

The word "PLAGUE" is rendered in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters are set against a bright red, glowing rectangular background. Numerous small, black silhouettes of insects, likely flies or beetles, are scattered across the red area, some appearing to crawl over the letters. The overall effect is one of a menacing and infested environment.

# PLAGUE

MICHAEL GRANT

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

# PLAGUE

Coming in 2011

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## PLAGUE

# ONE

## PETE

HE STOOD POISED on the edge of a sheet of glass. Barefoot. Perfectly balanced. One foot in front of the other. Arms at his side. That was the game now.

The sheet of glass went down and down and down forever. Like a shimmering, translucent curtain.

The top edge of the glass was thin, so thin it might cut him if he slipped or fell or took a too-hasty step. That top edge was a thin ribbon of rainbow, reflecting bright reds and greens and yellows.

On one side of the glass – darkness. On the other – jarring, disturbing colours.

He could see things down there on the right side: down below his right hand, beyond the reach of his fingers. Down there were his mom and his dad and his sister. Down there were jagged edges and harsh noises that made him want to clap his hands over his ears. When he looked at those things, those people, the wobbly, insubstantial houses, the sharp-edged furniture, the claw hands and hooked noses and staring, staring, staring eyes and yelling mouths, he wanted to close his eyes.

But it didn't work. Even through his closed eyes he saw them.

## MICHAEL GRANT

And he heard them. But he did not understand their wild, pulsating colours. Sometimes their words weren't words at all but brilliant parrot-coloured spears shooting from their mouths.

Mother, father, sister, teacher, others. Lately only sister and others. Saying things. Some words he got. Pete. Petey. Little Pete. He knew those words. And sometimes there were soft words, soft like kittens or pillows and they would float from his sister and he would feel peace for a while until the next jangling, shrieking noise, the next assault of stabbing colour.

On his left: down, down below the endless sheet of glass, a very different world. Quiet, ghostly things drifted silently in shades of grey. No hard edges, no loud sounds. No horrible colours to make him start screaming. It was dark and so very, very quiet.

Down there was a softly-glowing orb, like a faint green sun. It would reach out to him sometimes. A tendril. A mist. It would touch him as he stood balanced, one foot in front of the other, hands at his side.

Peace. Quiet. Nothingness. It would whisper these thoughts to him.

Sometimes it would play. A game.

Pete liked games. Only the left side would play games his way, games had to be his way, the same way, always and unchanging. But the last game Pete had played with the Darkness had turned harsh and over-bright. It had suddenly stabbed Pete with arrows in his brain. It had broken the game.

## PLAGUE

The sheet of glass had shattered. But now it was whole again, and he balanced on top. As if it was sorry, the soft green sun said, 'Come down here and play,' in its whispery voice.

On the other side, the agitated, jangly, hard side, his sister – her face a stretched mask beneath yellow hair, a mouth of pink and glittery white – was pushing at him with hands like hammers.

'Roll over. I have to get this sheet out from under you. It's soaked.'

Pete understood some of the words. He felt the hardness of them.

But Pete felt something else even more. A strangeness. An alienness. Something wrong – a deep, throbbing musical note, a bow drawn over strings, that pulled his focus away from the left and the right, away even from the sheet of glass on which he balanced.

It came from the place he never looked: inside him.

Now Pete looked down at himself, like he was floating outside himself. He looked down at his body, puzzled by it. Yes: that was the new voice, the insistent note, the demanding voice more compelling even than the soft murmur of the Darkness or the jangly words of his sister. His body was demanding his attention, distracting him from his game of balancing on the sheet of glass.

'You're sweating,' his sister said. 'You're burning up. I'm going to take your temperature.'