



**"Bram Stoker meets Stephen King
meets Michael Crichton."**

—Nelson DeMille

**GUILLERMO
DEL TORO**

**THE NIGHT
ETERNAL**

CHUCK HOGAN

New York Times bestselling authors of *The Fall*

THE NIGHT ETERNAL

Book III
of
The Strain Trilogy

Guillermo Del Toro
and
Chuck Hogan

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

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Dedications

To my parents.
Now I know how hard a job you had . . .
—GDT

For Charlotte, eternally.
—CH

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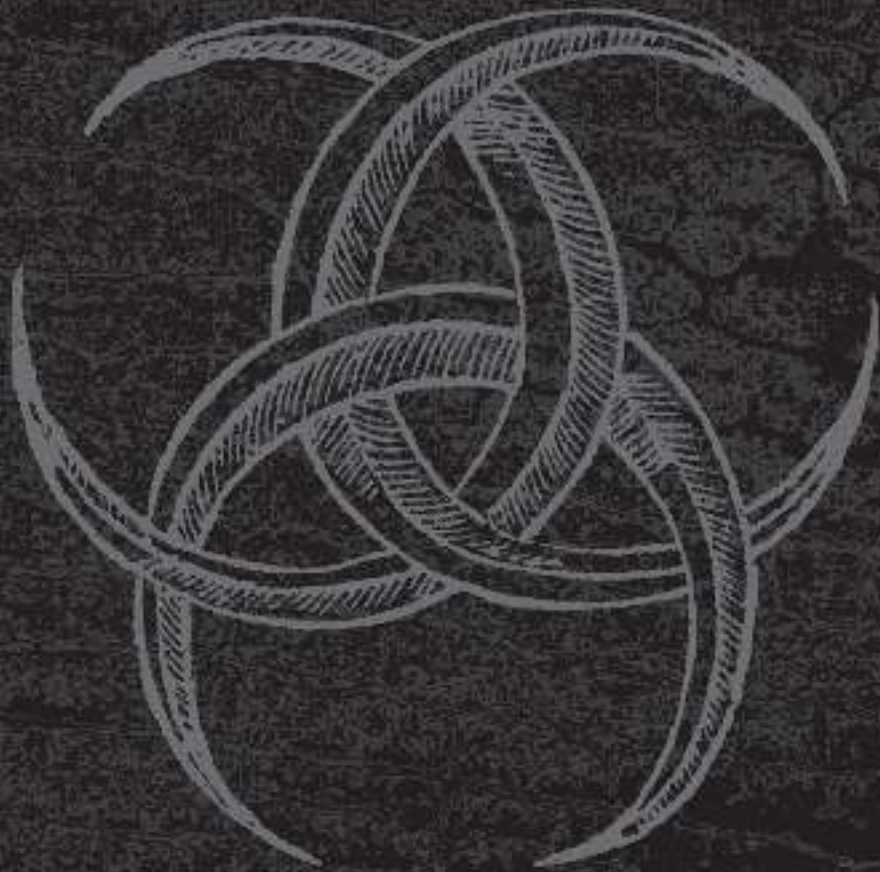
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RAIN OF ASHES



Extract from the Diary of Ephraim Goodweather

On the second day of darkness they rounded them up. The best and the brightest: all those in power, the wealthy, the influential.

Lawmakers and CEOs, tycoons and intellectuals, rebels and figures of great popular esteem. None were turned; all were slain, destroyed. Their execution was swift, public, and brutal.

Save for a few experts from each discipline, all leaders were eliminated. Out they marched, thousands damned, from the River House, the Dakota, the Beresford, and their ilk. They were all apprehended and herded into major metropolitan gathering places worldwide, such as the National Mall in Washington, DC, Nanjing Road in Shanghai, Moscow's Red Square, Cape Town Stadium, and Central Park in New York City. There, in a horrific pageant of carnage, they were disposed of.

It was said that over one thousand strigoi rampaged down Lexington and raided every building surrounding Gramercy Park. Offerings of money or favor fell on deaf ears. Soft, manicured hands implored and begged. Their bodies twitched—hanging from lampposts all along Madison Avenue. In Times Square, twenty-foot-high funeral pyres burned tanned, pampered flesh. Smelling much like barbecue, the elite of Manhattan illuminated the empty streets, closed shops—EVERYTHING MUST GO—and silent LED megascreens.

The Master had apparently calculated the right number, the exact balance, of vampires needed to establish dominance without overburdening the blood supply; its approach was methodological and indeed mathematical. The elderly and infirm were also collected and eliminated. It was a purge and a putsch. Roughly one-third of the human population was exterminated over that seventy-two-hour period, which had since become known as, collectively, "Night Zero."

The hordes took control of the streets. Riot police, SWAT, the U.S. Army—the tide of monster overtook them all. Those who submitted, those who surrendered themselves, remained as guards and keepers.

The Master's plan was a resounding success. In brutally Darwinian fashion, the Master had selected the survivors for compliance and malleability. Its growing strength was nothing short of terrifying. With the Ancients destroyed, its control over the horde—and through them, the world—had broadened and become ever more sophisticated. The strigoi no longer roamed the streets like raving zombies, raiding and feeding at will. Their movements were coordinated. Like bees in a hive or ants in a hill, they apparently each had clearly defined roles and responsibilities. They were the Master's eyes on the street.

In the beginning daylight was entirely gone. A few seconds of faint sunlight could be glimpsed when the sun was at its zenith, but other than that, the darkness was unremitting. Now, two years later, the sun filtered through the poisoned atmosphere for only two hours each day, but the pale light it gave was nothing like the sunlight that had once warmed Earth.

The strigoi were everywhere, like spiders or ants, making sure that those left alive were truly fitting back into a routine . . .

And yet the most shocking thing of all was . . . how little life had truly changed. The Master

capitalized on the societal chaos of the first few months. Deprivation—of food, clean water, sanitation, law enforcement—terrorized the populace, so much so that, once basic infrastructure was restored, once a program of food rations was implemented and the rebuilt electrical grid chased off the darkness of the long nights, they responded with gratitude and obedience. Cattle need the recompense of order and routine—the unambiguous structure of power—to surrender.

In fewer than two weeks, most systems were restored. Water, power . . . cable television was reintroduced, broadcasting all reruns now, without commercials. Sports, news, everything a repeat. Nothing new was produced. And . . . people liked it.

Rapid transit was a priority in the new world, because personal automobiles were extremely rare. Cars were potential bombs and as such had no place in the new police state. Cars were impounded and crushed. All vehicles on the street belonged to public services: police, fire department, sanitation—they were all operational, manned by complying humans.

Airplanes had suffered the same fate. The only active fleet was controlled by Stoneheart, the multinational corporation whose grip on food distribution, power, and military industries the Master had exploited in its takeover of the planet, and it consisted of roughly 7 percent of the planes that once crossed the world's skies.

Silver was outlawed and became trade currency, highly desirable and exchangeable for coupons or food points. The right amount of it could even buy you, or a loved one, a way out of the farms.

The farms were the only entirely different thing in this new world. That and the fact that there was no more educational system. No more schooling, no more reading, no more thinking.

The pens and slaughterhouses were manned twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Trained wardens and cattle drivers supplied the strigoi with the nutrients needed. The new class system was quickly established. A system of biological castes: the strigoi favored B positive. Any blood type would do, but B positive either provided extra benefits—like different grades of milk—or held its taste and quality better outside the body and was better for packaging and storing. Non-B's were the workers, the farmers, the true grunts. B positives were the Kobe—the prime cut of beef. They were pampered, given benefits and nutrients. They even got double the exposure at the UV camps, to make sure their vitamin D took root. Their daily routine, their hormonal balance and ultimately their reproduction were systematically regulated to keep up with the demand.

And so it was. People went to work, watched TV, ate their meals, and went to bed. But in the dark and in the silence they wept and stirred, knowing all too well that those they knew, those next to them—even the ones sharing the very bed they were lying on—could suddenly be gone, devoured by the concrete structure of the closest farm. And they bit their lips and cried, for there was no choice but to submit. There was always someone else (parents, siblings, children) who depended on them. Always someone else who gave them the license to be afraid, the blessing of cowardice.

Who would have dreamed that we would be looking back with great nostalgia at the tumultuous nineties and early noughts. The times of turmoil and political pettiness and financial fraud that preceded the collapse of the world order . . . it was a golden era by comparison. All that we were became lost—all social form and order in the way our fathers and forefathers understood it. We became a flock. We became cattle.

Those of us who are still alive but have not joined the system . . . we have become the anomaly. . . . We are the vermin. Scavengers. Hunted.

With no way to fight back . . .

Kelton Street, Woodside, Queens

A SCREAM PEALING in the distance, and Dr. Ephraim Goodweather startled awake. He thrashed on the sofa, flipping onto his back and sitting up, and—in one fluid, violent motion—gripped the worn leather sword handle jutting out of the pack on the floor at his side and slashed the air with a blade of singing silver.

His battle cry, hoarse and garbled, a fugitive from his nightmares, stopped short. His blade quivered, unmet.

He was alone.

Kelly's house. Her sofa. Familiar things.

His ex-wife's living room. The scream was a far-off siren, converted into a human shriek by his sleeping mind.

He had been dreaming again. Of fire and shapes—indefinable but vaguely humanoid—made of blinding light. A flashpoint. He was in the dream and these shapes wrestled with him right before the light consumed it all. He always awoke agitated and exhausted, as if he had physically grappled with an opponent. The dream came out of nowhere. He could be having the most domestic kind of reverie—a picnic, a traffic jam, a day at the office—and then the light would grow and consume it all and the silvery figures emerged.

He blindly groped for his weapon bag—a modified baseball gear bag, looted many months before off the high rack of a ransacked Modell's on Flatbush Avenue.

He was in Queens. Okay. Okay. Everything coming back to him now—accompanied by the first pangs of a jaw-clenching hangover. He had blacked out again. Another dangerous binge. He returned the sword to his weapons bag, then rolled back, holding his head in his hands like a cracked crystal sphere he had delicately picked up off the floor. His hair felt wiry and strange, his head throbbing.

Hell on earth. Right. Land of the damned.

Reality was an ornery bitch. He had awoken to a nightmare. He was still alive—and still human—which wasn't much, but it was the best he could expect.

Just another day in hell.

The last thing he remembered from sleep, the fragment of the dream that clung to his consciousness like sticky afterbirth, was an image of Zack bathed in searing silver light. It was out of his shape that the flashpoint had occurred this time.

“Dad—” Zack said, and his eyes locked with Eph's—and then the light consumed it all.

The remembrance of it raised chills. Why couldn't he find some respite from this hell in his dreams? Wasn't that the way it was supposed to work? To balance out a horrible existence with dreams of flight and escape? What he wouldn't have given for a reverie of pure sentimentality, a spoonful of sugar for his mind.

Eph and Kelly fresh out of college, ambling hand-in-hand through a flea market, looking for cheap furniture and knickknacks for their first apartment . . .

Zack as a toddler, stomping fat-footed around the house, a little boss in diapers . . .

Eph and Kelly and Zack at the dinner table, sitting with hands folded before full plates, waiting for

Z to plow through his obsessively thorough saying of grace . . .

Instead, Eph's dreams were like badly recorded snuff films. Familiar faces from his past—enemies, acquaintances, and friends alike—being stalked and taken while he watched, unable to reach them, to help them, or even to turn away.

He sat up, steadying himself and rising, one hand on the back of the sofa. He left the living area and walked to the window overlooking the backyard. LaGuardia Airport was not far away. The sight of an airplane, the distant sound of a jet engine, was cause for wonder now. No lights circled the sky. He remembered September 11, 2001, and how the emptiness of the sky had seemed so surreal back then, and what a strange relief it was when the planes returned a week later. Now there was no relief. No getting back to normal.

Eph wondered what time it was. Sometime o'clock in the morning, he figured, judging by his own failing circadian rhythm. It was summer—at least according to the old calendar—and so the sun should have been high and hot in the sky.

Instead, darkness prevailed. The natural order of night and day had been shattered, presumably forever. The sun was obliterated by a murky veil of ash floating in the sky. The new atmosphere was comprised of the detritus of nuclear explosions and volcanic eruptions distributed around the globe, a ball of blue-green candy wrapped inside a crust of poisonous chocolate. It had cured into a thick, insulating cowl, sealing in darkness and cold and sealing out the sun.

Perennial nightfall. The planet turned into a pale, rotting netherworld of rime and torment.

The perfect ecology for vampires.

According to the last live news reports, long since censored but traded like porn on Internet boards, these post-cataclysm conditions were much the same around the world. Eyewitness accounts of the darkening sky, of black rain, of ominous clouds knitting together and never breaking apart. Given the planet's rotation and wind patterns, the poles—the frozen north and south—were theoretically the only locations on Earth still receiving regular seasonal sunlight . . . though nobody knew this for certain.

The residual radiation hazard from the nuclear explosions and the plant meltdowns had been intense at first, catastrophically so at the various ground zeros. Eph and the others had spent nearly two months belowground, in a train tunnel beneath the Hudson River, and so were spared the short-term fallout. Extreme meteorological conditions and atmospheric winds spread the damage over large areas, which may have aided in dispersing the radioactivity; the fallout was expelled by the hard rainstorms created by the violent changes to the ecosystem, further diffusing the radiation. Fallout decays exponentially, and in the short term, areas without direct-impact exposure became safe for travel and decontamination within approximately six weeks.

The long-term effects were yet to come. Questions as to human fertility, genetic mutations, and increased carcinogenesis would not be answered for some time. But these very real concerns were overshadowed by the current situation: two years following the nuclear disasters and the vampiric takeover of the world, all fears were immediate.

The pealing siren went quiet. These warning systems, meant to repel human intruders and attract assistance, still went off from time to time—though much less frequently than in the early months, when the alarms wailed constantly, persistently, like the agonal screams of a dying race. Another vestige of civilization fading away.

In the absence of the alarm, Eph listened for intruders. Through windows, rising from dank cellars descending from dusty attics—vampires entered through any opening, and nowhere was safe. Even the few hours of sunlight each day—a dim, dusky light, haven taken on a sickly amber hue—still offered

many hazards. Daylight was human curfew time. The best time for Eph and the others to move—safe from direct confrontation by *strigoi*—was also one of the most dangerous, due to surveillance and the prying eyes of human sympathizers looking to improve their lot.

Eph leaned his forehead against the window. The coolness of the glass was a pleasant sensation against his warm skin and the throbbing inside his skull.

Knowing was the worst part. Awareness of insanity does not make one any less insane. Awareness of drowning does not make one any less of a drowning person—it only adds the burden of panic. Fear of the future, and the memory of a better, brighter past, were as much a source of Eph's suffering as the vampire plague itself.

He needed food, he needed protein. Nothing in this house; he had cleaned it out of food—and alcohol—many months ago. Even found a secret stash of Butterfingers in Matt's closet.

He backed off from the window, turning to face the room and the kitchen area beyond. He tried to remember how he got here and why. He saw slash marks in the wall where, using a kitchen knife, he had released his ex-wife's boyfriend, decapitating the recently turned creature. That was back in the early days of slaying, when killing vampires was nearly as frightening as the notion of being turned to one. Even when the vampire in question had been his ex-wife's boyfriend, a man poised to assume Eph's place as the most important male figure in Zack's life.

But that gag reflex of human morality was long gone now. This was a changed world, and Dr. Ephraim Goodweather, once a prominent epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was a changed man. The virus of vampirism had colonized the human race. The plague had routed civilization in a coup d'état of astonishing virulence and violence. Insurgents—the willful, the powerful, and the strong—had all largely been destroyed or turned, leaving the meek, the defeated, and the fearful to do the Master's bidding.

Eph returned to his weapon bag. From a narrow, zippered pocket meant for batting gloves or sweatbands, he pulled out his creased Moleskine notebook. These days he remembered nothing without writing it down in his tattered diary. Everything went in there, from the transcendental to the banal. Everything must be recorded. This was his compulsion. His diary was essentially a long letter to his son, Zack. Leaving a record of his search for his only boy. Noting his observations and theories involving the vampire menace. And, as a scientist, simply recording data and phenomena.

At the same time, it was also a helpful exercise for retaining some semblance of sanity.

His handwriting had grown so cramped over the past two years, he could barely read his own entries. He recorded the date each day, because it was the only reliable method of tracking time without a proper calendar. Not that it mattered much—except for today.

He scribbled down the date, and then his heart pushed a double beat. Of course. That was it. Why he was back here yet again.

Today was Zack's thirteenth birthday.

YOU MAY NOT LIVE BEYOND THIS POINT warned the sign affixed to the upstairs door, written in Magic Marker, illustrated with gravestones and skeletons and crosses. It was drawn in a younger hand, done when Zack was seven or eight. Zack's bedroom had been left essentially unchanged since the last time he'd occupied it, the same as the bedrooms of missing kids everywhere, a symbol of the stopping of time in the hearts of their parents.

Eph kept returning to the bedroom like a diver returning again and again to a sunken shipwreck. A secret museum; a world preserved exactly as it had once been. A window directly into the past.

Eph sat on the bed, feeling the mattress's familiar give, hearing its reassuring creak. He had been

through everything in this room, everything his boy used to touch in the life he used to lead. He curated this room now; he knew every toy, every figurine, every coin and shoestring, every T-shirt and book. He rejected the notion that he was wallowing. People don't attend church or synagogue or mosque to wallow; they attend regularly as a gesture of faith. Zack's bedroom was a temple now. Here, and here alone, Eph felt a sense of peace and an affirmation of inner resolve.

Zack was still alive.

This was not speculation. This was not blind hope.

Eph knew that Zack was still alive and that his boy had not yet been turned.

In past times—the way the world used to work—the parent of a missing child had resources to turn to. They had the comfort of the police investigative process, and the knowledge that hundreds, if not thousands, of people identified and sympathized with their plight and were actively assisting in the search.

This abduction had occurred in a world without police, without human law. And Eph knew the identity of the being that had abducted Zack. The creature that was once his mother—yes. She committed the abduction. But her action was compelled by a larger entity.

The king vampire, the Master.

But Eph did not know why Zack had been taken. To hurt Eph, of course. And to satisfy his undead mother's drive to revisit her "Dear Ones," the beings she had loved in life. The insidious epidemiology of the virus spread in a vampiric perversion of human love. Turning them into fellow *strigoi* locked them to you forever, to an existence beyond the trials and tribulations of being human, devolving into only primal needs such as feeding, spreading, survival.

That was why Kelly (the thing that was once Kelly) had become so psychically fixated on their boy, and how, despite Eph's best efforts, she had been able to spirit him away.

And it was precisely this same syndrome, this same obsessive passion for turning those closest to them, that confirmed to Eph that Zack had not been turned. For if the Master or Kelly had drunk the boy, then Zack would surely have returned for Eph as a vampire. Eph's dread of this very occurrence—of having to face his undead son—had haunted him for two years now, at times sending him into a downward spiral of despair.

But why? Why hadn't the Master turned Zack? What was it holding him for? As a potential market to be played against Eph and the resistance effort he was part of? Or for some other more sinister reason that Eph could not—dared not—fathom?

Eph shuddered at the dilemma this would present to him. Where his son was concerned, he was vulnerable. Eph's weakness was equal to his strength: he could not let go of his boy.

Where was Zack at that very moment? Was he being held somewhere? Being tormented as his father's proxy? Thoughts like these clawed at Eph's mind.

It was not knowing that unsettled him the most. The others—Fet, Nora, Gus—were able to commit fully to the resistance, all their energy and their focus, precisely because they had no hostages in this war.

Visiting this room usually helped Eph feel less alone in this accursed world. But today it had the opposite effect. He had never felt so acutely alone as he felt right here, at this very moment.

Eph thought again about Matt, his ex-wife's boyfriend—the one he had slain downstairs—and how he used to obsess over that man's growing influence on Zack's upbringing. Now he had to think—daily, hourly—about what sort of hell his boy must be living in, under the rule of this actual monster

..
Overcome, feeling nauseous and sweaty, Eph dug out his diary and scratched down the same

question that appeared throughout the notebook, like a koan:

Where is Zack?

As was his habit, he flipped back through the most recent entries. He spied a note about Nora and tried to make out his penmanship.

“Morgue.” “Rendezvous.” “Move at sunlight.”

Eph squinted, trying to remember—as a sense of anxiety spread through him.

He was supposed to meet Nora and Mrs. Martinez at the old Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Manhattan. Today.

Shit.

Eph grabbed his bag with a clank of the silver blades, throwing the straps over his back, sword handles behind his shoulders like leather-wrapped antennae. He looked around quickly on his way out, spying an old Transformers toy next to the CD player on Zack’s bureau. Sideswipe, if Eph remembered correctly from reading Zack’s books outlining the Autobots’ specs. A birthday present from Eph to Zack, just a few years before. One of Sideswipe’s legs dangled, snapped from overuse. Eph manipulated the arms, remembering the way Zack used to effortlessly “transform” the toy from car to robot and back again like a Rubik’s Cube grand master.

“Happy birthday, Z,” whispered Eph before stuffing the busted toy into his weapons bag and heading for the door.

Woodside

THE FORMER KELLY Goodweather arrived outside her former residence on Kelton Street just minutes after Eph’s departure. She had been tracking the human—her Dear One—since picking up his bloodbeat some fifteen hours before. But when the sky had brightened for the meridiem—the two to three hours of dull yet hazardous sunlight that filtered through the thick cloud cover each planetary rotation—she’d had to retire underground, losing time. Now she was close.

Two black-eyed feelers accompanied her—children blinded by the solar occlusion that coincided with the Master’s arrival in New York City, who were subsequently turned by the Master itself and now gifted with the enhanced perception of second sight—small and fast, skittering along the sidewalk and over abandoned cars like hungry spiders, seeing nothing and sensing everything.

Normally, Kelly’s innate attraction to her Dear One would have been sufficient for her to track and locate her ex-husband. But Eph’s signal was weakened and distorted by the effects of ethanol, stimulants, and sedatives on his nervous and circulatory systems. Intoxication confused the synapses in a human brain, slowing its transfer rate and serving to cloak its signal, like interference over a radio channel.

The Master had taken a peculiar interest in Ephraim Goodweather, specifically in monitoring his movement throughout the city. That was why the feelers—formerly a brother and sister, now nearly identical, having shed their hair, genitals, and other human gender markers—had been sent by the Master to assist Kelly in her pursuit. Here, they began racing back and forth along the short fence in front of the house, waiting for Kelly to catch up to them.

She opened the gate and entered the property, walking once around the house, wary of traps. Once satisfied, she rammed the heel of her hand through a double windowpane, shattering glass as she reached up and unfastened the lock, raising the sash.

The feelers leaped inside, Kelly following, lifting one bare, dirty leg through, then bending and

easily contorting her body to enter the three-foot-square opening. The feelers climbed all over the sofa, indicating it like trained police canines. Kelly stood very still for a long moment, opening her senses to the interior of the dwelling. She confirmed that they were alone and thus too late. But she sensed Eph's recent presence. Maybe there was more to be learned.

The feelers scooted across the floor to a north-facing window, touching the glass as though absorbing a recent, lingering sensation—then at once scrambled up the stairs. Kelly followed them, allowing them to scent and indicate. When she came upon them they were leaping around a bedroom their psychic senses agitated by the urgency of Eph's recent occupation, like animals driven wild by some overwhelming but little-understood impulse.

Kelly stood in the center of the room, arms at her sides. The heat of her vampiric body, her blazing metabolism, instantly raised the temperature of the cool room a few degrees. Unlike Eph, Kelly suffered no form of human nostalgia. She felt no affinity for her former domicile, no pangs of regret or loss as she stood in her son's room. She no longer felt any connection to this place, just as she no longer felt any connection to her pitiable human past. The butterfly does not look back upon its caterpillar self, either fondly or wistfully; it simply flies on.

A hum entered her being, a presence inside her head and a quickening throughout her body. The Master, looking through her. Seeing with her eyes. Observing their near miss.

A moment of great honor and privilege . . .

Then, just as suddenly, the humming presence was gone. Kelly felt no reproach from the Master for having fallen short of capturing Eph. She felt only useful. Of all the others that served it, throughout this world, Kelly had two things the Master greatly valued. The first was a direct link to Ephraim Goodweather.

The second was Zachary.

Still, Kelly felt the ache of wanting—of needing—to turn her dear son. The urge had subsided but never vanished. She felt it all the time, an incomplete part of herself, an emptiness. It went against her vampire nature. But she bore this agony for one reason only: because the Master demanded it. Its immaculate will alone held Kelly's longing at bay. And so the boy remained human. Remained undelivered, unfinished. There was indeed a purpose to the Master's demand. In that, she trusted without any uncertainty. For the motive had not been revealed to her, because it was not for her to know yet.

For now it was quite enough to see the boy sitting at the Master's side.

The feelers leaped around her as Kelly descended the staircase. She crossed to the raised window and exited through it as she had entered, almost without breaking stride. The rains had started again, fat, black drops pelting her hot scalp and shoulders, disappearing in wisps of steam. Standing out on the center yellow line of the street, she sensed Eph's trail anew, his bloodbeat growing stronger as he became more sober.

With the feelers racing back and forth, she strode through the falling rain, leaving a faint trail of steam in her wake. She neared a rapid-transit station and felt her psychic link to him beginning to fade. This was due to the growing distance between them. He had boarded a subway train.

No disappointment clouded her thoughts. Kelly would continue to pursue Eph until they were reunited once and for all. She communicated her report back to the Master before following the feelers into the station.

Eph was returning to Manhattan.

THE HORSE CHARGED. In its wake was a plume of thick black smoke and orange flame.

The horse was on fire.

Fully consumed, the proud beast galloped with an urgency born not of pain but of desire. At night visible from a mile away, the horse without rider or saddle raced through the flat, barren countryside toward the village. Toward the watcher.

Fet stood transfixed by the sight. Knowing it was coming for him. He anticipated it. Expected it.

Entering the outskirts of the village, bearing down on him with the velocity of a flaming arrow, the galloping horse spoke—naturally, in a dream, it spoke—saying, *I live*.

Fet howled as the flaming horse overtook him—and he awoke.

He was on his side, lying on a fold-down bed in the crew bunk beneath the foredeck of a rocking ship. The vessel pitched and swayed, and he pitched and swayed with it, the possessions around him netted and tied down tight. The other beds were folded up to the wall. He was the only one currently bunking.

The dream—always essentially the same—had haunted him since his youth. The flaming horse with burning hooves racing at him out of the dark night, awakening him just before impact. The fear he felt upon waking was deep and rich, a child's fear.

He reached for his pack beneath the bunk. The bag was damp—everything on the ship was damp—but its top knot was tight, its contents secure.

The ship was the *Farrell*, a large fishing boat used for smuggling marijuana, which, yes, was still profitable black-market business. This was the final leg of a return trip from Iceland. Fet had hired the boat for the price of a dozen small arms and plenty of ammunition to keep them running pot for years to come. The sea was one of the few areas left on the planet that was essentially beyond the vampires' reach. Illicit drugs had become incredibly scarce under the new prohibition, the trade confined to homegrown and home-brewed narcotics such as marijuana and pockets of methamphetamine. They operated a smaller sideline business smuggling moonshine—and, on this trip, a few cases of fine Icelandic and Russian vodka.

Fet's mission to Iceland was twofold. His first order of business was to travel to the University of Reykjavik. In the weeks and months following the vampire cataclysm, while still holed up inside the train tunnel beneath the Hudson River, waiting for the surface air to become habitable once again, Fet constantly paged through the book Professor Abraham Setrakian had died for, the book the Holocaust survivor-turned-vampire hunter had entrusted explicitly and exclusively to Fet's possession.

It was the *Occido Lumen*, loosely translated as "The Fallen Light." Four hundred eighty-nine folios handwritten on parchment, with twenty illuminated pages, bound in leather and faced with plates of pure vampire-repelling silver. The *Lumen* was an account of the rise of the *strigoi*, based upon a collection of ancient clay tablets dating back to Mesopotamian times, discovered inside a cave in the Zagros Mountains in 1508. Written in Sumerian and extremely fragile, the tablets survived over a century until they fell into the hands of a French rabbi who was committed to deciphering them—more than two centuries before Sumerian was widely translated—in secret. The rabbi eventually presented his illuminated manuscript to King Louis XIV as a gift—and was immediately imprisoned for his effort.

The original tablets were pulverized upon royal order and the manuscript believed destroyed or lost. The king's mistress, a dabbler in the occult, retrieved the *Lumen* from a palace vault in 1671, and from there it changed hands many times in obscurity, acquiring its reputation as a cursed text. The *Lumen* resurfaced briefly in 1823 and again in 1911, each time coinciding with mysterious outbreaks of disease, before disappearing again. The text was offered for auction at Sotheby's in Manhattan no

fewer than ten days following the Master's arrival and the start of the vampire plague—and was won after great effort, by Setrakian with the backing of the Ancients and their accumulated wealth.

Setrakian, the university professor who shunned normal society following the turning of his beloved wife, becoming obsessed with hunting and destroying the virus-bred *strigoi*, had considered the *Lumen* the authoritative text on the conspiracy of vampires that had plagued the earth for most of the history of mankind. Publicly, his station in life had fallen to that of a lowly pawnbroker in an economically depressed section of Manhattan; yet in the bowels of his shop he had maintained an armory of vampire-fighting weapons and a library of ancient accounts and manuals regarding the dread race, accumulated from all corners of the globe throughout decades of pursuit. But such was his desire to reveal the secrets contained within the *Occido Lumen* that he ultimately gave his life so that it would fall into Fet's hands.

It had occurred to Fet, during those long, dark nights in the tunnel beneath the Hudson River, that the *Lumen* had to have been offered up for auction by someone. Someone had possessed the cursed book—but who? Fet thought that perhaps the seller had some further knowledge of its power and its contents. In the time since they surfaced, Fet had been diligently going through the tome with a Latin dictionary, doing the tedious work of translating the lexicon as best he could. On an excursion inside the vacated Sotheby's building on the Upper East Side, Fet discovered that the University of Reykjavik was to be the anonymous beneficiary of the proceeds from the sale of the extraordinarily rare book. With Nora he weighed the pros and cons of undertaking this journey, and together they decided that this lengthy voyage to Iceland was their only chance of uncovering who had actually put the book up for auction.

However, the university, as he discovered upon arrival, was a warren of vampires. Fet had hoped that Iceland might have gone the way of the United Kingdom, which had reacted swiftly to the plague, blowing up the Chunnel and hunting down *strigoi* after the initial outbreak. The islands remained nearly vampire-free, and their people, though completely isolated from the rest of the infected globe, remained human.

Fet had waited until daylight to search the ransacked administrative offices in hopes of tracing the book's provenance. He learned that the university trust itself had offered the book for auction, not a scholar employed there or a specific benefactor, as Fet had hoped. As the campus itself was deserted, this was a long way to travel to find a dead end. But it was not a total waste. For on a shelf in the Egyptology department, Fet had found a most curious text: an old, leather-bound book, printed in French in 1920. On its cover were the words *Sadum et Amurah*. The very last words that Setrakian had asked Fet to remember.

He took the text with him. Even though he spoke not a single word of French.

The second part of his mission proved to be much more productive. At some point early on in his association with these pot smugglers, after learning how wide their reach was, Fet challenged them to connect him with a nuclear weapon. This request was not as far-fetched as one might think. In the Soviet Union especially, where the *strigoi* enjoyed total control, many so-called suitcase nukes had been purloined by ex-KGB officers and were rumored to be available—in less-than-mint condition—on the black markets of Eastern Europe. The Master's drive to purge the world of these weapons—in order that they could not be used to destroy its site of origin, as the Master had itself destroyed the site of the Ancients—proved to Fet and the others that the Master was indeed vulnerable. Much like the Ancients, the Master's site of origin, the very key to its destruction, was encrypted within the pages of the *Lumen*. Fet offered the right price and had the silver to back it up.

This crew of smugglers put out feelers among their maritime compatriots, with the promise of a

silver bounty. Fet was skeptical when the smugglers told him they had a surprise for him, but the desperate will believe in almost anything. They rendezvoused on a small volcanic island south of Iceland with a Ukrainian crew of seven aboard a junked-out yacht with six different outboard engines off the stern. The captain of the crew was young, in his midtwenties, and essentially one-handed, his left arm withered and ending in an unsightly claw.

The device was not a suitcase at all. It resembled a small keg or trash can wrapped in a black tarpaulin and netting, with buckled green straps around its sides and over its lid. Roughly three feet tall by two feet wide. Fet tried lifting it gently. It weighed over one hundred pounds.

“You sure this works?” he asked.

The captain scratched his copper beard with his good hand. He spoke broken English with a Russian accent. “I am told it does. Only one way to find out. It misses one part.”

“One part is missing?” said Fet. “Let me guess. Plutonium. U-233.”

“No. Fuel is in the core. One-kiloton capability. It misses the detonator.” He pointed to a thatch of wires on the top and shrugged. “Everything else good.”

The explosive force of a one-kiloton nuke equaled one thousand tons of TNT. A half-mile shockwave of steel-bending destruction. “I’d love to know how you came across this,” said Fet.

“I’d like to know what you want it for,” said the captain. “Best if we all keep our secrets.”

“Fair enough.”

The captain had another crewman help Fet load the bomb onto the smugglers’ boat. Fet opened the hold beneath the steel floor where the cache of silver lay. The *strigoi* were bent on collecting every piece of silver in the same manner as they were collecting and disarming nukes. As such, the value of this vampire-killing substance rose exponentially.

Once the deal was consummated, including a side transaction between crews of bottles of vodka for pouches of rolling tobacco, drinks were poured into shot glasses.

“You Ukraine?” the captain asked Fet after downing the firewater.

Fet nodded. “You can tell?”

“Look like people from my village, before it disappear.”

“Disappear?” said Fet.

The young captain nodded. “Chernobyl,” he explained, raising his shriveled arm.

Fet now looked at the nuke, bungee-corded to the wall. No glow, no *tick-tick-tick*. A drone weapon awaiting activation. Had he bartered for a barrel full of junk? Fet did not think so. He trusted the Ukrainian smuggler to vet his own suppliers, and also the fact that he had to continue doing business with the pot smugglers.

Fet was excited, even confident. This was like holding a loaded gun, only without a trigger. All he needed was a detonator.

Fet had seen, with his own eyes, a crew of vampires excavating sites around a geologically active area of hot springs outside Reykjavik, known as Black Pool. This proved that the Master did not know the exact location of its own site of origin—not the Master’s birthplace, but the earthen site where it had first arisen in vampiric form.

The secret to its location was contained in the *Occido Lumen*. All Fet had to do was what he as of yet had failed to accomplish: decode the work and discover the location of the site of origin himself. Were the *Lumen* more like a straightforward manual for exterminating vampires, Fet would have been able to follow its instructions—but instead, the *Lumen* was full of wild imagery, strange allegories, and dubious pronouncements. It charted a backward path throughout the course of human history, steered not by the hand of fate but by the supernatural grip of the Ancients. The text confounded him.

as it did the others. Fet lacked faith in his own scholarship. Here, he missed most the old professor's reassuring wealth of knowledge. Without him, the *Lumen* was as useful to them as the nuclear device was without a detonator.

Still, this was progress. Fet's restless enthusiasm brought him topside. He gripped the rail and looked out over the turbulent ocean. A harsh, briny mist but no heavy rain tonight. The changed atmosphere made boating more dangerous, the marine weather more unpredictable. Their boat was moving through a swarm of jellyfish, a species that had taken over much of the open seas, feeding on fish eggs and blocking what little daily sun reached the ocean—at times in floating patches several miles wide, coating the surface of the water like pudding skin.

They were passing within ten miles of the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts, which put Fet in mind of one of the more interesting accounts contained in Setrakian's work papers, the pages he had compiled to leave behind alongside the *Lumen*. In them, the old professor related an account of the Winthrop Fleet of 1630, which made the Atlantic voyage ten years after the *Mayflower*, transporting second wave of Pilgrims to the New World. One of the fleet's ships, the *Hopewell*, had transported three pieces of unidentified cargo contained in crates of handsome and ornately carved wood. Upon landing in Salem, Massachusetts, and resettling in Boston (due to its abundance of freshwater) thereafter, conditions among the Pilgrims turned brutal. Two hundred settlers were lost in the first year, their deaths attributed to illness rather than the true cause: they had been prey for the Ancients, after having unwittingly conveyed the *strigoi* to the New World.

Setrakian's death had left a great void in Fet. He dearly missed the wise man's counsel as well as his company, but most acutely he missed his intellect. The old man's demise wasn't merely a death but—and this was not an overstatement—a critical blow to the future of humankind. At great risk to himself, he had delivered into their hands this sacred book, the *Occido Lumen*—though not the means to decipher it. Fet had also made himself a student of the pages and leather-bound notebooks containing the deep, hermetic ruminations of the old man, but sometimes filed away side by side with small domestic observations, grocery lists, financial calculations.

He cracked open the French book and, not surprisingly, couldn't make heads or tails of it either. However, some beautiful engravings proved quite illuminating: in a full-page illustration, Fet saw the image of an old man and his wife, fleeing a city, burning in a holy flash of fire—the wife turning to dust. Even he knew that tale . . . “Lot . . .,” he said. A few pages before he saw another illustration: the old man shielding two painfully beautiful winged creatures—archangels sent by the Lord. Quickly Fet slammed the book shut and looked at the cover. *Sadum et Amurah*.

“Sodom and Gomorrah . . .,” he said. “Sadum and Amurah are Sodom and Gomorrah . . .” And suddenly he felt fluent in French. He remembered an illustration in the *Lumen*, almost identical to the one in the French book. Not in style or sophistication but in content. Lot shielding the archangels from the men seeking congress with them.

The clues were there, but Fet was mostly unable to put any of this to good use. Even his hands, coarse and big as baseball mitts, seemed entirely unsuited for handling the *Lumen*. Why had Setrakian chosen him over Eph to guard the book? Eph was smarter, no doubt, much better-read. Hell, he probably spoke fucking French. But Setrakian knew that Fet would die before allowing the book to fall into the Master's hands. Setrakian knew Fet well. And loved him well—with the patience and the care of an old father. Firm but compassionate, Setrakian never made Fet feel too slow or uninformed; quite to the contrary, he explained every matter with great care and patience and made Fet feel included. He made him belong.

The emotional void in Fet's life had been filled by a most unsuspected source. When Eph grew

increasingly erratic and obsessive, beginning in the earliest days inside the train tunnel but magnifying once they surfaced, Nora had come to lean more on Fet, to confide in him and to give and to seek comfort. Over time, Fet had learned how to respond. He had come to admire Nora's tenacity in the face of such overwhelming despair; so many others had succumbed to either hopelessness or insanity, or else, like Eph, had allowed their despair to change them. Nora Martinez evidently saw something in Fet—maybe the same thing the old professor had seen in him—a primal nobility, more akin to a beast of burden than a man, and something Fet himself had been unaware of until recently. And if this quality that he possessed—steadfastness, determination, ruthlessness, whatever it was—made him somehow more attractive to her under these extreme circumstances, then he was the better for it.

Out of respect for Eph, he had resisted this entanglement, denying his own feelings as well as Nora's. But their mutual attraction was more evident now. On the last day before his departure, Fet had rested his leg against Nora's. A casual gesture by any measure, except for someone like Fet. He was a large man but incredibly conscious of his personal space, neither seeking nor allowing any violation of it. He kept his distance, ultimately uncomfortable with most human contact—but Nora's knee was pressed against his, and his heart was racing. Racing with hope as the notion dawned on him: *She's holding. She is not moving away . . .*

She had asked him to be careful, to take care of himself, and in her eyes were tears. Genuine tears as she saw him leave.

No one had ever cried for Fet before.

Manhattan

EPH RODE THE 7 express inbound, clinging fast to the exterior of the subway train. He gripped the rear left corner of the last car, his right boot perched on the rear step, fingertips dug into the window frames, rocking with the motion of the train over the elevated track. The wind and the black rain whipped at the tails of his charcoal-gray raincoat, his hooded face turned in toward the shoulder strap of his weapon pack.

It used to be that the vampires had to ride on the outside of the trains, shuttling around the underground of Manhattan in order to avoid discovery. Through the window, whose dented frame he had pried his fingers under, he saw humans sitting and rocking with the motion of the train. The distant stares, the expressionless faces: a perfectly orderly scene. He did not look for long, for if there were any *strigoi* riding, their heat-registering night vision would have spotted him, resulting in a very unpleasant welcoming party at the next stop. Eph was still a fugitive, his likeness hanging in post offices and police stations throughout the city, the news stories concerning his successful assassination of Eldritch Palmer—cleverly edited from his unsuccessful attempt—still replayed on television every week or so, keeping his name and face foremost in the minds of the watchful citizenry.

Riding the trains required skills that Eph had developed through time and necessity. The tunnels were invariably wet—smelling of burned ozone and old grease—and Eph's ragged, smeared clothes acted as perfect camouflage, both visual and olfactory. Hooking up to the rear of the train—that required timing and precision. But Eph had it down. As a kid in San Francisco, he had routinely used the back of streetcars to hitch a ride to school. And you had to board them just in time. Too early and you would be discovered. Too late and you would be dragged and take a bad tumble.

And in the subway, he had taken some tumbles—usually due to drink. Once, as the train took a curve under Tremont Avenue, he had lost his footing as he calculated his landing jump and trailed on the back of the train, legs hopping frantically, bouncing against the tracks until he rolled on his side, cracking two ribs and dislocating his right shoulder—the bone popping softly as it hit the steel rails on the other side of the line. He barely avoided being hit by an oncoming train. Seeking refuge in a maintenance alcove saturated in human urine and old newspapers, he had popped the shoulder back in place—but it bothered him every other night. If he rolled on it in his sleep he would wake up in agony.

But now, through practice, he had learned to seek the footholds and the crevices in the rear structure of the train cars. He knew every train, every car—and he had even fashioned two short grappling hooks to grab on to the loose steel panels in a matter of seconds. They were hammered out of the good silver set at the Goodweather household and, now and then, served as a short-range weapon with the *strigoi*.

The hooks were attached to wooden handles, made from the legs of a mahogany table Kelly's mother had given them as a wedding present. If she only knew . . . She had never liked Eph—not good enough for her Kelly—and now she would like him even less.

Eph turned his head, shaking off some of the wetness in order to look out through the black rain at the city blocks on either side of the concrete viaduct high above Queens Boulevard. Some blocks remained ravaged, razed by fires during the takeover, or else looted and long since emptied. Patches of the city appeared as though they had been destroyed in a war—and, indeed, they had.

Others were lit by artificial light, city zones rebuilt by humans overseen by the Stoneheart Foundation, at the direction of the Master: light was critical for work in a world that was dark for as many as twenty-two hours each calendar day. Power grids all across the globe had collapsed following the initial electromagnetic pulses that were the result of multiple nuclear detonations. Voltage overruns had burned out electrical conductors, plunging much of the world into vampire-friendly darkness. People very quickly came to the realization—terrifying and brutal in its impact—that a creature race of superior strength had seized control of the planet and that man had been supplanted at the top of the food chain by beings whose own biological needs demanded a diet of human blood. Panic and despair swept the continents. Infected armies fell silent. In the time of consolidation following Night Zero, as the new, poisonous atmosphere continued to roil and cure overhead, so did the vampires establish a new order.

The subway train slowed as it approached Queensboro Plaza. Eph lifted his foot from the rear step, hanging from the blind side of the car so as not to be seen from the platform. The heavy, constant rain was good for one thing only: obscuring him from the vampires' watchful, blood-red eyes.

He heard the doors slide open, people shuffling in and out. The automated track announcements droned from overhead speakers. The doors closed and the train began moving again. Eph regripped the window frame with his sore fingers and watched the dim platform recede from his vision, sliding away down the line like the world of the past, shrinking, fading, swallowed up by the polluted rain and the night.

The subway train soon dipped underground, out of the driving rain. After two more stops, it entered the Steinway Tunnel, beneath the East River. It was modern conveniences such as this—the amazing ability to travel beneath a swift river—that contributed to the human race's undoing. Vampires, forbidden by nature from crossing a body of moving water under their own power, were able to circumvent such obstacles by the use of tunnels, long-distance aircraft, and other rapid-transition alternatives.

The train slowed, approaching Grand Central Station—and just in time. Eph readjusted his grip on the subway car's exterior, fighting fatigue, tenaciously holding on to his homemade hooks. He was malnourished, as thin now as he had been as a freshman in high school. He had grown accustomed to the persistent, gnawing emptiness in the pit of his belly; he knew that protein and vitamin deficiencies affected not only his bones and muscles but also his mind.

Eph hopped off before it came to a full stop, stumbling to the rock bed between the tracks. He rolled on his left shoulder, landing like an expert. He flexed his fingers, unlocking the arthritis-like paralysis of his knuckles, putting away the hooks. The train's rear light shrank up ahead, and he heard the grating of steel wheels braking against steel rails, a metallic shriek his ears never got used to.

He turned and hobbled off the other way, deeper into the tunnel. He had traveled this route enough times that he did not need his night scope to reach the next platform. The third rail was not a concern covered with wood casing, in fact making for a convenient step up onto the abandoned platform.

Construction materials remained on the tile floor, a renovation interrupted at its earliest stage: scaffolding, a stack of pipe sections, bales of tubing wrapped in plastic. Eph pushed back his wet hood and reached into his pack for his night-vision scope, strapping it over his head, the lens fitting in front of his right eye. Satisfied that nothing had been disturbed since his last visit, he moved toward the unmarked door.

At its pre-vampire peak, half a million people daily crossed the polished Tennessee marble of the Grand Concourse floor somewhere above him. Eph could not risk entering the main terminal—the half-acre concourse afforded few places to hide—but he had been up on the catwalks on the roof. There, he had looked at the monuments to a lost age: landmark skyscrapers such as the MetLife Building and the Chrysler Building, dark and silent against the night. He had climbed above the two-story-high air-conditioning units on the terminal roof, standing on the pediment facing Forty-second Street and Park Avenue, among colossal statues of the Roman gods Minerva, Hercules, and Mercury above the great clock of Tiffany glass. On the central section of the roof, he had looked down more than a hundred feet to the cathedral-like Grand Concourse. That was as close as he had gotten.

Eph eased open the door, his scope seeing into the total darkness beyond. He climbed two long flights of stairs, then went through another unlocked door into a long corridor. Thick steam pipes ran the length of it, still functioning, groaning with heat. By the time he reached the next door, he was dripping with sweat.

He slid a small silver knife from his backpack, needing to be careful here. The cement-walled emergency exit was no place to get cornered. Black-tinged groundwater had seeped into the floor, pollution from the sky having become a permanent part of the ecosystem. This section of the underground was once regularly patrolled by maintenance workers, rooting out the homeless, the curious, the vandals. Then the *strigoi* briefly assumed control of the underworld of the city, hiding, feeding, spreading. Now that the Master had reconfigured the planet's atmosphere in order to free vampires from the threat of the sun's virus-killing ultraviolet rays, they had risen from this labyrinthine netherworld and claimed the surface for themselves.

The last door was plastered with a white-and-red sign: EMERGENCY EXIT ONLY—ALARM WILL SOUND. Eph returned his blade and his night-vision scope to his backpack, then pushed the pressure bar, the alarm wires having been snipped long ago.

A foul breeze from the stringy black rain exhaled into his face. He pulled up his damp hood and started walking east on Forty-fifth Street. He watched his feet splashing on the sidewalk, walking as he was with his head down. Many of the wrecked or abandoned cars from the initial days remained shoved to the curbs, making most of the streets one-way paths for work vans or supply trucks operating

by the vampires and the Stoneheart humans. Eph's eyes remained low but vigilantly searched either side of the street. He had learned never to look around conspicuously; the city had too many windows, too many pairs of vampire eyes. If you looked suspicious, you were suspicious. Eph went out of his way to avoid any interaction with *strigoi*. On the streets, as everywhere, humans were second-class citizens, subject to search or any kind of abuse. A sort of creature apartheid existed. Eph could not risk exposure.

He hurried over to First Avenue, to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, quickly ducking down the ramp reserved for ambulances and hearses. He squeezed behind stretchers and a rolling wardrobe they had set there in order to obscure the basement entrance, and entered the unlocked door to the city morgue.

Inside, he stood a few moments in the dim silence, listening. This room, with its stainless steel autopsy tables and numerous sinks, was where the first group of passengers from doomed Regis Air Flight 753 had been brought two years before. Where Eph had first examined the needle-like breach in the necks of the seemingly dead passengers, exposing a puncture wound that extended to the common carotid artery—which they would soon discover had been caused by the vampires' stingers. Where he had also first been shown the strange antemortem augmentation of the vestibular folds around the vocal cords, later determined to be the preliminary stage of the development of the creatures' fleshy stingers. And where he had first witnessed the transformation of the victims' blood from healthy red to oily white.

Also, just outside on the sidewalk was where Eph and Nora first encountered the elderly pawnbroker Abraham Setrakian. Everything Eph knew about the vampire breed—from the killing properties of silver and ultraviolet light, to the existence of the Ancients and their role in the shaping of human civilization since the earliest times, to the rogue Ancient known as the Master whose journey to the New World aboard Flight 753 marked the beginning of the end—he had learned from this tenacious old man.

The building had remained uninhabited since the takeover. The morgue was not part of the infrastructure of a city administered by vampires, because death was no longer the necessary end point of human existence. As such, the end-of-life rituals of mourning and corpse preparation and burial were no longer needed and rarely observed.

For Eph, this building was his unofficial base of operations. He started up the stairs to the upper floors, ready to hear it from Nora: how his despair over Zack's absence was interfering with their resistance work. Dr. Nora Martinez had been Eph's number two in the Canary Project at the CDC. In the midst of all the stress and chaos of the rise of the vampires, their long-simmering relationship had gone from professional to personal. Eph had attempted to deliver Nora and Zack to safety, out of the city, back when the trains were still running beneath Penn Station. But Eph's worst fears were realized when Kelly, drawn to her Dear One, led a swarm of *strigoi* into the tunnels beneath the Hudson River, derailing the train and laying waste to the rest of the passengers—and Kelly attacked Nora and spirited his son away.

Zack's capture—for which Eph in no way held Nora accountable—had nonetheless driven a wedge between them, just as it had driven a wedge between Eph and everything. Eph felt disconnected from himself. He felt fractured and fragmented and knew that this was all he had to offer Nora now.

Nora had her own concerns: chiefly her mother, Mariela Martinez, her mind crippled by Alzheimer's disease. The OCME building was large enough that Nora's mother could roam the upper floors, strapped into her wheelchair, creeping down the hallway by the grip socks on her feet, conversing with people no longer present or alive. A wretched existence, but, in reality, not so far

removed from that of the rest of the surviving human race. Perhaps better: Mrs. Martinez's mind had taken refuge in the past and thus could avoid the horror of the present.

The first sign Eph found that something was amiss was the overturned wheelchair, lying on its side near the door off the fourth-floor stairway, strap belts lying on the floor. Then the ammonia scent hit him, the telltale odor of vampire presence. Eph drew his sword, his pace quickening down the corridor, a sick feeling rising from his gut. The medical examiner's building had limited electricity, but Eph could not use lamps or light fixtures that would be visible from the street, so he proceeded down the dim corridor in a defensive crouch, mindful of doors and corners and other potential hiding places.

He passed a fallen partition. A ransacked cubicle. An overturned chair. "Nora!" he called. An incautious act, but if there were still any *strigoi* present, he wanted to draw them out now.

On the floor in a corner office, he discovered Nora's travel backpack. It had been ripped open, her clothes and personal items flung around the room. Her Luma lamp sat in the corner, plugged into its charger. Her clothes were one thing, but Eph knew that Nora would never go anywhere without her U lamp, unless she had no choice. He did not see her weapon pack anywhere.

He picked up the handheld lamp, switching on the black light. It revealed swirling bursts of bright color on the carpet and against the side of the desk: vampire excrement stains.

Strigoi had marauded here; that was obvious. Eph tried to remain focused and calm. He thought he was alone, at least on this floor: no vampires, which was good, but no Nora, or her mother, which was devastating.

Had there been a fight? He tried to read the room, its swirling stains and overturned chair. He didn't think so. He roamed the hall looking for more evidence of violence beyond property damage but found none. Combat would have been her last resort, and had she made a stand here, the building would certainly be under the control of vampires now. This, to Eph's eye, looked more akin to a house raid.

While examining the desk, he found Nora's weapon bag stowed beneath it, her sword still inside. So evidently she had been surprised. If there was no battle—no silver-to-vampire contact—then her chances of meeting a violent end decreased exponentially. The *strigoi* weren't interested in victims. They were intent on filling their camps.

Had she been captured? It was a possibility, but Eph knew Nora, and she would never go without a battle—and he just didn't see any evidence of that. Unless they had captured her mother first. Nora might have acquiesced then out of fear for Mrs. Martinez's safety.

If so, it was unlikely that Nora would have been turned. The *strigoi*, under the Master's command were reluctant to add to their ranks: drinking a human's blood and infecting them with the vampiric viral strain only created another vampire to feed. No, it was more likely that Nora would have been transported to a detention camp outside the city. From there, she could be assigned work or further disciplined. Not much was known about the camps; some of those who went in never reemerged. Mrs. Martinez, having lived well beyond her productivity years, would meet a more certain end.

Eph looked around, becoming frantic, trying to figure out what to do. This appeared to be a random incident—but was it? At times, Eph had to keep his distance from the others and carefully monitor his comings and goings from the OCME, because of Kelly's tireless pursuit of him. His discovery could lead the Master right to the heart of their resistance. Had something gone wrong? Was Fet compromised as well? Had the Master somehow gotten onto their entire cell?

Eph went to the laptop computer on the desk, opening it. It was still powered on, and he struck the space bar to wake up the screen. Workstation computers in the ME's building were hardwired to a

still-functioning network server. The Internet was heavily damaged in spots and generally unreliable. One was more likely to receive an error message than a page load. Unrecognized and unauthorized Internet protocol addresses were particularly susceptible to worms and viruses, and many computers in the building had become either locked up due to hard-drive-damaging malware or slowed to an unusable crawl by corrupted operating systems. Mobile phone technology was no longer in existence either for telecommunication or for Internet access. Why allow the human underclass access to a communications network capable of spanning the globe—something the vampires possessed telepathically?

Eph and the others operated under the assumption that all Internet activity was vampire-monitored. The page he was now looking at—that Nora had apparently abandoned suddenly, without time to shut down the hard drive—was some sort of personal message exchange, a two-party chat conducted in shorthand.

“NMart” was obviously Nora Martinez. Her partner in conversation, “VFet,” was Vasiliy Fet, the former New York City exterminator. Fet had joined their fight early, by way of an invasion of rats prompted by the arrival of the *strigoi*. He had proven himself invaluable to the cause, for both his vermin-killing techniques and his knowledge of the city, in particular the boroughs’ subterranean passageways. He had become as much of a disciple of the late Setrakian as Eph was, coming into his own as a New World vampire hunter. Currently, he was on a freighter somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean, returning from Iceland on a very important errand.

This thread, full of Fet’s grammatical idiosyncrasies, had started the day before, and it was mainly about Eph. He read words he was never meant to see:

NMart: E not here—missed rendezvous. You were right. I shouldn’t have relied on him. Now all I can do is wait . . .

VFet: Don’t wait there. Keep moving. Return to Roosvlt.

NMart: Can’t—my mother is worse. Will try to stay another day at most. TRULY cannot take this anymore. He’s dangerous. He’s becoming a risk to us all. Just a matter of time before bitch-vamp Kelly catches up with him or he leads her back here.

VFet: I hear you. But w need him. Most keep hm close.

NMart: He goes out on his own. Doesn’t care about anything else.

VFet: He’s 2 important. 2 them. 2 the M. 2 us.

NMart: I know it . . . it’s just that I can’t trust him anymore. I don’t even know who he is . . .

VFet: We all just have to keep him from sinking all to the deep end. You especially. Keep him afloat. He dsn’t know where the book is. That’s our double blind. He can’t hurt us that way.

NMart: He’s at K’s house again. I know it. Raiding it for memories of Z. Like stealing from a dream.

And then:

NMart: You know I miss you. How much longer?

VFet: Returning now. Missing you too.

Eph shrugged off his weapon pack, resheathing his sword, and dropped down into the office chair. He stared at the most recent exchange, reading it again and again, hearing Nora’s voice, then Fet’s Brooklyn accent.

Missing you too.

He felt weightless, reading it—as though the force of gravity had been removed from his body. And yet, here he sat, still.

He should have felt more anger. More righteous fury. Betrayal. A jealous frenzy.

And he did feel all these things. But not deeply. Not acutely. They were there, and he acknowledged them, but it amounted to . . . more of the same. His malaise was so overwhelming that no other flavor, no matter how sour, could change his emotional palate.

How had this happened? At times, over these past two years, Eph had consciously kept his distance from Nora. He had done so to protect her, to protect them all . . . or so he said to himself, justifying plain abandonment.

Still—he couldn't understand it. He reread the other part. So he was a "risk." He was "dangerous." Unreliable. They seemed to think that they were carrying him. Part of him felt relief. Relief for Nora—*Good for her*—but most of him just throbbed with mounting rage. What was this? Was he jealous just because he couldn't hold her anymore? God knew he was not exactly minding the store; was he angry because someone else had found his forgotten toy and now he wanted it back? He knew himself so little . . . Kelly's mother used to tell him he was always ten minutes too late to all the major milestones of his life. Late for Zack's birth, late for the wedding, late to save his marriage from falling apart. God knew he was late to save Zack or save the world, and now—now this . . .

Nora? With Fet?

She was gone. Why didn't he do something before? Strangely, amid the pain and the sense of loss he also felt relief. He didn't need to worry anymore—he didn't need to compensate for his shortcomings, explain his absence, mollify Nora. But as that tenuous wave of relief was about to kick in, he turned around and caught himself in a mirror.

He looked older. Much older than he should have. And dirty, almost like a hobo. His hair was plastered against his sweaty forehead and his clothes were layered with months of grime. His eyes were sunk and his cheeks jutted out, pulling the taut, thin skin surrounding them. *No wonder*, he thought. *No wonder*.

He pulled himself back out of the chair in a daze. He walked down four flights of stairs and out of the medical examiner's building through the pissing black rain to nearby Bellevue Hospital. He climbed in through a broken window and walked the dark and deserted halls, following signs for the emergency room. Bellevue's ER was once a Level 1 trauma center, meaning it had housed a full range of specialists providing access to the best facilities.

As well as the best drugs.

He arrived at the nurses' station and found the drug cabinet door torn off. The locked refrigerator had also been pried open and ransacked. No Percs, no Vikes, no Demerol. He pocketed some oxycodone and antianxiety meds in blister packs—self-diagnosing and self-medicating—tossing empty cartons over his shoulder. He popped two white oxys and dry-swallowed them—then froze.

He had been moving so quickly and making so much noise that he had not heard the bare feet approaching. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement from across the nurses' station and stood.

Two *strigoi*, staring at him. Fully formed vampires, hairless and pale, unclothed. He saw the thickened arteries bulging through their necks, running down over their clavicles into their chests like throbbing tree roots. One had once been a male human (larger body) and the other had been a female (breasts shriveled and pale).

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