

## CHAPTER 60

*Alerted by her father to the true dangers of Tom's stop-motion hobby (and its subliminal ties to the demon Fau'Charoth), Julie is forced to confront Tom, after a nocturnal rampage of his creature is witnessed at the high school.*

It was near six-thirty in the evening by the time Julie had the courage to ride her bike over to Tom's house. She wasn't sure what she expected to find. When he didn't show up for classes again, she grew worried. Nobody picked up when she called.

What her father revealed on the phone left her feeling untethered to reality. She had never allowed much reflection on the dark side of things. Life had certainly delivered its share of misfortune—her father's accident, the breakup of her family, the harassment of her peers—but she had refused to let it take root in her philosophies. If you searched for the evils of the world, you would find them—and worse, they would find *you*. She kept a vanguard against these dark thoughts, maintaining faith in a benevolent universe.

Evil could never prevail in an innocent heart, or so she wanted to believe.

But she was wrong. Innocence was not a panacea to wickedness, and even the noblest of souls could become a nest for the sinister. This was the claim her father was

When she pulled into his driveway, she noticed the garage door was open and empty. His mother was probably out again, having gone on parental AWOL for another evening. Julie understood now how neglected Tom must feel by her, and how disastrous that neglect may prove to be. It made her indignant, knowing that much of the trouble might have been avoided if Tom had at least one attentive parent.

She rang his doorbell and waited. Tom appeared at the door, surprised to see her. “Julie. Hi.” He was absolutely haggard. His hair was an oily mat with unruly, clumping strands, and his clothes were wrinkled. He looked like he’d just risen from bed, but by the circles under his eyes she suspected he hadn’t really slept in days.

She stepped into the doorway and offered a kiss, which glanced off his cheek.

“Hi. I tried to call.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Are you okay? You look—”

“I’m still not feeling too well. It must be the flu. Come in. It’s kind of chilly outside.”

“Chilly?” It was actually a warm evening. Julie noticed he was wearing a thick hooded sweat jacket over a flannel shirt, and there appeared to be another sweatshirt below that. She herself was sweating in a T-shirt and denim jacket.

They walked through the house. The living room was dimly lit. Tom offered her a drink, which she passed on. “But take something for yourself. You need plenty of

“Fever?” He looked at her sidelong. “I don’t have a fever. I’m freezing.” He tucked his hands into his sweat pockets. Julie was seriously growing concerned. Was it simply the flu, or could it be something worse?

“Well, you should stay in bed. Take an aspirin. I’ll cook some soup for you.”

“Thanks. I’m not hungry, and I’ll be fine. Just need some rest.” He shifted the topic. “What’s happening in school?”

“It’s crazy. Did you hear about the stage?”

He glanced away, distracted. “Stage?”

“Someone trashed the auditorium!” Julie reported. “They had to cancel the play! Everything was destroyed, including the set and the new lighting console we worked so hard to purchase. Two kids said they saw a ‘monster’.”

His eyes lit up, but he struggled to appear nonchalant. “Really? A ‘monster,’ huh? I thought mine were the only monsters in this town.”

Julie followed Tom into his bedroom. “It was in all the papers. Some of them are even calling it a—” Her eyes widened as though she had boarded an alien spacecraft.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed.

The movie set, which stood above his two bureaus on a large plank of plywood, had grown like a fungus, extending now to much of the back wall. His twisted rows of aluminum foil trees had become a forest, with branches reaching beyond the painted backdrop. The magenta sky had spirals of pink and ominous clouds of charcoal gray

and blue-green lichen. It was as if the lunatic dreams of madmen had gathered together to form a universe.

“You’ve been busy,” she said with astonishment.

“Yeah,” he shrugged. “I added a little bit every day, and it just kinda *grew*. I told you I was inspired.”

“Inspired?”

Julie glanced around, a chill clutching her spine. And she noticed something else as well.

It *was* cold in this room. The temperature seemed to have dropped as much as ten degrees since they left the hallway. She reflexively tugged at the corners of her jacket to close it.

The camera stood in a corner on its tripod. The shelves above his desk were stocked with his animation models, mostly dragons, dinosaurs, and grotesque, misbegotten characters with scales and horns. Despite their ugliness, Julie had always thought of them as whimsical or cute, an extension of how she felt for Tom. But now she thought they were horrible, distorted creatures of the psyche, and her heart broke, thinking of the self-aborrence that one must feel to identify with them. She was beginning to understand for the first time the world Tom lived in—a manufactured world that served as both a sanctuary and a prison. These creatures were his own mirror image, each one a reflection of some aspect of his soul. And none of them were kind.

“Boy,” she remarked tentatively, recalling Danny’s description of the creature and how it paralleled the news reports. “He sure looks real, doesn’t he?” Her hand reached out for it.

“DON’T TOUCH IT!” Tom shouted.

Julie snatched her hand back in alarm. “Sorry.”

He apologized. “It’s just that . . . I’m in the middle of a shot.”

A projector was set up on a small table, directed onto the wall above his bed. A roll of film was already threaded. “I got more rushes back today,” he said with artistic pride. “Would you like to see them?”

Julie nodded, still unnerved by his extreme reaction. He switched on the projector. The plastic super-8 cartridge began to rotate on its spindle. “It’s just a test, but I think I got some great moves in it.”

He turned the lights off, and the room filled with darkness, except for the light of the projector. The bright flash on Tom’s wall was replaced with glimpses of his eerie world. The miniature mountains and crushed foil trees became a phantasmagoric vista as the camera panned through the landscape.

Julie sat on the edge of his bed, inches away from the Fau’Charoth model. She could feel its gaze on her, and she glanced back at the rubber creature nervously. Yellow-gold eyes peered out from beneath its horned brows. The snout bore a frozen grimace of teeth. Julie felt a shiver, as though the model was peering into her soul. She

On screen, the puppet's animated image appeared in *life*. The demon fluttered down, the great bat-wings flailing. It dropped to all fours and then slowly erected itself. It was uncannily realistic, his best work thus far. The animation was smoother than his previous efforts, without the jarring stop-motion strobe of some of his earlier works. In a few short weeks, Tom had mastered the craft and could certainly rival any of the professionals currently at work in the field. Julie would have been delighted with him, if she wasn't so frightened.

Fau'Charoth took a few steps and made a quick turn to face the lens, its tail swooshing in a sinuous curve. Julie recognized its movements. They were similar to the Ymir, Harryhausen's space monster, but even more so they resembled Tom's *impersonation* of that creature. The way it twisted its torso and arched its back. The way the neck darted forward. Julie was looking at an animated doppelganger of Tom DeFrank!

She remembered the unrestrained enthusiasm he expressed when he described animating: how for that brief time Tom *became* his fantasy creatures, stepping into their bodies and moving about. He said he dreamed about it, as though his greatest wish was to shed his pitiful human form and lumber like a beast. She recalled the reports from school of the "monster with wings," rampaging through the auditorium, taking vengeance on the stage. Julie watched the image on the screen, and wondered: *Has he found a way?*

The animated Fau'Charoth continued to skulk through its nightmare world. On

about, unable to look at the screen anymore. When she could no longer take it, she stood up hastily and stepped away from the puppet.

“Turn it off,” she gasped.

“Julie?”

“Please! Will you just turn it off?”

Crestfallen, Tom switched off the projector. The movie demon was banished, and she sat in the dark while he reached for the room lights.

“What’s wrong?” Tom inquired.

Julie had to gather her thoughts, taking a deep breath. “What *was* that?”

Tom looked puzzled. “What’s what?”

“That!” She pointed to the blank wall dumbly.

He shrugged. “It’s just my animation.”

She shook her head, dread consuming her. “No. There’s something else. Something else going on, and you’re not telling me.”

They exchanged a penetrating stare, and Tom’s denial began to erode. He slowly paced about the room, as though struggling to conceive an explanation. “Okay. Okay . . . you’re right. There *is*. I was planning to tell you, but I wasn’t sure of it at first. I thought I was going crazy, and I didn’t want to scare you away.”

Julie sat down, trying to relax. Confronting him was not the way to go about this. She needed to gain his trust. Her eyes softened as she looked at the boy. “You won’t

model. I thought they were just dreams. But they're *real*! It's . . . it's like it's *me*, but it isn't, somehow. At night, I go places, and I become this creature. It's just so amazing. Like having every one of your greatest wishes realized. Remember the dragon, Julie? I become a dragon!"

His eyes expressed a zeal that was vaguely familiar, and she realized it was the look in her father's eyes when he began his painting, the fervor of an explorer who had discovered a new continent.

"I wish you could be there with me! You get this incredible feeling of power! It's an emotional rush like nothing you can imagine! So invigorating. It's the most supremely satisfying thing I've ever felt in my life."

She listened uncomfortably. It confirmed her father's wildest and most absurd fears. But she refused to accept it. It was utter lunacy! "Tom . . . are you saying you're some kind of *werewolf*?"

"A werewolf?" Tom gawked in astonishment as though the very term brought his ravings into check. "No! I don't transform into some hairy monster or anything. I dream about Fau'Charoth, and in my dreams, somehow, I become him. For real!"

Julie wore an incredulous smile as though questioning her own sanity. She rose to her feet, her face awash with trepidation. "Okay, you *are* scaring me now."

He opened his arms to reassure her, and reached out. She flinched fearfully, and Tom withdrew. A crushed look filled his eyes, and he pleaded softly to her. "Julie . . .

“*Can* you?”

“Yes. I can.”

“Tom. Listen to yourself. What about last night? The stage . . . those boys. Did you control *that*?”

Tom shrugged self-consciously. “I got a little carried away. It didn’t hurt them. Just scared them a little. That’s all. And that stupid play! I mean, they deserved it, right? For what they did to you.”

She gazed at him in confusion, and then it occurred to her: “You did that for *me*?”

He looked to the floor, shielding guilt. “I got angry . . . for your sake.”

Julie softened her voice, conscious of her indignation. The last thing she wanted to do was stand in judgment of him. The boy needed help, and as her father pointed out, he needed to *ask for it*. She stepped up to him and gently took one of his hands “Tom. My dad thinks—”

His eyes sharpened, suddenly defensive. “Your *dad*? What does he have to do with this?”

“My dad thinks . . . you might be possessed by a demon.”

The insinuation hit like an uppercut. “*What*?” She could see the betrayed look in his eyes. Tom gazed at her a moment, deeply smitten. He shook his head rigorously.

“No . . . no. Not you too.”

“Tom, sweetie, look at me,” she pleaded, trying to recapture his eyes. “He’s

“How dare he!”

“Tom—”

“Tell him to mind his own business. I can handle it.”

“Tom . . . we’ve been to the tunnel.”

Tom looked at her, stunned.

“We were there,” she revealed. “We saw everything. Danny told me about the night you got lost in it. How you came out chanting spells.”

“I wasn’t chanting—Dan’s got a big mouth!”

“Why didn’t *you* tell me about it?”

“I don’t know why. I wanted to . . . but I couldn’t.”

“You *couldn’t*?” She gazed at him firmly. “Tom . . . Can’t you see? Whatever this thing is, you’re not in control of it.”

“*No* . . . yes I am!”

“It’s controlling you! You told me you never want anything to control your life. That’s why you make puppets, remember? Well now *you’re* the puppet!”

It was a clever twist of his philosophy, and she hoped it would penetrate.

But his behavior was that of a junkie defending his habit. “No! I created it! *I’m* the puppet master!”

“You have to stop animating. You don’t know what you’re doing. This demon was summoned through a blood ritual. And you were part of it.”

the truth. When Tornau escaped, your parents were terrified that he might come back for you, so the police concealed your name from the records.”

“Tornau—what? Julie! You’re babbling.”

“Remember the Tornau cult? The big raid at the farm when they almost killed the baby? Tom . . . that was *you*. You were the baby the cult tried to sacrifice.”

Tom looked at her as though she had spoken in tongues. He put a hand to the back of his head in a slow labored movement. “*Huh?* Wait. That’s not possible.”

“Think about it. The ‘incident’ your parents moved away from? It wasn’t your grandparents. Jacob Tornau abducted you as a child. Six people were murdered as part of that ritual, and they were going to kill you too, but this one woman—her name was Sarah Halloway—she felt sorry for you because you were only a baby, and she didn’t want you to die. So she informed the sheriff. But the cult escaped to the tunnel and performed the final blood rite, using *Sarah* instead of the baby. That painting on my father’s wall, it’s *her*! She died to save you, Tom. But this demon survived. And it attached itself to you.”

He began to pace like an angry, overwhelmed tiger. “This is crazy!”

“Is it? Look at everything that’s happening. This monster. That spell—”

“What about it?!” he shouted and then rubbed his forehead, trying to regain his composure. It was too much for him to absorb. “Look, Julie, I don’t know what your father’s been smoking in that haunted castle of his, but I don’t know anything about

“I’m just an animator. *This* is what I do.” He gestured about his room, including the set and the models in an all encompassing sweep. “It’s who I *am*. I thought you understood that. I thought if *anyone* could understand, *you* could. Now you want me to give it all up because your dad has some wacko notions about possession?! How dare he judge me like that! This is all I got, Julie! It’s all I got in the world, and if you don’t like it, you can both *go to Hell!*”

Julie gasped as though she’d been slammed in the stomach. A shadow fell between them. He stood away, arms folded defensively, unable to look at her. He had hurt her in ways he could never comprehend, but he was at that moment devastated himself.

“Tom . . . you don’t—”

“I think you should go now.”

The words contained such finality that she felt her heart shatter. She gazed at him, struggling to find a way to close the chasm that had formed between them. He continued to stare into space, a million light years away. Julie watched him quietly, awaiting some retractile indication from him. But nothing came.

“Tom . . . please.”

“Go! Go, before I *turn into a monster!*”

Julie fled from his room and ran down the steps from the living room to the main entrance.

despair the great irony: that both the men she loved dearest in life had been taken from her by mysterious forces from beyond.

Tom stood in silence, his head bowed heavily. He was in a stupor; barely comprehending that Julie was gone. One brief, angry exchange of words had obliterated their relationship, and a black hole of despair now formed in his chest. In a flash, he had plunged into a depth never before reached in his young life.

*How could this happen?*

He remembered her startling insinuation. It pummeled him completely out of his senses. And the way she cringed from his touch. The look of fear in her face that said “You are different. You are disturbed.” All through his life, he saw that reaction in people’s eyes. Friends keeping their distance. Relatives privately sharing “heartfelt” concerns with his mom. Counselors, psychologists, priests. A glance at his sketchbook was to them a glimpse into a troubled mind. He was a bad seed, tinged by the darkness. In need of salvation. He recalled the taunts and accusations from school. Monster-Boy. DeFrankenstein. Always it pushed him away, making him the misfit. The exile. Was there something wrong with him that people picked up on? A kernel of evil in his soul? He always wondered if any of it was true.

Now he knew for certain that—yes—there was something different and vile about him. He was tainted by the diabolical. Even as an infant, he had been selected by the

Was it true? Was he really that child, stolen and nearly killed in sacrifice? If so, did he have any recollection of it at all? Did a trace of cruel hands and dark robed figures lurk somewhere in his subconscious? And how did it affect him? Was there a blemish on him even now, a twin-pointed crease on his palm, a triple-six birthmark on his scalp? Maybe this was why his father left, and his mother withdrew emotionally. They sensed the change and no longer wanted any part of him!

Tears jumped to his eyes. He was a monster! An abomination!

And yet a woman died to save him.

This was the bitterest irony of all. Cut off from his parents' affections, he'd always felt undeserving of love. Yet this poor woman, this Sarah Halloway, deemed him worthy of rescue and was slain for it. He remembered the glowing portrait in Parrish's study, the mournful, familiar face that seemed to call to him from across time.

*She died to save him!*

Now he made allegiance with the very machinations from which she had spared him. He looked over to the model on his tabletop, and his vision blurred. No wonder it had bound to him. They were siblings of a sort. Demons summoned and rejected, alone in the feckless void of reality.

"Is that what we are?" he asked it aloud.

The puppet seemed small and innocuous, a construct of rubber and metal.

He heard the front door to the house open and shut.

“Julie!” He ran out of his room, hoping to catch her before she was gone, possibly forever. He needed her. He couldn’t continue without her.

Far down the street, she was already peddling away on her bike. “Julie!” he called out to her, but she was long out of earshot.

“Julie, PLEASE!” He sprinted in a great effort to catch up to her. But it was too late. She had turned off the side road and was gone. He stood alone in the dark empty street. Far-off, he could scarcely make out the rotating beacon of the “eye of the dragon,” traversing the night sky like a memorial candle for his dying love.

One last time, he shouted her name, but it was lost beneath all the barking.

Dogs were barking. Everywhere.

## CHAPTER 61

Julie lay facedown in her bed, and she could feel the dampness of her tears on the pillow. She drifted in and out of sleep, the heavy sadness like an anvil on her heart. The quiet splashes of the lake and the ticking of her nearby clock filled the silence. She felt the subtle rhythms of her body, the intake of air into her lungs, and the soft patter of her heart. Suddenly, as pinpricks of fear stabbed at her, she was alert. Her face and arms felt exposed above the bed sheet. The temperature in the room dropped to an unseasonable chill, and she imagined her breath as a white cloud of vapor. Her eyes cracked open, blinking through the darkness, because she fearfully realized *she was not alone!*

*Fau'Charoth hovered above the girl as an ethereal specter. It could smell the*

*linger as little more than a conscious mist. It peered at the girl with perplexing fascination as it absorbed the energies of its host, miles away.*

*There she was, the mysterious presence that inspired so much anxiousness and desire. As it looked down at her, a terrible longing filled its being, a voracious hunger for emotional essence. Something was being withheld, and it caused the demon's host immense pain. Anguish filled it like a viral transmission. It felt empty, a vacuous hole, and the demon glared at the girl, confused in its primordial mind. For here was the source of the pain, and yet here the cure.*

*The girl stirred, and Fau'Charoth's ears pricked up like a dog. It listened to her breathing as its jaws lolled insatiably. She was food for the taking, completely vulnerable. The demon had eaten girl flesh before. Over the centuries, it had been conjured frequently with the ritual sacrifice of young women. Succored by their life forces, it then feasted on their meat like a true carnivore. Was it not the intention of its host that it do the same with this one? Was she not a morsel to sate its palate? It was tempted to take on its dense physical shape and spring upon her with tooth and claw, rending her to pieces. Its jaws would reduce her savory form to gristle, and the warm blood would flow down its gullet in delicious streams. She was an elixir waiting to be drunk, a banquet that would fill the coffers of its being and end the terrible emptiness that now plagued it.*

*But something prevented it. Somehow, it understood that to do so would only*

*A tingling occurred throughout its ætheric shroud. On an astral-molecular level, the demon's vibrations were raised, a feeling so strange and mystifying that the ghost creature wavered in uncertainty. Fearful of these new and beguiling sensations, it fled the room in a fury.*

Julie sat up abruptly with a shout. She reached for her night lamp, and with a snap of the key, the room was flooded with light. Her eyes darted about, shaking with fear, as every shadowy corner revealed its contents to her. But she could find nothing of the intruding presence. The room was empty.

A few deep breaths brought her out of panic. Julie lay back in bed, drawing her knees up under the covers, where she clutched herself in a fetal position, and cried.

*Fau'Charoth soared across the landscape, angry and driven. It made frantic and delirious spins through the air, as though to rid itself of a pestilence. The shift in its vibration caused it to experience things unknown ever to a demon of its kind. This new essence was like a cancer, attacking the very fabric of its composition, transforming it, molecule by molecule, into something new. Fau'Charoth was evolving. Its mind had been that of a wild beast, savage and untamed, without the capacity to distinguish complex emotions. But that was changing.*

*Rage! Lust! Hunger! These were sensations with which it was well acquainted.*

*energy of purer substance, rich and more potent, more vital, capable of overwhelming ecstasies and devastating torment.*

*Here was love and anguish and despair.*

*Fau'Charoth lacked the intellect to define them. A poet might take them to task, but not an elemental creature, devoid of an advanced spirit. It was composed of emotional essence. Feeling and action were the same to it, and so it was compelled to obey the dictates of its heart, even as confined vapors, ignited, were compelled to explode.*

*The demon flapped its gigantic wings in frenzy, and flew off to the horizon, where a beam of light suddenly gave meaning to its rage.*

A small airplane made its way to the landing field, guided to the runway by the rotating beacon. The pilot, Dick Livingston, was finishing his last flight for the day. Having shuttled three chatty passengers to Newark, he was returning now for the third and final time. The cabin was empty, and he savored the quiet. Three such trips in one day were an overload. In the distance, the main terminal of Sullivan County Airport was a welcome sight. Livingston tapped his microphone once and transmitted to the tower.

“Hello Sullivan County, this is Fletcher Seagull ten-four bravo, making final approach. Over.” He clicked a switch on the console, preparing for descent.

the night shift. Dick had met her twice, passing through the terminal, and it put a pretty face to the voice. Since then, she'd become his friend on the airwaves. The thought of her guiding him safely to the runway made his evening transports that much more endurable. He fancied one day asking her to dinner, but for now he'd settle for coffee and a doughnut. "Save me a cup of the good stuff. I'm coming in for the last time, tonight."

"Roger that, Dick. I break at midnight."

He sensed an invitation in her voice, feeling suddenly bold. "How's about meeting me in the commissary, and—"

*Crash!*

The airplane was violently struck on the wing, causing the entire craft to dip and jolt to the left. "HOLY—" Dick fought at the controls as something large and dark swooped past the cockpit window.

"Come again, Dick?"

"Something just winged me!"

"*What?*"

"Check your radar!"

"I'm checking. There's noth—wait, there *is* something. Too small for a craft."

"I see it dead ahead."

He craned his neck to follow the dark shape, which soared off toward the

“Lilah?” His voice was excited.

Silence.

“Lilah, are you there?”

“We still have it on radar. Can you still see it, Dick?”

“No. It’s gone.”

Whatever it was, it was out of sight, and Dick furrowed his brows curiously. In all his years as a pilot, first for the navy and finally as a privateer, he had never once reported a UFO. Often he wished to, just to break the routine of air travel. Most reports described bright lights, saucer shapes, or luminous cylindrical objects and could usually be explained as weather balloons or the planet Venus. But what could he call this? A giant bat? Pterodactyl?

He puzzled, listening to expectant static on the cab speaker, until he noticed the gauges on his panel. The plane was quickly losing altitude.

“What the hell—”

Lilah’s voice jolted him. “Dick, you’re descending too rapidly! Elevate to 1,601.”

He grabbed for the controls as the runway appeared out of the clouds, racing toward him from below. The wing had apparently been severely crippled by this *thing*, and he was drifting uncontrollably in flight.

“Uhhh . . . Lilah? I’m having trouble here.”

But he knew he was anything but *fine*. The air currents against his wings made an uncharacteristic wailing sound, like banshees heralding his death. This would be the landing of his life, if he survived. He gripped the controls fiercely.

“Clear the runway! I’m coming down!” Then he caught sight of the *thing* again. “There it is! It’s heading for the hangar!”

It was way too big to be a bird. Not large enough to be another plane. It was black, and he caught a glimpse of leathery wings. Landing lights were blotted out by its passage as the great winged object glided to the earth. As it cleared the runway, it veered off to the side of the building. Then it disappeared.

Down below, airport workers were rushing out of the terminal to the landing strip. They watched as the small craft descended rapidly toward the tarmac. One of its wings was torn, offsetting the wind drift. Dick had managed to direct the plane back to the runway and was struggling now to steer clear of the parked aircraft and utility buildings.

Bob O’Connell, the airfield supervisor, was shouting orders into a walkie-talkie, motioning people into position.

Workers held their breaths as the plane dove for the runway. Its wheels hit the tarmac, and it fell into a dangerous skid. Air pockets were formed within the crevasses of the damaged wing, causing it to veer to the left and right. Within the cockpit, Dick Livingston fought to steer the plane safely, but as he struggled to maintain control the craft sped off the airstrip and swerved toward the main hangar. Tires screeched, and

A siren was wailing. He heard shouts. The impact stunned him, and he lifted his head from the bloody window, feeling the sticky warmth on the side of his face. He reached for the buckle on his harness. A fire engine advanced to the crash site, red lights flashing, and he saw the familiar face of Bob O’Connell appear at his cockpit window carrying a large fire extinguisher. He gave the man a relieved thumbs-up—*any landing from which you can walk away*—and a cloud of white gas blotted everything out as O’Connell sprayed the entire engine.

From the outside, O’Connell could see the craft was totaled. It landed on its side, narrowly missing a head-on collision with the hangar’s corner. The plane was squashed along the wall of the building like some huge fly mashed against a windshield. The left wing was crushed; and the right wing suffered a cruel gash that looked like three slashes of a machete. Curiously, it had made no contact in the collision. What could have caused it? Others joined O’Connell beside the craft.

“Let’s get the man out of there,” he commanded them to the cockpit. He knew it would take machinery to pry the doors open, but perhaps if they broke through the windshield, the pilot could crawl through. “Get me a hammer over here!”

The hammer broke through the safety glass. Dick coughed off the remaining extinguisher gas and looked out gratefully to O’Connell and the others.

Then he noticed how they’d all frozen in place.

Something growled.

“Holy Jesus,” Bob O’Connell cursed.

It rose on its haunches, and two great wings unfolded. O’Connell’s throat locked.

“Shit! What is it?!” shouted another worker.

*Fau’Charoth had struck out at the rival night creature, which fell, defeated, from the sky. The demon snarled in challenge as it padded toward the winged object, a predator advancing on its prey. Startled humans were gathered about it, and as they looked up, the demon could sense their fear. Bright halos of energy radiated off their forms, shifting in color as their terror intensified. The demon’s rage had reached a peak. Like a child in the fit of a tantrum, it needed to smash something.*

Dick Livingston fumbled again with his harness. The damned catch was jammed!

“Bob! What’s going on?”

O’Connell and the others hesitated as the strange shape lumbered closer. It crept forward on its two legs, occasionally dropping to its forepaws, as though standing erect was strange to it. O’Connell stared at the creature and at Dick in the cockpit, uncertain.

“Jesus Christ,” he repeated.

The demon roared and raced toward them in a four-legged gallop. The men scattered. O’Connell dropped the hammer and ran from the airplane.

Dick couldn’t help noticing their hasty retreat. “Hey! Get me out of this thing!” He saw the hideous shape through the broken windshield. It was the same thing he had seen from the air, only now it was earthbound. An unidentified *stalking* object! His

yellow-eyed menace. It growled, and the pointed snout pressed forward through the empty frame of the window. It was inches away. The little nose twitched. Muscles tightened, lifting the lips from long pointed fangs. The demon gave off a wet gurgling snarl as it peered in at the pilot. The pointed triangle ears folded back in canine threat. Dick trembled, trapped in his pilot seat, gazing motionless. He could feel sweat spreading through his flight suit.

Fau'Charoth opened wide its jaws and snapped them forward. The fangs clashed together a finger-length short of Dick's face. He gasped aloud. "No, please, no, please, God, please . . . please."

A shot rang out. The yellow orbs glared in fury, but hesitated. Then it glanced away.

A distance away, as the workers cowered and watched, airport security officer Hank Gleason arrived, pistol drawn from his holster. He spied the strange creature on the nose of the plane, and without hesitation began firing rounds at it. The demon turned, startled, as the projectiles pierced its hide and chest. The bullets clearly penetrated, but seemed to have little effect.

The demon turned and gave off a shrill bark. Then it pounced free of the plane and was airborne, soaring toward the officer. Hank emptied his chambers into the flying monster until the gun clicked empty.

He ducked down and threw his hands protectively to his face as taloned feet fell

It clutched at his side like a bird of prey. There was piercing pain as the claws penetrated his jacket. Hank felt himself hoisted as the great flapping wings launched the creature skyward.

His head fell back, cringing against the squeezing grip, and as he dangled upside down he saw the runway below flashing past him. His feet and arms flailed helplessly. He was being carried off like a rodent in an owl's claw! Instinctively, he reached up and grasped the creature's ankles, pulling his weight upward to relieve some of the pain in his side. Its skin was hot to the touch.

Higher and higher they flew, until the terminal grew small and the lamps of the airfield became bulbs of starlight.

And then there was a bright flash. Hank heard the creature let out a snort. It veered toward the light. Suddenly the man's eyes were blinded by the direct glare of the tower beacon.

*Fau'Charoth gazed at the rotating shaft of light emanating from the tower. Its struggling prey weighed heavily in its claws. The demon intended to feast on its flesh, but the light distracted it. The glowing eye resonated with a familiar essence that filled it with longing. The demon soared toward the tower, carrying the hapless man aloft to the picnic clearing. The closer the beacon loomed, the more its celestial brilliance beckoned to it, until all other desires were forgotten.*

As they descended, Gleason felt the talons release, and he was falling! Branches

brilliantly with the rotating light. He had been abandoned by the creature, but sensed somehow that it was still nearby. Creeping out of the bush, he gazed up and caught sight of it. The winged beast was perched on the very peak of the tower like an aluminum eagle on a flag post.

*Fau'Charoth clutched the metal of the tower, crouching low. It could hear the hum of vibrating motors as the great orb of light rotated. Its fingers passed over the hot glass, grasping the "eye of the dragon" in its claw, as though the cold metal of the scaffold held within it some meaning. The demon peered across the landscape, spying the picnic tables and the drive path through the forest. It knew this place and felt the trembling of familiar pleasures. They were but a memory, displaced by yearning and despair, yet they pierced the demon like a hot skewer. Again, its astral essence throbbed to the rhythms of human emotion.*

*It remembered the girl. She was gone now, her love withdrawn. Sorrow racked its soul, and it gave off a whimper. Then it threw back its head and let off a long mournful howl of animal torment. The wailing echoed across the clearing and traveled over the distant airfield, where Bob O'Connell, Dick Livingston, and the others heard it and cowered in awe and terror.*

*The creature lolled its head pitifully. Sorrow brought pain. And pain-rage!*

*With an angry swipe, Fau'Charoth pounded down on the beacon. There was an explosion of glass and electrical charge as the dragon's eye went dark*

## CHAPTER 62

Tom awoke in the armchair of his living room.

Rather, it seemed he *faded back* into his human form, having never fully lost consciousness. He found himself flopped heavily in the sofa, chin to his chest. The image of the airport, the hapless face of the pilot, and the struggling of the officer he had nearly killed were just febrile memories, like images on the television.

He sprang up from his chair, looking about. His head reeled with vertigo. The churning sensation was dying down in his solar plexus. It felt strange and unsettling to be back in his body, as though it were suddenly too small and lightweight. The enormous creature shape was gone. The phantom memory of a tail and wings tingled like the “ghost limbs” of an amputee. As he walked through the house, he felt the instinctive

Slowly he settled back into reality and experienced the horrifying sensation that he was actually *stealing* himself back. Fau'Charoth was only reluctantly letting go. Something had changed in their connection. Where before he had been in command of his actions, albeit in an awakened dream state, he now perceived himself to be a mere passenger in another body. As though the creature had stolen his eyes and taken them for a joyride. It still thought like him. It still felt his feelings. But Fau'Charoth was no longer the emotional alter ego he'd considered it to be. The "demon" was a twin to his consciousness, but separate of body, soul, and *will*.

Julie was right. He *was* losing control.

*Julie!* He had been with her too! The creature paid a visit to her bedside, standing over her in an ætheric state. He remembered how small and sad she looked beneath her covers. He—it—wanted to touch her, hungering to be close. At first the desire was purely carnivorous.

But then some new and compelling emotions surfaced within it. These new feelings caused it anxiety. They were alien and incomprehensible. The demon reacted like a chimp puzzling over chords of music on a radio, until it destroys the set in frustration. He remembered its bewilderment and the terrible rampage that ensued.

It had nearly *killed* a man!

The creature was going to devour the cop like another hog in a pigpen! Had it not been for the distraction of the beacon tower, Tom would be a murderer!

He raced out of the house, running to the backyard where vaguely in the distance, he hoped to catch the light beam on the horizon. There was a slight drizzle. The sky was a dark canopy of mist and cloud, but the familiar beacon was nowhere to be seen.

“Damn you! What have you done!”

He would never willfully have destroyed the “eye of the dragon.” He certainly never would have attempted to kill a human being. Tom was afraid now. Terrified of what he had unleashed. Yet part of him felt extremely angry and betrayed. He was tricked and misled by this *thing*—this thief of his soul.

If it was separate, then he wanted to confront it. *See* it with his own eyes! Tom made fists to temper his resolve. “Fau’Charoth,” he spoke aloud, determined. “I know you’re out there. Come forth!”

He listened and heard only the crickets and the light patter of soft rain. He tightened his fists. “Show yourself! I command you to show yourself!”

Something stirred in his solar plexus. The sensation churned and built into a spiral of energy. There was an explosion and a burst of light that Tom took for a thunderbolt. *Was he struck by lightning?* It was as if a large part of him broke off in a flash. The force drove him to his knees. His eyelids fell heavy and he thought he might faint, but he pried his eyes open and peered ahead.

There it was, standing before him beside the yard table and metal shed.

Fau’Charoth unfurled its wings and lifted to its full height, gazing down at its

He often wondered what it would be like to see an actual dragon. In his youth, he had visited zoos, gazed at an elephant or rhinoceros and imagined he was looking at a triceratops. When he watched a monster movie, he tried to project himself into the hero or victim as they peered at the sci-fi creature. He often wondered what it would be like to stand in the presence of something so unique, so otherworldly. To see it moving, hear its *breathing*. Observe its flesh shifting over bone. Tom thought all these things in a millisecond, as though his brain was scrambling to process the incredible vision before him. There it stood! His same eyes, having witnessed the rhino and elephant, were now peering at the reptilian monster, this chimera from his imagination.

It looked the same as he had envisioned it on paper. The same lupine face he had etched in graphite now lolled at him. The same dragon tail now swished behind sinuously. Its posture was the one he had generated in his animation, moving with the stop-frame action of hundreds of work hours. Tom knew this creature intimately in his heart, and from his heart it had escaped!

It leaned forward, gazing at the boy with glowing yellow eyes, and as Tom gazed into its pupils, all energy drained from his form. He felt his consciousness drift—*snatched away!*

*And suddenly he was gazing down at himself! It looked at the boy with beastly familiarity as the essence spread through the veins of its being. It felt strong again and issued a threatening gurgle from its throat. Tom knelt before it on the grass, a dormant*

No!

Tom snapped back into his body with a gasp. His eyes darted about the yard, cowering from its threat. It was gone. The yard was empty once again. There was no indication that the creature had ever been there. For a moment he thought he'd passed out and imagined it. The droplets of rain had accumulated on his neck, and he was shivering. He couldn't recall how long he'd sat there on his haunches. The intimidating thoughts of the creature burned in his mind. Forcing life into his limbs, he raced back into the house, overwhelmed and desperate, and certain of what he had to do.

It was too much. Far too much for him to control.

Julie was right. He had to put a stop to it.

Tom stormed into his bedroom and gazed down at the creature model, which remained fastened to the set. He reached below, and with a quick twist, unscrewed the tie-downs that secured its feet to the base. Then he grabbed it up fiercely, preparing to tear the flesh off the jointed steel skeleton.

But as he held the puppet, his fingers sinking deep into the latex skin, something restrained him. It felt so perfect. The model was exquisite, the product of so much toil and creative labor. Tom felt angry tears form in his eyes. He didn't have the strength of will to destroy his own handiwork. It would be like shredding a piece of his soul.

Frustrated, he carried the puppet to a large wooden chest in the corner of the

And very very alone.

Julie. He missed Julie.

“What have I done?” he cried aloud.