

## **The Final Charge**

### **Alexander Hewitt**

The last man on earth sat alone in the corner. The light of a summer sun was streaming through the window, landing on the dusty floorboards. The world was silent, no birds, no buzz of insects, no leaves rustling outside. The wood beneath him was brittle from years of rot, but even that had since become sterile.

Now there was just him, sitting in the room, his breath like sandpaper in his ears. His heart beat like a drum, slow, and steady. He counted the beats, trying to ignore his aching legs.

He reached towards the pile of cans beside him, the results of his days search. The supply would last him a few months if he was careful.

His hand was trembling as it grasped the nearest tin, and drew it towards him.

Something thumped. He glanced to the stack of metal food, but nothing had fallen.

The man shrugged, the sound was probably in his head. He was surprised it had taken him this long to start hearing things.

He inspected the can, shaking it by his ear. The label was missing, but from the sound it was likely beans. Most of the cans he found were beans.

Something knocked again, twice. The sound was coming from the door.

He turned towards the noise, and the door creaked open.

He placed the can down beside him, and tried to get up. His legs still hurt, but he figured even hallucinations were worth checking. Anything to help pass the time.

As he started to rise, a figure walked into the room.

They were tall, draped in a black robe, a hood covering their face, and in their bony grip was a scythe that shimmered in the sunlight.

The figure turned towards the man. "Hello."

The man's voice was dry. He hadn't spoken in months.

"H-hello," he said, stammering. He coughed and swallowed, trying to get his vocal cords working. "Who are you?"

His gaze wandered up and down the lone figure. He admired the shine of the scythe, the depths of the shadows where a face should be, and the way the dust lay undisturbed beneath their feet.

“I am Death,” said the figure. The voice shivered through the man's bones, and the room grew cold.

The man blinked, rubbed his eyes and tried thinking of other things, trying to shift the hallucination from his mind. But when he opened his eyes, the figure remained.

“Have I gone mad?” he asked.

“What is madness, to a lonely soul?” Death replied. “You have nothing to judge sanity by, but yourself. So no.”

The man tried rubbing his eyes again, to no avail.

“Yep, definitely mad,” he said. “Trust my head to come up with that kind of crap.”

“I'm sorry,” said Death, bowing his head and clutching the scythe. “I didn't mean to upset you.”

“Who are you?” the man asked.

“I told you. I am Death.”

“No, honestly, who are you?”

“Would you prefer me to lie?”

The man shook his head. “No, I guess not. Does that mean, I'm dead?”

“No,” said Death.

“Am I dying?”

“Very slowly, but I think your people once called that living. It's intentional.”

“So, why are you here?”

“Because,” said Death, “you are the last one. The last of my charges before I rest my scythe for good.”

“And...?” asked the man.

“And...” continued Death. “You seemed...lonely...”

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It was another month before the summer days started to cool.

The sun was low in the sky, casting long grey shadows. They wandered through the old park, dust

crunching beneath the man's feet, gazing at tree branches that hadn't sprouted leaves since he was a child.

"I remember these," said Death. "These were great oaks, mighty creatures that saw the fall of empires. I was there for them all, in the end."

The man kicked at the loose dust beneath his feet, spitting clouds around his shoes.

"I remember this place too," he said. "We used to come here as kids. In Autumn, we'd gather up the leaves and jump through the piles."

He smiled, chuckling to himself as the memories flooded in. "I used to always try and make the tallest tower, all yellow, reds and oranges, then crash through the middle and make the biggest mess I could. This friend and I would compete, see who could make the tallest pile, the biggest splash. We'd end up with crunched leaves through our clothes for days after that."

His smile started to recede as the memories drifted away. He kicked at the dust beneath his shoes again.

"Why would you do that?" Death asked.

The man shrugged, and turned to them. "Because it was fun."

"Ahh," said Death, in the tone of one that recognises the answer, but understands it as much as a cat understands how to open cat food. "I've long watched humans, seen your concept of 'fun,' I've never quite grasped its purpose. It's a learning mechanism, yes?"

"That's probably a part of it," the man replied. "But really, it's just something you do, because you can. Something that makes you smile."

Death considered this a few moments. "Like, chess?"

"Possibly. Do you enjoy playing chess?"

"Yes," said Death. "It is by far the greatest invention of your species."

"Not the wheel?"

"Not even close. I've never had need for wheels."

The man grinned. "Fair enough. Who do you play with?"

"Every so often one of my charges challenge me to a game," they said. "Trying to win back their life, forestall walking through the next door. I don't have the power to grant that, so I just make sure to win, and they seem happy enough."

The man chuckled, and watched a spec of dust fall from the tree branches, like snow.

“Shame you don't have a board,” he said. “I always fancied learning how to play chess.”

There was a rustle of cloth behind him. When the man turned, Death was holding a thick folded chess set in his hand. It had stone tiles with a yellow and black painted border, and the man could hear pieces rattle inside.

“I always carry a set with me,” said Death. “Just in case.”

The man laughed. “Alright, how do you play?”

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The room was cold, and the dark window panes covered in frost. The man's stomach grumbled as he threw another chair leg onto the fire, and he glanced to the small pile of remaining cans. They had searched for weeks, but every building they found, they had already emptied, and the winter chill made moving at night impossible.

The firelight danced around the room, shining off of the scythe leant against Death's shoulder, as he captured the man's knight with a pawn.

“Damn, nice move,” said the man, sitting down to the chessboard again. He hadn't managed to beat Death in a single game, but he liked trying.

Death didn't react, but the man thought he felt them smiling.

“Do you give up?”

“Never!” the man said with a grin. “Watch this!”

He picked up his second knight, and moved the piece forwards.

“Your species has always amazed me,” said Death. “Your resilience, your stubbornness.”

Death selected a bishop with his bony fingers, and captured the second knight.

“And look where it got us?” the man said. “Just me left, running out of food, and chairs. Supplies will maybe last a month. Two at most.”

“And yet you keep searching,” said Death. “No matter how many times the world throws you down, you always seem to get back up. Why? Why keep fighting?”

“It's just how we are, you must have seen human stubbornness before?”

“Yes, many times,” said Death. “And there's usually something, a loved one left behind, a deed that

needed doing, ambition, or fear. But here we are, at the end of everything, nothing left worth the struggle, and you're still fighting. It's incredibly...human."

The man chuckled. "You say that like it's a bad thing?"

"I would never," said Death. "But I am curious, why do you do it?"

"Tradition, I guess," the man said with a shrug. He moved his pawn forward a space. "And, it's how you get better, how you overcome problems like this. You try, and you fail, and you try, and you fail."

Death moved their bishop, to take the man's pawn.

"Until eventually," said the man, selecting his queen. "You learn."

He moved the piece forwards, threatening Death's king.

"That's Check, isn't it?" the man said, smiling. He felt Death smiling back.

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The sunlight had returned, streaming in through the window, but it held no warmth.

The man lay in the corner. His stomach had stopped grumbling days ago, and he doubted his legs would let him stand. Death was sitting beside him, the dark cloth of the robe spilling past their feet.

"Here's a question," said the man. His voice was weak.

"Yes?" asked Death.

"Was I the lonely one, or you?"

He felt Death smile at him, before turning to the chessboard, and moving a piece. The man didn't have the strength, so Death had been playing both sides for him to watch.

"What happens to me, after all this?" the man asked, as he had many times in recent days.

"After you die, I release you from this world," said Death. "And I walk with you to the next doorway."

"And, what happens to you, when I'm gone?"

Death didn't answer for a few moments.

"I'm not sure," they said at last. "You're my final charge. After you, I'm done."

The man thought about this, and started coughing, the spasms burning his throat. Death looked down at the board.

“Would, maybe,” said the man, when he could breathe again. “Would you maybe like to come with me? After all this, I could use a friend.”

“Friend?” asked Death, looking at him. “You would really want me to...join you?”

The man smiled. “I would.”

“I don't know if I can,” they said. “Only the dead can walk through the doorway.”

“But if I'm the last thing that's ever going to die,” the man said. “Then surely death itself has died? So you'll have to walk yourself through eventually.”

Death shrugged. “I guess that's one way to look at it.”

“Good,” he said, coughing one last time. “Then you can come with me.”

The man closed his eyes, and eased his head back, as one by one his muscles relaxed.

“...And...don't forget the chessboard.”

His heart stopped beating.

Death rose to their feet

They watched the breath leave him, and whispered: “That sounds like fun.”

They grasped the scythe, and with one final swing, they released the man's soul from his body.

His spirit stood up, pain free, and grinned. “Hello.”

A door appeared in the distance, a dark hole in the world, shining in black.

Death lay the scythe beside the body, and smiled to their old partner, the job now done.

“Are you ready?” asked Death, holding out a bony palm. “No regrets?”

The man smiled at his friend and took their hand. “None.”

They both walked towards the doorway, hand in hand.

And together, they stepped through.

Alexander Hewitt is a writer currently based in London, UK. He travels whenever possible, never

sleeps enough, and is rather fond of wearing hats. He has an occasionally updated blog, <https://alexanderhewitt.blogspot.com/> and you can follow him more regularly on Twitter at @alexandrjhe Witt or instagram @alexanderjhe Witt.