

Preview Dream World

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Chapter 1

The centerpiece of the room was the large black carpet, in the middle of which sat Jason.

On the low table in front of him the ball of a pendulum hung motionless. His eyes focused on the pendulum, the soft light from the down-lighter gently reflecting off the surface of the iron ball.

Jason breathed deeply and sighed, pushing the air out until his lungs were completely empty. Slowly he breathed in again, controlling the pace at which the air entered his lungs. He felt the cold air entering his nostrils, noticed how the air heated up as it moved into his throat and could feel it swirl around as it entered his lungs. He was counting.

At the count of ten he stopped breathing in and gently let the air out again. Already he could feel his mind letting go.

At the second breath he closed his eyes, once again counting to ten. Now he was part of the air rushing into his lungs, heating up and moving down, down. Slowly he started leaning back, dropping to the carpet until his shoulders touched the thick black material. Breathing in again he unfolded his legs and stretched them towards the table. Once he lay fully stretched out he relaxed, breathing out again.

He was falling.

Jason concentrated. In his mind's eye he could see the pendulum ball hanging suspended in time. He felt the edge of consciousness easing closer, the dark of a resting mind just beyond his grasp. He gave the ball a push with his mind. It moved ever so slightly on the silver cord to which it was tethered. He looked around the room, but it was no longer the room in which he lay sleeping. The edge of sleep had slipped past him, and the dream had started.

He smiled. The lucid playground of the dream state was his favorite place. His fingers slid over the fabric of the robe he was now wearing. In the dream state he was no longer Jason. He could be whatever he wanted to be, whoever he wanted to be.

When Jason started dreaming, Argelon the dream priest woke up.

He tapped the pendulum hard enough with his finger for the silver ball to swing all the way up, and he kept it there. He wasn't holding the ball in place. In the dream he'd stopped time. The ball was hanging between the moment where it had reached its zenith and where it would start dropping down again. Argelon left the ball in mid-air and stepped away, watching it. It would stay there until he let time flow back, giving him as much time as he needed.

Argelon turned his back on the ball and looked around the room, he needed space to perform his work. The dream priest concentrated, around him the room changed, images and scenery flicking by. He ignored these, knowing they were only dream fragments brought up by his subconscious. A woman appeared and a moment later disappeared. A stallion raced over mountaintops. In the dream his mind was clear, only the images wavered.

The shifting slowed down and stopped. Above him the ceiling had disappeared to make way for deep blue skies, while around him golden desert sand stretched into the distance.

Argelon bent down and pushed his hand into the sand, pushing down until his whole arm was buried. He felt around until he found what he was looking for and pulled his arm out again. In the palm of his hand lay a ruby, its unpolished surface glowing dull in the sunlight. He held his palm upward and waited while the red gem drifted off his hand and into the air. When it reached eye level he stopped and waited. There was no sun and no shadows in this place, yet the ball filled with an inner light until it burned bright red, spilled out and spread over the sand. He waited for the light to fill the dunes around him, until the light had filled the horizon.

Argelon looked up at the sunless sky. When he spoke his voice was like thunder, rolling over the dunes and becoming part of the red light.

‘I, Argelon, Dream Priest, who have found the Ruby of Blood, call to me the power of Succubus, that she may serve me!’

The thunder of his voice did not die down. It stayed in the air, its echoes crackling into the infinity of his dream-time.

Around him he could feel the power building. It was a greater power than he possessed, yet it was now in his power. He could feel it bind to him, obeying his command. Argelon felt malevolent. He had created the ruby himself, it existed only in his dreams, but in his dreams he was all-powerful. He had fought monsters in his dreams, had destroyed time and now finally, finally he had enough power to bind Succubus the demon.

He felt the power of the demon enter and rise inside him, searing his emotions. She wanted to get out, but he wouldn’t let her. She wanted to rise and consume him, but he was now her master, she would obey him. Her fury was a flame burning in him, her passion pushing and pulsing inside him. He resisted her, forcing her fire down until he had his emotions in control.

Again he concentrated, forcing the scenery around him to *shift*. He had to get away from this place, in his thoughts, before the demon Incubus could rise to look for his mate.

For a moment he was floating in absolute nothingness. In his mind he saw blue lightning and then a dome of thundering blue streaks enveloped him, the demon inside his soul raging anger at the sound. She had been disturbed, and someone would pay. The one who had captured her was male, her favorite prey.

Argelon forced himself to concentrate harder. He had to dislodge the demon inside soon, or she would gain control of him. He drifted to the edge of the blue thunder, closer and closer until he could reach out and touch the lightning. The lightning would be her cage, a tomb to keep her in his power. He stretched his thoughts out until his soul touched the blue bolts of lightning. Succubus responded instantly, shrieking and boiling inside him, her throbbing anger now barely controllable.

With a quick movement Argelon pulled himself through the blue lightning. For a moment longer he could feel the demon trapped inside him, but then the lightning drove her out. She could not go through the lightning he had created in his dreamscape.

He moved away from the blue ball and turned around to look at his prize.

The woman was as he had never seen before. Blue fire danced in her eyes, reflecting the blue lightning that was her cage. Below her shoulders silken light shrouded the body of immortal beauty, revealing only form. Her full lips held the mists of morning dew, glistening dark red and inviting.

She brought a hand up and stroked a finger across her cheek, her lips parting slightly. The finger crept further, tracing a line down the supple curve of her throat, down to the valley that nestled between her full mounds, and down further.

Argelon shook his head violently and brought his eyes up to meet hers. This was the most dangerous time, when he had to face the demon he commanded. Behind the blue lightning bars of her cage Succubus stretched a slim arm towards him, holding her palm up.

‘Come Argelon, come to me, that we may share each other’s beauty,’ her voice was liquid, soft and crystal clear in his head.

‘Do not tempt me, demon!’ he took his eyes from the demon and looked over her shoulder. To be caught by her invitation would mean death, and eternal damnation. ‘You are here to do my will, and my will is not to be with you.’

The woman withdrew her hand and clasped both hands in front of her. She looked down, her face distraught. The tone of her voice changed, now she was the submissive slave, the one over which he had full control.

‘Please let me out. I’ll obey your wish, and the two of us will be strong as one,’ she sighed softly.

Argelon shook his head. Inside her silken voice he could hear the venom of hate, knew the threat that lay hidden in her words.

‘You shall stay where you are, and there shall be no communion between us. When the time is right I will show you my wish, and I shall command you, and you will do as I say.’

He turned his back on her and concentrated. Behind him he heard the soft hiss of a snake, but paid it little attention. When his eyes were not on her she would change form, and the hatred which was in her would reveal itself.

He willed himself back to his room, the room where the silver pendulum ball hung suspended in time.

The ball had changed. It no longer had the glossy shining surface he had first given it. It was now the round cage of lightning, tethered and hanging, caught in motion. Inside the ball the demon raged, caught between dimensions and dangerously close to time. Where she lived there was no time, but now she hung on the edge, with only Argelon’s dreamscape between her and the moment when he would release the ball.

Argelon nodded, and the ball dropped. It swung on the silver cord and reached the bottom of its arc, moved up the other side and reached the zenith. Argelon allowed the ball to swing freely, up and down, down and up. He was careful not to be mesmerized by the pendulum, for being hypnotized in his dreamscape could mean death. Slowly the ball shortened its arc, moving with less force. With each passing moment he could feel her power over him diminishing, could feel the moment near when she would be resting at the bottom, caught in his power.

He sat down on the carpet and waited until the ball hung still. When there was no more movement he lay down and concentrated, easing his mind back to wakefulness. He probed and sought carefully until he identified the place where waking reality would take over from dream reality, and mentally stepped over the line.

Jason opened his eyes. Without wasting a moment he rolled over and stood up, looking at the suspended pendulum ball. He picked up a book from the table and opened it on the first page, reading the words written there.

“Are you awake, or are you dreaming?”

Jason waited to see if the words would change. If they changed it would mean he had not woken up yet, he was still dreaming. It was a trick he’d learned years back, when dreaming had first caught his attention. He’d learned that looking at written words were a key to lucid dreaming. If he read words and they changed as he was reading them he was caught in a dream. If the words stayed still the chances were good that he was awake.

The words on the page kept still. Jason turned to the wall and looked at the clock hanging there. The clock kept time, with none of the erratic movements backwards and forwards he'd gotten used to in dream reality.

Jason was awake.

Kneeling down he looked at the silver ball. The lightning was not visible anymore, but he knew it was still there. He picked up a pen and sat down in his favorite chair, opening the black book to the last entry he'd written. Using as much detail as he could he wrote down events as they had played out in his dream, ensuring he could recall the dream if he wanted to.

Once he was done he put the book back on the table and stretched himself out. His first task had been completed successfully. He left the living room and went to his bedroom, where thick drapes kept sunlight out of his life.

Jason hated light. It pestered him, keeping him awake when he wanted to sleep to explore the dream world. Sunlight was for those who walked by day.

On the bed Jason knew it would be some time before he could get to sleep again, but now that he had bound the demon he wanted action, to teach those bastards out there a lesson they would never forget.

Thoughts drifted in and out of his head, memories of being tormented by people. Jason hated people as much as he hated sunlight. He closed his eyes and immediately saw one of the boys who had been to school with him, who had hit him so hard against the ear that he'd woken up crying on the ground, in front of all the other school kids. He hated the boy, and the boy was going to pay the price for what he had done.

He let the image drift out of his mind. It was replaced by another, this time of the teacher who had called him a dumb donkey and had sent him out of the class to stand in the hallway, because he was useless and he couldn't even do math. Jason thought for a long time about the teacher. The boy would be difficult, Jason would have to find him before he could teach him a lesson, but the teacher would be easy. He knew where she lived. She was still teaching in the cold class off the cold hallway where Jason had stood looking out over the balcony, daydreaming.

He brought an image of the woman up in his mind and kept it there for a long time, chanting a soft mantra to himself.

'In my dreams I know your face,
Your face within my secret place.'

He repeated the words to himself until he was sure he would remember her in his dreams and let the image of her face fade from his mind. It was replaced by other images, other people who had taken his dignity from him, those who had bullied him, had taunted him, had made him an outcast.

The images came faster and faster, until Jason no longer needed to think to have them march through his mind's eye, they were simply there and then gone. Then he too was gone, sleep taking hold of him and releasing him from the nightmare of life.

Chapter 2

Cindy Goldberg turned the key and pushed the door open with her shoulder, the stack of school books under her arm threatening to over balance and spill to the ground. The house was quiet, and for a second she wondered if her two daughters might have gone out. She would be furious if they had, it was midterm and they were supposed to be doing

homework. She stepped into the foyer and listened for their voices, but the house remained quiet.

She walked into the living room and dumped the stack of books on the table. She had a lot of work to get through, and worrying about her own children's grades was the last thing she felt like doing. She already had enough troubles with the little brats in her class, and her temper nowadays was frayed.

She walked into the kitchen, where another unwelcome sight greeted her. Her usually pristine kitchen counters held the remnants of a hastily concocted lunch, bread, jam and butter lying scattered on the polished countertop. Automatically she picked up the jam and butter and opened the fridge, placing each neatly in its place. She would have to teach these girls a lesson. Since her workload had increased she hadn't had enough time to pay them enough attention, but this mess was inexcusable. Taking the cloth from the sink she started wiping the counter, wondering about the girls. It was true that she had spent less time with them lately, but she had explained to them that because the school was overfull she had to do extra work. They had agreed to help her out, to be good and accept the fact that she would now spend less time with them.

Cindy's mind went back to the previous day and she was surprised at the memory. The kids had been busy with homework when she arrived from school, and the whole house had been neat like she expected it to be.

She looked down at the gleaming counter. Why had they left this mess today? A strange feeling clawed at her, but then she remembered unlocking the front door when she'd come in. The door had definitely been locked, it could not have been an intruder. Her heart started beating faster. She left the kitchen and walked into the passage, from where she could already see that both girls' bedroom doors were open.

'Catherine?'

Her voice sounded hollow in the passage. When no reply came she started walking, wanting to run but too scared of what she would find.

'Calm down,' she told herself, feeling her heart race. She reached the first door and stared into the room. The room was almost as it should have been, with schoolbooks open and a pen lying in the fold of one. Everything was in place, except for the chair which was pushed out from the desk, and her missing daughter.

Cindy frowned and stepped into the next room, where the same sight greeted her. The girls had been doing their homework, but something had interrupted them. She walked into Catherine's room and pulled the curtain aside, checking the pool area outside. Everything looked normal, the girls were not out there. She dropped the curtain back into place and left the room, heading down the passage to the sliding door that led outside.

The door was open. Cindy slowed down, expecting to find the girls on the patio, but they weren't there. She looked around, knowing they had to be somewhere in the garden.

'Catherine?'

Her voice wasn't raised much, just enough to fill the back yard area. When she got no answer she turned towards the side of the house.

She saw the hand first. In the shade of the big oak that grew beside the house she could make out a hand, attached to an arm. The hand was far too high, it hung at least two meters from the ground. Cindy started to run. As she neared the corner of the house the rest of the body came into view.

Hanging from the tree was Catherine, a noose pulled tight around her neck. For a second Cindy stopped and looked at the body of her daughter, then she screamed.

Her scream tore through the yard, through her head and through her soul, but she couldn't stop. She was running, and in front of her Catherine's face came into view, her tongue stuck out between blue lips, her neck drawn at an angle against the rope. In the shade of the tree her body hung limp.

She heard someone call her name, heard the neighbour shout at her, asking if everything was alright, but then she was screaming again. Her hands drawn up to her mouth, into her mouth, and then she was biting her knuckles, drawing blood in an effort to feel anything other than the feelings tearing through her.

She was slipping, a dark cloud threatening to overshadow her consciousness, threatening to envelope her and drag her to oblivion, where the sight would be far from her and she would be safe. She fought it, knowing there was something else she had to do, something important, but not able to think what it was. There was movement now, but her world had slowed down, closed in until only the picture of her daughter hanging from the oak tree filled her world.

Someone had jumped over the wall. Cindy could see him running towards her and then stop as he too saw the dead child. Then he was moving again, saying something to her, but his words were far away, they couldn't reach her where her thoughts had gone. He was moving, but he was moving towards a part of the tree that Cindy could not see yet, a part of the tree that was still hidden behind a corner of the house.

Slowly her legs gave in under her, leaving her to drop down to the lawn, drop down to her knees so she wouldn't be able to move, because if she moved she would go to the tree, and now she knew what she was missing. She dropped to her arms and started crawling, tried to get up but fell again.

Now the man was also screaming, but he was calling to someone. Cindy knew what she was missing, and she knew why the man was screaming.

He had found her other daughter.

She was up and running before her cold mind could play its treacherous tricks on her again, using her unwilling legs, forcing them to do her will against her will, running to the tree she wanted to run from. She saw the neighbour's son scale the wall, a knife in his hand. For a moment she thought he meant her daughter harm, thought that these two had killed her daughters, but she knew the knife would have another use. They were here to help her, to cut her daughter from the tree.

Now she was at the end of the house, and she could see around the corner, could see the man holding something up, could see him stretch up, holding something in his arms.

The boy with the knife didn't go to his father. Instead he ran straight to the tree, climbing up to the lower branches and then swinging, up and up to where his feet could reach the branch. Without waiting he crawled along the branch and then he was cutting at the rope, slicing at the tether of death that held Megan around the neck.

She saw her younger daughter drop, saw the man catch her and then he was putting Megan down, laying her on the grass and then Cindy was there, and they were tearing at the rope, clawing to get it off. Megan was breathing, blood running from her neck in a thin line and dripping onto the green grass, glistening red in the afternoon sunshine.

'What the hell happened?' asked the man, but she couldn't answer. He was pulling the girl's jaw up, and then he was bending down and putting his face to her daughters and for a moment Cindy thought he was kissing her, but then saw her daughter's chest heave. The man was helping her, not hurting her. She let him, willed him to help her daughter

breath, willed him to bring her back to life. She saw a spasm take hold of the child, and then Megan was breathing on her own, great big gulping breaths of air.

The sound which came from behind Cindy was sickening. A damp thud sounded on the grass, and without having to turn around Cindy knew that Catherine was dead. The older girl had been heavy enough to pull the noose tight, and it had done its job. For now though, her only concern was for Megan, Megan who was bleeding and not breathing properly.

Sirens wailed in the distance. She drew her hand across her face, trying to clear the tears so she could help the man who was still bending over her daughter, but the hand only smeared tears and snot into her hair, and she couldn't stop crying. As more tears flowed she took hold of her daughter's hand, whispering soft words into the air, not knowing what those words were. It was all she could do as she listened to the sirens' approach.

Chapter 3

'Fuck off!' Andrew shouted at the woman. He'd had enough of cops to last him a lifetime, and this bitch was the last thing he wanted to see today. 'I haven't got any dope and as far as I can remember I haven't done anything wrong, so unless you've got a search warrant you can get your pussy back down that corridor and out of this building,' he folded his arms, knowing she didn't have a search warrant.

On the other side of the security door the woman in uniform stood her ground. He didn't like her attitude. She was too calm, as if she knew him well. '*She must have studied my file,*' he decided and started closing the door in her face, but her hand was coming through the gap in the security gate, flying towards his face and suddenly his nose exploded. The punch rocked him back on his feet and took him off balance. Before he had time to recover she gripped his shirt and pulled him to the gate, her strength surprising him.

'We're going to have a little talk, mister,' her words were cold, but her hand had reached into his pants and she had him where she wanted him, digging one sharp nail into his soft skin to make sure he understood the point.

He held onto the pain, savouring it and smiling at her. This bitch could play ball, and right now she was getting pretty close to having one free in her hand.

'What do you want?' he asked.

The words let a stream of blood from his nose into his mouth, the metallic taste mixing with the sweetness of her breath until he thought the combination of her breath and her hands and his own pain would make him lose control, but she pulled her face back and released the pressure she had on him. He brought his own hands up and cupped her breasts through the iron bars, still smiling into her face.

'It seems we've reached an impasse,' his voice held a menace he did not like, something about him he tried to hide from.

'No we haven't,' she said, the click from the lock on the security gate warning him he'd been outsmarted. Before he could respond she had the gate open, now there was nothing between them. He brought his hands up, ready to punch her the moment he smelled trouble. Normally he wouldn't dare hit a woman, but the pig had arrived at his apartment reeking of trouble, and she'd given him her smell's worth.

'Relax, I only want to talk to you,' she pushed past him and entered the flat, looking around her to find an open space to sit. The place was crammed with stuff, some she could

recognize and some a mystery. She picked a pizza box off a couch and threw it on the floor, sitting down where it had been.

'By the way, the name's Shelly,' she said, not bothering to look at the man still standing where she had left him.

'You're one heck of a bitch to come storming in here like that,' he was sounding unsure of himself, not comfortable with the thought of a woman entering his flat. 'I guess you know who I am.'

'Andrew "I killed my girlfriend while on drugs, Shaw,"' she answered, now looking around at him.

'Yeah, and I served my time and I've done my duty, so what the fuck are you doing here, playing mother?' Andrew felt threatened by her presence. He didn't want her to be here. If it had been a male cop he would have welcomed the man in, but a woman was a different kettle of fish.

'Getting some facts straight,' she answered. 'You lied at your trial.'

'What the hell makes you think that?' he asked, his voice nasal from pinching the top of his nose to stop the bleeding. He wiped a collection of books from a chair opposite her and sat down, letting the blood drip onto the floor in front of him.

'This place is a pigsty, you need a woman in here,' her eyes were still taking in everything strewn about the place.

'The cleaning stuff is in the kitchen, you can get going anytime you want.'

'Very funny, wise guy. Look, I didn't come here for a chit chat. I need some help and so do you, so why don't we stop antagonizing each other and see if we can be mutually beneficial?' She'd taken the menace out of her voice. Her eyes were now searching his, trying to find something there.

Andrew stared back, wondering what kind of trouble this woman was going to be. *The bad kind*, he thought, but for now she had him cornered.

'Ok so stop bullshitting me and tell me why you think I lied during my trial,' he said and relaxed in the chair.

'You said you and Caroline smoked dope the night you murdered her. According to you it was bad shit you'd picked up off some guy on the street, and it made you lose your mind. That's a good story and it held water ten years ago, but you were lying, weren't you?'

Opposite her Andrew was smiling. 'What the fuck difference would it make? I pleaded guilty, I got sent to jail and did my term. I was released and my probation period is over, so what the hell do you want? It's not as if you can send me back for murder if you found I did it for money or because she cheated on me, would it? I killed her, I did my time. End of story.'

Shelly got up, looking around for the bathroom. She found it behind some boxes and went to find toilet paper. The mess in the bathroom was no different from that in the sitting room. Books and magazines lay strewn on the floor, but mercifully he had real toilet paper instead of a stack of newspapers. Her eyes scanned some of the books' titles, but the psychiatry theme of most of them was just another confirmation of what she already knew. She unrolled a long piece of toilet paper and stepped back into the lounge, going straight to him and putting the paper in his hand. He accepted it and put the paper under his nose, which had slowed to a steady drip of blood. She sat down again.

'When you smoke dope,' she said, 'your body takes fourteen days to get rid of the evidence. You were never tested, because you had admitted the fact in an affidavit. Nobody thought you would be lying, because people usually go to great lengths to deny that kind of

thing,' her eyes were once again going over the room, this time taking in the details of the magazines he'd chucked off the chair. Here too the psychiatry theme dominated. Before he could notice her interest she continued.

'The person who did the autopsy on Caroline didn't have her blood tested, the wounds you inflicted were obviously the cause of her death. He did, however, draw some blood, and when I went looking the other day guess what I found?'

She didn't give him time to answer. 'Her blood was still there in the laboratory, frozen, forgotten for all these years.'

Shelly stopped and gave him time to speak, but Andrew only looked at her.

'Her body never had a chance to get rid of the drug, and yet no trace of dope was found in her blood when I had it tested, which means you lied at your trial.'

Andrew looked at her for a few seconds longer and burst out laughing. His laughter filled the room and she could hear the genuine humour in his voice, but she gave him time to finish. He could have his laugh, she would have her laugh later. While he laughed she took the chance to take in more of the equipment in the room. There was stuff she'd never seen before, but one particular piece held her attention. Next to the sofa on the floor a little black box, with a red light and some kind of meter needle, lay forgotten. From the front of the box two wires led to two very thin and sharp needles, and even from where she sat Shelly thought she could see blood on those two needles. She tore her eyes away from the box, not wanting to think what demented pleasure Andrew might be getting from it. He was calming down again, his laughter now at an end. She would have to be careful with him, if she gave away her game now he might run.

'So what the fuck are you here to do?' he asked 'Arrest me for lying under oath? God woman, I've been in jail for so long it's like my second home. Let me get some things and let's go!' he got up from the couch, and now his stance was dangerous.

Shelly stayed seated, knowing that standing up would send a wrong signal of aggression. 'Sit down and relax,' she said, trying to sound as if perjury was the last thing on her mind. 'I told you, I'm only here to talk to you. The two of us can help each other.'

'And if I don't help you, I'm under threat of being arrested? That's blackmail, bitch!' his voice held anger, but she knew he would listen.

She waited for him to sit down before continuing. 'If you don't agree to help me it's fine, I won't do anything. I'm not interested in the fact that you lied under oath, I'm only interested in what you lied about. And the name is Shelly, not bitch. When last did you eat?'

Andrew looked at her as if she'd gone mad, but he was interested in her story. He had lied at his trial, and somehow this woman had found out. He was very, very interested in her story.

'I don't eat much as a rule,' he answered. 'I think I ate yesterday morning.'

'Let's get out of here and I'll buy you something to eat. There's a nice patch of grass in the park where I think the two of us could sit and have a nice civil conversation.' She stood up. 'Get yourself cleaned up first though, you look like shit.'

Shift

'So what's it to you if I lied about how Caroline died?' asked Andrew and bit into the burger she'd bought him. Since leaving his flat he'd relaxed. He didn't mind the woman wanting to talk to him, but after the death of his girlfriend he didn't want woman in his apartment anymore.

Shelly thought for a moment before answering. 'I don't know how to explain this to you, so maybe it would be a good thing if we went over how exactly you killed her. As I said, I'm not interested in your case, but once I know what happened to Caroline I'll be able to explain myself better.'

She watched him to see what his reaction would be, but right now the food held his attention. She'd noticed how he'd relaxed after leaving the apartment, and a bit more hope was growing in her mind.

'According to you, you don't remember much about the evening,' she pressed on. 'The two of you smoked dope, you got into a bad mood and you bashed her around, but that's your story. So far we're still waiting for somebody to explain how you ripped her open with your bare hands. The pathologist suggested that you used a sharp weapon because there was cut marks on the edges of the wounds, but that doesn't explain why the cut marks looked like those a handful of razor sharp claws would make.'

She stopped and waited for his response, waited to see if he was going to turn around and block her out.

Andrew ate in silence, only looking at her in quick glances. This woman had noticed things nobody else had seen, he could see that, but he didn't know what she was on about. He himself didn't know what the hell had happened the night Caroline died, he only knew he'd killed her. That much he could remember. He finished eating at his leisure and wiped his mouth before speaking.

'The murder weapon was never found, so I can't help you out on that one,' he spoke softly, aware that there were other people sitting near them. 'The police searched every part of my place, and they found nothing. Ten years later when I got out of jail I went back myself and tried to find it, but found nothing. I know the cops had missed some of my hidey holes, because some of the drugs I'd hidden were still there, but I found no weapon,' he sighed and looked up to the sky, as if asking for help from above.

'Why don't you tell me what happened?' asked Shelly, surprising him. 'Just between you and me, tell me what happened that night, and then I'll know if you can help me, and if I can help you.'

Andrew looked at her for a long time. He'd never told anybody what had happened that night. In court he'd fabricated a story about drugs, he'd even gone as far as to mention some of the places where he'd hidden the drugs to make sure they would find some. Anything to keep the truth from being known. To be in jail for ten years or more would be bad, but to be labelled as insane would have landed him in a mental institution, and that would have been much, much worse.

Now this woman was here, asking him to square up with her, and she had a strange look in her eyes. She knew more than she'd let on up to now, he was sure of that. Somehow she still had a card up her sleeve, and she wouldn't be scared to use it either. He considered his options. He could tell her what had happened and get into trouble, yet if he did tell her he would be getting it off his chest for the first time ever. He nodded his head and looked down.

'I don't know what happened,' he said 'We came home and did nothing unusual, and then we went to bed, like any other couple on this planet,' he stopped and looked at her to see what impression this was making.

'Did you use any drugs?' she asked.

'No. Caroline had found out she was pregnant and had stopped using. I was trying to make up my mind about the pregnancy thing, trying to come to grips with the fact that I was

going to be a father, and I'd stopped using drugs for a few days to see how I would fare. We just went to bed and talked for a while, and then we fell asleep.'

His voice had grown faint, as if he was back in the room on the night Caroline had died. He wanted to tell the rest, needed to tell the rest, but now he wasn't sure he could.

'What happened then?' asked Shelly, softly persistent.

Andrew wiped a hand over his brow. Thinking about the night had brought a film of sweat over his face, a cold film of sweat.

'I had a dream,' he looked into her eyes, trying to see if she believed him, and what he saw there was encouraging. 'In my dream we were sitting in front of the television, and we were having an argument about the baby. She wanted me to stop using drugs, calling me useless and saying she would find somebody else to be the father of the child.' Andrew stopped and swallowed, not believing that he was actually telling a cop the story he'd kept hidden for so long.

'I can't remember what exactly I was thinking in the dream, but somehow I started thinking I was a demon, a bastard who'd awakened life in this woman, and that the baby she was going to have would be like me, and that it had to be stopped,' Andrew wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans, sweat now running down his face. He could remember, even ten years after that night, he could remember so well what had happened.

'When I looked down at my hands they'd turned to claws, demon's claws,' he stopped and looked at the woman, searching her face for the smile that would tell him he was mad and she didn't believe a word of what he was saying, but her face was still serious. He thought again how she looked like someone who knew something and would use it. He decided to go on before his thoughts could stop him, knowing that whether she believed him or not was not important, telling the story for once was.

'I knew I had to kill the baby. It was so bloody simple, and so bloody stupid. In my dream there was only one thought, the baby had to be killed. The rest was easy. I simply turned to her and dug my claws into her abdomen. Somehow I knew where the foetus was, and I went directly for it.' He looked at the woman opposite him, wondering if she would ever understand the pain and suffering that dream had caused him. When he spoke again she could hear the pleading in his voice, as if he desperately wanted someone to understand what had happened to him.

'She didn't even have time to see it coming. One moment she was sitting next to me, the next I had thrust my claws into her and pulled out the foetus, and she was dying from a gaping wound in her abdomen.'

Andrew stopped. The story was out, he had told it to the police, sitting under the rolling skies in a nice green park. He tried to savour the park, knowing that once she had a chance to share his story with her colleges he would probably be heading for a cold and lonely cell, but for once it didn't matter. This morning he had been a loony in his apartment, tonight he would be a loony in a madhouse.

'What did you do with the foetus?' asked Shelly.

Andrew looked at her in disbelief. This woman was sitting here calm as anything while he told her how he'd suddenly grown claws and ripped his girlfriend's stomach open. He shook his head and looked away, not daring to look at her while he spoke.

'The demon ate it.'

'So what happens now?' asked Andrew. The cop had grown quiet for a long time after he'd finished, and he was getting impatient sitting waiting for her. He'd told her his

story, now he wanted to know what she needed help with, how knowing about the death of his girlfriend might help her.

Shelly took a deep breath and sighed.

'I need your help with a case I'm working on,' she said.

Andrew looked at her and stuck his forefinger to his chest. 'My help?'

'Your help,' answered Shelly. 'I'm investigating what would have been a double suicide if one of the victims hadn't survived, and I think you might be able to help me.' She stopped and waited to see if he would object, but Andrew kept his silence.

'You don't have to worry about what I believe or don't believe about your story, I've heard worse from an eight year old, so I believe every word you said,' she stopped again, suddenly not sure how to go on. She had to go on, had to press on now while she had the advantage over him.

'I notice you seem almost glad to have told the story to somebody at last, she ventured. 'It's been a long time, hasn't it?'

Andrew nodded his head. He felt better with the secret off his chest, and for now the prospect of the madhouse seemed to have been pushed aside.

'I don't know how you got on to me, and I feel there's a lot you're not telling me,' he said 'but tell me about this case of yours, I suppose it's got some bearing on what happened to me?'

Shelly nodded her head. 'Look, I'm not supposed to be telling you this, but if I don't do something, a young girl is going to land up where you're scared you'll land up, in a mental institution. The girl and her sister tried to commit suicide by hanging themselves from a tree, but only the older sister succeeded. The younger one told us what happened, and her story is going to cause her trouble. Apart from that, there are also some unanswered questions, much like the cut marks on Caroline's abdomen.'

'Such as?' asked Andrew.

'I was one of the first people on the scene,' she continued. 'When their mother found them they were hanging from a tree, from high branches. She screamed and a neighbour and his son came to help her. The son climbed the tree and cut the two girls free. The tree has about a meter of soil around it, and when I looked at the soil there was only one set of footprints, those of the boy who had climbed the tree. There is no way the girls or anybody else could climb up that tree without touching that soil, and there's no sign of anybody else having been at the house. The others who had a look at the case are dumbfounded, but they refuse to accept that there's any chance the girl's story could be true.'

'So what's the girl's story?' asked Andrew, already feeling he knew some part of the answer.

Shelly crossed her legs and put her arms on her knees. 'According to the girl a man appeared in the house. She and her sister had come home and gone to their rooms to do homework, and then her sister had gotten hungry and went to the kitchen to make sandwiches. The younger girl heard her talking to someone in the kitchen and said her sister sounded scared, so she went to investigate. When she got to the kitchen there was a man with her sister. He was talking to her, and she says he was angry. He was telling her sister he was going to hang them from the tree.'

Shelly stopped, remembering the girl's tears when she had told the story, remembering how the girl had cried when she realized nobody believed her.

'The girl said she tried to run away, but that everything had become slow, as if she was in water. That what's making me think there's some kind of dream quality to her story, and why you're of interest to me. Everyone else thinks she and her sister were loony, that it might be something that runs in the family. Both her mother and father have been under observation for weeks, but so far nobody can see anything wrong with them. When I started giving the case more serious thought I remember the same happening to you, and thought I should ask your help.'

Andrew opened the soft drink Shelly had bought him and looked around. 'You're not telling me everything,' he said, opening his eyes.

There's so much to tell, and I don't know where to begin,' she knew she had his trust now that she'd listened to his story. He would give her a little more time, but if she screwed up she could forget about getting any help out of him. She decided to tell him the rest of her story, to keep him interested.

'According to the girl, the man in the kitchen wasn't standing on the ground. He was floating some way off the floor and he had ropes in his hands, the ropes he used to hang them with. In the dream state they couldn't escape, and he'd gotten the nooses around their necks and pulled them up until their feet left the ground. Then he'd drifted out of the house to where the tree stood, where he'd tied the ropes to the tree and left them to die.'

'That's some story,' said Andrew when Shelly was finished.

'And then some,' she answered. 'The lock on the door where they went out was still locked when we got there, even though the door was open. Everybody else has decided that one of the girls had turned the lock after they had opened the door and taken out the key again, but I think otherwise. Why would two healthy kids pull a prank like that? It just doesn't make sense.'

'Kids sometimes do strange things,' said Andrew, not knowing what to make of the story. If the kids' experience had been anything like his own he felt sorry for them, but right now he failed to see how he could be of any assistance to the cop. She looked at him and he could see the challenge in her eyes.

'You know as well as I do they didn't hang themselves,' her statement was simple, but it told Andrew a lot. It told him she believed his own story, that she had sympathy for him and that he wasn't mad, because other people had also had experiences like his.

'So what happens now?' he asked, wondering how she thought he could help.

'I'm trying to figure out some things, and a lot of what you can tell me will help. What I'm trying to find out is how you killed Caroline. I know you turned into a demon, but there's a question there. Did your physical body turn into a demon or did your dream body turn into a demon?'

Andrew frowned and shook his head, not understanding her question. Shelly sighed and tried again.

'What I'm trying to figure out is whether Caroline was killed in real life or in dream life? Was your physical body in bed when you killed her, which means your dream body was the one that did the killing, or had your physical body changed into a demon?'

She hoped she was making more sense to him this time, but his long drawn out silence disappointed her. The chances were good that the incident had taken place too long ago for him to remember. He put his head in his hands, and she could feel him concentrating, trying to bring back the memories. When he looked up he had a thoughtful expression on his face.

'You surprise me more and more, Shelly,' it was the first time he'd used her name, but he liked the name. 'I've never thought about that, but you're right in asking. There's a lot you still don't know about me, and I don't care for you to know, but I'll give you the answer. It was my dream body that killed Caroline, not my physical body. Don't ask me just yet to explain that, because it would take me a month, so just accept the answer for now. Is that all you wanted to know?'

From the tone of his voice she knew they had reached the end to their conversation, for now.

'That helps a lot,' she said. 'I've known for some time it would be some kind of dream body, and from what I've read there are many possibilities. I'll think about what you said, but in the meantime I'd like to know if we can perhaps talk again sometime?'

Andrew thought about this. The woman was strange, and some part of him wanted to find out more about her. Something strange had happened today, his mind was screaming it at him all the time, but he couldn't quite figure it out. He needed time on his own, time to think about his situation. Things weren't good, but at least she looked ready to believe his story about Caroline.

'Ok, I'll think about it and maybe I'll talk to you again,' he stood up and brushed grass from the seat of his pants. Shelly also stood up, giving Andrew time to have a good look at her. The part of his mind that was bothered by her screamed at him again, but still he couldn't grasp what had happened that frightened him.

'For such a pretty girl you pack quite a punch,' he said as they walked to the edge of the park.

'Sorry about that, I just wanted to get your attention.'

'It worked,' said Andrew, and laughed.

Chapter 4

Jason unlocked the door and carefully pulled it open. The man and woman standing in the hallway were both dressed smartly for the occasion. He smiled as if uncertain of himself and extended a hesitant hand. Outside the door the man smiled an overconfident smile. For every bit of uncertainty Jason showed, his smile crept wider. His prey was skittish, it needed to be reassured.

'Good afternoon,' said Jason, adding the insecurity of his body language to his voice.

'Good afternoon, Jason, I am Gregory,' the man introduced himself, shaking Jason's hand. Jason felt the grip grow tighter than was necessary. The man would be at his ease, he would know he had a solid sale coming. Jason shifted his eyes to the woman by the man's side, letting his eyes drift down to where she was showing more cleavage than any respectable salesperson would have dared.

'This is my wife and partner, Lucinda,' the big man spoke easily, as if he'd rehearsed his introduction in the mirror at least a thousand times.

'How do you do?' Lucinda smiled and shook his hand. Her touch was silky smooth, graceful and sweet as honey. Jason held onto her hand for a second longer than was needed, then pulled back. It was good. She would have felt his want for her, his need to hold her hand and feel her touch. She would be positive, at her ease.

He took a step back into the apartment and held the door open for them. 'Please come in,' he was looking down and bowing his head, a gesture of trust, but already that

other part of him was waking up, and he saw the knowing glance being exchanged by the two visitors.

They had prepared well for the occasion. The man had not a trace of aftershave to take attention away from his wife, and his wife carried a scent that spoke of forbidden pleasures. Jason closed the door softly behind them and followed them into the lounge.

'Have a seat,' he indicated the double couch and stepped smartly past them to take his own seat opposite the coffee table.

'What a wonderful view,' said the woman, casting her eyes over Jason's shoulder to look out of the window. Jason smiled at the compliment, knowing she was lying. From where she stood she would only just be able to see the horizon, but it was her job to give a compliment. He waited patiently for them to get comfortable on the couch and stole a sideways glance at the suspended pendulum ball on the table. If he listened with that other part, the dreaming self, he could hear the screams of the demon he had locked in the ball. She was hungry, and she was letting him know about it.

The man had pulled a file from his briefcase and opened it up on his knees, paging through the loose pieces of paper inside.

'So you're thinking about life insurance?' said Gregory, looking up at Jason and trying to find his eyes. Jason saw the move coming and dropped his eyes to the folder instead. He didn't want the man to see his eyes. If Gregory recognized him before he could open the gate to the other side he might turn nasty, and that would complicate things.

'Yes,' he answered simply and looked at the woman, keeping his eyes carefully just above her eyes, looking at her hair.

Jason was concentrating. Bringing both of them here had been risky, but now the moment of truth had come. He searched his mind for the line, found it and moved closer in his sleep. He had to take them over at exactly the right moment, or one of them would stay on the wrong side.

The man saw his discomfort and pulled back his approach a bit. Here was a client who would sign the documents, but whom needed to be handled with care. Jason felt Gregory pull back and waited for him to take a quick and again knowingly look at his wife, and made the switch, the *shift*.

Lucinda glanced up quickly, but Jason kept his face straight. She had noticed something happening but she wouldn't know what it was, and he was safe now. And now he was looking directly into her eyes, willing her to recognize him. He saw only confusion there. She brought her hand up and took Gregory by the arm. Gregory turned and saw the look on her face and frowned. She wasn't supposed to look confused, it would disconcert the customer and was a sure way of losing a deal. Only when she flicked her eyes towards Jason did he slowly look around.

He's missed it completely, thought Jason. Gregory looked at him for a second and then looked back at his wife, not knowing what she was trying to tell him. Lucinda only looked down and smoothed her hands over her dress, not knowing what had made her feel uncomfortable. Gregory pulled a paper from the file on his lap and held it out to Jason.

'This is our standard life insurance policy,' he said and smiled his most charming smile.

Jason didn't move to take the paper. Instead he folded his arms and smiled back at Gregory.

'I was not actually thinking of life insurance for myself,' he said.

'Oh? Is this for someone in your family?' asked Gregory.

‘No, I was actually thinking of life insurance for you.’

Gregory looked at his wife, but the confusion he saw in her face was only a mirror of his own feelings. He looked back at Jason, who had unfolded his arms and was busy pulling his finger along the stand of the pendulum on the table next to him. Something about the man was amiss, and Gregory didn’t feel like playing games with him.

‘Excuse me?’ It was all he could get out, and he felt lame for it, but the man had caught him by surprise.

‘You’re going to be needing life insurance yourself soon,’ said Jason and ran his thumb over the pendulum, moved his hand closer to the ball and almost flicked it, but restrained himself. He didn’t want her to be too angry, or the show would be over all too soon.

On the couch Gregory had pulled himself upright.

‘Look Jason, my wife and I, we are professional people. We like a joke as much as the next person, but I’m just not catching yours, and if you aren’t going to be forthcoming, I’m afraid we’ll just have to leave,’ he closed the folder on his lap to emphasize his words.

‘You can’t leave now, Gregory,’ said Jason in a friendly voice, giving the ball of the pendulum a slight nudge with his finger. He saw Gregory’s eyes swivel to the ball and waited for the ball to reach its topmost curve, then stopped it. Once again the ball was hanging in mid-air, and now he had the two exactly where he wanted them. They were in his space, in his time and in his dream.

‘Let’s go,’ said Gregory and pushed the folder back into his briefcase. Without waiting for Lucinda to answer him he took his wife by the hand and stood up, pulling her up after him. On the couch opposite him Jason stayed seated, wondering how long the man would take to realize the situation he was in.

Jason was enjoying this. Lucinda had already realized something was wrong, but Gregory was going to have to have it thrust in his face. The ball was still hanging in the air, and the man hadn’t even noticed something strange was going on. He waited for them to turn their backs on him and enter the short entry hall that led to his front door before making the last and final shift. Moments later Gregory had pulled the front door open and almost stepped outside.

Gregory looked down. The hallway outside was still there, but now a dark abyss enclosed everything. He could see everything where it had been when he’d come here not ten minutes ago, but nothing was solid anymore. If he stepped onto the landing outside he would fall, and there was nothing to catch him. Black reality awaited him, and with the vision came the realization.

The good had been sucked out of the world. What now lay before him was the skeleton of evil left when everything else was ripped out. It was cold hatred, it was huge and it was screaming at him. He backed away from the door a step, feeling his wife’s hand in his pulling him back. She was calling to him, but in this place her words were hollow, empty. He looked down at their entwined fingers, and now the death that washed around outside the door was there too.

‘Why don’t you two come back and have a seat,’ said Jason, his voice as cold as the air outside.

Gregory swung the door shut, wanting to block the vision of the dead world from his eyes, but the door was gone. Where the door had been was just a black void, an untouchable and unthinkable nothingness that called to him with cold and hateful voices. He backed away further and turned around, to where Jason was still sitting in his chair.

‘What the hell is going on here?’ he heard himself say, but before the words were out another mystery had added itself to his newfound world. Somewhere the soft crackling of distant lightning and thunder had started to seep through, and Gregory could feel the air around him burn. This wasn’t right, the lightning was far off, yet it was here in the room with him. He looked around and tried to find its source, but it kept itself hidden. Slowly and reluctantly he walked back to the room, and now it was Jason who was confident.

‘How do you like the view now?’ he asked, looking at Lucinda and then over his shoulder. ‘Have a closer look, I’m sure you’ll find it most interesting,’ his voice held a cold menace, a threat of hidden misery that would unfurl dark claws of anger if they as much as thought of disobeying him.

Gregory tried to stop his legs from walking, but then he was standing at the window and looking down, and what he was looking down at was nothing, nothing except mists swirling in fathomless darkness, the layers of time itself stripped from the land. He pulled his eyes away and looked at Lucinda, but she was no longer the wife he knew.

He gaped. She was young again, she was the young princess he had met at school, who had taken his heart in her hands, who had shown him the secrets. Before her there had only been anger, and hate and a need to rule those around him. But with her, and with her power, they had been unstoppable. She had taught him how to win not just the fight, but the power over those he had so hated. He had wanted power, and with her by his side he had found all the power he needed.

Now she was young again, but she was the blackness that reigned outside, a person who existed in evil only. Her eyes were blue, but they held the promise of the cold grey outside. Without saying a word they turned to confront Jason, but there was another *shift*, and the room was gone.

‘Like my little trick?’ said Jason, smiling at them from where he sat.

Gregory thought for only a moment and lunged towards Jason, but his movements were slow, as if moving underwater, and the madman who had lured them here stayed just out of his reach.

‘Stop fighting him,’ said Lucinda, laying a hand on Gregory’s shoulder. ‘Let’s hear what he has to say.’

Gregory looked at her furiously, but stopped fighting the air around him and looked at Jason expectantly.

‘Ok, Jason, why don’t you tell us what’s going on?’ He was using his most sarcastic voice, the voice he kept in reserve for when people particularly pissed him off. It had no effect on the man sitting opposite him.

‘Call me Argelon,’ the dream priest said, and now a faint flicker of a memory tried to surface in Gregory’s mind. ‘The two of us met many years ago, and I’m disappointed you don’t recall me.’

Gregory tried, and then the memory did surface. He was back in school, and some skinny kid with pimples and freckles mixed like a bad salad had looked at his girlfriend. The girlfriend wasn’t Lucinda, she’d only come later. Before Lucinda, Gregory had known only one way of telling people he was angry with them, and that had been with his fists. Now he remembered the boy, remembered how his fist had hammered into the side of the boy’s head, remembered the satisfaction he’d felt when asserting his authority.

‘It’s time to settle some old scores, Gregory.’

The chair on which Argelon had been sitting had disappeared, and now he was drifting in a black void.

'What's going on?' the question came from Lucinda, and Argelon could feel Jason's memory of how dangerous this woman was.

'Let me explain by asking you a couple of questions,' said Argelon. 'How did you get to this building?'

The man and woman looked at each other for some time before Lucinda slowly shook her head. 'I can't remember,' she said.

'How did you know I wanted life insurance?' asked Argelon without giving them time to think further. Again they shared a glance between them, and again Lucinda shook her head.

'The answer is that you didn't,' said Argelon, smiling at the look of confusion his remark brought to their faces. 'You two aren't here at all. You're back in your beds, sleeping in the middle of the night. I am the dream priest, and as Gregory here has just remembered, I'm pissed off with him. You two are here because you came at my command, because I've got an old score to settle.'

Gregory could hear the crackle of lightning again. It was somewhere in this room, and the sound of it scared him. Now that this mad monster had told him about the dream he recognized it as the truth. He knew he was dreaming, but there was nothing he could do to wake up. He tried to compose himself, but found thinking in this dream-state difficult.

'You're not seriously still thinking about that old incident, are you?' He couldn't believe it, but before he could think any further his attention was caught by something else. The pendulum the man had toyed with earlier was still there, the ball still hanging in mid-air. As Gregory watched, the frame and wire rope grew translucent and faded into the night which hung around him, until only the silver ball remained.

'You see, Gregory, I *am* still thinking about that incident, because in here, in the dream state, that incident is just about to happen. It is also happening at the moment, and it just happened a moment ago. For me, that incident is an on-going business, and until I put it to rest it will torment me, and I won't be able to get on with my dreams,' Argelon was sounding dangerous now, anger that had distilled for a long time was boiling up in his voice.

Gregory looked at Lucinda. She had taught him how to handle situations like these, taught him how to take control, but what he saw in her now was a betrayal. In her eyes he saw her desperately searching for the control which she so effortlessly wielded, but she was searching it out for her own will only. Her eyes told Gregory of the hell to which she would damn him if it would get her out of here, of the love that had never existed between them, and now Gregory understood something else as well.

She had never taught him how to control. Since the day they had met she had merely controlled him, pulling the strings that needed pulling to get her way. Her touch on his skin had been the motion of the puppeteer, gently yet purposefully moving him around in her world. Now she had cut the ropes and he was falling, no longer under her control, no longer under any control.

She pulled her hand out of his, and already he could feel her searching for the dream priest's hand, but Gregory knew it was a wrong move. The dream priest was stronger than she was, and if he took her hand she would be lost. He let her go, knowing he had lost her forever.

'I've got a little surprise for you, Gregory,' said Argelon, and now the ball by his side was growing. Gregory looked at the ball and saw it double in size, but it wasn't getting bigger. Instead he was moving towards the ball as if from a great distance, and now the

sound of the lightning and thunder was growing. The ball was now silver and now flame, and then it was a ball of lightning, and he was moving, being dragged to the ball.

‘What is that thing?’ Lucinda now stood by Argelon’s side, already under his control.

‘Her name is Succubus,’ answered Argelon. ‘She’s a bit peeved because I’ve captured her, and I haven’t fed her for a couple of days.’

In the cage of lightning the woman was drifting on soft darkness. Lucinda saw the mesmerized look on Gregory’s face.

‘Why don’t you give her some food?’ she asked.

Lucinda was beautiful, but nothing she had ever seen could compare to the picture of naked beauty that drifted in the cage. The woman was almost not there, drifting on the edge of reality, where only imagination could reach her, and it was with his imagination that Gregory was now searching for her, wanting her and needing her.

‘I’m about to feed her,’ said Argelon, placing his hand on Lucinda’s shoulder. ‘That is why I brought you two here.’

Gregory didn’t hear him, couldn’t hear him. He was drifting free outside the cage, but captured by the beauty of his imagination.

‘What does she eat?’ asked Lucinda, turning her eyes towards Argelon.

‘Watch,’ he answered and let go of Gregory. He’d kept the man in his power up to now, but now it was time.

Gregory drifted to the cage. He looked around at Argelon and Lucinda hanging side by side in the darkness, and drifted away from them. They could keep each other, he would join the woman in the cage. If Jason wanted to keep him prisoner it was fine, he was going to be a prisoner and he was going to be in the same cage as this woman and he would stay there. He neared the blue lightning and now it thundered into him, but he was safe. He could get in, because the dream priest wanted him in there and the lightning wouldn’t hurt him.

Gregory hesitated only a moment, and then he’d passed the blue streaks of death that held the woman. He turned his eyes towards her, and now that he was inside the cage he could see her beauty more clearly, could see the smoothness of her skin and feel the sweetness of her breath.

She was touching him, touching him like he’d never been touched before, and then her tongue was in his mouth and his eyes were closed. Her hands moved over him, caressing and caring, soothing him, taking his thoughts away to another land, the land of dreams where boundaries did not exist, and the two of them were going to be as one.

The woman turned her head towards Argelon and winked at him. And the dream *shifted*.

Gregory stopped, suddenly unsure of himself. A moment ago the woman had skin as smooth as silver moonlight, but now he could feel large hard patches under that skin, his fingers tracing the outlines of scales, as if the skin was only something drawn over a rough surface. Her soft touch became hard as claws, and the nails she had drawn over his skin were now sinking in, burning into his skin and drawing blood. And then she smiled. The smile didn’t stop, it curled around her face and opened a mouth with razor sharp teeth, and the stench that came from the mouth told Gregory of death and hate and damnation, and then she was coming for him.

Her claws gripped him by the throat, and the pain was instantaneous. He tried to scream, but a talon had pierced his throat and blocked off his airway, and he was

suffocating, his mind pleading for air and his soul pleading for mercy, and in front of his eyes that mouth was opening.

He saw the thing's head snap back, and then the teeth were coming for him, and sinking into him, ripping into the deepest parts of him that he didn't know existed. She was biting him, but she was biting through him to where his soul was, wrenching and tearing it loose and then she ripped his soul out, and she was devouring him.