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The Fall

Book II of the Strain Trilogy

Written by

Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan

Published by Harper

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the
fall

BOOK II
OF
The Strain Trilogy

GUILLERMO DEL TORO
and **CHUCK HOGAN**

HARPER

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This one is for Lorenza, with all my love.

—GDT

For my four favorite creatures.

—CH

Extract from the diary of Ephraim Goodweather

Friday, November 26

It took the world just sixty days to end. And we were there to account for it—our omissions, our arrogance . . .

By the time the crisis went to Congress, and was analyzed, legislated, and ultimately vetoed, we had already lost. The night belonged to them.

Leaving us longing for daylight when it was ours no more . . .

All this mere days after our “uncontestable video evidence” reached the world—its truth drowned in thousands of smirking rebuttals and parodies that YouTube’d us beyond all hope.

It became a Late Night pun, smart-asses that we were, hardy-har-har—until dusk fell upon us and we turned to face an immense, uncaring void.

The first stage of public response to any epidemic is always Denial.

The second, Search For Blame.

All the usual scarecrows were trotted out as distractions: economic woes, social unrest, the racial scapegoating, terrorist threats.

But in the end, it was just us. All of us. We allowed it to happen because we never believed it could happen. We were too smart. Too advanced. Too strong.

And now the darkness is complete.

There are no longer any givens, any absolutes—no root to our existence. The basic tenets of human biology have been rewritten, not in DNA code but in blood and in virus.

Parasites and demons are everywhere. Our future is no longer the natural organic decay of death but a complex and diabolical transmutation. An infestation. A becoming.

They have taken from us our neighbors, our friends, our families. They wear their faces now, the faces of our familiars, our Dear Ones.

We have been turned out of our homes. Cast out of our own kingdom, we roam the outlands in search of a miracle. We survivors are bloodied, we are broken, we are defeated.

But we are not turned. We are not Them.

Not yet.

This is not intended as a record or a chronicle, but as a lamentation, the poetry of fossils, a reminiscence of the end of the era of civilization.

The dinosaurs left behind almost no trace of themselves. A few bones preserved in amber, the contents of their stomachs, their waste.

I only hope that we may leave behind something more than they did.

GRay skIES

Knickerbocker Loans and Curios, East 118th Street, Spanish Harlem

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4

Mirrors are the bearers of bad news, thought Abraham Setrakian, standing under the greenish fluorescent wall lamp, staring into his bathroom mirror. An old man looking into older glass. The edges were blackened with age, a corruption creeping ever closer to the center. To his reflection. To him.

You will die soon.

The silver-backed looking glass showed him that much. Many times he had been close to death, *or worse*; but this was different. In his image he saw this inevitability. And still, somehow, Setrakian found comfort in the truth of the old mirrors. They were honest and pure. This one was a magnificent piece, turn-of-the-century, quite heavy, strung from the wall by corded wire, hanging off the old tile at a downward angle. There were, hung from walls and standing on the floors and leaning against bookshelves, some eighty silver-backed mirrors arranged throughout his living quarters. He collected them compulsively. As people who have walked through a desert know the value of water, so Setrakian found it impossible to

pass up the acquisition of a silver looking-glass—especially a smaller, portable one.

But, more than that, he relied upon their most ancient quality.

Contrary to popular myth, vampires certainly do have reflections. In mass-produced, modern mirrors, they appear no different than they do to the eye. But in silver-backed glass, their reflections are distorted. Some physical property of the silver projects these virus-laden atrocities with visual interference—like a warning. Much like the looking glass in the Snow White story, a silver-backed mirror cannot tell a lie.

And so, Setrakian looked at his face in the mirror—between the thick porcelain sink and the counter that held his powders and salves, the rubs for his arthritis, the heated liniment to soothe the pain in his gnarled joints—and studied it.

Here he confronted his fading strength. The acknowledgment that his body was just that: a body. Aged and weakening. Decaying. To the point where he was unsure if he would survive the corporeal trauma of a turning. Not all victims do survive it.

His face. Its deep lines like a fingerprint—the thumb of time stamped firmly onto his visage. He had aged twenty additional years overnight. His eyes appeared small and dry, yellowed like ivory. His pallor was off, and his hair lay against his scalp like fine silver grass matted down by a recent storm.

Pic—pic—pic . . .

He heard death calling. He heard the cane. His heart.

He looked at his twisted hands, molded by sheer will to fit and hold the handle of that silver cane sword—but able to do little else with any dexterity.

The battle with the Master had weakened him greatly. The Master was stronger even than Setrakian had remembered or presumed. He had yet to process his theories spawned by

the Master's survival in direct sunlight—sunlight that weakened and marked him, but did not obliterate him. The virus-smashing ultraviolet rays should have cut through him like the power of ten thousand silver swords—and yet the terrible creature had withstood it and escaped.

What is life, in the end, but a series of small victories and larger failures? But what else was there to do? Give up?

Setrakian never gave up.

Second-guessing was all he had at the moment. If only he had done *this* instead of *that*. If he could have somehow dynamited the building once he knew that the Master was inside. If Eph had allowed him to expire rather than saving him at that last critical moment . . .

His heart was racing again, just thinking of lost opportunities. Fluttering and skipping beats. Lurching. Like an impatient child inside him, wanting to run and run.

Pic—pic—pic . . .

A low hum purred above the heartbeat.

Setrakian knew it well: this was the prelude to oblivion, to waking up inside an emergency room, if there were any still operating . . .

With a stiff finger, he fished a white pill out of his box. Nitroglycerin prevented angina by relaxing the vessels carrying blood to his heart, allowing them to dilate, increasing flow and oxygen supply. A sublingual tablet, he placed it underneath his dry tongue, to dissolve.

There was immediately a sweet, tingling sensation. In a few minutes, the murmur in his heart would subside.

The fast-acting nitro pill reassured him. All this second-guessing, this recrimination and mourning: it was a waste of brain activity.

Here he was now. His adopted Manhattan called to him, crumbling from within.

It was a few weeks now since the 777 had touched down at JFK. Since the arrival of the Master and the start of the outbreak. Setrakian had foreseen it from the first news report, as surely as one intuits the death of a loved one when the phone rings at an odd hour. News of the dead plane gripped the city. Just minutes after landing safely, the plane had shut down completely, sitting dark on the taxiway. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention boarded the plane in contact suits and found all passengers and crew dead, but for four “survivors.” These survivors were not well at all, their disease syndrome only augmented by the Master. Hidden inside his coffin within the cargo hold of the airplane, the Master had been delivered across the ocean thanks to the wealth and influence of Eldritch Palmer: a dying man who had chosen not to die but instead to trade human control of the planet for a taste of eternity. After a day’s incubation, the virus activated in the dead passengers and they arose from their morgue tables and carried the vampiric plague into the city streets.

The full extent of the plague was known to Setrakian, but the rest of the world resisted the horrible truth. Since then, another airplane had shut down soon after landing at London’s Heathrow Airport, stopping dead on the taxiway to the gate. At Orly Airport, an Air France jet arrived stillborn. At Narita International Airport in Tokyo. At Franz Joseph Strauss in Munich. At the famously secure Ben Gurion International in Tel Aviv, where counterterrorist commandos stormed the darkened airliner on the tarmac to find all 126 passengers dead or unresponsive. And yet no alerts were issued to search the cargo areas, or to destroy the airplanes

outright. It was happening too fast, and disinformation and disbelief ruled the day.

And on it went. In Madrid. Beijing. Warsaw. Moscow. Brasília. Auckland. Oslo. Sofia. Stockholm. Reykjavik. Jakarta. New Delhi. Certain more militant and paranoid territories had correctly initiated immediate airport quarantines, cordoning off the dead jets with military force, and yet . . . Setrakian couldn't help but suspect that these landings were as much a tactical distraction as an attempt at infection. Only time would tell if he was correct—though, in truth, there was precious little time.

By now, the original *strigoi*—the first generation of vampires, the Regis Air victims, and their Dear Ones—had begun their second wave of maturation. They were becoming more accustomed to their environment and new bodies. Learning to adapt, to survive—to thrive. They attacked at nightfall, the news reported “rioting” in large sectors of the city, and this was partially true—looting and vandalism ran rampant in broad daylight—but no one pointed out that activity spiked at night.

Because of these disruptions occurring nationwide, the country's infrastructure was beginning to crumble. Food delivery lines were broken, distribution delayed. As absences increased, available manpower suffered and electrical outages and brownouts went unserved. Police and fire response times were down, and incidences of vigilantism and arson up.

Fires burned. Looters prevailed.

Setrakian stared into his face, wishing he could once again glimpse the younger man within. Perhaps even the boy. He thought of young Zachary Goodweather, just down the hall in the spare bedroom. And, somehow, the old man at the end

of his life felt sorry for the boy—eleven years old but already at the end of childhood. Tumbling from grace, stalked by an undead thing occupying the body of his mother . . .

Setrakian stepped out to the dressing area of his bedroom, finding his way to a chair. He sat with one hand covering his face, waiting for the disorienting sensation to pass.

Great tragedy leads to feelings of isolation, which sought to envelop him now. He mourned his long-lost wife, Miriam. Memories of her face had been crowded out of his mind by the few photographs in his possession, which he referred to often and which had the effect of freezing her image in time without ever truly capturing her being. She had been the love of his life. He was a lucky man; it was a struggle sometimes to remember this. He had courted and married a beautiful woman. He had seen beauty and he had seen evil. He had witnessed the best and the worst of the previous century, and he had survived it all. Now he was witnessing the end.

He thought of Ephraim's ex-wife, Kelly, whom Setrakian had met once in life and once again in death. He understood the man's pain. He understood the pain of this world.

Outside, he heard another automobile crash. Gunshots in the distance, alarms ringing insistently—cars, buildings—all going unanswered. The screams that split the night were the last cries of humanity. Looters were taking not only goods and property—they were looting souls. Not taking possessions—but taking possession.

He let his hand fall, landing upon a catalog on the small side table. A Sotheby's catalog. The auction was to be held in just a few days. This was not a coincidence. None of it was coincidence: not the recent occultation, not the conflict overseas, not the economic recession. Like orderly dominoes we fall.

He lifted the auction catalog and searched for a particular page. In it, without any accompanying illustration, was listed an ancient volume:

Occido Lumen (1667)—A complete account of the first rise of the Strigoi and full confutation of all arguments produced against their existence, translated by the late Rabbi Avigdor Levy. Private collection. Illuminated manuscript, original binding. In view upon appointment. Estimated \$15–\$25M

This very book—not a facsimile, not a photograph—was crucial to understanding the enemy, the *strigoi*. And vanquishing it.

The book was based on a collection of ancient Mesopotamian clay tablets first discovered in jars inside a cave in the Zagros Mountains in 1508. Written in Sumerian and extremely fragile, the tablets were traded to a wealthy silk merchant, who traveled with them throughout Europe. The merchant was found strangled in his quarters in Florence and his warehouses set on fire. The tablets, however, survived in the possession of two necromancers, the famous John Dee and a more obscure acolyte known to history as John Silence. Dee was Queen Elizabeth I's consultant, and, unable to decipher them, kept the tablets as a magical artifact until 1608 when, forced by poverty, he sold them—through his daughter Katherine—to the learned Rabbi Avigdor Levy in the old ghetto of Metz, in Lorraine, France. For decades, the rabbi meticulously deciphered the tablets, utilizing his unique abilities—it would be almost three centuries before others could finally be able to decipher similar tablets—and eventually presented his findings in manuscript form as a gift for King Louis XIV.

Upon receipt of the text, the king ordered the elderly rabbi's imprisonment and the destruction of the tablets, as well as of the rabbi's entire library of texts and devotional artifacts. The tablets were pulverized, and the manuscript languished in a vault alongside many forbidden treasures. Secretly, Mme de Montespan, the king's mistress and an avid dabbler in the occult, orchestrated the retrieval of the manuscript in 1671. It remained in the hands of La Voisin, a midwife who was de Montespan's sorceress and confidante, until her exile following her implication in the hysteria surrounding the *Affaire des Poisons*.

The book subsequently resurfaced briefly in 1823, appearing in the possession of the notorious London reprobate and scholar William Beckford. It appeared listed as part of the library in Fonthill Abbey, Beckford's palace of excess, where he accumulated natural and unnatural curiosities, forbidden books, and shocking objets d'art. The Gothic Revival construction and its contents were sold to an arms dealer in order to satisfy a debt, and the book remained lost for nearly a century. It was listed erroneously, or perhaps surreptitiously, under the title *Casus Lumen* as part of a 1911 auction in Marseille, but the text was never produced for display and the auction summarily canceled after a mysterious outbreak gripped the city. In the ensuing years, the manuscript was widely believed to have been destroyed. Now it was at hand, right here, in New York.

But \$15 million? \$25 million? Impossible to get. There had to be some other way . . .

His greatest fear, which he dared share with no one, was that the battle, begun so long ago, was already lost. That this was all an endgame, that humanity's king was already in check,

yet stubbornly playing out its few remaining moves upon the global chessboard.

Setrakian closed his eyes against a humming in his ears. But the humming persisted—in fact, grew stronger.

The pill had never had this effect on him before.

Once he realized this, Setrakian stiffened and rose to his feet.

It was not the pill at all. The hum was all around him. Low-grade, but there.

They were not alone.

The boy, thought Setrakian. With great effort, he pushed himself up and out of the chair, starting for Zack's room.

Pic—pic—pic . . .

The mother was coming for her boy.

Zack Goodweather sat cross-legged in the corner of the Zroof of the pawnshop building. His dad's computer was open in his lap. This was the only spot in the entire building where he could get connected to the Internet, trespassing on the unsecured home network of a neighbor somewhere on the block. The wireless signal was weak, varying between one and two bars, slowing his Internet search to a crawl.

Zack had been forbidden to use his dad's computer. In fact, he was supposed to be asleep right now. The eleven-year-old had enough difficulty sleeping on normal nights, a decent case of insomnia he'd been hiding from his parents for some time.

Insomni-Zack! The first superhero he ever created. An eight-page color comic written, illustrated, lettered, and inked by Zachary Goodweather. About a teen who patrolled the streets of New York by night, foiling terrorists and polluters. And

terrorist polluters. He never could get the blanket cape folds to come out right, but he was passable with faces, and okay with musculature.

This city needed an *Insomni-Zack* now. Sleep was a luxury. A luxury no one could afford—if everyone knew what he knew.

If everyone had seen what he had seen.

Zack was supposed to be sacked out in a goose-down sleeping bag inside a spare bedroom on the third floor. The room smelled like a closet, like an old cedar room in his grandparents' house—one that no one opened anymore except for kids who liked to snoop. The small, oddly angled room had been used by Mr. Setrakian (or Professor Setrakian—Zack still wasn't clear on that part, seeing how the old man ran the first-floor pawnshop) for storage. Tilting stacks of books, many old mirrors, a wardrobe of old clothes, and some locked trunks—really locked, not the fake kind of lock that can be picked with a paper clip and a ballpoint pen (Zack had already tried).

The exterminator, Fet—or V, as he had told Zack to call him—had hooked up an ancient, cartridge-fed, 8-bit Nintendo system to a pawned Sanyo television set with big knobs and dials on the front instead of buttons, all brought up from the showroom downstairs. They expected him to stay put and play *The Legend of Zelda*. But the bedroom door had no lock. His dad and Fet had mounted iron bars onto the wall over the window—mounted them on the inside, rather than the outside, bolted to the wall beams—a cage that Mr. Setrakian said was left over from the 1970s.

They weren't trying to lock him in, Zack knew. They were trying to lock *her* out.

He searched for his dad's professional page at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and got a "Page Not Found." So they had already scrubbed him from the government Web site. News hits for "Dr. Ephraim Goodweather" claimed he was a discredited CDC official who fabricated a video purporting to show a human-turned-vampire being destroyed. It said that he had uploaded it (actually, Zack uploaded the video for him, one that his dad wouldn't let him view) onto the Internet in an attempt to exploit the eclipse hysteria for his own purposes. Obviously, that last part was BS. What "purposes" did his dad have other than trying to save lives? One news site described Goodweather as "an admitted alcoholic involved in a contentious custody battle, who is now believed to be on the run with his kidnapped son." That left Zack with a lump of ice in his chest. The same article went on to say that both Goodweather's ex-wife and her boyfriend were currently missing and presumed dead.

Everything made Zack feel nauseous these days, but the dishonesty of this article was especially toxic to him. All wrong, every last word. Did they really not know the truth? Or . . . did they not care? Maybe they were trying to exploit his parents' trouble *for their own purposes*?

And the talkback? The comments were even worse. He could not deal with the things they were saying about his dad, the righteous arrogance of all these anonymous posters. He had to deal right now with the awful truth about his mom—and the banality of the venom spewed in blogs and forums missed the point completely.

How do you mourn someone who isn't really gone? How do you fear someone whose desire for you is eternal?

If the world knew the truth the way Zack knew the truth,

then his dad's reputation would be restored, and his voice heard—but still nothing else would change. His mom, his life, would never be the same.

So, mostly, Zack wanted it all to pass. He wanted something fantastic to happen to make everything right and normal again. As when he was a child—like five or something, he broke a mirror and just covered it with a sheet, then prayed with all his might for its restoration before his parents found out. Or the way he used to wish his parents would fall back in love again. That they would wake up one day and realize what a mistake they had made.

Now he secretly hoped that his dad could do something incredible. Despite everything, Zack still assumed that there was some happy ending awaiting them. Awaiting all of them. Maybe even something to bring Mom back to the way she was.

He felt tears coming, and this time he didn't fight them. He was up on the roof; he was alone. He wanted so badly to see his mother again. The thought terrified him—and yet he yearned for her to come. To look into her eyes. To hear her voice. He wished for her to explain this to him the way she did every troubling thing. *Everything is going to be just fine . . .*

A scream somewhere deep in the night brought him back to the present. He peered uptown, seeing flames on the west side, a column of dark smoke. He looked up. No stars tonight. And only a few airplanes. He had heard fighter jets zooming overhead that afternoon.

Zack rubbed his face in the crook of his elbow sleeve and turned back to the computer. With some quick desktop searching, Zack discovered the folder containing the video file he was not supposed to view. He opened it and heard Dad's voice, and realized Dad was

operating the camera. Zack's camera, the one his dad had borrowed.

The subject was hard to see at first, something in the dark inside a shed. A thing leaning forward on its haunches. A guttural growl and a back-of-the-throat hiss. The slinking noise of a chain. The camera zoomed in closer, the dark pixilation improving, and Zack saw its open mouth. A mouth that opened wider than it should, with something resembling a thin silver fish flopping inside.

The shed-thing's eyes were wide and glaring. He mistook their expression for one of sadness at first, and hurt. A collar—apparently, a dog collar—restrained it at the neck, chained to the dirt floor behind it. The creature looked pale inside the dark shed, so bloodless it was nearly glowing. Then came a strange pumping sound—*snap-chunk, snap-chunk, snap-chunk*—and three silver nails, propelled from behind the camera (from Dad?) struck the shed-thing like needle-bullets. The camera view jerked up as the thing roared hoarsely, a sick animal consumed with pain.

“Enough,” said a voice on the clip. The voice belonged to Mr. Setrakian, but it was not a tone like anything Zack had ever heard out of the kindly, old pawnbroker's mouth. *“Let us remain merciful.”*

Then the old man stepped into view, intoning some words in a foreign, ancient-sounding language—almost like summoning a power or declaring a curse. He raised a silver sword—long and bright with moonlight—and the shed-thing howled as Mr. Setrakian swung the sword with great force . . .

Voices pulled Zack out of the video. Voices from the street below. He shut the laptop and stood, staying back, peering over the raised edge of the roof down to 118th Street.

A group of five men walked up the block toward the pawnshop, trailed by a slow-moving SUV. They carried weapons—guns—and were pounding on every door. The SUV stopped before the intersection, right outside the front of the pawnshop. The men on foot approached the building, rattling the security gates. Calling, “Open up!”

Zack backed away. He turned to go to the roof door, figuring he’d better get back to his room in case anyone came looking.

Then he saw her. A girl, a teenager, high school probably. Standing on the next roof over, across an empty lot around the corner from the shop entrance. The breeze lifted her long nightshirt, ruffling it around her knees, but did not move her hair, which hung straight and heavy.

She stood on the raised edge of the roof. The very edge, balanced perfectly, no wavering in her posture. Poised at the brink, as though wanting to try to make the jump. The impossible leap. Wanting to and knowing she would fail.

Zack stared. He didn’t know. He wasn’t sure. But he suspected.

He raised a hand anyway. He waved to her.

She stared back at him.

Dr. Nora Martinez, late of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, unlocked the front door. Five men in combat gear with armored vests and assault weapons stared her down through the security grate. Two of them wore kerchiefs, covering their lower faces.

“Everything all right in there, ma’am?” one of them asked.

“Yes,” said Nora, looking for badges or any kind of insignia

and seeing none. “So long as this grate holds up, everything is fine.”

“We’re going door-to-door,” said another. “Clearing blocks. Some trouble down that way”—he pointed toward 117th Street—“but we think the worst of it is moving downtown from this direction.” Meaning Harlem.

“And you are . . . ?”

“Concerned citizens, ma’am. You don’t want to be in here all alone.”

“She’s not,” said Vasiliy Fet, the New York City Bureau of Pest Control Services worker and independent exterminator, appearing behind her.

The men sized up the big man. “You the pawnbroker?”

“My father,” said Fet. “What sort of trouble are you seeing?”

“Trying to get a handle on these freaks rioting in the city. Agitators and opportunists. Taking advantage of a bad situation, making it worse.”

“You sound like cops,” said Fet.

“If you’re thinking about leaving town,” said another one, avoiding the topic, “you should go now. Bridges are stacked up, tunnels jammed. Place is going to shit.”

Another said, “You should think about getting out here and helping us. Do something about this.”

Fet said, “I’ll think about it.”

“Let’s go!” called the driver of the SUV idling in the street.

“Good luck,” said one of the men, with a scowl. “You’ll need it.”

Nora watched them go, then locked the door. She stepped back into the shadows. “They’re gone,” she said.

Ephraim Goodweather, who had been watching from the side, emerged. “Fools,” he said.

“Cops,” said Fet, watching them round the street corner.

“How do you know?” asked Nora.

“You can always tell.”

“Good thing you stayed out of sight,” Nora said to Eph.

Eph nodded. “Why no badges?”

Fet said, “Probably got off shift and huddled up at happy hour, decided this wasn’t how they were going to let their city go out. Wives all packed up for Jersey, they’ve got nothing to do now but bang some heads. Cops feel they run the place. And they’re not half wrong. Street-gang mentality. It’s their turf and they’ll fight for it.”

“When you think about it,” said Eph, “they’re really not that much different than us right now.”

Nora said, “Except that they’re carrying lead when they should be wielding silver.” She slipped her hand into Eph’s. “I wish we could have warned them.”

“Trying to warn people is how I got to be a fugitive in the first place,” said Eph.

Eph and Nora were the first to board the dead plane after SWAT team members discovered the apparently dead passengers. The realization that the bodies weren’t decomposing naturally, coupled with the disappearance of the coffin-like cabinet during the solar occultation, had helped convince Eph that they were facing an epidemiological crisis which could not be explained by normal medical and scientific means. The grudging realization opened him up to the revelations of the pawnbroker, Setrakian, and the terrible truth behind the plague. His desperation to warn the world of the true nature of the disease—the vampiric virus moving insidiously through the city and out into the boroughs—led to a break with the CDC, which then tried to silence him with a

trumped-up charge of murder. He had been a fugitive ever since.

He looked to Fet. "Car packed?"

"Ready to go."

Eph squeezed Nora's hand. She did not want to let him go. Setrakian's voice came down the spiral stairs in back of the showroom. "Vasily? Ephraim! Nora!"

"Down here, professor," replied Nora.

"Someone approaches," he said.

"No, we just got rid of them. Vigilantes. Well-armed ones."

"I don't mean someone human," said Setrakian. "And I cannot find young Zack."

Zack's bedroom door banged open, and he turned. His dad blew in, looking like he expected a fight. "Jeez, Dad," said Zack, sitting up in his sleeping bag.

Eph looked all around the room. "Setrakian said he just looked in here for you."

"Uhh . . ." Zack made a show of rubbing his eye. "Must not have seen me on the floor."

"Yeah. Maybe." Eph looked at Zack a bit longer, not believing him, but clearly with something more pressing on his mind than catching his son in a lie. He walked around the room, checking the barred window. Zack noticed that he held one hand behind his back, and moved in such a way that Zack could not see what he held there.

Nora rushed in behind him, then stopped when she saw Zack.

"What is it?" asked Zack, getting to his feet.

His dad shook his head reassuringly, but the smile came

too quickly—just a smile, no levity in his eyes, none at all. “Just looking around. You wait here, ’kay? I’ll be back.”

He exited, turning in such a way that the thing behind his back remained obscured. Zack wondered: was it the *snap-chunk* thing, or some silver sword?

“Stay put,” said Nora, and closed the door.

Zack wondered what it was they were looking for. Zack had heard his mother mention Nora’s name once in a fight with his dad—well, not a fight really, since they were already split up, but more of a venting. And Zack had seen his dad kiss her that one time—right before he left them and went off with Mr. Setrakian and Fet. Then she had been so tense and preoccupied the whole time they were gone. And once they returned—everything had changed. Zack’s dad had looked so down—Zack never wanted to see him look that way again. And Mr. Setrakian came back sick. Zack, in his subsequent snooping, had caught some of the talk, but not enough.

Something about a “master.”

Something about sunlight and failing to “destroy it.”

Something about “the end of the world.”

As Zack stood alone in the spare room now, puzzling out all these mysteries swirling around him, he noticed a blur in a few of the mirrors hanging on the wall. A distortion, akin to a visual vibration—something that should have been in focus but instead appeared hazy and indistinct in the glass.

Something at his window.

Zack turned, slowly at first—then all at once.

She was clinging to the exterior of the building somehow. Her body was disjointed and distorted, her eyes red and wide and burning. Her hair was falling out, thin and pale now, her schoolteacher dress torn away at one shoulder, her exposed

flesh smeared with dirt. The muscles of her neck were swollen and deformed, and blood worms slithered beneath her cheeks, across her forehead.

Mom.

She had come. As he knew she would.

Instinctively, he took a step toward her. Then he read her expression, which all at once transformed from pain into a darkness that could only be described as demonic.

She had noticed the bars.

In an instant, her jaw dropped open—way open, just like in the video—a stinger shooting out from deep beneath where her tongue was. It pierced the window glass with a crack and a tinkle, and kept coming through the hole it punched. Six feet in length, the stinger tapering to a point and snapping at full extension mere inches from his throat.

Zack froze, his asthmatic lungs locked, unable to draw any breath.

At the end of the fleshy shoot, a complicated, double-pronged tip quivered, rooting in the air. Zack remained riveted to the spot. The stinger relaxed and, with a casual, upward nod of her head, she retracted it quickly back into her mouth. Kelly Goodweather thrust her head through the window, crashing out the rest of the glass. She squeezed up inside the open window frame, needing only a few more inches to reach Zack's throat and claim her Dear One for the Master.

Zack was transfixed by her eyes. Red with black points in the center. He searched, vertiginously, for some semblance of Mom.

Was she dead, as Dad said? Or alive?

Was she gone forever? Or was she here—right here in the room with him?