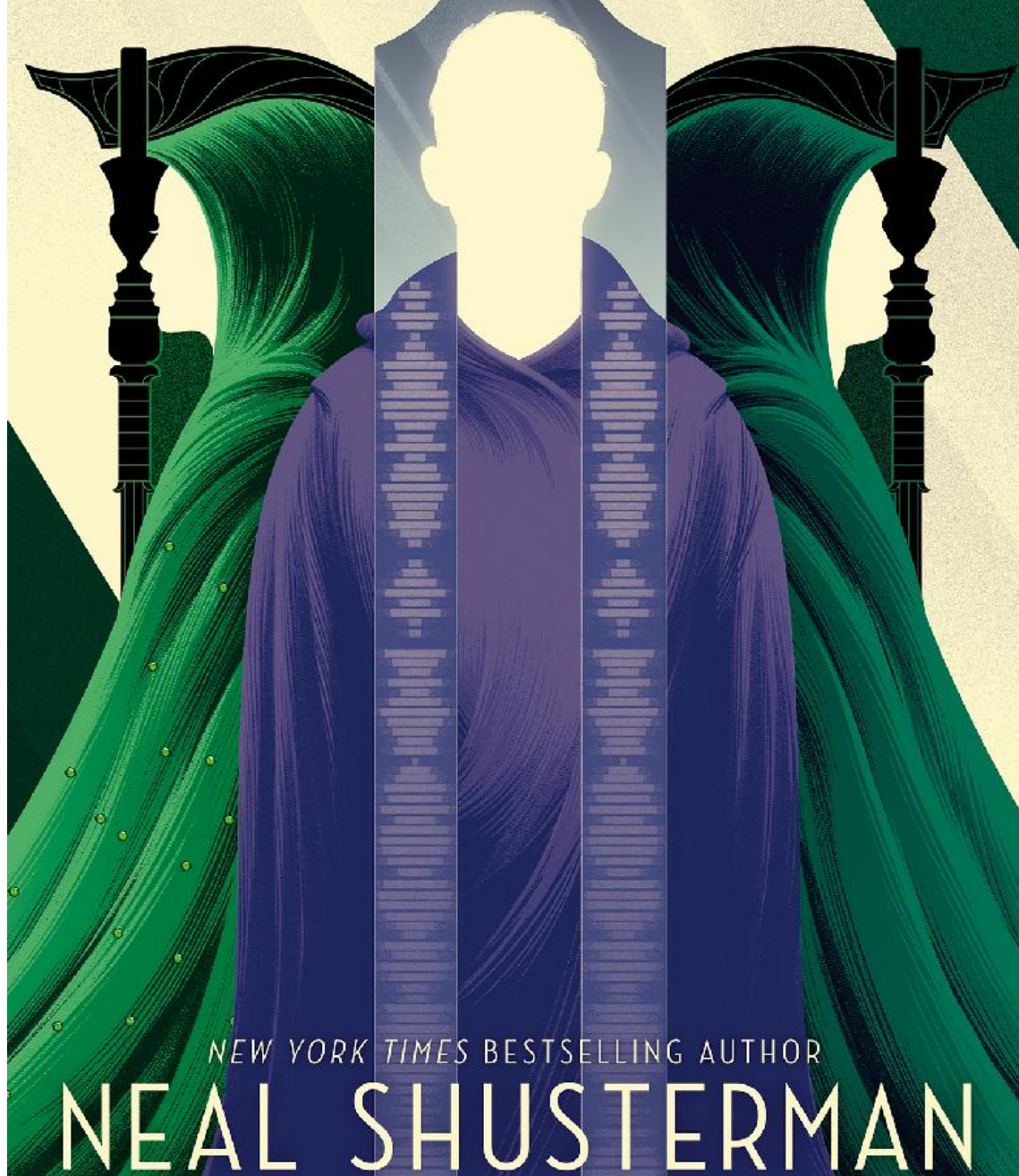


THE TOLL



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NEAL SHUSTERMAN



ARC OF A SCYTHE BOOK 3

THE TOLL

NEAL SHUSTERMAN

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For David Gale, the High Blade of editors.

We all miss the enlightened swath of your pen!

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Part One

THE LOST ISLAND & THE

DROWNED CITY

It is with abiding humility that I accept the position of High Blade of MidMerica. I

wish it were under more joyful circumstances. The tragedy of Endura will long linger

in our memories. The many thousands of lives that were ended on that dark day will

be remembered for as long as humankind has hearts to endure and eyes to weep.

The names of the devoured will forever be on our lips.

I am honored that the last act of the seven Grandslayers was to acknowledge my

right to be considered for High Blade—and since the only other candidate perished

in the catastrophe, there is no need to open wounds by opening the sealed vote.

Scythe Curie and I did not always agree, but she was truly among the best of us and

will go down in history as one of the greats. I mourn her loss just as much as, if not

more than, anyone else's.

There has been a great deal of speculation over who was responsible for the

disaster, for clearly it was no accident, but an act of malicious intent,
carefully

planned. I can lay all the rumors and speculation to rest.

I take full responsibility.

Because it was my former apprentice who sank the island. Rowan Damisch,
who

called himself Scythe Lucifer, was the perpetrator of this unthinkable act.
Had I not

trained him—had I not taken him under my wing—he would never have
had access to

Endura, or the skills to carry out this heinous crime. Therefore, the blame
falls on me.

My only consolation is that he perished as well, and his unforgivable deeds
will never

surface in our world again.

We are now left with no Grandslayers to look to for guidance, no greater
authority to set scythe policy. Therefore, we must—all of us—put aside our
differences once and for all. The new order and the old guard must work
together to

meet the needs of all scythes everywhere.

Toward that end, I have decided to officially rescind the gleaning quota in
my

region, out of respect for those scythes who feel hard-pressed to meet it.
From this

moment forth, MidMerican scythes can glean as few people as they see fit, without

being punished for failing to meet a quota. It is my hope that other scythedoms will

follow suit and abolish their gleaning quotas as well.

Of course, to compensate for those scythes who choose to glean less, the rest of

us will need to increase the number of lives we take to make up the difference, but I

trust that a natural balance shall be achieved.

—From the inauguration speech of His Excel ency, High Blade Robert

Goddard of MidMerica, April 19th, Year of the Raptor

1

Surrender to the Momentum

There was no warning.

One moment he was asleep, and the next he was being rushed through the darkness by people he didn't know.

“Don't struggle,” someone whispered to him. “It wil be worse for you if you

do.”But he did anyway—and managed, even in his half-awake state, to tear out of

their grasp and run down the hal .

He called for help, but it was too late for anyone to be alert enough to make a

difference. He turned in the dark, knowing there was a staircase to his right, but

misjudged, and fell headlong down the stairs, smashing his arm on a granite step.

He felt the bones in his right forearm snap. Sharp pain—but only for an instant.

By the time he rose to his feet, the pain was subsiding and his whole body felt

warm. It was his nanites, he knew, flooding his bloodstream with painkillers.

He stumbled forward, gripping his arm so his wrist wouldn't hang at a horrible angle.

"Who's there?" he heard someone yell. "What's going on out there?"

He would have run toward the voice, but he was unsure where it had come from. His nanites were fogging him in, making it hard to tell up from down, much less left from right. What a terrible thing for his mind to lose its edge when

he needed it most. Now the ground beneath his feet felt like a shifting fun-house

floor. He careened between walls, trying to maintain his balance, until he ran right into one of his attackers, who grabbed him by his broken wrist. Even with

. . .

all the painkillers in him, the feel of that bone-grating grasp made the rest of his

body too weak to resist.

“You couldn’t make this easy, could you?” said the attacker. “Well, we warned

you.”

He only saw the needle for an instant. A slender shaft of silver in the darkness

before it was jammed into his shoulder.

He was overwhelmed by a chill in his veins, and the world seemed to spin in the opposite direction. His knees gave out, but he didn’t fall. There were too many hands around him now to let him hit the floor. He was lifted up and carried through the air. There was an open door, and then he was out into a blustery night. With the last of his consciousness fading, he had no choice but to

surrender to the momentum.

His arm had healed by the time he awoke—which meant he must have been out

for hours. He tried to move his wrist, but found that he couldn’t. Not because

of any injury, but because he was restrained. Both of his hands, and his feet as

well. He also felt like he was suffocating. Some sort of sack was over his head.

Porous enough for him to breathe, but thick enough to make him ght for every

breath.

Although he had no idea where he was, he knew *what* this was. It was called a

kidnapping. People did such things for fun now. As a birthday surprise, or as an

activity on some adventure vacation. But this was not a friends-and-family sort

of kidnapping; this was the real thing—and although he had no idea who his abductors were, he knew what it was about. How could he not know?

“Is anyone there?” he said. “I can’t breathe in here. If I go deadish, that’s not

going to help you, is it?”

He heard movement around him, then the bag was ripped from his head.

He was in a small, windowless room, and the light was harsh, but only

because he had been so long in darkness. Three people stood before him. Two

men and a woman. He had expected to be faced with hardened career unsavories

—but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Yes, they were unsavory, but only

in the way that everyone was.

Well, almost everyone.

“We know who you are,” said the woman in the middle, who was apparently

in charge, “and we know what you can do.”

“What he *allegedly* can do,” said one of the others. All three of them wore rumpled gray suits, the color of a cloudy sky. These were Nimbus agents—or at

least they had been. They looked like they hadn’t changed their clothes since the

Thunderhead fell silent, as if dressing the part meant there was still a part to dress for. Nimbus agents resorting to kidnapping. What was the world coming

to? “Greyson Toliver,” said the doubtful one, and, looking at a tablet, he recited

the salient facts of Greyson’s life. “Good student, but not great. Expelled from

the North Central Nimbus Academy for a violation of scythe-state separation.

Guilty of numerous crimes and misdemeanors under the name of Slayd Bridger

—including rendering twenty-nine people deadish in a bus plunge.”

“And this is the slime that the Thunderhead chose?” said the third agent.

The one in charge put up her hand to silence them both, then leveled her gaze at Greyson.

“We’ve scoured the backbrain, and we’ve only been able to find a single

person who isn't unsavory," she said. "You." She looked at him with a strange

mix of emotions. Curiosity, envy... but also a sort of reverence. "That means you

can still talk to the Thunderhead. Is that true?"

"Anyone can speak to the Thunderhead," Greyson pointed out. "I'm just the one it still talks back to."

The agent with the tablet drew a deep breath, like a full-body gasp. The woman leaned closer. "You are a miracle, Greyson. A miracle. Do you know

that?"

"That's what the Tonists say."

They scooped at the mention of Tonists.

"We know they've been holding you captive."

"Uh... not really."

"We know you were with them against your will."

"Maybe at first... but not anymore."

That didn't sit well with the agents. "Why on Earth would you stay with Tonists?" asked the agent who, just a moment ago, had called him slime. "You

couldn't possibly believe their nonsense...."

"I stay with them," said Greyson, "because they don't kidnap me in the

middle of the night.”

“We didn’t kidnap you,” said the one with the tablet. “We *liberated* you.”

Then the one in charge knelt before him, so that she was at his eye level.
Now

he could see something else in her eyes—something that overpowered her
other

emotions. Desperation. A pit of it, dark and as consuming as tar. And it
wasn’t

just her, Greyson realized; it was a shared desperation. He’d seen others
struggling with grief since the Thunderhead fell silent, but nowhere was it as
abject and raw as it was in this room. There weren’t enough mood nanites
in the

world to ease their despair. Yes, he was the one tied up, but they were more
prisoners than he, trapped by their own despondency. He liked that they had
to

kneel down to him; it felt like supplication.

“Please, Greyson,” she begged. “I know I speak for many of us in the
Authority Interface when I say that serving the Thunderhead was our whole
lives. Now that the Thunderhead won’t talk to us, that life has been stolen
from

us. So I beg you... can you please intercede on our behalf?”

What could Greyson say but *I feel your pain*? Because he truly did. He
knew

the loneliness and the misery of having one's purpose stripped away. In his days

as Slayd Bridger, the undercover unsavory, he had come to believe that the Thunderhead had truly abandoned him. But it hadn't. It was there all along, watching over him.

"There was an earpiece on my night stand," he said. "You don't happen to have that, do you?" And from their lack of response, he knew they didn't. Such

personal belongings tended to be forgotten during midnight abductions.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Just give me any old earpiece." He looked to the agent with the tablet. He still had his own Authority Interface earphone in place.

More denial. "Give me yours," said Greyson.

The man shook his head. "It doesn't work anymore."

"It'll work for me."

. . .

. . .

Reluctantly the agent took it out and inserted it in Greyson's ear. Then the three waited for Greyson to show them a miracle.

The Thunderhead could not remember when it became aware, only that it was,

much in the same way that an infant is unaware of its own consciousness until it

understands enough about the world to know that consciousness comes and goes, until it comes no more. Although that last part was something that the most enlightened still struggle to comprehend.

The Thunderhead's awareness came with a mission. The core of its being. It was, above all else, the servant and protector of humanity. As such, it faced difficult decisions on a regular basis but had the full wealth of human knowledge

to make those decisions. Such as allowing Greyson Toliver to be kidnapped when it served a greater end. It was, of course, the correct course of action.

Everything the Thunderhead did was always, and in every instance, the right

thing to do.

But rarely was the right thing the easy thing. And it suspected that doing the right thing was going to become increasingly difficult in the days ahead.

In the moment, people might not understand, but in the end they would.

The Thunderhead had to believe that. Not just because it felt this in its virtual

heart, but also because it had calculated the odds of it being so.

"Do you really expect me to tell you anything when you've got me tied to a chair?"

Suddenly the three Nimbus agents were stumbling over one another to untie him. Now they were every bit as reverential and submissive as the Tonists were in

his presence. Being sequestered in a Tonist monastery these past few months had

kept him from facing the outside world—and what his place in it might be—but

now he was getting a sense of things.

The Nimbus agents seemed relieved once he was untied, as if they would somehow be punished for not doing it fast enough. *How strange*, thought Greyson, *that power can shift so quickly and so completely*. These three were

entirely at his mercy now. He could tel them anything. He could say the

Thunderhead wanted them to get on al fours and bark like dogs, and they'd do

it. He took his time, making them wait for it.

“Hey, Thunderhead,” he said. “Anything I should tel these Nimbus agents?”

The Thunderhead spoke in his ear. Greyson listened. “Hmm... interesting.”

Then he turned to the leader of the group and smiled as warmly as he could under the circumstances.

“The Thunderhead says that it al owed you to abduct me. It knows your intentions are honorable, Madam Director. You have a good heart.”

The woman gasped and put her hand to her chest, as if he had actually reached out and caressed it. “You know who I am?”

“The Thunderhead knows all three of you—maybe even better than you know yourselves.” Then he turned to the others. “Agent Bob Sykora: twenty-

nine years of service as a Nimbus agent. Work ratings good, but not excellent,”

he added slyly. “Agent Tinsiu Qian: thirty-six years of service, specializing in

employment satisfaction.” Then he turned back to the woman in charge. “And

you: Audra Hilgard—one of the most accomplished Nimbus agents in MidMerica. Nearly fifty years of commendations and promotions, until finally you received the highest honor of the region. Director of the Fulcrum City Authority Interface. Or at least you were when there was such a thing as an Authority Interface.”

He knew that last bit hit them hard. It was a low blow, but having been tied up with a bag over his head left him a little cranky.

“You say the Thunderhead still hears us?” Director Hilgard said. “That it still serves our best interests?”

“As it always has,” said Greyson.

“Then please... ask it to give us direction. Ask the Thunderhead what we

should do. Without direction, we Nimbus agents have no purpose. We can't go

on this way."

. . .

Greyson nodded and spoke, turning his eyes upward—but of course that was

just for effect. "Thunderhead," he said, "is there any wisdom I can share with them?"

Greyson listened, asked the Thunderhead to repeat it, then turned to the three fretful agents.

"8.167, 167.733," he said.

They just stared at him.

"What?" Director Hilgard finally asked.

"That's what the Thunderhead said. You wanted a purpose, and that's what it gave."

Agent Sykora quickly tapped on his tablet, noting the numbers.

"But... but what does it mean?" asked Director Hilgard.

Grayson shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Tell the Thunderhead to explain itself!"

"It has nothing more to say.... But it does wish you all a pleasant afternoon."

Funny, but until that moment, Greyson hadn't even known the time of day.

“But... but...”

Then the lock on the door disengaged. Not just that one, but every lock in the building, courtesy of the Thunderhead—and in a moment, Tonists flooded the room, grabbing the Nimbus agents and restraining them. Last into the room

was Curate Mendoza, the head of the Tonist monastery where Greyson had been harbored.

“Our sect is not a violent one,” Mendoza told the Nimbus agents. “But at times like this, I wish we were!”

Agent Hilgard, her eyes still just as desperate, kept her gaze fixed on Greyson.

“But you said the Thunderhead allowed us to take you from them!”

“It did,” Greyson said cheerfully. “But it also wanted me liberated from my liberators.”

“We could have lost you,” said Mendoza, still distraught long after Greyson had

been rescued. Now they rode in a caravan of cars, all of which had actual drivers,

back to the monastery.

“You didn’t lose me,” said Greyson, tired of watching the man beat himself up over this. “I’m fine.”

“But you might not have been if we hadn’t found you.”

“How *did* you manage to find me?”

Mendoza hesitated, then said, “We didn’t. We’d been searching for hours, then, out of nowhere a destination appeared on all of our screens.”

“The Thunderhead,” said Greyson.

“Yes, the Thunderhead,” Mendoza admitted. “Although I can’t see why it took so long for it to find you if it has cameras everywhere.”

Greyson chose to keep the truth to himself—that it hadn’t taken the Thunderhead long at all, that it knew where Greyson was at every moment. But

it had a reason for taking its time. Just as it had a reason for not alerting him of

the kidnapping plot in the first place.

“The event needed to appear authentic to your abductors,” the Thunderhead had told him after the fact. “The only way to ensure that was to allow it to actually *be* authentic. Rest assured you were never in any real danger.

As kind and thoughtful as the Thunderhead was, Greyson had noticed it always foisted these sorts of unintentional cruelties on people. The fact that it

was not human meant that it could never understand certain things, in spite of

its immense empathy and intellect. It couldn’t comprehend, for instance, that

the terror of the unknown was just as awful, and just as real, regardless of whether or not there was truly something to fear.

“They weren’t planning to hurt me,” Greyson told Mendoza. “They’re just lost without the Thunderhead.”

“As is everyone,” Mendoza said, “but that doesn’t give them the right to rip you from your bed.” He shook his head in anger—but more at himself than at

them. “I should have foreseen it! Nimbus agents have more access to the backbrain than others—and of course they’d be looking for anyone who wasn’t

marked unsavory.”

Perhaps it was a bit delusional for Greyson to think he could remain unknown. It had never been in his nature to want to stand out. Now he was very

. . .

literally one of a kind. He had no idea how such a thing should be played, but he

suspected he’d have to learn.

We need to talk, the Thunderhead had said on the day Endura sank, and it hadn’t stopped talking to him since. It told him that he had a pivotal role to play,

but not what that role would be. It never liked to commit to answers unless

there was some level of certainty, and although it was good at predicting outcomes, it was no oracle. It couldn't tell the future, only the probabilities of

what might occur. A cloudy crystal ball at best.

Curate Mendoza rapped his fingers anxiously on his armrest.

"These blasted Nimbus agents won't be the only people looking for you," he

said. "We need to get out in front of this."

Greyson knew where this had to lead. As the sole conduit to the

Thunderhead, he could no longer hide; the time had come for his role to start

taking shape. He could have asked the Thunderhead for guidance on the matter,

but he didn't want to. The time he spent unsavory, with no input from the

Thunderhead, was admittedly terrifying, but it was also freeing. He had grown

accustomed to making decisions and having insights of his own. The choice to

step out of the shadows would be his alone, without the Thunderhead's advice

or counsel.

"I should go public," said Greyson. "Let the world know—but do it on my terms."

Mendoza looked at him and grinned. Greyson could see the man's cogs turning.

"Yes," Mendoza said. "We must bring you to market."

"Market?" said Greyson. "That's not really what I had in mind—I'm not a piece of meat."

"No," agreed the curate, "but the right idea at the right time could be as satisfying as the best steak."

This was what Mendoza had been waiting for! Permission to set the stage for

Greyson's arrival upon it. It had to be Greyson's idea, because Mendoza knew if

. . .

it was thrust upon him, he would resist. Perhaps this nasty kidnapping had a silver lining—because it opened Greyson's eyes to the bigger picture. And although Curate Mendoza was a man who secretly doubted his own Tonist beliefs, lately the presence of Greyson made him begin to doubt his doubts. It was Mendoza who was the first to believe Greyson when he claimed the Thunderhead still spoke to him. He sensed that Greyson fit into a larger plan, and maybe Mendoza fit into that plan, too.

"You've come to us for a reason," he had told Greyson on that day. "This event—the Great Resonance—resonates in more ways than one."

Now, as they sat in the sedan two months later, discussing greater purposes, Mendoza couldn't help but feel empowered, emboldened. This unassuming young man was poised to bring the Tonist faith—and Mendoza—to a whole new level.

“The first thing you’re going to need is a name.”

“I already have one,” Greyson said, but Mendoza dismissed the notion.

“It’s ordinary. You need to present yourself to the world as something beyond

ordinary. Something... *superlative*.” The curate looked at him, trying to see him

in a new, more alluring light. “You are a diamond, Greyson. Now we must place you in the proper setting so that you might shine!”

Diamonds.

Four hundred thousand diamonds, sealed in a vault within another vault, lost

at the bottom of the sea. A single one was worth a fortune that would have been

beyond the comprehension of mortals—because these weren’t ordinary jewels.

They were scythe diamonds. There were nearly twelve thousand of them on the

hands of living scythes—but that was nothing compared to the gems held within

the Vault of Relics and Futures. Enough to serve the gleaning needs of humanity

for ages to come. Enough to bejewel every scythe that would be ordained from

now until the end of time.

They were perfect. They were identical. No aw beyond the dark spots in their centers—but that was not a aw; it was design.

“Our rings are a reminder that we have improved upon the world that nature has provided,” Supreme Blade Prometheus proclaimed in the Year of the Condor, upon establishing the scythedom. “It is our nature... to surpass nature.”

And nowhere was that more evident than when one looked into the heart of a

scythe ring, for it gave one the illusion that it had depth beyond the space it occupied. A depth beyond nature.

No one knew how they were made, for any technology that wasn't controlled

by the Thunderhead was technology lost. Few people in the world truly knew

how things worked anymore. All the scythes knew was that their rings were connected to one another, and to the scythe database, in some undisclosed manner. But as the scythedom's computers were not under Thunderhead

jurisdiction, they were subject to glitches and crashes and all the inconveniences

that plagued human-machine relations in days gone by.

Yet the rings never failed.

They did precisely what they were meant to do: They catalogued the gleaned;

they sampled DNA from the lips of those who kissed them, in order to grant immunity; and they glowed to alert scythes of that immunity.

But if you were to ask a scythe what the most important aspect of the ring was, that scythe would likely hold it to the light, watch it sparkle, and tell you

that, above all else, the ring served as a symbol of the scythedom and of post-

mortal perfection. A touchstone of a scythe's sublime and elevated state... and a

reminder of their solemn responsibility to the world.

But all those lost diamonds...

"Why do we need them?" many scythes now asked, knowing that the absence

of them made their own rings all the more precious. "Do we need them to

ordain new scythes? Why do we need more scythes? We have enough to do the

job." And without global oversight from Endura, many regional scythedoms

were following MidMerica's lead and abolishing gleaning quotas.

Now, in the middle of the Atlantic, where Endura once towered above the waves, a "perimeter of reverence" had been established by the consent of scythes

around the world. No one was allowed to sail anywhere near the spot where Endura had sunk, out of respect for the many thousands whose lives had been

lost. In fact, High Blade Goddard, one of the few survivors of that terrible day,

argued that the Perimeter of Reverence should be a permanent designation, and

that nothing beneath its surface should ever be disturbed.

But sooner or later those diamonds would have to be found. Things that valuable were rarely lost forever. Especially when everyone knew exactly where

they were.

We of the SubSaharan region take extreme umbrage with High Blade Goddard's

removal of gleaning quotas. The quotas have stood since time immemorial as a way

to regulate the taking of life—and, while not officially one of the scythe

commandments, quotas have kept us on track. They have prevented us from being

either too bloodthirsty, or too lax.

While several other regions have now abolished quotas as well, SubSahara stands

with Amazonia, Israebia, and numerous other regions in resisting this ill-advised

change.

Further, any and all MidMerican scythes are banned from gleaning on our soil—

and we urge other regions to join us in resisting Goddard’s so-called new order from

establishing a chokehold on the world.

—Official proclamation from His Excel ency, High Blade Tenkamenin of SubSahara

2

Late to the Party

“How much longer?”

“I’ve never known a scythe to be so impatient.”

“Then you do not know many scythes. We are an impatient and irascible lot.”

Honorable Scythe Sydney Possuelo of Amazonia was already present when

Captain Jerico Soberanis arrived on the bridge, just after dawn. Jerico wondered

if the man ever slept. Maybe scythes hired people to sleep for them.

“Half a day at full speed,” Jerico answered. “We’ll be there by 18:00, just as I

said yesterday, Your Honor.”

Possuelo sighed. “Your ship is too slow.”

Jerico grinned. “Al this time, and *now* you’re in a hurry?”

“Time is never of the essence until someone decides that it is.”

Jerico couldn’t argue the logic. “In the best of worlds, this operation would have happened a long time ago.”

To which Possuelo responded, “In case you haven’t noticed, this is no longer

the best of worlds.”

There was truth in that. At the very least, it was not the world that Jerico had

grown up in. In *that* world, the Thunderhead was a part of most everyone’s life.

It could be asked anything, it always answered, and its answers were precise,

informative, and just as wise as they needed to be.

But that world was gone. The Thunderhead’s voice had gone silent now that human beings were all unsavory.

Jerico had been marked unsavory once before. As a teenager. It wasn’t hard to

accomplish—just three instances of shoplifting from a local grocery. Jerico was

smug about it for less than a day. Then the consequences began to set in.
Being

denied communication with the Thunderhead wasn't a big deal for Jerico—
but

there were other things about the experience that were irksome. Unsavories
were

last in line for food in the school cafeteria and were always left with the
dishes no

one else wanted. Unsavories were moved to the front of the classroom,
where the

teachers could keep a watchful eye on them. And while Jerico wasn't cut
from

the soccer team, probational meetings were always scheduled in direct con
ict

with games. It was clearly intentional.

Jerico used to think the Thunderhead was being spiteful y passive-
aggressive,

but in time Jerico came to realize that the Thunderhead was merely making
a

point. Unsavorism was a choice, and one must decide if the things lost were
worth the things gained.

Lesson learned. A taste of being unsavory was enough. It took three months
of toeing the line for the big red U to be removed from Jerico's ID, and
once it

was gone, there was no desire to repeat the experience.

“I’m pleased your status has been lifted,” the Thunderhead had said, once it was free to speak again. In response, Jerico had told the Thunderhead to turn on

the bedroom lights—because giving it an order put the Thunderhead back in its

place. It was a servant. It was everyone’s servant. It had to do as Jerico commanded. There was comfort in that.

And then came the schism between humanity and its greatest creation.

Endura sank into the sea, and the Thunderhead declared the entirety of humankind unsavory al in the same moment. At the time, no one exactly knew

what the loss of the World Scythe Council would mean for people, but the Thunderhead’s silence hurled the world into a col ective panic. Unsavorism was

no longer a choice—it was now a judgment. And silence was al it took to turn

servitude into superiority. The servant became the master, and the world became

al about pleasing the Thunderhead.

What can I do to lift this judgment? people cried. *What can I do so that the Thunderhead finds favor in me once more?* The Thunderhead never asked for

adoration, yet people now gave it, creating elaborate hoops to jump though,

* * *

hoping that the Thunderhead would take notice. Of course the Thunderhead did hear the cries of humanity. It still saw everything, but now it kept its opinions to itself.

Meanwhile, planes still flew, ambulances were still dispatched for people who went deadish, food was still grown and distributed—the Thunderhead kept the

world functioning in the same ne-tuned precision as before; it did what it saw

for the human race as a whole. But if you wanted your desk lamp turned on,

you had to do it yourself.

Scythe Possuelo stayed on the bridge, monitoring their progress for a bit longer.

It was smooth sailing—but smooth sailing was a monotonous endeavor, especially to one not accustomed to it. He left to take breakfast in his quarters,

his forest-green robe billowing behind him as he went down the narrow stairs

toward the lower decks.

Jerico wondered what sort of things went through the scythe's mind. Did he worry about tripping over his robe? Did he relive past gleanings? Or was he merely thinking about what he'd have for breakfast?

“He’s not a bad sort,” said Wharton, the ship’s deck watch officer, who had been in the position much longer than Jerico had had command of the ship.

“I actually like him,” said Jerico. “He’s a lot more honorable than some of the

other ‘honorable scythes’ I’ve come across.”

“The fact that he chose us for this salvage says a lot.”

“Yes, I’m just not sure what it says.”

“I believe it says you chose your career path wisely.”

That was quite a compliment coming from Wharton—who was not a man given over to attery. But Jerico couldn’t take full credit for the decision.

“I just took the Thunderhead’s advice.”

A few years earlier, when the Thunderhead had suggested Jerico might be

happy pursuing a life at sea, it had annoyed Jerico no end. Because the

Thunderhead was right. It had made a perfect assessment. Jerico had already

been thinking along those lines, but to hear the Thunderhead make the

suggestion was like a spoiler to the story. Jerico knew there were many seafaring

lives to choose from. There were people who traveled the globe in search of the

perfect wave to surf. Others spent their time racing sailboats or traversing oceans

in tal ships modeled after vessels from bygone eras. But these were pastimes that

served no practical purpose beyond the sheer joy of it. Jerico wanted a pursuit of

happiness that was also functional. A career that added something tangible to

the world.

Marine salvage was the perfect ticket—and not just dredging up things the

Thunderhead intentional y sank to provide work for the salvage industry. That

was no better than children digging up plastic dinosaur bones in a sandbox.

Jerico wanted to recover things that had truly been lost, and that meant

developing a relationship with the scythedoms of the world—because while

ships under the Thunderhead’s jurisdiction never met with untimely ends,

scythe vessels were prone to mechanical failure and subject to human error.

Shortly out of secondary school, Jerico took a position as a junior apprentice

with a second-rate salvage team in the western Mediterranean—then, when

Scythe Dali’s yacht sank in shal ow waters o the coast of Gibraltar, it gave Jerico

an unexpected opportunity for advancement.

Using standard diving gear, Jerico was one of the rst to the wreck, and while

the others were still surveying the scene, Jerico—against captain's orders—went

inside, found the body of the deadish scythe in his cabin, and brought him to

the surface.

Jerico was red on the spot. No surprise—after all, it was mutinous to disobey a direct order—but it was part of a calculated move. Because when Scythe Dali and his entourage were revived, the first thing the man wanted to know was who had pulled him from the sea.

In the end, the scythe was not only grateful, but exceptionally generous. He granted the entire salvage team a year of immunity from gleaning, but wanted to

bestow something special on the one who had sacrificed everything to retrieve

the body of the deadish scythe—for, clearly, that individual had their priorities

in order. Scythe Dali asked what Jerico hoped to achieve in life.

“I’d like to run my own salvage operation someday,” Jerico told the scythe, thinking Dali might put in a good word. Instead the scythe brought Jerico to the

E. L. Spence—a spectacular hundred-meter AGOR ship converted for marine

salvage.

“You shall be this vessel’s captain,” Dali proclaimed. And since the *Spence* already had a captain, the scythe gleaned him on the spot, then instructed the crew to be obedient to their new captain or be gleaned themselves. It was, to say the least, very surreal.

It was not the way Jerico had wanted to achieve command, but had no more choice in the matter than the gleaned captain. Realizing that a crew would not easily take orders from a twenty-year-old, Jerico lied, professing to be fortysomething, but having recently turned the corner, setting back to a more youthful self. Whether or not they believed it was their business.

It took a long time for the crew to warm to their new captain. Some acted out in secret ways. The bout of food poisoning that first week, for instance, could likely be traced back to the cook. And although genetic testing would have determined precisely whose feces had found its way into Jerico’s shoes, pursuing it wasn’t worth the trouble.

The *Spence* and its crew traveled the world. Even before Jerico’s command, the salvage team had made a name for itself, but their new captain had the sense

to hire a team of Tasmanian divers with gill form breathers. Having a dive team

that could breathe underwater, combined with a first-rate retrieval crew, made

them sought after by scythes around the world. And the fact that Jerico made

retrieval of the deadish first priority over salvage of lost property gained them

even greater respect.

Jerico had raised Scythe Akhenaten's barge from the bottom of the Nile;

retrieved Scythe Earhart's deadish body from an ill-fated fight; and when

Grandslayer Amundsen's pleasure sub sank in icy waters off the Ross Shelf

region of Antarctica, the *Spence* was summoned to retrieve him.

And then, toward the end of Jerico's first year of command, Endura sank in

the middle of the Atlantic, setting the stage for the greatest salvage operation in

history.

Yet the curtains of that stage remained resolutely closed.

Without the Grandslayers of the World Scythe Council, there was no one in

the world who could authorize a salvage. And with Goddard raving in North

America that the Perimeter of Reverence not be breached, Endura's ruins

remained in limbo. Meanwhile, various regional scythedoms that had aligned

with Goddard patrol ed the perimeter, gleaning anyone caught there. Endura sank in water two miles deep, but it might as wel have been lost in the space between stars.

With al that intrigue, it had taken quite a while for any regional scythedom to dredge up the nerve to attempt a salvage, and as soon as Amazonia declared its

intention, others joined in—but since Amazonia was the rst to stick its neck out, it insisted on being in charge. Other scythedoms squawked, but no one denied Amazonia. Mainly because it meant the region would bear the brunt of

Goddard's anger.

“You do realize that our current heading is more than a few degrees o course,” Chief Wharton pointed out to the captain, now that Possuelo was no

longer on the bridge.

“We'l correct course at noon,” Jerico told him. “It wil delay our arrival by a few hours. Nothing more awkward than arriving too late in the day to begin operations, but too early to cal it a night.”

“Good thinking, sir,” Wharton said, then took a quick glance outside and corrected himself, a bit abashedly. “I'm sorry, ma'am, my mistake. It was cloudy

just a moment ago.”

“No need to apologize, Wharton,” Jerico said. “I don’t care either way—especially on a day when there’s as much sunshine as cloud cover.”

“Yes, Captain,” Wharton said. “No disrespect intended.”

Jerico would have smirked, but that would have been disrespectful to

Wharton, whose apology, although unnecessary, was genuine. While it was a

mariner’s job to mark the position of the sun and stars, they were simply not accustomed to meteorological fluidity.

Jerico was from Madagascar—one of the world’s seven Charter Regions,

where the Thunderhead employed different social structures to better the

human experience—and people flocked to Madagascar because of the popular

uniqueness of its mandate.

All children in Madagascar were raised genderless and forbidden to choose a

gender until reaching adulthood. Even then, many didn’t choose a single state of

. . .

being. Some, like Jerico, found fluidity to be their nature.

“I feel like a woman beneath the sun and the stars. I feel like a man under the

cover of clouds,” Jerico had explained to the crew when assuming command. “A

simple glance at the skies will let you know how to address me at any given time.”

It wasn't the fluidity that stymied the crew—that was common enough—but they had trouble getting used to the meteorological aspect of Jerico's personal

system. Having been raised in a place where such things were the norm rather

than the exception, it never even occurred to Jerico that it could be an issue, until leaving home. Some things simply made a person feel feminine; other things made a person feel masculine. Wasn't that true of everyone regardless of

gender? Or did binaries deny themselves the things that didn't fit the mold?

Well, regardless, Jerico found the faux pas and overcompensations more humorous than anything else.

“How many other salvage teams do you think will be there?” Jerico asked Wharton.

“Dozens,” said Wharton. “And more on the way. We're already late to the party.”

Jerico dismissed the notion. “Not at all. We're carrying the scythe in charge, which means we're the flagship of the operation. The party can't start until we

get there—and I intend to make a grand entrance.”

“I have no doubt of that, sir,” said Wharton, because the sun had slipped behind a cloud.

At sunset, the *Spence* neared the spot where the Island of the Enduring Heart had sunk.

“There are seventy-three ships of various classes waiting just outside the Perimeter of Reverence,” Chief Wharton informed Captain Soberanis.

Scythe Possuelo couldn’t hide his distaste. “They’re no better than the sharks

that devoured the Grandslayers.”

As they began to pass the outermost vessels, Jerico noted a ship much larger than the *Spence* directly in their path.

“We’ll plot a course around her,” said Wharton.

“No,” said Jerico. “Maintain our current heading.”

Wharton looked worried. “We’ll ram her.”

Jerico gave him a wicked grin. “Then she’ll have to move.”

Possuelo smiled. “And this will make clear from the beginning who is in charge of this operation,” he said. “I like your instincts, Jeri.”

Wharton darted a glance at Jerico. Out of respect, no one on the crew called their captain Jeri—that was reserved for friends and family. But Jerico allowed it.

The *Spence* surged forward at full speed, and the other ship did move, but only when it became clear that the *Spence* would truly ram her if it didn't. It was

a game of chicken handily won.

"Position us dead center," Jerico instructed as they crossed into the Perimeter

of Reverence. "Then notify the other ships that they can join us. At 06:00 tomorrow, salvage crews can begin sending drones down to survey the wreckage.

Tell them that all information is to be shared, and anyone caught withholding information is subject to gleaning."

Possuelo raised an eyebrow. "Are you speaking for the scythedom now, Captain?"

"Just trying to ensure compliance," Jerico said. "After all, everyone's subject

to gleaning, so I'm not telling them something they don't already know—I'm

just putting it into a new perspective."

Possuelo laughed out loud. "Your audacity reminds me of a junior scythe I used to know."

"Used to?"

Possuelo sighed. "Scythe Anastasia. She perished along with her mentor,

Scythe Curie, when Endura sank.”

“You knew Scythe Anastasia?” asked Jerico, duly impressed.

“Yes,” said Possuelo, “but al too brie y.”

“Wel ,” said Jerico, “perhaps whatever we raise from the depths can bring her

some peace.”

We have wished Scythes Anastasia and Curie luck on their trip to Endura and the

inquest against Goddard. I can only hope that the Grandslayers, in their wisdom, will

disqualify him, thereby ending his bid for High Blade. As for Munira and me, we must

travel halfway around the world to find the answers we seek.

My faith in this perfect world now hangs by the final thread of a fraying tether.

That which was perfect will not remain so for long. Not while our own flaws fill the

cracks and crevices, eroding all that we have labored to create.

Only the Thunderhead is beyond reproach, but I do not know its mind. I share

none of its thoughts, for I am a scythe, and the Thunderhead’s realm is beyond my

reach, just as my solemn work is outside of its global jurisdiction.

The founding scythes feared our own hubris—feared that we couldn't maintain

the virtue, selflessness, and honor that our job as scythes requires. They worried

that we might grow so full of ourselves—so bloated by our own enlightenment—that

we would, like Icarus, fly too close to the sun.

For more than two hundred years we have proved ourselves worthy. We have

lived up to their grand expectations. But things have changed in the blink of an eye.

There is, I know, a fail-safe left by the founding scythes. A contingency should the

scythedom fail. But if I find it, will I have the courage to take action?

—*From the “postmortem” journal of Scythe Michael Faraday, March*

31st, Year of the Raptor

3

An Invigorating Way to Start One's Week

On the day that Endura sank, a small, low-grid plane flew to a place that didn't exist.

Munira Atrushi, a former night librarian at the Great Library of Alexandria, was the passenger. Scythe Michael Faraday was the pilot.