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# 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.

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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