’t an accident then? That you somehow arranged it?” said Johnny in amazement. “I didn’t think you could do that or were even allowed to, for that matter,” he continued, absolutely astounded to discover that once again he was stuck in a life and death situation through no fault of his own.

“I’m afraid so. It took quite a bit of work arranging things, especially that patch of ice over there and even then, we weren’t sure that it would work, but as I said, things back home are desperate and we really didn’t know what else to do,” replied Eddie despondently.

“But, I mean, killing us off just because you’ve got problems at home! That’s not fair!” cried Johnny in dismay and anger. “I was really looking forward to this holiday and spending time with my friends and now here I am, dead again! Do you know what that’s going to do to my parents, not to mention to Simon’s folks and Trudy’s foster family?” he continued, his voice rising to a shout as his outrage began to take over.

“Johnny. Johnny! Look, I really am sorry about this and I am still your friend, I hope, but there really was nothing else that we could do. And it’s not like you’re really dead. As long as you don’t lose your life-bands in the coming battle then we’ll return you afterwards, like before and everything will be alright,” a pleading note appearing in his voice, as he tried to calm Johnny down.

Suddenly Trudy butted in. “Eddie, did you just say ‘battle’? What on earth is going on?”

“Not on Earth,” said Eddie, unable, as always, to avoid making a wisecrack. “The problem’s back in Deathville, the place where I live, and I think it’s better if you see what’s happened for yourselves, rather than have me try to explain to you right here,” he continued, reaching out a bony hand towards Johnny.

“Really? So, we’re going to Deathville, are we?” said Johnny sourly, as he took Eddie’s outstretched hand.

“I’m afraid so and we’re all going, not just you,” replied Eddie equally glumly.

“What does he mean, we’re all going? Going where?” asked Simon, who was still struggling to comprehend exactly what was going on.

“Hold hands with Johnny and I’ll show you. And no matter what happens, don’t let go. I couldn’t deal with any more lost souls!” said Eddie, as he gripped Johnny’s hand a little more tightly and turned his back on his friend.

“Just grab my hand and like he says, whatever you do, don’t let go!” cried Johnny, as his anger was suddenly replaced by an overwhelming feeling of exhilaration at the thought of travelling to Deathville once again.

And so, with Eddie taking the lead, followed by Johnny and Simon, with Trudy hanging on tightly to the end of the makeshift conga-line, he turned and gave them an encouraging wink, before jumping high up into the air.