For Olga (Ludovika) Nødtvedt, a faraway fan and friend

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The creation of a novel is more than just the effort of the writer—there are many people involved in bringing a story to fruition, and every single one of them deserves credit for their contribution.

First and foremost, my editor David Gale and associate editor Liz Kossnar, as well as everyone at Simon & Schuster, who have been, and continue to be amazingly supportive: Justin Chanda, Jon Anderson, Anne Zafian, Katy Hershberger, Michelle Leo, Candace Greene, Krista Vossen, Chrissy Noh, and Katrina Groover to name just a few. Also Chloë Foglia, for what has to be one of my all-time favorite covers!

Thanks to Barb Sobel, my assistant who runs interference and keeps my life organized; and Matt Lurie, who manages my website and has built my social media presence.

Thanks to my book agent, Andrea Brown; my foreign rights agent, Taryn Fagerness, my entertainment industry agents, Steve Fisher & Debbie Deuble-Hill at APA; my manager, Trevor Engelson; my contract attorneys Shep Rosenman and Jennifer Justman, as well as trademark attorneys, Dov Scherzer and Matt Smith.

At the writing of this, Scythe is being developed as a feature film, and I'd

like to thank everyone involved, including Jay Ireland at Blue Grass Films, as

well as Sara Scott and Mika Pryce at Universal.

Forever and always, a special thanks to my kids, Brendan, Jarrod, Joelle and Erin—who keep me on my toes, keep me young, and always have thought-provoking comments and suggestions. And, of course, my aunt Mildred Altman, who is going strong at eighty-eight, and has read every single one of my books!

Thanks everyone! This series promises to be a very exciting journey! I'm glad you're all a part of it!

Part One

ROBE AND RING

We must, by law, keep a record of the innocents we kill.

And as I see it, they're all innocents. Even the guilty. Everyone is guilty of something, and everyone still harbors a memory of childhood innocence, no matter how many layers of life wrap around it. Humanity is innocent; humanity is guilty, and both states are undeniably true.

We must, by law, keep a record.

It begins on day one of apprenticeship—but we do not officially call it "killing." It's not socially or morally correct to call it such. It is,

and has always been, “gleaning,” named for the way the poor would trail behind farmers in ancient times, taking the stray stalks of grain left behind. It was the earliest form of charity. A scythe’s work is the same. Every child is told from the day he or she is old enough to understand that the scythes provide a crucial service for society. Ours is the closest thing to a sacred mission the modern world knows. Perhaps that is why we must, by law, keep a record. A public journal, testifying to those who will never die and those who are yet to be born, as to why we human beings do the things we do. We are instructed to write down not just our deeds but our feelings, because it must be known that we do have feelings. Remorse. Regret. Sorrow too great to bear. Because if we didn’t feel those things, what monsters would we be?

—From the gleaning journal of H.S. Curie

1

No Dimming of the Sun

The scythe arrived late on a cold November afternoon. Citra was at the dining room table, slaving over a particularly difficult algebra problem, shuffling variables, unable to solve for X or Y, when this new and far more pernicious variable entered her life’s equation.

Guests were frequent at the Terranovas' apartment, so when the doorbell rang, there was no sense of foreboding—no dimming of the sun, no foreshadowing of the arrival of death at their door. Perhaps the universe should have deigned to provide such warnings, but scythes were no more supernatural than tax collectors in the grand scheme of things. They showed up, did their unpleasant business, and were gone.

Her mother answered the door. Citra didn't see the visitor, as he was, at first, hidden from her view by the door when it opened. What she saw was how her mother stood there, suddenly immobile, as if her veins had solidified

within her. As if, were she tipped over, she would fall to the floor and shatter.

"May I enter, Mrs. Terranova?"

The visitor's tone of voice gave him away. Resonant and inevitable, like the dull toll of an iron bell, confident in the ability of its peal to reach all those who needed reaching. Citra knew before she even saw him that it was a scythe. My god! A scythe has come to our home!

"Yes, yes of course, come in." Citra's mother stepped aside to allow him entry—as if she were the visitor and not the other way around.

He stepped over the threshold, his soft slipper-like shoes making no sound on the parquet floor. His multilayered robe was smooth ivory linen, and

although it reached so low as to dust the floor, there was not a spot of dirt on it anywhere. A scythe, Citra knew, could choose the color of his or her robe—every color except for black, for it was considered inappropriate for their job.

Black was an absence of light, and scythes were the opposite. Luminous and enlightened, they were acknowledged as the very best of humanity—which is why they were chosen for the job.

Some scythe robes were bright, some more muted. They looked like the rich, flowing robes of Renaissance angels, both heavy yet lighter than air. The unique style of scythes' robes, regardless of the fabric and color, made them easy to spot in public, which made them easy to avoid—if avoidance was what a person wanted. Just as many were drawn to them.

The color of the robe often said a lot about a scythe's personality. This scythe's ivory robe was pleasant, and far enough from true white not to assault the eye with its brightness. But none of this changed the fact of who and what he was.

He pulled off his hood to reveal neatly cut gray hair, a mournful face red-cheeked from the chilly day, and dark eyes that seemed themselves almost to be weapons. Citra stood. Not out of respect, but out of fear. Shock. She tried

not to hyperventilate. She tried not to let her knees buckle beneath her. They were betraying her by wobbling, so she forced fortitude to her legs, tightening her muscles. Whatever the scythe's purpose here, he would not see her crumble.

"You may close the door," he said to Citra's mother, who did so, although Citra could see how difficult it was for her. A scythe in the foyer could still turn around if the door was open. The moment that door was closed, he was truly, truly inside one's home.

He looked around, spotting Citra immediately. He offered a smile. "Hello, Citra," he said. The fact that he knew her name froze her just as solidly as his appearance had frozen her mother.

"Don't be rude," her mother said, too quickly. "Say hello to our guest."

"Good day, Your Honor."

"Hi," said her younger brother, Ben, who had just come to his bedroom door, having heard the deep peal of the scythe's voice. Ben was barely able to squeak out the one-word greeting. He looked to Citra and to their mother, thinking the same thing they were all thinking. Who has he come for? Will it be me? Or will I be left to suffer the loss?

"I smelled something inviting in the hallway," the scythe said, breathing in

the aroma. “Now I see I was right in thinking it came from this apartment.”

“Just baked ziti, Your Honor. Nothing special.” Until this moment, Citra had never known her mother to be so timid.

“That’s good,” said the scythe, “because I require nothing special.” Then he sat on the sofa and waited patiently for dinner.

Was it too much to believe that the man was here for a meal and nothing more? After all, scythes had to eat somewhere. Customarily, restaurants never charged them for food, but that didn’t mean a home-cooked meal was not more desirable. There were rumors of scythes who required their victims to prepare them a meal before being gleaned. Is that what was happening here? Whatever his intentions, he kept them to himself, and they had no choice but to give him whatever he wanted. Will he spare a life here today if the food is to his taste, Citra wondered? No surprise that people bent over backwards to please scythes in every possible way. Hope in the shadow of fear is the world’s most powerful motivator.

Citra’s mother brought him something to drink at his request, and now labored to make sure tonight’s dinner was the finest she had ever served. Cooking was not her specialty. Usually she would return home from work just in time to throw something quick together for them. Tonight their lives

might just rest on her questionable culinary skills. And their father? Would he

be home in time, or would a gleaning in his family take place in his absence?

As terrified as Citra was, she did not want to leave the scythe alone with his own thoughts, so she went into the living room with him. Ben, who was clearly as fascinated as he was fearful, sat with her.

The man finally introduced himself as Honorable Scythe Faraday.

"I . . . uh . . . did a report on Faraday for school once," Ben said, his voice cracking only once. "You picked a pretty cool scientist to name yourself after."

Scythe Faraday smiled. "I like to think I chose an appropriate Patron Historic. Like many scientists, Michael Faraday was underappreciated in his life, yet our world would not be what it is without him."

"I think I have you in my scythe card collection," Ben went on. "I have almost all the MidMerican scythes—but you were younger in the picture."

The man seemed perhaps sixty, and although his hair had gone gray, his goatee was still salt-and-pepper. It was rare for a person to let themselves reach such an age before resetting back to a more youthful self. Citra wondered how old he truly was. How long had he been charged with ending lives?

"Do you look your true age, or are you at the far end of time by choice?"

Citra asked.

“Citra!” Her mother nearly dropped the casserole she had just taken out of the oven. “What a question to ask!”

“I like direct questions,” the scythe said. “They show an honesty of spirit, so I will give an honest answer. I admit to having turned the corner four times. My natural age is somewhere near one hundred eighty, although I forget the exact number. Of late I’ve chosen this venerable appearance because I find that those I glean take more comfort from it.” Then he laughed.

“They think me wise.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Ben blurted “To glean one of us?”

Scythe Faraday offered an unreadable smile.

“I’m here for dinner.”

• • •

Citra’s father arrived just as dinner was about to be served. Her mom had apparently informed him of the situation, so he was much more emotionally prepared than the rest of them had been. As soon as he entered, he went straight over to Scythe Faraday to shake his hand, and pretended to be far more jovial and inviting than he truly must have been.

The meal was awkward—mostly silence punctuated by the occasional comment by the scythe. “You have a lovely home.” “What flavorful

lemonade!” “This may be the best baked ziti in all of MidMerica!” Even though everything he said was complimentary, his voice registered like a seismic shock down everyone’s spine.

“I haven’t seen you in the neighborhood,” Citra’s father finally said.

“I don’t suppose you would have,” he answered. “I am not the public figure that some other scythes choose to be. Some scythes prefer the spotlight, but to truly do the job right, it requires a level of anonymity.”

“Right?” Citra bristled at the very idea. “There’s a right way to glean?”

“Well,” he answered, “there are certainly wrong ways,” and said nothing more about it. He just ate his ziti.

As the meal neared its close, he said, “Tell me about yourselves.” It wasn’t a question or a request. It could only be read as a demand. Citra wasn’t sure whether this was part of his little dance of death, or if he was genuinely interested. He knew their names before he entered the apartment, so he probably already knew all the things they could tell him. Then why ask?

“I work in historical research,” her father said.

“I’m a food synthesis engineer,” said her mother.

The scythe raised his eyebrows. “And yet you cooked this from scratch.”

She put down her fork. “All from synthesized ingredients.”

“Yes, but if we can synthesize anything,” he offered, “why do we still need

food synthesis engineers?"

Citra could practically see the blood drain from her mother's face. It was her father who rose to defend his wife's existence. "There's always room for improvement."

"Yeah—and Dad's work is important, too!" Ben said.

"What, historical research?" The scythe waved his fork dismissing the notion. "The past never changes—and from what I can see, neither does the future."

While her parents and brother were perplexed and troubled by his comments, Citra understood the point he was making. The growth of civilization was complete. Everyone knew it. When it came to the human race, there was no more left to learn. Nothing about our own existence to decipher. Which meant that no one person was more important than any other. In fact, in the grand scheme of things, everyone was equally useless. That's what he was saying, and it infuriated Citra, because on a certain level, she knew he was right.

Citra was well known for her temper. It often arrived before reason, and left only after the damage was done. Tonight would be no exception.

"Why are you doing this? If you're here to glean one of us, just get it over with and stop torturing us!"

Her mother gasped, and her father pushed back his chair as if ready to get up and physically remove her from the room.

“Citra, what are you doing!” Now her mother’s voice was quivering. “Show respect!”

“No! He’s here, he’s going to do it, so let him do it. It’s not like he hasn’t decided; I’ve heard that scythes always make up their mind before they enter a home, isn’t that right?”

The scythe was unperturbed by her outburst. “Some do, some don’t,” he said gently. “We each have our own way of doing things.”

By now Ben was crying. Dad put his arm around him, but the boy was inconsolable.

“Yes, scythes must glean,” Faraday said, “but we also must eat, and sleep, and have simple conversation.”

Citra grabbed his empty plate away from him. “Well, the meal’s done, so you can leave.”

Then her father approached him. He fell to his knees. Her father was actually on his knees to this man! “Please, Your Honor, forgive her. I take full responsibility for her behavior.”

The scythe stood. “An apology isn’t necessary. It’s refreshing to be

challenged. You have no idea how tedious it gets; the pandering, the obsequious flattery, the endless parade of sycophants. A slap in the face is bracing. It reminds me that I'm human."

Then he went to the kitchen and grabbed the largest, sharpest knife he could find. He swished it back and forth, getting a feel for how it cut through the air.

Ben's wails grew, and his father's grip tightened on him. The scythe approached their mother. Citra was ready to hurl herself in front of her to block the blade, but instead of swinging the knife, the man held out his other hand.

"Kiss my ring."

No one was expecting this, least of all Citra.

Citra's mother stared at him, shaking her head, not willing to believe.

"You're . . . you're granting me immunity?"

"For your kindness and the meal you served, I grant you one year immunity from gleaning. No scythe may touch you."

But she hesitated. "Grant it to my children instead."

Still the scythe held out his ring to her. It was a diamond the size of his knuckle with a dark core. It was the same ring all scythes wore.

"I am offering it to you, not them."

“But—”

“Jenny, just do it!” insisted their father.

And so she did. She knelt, kissed his ring, her DNA was read and was transmitted to the Scythedom’s immunity database. In an instant the world knew that Jenny Terranova was safe from gleaning for the next twelve months. The scythe looked to his ring, which now glowed faintly red, indicating that the person before him had immunity from gleaning. He grinned, satisfied.

And finally he told them the truth.

“I’m here to glean your neighbor, Bridget Chadwell,” Scythe Faraday informed them. “But she was not yet home. And I was hungry.”

He gently touched Ben on the head, as if delivering some sort of benediction. It seemed to calm him. Then the scythe moved to the door, the knife still in his hand, leaving no question as to the method of their neighbor’s gleaning. But before he left, he turned to Citra.

“You see through the facades of the world, Citra Terranova. You’d make a good scythe.”

Citra recoiled. “I’d never want to be one.”

“That,” he said, “is the first requirement.”

Then he left to kill their neighbor.

• • •

They didn't speak of it that night. No one spoke of gleanings—as if speaking about it might bring it upon them. There were no sounds from next door. No screams, no pleading wails—or perhaps the Terranovas' TV was turned up too loud to hear it. That was the first thing Citra's father did once the scythe left—turn on the TV and blast it to drown out the gleaning on the other side of the wall. But it was unnecessary, because however the scythe accomplished his task, it was done quietly. Citra found herself straining to hear something —anything. Both she and Ben discovered in themselves a morbid curiosity that made them both secretly ashamed.

An hour later, Honorable Scythe Faraday returned. It was Citra who opened the door. His ivory robe held not a single splatter of blood. Perhaps he had a spare one. Perhaps he had used the neighbor's washing machine after her gleaning. The knife was clean, too, and he handed it to Citra.

"We don't want it," Citra told him, feeling pretty sure she could speak for her parents on the matter. "We'll never use it again."

"But you must use it," he insisted, "so that it might remind you."

"Remind us of what?"

"That a scythe is merely the instrument of death, but it is your hand that

swings me. You and your parents, and everyone else in this world are the wielders of scythes." Then he gently put the knife in her hands. "We are all accomplices. You must share the responsibility."

That may have been true, but after he was gone Citra still dropped the knife into the trash.

It is the most difficult thing a person can be asked to do. And knowing that it is for the greater good doesn't make it any easier.

People used to die naturally. Old age used to be a terminal affliction, not a temporary state. There were invisible killers called "diseases" that broke the body down. Aging couldn't be reversed, and there were accidents from which there was no return. Planes fell from the sky. Cars actually crashed. There was pain, misery, despair. It's hard for most of us to imagine a world so unsafe, with dangers lurking in every unseen, unplanned corner. All of that is behind us now, and yet a simple truth remains: People have to die.

It's not as if we can go somewhere else; the disasters on the moon and Mars colonies proved that. We have one very limited world, and although death has been defeated as completely as polio, people still must die. The ending of human life used to be in the hands of nature. But we stole it. Now we have a monopoly on death. We are its sole

distributor.

I understand why there are scythes, and how important and how necessary the work is . . . but I often wonder why I had to be chosen. And if there is some eternal world after this one, what fate awaits a taker of lives?

—From the gleaning journal of H.S. Curie

2

.303 %

Tyger Salazar had hurled himself out a thirty-nine-story window, leaving a terrible mess on the marble plaza below. His own parents were so annoyed by it, they didn't come to see him. But Rowan did. Rowan Damisch was just that kind of friend.

He sat by Tyger's bedside in the revival center, waiting for him to awake from speedhealing. Rowan didn't mind. The revival center was quiet. Peaceful. It was a nice break from the turmoil of his home, which lately had been filled with more relatives than any human being should be expected to endure. Cousins, second cousins, siblings, half-siblings. And now his grandmother had returned home after turning the corner for a third time, with a new husband and a baby on the way.

“You’re going to have a new aunt, Rowan,” she had announced. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

The whole thing pissed Rowan’s mother off—because this time Grandma had reset all the way down to twenty-five, making her ten years younger than her daughter. Now Mom felt pressured to turn the corner herself, if only to keep up with Grandma. Grandpa was much more sensible. He was off in EuroScandia, charming the ladies and maintaining his age at a respectable thirty-eight.

Rowan, at sixteen, had resolved he would experience gray hair before he turned his first corner—and even then, he wouldn’t reset so far down as to be embarrassing. Some people reset to twenty-one, which was the youngest genetic therapy could take a person. Rumor was, though, that they were working on ways to reset right down into the teens—which Rowan found ridiculous. Why would anyone in their right mind want to be a teenager more than once?

When he glanced back at his friend, Tyger’s eyes were open and studying Rowan.

“Hey,” Rowan said.

“How long?” Tyger asked.

“Four days.”

Tyger pumped his fist in triumph. “Yes! A new record!” He looked at his hands, as if taking stock of the damage. There was, of course, no damage left.

One did not wake up from speedhealing until there was nothing left to heal.

“Do you think it was jumping from such a high floor that did it, or was it the marble plaza?”

“Probably the marble,” Rowan said. “Once you reach terminal velocity, it doesn’t matter how high you are when you jump.”

“Did I crack it? Did they have to replace the marble?”

“I don’t know, Tyger—jeez, enough already.”

Tyger leaned back into his pillow, immensely pleased with himself. “Best splat ever!”

Rowan found he had patience to wait for his friend to wake up, but no patience for him now that he was conscious. “Why do you even do it? I mean,

it’s such a waste of time.”

Tyger shrugged. “I like the way it feels on the way down. Besides, I gotta remind my parents that the lettuce is there.”

That made Rowan chuckle. It was Rowan who had coined the term “lettuce-kid” to describe them. Both of them were born sandwiched

somewhere in the middle of large families, and were far from being their parents' favorites. "I got a couple of brothers that are the meat, a few sisters that are cheese and tomatoes, so I guess I'm the lettuce." The idea caught on, and Rowan had started a club called the Iceberg Heads at school, which now bragged almost two dozen members . . . although Tyger often teased that he was going to go rogue and start a romaine revolt.

Tyger had started splatting a few months ago. Rowan tried it once, and found it a monumental pain. He ended up behind on all his schoolwork, and his parents levied all forms of punishment—which they promptly forgot to enforce—one of the perks of being the lettuce. Still, the thrill of the drop wasn't worth the cost. Tyger, on the other hand, had become a splatting junkie.

"You gotta find a new hobby, man," Rowan told him. "I know the first revival is free, but the rest must be costing your parents a fortune."

"Yeah . . . and for once they have to spend their money on me."

"Wouldn't you rather they buy you a car?"

"Revival is compulsory," Tyger said. "A car is optional. If they're not forced to spend it, they won't."

Rowan couldn't argue with that. He didn't have a car either, and doubted his parents would ever get him one. The publicars were clean, efficient, and

drove themselves, his parents had argued. What would be the point in spending good money on something he didn't need? Meanwhile, they threw money in every direction but his.

"We're roughage," Tyger said. "If we don't cause a little intestinal distress, no one knows we're there."

• • •

The following morning, Rowan came face to face with a scythe. It wasn't unheard of to see a scythe in his neighborhood. You couldn't help but run into one once in a while—but they didn't often show up in a high school. The encounter was Rowan's fault. Punctuality was not his strong point—especially now that he was expected to escort his younger siblings and half-siblings to their school before hopping into a publicar and hurrying to his. He had just arrived and was heading to the attendance window when the scythe came around a corner, his spotless ivory robe flaring behind him.

Once, when hiking with his family, Rowan had gone off on his own and had encountered a mountain lion. The tight feeling in his chest now, as well as the weak feeling in his loins, had been exactly the same. Fight or flight, his biology said. But Rowan had done neither. Back then, he had fought those instincts and calmly raised his arms, as he had read to do, making himself

look larger. It had worked, and the animal bounded away, saving him a trip to

the local revival center.

Now, at the sudden prospect of a scythe before him, Rowan had an odd

urge to do the same—as if raising his hands above his head could frighten the

scythe away. The thought made him involuntarily laugh out loud. The last

thing you want to do is laugh at a scythe.

“Could you direct me to the main office?” the man asked.

Rowan considered giving him directions and heading the opposite way,

but decided that was too cowardly. “I’m going there,” Rowan said. “I’ll take

you.” The man would appreciate helpfulness—and getting on the good side of

a scythe couldn’t hurt.

Rowan led the way, passing other kids in the hall—students who, like him,

were late, or were just on an errand. They all gawked and tried to disappear

into the wall as he and the scythe passed. Somehow, walking through the hall

with a scythe became less frightening when there were others to bear the fear

instead—and Rowan couldn’t deny that it was a bit heady to be cast as a

scythe’s trailblazer, riding in the cone of such respect. It wasn’t until they

reached the office that the truth hit home. The scythe was going to glean one

of Rowan's classmates today.

Everyone in the office stood the moment they saw the scythe, and he wasted no time. "Please have Kohl Whitlock called to the office immediately."

"Kohl Whitlock?" said the secretary.

The scythe didn't repeat himself, because he knew she had heard—she just wasn't willing to believe.

"Yes, Your Honor, I'll do it right away."

Rowan knew Kohl. Hell, everyone knew Kohl Whitlock. Just a junior, he had already risen to be the school's quarterback. He was going to take them all the way to a league championship for the first time in forever.

The secretary's voice shook powerfully when she made the call into the intercom. She coughed as she said his name, choking up.

And the scythe patiently awaited Kohl's arrival.

The last thing Rowan wanted to do was antagonize a scythe. He should have just slunk off to the attendance window, gotten his readmit, and gone to class. But as with the mountain lion, he just had to stand his ground. It was a moment that would change his life.

"You're gleaning our star quarterback—I hope you know that."

The scythe's demeanor, so cordial a moment before, took a turn toward tombstone. "I can't see how it's any of your business."

“You’re in my school,” Rowan said. “I guess that makes it my business.”

Then self-preservation kicked in, and he strode to the attendance window, just out of the scythe’s line of sight. He handed in his forged tardy note, all the while muttering Stupid stupid stupid under his breath. He was lucky he wasn’t born in a time when death was natural, because he’d probably never survive to adulthood.

As he turned to leave the office, he saw a bleak-eyed Kohl Whitlock being led into the principal’s office by the scythe. The principal voluntarily ejected himself from his own office, then looked to the staff for an explanation, but only received the teary-eyed shaking of their heads.

No one seemed to notice Rowan still lingering there. Who cared about the lettuce when the beef was being devoured?

He slipped past the principal, who saw him just in time to put a hand on his shoulder. “Son, you don’t want to go in there.”

He was right, Rowan didn’t want to go in there. But he went anyway, closing the door behind him.

There were two chairs in front of the principal’s well-organized desk. The scythe sat in one, Kohl in the other, hunched and sobbing. The scythe burned Rowan a glare. The mountain lion, thought Rowan. Only this one actually had

the power to end a human life.

“His parents aren’t here,” Rowan said. “He should have someone with him.”

“Are you family?”

“Does it matter?”

Then Kohl raised his head. “Please don’t make Ronald go,” he pleaded.

“It’s Rowan.”

Kohl’s expression shot to higher horror, as if this error somehow sealed the deal. “I knew that! I did! I really did!” For all his bulk and bravado, Kohl Whitlock was just a scared little kid. Is that what everyone became in the end?

Rowan supposed only a scythe could know.

Rather than forcing Rowan to leave, the scythe said, “Grab a chair then. Make yourself comfortable.”

As Rowan went around to pull out the principal’s desk chair, he wondered if the scythe was being ironic, or sarcastic, or if he didn’t even know that making oneself comfortable was impossible in his presence.

“You can’t do this to me,” Kohl begged. “My parents will die! They’ll just die!”

“No they won’t,” the scythe corrected. “They’ll live on.”

“Can you at least give him a few minutes to prepare?” Rowan asked.

“Are you telling me how to do my job?”

“I’m asking you for some mercy!”

The scythe glared at him again, but this time it was somehow different. He wasn’t just delivering intimidation, he was extracting something. Studying something in Rowan. “I’ve done this for many years,” the scythe said. “In my

experience, a quick and painless gleaning is the greatest mercy I can show.”

“Then at least give him a reason! Tell him why it has to be him!”

“It’s random, Rowan!” Kohl said. “Everyone knows that! It’s just freaking random!”

But there was something in the scythe’s eyes that said otherwise. So Rowan pressed.

“There’s more to it, isn’t there?”

The scythe sighed. He didn’t have to say anything—he was, after all, a scythe, above the law in every way. He owed no one an explanation. But he chose to give one anyway.

“Removing old age from the equation, statistics from the Age of Mortality cite 7 percent of deaths as being automobile-related. Of those, 31 percent involved the use of alcohol, and of those, 14 percent were teenagers.” Then he

tossed Rowan a small calculator from the principal’s desk. “Figure it out

yourself.”

Rowan took his time crunching the numbers, knowing that every second taken was a second of life he bought for Kohl.

“.303%.” Rowan finally said.

“Which means,” said the scythe, “that about three out of every thousand souls I glean will fit that profile. One out every three hundred thirty-three. Your friend here just got a new car and has a record of drinking to excess. So,

of the teens who fit that profile, I made a random choice.”

Kohl buried his head in his hands, his tears intensifying. “I’m such an IDIOT!” He pressed his palms against his eyes as if trying to push them deep within his head.

“So tell me,” the scythe said calmly to Rowan. “Has the explanation eased his gleaning, or made his suffering worse?”

Rowan shrunk a bit in his chair.

“Enough,” said the scythe. “It’s time.” Then he produced from a pocket in his robe a small paddle that was shaped to fit over his hand. It had a cloth back and a shiny metallic palm. “Kohl, I have chosen for you a shock that will

induce cardiac arrest. Death will be quick, painless, and nowhere near as brutal as the car accident you would have suffered in the Age of Mortality.”

Suddenly Kohl thrust his hand out, grabbing Rowan's and holding it tightly. Rowan allowed it. He wasn't family; he wasn't even Kohl's friend before today—but what was the saying? Death makes the whole world kin. Rowan wondered if a world without death would then make everyone strangers. He squeezed Kohl's hand tighter—a silent promise that he wouldn't

let go.

"Is there anything you want me to tell people?" Rowan asked.

"A million things," said Kohl, "but I can't think of any of 'em."

Rowan resolved that he would make up Kohl's last words to share with his loved ones. And they would be fine words. Comforting ones. Rowan would find a way to make sense of the senseless.

"I'm afraid you'll have to let go of his hand for the procedure," the scythe said.

"No," Rowan told him.

"The shock could stop your heart, too," the scythe warned.

"So what?" said Rowan. "They'll revive me." Then he added, "Unless you've decided to glean me, too."

Rowan was aware that he had just dared a scythe to kill him. In spite of the risk, he was glad he had done it.

"Very well." And without waiting an instant longer, the scythe pressed the

paddle to Kohl's chest.

Rowan's vision went white, then dark. His entire body convulsed. He flew backwards out of his chair and hit the wall behind him. It might have been painless for Kohl, but not for Rowan. It hurt. It hurt more than anything—more pain than a person is supposed to feel—but then the microscopic painkilling nanites in his blood released their numbing opiates. The pain subsided as those opiates took effect, and when his vision cleared, he saw Kohl slumped in his chair and the scythe reaching over to close his sightless eyes. The gleaning was complete. Kohl Whitlock was dead.

The scythe stood and reached out to offer Rowan his hand, but Rowan didn't take it. He rose from the floor on his own, and although Rowan felt not

an ounce of gratitude, he said, "Thank you for letting me stay."

The scythe regarded him a little too long, then said, "You stood your ground for a boy you barely knew. You comforted him at the moment of his death, bearing the pain of the jolt. You bore witness, even though no one called you to do so."

Rowan shrugged. "I did what anyone would do."

"Did anyone else offer?" the scythe put to him. "Your principal? The office staff? Any of the dozen students we passed in the hall?"

"No . . . ," Rowan had to admit. "But what does it matter what I did? He's

still dead. And you know what they say about good intentions."

The scythe nodded, and glanced down at his ring, sitting so fat on his finger. "I suppose now you'll ask me for immunity."

Rowan shook his head. "I don't want anything from you."

"Fair enough." The scythe turned to go, but hesitated before he opened the door. "Be warned that you will not receive kindness from anyone but me for what you did here today," he said. "But remember that good intentions pave many roads. Not all of them lead to hell."

• • •

The slap was just as jarring as the electric shock—even more so because Rowan wasn't expecting it. It came just before lunch, as he was standing at his locker, and flew in with such force it knocked him back, making the row of lockers resound like a steel drum.

"You were there and you didn't stop it!" Marah Pavlik's eyes flared with grief and righteous indignation. She looked ready to reach up his nostrils with her long nails and extract his brain. "You just let him die!"

Marah had been Kohl's girlfriend for over a year. Like Kohl, she was a highly popular junior, and as such would actively avoid any interaction with sophomore rabble such as Rowan. But these were extraordinary

circumstances.

“It wasn’t like that,” Rowan managed to blurt out before she swung again. This time he deflected her hand. She broke a nail but didn’t seem to care. If nothing else, Kohl’s gleaning had given her perspective.

“It was exactly like that! You went in there to watch him die!”

Others had begun to gather, drawn, as most are, to the scent of conflict. He looked to the crowd for a sympathetic face—someone who might take his side

—but all he saw in the faces of his classmates was communal disdain. Marah was speaking, and slapping, for all of them.

This is not what Rowan had expected. Not that he wanted pats on the back for coming to Kohl’s aid in his last moments—but he wasn’t expecting such an unthinkable accusation.

“What, are you nuts?” Rowan shouted at her—at all of them. “You can’t stop a scythe from gleaning!”

“I don’t care!” she wailed. “You could have done something, but all you did was watch!”

“I did do something! I . . . I held his hand.”

She slammed him back into the locker with more strength that he thought she could possibly have. “You’re lying! He’d never hold your hand. He’d never touch any part of you!” And then, “I should have held his hand!”

Around them the other kids scowled, and whispered things that they clearly wanted him to hear.

“I saw him walking in the hall with the scythe like they were best buddies.”

“They came into school together this morning.”

“I heard he gave the scythe Kohl’s name.”

“Someone told me he actually helped.”

He stormed to the obnoxious kid who made the last accusation—Ralphy something or other. “Heard from who? No one else was in the room, you moron!”

But it didn’t matter. Rumors adhered to no logic but their own.

“Don’t you get it? I didn’t help the scythe, I helped Kohl!” Rowan insisted.

“Yeah, helped him into the grave,” someone said, and everyone else grumbled in agreement.

It was no use—he had been tried and convicted—and the more he denied it, the more convinced they’d be of his guilt. They didn’t need his act of courage; what they needed was someone to blame. Someone to hate. They couldn’t take their wrath out on the scythe, but Rowan Damisch was the perfect candidate.

“I’ll bet he got immunity for helping,” a kid said—a kid who’d always been his friend.

“I didn’t!”

“Good,” said Marah with absolute contempt. “Then I hope the next scythe comes for you.”

He knew she meant it—not just in the moment, but forever—and if the next scythe did come for him, she would relish the knowledge of his death. It was a darkly sobering thought, that there were now people in this world who actively wished him dead. It was one thing not to be noticed. It was something else entirely to be the repository of an entire school’s enmity.

Only then did the scythe’s warning come back to him: that he would receive no kindness for what he had done for Kohl. The man had been right—

and he hated the scythe for it, just as the others hated Rowan.

2042. It’s a year that every schoolchild knows. It was the year where computational power became infinite—or so close to infinite that it could no longer be measured. It was the year we knew. . . everything. “The cloud” evolved into “the Thunderhead,” and now all there is to know about everything resides in the near-infinite memory of the Thunderhead for anyone who wants to access it.

But like so many things, once we had possession of infinite knowledge, it suddenly seemed less important. Less urgent. Yes, we know everything, but I often wonder if anyone bothers to look at all

that knowledge. There are academics, of course, who study what we already know, but to what end? The very idea of schooling used to be about learning so that we could improve our lives and the world. But a perfect world needs no improvement. Like most everything else we do, education, from grade school through the highest of universities, is just a way to keep us busy.

2042 is the year we conquered death, and also the year we stopped counting. Sure, we still numbered years for a few more decades, but at the moment of immortality, passing time ceased to matter.

I don't know exactly when things switched over to the Chinese calendar—Year of the Dog, Year of the Goat, the Dragon, and so on. And I can't exactly say when animal activists around the world began calling for equal billing for their own favorite species, adding in Year of the Otter, and the Whale, and the Penguin. And I couldn't tell you when they stopped repeating, and when it was decreed that every year henceforth would be named after a different species. All I know for sure is that this is the Year of the Ocelot.

As for the things I don't know, I'm sure they're all up there in the Thunderhead for anyone with the motivation to look.

—From the gleaning journal of H.S. Curie

3

The Force of Destiny

The invitation came to Citra in early January. It arrived by post—which was the first indication that it was out of the ordinary. There were only three types of communications that arrived by post: packages, official business, or letters from the eccentric—the only type of people who still wrote letters. This appeared to be of the third variety.

“Well, open it,” Ben said, more excited by the envelope than Citra was. It had been handwritten, making it even odder. True, handwriting was still offered as an elective, but, aside from herself, she knew few people who had taken it. She tore the envelope open and pulled out a card that was the same eggshell color as the envelope, then read to herself before reading it aloud.

The pleasure of your company is requested at the Grand Civic Opera, January ninth, seven p.m.

There was no signature, no return address. There was, however, a single ticket in the envelope.

“The opera?” said Ben. “Ew.”

Citra couldn’t agree more.

“Could it be some sort of school event?” their mother asked.

Citra shook her head. “If it was, it would say so.”

She took the invitation and envelope from Citra to study them herself.

“Well, whatever it is, it sounds interesting.”

“It’s probably some loser’s way of asking me on a date because he’s too afraid to ask me to my face.”

“Do you think you’ll go?” her mother asked.

“Mom . . . a boy who invites me to the opera is either joking or delusional.”

“Or he’s trying to impress you.”

Citra grunted and left the room, annoyed by her own curiosity. “I’m not going!” she called out from her room, knowing full well that she would.

• • •

The Grand Civic Opera was one of several places where anyone who was anyone went to be seen. At any given performance, only half the patrons were there for the actual opera. The rest were there to participate in the great melodrama of social climbing and career advancement. Even Citra, who moved in none of those circles, knew the drill.

She wore the dress she had bought for the previous year’s homecoming dance, when she was sure that Hunter Morrison would invite her. Instead, Hunter had invited Zachary Swain, which apparently everyone but Citra

knew would happen. They were still a couple, and Citra, until today, hadn't had any use for the dress.

When she put it on, she was far more pleased with it than she thought she'd be. Teenage girls change in a year, but now the dress—which was more about wishful thinking last year—actually fit her perfectly.

In her mind, she had narrowed down the possibilities of her secret admirer. It could be one of five, only two of whom she would enjoy spending an evening alone with. The other three she would endure for the sake of novelty. There was, after all, some fun to be had spending an evening pretending to be pretentious.

Her father insisted on dropping her off. "Call when you're ready to be picked up."

"I'll take a publicar home."

"Call anyway," he said. He told her she looked beautiful for the tenth time, then she got out and he drove off to make room for the limousines and Bentleys in the drop-off queue. She took a deep breath and went up the marble steps, feeling as awkward and out of place as Cinderella at the ball.

Upon entering, she was not directed toward either the orchestra or the central staircase leading to the balcony. Instead, the usher looked at the ticket,

looked at her, then looked at the ticket again before calling over a second usher to personally escort her.

“What’s all this about?” she asked. Her first thought was that it was a forged ticket and she was being escorted to the exit. Perhaps it had been a joke after all, and she was already running a list of suspects through her mind.

But then the second usher said, “A personal escort is customary for a box seat, miss.”

Box seats, Citra recalled, were the ultimate in exclusivity. They were usually reserved for people too elite to sit among the masses. Normal people couldn’t afford them, and even if they could, they weren’t allowed access. As she followed the usher up the narrow stairs to the left boxes, Citra began to get scared. She knew no one with that kind of money. What if this invitation came to her by mistake? Or if there actually was some sort of big, important person waiting for Citra, what on earth were his or her intentions?

“Here we are!” The usher pulled back the curtain of the box to reveal a boy her age already sitting there. He had dark hair and light freckled skin. He stood up when he saw her, and Citra could see that his suit revealed a little too much of his socks.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

And the usher left them alone.

“I left you the seat closer to the stage,” he said.

“Thanks.” She sat down, trying to figure out who this was and why he had invited her here. He didn’t appear familiar. Should she know him? She didn’t want to let on that she didn’t recognize him.

Then out of nowhere, he said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

He held up an invitation that looked exactly like hers. “I’m not much into opera, but hey, it’s better than doing nothing at home. So . . . should I, like, know you?”

Citra laughed out loud. She didn’t have a mysterious admirer; it appeared they both had a mysterious matchmaker, which set Citra working on another mental list—at the top of which were her own parents. Perhaps this was the son of one of their friends—but this kind of subterfuge was pretty obtuse, even for them.

“What’s so funny?” the boy asked, and she showed him her identical invitation. It didn’t make him laugh. Instead he seemed a bit troubled, but didn’t share why.

He introduced himself as Rowan, and they shook hands just as the lights

dimmed, the curtain went up, and the music exploded too lush and loud for them to be able to hold a conversation. The opera was Verdi's La Forza del Destino, The Force of Destiny, but it clearly wasn't destiny that had hurled these two together; it was a very deliberate hand.

The music was rich and pretty, until it became too much for Citra's ears. And the story, while easy to follow even without a knowledge of Italian, had little resonance for either of them. It was, after all, a work from the Age of Mortality. War, vengeance, murder—all the themes on which the tale was strung—were so removed from modern reality, few could relate. Catharsis could only gather around the theme of love, which, considering that they were strangers trapped in an opera box, was far more uncomfortable than cathartic.

"So, who do you think invited us?" Citra asked as soon as the lights came up for the first act intermission. Rowan had no more clue than she did, so they shared whatever they could that might help them generate a theory. Aside from them both being sixteen, they had very little in common. She was

from the city, he the suburbs. She had a small family, his was large, and their parents' professions couldn't have been further apart.

"What's your genetic index?" he asked—a rather personal question, but perhaps it could have some relevance.

“22-37-12-14-15.”

He smiled. “Thirty-seven percent Afric descent. Good for you! That’s pretty high!”

“Thanks.”

He told her that his was 33-13-12-22-20. She thought to ask him if he knew the subindex of his “other” component, because 20 percent was pretty high, but if he didn’t know, the question would embarrass him.

“We both have 12 percent PanAsian ancestry,” he pointed out. “Could that have something to do with it?” But he was grasping at straws—it was merely coincidence.

Then, toward the end of intermission, the answer stepped into the box behind them.

“Good to see you’re getting acquainted.”

Although it had been a few months since their encounter, Citra recognized him immediately. Honorable Scythe Faraday was not a figure you soon forgot.

“You?” Rowan said with such severity, it was clear that he had a history with the scythe as well.

“I would have arrived sooner, but I had . . . other business.” He didn’t elaborate, for which Citra was glad. Still, his presence here could not be a

good thing.

“You invited us here to glean us.” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement of fact, because Citra was convinced it was true—until Rowan said, “I don’t think that’s what this is about.”

Scythe Faraday did not make any move to end their lives. Instead, he grabbed an empty chair and sat beside them. “I was given this box by the theater director. People always think making offerings to scythes will prevent

them from being gleaned. I had no intention of gleaning her, but now she thinks her gift played a part.”

“People believe what they want to believe,” Rowan said, with a sort of authority that told Citra he knew the truth of it.

Faraday gestured toward the stage. “Tonight we witness the spectacle of human folly and tragedy,” he said. “Tomorrow, we shall live it.”

The curtain went up on the second act before he could explain his meaning.

• • •

For two months, Rowan had been the school pariah—an outcast of the highest order. Although that sort of thing usually ran its course and diminished over time, it was not the case when it came to the gleaning of Kohl Whitlock. Every football game rubbed a healthy dose of salt in the

communal wound—and since all of those games were lost, it doubled the pain. Rowan was never particularly popular, nor was he ever the target of derision before, but now he was cornered and beaten on a regular basis. He was shunned, and even his friends actively avoided him. Tyger was no exception.

"Guilt by association, man," Tyger had said. "I feel your pain, but I don't want to live it."

"It's an unfortunate situation," the principal told Rowan when he turned up in the nurse's office, waiting out during lunch for some newly inflicted bruises to heal. "You may want to consider switching schools."

Then one day, Rowan gave in to the pressure. He stood on a table in the cafeteria and told everyone the lies they wanted to hear.

"That scythe was my uncle," he proclaimed. "I told him to glean Kohl Whitlock."

Of course they believed every word of it. Kids began to boo and throw food at him, until he said:

"I want you all to know that my uncle's coming back—and he asked me to choose who gets gleaned next."

Suddenly the food stopped flying, the glares ceased, and the beatings miraculously stopped. What filled the void was . . . well . . . a void. Not a

single eye would meet his anymore. Not even his teachers would look at him —a few actually started giving him As when he was doing B and C work. He began to feel like a ghost in his own life, existing in a forced blind spot of the world.

At home things were normal. His stepfather stayed entirely out of his business, and his mother was preoccupied with too many other things to give much attention to his troubles. They knew what had happened at school, and what was happening now, but they dismissed it in that self-serving way parents often had of pretending anything they can't solve is not really a problem.

"I want to transfer to a different high school," he told his mother, finally taking his principal's advice, and her response was achingly neutral.

"If you think that's best."

He was half convinced if he told her he was dropping out of society and joining a tone cult, she'd say, If you think that's best.

So when the opera invitation arrived, he hadn't cared who sent it.

Whatever it meant, it was salvation—at least for an evening.

The girl he met in the box seat was nice enough. Pretty, confident—the kind of girl who probably already had a boyfriend, although she never

mentioned one. Then the scythe showed up and Rowan's world shifted back into a dark place. This was the man responsible for his misery. If he could have gotten away with it, Rowan would have pushed him over the railing—but attacks against scythes were not tolerated. The punishment was the gleaning of the offender's entire family. It was a consequence that ensured the

safety of the revered bringers of death.

At the close of the opera, Scythe Faraday gave them a card and very clear instructions.

"You will meet me at this address tomorrow morning, precisely at nine."

"What should we tell our parents about tonight?" Citra asked. Apparently she had parents who might care.

"Tell them whatever you like. It doesn't matter, as long as you're there tomorrow morning."

• • •

The address turned out to be the Museum of World Art, the finest museum in the city. It didn't open until ten, but the moment the security guard saw a scythe coming up the steps of the main entrance, he unlocked the doors and let the three of them in without even having to be asked.

"More perks of the position," Scythe Faraday told them.

They strolled through galleries of the old masters in silence, punctuated

only by the sound of their footfalls and the scythe's occasional commentaries.

"See how El Greco uses contrast to evoke emotional yearning." "Look at the fluidity of motion in this Raphael—how it brings intensity to the visual story he tells." "Ah! Seurat! Prophetic pointillism a century before the pixel!"

Rowan was the first to ask the necessary question.

"What does any of this have to do with us?"

Scythe Faraday sighed in mild irritation, although he probably anticipated the question. "I am supplying you with lessons you won't receive in school."

"So," said Citra, "you pulled us out of our lives for some random art lesson? Isn't that a waste of your valuable time?"

The scythe laughed, and Rowan found himself wishing he had been the one to make him laugh.

"What have you learned so far?" Scythe Faraday asked.

Neither had a response, so he asked a different question.

"What do you think our conversation would have been like had I brought you to the post-mortality galleries instead of these older ones?"

Rowan ventured an answer. "Probably about how much easier on the eye post-mortal art is. "Easier and . . . untroubled."

"How about uninspired?" prompted the scythe.

"That's a matter of opinion," said Citra.

“Perhaps. But now that you know what you’re looking for in this art of the dying, I want you to try to feel it.” And he led them to the next gallery. Although Rowan was sure he’d feel nothing, he was wrong.

The next room was a large gallery with paintings hanging floor to ceiling. He didn’t recognize the artists, but that didn’t matter. There was a coherence to the work, as if it had been painted by the same soul, if not the same hand. Some works had a religious theme, others were portraits, and others simply captured the elusive light of daily life with a vibrancy that was missing in post-mortal art. Longing and elation, anguish and joy—they were all there, sometimes commingling in the same canvas. It was in some ways unsettling, but compelling as well.

“Can we stay in this room a little longer?” Rowan asked, which made the scythe smile.

“Of course we can.”

The museum had opened by the time they were done. Other patrons gave them a wide berth. It reminded Rowan of the way they treated him in school. Citra still seemed to have no clue why Scythe Faraday had called them—but Rowan was beginning to have an idea.

He took the kids to a diner, where the waitress sat them immediately and brought them menus, ignoring other customers to give them priority. Perk of

the position. Rowan noticed that no one came in once they were seated. The restaurant would probably be empty by the time they left.

“If you want us to provide you with information on people we know,” Citra said, as her food came, “I’m not interested.”

“I gather my own information,” Scythe Faraday told her. “I don’t need a couple of kids to be my informants.”

“But you do need us, don’t you?” Rowan said.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he talked about world population and the task of the world’s scythes, if not to level it, then to wrangle it to a reasonable ratio.

“The ratio of population growth to the Thunderhead’s ability to provide for humanity requires that a certain number of people be gleaned each year,” he told them. “For that to happen, we’re going to need more scythes.”

Then he produced from one of the many pockets hidden in his robe a scythe’s ring identical to the one he already wore. It caught the light in the room, reflecting it, refracting it, but never bending light into the heart of its dark core.

“Three times a year, scythes meet at a great assembly called a conclave. We discuss the business of gleaning, and whether or not more scythes are needed in our region.”

Citra now seemed to shrink in her chair. She finally got it. Although

Rowan had suspected this, to actually see the ring made him shrink a bit, too.

“The gems on scythe rings were made in those first post-mortal days by the early scythes,” Faraday said, “when society deemed that unnatural death needed to take the place of natural death. There were many more gems made than were needed at the time, for the founders of the Scythedom were wise enough to anticipate a need. When a new scythe is required, a gem is placed into a gold setting and is bestowed upon the chosen candidate.” He turned the ring in his fingers, pondering it, sending refracted light dancing around the room. Then he looked them in the eye—first Citra, then Rowan. “I just returned from Winter Conclave and have been given this ring so that I might take on an apprentice.”

Citra backed away. “Rowan can do it. I’m not interested.”

Rowan turned to her, wishing he had spoken. “What makes you think I am?”

“I have chosen both of you!” Faraday said, raising his voice. “You will both learn the trade. But in the end, only one of you will receive the ring. The other may return home to his or her old life.”

“Why would we compete for something that neither of us wants?” Citra asked.