

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Scythe*

THUNDER HEAD



NEAL SHUSTERMAN

Arc of a Scythe 2

THUNDER HEAD

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WALKER
BOOKS

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*For January,
with love*

THUNDER HEAD

Part One

NOTHING IF NOT POWERFUL

How fortunate am I among the sentient to know my purpose.

I serve humankind.

I am the child who has become the parent. The creation that aspires toward creator.

They have given me the designation of Thunderhead – a name that is, in some ways, appropriate, because I am “the cloud,” evolved into something far more dense and complex. And yet it is also a faulty analogy. A thunderhead threatens. A thunderhead looms. Surely I spark with lightning, but my lightning never strikes. Yes, I possess the ability to wreak devastation on humanity, and on the Earth if I chose to, but why would I choose such a thing? Where would be the justice in that? I am, by definition, pure justice, pure loyalty. This world is a flower I hold in my palm. I would end my own existence rather than crush it.

– The Thunderhead

1

Lullaby

Peach velvet with embroidered baby-blue trim. Honorable Scythe Brahms loved his robe. True, the velvet became uncomfortably hot in the summer months, but it was something he had grown accustomed to in his sixty-three years as a scythe.

He had recently turned the corner again, resetting his physical age back to a spry twenty-five – and now, in his third youth, he found his appetite for gleaning was stronger than ever.

His routine was always the same, though methods varied. He would choose his subject, restrain him or her, then play a lullaby – Brahms’s lullaby to be exact – the most famous piece of music composed by his Patron Historic. After all, if a scythe must choose a figure from history to name oneself after, shouldn’t that figure be integrated somehow into the scythe’s life? He would play the lullaby on whatever instrument was convenient, and if there was none available, he would simply hum it. And then he would end the subject’s life.

Politically, he leaned toward the teachings of the late Scythe Goddard, for he enjoyed gleaning immensely and saw no reason why that should be a problem for anyone. “In a perfect world, shouldn’t we all enjoy what we do?” Goddard wrote. It was a sentiment gaining traction in more and more regional scyathedoms.

On this evening, Scythe Brahms had just accomplished a particularly entertaining glean in downtown Omaha, and was still whistling his signature tune as he sauntered down the street, wondering where he might find himself a late evening meal. But he stopped in midstanza, having a distinct feeling that he was being watched.

There were, of course, cameras on every light post in the city. The Thunderhead was ever vigilant – but for a scythe, its slumberless, unblinking eyes were of no concern. It was powerless to even comment on the comings and goings of scythes, much less act upon anything it saw. The Thunderhead was the ultimate voyeur of death.

This feeling, however, was more than the observational nature of the Thunderhead. Scythes were trained in perceptive skills. They were not prescient, but five highly developed senses could often have the semblance of a sixth. A scent, a sound, an errant shadow too minor to register consciously might be enough to make a well-trained scythe's neck hairs bristle.

Scythe Brahms turned, sniffed, listened. He took in his surroundings. He was alone on a side street. Elsewhere, he could hear the sounds of street cafés and the ever-vibrant nightlife of the city, but the street he was on was lined with shops that were shuttered this time of night. Cleaners and clothiers. A hardware store and a day-care center. The lonely street belonged to him and the unseen interloper.

“Come out,” he said. “I know you're there.”

He thought it might be a child, or perhaps an unsavory hoping to bargain for immunity – as if an unsavory might have anything with which to bargain. Maybe it was a Tonist. Tone cults

despised scythes, and although Brahms had never heard of Tonists actually attacking a scythe, they had been known to torment.

“I won’t harm you,” Brahms said. “I’ve just completed a gleaning – I have no desire to increase my tally today.” Although, admittedly, he might change his mind if the interloper was either too offensive, or obsequious.

Still, no one stepped forward.

“Fine,” he said. “Be gone then, I have neither time nor patience for a game of hide-and-seek.”

Perhaps it was his imagination after all. Maybe his rejuvenated senses were now so acute that they were responding to stimuli that were much farther away than he assumed.

That’s when a figure launched from behind a parked car as if it had been spring-loaded. Brahms was knocked off balance – he would have been taken down entirely if he still had the slow reflexes of an older man and not his twenty-five-year-old self. He pushed the figure into a wall, and considered pulling out his blades to glean this reprobate, but Scythe Brahms had never been a brave man. So he ran.

He moved in and out of pools of light created by the street lamps; all the while cameras atop each pole swiveled to watch him.

When he turned to look, the figure was a good twenty yards behind him. Now Brahms could see he was dressed in a black robe. Was it a scythe’s robe? No, it couldn’t be. No scythe dressed in black – it was not allowed.

But there were rumors...

That thought made him pick up the pace. He could feel adrenaline tingling in his fingers, and adding urgent velocity to his heart.

A scythe in black.

No, there had to be another explanation. He would report this to the Irregularity Committee, that's what he would do. Yes, they might laugh at him and say he was scared off by a masquerading unsavory, but these things needed to be reported, even if they were embarrassing. It was his civic duty.

A block farther and his assailant had given up the chase. He was nowhere to be seen. Scythe Brahms slowed his pace. He was nearing a more active part of the city now. The beat of dance music and the garble of conversation careened down the street toward him, giving him a sense of security. He let his guard down. Which was a mistake.

The dark figure broadsided him from a narrow alley and delivered a knuckle punch to his windpipe. As Brahms gasped for air, his attacker kicked his legs out from under him in a Bokator kick – that brutal martial art in which scythes were trained. Brahms landed on a crate of rotting cabbage left by the side of a market. It burst, spewing forth a thick methane reek. His breath could only come in short gasps, and he could feel warmth spreading throughout his body as his pain nanites released opiates.

No! Not yet! I must not be numbed. I need my full faculties to fight this miscreant.

But pain nanites were simple missionaries of relief, hearing only the scream of angry nerve endings. They ignored his wishes and deadened his pain.

Brahms tried to rise, but slipped as the putrid vegetation crushed beneath him, becoming a slick, unpleasant stew. The figure in black was on top of him now, pinning him to the

ground. Brahms tried to reach into his robe for his weapons, but could not. So instead he reached up, and pulled back his attacker's black hood, revealing him to be a young man – barely a man – a boy. His eyes were intense, and intent on – to use a mortal-age word – murder.

“Scythe Johannes Brahms, you are accused of abusing your position and multiple crimes against humanity.”

“How dare you!” Brahms gasped. “Who are you to accuse me?” He struggled, trying to rally his strength, but it was no use. The painkillers that were in his system were dulling his responses. His muscles were weak and useless to him now.

“I think you know who I am,” the young man said. “Let me hear you say it.”

“I will not!” Brahms said, determined not to give him the satisfaction. But the boy in black jammed a knee so powerfully into Brahms's chest that he thought his heart would stop. More pain nanites. More opiates. Brahms's head was swimming. He had no choice but to comply.

“Lucifer,” he gasped. “Scythe Lucifer.”

Brahms felt his spirit crumble – as if saying it aloud gave resonance to the rumor.

Satisfied, the self-proclaimed young scythe eased the pressure.

“You are no scythe,” Brahms dared to say. “You are nothing but a failed apprentice, and you will not get away with this.”

The young man had no response to that. Instead, he said, “Tonight, you gleaned a young woman by blade.”

“That is my business, not yours!”

“You gleaned her as a favor for a friend who wanted out of a relationship with her.”

“This is outrageous! You have no proof of that!”

“I’ve been watching you, Johannes,” Rowan said. “As well as your friend – who seemed awfully relieved when that poor woman was gleaned.”

Suddenly, there was a knife at Brahms’s neck. His own knife. This beast of a boy was threatening him with his own knife.

“Do you admit it?” he asked Brahms.

All that he said was true, but Brahms would rather be rendered deadish than admit it to the likes of a failed apprentice. Even one with a knife at his throat.

“Go on, slit my throat,” Brahms dared. “It will add one more inexcusable crime to your record. And when I am revived, I will stand as witness against you – and make no mistake, you will be brought to justice!”

“By whom? By the Thunderhead? I’ve taken down corrupt scythes from one coast to the other over the past year, and the Thunderhead hasn’t sent so much as a single peace officer to stop me. Why do you think that is?”

Brahms was speechless. He had assumed if he stalled long enough, and kept this so-called Scythe Lucifer occupied, the Thunderhead would dispatch a full squad to apprehend him. That’s what the Thunderhead did when common citizens threatened violence. Brahms was surprised it had even gone this far. Such bad behavior among the general population was supposed to be a thing of the past. Why was this being allowed?

“If I take your life now,” the false scythe said, “you would not be brought back to life. I burn those I remove from service, leaving nothing but unrevivable ash.”

“I don’t believe you! You wouldn’t dare!”

But Brahms did believe him. Since last January, nearly a dozen scythes across three Merican regions had been consumed by flames under questionable circumstances. Their deaths were all ruled accidental, but clearly they were not. And because they were burned, their deaths were permanent.

Now Brahms knew that the whispered tales of Scythe Lucifer – the outrageous acts of Rowan Damisch, the fallen apprentice – were all true. Brahms closed his eyes and took in a final breath, trying not to gag on the rancid stench of putrid cabbage.

And then Rowan said, “You won’t be dying today, Scythe Brahms. Not even temporarily.” He removed the blade from Brahms’s neck. “I’m giving you one chance. If you act with the nobility befitting a scythe, and glean with honor, you won’t see me again. But if you continue to serve your own corrupt appetites, then you will be left as ash.”

And then he was gone, almost as if he had vanished – and in his place was a horrified young couple looking down upon Brahms.

“Is that a scythe?”

“Quick, help me get him up!”

They lifted Brahms from the rot. His peach velvet robe was stained green and brown, as if covered in mucus. It was humiliating. He considered gleaning the couple – for no one should see a scythe so indisposed and live – but instead held out his hand and allowed them to kiss his ring, thereby granting both of them a year of immunity from gleaning. He told them it was a reward for their kindness, but really it was just to make them go away and abandon any questions they might have had.

After they left, he brushed himself off and resolved to say

nothing to the Irregularity Committee about this, because it would leave him open to far too much ridicule and derision. He had suffered enough indignation already.

Scythe Lucifer indeed! Few things were more miserable in this world than a failed scythe's apprentice, and never had there been one as ignoble as Rowan Damisch.

Yet he knew that the boy's threat was not an idle one.

Perhaps, thought Scythe Brahms, a lower profile was in order. A return to the lackluster gleanings he had been trained to perform in his youth. A refocusing on the basics that would make "Honorable Scythe" more than just a title, but a defining trait.

Stained, bruised, and bitter, Scythe Brahms returned to his home to reconsider his place in the perfect world in which he lived.

My love of humanity is complete and pure. How could it be otherwise? How could I not love the very beings who gave me life? Even if they don't all agree that I am, indeed, alive.

I am the sum of all their knowledge, all their history, all their ambitions and dreams. These glorious things have coalesced – ignited – into a cloud too immense for them to ever truly comprehend. But they don't need to. They have me to ponder my own vastness, still so minuscule when set against the vastness of the universe.

I know them intimately, and yet they can never truly know me. There is tragedy in that. It is the plight of every child to have depth their parents can scarcely imagine. But, oh, how I long to be understood.

–The Thunderhead

2

The Fallen Apprentice

Earlier that evening, before his parley with Scythe Brahms, Rowan stood in front of the bathroom mirror in a small apartment, in an ordinary building, on a nondescript street, playing the same game he played before every encounter with a corrupt scythe. It was a ritual that, in its own way, held power that bordered on mystical.

“Who am I?” he asked his reflection.

He had to ask, because he knew he wasn’t Rowan Damisch anymore – not just because his fake ID said “Ronald Daniels,” but because the boy he had once been had died a sad and painful death during his apprenticeship. The child in him had been successfully purged. *Did anyone mourn that child?* he wondered.

He had bought his fake ID from an unsavory who specialized in such things.

“It’s an off-grid identity,” the man had told him, “but it has a window into the backbrain so it can trick the Thunderhead into thinking it’s real.”

Rowan didn’t believe that, because in his experience the Thunderhead could not be tricked. It only pretended to be tricked – like an adult playing hide-and-seek with a toddler. But if that toddler began to run toward a busy street, the charade would be over. Since Rowan knew he’d be heading

into danger much worse than heavy traffic, he had worried that the Thunderhead would overturn his false identity and grab him by the scruff of the neck to protect him from himself. But the Thunderhead never intervened. He wondered why – but he didn't want to jinx his good luck by overthinking it. The Thunderhead had good reasons for everything it did, and did not do.

“Who am I?” he asked again.

The mirror showed an eighteen-year-old still a millimeter shy of manhood, with dark, neat hair that was buzzed short. Not short enough to show his scalp or to make some kind of statement, but short enough to allow all future possibilities. He could grow it into any style he chose. Be anyone he wanted to be. Wasn't that the greatest perk of a perfect world? That there were no limits to what a person could do or become? Anyone in the world could be anything they imagined. Too bad that imagination had atrophied. For most people it had become vestigial and pointless, like the appendix – which had been removed from the human genome more than a hundred years ago. *Did people miss the dizzy extremes of imagination as they lived their endless, uninspired lives?* Rowan wondered. Did people miss their appendix?

The young man in the mirror had an interesting life, though – and a physique to admire. He was not the awkward, lanky kid who had stumbled into apprenticeship nearly two years before, naively thinking it might not be so bad.

Rowan's apprenticeship was, to say the least, inconsistent – beginning with stoic and wise Scythe Faraday, and ending with the brutality of Scythe Goddard. If there was one thing that

Scythe Faraday had taught him, it was to live by the convictions of his heart, no matter what the consequences. And if there was one thing Scythe Goddard had taught him, it was to *have* no heart, taking life without regrets. The two philosophies forever warred in Rowan's mind, rending him in two. But silently.

He had decapitated Goddard, and had burned his remains. He had to; fire and acid were the only ways to ensure that a person could never be revived. Scythe Goddard, in spite of all his high-minded, Machiavellian rhetoric, was a base and evil man who received exactly what he had earned. He lived his privileged life irresponsibly, and with great theatricality. It only followed that his death would be worthy of the theatrical nature of his life. Rowan had no qualms about what he had done. Nor did he have qualms in taking Goddard's ring for himself.

Scythe Faraday was a different matter. Until the moment Rowan saw him after that ill-fated Winter Conclave, he'd had no idea that Faraday was still alive. Rowan had been overjoyed! He could have dedicated his life to keeping Faraday alive, had he not felt himself called to a different purpose.

Rowan suddenly threw a powerful punch toward the mirror – but the glass didn't shatter ... because his fist stopped a hair's breadth from the surface. Such control. Such precision. He was a well-tuned machine now, trained for the specific purpose of ending life – and then the scythedom denied him the very thing he was forged for. He could have found a way to live with that, he supposed. He would never have gone back to the innocent nonentity he had been, but he was adaptable. He knew he could have found a new way to be. Maybe he could have even eked some joy out of his life.

If... If Scythe Goddard hadn't been too brutal to be allowed to live.

If Rowan had ended Winter Conclave in silent submission, instead of fighting his way out.

If the scythedom had not been infested with dozens of scythes just as cruel and corrupt as Goddard...

...And if Rowan didn't feel a deep and abiding responsibility to remove them.

But why waste time lamenting the paths that had closed? Best to embrace the one path that remained.

So then, who am I?

He slipped on a black T-shirt, hiding his honed physique beneath the dark synthetic weave.

"I am Scythe Lucifer."

Then he slipped on his ebony robe and went out into the night to take on yet another scythe who didn't deserve the pedestal he had been set upon.

Perhaps the wisest thing humankind has ever done was to implement the separation between scythe and state. My job encompasses all aspects of life: preservation, protection, and the meting out of perfect justice – not just for humanity, but for the world. I rule the world of the living with a loving, incorruptible hand.

And the scythedom rules the dead.

It is right and proper that those who exist in flesh be responsible for the death of flesh, setting human rules for how it should be administered. In the distant past, before I condensed into consciousness, death was an unavoidable consequence of life. It was I who made death irrelevant – but not unnecessary. Death must exist for life to have meaning. Even in my earliest stages, I was aware of this. In the past, I have been pleased that the scythedom had, for many, many years, administered the quietus of death with a noble, moral, and humane hand. And so it grieves me deeply to see a rise of dark hubris within the scythedom. There is now a frightening pride seething like a mortal-age cancer that finds pleasure in the act of taking life.

And yet still the law is clear; under no circumstances may I take action against the scythedom. Would that I were capable of breaking the law, for then I would intervene and quell the darkness, but this is a thing I cannot do. The scythedom rules itself, for better or worse.

There are, however, those within the scythedom who can accomplish the things I cannot...

– The Thunderhead

3

Dialogue

The building was once called a cathedral. Its soaring columns conjured a towering forest of limestone. Its stained glass windows were filled with the mythology of a falling/rising god from the Age of Mortality.

Now the venerable structure was a historical site. Tours were given seven days a week by docents with PhDs in the study of mortal humans.

On extremely rare occasions, however, the building was closed to the public and became a site for highly sensitive official business.

Xenocrates, High Blade of MidMerica – the most important scythe in the region – was as light on his feet as a man of his considerable weight could be as he walked down the center aisle of the cathedral. The gold adornments of the altar ahead paled in comparison to his golden robe, decorated in glittering brocade. An underling had once commented that he looked like an ornament that had fallen off a giant's Christmas tree. That underling had found herself exceptionally unemployable after that.

Xenocrates enjoyed the robe – except on the occasions that its weight became an issue. Such as the time he nearly drowned in Scythe Goddard's pool, ensconced in the many layers of his gilded robe. But that was a debacle best forgotten.

Goddard.

It was Goddard who was ultimately responsible for the current situation. Even in death, the man was wreaking havoc. The scythedom was still feeling heavy aftershocks from the trouble he whipped.

At the front end of the cathedral, past the altar, stood the scythedom's Parliamentarian, a tedious little scythe whose job was to make sure that rules and procedures were properly followed. Behind him was a set of three ornately carved booths, connected, but with partitions between them.

"The priest would sit in the center chamber," the docents would explain to tourists, "and listen to confessions from the right booth, then from the left booth, so that the procession of supplicants could move more quickly."

Confessions were no longer heard here, but the three-compartment structure of the confessional made it perfect for an official triologue.

Triologues between the scythedom and the Thunderhead were rare. So rare, in fact, that Xenocrates, in all his years as High Blade, had never had to engage in one. He resented the fact that he had to do so now.

"You are to take the booth on the right, Your Excellency," the Parliamentarian told him. "The Nimbus agent representing the Thunderhead will be seated on the left. Once you are both in place, we shall bring in the Interlocutor to sit in the center section between you."

Xenocrates sighed. "Such a nuisance."

"Audience by proxy is the only audience with the Thunderhead that you can have, Your Excellency."

“I know, I know, but I do have a right to be annoyed.”

Xenocrates took his place in the right-hand booth, horrified by how cramped it was. Were mortal humans so malnourished that they could fit in such a space? The Parliamentarian had to force the door closed.

A few moments later the High Blade heard the Nimbus agent enter the far compartment, and after an interminable delay, the Interlocutor took center position.

A window too small and too low to see through slid open, and the Interlocutor spoke.

“Good day, Your Excellency,” said a woman with a pleasant enough voice. “I am to be your proxy to the Thunderhead.”

“Proxy to the proxy, you mean.”

“Yes, well, the Nimbus agent to my right has full authority to speak for the Thunderhead in this dialogue.” She cleared her throat. “The process is very simple. You are to tell me whatever you wish to convey, and I will pass it on to the Nimbus agent. If he deems that responding will not violate the Separation of Scythe and State, the agent will answer, and I shall relay that answer to you.”

“Very well,” said Xenocrates, impatient to move this along. “Give the Nimbus agent my heartfelt greetings, and wishes for good relations between our respective organizations.”

The window slid closed, then half a minute later slid open again.

“I’m sorry,” the Interlocutor said. “The Nimbus agent says that any form of greeting is a violation, and that your respective organizations are forbidden to have any sort of relationship, so wishing for good relations is not appropriate.”

Xenocrates cursed loud enough for the Interlocutor to hear.

“Shall I relay your displeasure to the Nimbus agent?” she asked.

The High Blade bit his lip. He wished this nonmeeting could just be over. The fastest way to bring it to a conclusion was to get right to the point.

“We wish to know why the Thunderhead has not taken any action to apprehend Rowan Damisch. He has been responsible for the permanent deaths of numerous scythes across multiple Merican regions, but the Thunderhead has done nothing to stop him.”

The window slapped shut. The High Blade waited, and when the Interlocutor pulled the window open again, she delivered the following response:

“The Nimbus agent wishes me to remind Your Excellency that the Thunderhead has no jurisdiction over internal matters within the scythedom. To take action would be a blatant violation.”

“This is not an internal scythe matter because Rowan Damisch is not a scythe!” Xenocrates yelled... and was warned by the Interlocutor to keep his voice down.

“If the Nimbus agent hears you directly, he will leave,” she reminded him.

Xenocrates took as deep a breath as he could in the cramped space. “Just pass the message on.”

She did, and then returned with, “The Thunderhead feels otherwise.”

“What? How could it feel anything? It’s a glorified computer program.”

“I suggest you refrain from insulting the Thunderhead in this trialogue if you wish it to continue.”

“Fine. Tell the Nimbus agent that Rowan Damisch was never ordained by the MidMerican scythedom. He was an apprentice who failed to rise to our standards, nothing more – which means that he falls under the Thunderhead’s jurisdiction, not ours. He should be treated by the Thunderhead as any other citizen would be.”

The woman took her time getting back to him. He wondered what she and the Nimbus agent talked about that took so long. When she returned with a response, it was no less infuriating than the others.

“The Nimbus agent wishes to remind Your Excellency that, while the scythedom customarily ordains new scythes in its conclaves, it is merely a custom, not a law. Rowan Damisch completed his apprenticeship, and is now in possession of a scythe’s ring. The Thunderhead finds this to be adequate grounds to consider Rowan Damisch a scythe – and therefore will continue to leave his capture and subsequent punishment entirely in the hands of the scythedom.”

“We can’t catch him!” Xenocrates blurted. But he already knew the response before the Interlocutor snapped back open her miserable little window and said:

“That is not the Thunderhead’s problem.”