



The Dream Wife

A Perfect Woman Exists In Your
Dreams... But What Happens
When She Crosses Over?

Rumi Zen Zapp

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As you journey through this book, may each page be a portal
between the world of dreams and the awakenings that follow.

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Dedication

To my mother— my light...

Prologue

In the stillness of the night, Peter softly spoke a name, a chilling syllable that resonated with an unsettling melody: “Sarena.”

Lying next to him, Emma felt a shiver that went beyond coldness. These dreams that held her husband captive seemed alive and aware, intertwining themselves into their waking reality.

Who was this Sarena? A figment of the imagination, or something more mysterious? The answer remained unknown to Emma. Yet she knew this was not a dream; it felt like a nightmare.

As the first rays of daylight appeared, she made a promise to uncover this enigma, even if it meant facing horrors. Her love was at stake. She was determined to confront the unknown.

However, a lingering uncertainty plagued her spirit. What if this battle was one she was destined to lose?

It seemed that the nightmare had just begun...

Chapter One

The Dream Begins

Emma awoke in bed, slowly opening her eyes to the gentle morning sunlight peeking through the curtains. Beside her, Peter still slumbered peacefully, his chest rising and falling with each breath. A soft smile graced Emma's lips as she admired her husband's sleeping figure. Every morning she felt a surge of love, grateful to be awakening by his side.

Taking care not to disturb him, Emma slipped out from under the covers. She snugly tucked them around Peter. She made her way to the bathroom, ready to begin her morning routine. Once she was dressed for work, Emma headed to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

The delightful aroma of brewing coffee and sizzling bacon filled the air as Emma gracefully moved around the kitchen, falling into her morning rhythm. Before long, she heard Peter's footsteps drawing near. "Morning," she greeted him warmly. "The coffee is ready."

They sat down to have breakfast while conversing about their plans for the day. They started their morning with their usual playful, affectionate banter. To an outsider, Emma and Peter would have seemed as content as any other couple.

Lately, however, both of them had been longing for something. They yearned for a child—the missing piece that would complete their family. Over the past year and a half, they had been trying relentlessly, but they would always find deep disappointment. As each cycle passed without success, the process tested their optimism.

Emma tried her best to stay positive by focusing on the life she shared with Peter. Yet her desire for a child always lingered beneath the surface. She knew Peter felt it too, although he attempted to conceal it for her sake. They persevered, determined to start a family despite the challenges they faced.

Little did Emma know how that hope would soon become intertwined with a presence from Peter's dreams. A woman named Sarena would disrupt their lives in ways neither of them could have imagined... After they finished eating, Emma and Peter worked together to clean up the dishes, carrying out their routine for household chores. Emma took care of washing while Peter dried and put everything back in its place. The sounds of the neighborhood seeped in through the window—horses galloping by, children playing, and birds singing.

These simple moments with her husband meant the world to Emma. They had met at a party hosted by a friend six years ago and instantly felt a deep connection. Their relationship had been right from the start, both of them knowing that they were meant to be together. Peter was Emma's rock—endlessly loving, always able to make her laugh. She couldn't imagine going through life without him by her side.

That evening, after finishing dinner and clearing the table, Peter shared an experience that added a new dimension to their disappointing attempts at having a child. He turned to Emma suddenly and said, "I had a vivid dream last night. There was this captivating woman with eyes that seemed to look directly into my soul. Her name was Sarena."

Emma was taken aback by this revelation; Peter rarely remembered his dreams in detail. She sank into a chair as he continued sharing.

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He described a forest setting, a sparkling waterfall, and intricate marble pillars surrounding Sarena's throne. The imagery he described felt like scenes from a movie or even a woven tapestry. They were quite different from Peter's usual dreams. However, what unsettled Emma the most was that he spoke about Sarena with awe in his voice, as if recounting a spiritual encounter.

After Peter finished, he leaned back in his chair with the expression of someone awakening from a trance. Emma gazed at him across the remains of their dinner, feeling a knot forming in her stomach. There was something about the intensity of the dream. Peter had never shown any interest in another woman before, real or imaginary. However, the look on his face... that look was unmistakable.

Over the course of the week, the knot in Emma's stomach only tightened further. Peter dreamt of Sarena every night, vibrant colors filling his mind. Each morning, during breakfast, he would recount scenes and conversations while Emma picked at her food, growing increasingly troubled. She knew it was irrational— dreams held no substance, regardless of how vivid they felt. Yet deep down she couldn't shake the notion that this Sarena symbolized something— perhaps even a forewarning.

Whatever significance these dreams held, she had a feeling that this was merely the beginning. The dreams would persist; Emma harbored no doubts about that anymore. Her uneasiness would only escalate further. Not even her overwhelming fears could have prepared her for what lay ahead...

Chapter Two

The Shadow Woman

The next morning, Emma woke up feeling tired and still carrying the remnants of the previous night's sleep. Peter had already started making breakfast in the kitchen, happily whistling as he prepared it. Emma shuffled in and gently leaned her head against his back as her morning greeting.

As they sat down to eat, Emma discreetly observed her husband, hoping to detect any hints of hidden emotions, beneath his cheerful demeanor. However, Peter appeared as he usually did— full of energy and affection, eagerly discussing his plans for the day ahead.

It wasn't until they had finished cleaning up and were getting ready to leave for work that Peter turned to Emma with a hint of shyness in his voice. "I had another dream about Sarena last night," he confessed softly.

Emma paused for a moment; her hand frozen halfway toward grabbing her pocketbook from the counter. She took a breath before responding with measured neutrality. "Oh?" she replied.

Peter proceeded to describe the latest chapter of his recurring dream without noticing the tension beneath Emma's composed façade. This time, Peter recalled a garden scene with vivid details like individual rose blossoms and vines cascading down elegant marble columns.

There in the center stood Sarena, her eyes shining with a hint of violet and her lips curved into a secretive smile. As Peter painted pictures with his words, Emma found herself grappling with her insecurities. She reminded herself that it

was merely a dream— a normal expression of the imagination. However, despite her efforts, Emma couldn't ignore the feeling that wrapped around her heart. The way Peter spoke Sarena's name... it felt like a prayer on his lips. It disturbed her on an instinctive level.

Emma responded to Peter's retelling of the dream with ambiguous acknowledgments. As she went through the motions of work that day, she found Sarena lingering in the recesses of her mind like an elusive shadow. Irrationally, a part of her perceived this dream figure as a threat— an adversary trying to stake a claim to her husband.

Emma chided herself harshly for these thoughts and swallowed the bitterness that surged within her. She knew Peter loved her deeply; no figment of his imagination could ever change that fact.

However, as the nights passed and Peter's dreams grew more frequent and vivid, that seed of bitterness continued to take root within Emma's heart.

During the week, Emma couldn't help but notice Peter becoming increasingly captivated by Sarena. It seemed like his fascination with her was growing nonstop like a snowball rolling down a hill. He would spend hours filling his notebook with descriptions of her— the dimple on her left cheek when she smiled, the elegant dresses and sparkling jewelry she adorned herself with, and even the melodic tones of her voice.

One night, Emma caught Peter sketching a portrait of Sarena. Seeing the concentration on his face as he carefully shaded every detail of her lips and perfectly arched eyebrows struck a painful chord in Emma's heart. At that moment, the bitterness she had tried to swallow welled up uncontrollably

in her throat— when was the last time he had looked at her with that kind of adoration?

During daylight hours, Peter went about his routine as usual but it was obvious that Sarena constantly occupied his thoughts. Emma would often notice him lost in contemplation when he thought she wasn't watching, his mind clearly wandering off to dreamscapes. There were times when she had to call out to him before he snapped back to reality and acknowledged her presence.

One evening, as they were preparing for bed, Peter broached the subject of Sarena again. “You know,” he pondered aloud, “it's quite extraordinary how persistent these dreams have been... It's almost as if we have a connection. Like Sarena has her own life that continues even when I'm awake.”

Emma busied herself with adjusting the covers, feeling a shiver run down her spine at his words. The same thought had crossed her mind too—it was uncommon to dream of the same stranger repeatedly. There must be an explanation... right?

Peter's theory lingered in the air as they slept back to back that night, a gap separating their bodies. In the darkness, Emma silently wept into her pillow, overwhelmed by the sense of dread and loss that was tightening around her heart. She felt like a shadow drifting aimlessly while Sarena's captivating light pulled her husband away.

The following days passed slowly amid mounting tension. Emma veered between avoiding any mention of the dreams and subtly trying to learn more about this enchanting woman who had captivated her husband.

From Peter's descriptions, Emma constructed an image of Sarena in her mind. She was utterly ethereal, possessing an allure that fascinated everyone in her presence.

Her beauty was, like none other. Her waist-length hair shimmered like fine silk, while her eyes held flecks of deep violet reminiscent of nightshade. Her voice had a soothing quality but could also carry a commanding and regal tone.

In Peter's dreams, she dwelled in enchanting glens and majestic seaside castles. She was attended by servants and devoted subjects who catered to her every need. Her movements exuded endless grace. The contrast between the reserved, practical Emma and this mystical dream woman couldn't have been more striking.

The divide between Emma and Peter grew wider with each passing day. Their conversations became strained, often falling into painful silences. At night, they found themselves clinging to the edges of the bed as if miles apart. Peter's efforts to reach out to Emma diminished, both within the confines of their bed and beyond.

One night, as Peter murmured Sarena's name in his sleep Emma lay there gazing up at the darkened ceiling above her. A single tear traced its way down her cheek as she confronted the truth: she was losing him. This enchanting apparition had gradually entangled herself in Peter's heartstrings, pulling him away strand by strand. Emma had never felt so powerless or adrift.

She knew action needed to be taken; she couldn't remain passive any longer.

What could bring back someone who was so deeply immersed in their own invented world? It was evident that she couldn't continue like this, feeling helpless as the man she loved continued to withdraw into his fantasies. Something had to change... for Peter's sake as well as her own.

Chapter Three

The Escape

Life appeared normal on the surface. Peter continued his work at the firm while Emma stayed busy as an editor. They still shared meals, slept in the same bed, and exchanged affectionate gestures.

However, beneath this façade of normalcy, their relationship was slowly deteriorating. Once filled with laughter and playful banter, their conversations now often fell into lengthy silences. Their passionate and spontaneous sex life had dwindled to nothing.

The main issue they couldn't ignore was their struggle to conceive a child. Each month that passed without success it felt like another reminder of their relationship troubles.

Emma silently bore the weight of not being able to conceive and found herself filled with deep sadness and disappointments, internalizing her pain. While Peter tried his best to remain positive. His reassurances often felt hollow, and they both felt helpless and lost.

As time went on, Peter continued to find solace in his dreams. They provided an escape from the strain of reality. He eagerly awaited sleep so he could immerse himself in Sarena's world of fantasy and magic. Upon waking, he moved through his days distracted and emotionally distant, yearning for nightfall when he could return to the place that brought him solace.

Emma noticed these changes with a feeling of dread in her stomach.

She understood that Peter's withdrawal into his thoughts was a way for him to cope. But she couldn't help feeling rejected and isolated as he grew more distant each day.

Emma longed for the sound of Peter's laughter, his affectionate nature, and the way his eyes used to light up when she entered the room. Now his smiles seemed forced, never quite reaching his eyes. They often had an unfocused look, as if he was fixated on something beyond her shoulder. While he remained present physically, it felt like his spirit had wandered off to a world of fantasy and freedom that she couldn't access.

Emma made efforts to reconnect with Peter by planning weekend getaways, cooking meals, and initiating intimacy in their lit bedroom— all attempts to revive their fading bond. (Get an exclusive look at Emma through a sketch at rumizen.com/sketches)

Occasionally she caught glimpses of the old Peter— moments of light breaking through the clouds that surrounded him. She felt it in a gentle squeeze of her hand during dinner or a sparkle in his eyes during moments of shared laughter.

But these instances were fleeting, and darkness quickly descended again; Peter would quickly retreat back into daydreams and distractions. Their conversations lapsed into silence more frequently than not.

In bed, there was a distance between them. Peter clung to the edge of the bed facing away from her and the sheets between them felt cold.

The breaking point arrived one afternoon. Emma returned home from work earlier than usual to find Peter asleep on the couch with his notebook resting on his chest. With the intention of covering him with a blanket, Emma

approached him. However, she was taken aback when she saw another sketch of Sarena.

Without thinking, Emma snatched the notebook. Her heart started racing. It was filled with notes and drawings of this woman from Peter's dreams. Overwhelmed by emotions Emma sank onto the couch as tears welled up in her eyes.

Her sobs woke Peter from his slumber. He sat up groggily while Emma extended the notebook toward him, tears streaming down her face.

"This has to stop," she managed to say amidst choked sobs. "I can't bear watching you slip away day by day. It feels like I'm losing you more and more."

He stared back at her in silence, mouth half opened with no words coming out. The silence grew heavier between them as the rain continued pouring outside their window. Emma waited anxiously, barely breathing as she silently prayed for him to say something— anything— that would bridge the gap between them, which had grown to feel like a chasm.

Instead, Peter looked away, reaching for his notebook. "Why don't we just have a quiet dinner tonight?" he muttered quietly.

Emma stood motionless for a moment before turning and slowly walking toward the bedroom, still clutching the notebook tightly in her hand. She had found her answer. His dreams were his escape. She couldn't compete with their allure— with her allure.

Quietly closing the door behind her, Emma surrendered to a flood of sorrow. Soon all that remained was a desolate void that mirrored the space beside her in bed where Peter used to sleep.

In the weeks that followed, Peter retreated into his vivid inner world of dreams. Most evenings, when Emma returned home, she would find him already asleep on the couch with his notebook resting on his chest and a pencil loosely held in his hand. Detailed sketches of Sarena filled the pages, precisely capturing her likeness from every angle.

Emma moved through their days like a phantom, feeling vacant and hardly noticed by others. She drifted silently through their home while Peter aimlessly shuffled between the bedroom and couch in a cycle of sleep and dreams. Their lives revolved around the gravity of his dreams, leaving no room for Emma's radiance to break through.

Mealtimes passed in eerie silence, every clink of utensils echoing in the air. Emma yearned to break the silence, wanting to shake Peter out of his trance by grasping his shoulders. There seemed to be a barrier surrounding him, constructed over weeks of withdrawal and avoidance.

So she sat across from this stranger who wore her husband's face, silently observing as his eyes took on that glazed expression and he was transported to realms she couldn't reach. His dreams had become a haven that offered fulfillment that reality couldn't provide.

Deep down, Emma understood some of the allure it held for him. The life they had built together was crumbling under the weight of disappointment: jobs no longer sparked joy, months filled with failure and sorrow. The ivory tower they had constructed in their more hopeful days now felt like a confining prison.

Understanding didn't diminish the pain of feeling abandoned. Emma felt that she had been discarded like a faded photograph in favor of more vivid dreams. Across the growing chasm between them, Emma's heart silently cried

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out with grief while her lips remained sealed shut. She mourned for the life that could have been, if only the real world hadn't lost its luster. If only their hopes hadn't turned to anguish.

If only Peter could see the pain hidden behind her façade. If only she knew how to bridge the gap and bring him back. She was at a loss for how to do this, so she remained rooted in reality, reaching out into the emptiness while Peter drifted away into his dreams.

As Emma withdrew into herself, Peter delved deeper into his inner world. He slept constantly, only briefly surfacing to eat or use the bathroom before succumbing to slumber again. Eventually, he even stopped going to work severing yet another connection to reality.

Their home gradually descended into chaos, dishes piling up and layers of dust accumulating on surfaces. Emma aimlessly wandered through the mess without the energy or desire to clean it up. Nothing mattered except finding a way to bring Peter back from the all-consuming grip of his fixation.

One evening, Emma returned home to find Peter awake for once, silently contemplating the shadows gathering in the corners of their living room. Her heart raced as she approached him and knelt by his feet. "Peter," she pleaded, "this has to stop. Please come back to me."

"You just don't get it, Emma," Peter replied after a pause, his eyes lost in contemplation. "These dreams... they feel more real than our lives." He motioned vaguely around the room. "They are so vivid and complete. There's no pain, no disappointment. It's all beauty and meaning. Can't you understand how extraordinary that is?"

Emma was taken aback, speechless for a moment. Was he that far gone? Had the dream world already ensnared him so deeply that no earthly plea could bring him back?

Peter reached out for her hand with an expression on his face. “Please just let me have this escape,” he whispered. “I need it now more than ever.”

As Emma looked into the eyes of the man she loved, she felt the gap between them tearing her heart apart once again.

Leaving a kiss on her forehead, Peter rose from his seat. He quietly retreated to the bedroom, leaving Emma alone in the room as darkness enveloped her. That night, she chose not to follow him to bed, but instead curled up on the couch amid the remnants of their shared life.

She cried until daybreak, mourning everything they had lost. The vision she’d had for their future was falling apart, like ashes slipping through her grasp. She felt completely helpless as they descended into darkness.

Chapter Four

The Dream Wife

Over the next few days, Peter would only come out of the bedroom for short periods, barely acknowledging Emma before returning to bed. She could hear him murmuring and occasionally crying out from behind the door, clearly caught up in vivid dreams.

Meals were left untouched on the bedside table, only half-heartedly picked at when hunger forced Peter to awaken. He had called in sick to work so many times that Emma knew his return wouldn't be met with much sympathy.

She didn't have the strength to confront him about it. A deep well of despair had engulfed her, eroding her determination. She moved through their apartment like a ghost, silently observing as her husband slipped out of her grasp.

One evening, as darkness settled over the city outside, Peter emerged from the bedroom looking more-clear headed than he had in days. Hope stirred within Emma as he sat down beside her on the couch. Maybe those feverish dreams were finally loosening their grip on him.

“Emma.” he began slowly. “We need to have a conversation.”

She turned towards him, feeling hopeful. “Yes, I'm here. What is it?”

Peter let out a sigh, his gaze fixed on his hands. “I have something important to tell you. I've developed

feelings for Sarena. Fallen in love with her. She's the partner I've always dreamed of.”

Emma froze in place as the weight of his words hit her like a blow. Her voice strained and heavy, she managed to ask, “What do you mean?”

Peter met her gaze with a mix of pain and determination. “I mean exactly what I said,” he replied, gesturing around them helplessly. “In some ways she feels more real to me than all of this. My emotions for her are genuine.”

An uncontrollable gasp escaped Emma’s lips as she rose abruptly from her seat. This couldn't be happening; it felt surreal. How could her logical and practical husband become entangled in illusions about someone from his dreams? Yet the unwavering look in his eyes left no room for doubt—he truly believed every word he spoke.

Tears streamed down Emma’s face as she fled the room, collapsing onto the kitchen floor in a state of shock. How had their lives unraveled so completely? Her husband claimed to be in love with a figment of his slumbering imagination—madness.

But it was a madness that had taken hold and thrived within him, gripping him tightly—the man she loved was undeniably ensnared by it. Emma wrapped her arms around herself tightly, feeling even more isolated than before.

How could she possibly confront an adversary that existed within the realm of dreams and challenged all understanding?

Chapter Five

In the Depths of Dreams

Emma hardly slept a wink that night, unable to escape the echo of Peter's confession. Restless beneath the sheets, she was acutely aware of his presence beside her. What encounters was he imagining with his dream lover tonight? The mere thought made Emma feel nauseous.

When the gray light of morning seeped into the room, Emma hastily got out of bed, unable to bear lying next to him any longer. In the bathroom mirror she saw her reflection staring back at her—pale, disheveled, with dark circles under her eyes revealing her inner turmoil. She looked as empty as she felt inside.

Peter entered the kitchen just as Emma settled down with her coffee. He avoided making eye contact as he poured himself a bowl of cereal. Stealthily observing him over the rim of her mug, Emma searched for any signs of cracks in his delusion. However, he appeared rested for once—his eyes were clear and his movements were steady. The intensity of his dreams seemed to be increasing.

As Peter cleaned up after breakfast, Emma cautiously broached the subject of going out to dinner. "I was thinking maybe we could try that place tonight—the one we've been talking about?"

Peter blinked and took a moment to detach from his inner world before registering her words. "Oh... um... can we raincheck? I'm feeling quite exhausted. I think I'll go to bed tonight." Despite her disappointment, Emma managed

to put on a smile and responded, “No worries. We can plan for another time.”

Once Peter retreated back to the bedroom, Emma sank onto the couch overwhelmed by grief and helplessness. She knew she had to persist in trying to connect with him and pull him away from this obsession. However, with each attempt, her hope dwindled further as it seemed like the grip of these dreams was unbreakable.

That night, Emma found herself lying awake again, unable to ignore the sounds of Peter’s dreaming: fragmented murmurs, occasional laughter and occasional moans. She couldn’t help but wonder what heights of passion and beauty he was experiencing with Sarena while leaving her discarded and forgotten.

As she eventually drifted into sleep, vivid images infiltrated Emma’s mind. She envisioned Peter wandering through a garden filled with flowers overhead while marble statues gleamed in the dappled sunlight. At the heart of this scene stood Sarena in silks adorned with jewels, her flowing hair cascading down her back. Sarena extended a hand toward Peter, drawing him closer until their bodies pressed against each other intimately. Helpless and unseen by them both, Emma watched as they shared a kiss— Emma woke abruptly from this vivid dream sequence, her heart racing in her chest.

Fragments of the dream lingered in her mind, causing her to take slow breaths. She reassured herself that she was merely processing her struggles. However, a part of her couldn’t shake the fear that she had caught a glimpse into Peter’s rendezvous, with Sarena, tormenting her through his dreams.

That week, Peter seemed to exist in two worlds simultaneously. He went through the motions of his life with

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Emma: sharing meals, having brief conversations and giving absent kisses on the cheek. Yet his mind seemed elsewhere and his eyes often held a noticeable gleam.

At night, his dreams became more vivid and intense; his exclamations echoed through the hallways. Emma imagined Sarena materializing from those dreams in detail, exerting influence over Peter's thoughts.

Throughout each day, Emma valiantly attempted to redirect Peter's attention to their shared life. They went on picnics in the park, visited museums together and indulged in dinners. She spared no effort or expense.

Occasionally, she would catch a glimmer of engagement with reality in Peter's eyes, giving her moments of hope. Too soon, though, those shutters would close once again as Sarena's irresistible allure pulled him back into the depths of his slumbering mind. It seemed nothing could compete with the captivating escape he found in his dreams.

Emma felt like she was losing Peter more and more each day. It seemed that every moment he was awake it was just borrowed time until he could find solace in sleep again. The warm, funny, and present Peter she had once known had become a shadow that faded more with each dream.

As Peter drifted away from her, Emma found herself sinking deeper into despair. She oscillated between bitterness over his betrayal and compassion for the grip these dreams had on him. Underneath it all was an ocean of grief for the life and future they had lost.

Her days became a blur of routines while her sleepless nights dragged on. There were no longer any conversations between Emma and Peter; their connection had become an abyss where they merely coexisted.

The soundtrack of Peter's dreams always echoed in the background. Emma would listen to his breaths and murmurs

through the bedroom wall, tormented by thoughts of encounters playing out nightly under their own roof.

During one sleepless night, Emma found herself drawn to the living room, where she discovered Peter's collection of dream journals. Without hesitation, she eagerly flipped through page after page.

What she witnessed filled her with a mixture of revulsion and despair. There were elaborate descriptions of Sarena's beauty, speculations about her life beyond dreams and detailed accounts of their moments together in sunlit forests and luxurious bedrooms. Scattered throughout were sketches capturing Sarena's likeness from angles, including side view, front view and full-length depictions.

One particular portrait caught Emma's attention. It showed Sarena reclining, showcasing her breasts and thighs with her eyes half closed in a teasing manner. A wave of nausea and heartache pushed Emma back to her empty bed.

Something had to change. Emma couldn't remain trapped in this existence, always playing second fiddle to an illusion. Deep within the pain, anger began to flicker—anger at her powerlessness, at the theft of the man she loved.

Tomorrow, she made up her mind as she stared into the darkness. Tomorrow she would take action. She would confront the man who had once been her rational husband as the passionate dreamer he had become. It was time to fight for their shared future.

Chapter Six

The Nightmare Unfolds

Emma woke in the morning with a sense of turmoil like that of a volcano ready to erupt. Today was the day she had decided to confront Peter and reveal herself, withholding nothing. She couldn't bear being an observer while her husband and their beautiful life together turned into a living nightmare.

When Peter stumbled into the kitchen, still sleepy and relaxed, Emma gathered her strength. As he reached for the coffee pot she stepped forward and gently grabbed his arm.

“We need to talk... Now,” she said with determination.

Peter blinked at her touch, slowly focusing on her face. For a moment Emma thought she caught a glimpse of the old Peter— warm, present and entirely hers. However, that glimpse disappeared as quickly as it came— when he closed himself off once again.

“Can it wait? I didn't sleep well—” he said, attempting to brush it off. Emma stood her ground.

“No. We're going to address this for once,” she insisted as she guided him toward the kitchen table, where he reluctantly sat down while avoiding her piercing gaze.

Emma spoke honestly about what had been building up inside her for months, pain and betrayal pouring out without restraint. Peter listened in silence; his shoulders slumped as her words washed over him. She concluded with a glimmer of hope in her eyes while reaching out for his hands.

“Peter, please come back to me. We can overcome this challenge if we work together and find a common ground.”

He continued to gaze downward without uttering a word. Then Emma barely caught his spoken words: “It’s not as simple as that.”

Rage surged through Emma’s veins upon hearing this. “NOT SIMPLE? I’m fighting for our marriage. You can’t even bring yourself to look at me!”

Peter’s face contorted in torment, his anguished eyes finally meeting hers. “You don’t understand— I..”

He abruptly stopped speaking and shifted his attention toward the hallway and instantly began walking straight into the bedroom with a calming urgency and slammed the door! Emma looked at him as he walked away, “Where are you going?!” “Talk to me!” Silence filled the room. Confusion and worry overcame her, as her eyes followed him; until the door slammed. “What the hell!” Emma screamed with tears in her eyes.

Moments later she heard a thudding sound. Her heart pounding, she moved closer to investigate.

As she approached the bedroom the source of the sound became evident. Behind the door she could hear the sound of bedsprings: *thud, creak, thud, creak*, repeating rapidly.

Emma forcefully swung open the door only to find Peter in bed engulfed in a nightmare. He flailed about, cries escaping from his throat— a prisoner in whatever fresh hell now haunted his dreams.

Emma stood frozen in the doorway, her hand instinctively covering her mouth as she witnessed her husband’s torment.

This nightmare was unlike any she’d witnessed before. Peter’s agony felt primal and his cries seemed inhuman. His face twisted in terror and his body convulsed, as if he was desperately attempting to escape an unseen demon.

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Gradually his thrashing stopped and the disturbing sounds faded into whimpers. Emma approached cautiously. She gently placed her hand on Peter's shoulder. In response he jerked away forcefully, his eyes open but without focus.

"No, stay away!" he croaked hoarsely. "Leave me alone!"

"It's me, Emma! You were having a nightmare," she reassured him with her hands held up in a non-threatening gesture. Slowly but surely, recognition flickered across his face.

"Emma?" Peter's voice cracked as he dissolved into tears. Emma embraced him tightly, feeling her heart shatter at the sight of his anguish. It was clear that this went well beyond a bad dream.

That night, curled up snugly in bed together, Emma managed to coax the details of the nightmare from Peter, who still trembled uncontrollably. He described being trapped in a pitch-black chamber while vines coiled around his limbs and held him down. Sarena's presence had enveloped him. Her energy felt malevolent and suffocating. Her claws tore into him while he cried out for mercy...

Emma listened intently with horror etched across her face.

What kind of nightmare had invaded Peter's refuge? Over the following weeks, the nightmares persisted. Peter resisted sleep for as long as possible, dreading the haunting images that besieged him as soon as he succumbed to slumber. His screams often startled Emma awake in the depths of night, prompting her to rush down the hallway to check on him.

Peter's eyes became shadowed with dark circles. He rapidly lost weight, his cheekbones jutting out prominently

above his beard. These dreams provided no relief or solace— only torment and overwhelming fear.

Emma's anger faded away replaced by concern and an overwhelming sense of helplessness. She yearned to alleviate Peter's suffering, but had no control over the terrors that plagued his nights. His days were now solely focused on surviving, until darkness arrived with its array of torments.

During his waking moments, Peter grew increasingly paranoid and erratic. The slightest noise made him jump, while empty corners captured his stare. At times he would whisper rapidly under his breath, engaging in arguments with an unseen tormentor.

On the occasions when Emma managed to persuade him to eat something, he complained about a metallic taste. Once, while they sat picking at their dinner, Peter suddenly began violently swatting at the air around his head.

"Get them off me!" he shrieked in desperation, while Emma anxiously grasped onto his wrists. "Peter, I don't see anything! What's going on?" He sighed heavily. "You didn't notice them? The swarm of insects crawling all over me..." He visibly trembled with fear.

Emma felt a cold wave of fear gripping her heart. Peter was falling apart in front of her eyes. Sarena's presence seemed to have seeped into his consciousness from his nightmares, tainting his perception of reality.

Days blended into nights and back again. Emma watched helplessly as Peter deteriorated. He barely acknowledged her presence anymore, lost in some waking nightmare that she couldn't comprehend.

When exhaustion finally forced him to sleep, the screams would soon follow. Emma would hold him tightly during these episodes, tears streaming down her face. It felt

Rumi Zen Zapp

like she was witnessing the agonizing death of someone she loved.

Eventually, Peter lost his job, as his haggard appearance and unpredictable outbursts became too much for his employer to handle. Emma took on freelance work to alleviate their worries. Every moment not spent working was dedicated to comforting Peter or ensuring he had nourishment and hydration— anything to alleviate his suffering.

Despite her efforts, she couldn't halt the horrific downward spiral that was consuming him. Helpless anger burned within her— resentment toward the force that had poisoned the mind and body of the person she loved.

Something had to change before it was too late. In the hours of the night, Emma sat by Peter's side, watching over him as he tossed and turned in sleep. Moonlight seeped through the blinds, casting streaks of light on his gaunt face. As she gazed at him, a sense of determination grew within her. Enough was enough. She resolved to find answers and fight back against whatever was afflicting him, even if it meant risking her life.

The following morning, Emma urgently contacted Peter's psychiatrist Dr. Caldwell and scheduled an appointment. If conventional medicine couldn't provide answers, she was determined to seek out any solution or expert who could shed light on what was happening.

With Peter trailing behind her like a shadow of himself, they entered the clinic. As Emma checked him in, she noticed patients stealing glances at him. His disheveled appearance and wild eyes made him seem unhinged.

The psychiatrist listened attentively as Emma described the nightmares and paranoia that had led to Peter's rapid decline. Emma proposed adjustments to his medications,

scheduling a sleep study and increasing his therapy sessions. (Bring Dr. Caldwell to life through an exclusive sketch at rumizen.com/sketches)

Emma nodded along with a sense of resignation settling in her bones. Deep inside her being she knew that no amount of medication or therapy alone could combat this darkness that had taken hold of Peter. Its origins transcended understanding and ventured into realms beyond ordinary human existence.

Outside, Emma guided a distant Peter toward the car. As she assisted him, he turned to her with clarity.

“This will never come to an end,” he whispered softly. “She's a part of me now.”

A shiver coursed through Emma's body. Was it a sign? A confession of Sarena's control? For the first time, Emma fully grasped the enormity of what lay before her. This adversary was no ordinary opponent. It embodied a force, something ancient and inherently cunning.

With determination in her eyes, Emma started the car engine. If this entity believed it could separate Peter from her grasp, it would soon realize that she too possessed abilities. She would combat darkness with darkness; she would challenge its intentions with her life. This was far from over; in fact, the real battle had only just begun.

Chapter Seven

Sarena's Pull

Emma returned home from her appointment with the psychiatrist to find Peter not only awake, but surprisingly alert. He sat at the kitchen table sipping tea. There was a look in his bloodshot eyes. Spread out before him was a brand-new dream journal, filled from edge to edge with cramped handwriting detailing Peter's nightmares.

Emma's heart sank at the sight. She had hoped the visit to the psychiatrist would bring Peter some clarity or relief. However, it seemed that he had already immersed himself back into Sarena's world.

Peter glanced up as Emma took a seat across from him. "There is still much we don't understand," he murmured cryptically. Before Emma could respond, he swiftly picked up the journal and disappeared into the bedroom.

In the days that followed, Peter became even more completely absorbed in documenting his nightmares and everything related to Sarena. He repeatedly sketched her likeness, filling pages with charcoal portraits and pencil profile studies. Notebooks upon notebooks full of insights into his psyche accumulated on the kitchen table.

Meanwhile, Peter withdrew further into himself until he resembled a ghost haunting their home. Whole days went by without any communication between them. The silence grew so overwhelming that Emma felt the urge to scream just to break its suffocating hold.

Desperate for some company, she decided to invite over her friend Lily. As Lily entered the apartment, her eyes

widened when she noticed Peter's frail appearance and the chaotic state of the place.

During their coffee meet-up later, Emma couldn't help but pour out her feelings in a rush. The dreams, Peter's fixation on Sarena and his declining mental health. Uttering these words provided some relief for Emma. She could sense a hint of disbelief in Lily's gaze. (Get to know Emma's grounded friend Lily through an exclusive sketch at rumizen.com/sketches)

"Are you certain that you're not just overthinking relationship challenges?" Lily asked gently. Emma let out a brittle laugh. If only it were that easy.

Before she left, Lily assured Emma that she would check in again soon. However, as Emma caught a glimpse of pity in Lily's glance, she knew deep down that she was alone in this dreadful situation. No one else could truly grasp what was happening to Peter.

Chapter Eight

The Toll

The days stretched on monotonously without variation. Peter alternated between writing in his journal and lying motionless in a state of numbness. Emma moved through their home like a ghost, feeling the walls closing in around her and suffocating her. The weight of solitude hung heavily in every room.

Mealtimes passed uncomfortably without any conversation. Peter would slump over his plate, mechanically shoveling food into his mouth, while Emma stared across the table. Sometimes she was overcome by an absurd urge to shout or flip her plate over just to break the suffocating silence.

Their only connection came during those hours when they held their breaths, Emma gently stroking Peter's hair as he screamed out visions that were too terrible to exist in a world created by a loving God. When daylight returned, so did the impenetrable silence, solid as stone.

Emma stopped going out or contacting friends. She felt trapped by her loyalty to Peter, although she was watching him fade away before her eyes, she still held onto a glimmer of the person she loved. Deep in her bones, though, she feared the malevolent nightmare that had ensnared him.

Sarena had transformed into a presence that loomed over their lives. Emma could vividly imagine Sarena's vulpine features twisted with pleasure, baring needle teeth and dripping poisonous venom into Peter's mind.

Behind those deep violet eyes resided a hunger for souls that had been stolen away.

During the nights there was no solace to be found. Emma would lie motionless, her heart pounding as Peter's cries reverberated through the corridor. Sleep eluded her; instead, she busied herself by fortifying the barriers of her mind against the prying shadows. In the darkness, peculiar thoughts swirled around. Was that a woman's laughter, or simply the rustling of wind?

Eventually, faint light would seep through the blinds as Emma rose, unrested, to face another day. She yearned for oblivion, to escape from herself and from the haunting nightmare that had enveloped her existence. However, she couldn't risk surrendering her consciousness. Each passing moment held the potential for intrusions from this dream, that eagerly awaited to seize her soul just as it had claimed her husband's.

Chapter Nine

Shadows of Reality

Emma walked briskly down the grocery aisle, absentmindedly placing items into her shopping bag. The smell of food cooking filled the store combined with the sound of festival music on the street, and the bustling shoppers created a sensory experience that grated on her nerves. She could feel herself reaching a breaking point.

At the checkout counter, the cashier made conversation. It barely registered with Emma. She responded with one-word answers, her focus fixed on what the total would be. Her face flushed with embarrassment when the manager came over and said, “Your line of credit payment is overdue. You must pay your account balance in full today to use your line to purchase your groceries.”

Feeling flustered, Emma hurriedly searched for cash while impatient customers in line fidgeted restlessly. The manager waited patiently— Emma turned leaving her groceries behind and rushed toward the doors. As she opened the doors, she felt a sense of freedom on the other side. She was outside in the fresh air, beyond those sterile glass walls. With a sigh of relief, Emma made her way home.

That night, within the comfort of her home’s isolation, Emma found solace. Lately, she had been overwhelmed by the emptiness of those echoing rooms and their silence, which seemed to suffocate her spirit. She yearned for days gone by, when Peter’s warmth and laughter filled every nook and cranny of their living space. Now it felt as though his troubles had seeped into every corner like a cloud.

Tonight was different, because Peter had fallen asleep early, allowing Emma a rare moment of solitude. Sensing an opportunity to unwind from the day's indignities, she treated herself to a soothing bath, hoping that it would wash away all traces of stress.

Settling into the warm water she allowed her eyes to gently close, feeling the tension melt from her muscles. The steam brushed against her face and enveloped her cheeks.

Gradually she became aware of a fragrance permeating the air. It felt unfamiliar. She didn't have any bath oils with that scent. It contained a hint of decay, conjuring images of a forest teeming with alluring yet poisonous beauty.

Startled, Emma sat up abruptly as water splashed over the sides. Her heart raced as she frantically scanned the room in the glow of candlelight. Everything seemed normal; there was no sign of anyone. The malevolent scent lingered in the air, leaving a message behind. She could sense its warning.

Cutting her bath short, Emma hurriedly washed off the aroma that was clinging to her skin. As she dried herself off with a towel, she strained her ears for any sound coming from Peter's room, while trying to calm down her racing pulse. Surprisingly, there was silence in their apartment; Peter's sporadic cries were absent this time.

Changing into a nightgown, Emma settled onto the sofa, holding a book of poetry in her hands. She flipped through the pages absentmindedly feeling a hint of jealousy towards the words that portrayed carefree lives so different from her own restricted existence.

As she read, the lines of poetry blended together in a haze of prose and romantic daydreams.

Gradually she drifted off to sleep, comforted by the glow of the candle illuminating the softly lit parlor. Sometime later Emma suddenly woke up feeling disoriented.

Did she hear something? She rubbed her eyes. Looked around the room. Everything appeared normal. She winced at the stiffness in her neck and glanced at the grandfather clock loudly ticking in the corner—it showed 3 a.m.

Letting out a sigh, she got up and slowly walked down the hallway toward her bedroom. However, when she approached Peter's room, faint noises caught her attention. There was a repetitive creaking sound accompanied by thuds. Emma's heart rate quickened. She pressed her ear against the door. The sounds became clearer— she could hear springs compressing and thuds that reminded her of furniture being moved on carpet.

With caution, Emma opened the door slightly to reveal a strip of darkness inside. Her breath caught in her throat at what she saw before her. Peter was out of bed with his eyes closed, moving stiffly as if he were mimicking dragging an object across the floor.

“Peter!” Emma whispered urgently. He continued his pantomime without any acknowledgement— sleepwalking and acting out some vivid dream sequence. Emma watched in both fascination and unease as her husband performed for an unseen audience.

Once Peter returned to bed and his simulated movements stopped, Emma decided to retreat to the couch for some peace of mind.

That night, she couldn't sleep. The boundary between dreams and wakefulness seemed dangerously hazy. Peter was losing himself, drifting into realms that she couldn't reach.

In those realms, something old and clever lay in wait, poised to seize him. Emma couldn't allow that to happen. She would keep both of them grounded in reality, regardless of the consequences.

Chapter Ten

The Haunting

As the days passed, Emma started feeling an eerie presence getting closer and playing tricks on her. She noticed objects disappearing to reappear in strange places. Cupboards and drawers that she knew she had closed were found open. One morning, she woke up to find the contents of the refrigerator scattered across the kitchen floor.

Initially, Emma doubted her sanity, thinking maybe she was losing touch with reality. However, there was a mockery in these occurrences that pointed to an intelligence at play. This was no haunting; it felt like something wicked and calculating had crossed over from dreams into reality.

Emma attempted to discuss these incidents with Peter. He became annoyed by the interruptions, brushing off her stories as mere forgetfulness. How could she make him understand that this went beyond memory lapses, when he himself struggled to distinguish between illusion and truth?

One evening, when Emma was home alone, her unease heightened as darkness engulfed the rooms around her. The unsettling sensation of being watched sent shivers down her spine. Although the coldness she felt seemed to emanate from within, she clutched a sweater tightly around herself in an attempt to fight it.

In the hallway, a hanging portrait caught Emma's attention. She moved toward it to straighten it out, nerves on edge, as its off-kilter position was evidence of an unwelcome guest in her house.

As Emma lifted the picture frame from the nail it was hanging on, something suddenly fluttered out from behind it. Her hands trembled as she picked up the object from the floor. It was a lace handkerchief with the embroidered initials "SWB."

The handkerchief felt scorching hot in Emma's grasp, proving that her anxious mind wasn't just playing tricks on her. It was clear that an intruder was toying with her emotions and she couldn't shake off the sensation that she recognized those eyes watching her from the shadows.

That night, Emma lay in bed almost paralyzed, hardly daring to take a breath. Every creak of wood or rustle of wind carried a whisper. The haunting experiences had exposed her fear. She felt utterly powerless against this presence invading the safety of their home. She sensed that a predator lurked nearby, relishing in her terror.

Morning arrived with no respite from the suffocating atmosphere that had taken hold of their apartment. Emma moved through her routine nervously, her throat hoarse from shouting at imagined spirits. She frequently paused to glance around corners, feeling a prickle on her skin as if someone were watching her every move.

Meanwhile, Peter seemed unaffected by the looming darkness hanging over them. If he noticed Emma's frayed nerves, he gave no sign of it. His attention was solely devoted to documenting his nightmares and trying to make sense of the twists and turns of his mind.

By noon Emma couldn't stand it anymore. It felt like the walls were closing in, suffocating her. She had an urge to escape from the presence of this force that had invaded their home. With trembling hands she grabbed her purse and hurriedly left, seeking solace in the sunlight.

Entering a nearby café, Emma tried to find some comfort in its ambiance. However, she couldn't. She felt tense and watchful as she scanned each person present. Every friendly smile seemed sinister, every movement a threat. She knew she was being paranoid. Distinguishing between fear and irrationality was a challenge.

Just as Emma was engulfed in her unease, her friend Lily suddenly tapped her on the shoulder, startling her out of her thoughts. Lily's cheerful voice greeted her with a boisterous hello—insisting they go out for drinks that night. Emma struggled to come up with an excuse. She gave in to Lily's requests and agreed to meet at their usual spot, as if it could be a lifeline as Lily continued talking.

That evening, while halfheartedly getting ready for their outing, Emma avoided making eye contact with herself in the mirror. She didn't want to confront the look in her eyes reflecting back at her. A night of pretending everything was normal awaited her, while she felt isolated and trapped within herself. With determination etched on her face, she applied a layer of concealer under her eyes to hide any signs of exhaustion.

Tonight, she would sip wine and engage in conversations while hiding the decay happening inside of her.

Tonight, she would wear a mask of forced smiles as her marriage fell apart. Inwardly, she felt herself decaying while pretending to live. She couldn't let her façade crack, although she yearned to scream the truth of these horrors to to anyone who would listen. But if she did so, they would only see a broken woman.

Emma absentmindedly picked at the appetizers, nodding along to Lily's stories without absorbing them. Her gaze remained fixed on the entrance, her gut tightening with

tension every time the door opened. She had only managed to slip out for the evening by giving Peter sleeping pills. She knew her absence wouldn't go unnoticed.

The sparkling bar filled with patrons seemed like another world, untouched by evil presences and crumbling marriages. Emma couldn't help but envy their ignorance. How she wished her biggest worry could be a date or a work deadline.

“Emma?” Lily’s frown brought Emma back to reality, her hand resting on Emma’s. “What’s going on with you tonight? You seem... unsettled. Is everything alright at home?”

Emma felt her throat tighten. No, nothing was alright. Her familiar home had become strange and foreign. Her husband seemed possessed.

How could she confess this to Lily, who was now looking at her with concern in her innocent eyes? Muttering excuses about pending work deadlines, Emma stood up suddenly, feeling overwhelmed by the crowded bar and the noisy voices. Lily called out to her. Emma continued on, escaping into the night air. She took deep breaths, feeling a sense of freedom.

The darkness of the apartment greeted Emma as she gently opened the door. Her own breaths seemed loud in the silence. A feeling of disgust rose in her throat as she sensed it— The energy left behind by whatever had entered while she was away. It felt more like a violation than an intrusion. This was personal; it felt like a message crafted specifically for her.

Emma’s steps slowed as she approached the bedroom. What kind of horrifying experience awaited her on the other side of that door? She turned the doorknob with trembling fingers, feeling her heart pounding in her throat. In the

bedroom, everything appeared unchanged. Yet somehow it had been tainted by an unseen malevolence seeping from within the walls.

A soft whimper came from the bed, causing Emma to raise her flashlight with both arms. Two glimmering dots stared back at her from within tangled blankets disturbed by restless sleep.

It wasn't Sarena. It was her husband, who was trapped in the grip of yet another unsettling dream. In dreams, Sarena had the ability to assume any form she desired. A sense of dread overwhelmed Emma as she cautiously distanced herself from the figure lying on the bed, which seemed to be Peter, yet was not quite him. There was no haven from the terror that lurked within these walls and haunted their thoughts.

Chapter Eleven

The Fall

Startled awake, Emma's heart raced as the remnants of a nightmare clung to her mind. It was as if she could still see Peter being consumed by tendrils, his eyes pleading for her help. With a shiver she sat up and rubbed her temples feeling the ache in her head. Sleep had become another battlefield where her subconscious waged war against the spirits haunting their lives.

Squinting against the morning sunlight, Emma sluggishly made her way to the bathroom mirror. The reflection of a weary woman stared back at her, appearing unfamiliar. When had her cheeks become so hollow and her collarbones so prominent beneath her skin? This living nightmare was taking its toll on her well-being.

With effort, Emma managed to consume her usual breakfast of coffee and toast (which she could barely stomach these days) before attending to Peter's daily routine. Anxious and hovering nearby as he prepared breakfast, she watched as his jittery hands clumsily dropped one carton after another. The eggs sizzled in the silence that weighed upon them.

Since the incident with the sleeping pills, Emma no longer dared leave Peter alone. He had transformed into something like a child. He was harmless one moment but frighteningly unpredictable the next. So she remained vigilant, standing guard against his dreams.

Once Peter was settled in his room with notebooks and pens at hand, Emma leaned heavily against the door trying

to push away the exhaustion that constantly loomed over her.

Emma used to get bad headaches that felt like intense pain behind her eyelids. These headaches would come right before she started hallucinating things that weren't really there. Now, instead of seeing visions, the headaches just made her feel disoriented, like her days were all blurring together.

She knew she could endure this. Her only mission was to stay afloat and keep both of their heads above water. However, the relentless undertow always loomed, threatening to drag them down into the abyss where ghostly fish glided amidst forgotten wrecks. She had grown weary of battling against the current...

No, indulging in self-pity was a luxury she couldn't afford. What kind of wife— what kind of person? —would abandon her oars and let the current claim those under her care? Determinedly, Emma straightened herself and made her way toward her typewriter. She would keep earning with calloused hands until this ordeal concluded or until she couldn't go on any longer.

The following weeks streaked by in a haze of work and weary watchfulness over Peter. Emma eagerly accepted any freelance project she could find, desperate for income now that Peter's job had vanished into thin air. The additional hours spent hunched over her typewriter intensified the headache pressing behind her eyes.

Financial concerns joined the shifting lineup of anxieties tormenting her mind. Peter's psychiatrist visits and costly prescriptions added to the strain.

Emma found herself overwhelmed by the growing pile of bills and collection notices. To make ends meet, she resorted to selling belongings. As her financial struggles

intensified, she withdrew from her circle, allowing relationships to wither away while her world shrank to the confines of her apartment. She mustered every ounce of energy to maintain a façade of competence for her clients. Any criticism or delay in delivering work would ignite a deep sense of shame in Emma.

Peter, on the other hand, seemed more disconnected from reality with each passing day. Like a balloon, he floated above all constraints— a beautiful yet tragic sight. Emma could only watch helplessly as the ties between them frayed, and her efforts to hold on caused deep emotional pain and distress.

There were moments when Emma almost envied Peter's state. How she longed to escape from the worries that plagued her mind! However, she remained trapped by her responsibilities— counting every penny for groceries, managing clients and consumed by anxiety over rent.

The demands were relentless, while their resources steadily dwindled. Emma stared directly into the face of ruin, fully aware that one catastrophe could send everything spiraling into collapse. The fragile equilibrium she had managed to find was inherently unstable— they inched to the precipice with each passing day.

She felt herself unraveling at the seams— pulled tightly between the pressures of providing for their needs and caring for Peter as he slipped away from her grasp.

Who could she rely on when everything around her clearly indicated her failure? It was up to her to handle this sinking ship by herself, even if it meant tying herself to the mast as the waves grew more intense.

Chapter Twelve

Confrontation

Emma tightened her grip on the railing of the horse and buggy cart as it maneuvered through the busy streets, a whirlwind of conflicting emotions swirling in her mind. The trip to the grocery store felt like a battlefield, each price tag reminding her of their tightening finances and every choice serving as a concession to Peter's increasing obsession with Sarena.

She had hoped to find solace in the task, losing herself in the pleasure of selecting fresh produce and planning meals. However, the harsh reality of their lives was impossible to escape. It seemed that Peter was lost in a world beyond her reach.

As she stepped out of the cart into the driveway, a pang of nostalgia washed over Emma. The house that had once symbolized their love and shared dreams now felt like a prison. She longed for the Peter who used to greet her with warmth and support. He was trapped in some kind of nightmarish state, leaving Emma to face the waking world alone.

Emma stumbled through the doorway under the weight of grocery bags. With more force than necessary, she kicked the door shut as if venting her simmering frustration. After depositing groceries around the kitchen, she paused to catch her breath, feeling a sense of foreboding hanging heavily upon her heart.

Emma walked into Peter's study, the room that had become his sanctuary and her source of distress. She

discovered him sitting hunched over his desk, passionately scribbling page after page filled with visions of nightmares. His face appeared gaunt. His eyes held a detached expression.

“Peter,” she said sharply, her temper fraying, “I can’t continue carrying this burden. We need to have a conversation.”

Without looking up, Peter continued to move his hand across the paper. Frustration welled up inside Emma. She approached him purposefully and forcefully placed her hand on the desk, startling him.

“Look at me!” she exclaimed. “This cannot continue. You’re physically present but emotionally absent. Don’t you see? I’m struggling to keep us afloat. It feels like you don’t even notice.”

Suddenly, Peter’s eyes blazed with clarity. He stood up in agitation and seethed, “Do you think I want this? Do you think I chose for my mind to become a prison? Believe me when I say that I yearn to be the man you remember. I simply can’t.”

His voice cracked with emotion, offering Emma a glimpse of the man she loved—who was now living trapped and tormented, with seemingly no way out.

“It’s because of her!” Emma retorted, her eyes welling up with tears. “She took you away from me, from our life! Why can’t you see that? How can you still defend Sarena after everything she’s done?” (Delve deeper into the complex Peter through an exclusive sketch at rumizen.com/sketches)

Peter flinched as if he had been struck, his face contorting with anger and despair. “You don’t understand anything about her! This isn’t Sarena’s fault. Can’t you grasp that?” He turned away, his chest heaving. “Just leave me be.”

Emma stood there motionless, feeling the weight of his dismissal hit her like a blow to the stomach. She stumbled out of the room with her mind spinning and her heart shattered. She had opened up to Peter, exposing all her fears and pain, only to be met with anger and rejection.

In their bedroom, she collapsed onto the bed as tears streamed down her face. The confrontation had exposed a divide between them— a rift that seemed impossible to bridge. Peter's loyalty and love were now tied to his tormentor in a way Emma couldn't comprehend.

That night, she lay there gazing into the darkness as hope's last flicker faded away within her. She had lost the battle for Peter's heart. Now this malicious presence that had taken on Sarena's appearance would reveal its true nature.

She would have no choice but to succumb as it obliterated every remaining trace of the life she had once cherished deeply.

Chapter Thirteen

A Ray of Rationality

Emma stood outside the psychiatrist's office, her heart racing with anticipation. The plain waiting room on the other side of the door felt like a world far removed from the turmoil that had consumed her life. Was she really taking this step? Seeking assistance seemed like a betrayal, an admission that Peter's dreams were nothing but a psychological anomaly.

The decision to schedule this appointment had weighed heavily on Emma, causing sleepless nights filled with guilt and desperation. Every time Peter mentioned Sarena or she saw his gaze, she couldn't shake off her feeling of helplessness. She desperately sought any explanation that could make sense of this hellish downward spiral.

"Emma?" A familiar voice jolted her back into the present moment. Dr. Caldwell appeared at the entrance; her silver hair neatly tied back. Her friendly emerald eyes crinkled with a smile, inviting Emma to step inside.

The office exuded a sense of both comfort and professionalism. Diplomas and accolades adorned the walls while soft music played in the background. Anxiously perching herself on a leather couch opposite the doctor's armchair, Emma nervously clasped the fabric of her skirt.

"Well then, Emma," Dr. Caldwell began gently, her eyes showing concern. "In your words, why don't you share with me what has brought you here today?"

Emma took a breath, unsure where to begin. She started slowly attempting to explain Peter's dreams, his fixation on

Sarena and how it was affecting their relationship and finances. As she spoke the words aloud, it almost seemed unbelievable, like something out of a fantasy. She glanced at Dr. Caldwell, half expecting skepticism. Instead, she found empathy and attentiveness.

Dr. Caldwell listened carefully, nodding occasionally and taking notes. When Emma finished sharing her concerns, Dr. Caldwell leaned forward and clasped her hands together. “While these issues are undoubtedly distressing, I wouldn't be too alarmed yet,” she said reassuringly. “Vivid dreams and sleep disturbances can often be linked to stress and anxiety. Has anything significant happened in Peter's life recently?”

Emma hesitated for a moment as the rational explanation clashed with her deep-seated fears. She voiced her worries. “But this dream world with Sarena. It consumes him...”

“I understand your concern,” replied Dr. Caldwell in a soothing tone. “Dreams can be influenced by factors we don't fully understand. It is possible that “Sarena” represents desires or emotions within Peter. Perhaps exploring couples counseling could provide an opportunity for both of you to openly discuss these issues.”

Emma shifted uncomfortably as her thoughts raced. She had come seeking validation, not alternative explanations.

The doctor's compassionate, unwavering gaze made her stop and reconsider. Was she perhaps misinterpreting these issues? Seeing demons in shadows?

They continued their conversation, with Dr. Caldwell sharing insights about dream psychology, and offering reassurance that they could navigate this challenging

situation together. Emma listened attentively clinging to the hope of returning to normalcy.

In the end, Emma left with a pamphlet on dreaming and a recommendation for couples counseling, feeling unsettled. The visit had given her a glimmer of hope. But she couldn't fully believe that such neat explanations could encompass the forces tearing their lives apart. She was convinced that there were mysteries at play that went beyond what science could grasp.

As she made her way to her car, the rationality of the doctor's words clashed with the haunting reality of her experiences. The uncertainty was a heavy burden that left her even more bewildered and isolated than before.

Chapter Fourteen

Cognitive Dissonance

“Absolutely not!” Emma recoiled at the sharpness in Peter’s voice. She had just suggested cautiously that they consider couples counseling, as Dr. Caldwell had suggested. However, his refusal made it evident that she had touched a nerve.

“Peter, please,” she pleaded gently, her eyes filled with desperation. “I genuinely believe this could benefit us. Having a third party to help us navigate everything... It might make a difference.”

“You expect me to sit there while a stranger dissects my mind?” Peter snapped back, his face twisted with anger and disbelief. “To have my experiences reduced to symptoms of some ailment? No way.”

“Peter, I’m genuinely concerned about you and our relationship,” Emma implored tearfully. “I love you. I’m trying my best to understand. I’m scared. Can’t you see that?”

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes showing both sadness and frustration. Then, without uttering another word he stormed out of the room. Seconds later she heard the slam of a door.

Emma sank onto the couch, overwhelmed by a mix of hurt and frustration.

Why couldn’t he understand that she was only trying to help? Wasn’t it clear that she genuinely wanted to comprehend his situation? Their relationship felt like a shattered mosaic with pieces scraping against each other.

She approached Peter's decline from a standpoint of concern and clinical analysis. However, he seemed to exist in a realm of shifting dreams and overpowering emotions—a world where reason held no sway. It was a domain ruled by Sarena. How could they bridge this gap when their communication had become so disjointed?

Dr. Caldwell's explanations initially gave Emma some solace. Seeing Sarena as a symbol and interpreting the dreams as manifestations of stress—this made some sense. Emma clung to these interpretations, hoping they would bring Peter back from the brink.

Then she would catch him frantically scribbling in his journal, his eyes filled with intensity as if arguing with invisible adversaries or seeing beyond their mundane reality. Sometimes she found him awake late at night, whispering into the darkness with an expression twisted by fear and longing. Doubt would inevitably seep back in.

What if Peter was actually perceiving the world for what it was? Could those clinical definitions be comforting illusions obscuring truths? What if there was something to Sarena—an essence that eluded rational explanation?

Emma found herself stuck between realities constantly shifting between perspectives as she struggled to distinguish between what was real and what was merely her imagination. The world around her appeared uncertain as the boundaries between her dreams and waking life blurred.

She aimlessly wandered through their home, pausing at the entrance of Peter's study to observe him as he passionately scribbled away, completely absorbed in his own world. He was simultaneously familiar and distant to her, pouring all his energy and focus into something she couldn't fully comprehend.

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A chilling thought crossed her mind: what if she was truly losing him? What if the Peter she knew was slowly slipping away, consumed by a realm that she couldn't access? This fear coiled within her stomach like a knot, forcing her to realize that their love alone might not be enough to rescue him.

Something inexplicable seemed to be taking control of the man she loved. She feared that soon there would be no remnants left to salvage. As she retreated to their bedroom, the weight of their reality pressed heavily upon her shoulders. She felt isolated and adrift—lost in a tempest without guidance or direction.

Chapter Fifteen

Undeniable Signs

Emma anxiously stared out the window, her heart racing—when the phone suddenly rang. She chewed on her lip feeling a sense of unease. Three days ago, she had discovered a candle burning in their living room. It was a clove votive that neither she nor Peter had purchased. The flickering flame had captivated her. It also stirred up a feeling of dread in her stomach.

Seeking explanations and desperate for reassurance that she wasn't losing touch with reality like Peter seemed to be, Emma reached out to Dr. Caldwell. However, when she called the doctor's office, the receptionist informed her that Dr. Caldwell was away at a conference and hadn't specified a return date.

Emma found herself waiting anxiously, while this unsettling intrusion into their home continued to linger. The scent of the candle remained in the air, hauntingly reminding her of something. With each passing day, more signs emerged.

As Emma stepped out of her bedroom into the hallway, an unfamiliar floral perfume would greet her senses— one that didn't belong to her collection. She would catch shadows out of the corner of her eye when she knew she was alone, sending shivers down her spine. In the silence of the night, whispers and faint murmurs that made the hair on her arms stand on end— would echo around her.

Meanwhile, Peter seemed oblivious to these occurrences as he remained trapped within his world, plagued by tormenting dreams and voices.

His eyes, once so full of life, now held an unfocused gaze and the laughter that used to fill their home had faded away. He seemed like a stranger to her, lost in a world she couldn't understand. It filled her with overwhelming fear and dread.

Emma's appearance grew pale and restless as she was startled by every creak of the floorboards. She found herself whispering prayers she hadn't uttered since childhood, feeling embarrassed by this instinct but unable to resist it. Her nights were unsettled, plagued by dreams of looming figures and haunting melodies.

As the days passed with no word from the hospital, Emma hesitated to reach out, afraid of being seen as unstable. The world around her seemed to unravel at the seams; what was once familiar now felt eerie and threatening.

She teetered on the brink of madness in solitude, convinced that something ominous had crossed over into their lives. Friends and family tried offering comfort but failed to grasp the magnitude of her terror. She felt abandoned, trapped in a nightmare with no way out.

Then one night, awakened from sleep by an unfamiliar sound echoing through the hallways, Emma summoned her courage and ventured down the squeaky corridor to check on Peter.

The house appeared to come alive as she felt the flickering shadows in the corners illuminated by moonlight. When she entered his room, her foot accidentally brushed against something on the floor. Her heart skipped a beat as she picked up the object— a silk scarf intricately embroidered with an “S”. A mix of fear and disbelief

overwhelmed her, causing tears to well up in her eyes. This was no figment of her imagination; it was evidence that Sarena existed and had been present here.

Emma stumbled backward. She felt dizzy, as if the room were spinning around her and the walls were closing in. She sensed a presence, a chilling breeze brushing against her skin and a faint whisper in her ear. A realization hit her like a ton of bricks: they were not alone.

Her perception of reality had shifted drastically, forever blurring the lines between the possible and the impossible. The battle at hand was no longer about comprehension; it had become a fight for survival.

Chapter Sixteen

Confronting the Reality

Emma paced back and forth across the living room, tightly clutching a silk scarf in her trembling hand. Adorned with an “S,” the delicate material, seemed to emanate a powerful energy. As the early morning sunlight streamed through the windows, casting shadows, Emma anxiously awaited Peter’s appearance. The shocking revelation from the night before had shattered any remaining doubts. She knew she had to confront him more forcefully.

When Peter ambled into the room that morning, still bleary-eyed, Emma gathered her strength as usual. His complexion was pale. His eyes appeared hollow. Without uttering a word, she raised the scarf before him, studying his face intently.

Peter’s eyes widened with a mix of shock and confusion as he exclaimed sharply, “Where did you find that? Have you been searching through my belongings?”

“I discovered it in your room last night,” Emma replied with a calm that took great effort. The scarf felt heavy in her hand; it symbolized the nightmare they were both living. “However, I believe we both understand that it doesn’t belong to me or you.” She paused momentarily, her heart pounding in her chest. “It belongs to Sarena, doesn’t it?”

Peter’s shoulders slumped as he sank onto the couch.

He appeared to struggle for what felt like an eternity before locking eyes with Emma. His voice, soft and audibly defeated, confessed, “I can’t keep deceiving you. Sarena...

she occupies my thoughts constantly. Whether I'm asleep or awake, it's as if she has become a part of me.”

Emma was struck by his admission with such force that she sank into a chair, the scarf slipping from her grasp and gently fluttering to the floor. A cold realization settled in the pit of her stomach: her worst fears had come true, his obsession had infiltrated his waking consciousness.

“Peter, please think clearly,” she implored in a voice that cracked with emotion. “Sarena isn't real! I understand that your experiences feel genuine. She only exists within your dreams.”

Peter's expression hardened as his eyes narrowed. “So nothing unusual has happened to you? No messages from her?” Emma's stunned expression spoke volumes, causing him to laugh bitterly—a sound that sent shivers down her spine. “See? You can't deny it either.”

Emma was overcome with dizziness; her hands gripped the armrests of the chair tightly as her thoughts spun uncontrollably. Was this madness or truth?

The room felt suffocating as Peter's words reverberated like a haunting melody. She gazed into his eyes, once brimming with warmth and love, now distant and tormented.

“I can sense that something is unfolding,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “However, we mustn't allow it to tear us apart Peter. We need to face it together.”

Peter's expression twisted with anger and anguish. “What are we fighting against? You don't understand, Emma. Sarena isn't merely a figment of my imagination. She's real.”

Emma's heart ached at the torment in his voice and the unyielding belief that consumed him. In that moment, she

realized arguing was futile— Peter had gone far down this path. She felt utterly alone.

A strange calm washed over her as clarity emerged from the chaos of her thoughts. Suddenly, she knew what she had to do.

She would disregard reason, scientific explanations, or others' concerns. If this phenomenon was supernatural in nature, she would confront it head on, according to its terms. This apparition had haunted her for long enough— it was time for a direct confrontation.

With shaking legs but unwavering determination, she rose to her feet. “I will find a way to substantiate it Peter. I’ll figure out a plan to demonstrate that Sarena is real. If she truly exists, I’ll confront her. I’m prepared to do whatever it takes to bring you back.”

Emma felt her resolve growing stronger within her. Retrieving the silk scarf from the ground, she focused on its texture as a reminder of the truth she must confront.

Chapter Seventeen

A Beacon in the Night

Emma hesitated in front of the oak door, her heart racing with anticipation. She carefully examined the plaque in front of her, which read “Dr. T. Bright, Dream Researcher.” Sweeping away a strand of hair that had fallen across her eyes, she tried to steady her trembling hands. It had required all her efforts to locate this expert on the mysteries of dreams. Emma desperately hoped that he would be able to shed some light on the haunting nightmares that plagued her and Peter.

Summoning her courage, she took a breath and knocked firmly on the door. After a moment it creaked open, revealing a man with wisps of white hair and piercing blue eyes that seemed to peer into her very soul.

“Mr. Bright? I’m Emma— nice to finally meet you,” she began, keeping her voice just above a whisper. “I was hoping we could discuss...”

“Yes, yes please come inside.” Dr. Bright interrupted in a lilting, arcane tone as he ushered her into the softly lit room. The space was adorned with instruments and artifacts whose purposes were beyond Emma’s understanding. Shelves lined the walls filled with books and mysterious vials.

Intriguing symbols and enigmatic scribbles adorned the walls, their presence highlighted by flickering candlelight.

Dr. Bright took a seat behind the desk, clasping his hands together as he focused his gaze on Emma. The room enveloped her in the smell of books and fragrant herbs.

“So you mentioned that your husband has been having dreams about a presence, accompanied by supernatural events?” he asked with genuine curiosity in his voice.

Emma nodded, surprised by his directness. His straightforward summary of her situation was both unexpected and comforting. Hesitant at first, she began sharing Peter’s fixation on the events that had plagued them—her shattered hopes and lingering doubts. She spoke about the scarf, the shadows lurking around and the whispers that seemed to follow her every step.

As she recounted her experiences, Emma noticed Dr. Bright listening intently in silence—his slender figure was motionless, except for blinks of his piercing eyes. The room seemed to absorb her words, as if they held some meaning for the artifacts and symbols surrounding them.

When Emma finally fell silent, an expectant hush settled over the room like a cloak.

Dr. Bright lapsed into silence as well, fixing his gaze on a point in the distance as thoughts consumed him.

After some time, he finally spoke to Emma assuring her that he wouldn't dismiss her experiences. He explained that her encounters aligned with phenomena he had studied extensively. He rummaged through a drawer and retrieved a journal filled with his research notes, suggesting that what she had encountered might exist beyond the realm of dreams.

Upon hearing his words, Emma’s heart raced with a mix of hope and fear. Could it be possible that she wasn't alone in this terrifying situation?

Dr. Bright reassured her of his willingness to assist in any way he could, offering her his business card along with the journal. He encouraged her to contact him the following day so they could further investigate the matter together. He

emphasized the importance of studying the notes, as they might provide insights into what she was facing.

With overflowing gratitude, Emma held onto the card and journal as she stepped back into the sun's comforting warmth. In that moment, after months of darkness, she felt a glimmer of hope shining through. No matter what challenges lay ahead, she knew she wouldn't have to face them alone.

Finally, she had found a mentor who would help guide her through this ordeal and, hopefully, rescue Peter.

As she stepped away from the door it seemed to close on its own, making a clicking sound that echoed in her ears. A subtle shiver ran down her spine. She brushed it off and focused on continuing her journey.

Chapter Eighteen

Into the Dream World

Emma rushed up the pathway to Dr. Bright's house, feeling a surge of excitement after their first meeting. She believed that if anyone could make sense of the chaos she was experiencing, it would be the doctor. As she pushed open the creaking door, it felt as if she was being welcomed into a world that was both unfamiliar and captivating.

Dr. Bright greeted her with a knowing smile. They settled down around an oak table adorned with leather journals, ceramic cups filled with feathered pens and peculiar artifacts that hinted at a lifetime of esoteric exploration. Emma's nerves were on edge. Her mind was brimming with questions as she stood on the brink of long-awaited answers. The room seemed to pulsate with knowledge, drawing her in as she eagerly sought to unravel the mysteries that had plagued her for so long.

Dr. Bright peered at her intently, his eyes flickering with curiosity before he spoke. (Visualize the mystical Dr. Bright through exclusive character art at rumizen.com/sketches) "I believe we can help your husband by inducing a lucid dream state," he said knowingly. He then asked Emma if she had ever heard of lucid dreaming.

Shaking her head in anticipation, Emma leaned forward attentively as the doctor explained what lucid dreaming entailed. First, it is a state where one becomes aware that one is dreaming. One can even influence the events within one's dreamscape. Skilled lucid dreamers can even enter others'

dreams— an idea that both thrilled and frightened Emma, opening doors to possibilities she had never considered.

“So you think I could actually enter Peter’s dreams? Interact with... her?” Emma inquired, her voice filled with a mix of anticipation and anxiety.

Dr. Bright responded cautiously, “It’s a possibility. However, the dream world is unpredictable and even dangerous. Intruding upon dream entities may not be well received.” His expression turned serious, conveying the importance of the rules governing this realm.

He proceeded to explain techniques for achieving lucidity, controlling dreams, and enhancing focus. Emma’s mind swirled with an abundance of knowledge. The potential seemed immense, as did the risks. Yet any opportunity to save Peter would be worth facing dangers.

As Dr. Bright delved further into the topic, demonstrating devices and tools used for manipulating dreams, Emma’s thoughts raced. Could she truly reach Peter in this manner? Was she prepared to engage in a battle of dreams and determination against Sarena?

The session concluded with Dr. Bright recommending that Emma read about dreaming and maintain a dream journal. As she left their meeting, excitement mingled with fear coursed through Emma’s veins. She stood at the threshold between waking reality and the potential of dreams— a territory awaiting her exploration.

Chapter Nineteen

The First Attempt

Emma settled down on the couch holding her dream journal. Today was the day she would attempt lucid dreaming with Dr. Bright's guidance. He had recommended starting by entering a dream before attempting to access Peter's dreams. Emma felt a mix of excitement and nervousness in her stomach.

She closed her eyes, and followed Dr. Bright's instructions, as she focused on relaxing each muscle group. As her breathing slowed, she imagined descending a staircase, allowing herself to be enveloped by the world of dreams.

Gradually, shapes and colors began to bloom in her mind's eye. Emma found herself walking through a meadow filled with plants. The air smelled fresh and the sunlight warmed her skin.

Suddenly, Emma realized she was inside a dream. She paused for a moment, taking in her surroundings. Each blade of grass was distinct and the scent of lavender was intoxicatingly vivid. She gently touched the flowers with her hands, reveling in the sensations.

Recalling Dr. Bright's advice, Emma focused on stabilizing her dream experience. The colors became more vivid. She felt completely immersed in the meadow setting. Taking steps forward, she felt buoyed by her progress.

A flickering movement at the edge of the meadow caught Emma's attention, causing her heart to race as she moved closer to investigate.

A break in the bushes revealed a path made of stones disappearing into the distance. Drawn forward, Emma stepped through the fallen leaves.

The path led to a courtyard surrounded by columns. Mist swirled close to the ground, concealing the stones beneath her feet. In the center of the courtyard stood a figure. It was tall, slender, and emanated a menacing air. Through the mist, Emma caught a glimpse of eyes that seemed to fixate on her, freezing her in place.

Emma woke up with a scream, her heart racing and her body covered in sweat. The remnants of the dream faded away as she realized she hadn't found Sarena this time. However, this lucid dream had shown Emma that it had the power to transport her into a realm she both feared and longed to explore.

After waking up, Emma's heart continued pounding for several minutes. Her hand trembled as she reached for her journal and meticulously recorded every detail of that dream, from its striking imagery and captivating scents to the terrifying encounter in the courtyard.

She found herself replaying the dream repeatedly in her mind, attempting to decipher the meaning behind that figure. Was it merely an embodiment of her fears? Did it hold significance? Dr. Bright had cautioned Emma about dreams' unpredictable nature. This one felt distinct.

As the hours passed during that day, Emma's initial fear transformed into determination.

She was aware that she was on the path; the realm of dreams had revealed itself to her. She had caught a glimpse of something both fascinating and frightening. There was still more to explore and comprehend.

She reached out to Dr. Bright, sharing her experience and seeking his insights. His calm reassurance boosted her

confidence. Together they devised a step-by-step plan, for the steps discussing techniques to delve into deeper layers of the dream world and prepare for her eventual confrontation with Sarena.

As Emma settled into bed that night, she was buoyed by her newfound determination. Now that the dream world had revealed some of its secrets to her, she was fully prepared to immerse herself again. The battle had now entered a new stage. Emma was ready to confront it fearlessly.

Chapter Twenty

Reality Check

Emma's excitement about her progress with dreaming didn't last long. The following morning, as she shared her experience during breakfast, Peter's expression turned dark.

"Just to clarify, are you now invading my dreams?" He slammed his napkin onto the table, his face filled with disbelief. "Have you considered how violating that feels?"

Emma recoiled, her heart racing. "That's not what I meant at all! I just want to understand what you're going through. Dr. Bright thinks it could be helpful." Her voice trembled as she spoke, feeling like her words were inadequate.

"Oh, so now some quack of a doctor knows my business?" Peter let out a scornful laugh and narrowed his eyes. "Thanks for keeping my dreams safe. Maybe the two of you can dissect my mind next."

He stormed off, leaving Emma stunned with her breakfast untouched. She had expected support and understanding, not this hostility, when all she wanted was to connect with him in this world he inhabited. But the more she tried to reach out to him, the more he resisted. Was it wrong of her to try bridging the gap between them?

In the days that followed, an uneasy tension settled in their apartment. Peter grew silent and voided Emma's attempts at reconciliation.

His gaze appeared distant, his warm smile now replaced by a façade. Emma began to feel hesitant to discuss her

dreams, sensing a growing distance between them. Her heart ached as their connection continued to crumble.

The breaking point arrived when Emma entered the living room and discovered Peter ripping pages from her dream journal, his face distorted by anger.

“Peter!” She instinctively reached out to snatch the journal. “What are you doing?”

He let go of the journal, breathing heavily. “I won't allow you to intrude upon what's mine,” he remarked coldly, his eyes burning with an anger she had never witnessed in him.

Emma clung onto the torn journal, suppressing tears that threatened to spill over. She had only sought understanding and wanted to help him. Now she felt herself hurtling toward something unbearable. The man standing before her felt like a stranger.

Alone on the couch that night, Emma cradled the broken binding of her journal. She had been so close to glimpsing Sarena's realm and finding a way to rescue Peter. She couldn't give up now. If she had to venture into those realms and keep it a secret, so be it. She refused to lose Peter without putting up a fight. With a sinking feeling in her heart, she knew that the battle had just begun.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shared Dreams

Emma slipped deeper into sleep, her mind fixated on her purpose. After hours of practicing, tonight was the night she would endeavor to enter Peter's dreams. Dr. Bright had given her guidance on how to avoid detection of her intrusion into Peter's psyche. Emma knew she had to be watchful yet invisible.

As Emma envisioned herself descending into unconsciousness, her surroundings began to transform. The darkness behind her eyes morphed into a furnished bedroom. Emma couldn't catch her breath. She had entered the realm of dreams.

Getting her bearings, she proceeded with caution to explore the space. Every detail felt real and tangible, from the carpet beneath her feet to the oil paintings gracing the walls. Through a window, soft evening light cast a haze upon a couple locked in an embrace on a canopied bed. Emma felt a pain in her chest. It was Peter... and Sarena. (See the magnetic Sarena and Peter visualized in exclusive art at rumizen.com/sketches)

Suppressing her emotions, Emma observed with detachment, studying the apparition who had captivated her husband. Sarena possessed an undeniable allure with ebony hair, prominent cheekbones and lips curved in a smile. She radiated both power and seduction while maintaining an air of softness. Emma could understand why Peter found himself drawn to Sarena, despite feeling a twinge of envy ignite within her.

Sarena whispered something into Peter's ear. He responded with laughter, drawing her closer. The ease of their intimacy caused an ache within Emma.

When was the last time she and Peter shared laughter, without any worries or inhibitions? She had to remind herself that this illusion was dangerous. Sarena was not a woman.

Gently pulling her gaze away, Emma silently retreated from the bedroom. The extent of Sarena's influence over Peter had become painfully evident. Emma had witnessed enough to understand the depth of her enchantment.

She needed to find a way to break that spell somehow. Peter was still trapped within his bewitched mind, and for his sake, she would uncover a means to shatter Sarena's deceit and finally bring him home.

As Emma continued her journey through the realm of dreams, she stumbled upon fragments of memories and scenes from Peter's subconscious. The pieces of their shared past were intertwined with haunting images of Sarena, creating a disorienting mosaic of love and obsession. The more Emma explored, the more entangled Sarena's presence became in their formerly happy life.

Emma's heart ached as she realized the extent of Sarena's manipulation. This dream woman had not just invaded their present. She had rewritten their past, casting a shadow over every joyful memory they shared. Tears filled Emma's eyes as she grasped the magnitude of the battle that lay ahead.

With a sense of resolve, she centered her thoughts, remembering the guidance given by Dr. Bright on navigating the realm of dreams. If Sarena possessed the ability to manipulate reality, Emma was determined to acquire that ability. She intended to regain their shared history, stand up

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for their love and permanently remove Sarena from their existence.

The Dream Wife

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sarena's Lure

Night after night, Emma found herself appearing in Peter's dreams and observing his interactions with Sarena. Each time it happened she struggled to make sense of her conflicting emotions.

She longed to understand what captivated Peter about this woman who frequented his dreams. The unease she felt while witnessing him caress Sarena's body and exchange whispers of devotion couldn't be ignored.

Emma tried to convince herself that it was only natural to feel unsettled seeing your partner involved with someone else, even if it was within the realm of imagination. However, her discomfort ran deeper. She recognized something in Sarena that she believed she lacked: a sensuality that attracted Peter like a moth to a flame.

During moments of introspection, Emma acknowledged a sense of envy stirring inside her. Her envy wasn't directed toward Sarena as an individual, but toward the qualities she embodied. They were qualities that Emma felt were absent in herself. She had taken Peter's love for granted, had been secure in their partnership. Now she faced the possibility that their bond might not be as unbreakable as she had once thought.

This realization fueled Emma's determination to fight for Peter and free him from Sarena's hold. Every night, as Emma witnessed their intimacy within the realm of dreams, she focused on understanding her rival.

No matter how hard she tried, understanding always seemed to elude her.

It had to do with how Sarena transitioned between different personas, instinctively grasping Peter's desires in a way that Emma no longer could.

Sarena had completely captivated Peter, binding him tightly to her. However, Emma refused to accept defeat. (Bring the mysterious Sarena to life with an exclusive sketch at rumizen.com/sketches) She persisted in her belief that knowledge is power. She believed that the more she uncovered about Sarena's hold over Peter, the greater her chances would be of breaking it. She only hoped that it would be enough to bring him back.

Emma's heart raced as she again entered Peter's dream and found herself in a dining hall. There, Peter and Sarena sat at a table with their eyes locked in connection. Concealing herself behind a pillar, Emma observed them as their conversation took a turn— discussing Emma herself.

In a soothing voice, Sarena portrayed Emma as someone from Peter's past. "She never truly understood you like I do, my love," she said softly. "She never delved into the depths of your soul."

Uncertainty clouded Peter's eyes and a flicker of guilt crossed his face. "I know," he whispered gently. "But I still have feelings for her."

Sarena tenderly caressed Peter's cheek, expressing her understanding.

"I can sense that those feelings are still there, but it seems like she's holding you back." Hearing this, Emma trembled with a mix of anger and despair. It wasn't about Sarena's attempt to seduce Peter; it felt like she was actively trying to erase Emma from his life.

This realization marked a turning point for Emma. She now understood that this went beyond competing for Peter's affection; it was a battle for his soul. Sarena's allure went beyond attraction; it promised Peter understanding, connection and the freedom to be oneself.

As Emma focused on the moment, determination surged within her, fueling her spirit.

She wasn't just going to fight for Peter; she was determined to reignite the connection they once shared. Emma would show him that their love was genuine, deeply rooted and worth fighting for.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Glimpse of the Past

Emma awoke to find herself in the country cottage of Peter's dreams. The air was filled with the scent of dried herbs and freshly baked bread. As she blinked in confusion she noticed a figure with hair hunched over a rough-hewn table, grinding herbs using a mortar and pestle. It was Sarena. She was much younger, still in her girlhood days. Her features were softer and her eyes filled with optimism, nothing like the seductress she would later become.

Intrigued by this glimpse into Sarena's past before she appeared in Peter's dreams, Emma approached cautiously so as not to disturb the dream scene. She hoped to gain insights into Sarena's origins and motivations. The young Sarena worked diligently, occasionally pausing to pull her hair back from falling across her face. Emma noticed that she wore a dress and apron and had stained hands, suggesting perhaps some sort of role as a servant or apprentice. The cottage itself was neat yet rustic, adorned with drying plants hanging from the rafters and a relaxed black cat lounging near the hearth.

Suddenly, the door swung open abruptly. An older woman entered with an expression as ominous as thunderclouds.

"Have you finished preparing the remedies?" she exclaimed in a harsh tone. She startled young Sarena, who almost spilled the contents of the mortar. She nodded timidly in response. The stern woman, scrutinized Sarena's work with a discerning eye before expressing her

dissatisfaction, “You could have been faster. Pay more attention to your tasks next time.”

Sarena’s eyes betrayed a flicker of fear as she lowered her head, accepting the rebuke without offering any resistance. Without uttering another word, the older woman departed, leaving behind an atmosphere filled with tension.

Something about Sarena’s expression and her vulnerability under the woman’s gaze unexpectedly tugged at Emma’s heartstrings. In that moment, Sarena seemed like a girl trapped under her mistress’ control—eager to please but always falling short of expectations.

Emma continued observing as Sarena resumed her work. It was then that she noticed a hidden book tucked away beneath the table—a collection of plant sketches and handwritten notes. Was Sarena secretly studying? Perhaps aspiring for something other than servitude?

Her allure and power remained dormant for now. Emma sensed a strength within Sarena—a spark that hinted at the formidable woman she would eventually become.

As thoughts of the complexity of Sarena’s character swirled through Emma’s mind, the image of the cottage slowly faded away.

She had always seen Sarena as an adversary. Could there be more to her? Did she possess a soul that could be reached? Was there a background that shaped her into her current self?

Emma woke up feeling uneasy, yet determined to uncover the identity of the woman behind the sorcery. Understanding her past might hold the key to securing Peter’s future. Emma now realized that Sarena wasn’t a creation of her dreams, but rather an individual with a rich story full of varied experiences and perhaps even pain. The

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mission to save Peter had grown more complex. Emma braced herself for what lay ahead.

The Dream Wife

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Dreamer and the Dreamt

Emma took a breath, trying to steady herself as she stood before Peter. The weight of her secret burdened her, torn between the guilt of invading his dreams and her desperate desire to understand and help him. She yearned for some kind of connection, a shared purpose that could bridge the growing distance between them.

“Peter there’s something I have to confess,” she began softly, her voice catching in her throat. He looked up from his notebook, his eyes tired and attentive. The furrows on his forehead revealed the burden of stress he carried.

Emma continued cautiously, “I’ve been entering your dreams... practicing lucid dreaming with Dr. Bright’s guidance.” Her words hung in the air—the admission couldn’t be undone.

Peter’s expressions shifted rapidly between confusion, shock and anger. “WHAT? How is that even possible?” he demanded, his voice rising. “You had no right to invade my dreams!”

“Please,” Emma said desperately as her heart raced in her chest. She began recounting everything she had witnessed, including the vision of Sarena as an innocent young woman in servitude; every detail spilled out with a trembling voice.

Peter’s anger transformed into disbelief.

“You must have just made that up,” he scoffed, his voice filled with disdain. “Sarena has always been the way she is now. Forever unchanging.”

Emma tried to control her frustration, tears welling up in her eyes. “I know it might seem unbelievable. I promise you it's true. She has a past, a soul that we can't fully comprehend.”

Peter abruptly stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. “I think it's best if you leave now,” he said coldly.

Emma felt her heart sink. She had taken a risk, hoping this revelation would shake him and open up a chance for understanding. His loyalty to Sarena ran deeper than she had realized. His rejection was wounding and left her feeling even more isolated.

That night Emma wept as she clutched her pillow tightly and sobs shook her body. She once again mourned the loss of their connection and the intimacy they once shared. How could she fight for their bond when he refused to meet her halfway and rejected all attempts at reconciliation?

As sleep eluded her and haunting images of Peter's accusing gaze filled her mind, Emma realized that the battle was no longer against Sarena and the dream world.

It had turned into a battle to salvage their love, to restore the trust and understanding that had once formed the foundation of their relationship.

In the depths of her mind, a persistent uncertainty took hold. Had she crossed a line? Was the harm irreparable? These questions left her with the fear that their love could be lost forever.

As the first rays of morning light peeked through the curtains, Emma made a promise. She wouldn't give up on Peter. She would confront the darkness and the enigma that was Sarena. For their love— for their future— she would

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courageously face the unknown and fight with all her strength.

The Dream Wife

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Decision

Emma stared out of the rain-speckled window, her hands clutching a cool cup of tea. Her mind churned like the storm raging outside. Memories of Peter's gaze, Sarena's smile and the haunting shadows from her dream world flickered through her thoughts, all leading to an inevitable conclusion.

Living this life on the sidelines, helplessly watching Sarena ensnare Peter in her web of darkness, was no longer sustainable for Emma. The time had come to take action.

With effort, Emma mustered the courage to face the reality she had long ignored. She was dealing with forces that transcended existence. Peter was under the influence of an entity capable of manipulating dreams and sowing madness. Through her dreams, Emma had glimpsed realms beyond her comprehension.

Her heart raced as she contemplated what lay ahead. To reclaim Peter and revive their shared life, she would have to confront this threat on its turf— descending again into his dreamscape and directly challenging Sarena's seductive tricks and deceit.

The prospect was terrifying. A growing resolve within Emma subdued her fear. She would no longer cower from this battle.

Summoning her courage, she approached Peter to share her decision. With a trembling voice, she began, "Peter, there's something I need to discuss with you."

Peter lifted his gaze from his notebook, his eyes bloodshot but alert. Concerned, he asked, “What is it, Emma?”

Taking a breath and finding strength in her words, she declared firmly, “I have reached a decision. I intend to confront Sarena within your dreams. It is there that I will face her and challenge the power she holds over you.”

Peter’s face flickered through confusion, shock and then outrage in succession. He protested urgently, “What? How can you even contemplate this? Emma, this is too dangerous!”

Tears welled up in Emma’s eyes as she responded with determination. “I must do this. I cannot bear to watch as she destroys you— destroys us. It ends now.”

Their voices intertwined with a combination of fear and love as they argued and pleaded with each other. Peter implored Emma to reconsider. Eventually, relenting to her determination, he conceded.

He pulled her close into an embrace filled with desperation and longing for what they had lost along the way.

The rest of the day was dedicated to getting ready. They carefully studied Dr. Bright’s notes, discussed strategies and even shared some laughter as they reminisced about moments from their shared past. Those memories provided comfort to their wounded spirits, serving as a reminder of what they were fighting for.

As night descended, Emma’s determination became resolute. The path that lay ahead was filled with danger and uncertainty. She would face it fearlessly. Her love for Peter and her belief in their future together would serve as her guiding light.

Rumi Zen Zapp

She only hoped that she possessed sufficient strength to face the challenges that awaited her.

The Dream Wife

Chapter Twenty-Six

Preparation

The following weeks went by in a whirl of preparation, guided by Dr. Bright. With Emma's decision to confront Sarena in the dream realm, failure was simply not an option. Each day they met in Dr. Bright's study, surrounded by books and mystical objects.

Dr. Bright proved to be a demanding mentor, pushing Emma relentlessly to ensure she was ready for any tricks the phantom might employ. He emphasized that dreams operate with a logic that we can't fully comprehend and advised her to be agile and prepared for unexpected challenges.

They dedicated hours to practicing techniques for controlling dreams: summoning objects, manipulating the dream environment and maintaining awareness amidst visions. Emma would lie down, entering a trance guided by Dr. Bright's voice as he meticulously examined her control over the dreamscape. The dreams became both a battleground and a realm of triumph over fear.

Peter played a role, too, offering assistance in researching methods of manipulating dreams and gently bringing Emma back from her dives into scholarly texts. Despite his initial hesitation, he became her source of stability, offering an encouraging smile or a comforting embrace.

Their connection gradually grew warmer as they shared a purpose.

Late in the evening, they would find themselves sitting side by side, engrossed in books or engaged in

conversations. Their discussions carried a touch of vulnerability as they openly acknowledged their mistakes and the distance between them.

The night before their planned confrontation, sleep eluded them both as anticipation coursed through their veins. They stayed awake into the wee hours, speaking softly and fondly as they reminisced about their whirlwind courtship and the blissful early years they shared.

“I should have cherished what we had instead of taking it for granted,” Emma confessed, her eyes shimmering with tears. Peter gently squeezed her hand, offering forgiveness without hesitation.

“No matter what lies ahead, I believe in your ability to face it,” he said in a trembling voice with emotion. “You’re braver than I ever was.” Upon hearing those words, Emma felt a surge of love and protectiveness well up inside her. She pledged to herself and to him that she would conquer this struggle for the sake of their future together.

As Peter finally succumbed to sleep, Emma gazed at his face. “I refuse to let darkness claim you,” she whispered solemnly. Her vow echoed through the room as a testament to her determination. Tomorrow awaited— a plunge into uncertainty. She was resolved not to hesitate. The radiant light they shared was worth fighting for.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Confrontation

Emma descended into the realm of dreams, preparing herself for the challenge. She imagined an iron gate and willed it to materialize before her. Beyond its confines stood a manor. This battleground she had conjured in her mind was where she would finally confront her adversary.

Approaching the imposing structure, Emma witnessed the decay of the surrounding foliage. Sinister shadows converged upon the rooftops, swirling like sentient entities. The very atmosphere seemed to quiver with anticipation, whispering threats that sent shivers down Emma's spine.

Nevertheless, she remained resolute, pushing open the weathered door. Inside was awaited a labyrinth of lit corridors that exuded a menacing aura, each turn leading deeper into darkness. Her voice resounded confidently: "I've come to confront you, sorceress!"

Her declaration reverberated through the passageways. Specks of light danced in the gloom and coalesced into a figure that was now approaching her. It was Sarena. She was ethereal and pale like moonlight. Her lips were curled into a rueful smile.

"Do you dare intrude upon my domain?" Sarena's voice was gentle yet laced with a hissing quality like silk gliding over steel. Emma held her ground as Sarena circled her, sensing the power emanating from within her.

"I can't stand by and watch you ruin him any longer," Emma declared, feeling a surge of pride as she managed to steady her voice. "Let go of my husband now!"

Sarena threw her head back and laughed, sending shivers down Emma's spine. "Oh, foolish girl. You're stumbling blindly into realms beyond your reach." Her violet eyes flickered with amusement. "And now you'll be joining us for eternity..."

Emma felt ethereal tendrils gripping her wrists and ankles, anchoring her in place. Panic threatened to consume her. She fought it off by focusing on her love for Peter. She envisioned a light symbolizing her bravery and compelled the shadows to retreat.

"You hold no power over me," she spat defiantly and with conviction.

Sarena's face contorted with rage as she summoned creatures from the depths of darkness; their malevolent eyes glowed ominously. The dream realm itself seemed to twist and warp at Sarena's command.

"Do you really believe your love is enough to defeat me?" Sarena hissed, every word dripping with scorn. "You know nothing about the depths of darkness, pain or longing. You cannot possibly win." Emma's heart raced. She stood her ground bravely countering Sarena's attacks with unwavering conviction. Her love for Peter and her determination to win him back fueled every move she made.

The battle between them raged on a dance of opposing wills, a struggle between darkness and light. Sarena's taunts grew increasingly personal as she probed into Emma's fears and insecurities. But Emma refused to give in; instead, her resolve strengthened with each assault.

As the confrontation reached its climax, Emma experienced a clarity— an insight into Sarena's nature. She realized that there was more to this entity than evil; something wounded and desperate lurked beneath the surface.

Rumi Zen Zapp

Could this understanding be the key to reaching Peter?
Could compassion become her weapon?

The Dream Wife

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Standoff

Sarena's face contorted into an expression of disgust as Emma stood confidently in front of her. "Do you really have the audacity to challenge me in my domain?" she said, her voice dripping disdainfully.

"I'm here to reclaim what belongs to me," Emma responded, her voice unwavering despite the fear gnawing at her from within. "You no longer hold any power over Peter."

Sarena let out a heartless laugh. "Do you honestly believe your love can save him? How pathetic. He is mine now. There is nothing you can do to alter that fact."

"We shall see," Emma declared, drawing upon the techniques she had developed under Dr. Bright's guidance.

The dreamlike setting twisted and swayed as Sarena unleashed her abilities, conjuring visions to inspire fear and confusion. Emma stumbled, almost losing her footing amidst the chaos, but remained steadfast, her love for Peter a guiding light in the darkness.

"You cannot emerge victorious," Sarena hissed, transforming into a serpent. "Your love is feeble. I will annihilate it."

Emma's heart ached at those words. She refused to be swayed.

"My love is powerful," she responded. "It will be the force that overcomes you." With a cry she struck out, her thoughts becoming her weapon and her determination acting as her shield.

The battle of wills raged on with neither side willing to surrender. The dream world became a battlefield of changing realities and bewildering illusions. Emma knew that she was confronting a formidable entity. She also knew that she fought for something pure and genuine.

Summoning her reserves of strength, Emma launched a desperate attack against Sarena. Her love for Peter fueled her resolve. Sarena let out a scream as her form disintegrated, her powers diminishing.

“You can never defeat me!” Sarena shrieked. Her voice faded away as she crumbled into nothingness. “I shall return. I will always return.”

Emma stood there panting heavily as the dream world settled around her. She had accomplished it. Sarena was gone. Peter was free.

She woke up to find herself trembling uncontrollably while her mind spun from the triumph. Peter stood by her side, his eyes wide with astonishment and his face pale.

“You did it,” he whispered softly while pulling her close in his arms. “You saved me.”

Emma allowed herself a moment to relish in the victory; a combination of love and relief surged within her.

In her heart, she had a feeling that the fight wasn't completely finished. Sarena's words stayed with her, a vow that sent shivers down her spine.

They may have emerged victorious from the war, but the peace that followed was uneasy. Although the darkness had been defeated, its remnants still lingered, biding their time.

Their future was uncertain, but Emma was certain of one thing; she would confront it with bravery, love and unwavering determination. Whatever challenges lay ahead, she was prepared.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Picking up the Pieces

Peter's soft words, "You saved me," reverberated in Emma's mind as the sun rose on a new day. The triumph they had shared over the darkness still felt fresh and surreal. It was hard for her to believe they had emerged victorious. The lingering shadows seemed to tease her with uncertainty.

Peter stirred from his slumber, his tired eyes meeting hers. Sensing her turmoil, he asked, "Are you okay?"

Emma managed a smile. "I'm fine," she replied, taking a moment to reflect on everything that had transpired.

He pulled her closer, his touch serving as an anchor. "It's all behind us now. We're safe," he reassured her, although a flicker of doubt in his eyes betrayed him. They both understood that the battle had left scars—wounds that would take time to heal.

Days turned into weeks as they focused on rebuilding their lives. Seeking support to overcome the trauma and finding solace in one another's presence became their pillars of strength. Gradually, the nightmares of the accursed manor and the malevolent being who had taken on Sarena's appearance began to fade, replaced by hope and love.

As their wounds mended, Peter proposed renewing their vows—a gesture to reaffirm their commitment and start afresh. Emma's heart swelled with joy at the idea.

They had endured the storm side by side. This was an opportunity to rejoice in their love, free from the shadow of Sarena. Their evenings were spent planning the renewal ceremony, carefully selecting words to express their

commitment. Laughter and happiness returned to their home, filling it with warmth and radiance. However, every now and then Emma couldn't help but cast a glance over her shoulder, plagued by a lingering uncertainty. Was it truly over? Had they truly conquered Sarena? Or was this merely a respite?

But as they stood together, hands intertwined, as they eagerly anticipated the future, Emma pushed those doubts aside. They had each other. That was all that mattered. Everything that was once shattered appeared ready to be restored. The path ahead was uncertain, but they were prepared to confront it— together.

Chapter Thirty

New Beginnings

“What do you think about using lilies for the centerpieces?” Peter inquired, delicately cradling an ivory bloom for examination.

Emma looked up from the assortment of samples spread out on the kitchen table, watching Peter studying the lily with a smile. Her heart swelled with warmth at the sight. Discussing the details of their vow renewal together, felt like rays of sunshine after a long and relentless storm.

In the weeks following Emma’s confrontation with Sarena, she and Peter had gradually started to reconstruct the foundations of their relationship. There were still painful memories, and a hint of mistrust still simmered beneath the surface. However, planning their vow renewal ceremony provided them with a shared focus for their future.

Leaning in, Emma inhaled deeply to take in the flower’s intoxicating fragrance. “It’s absolutely perfect,” she whispered softly. Peter’s smile grew wider at her approval. He reached out to gently tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, his hand lingering on her cheek. Emma allowed herself to relish his touch, which had been absent for far too long.

They spent the afternoon immersed in considering invitations, cake designs and venue options. Each decision was like a dance where their preferences and past intertwined in unexpected ways.

The vow renewal wasn’t just a way to reaffirm their love. It was also a testament to their shared strength and

resilience. It symbolized all the obstacles they had overcome together.

As the sun started setting, casting a glow on their joint efforts, they chose a quaint garden venue that held special memories for both of them. It was where Peter had first confessed his love for Emma, surrounded by twinkling fairy lights.

That night Emma woke up abruptly with her heart pounding. The remnants of a nightmare still clung to her: Peter walking away, hand in hand with a bride, turning back with indifference as Emma desperately begged him to stay... The nightmare felt like a reminder of the past, with Sarena's twisted image lingering at its edges.

Instinctively, Emma reached out for Peter and only relaxed when her fingers found his warmth. He stirred slightly and whispered her name in his sleep; there was something in his voice that comforted her. It was the voice of the man who loved her deeply, who had stood by her side and fought alongside her.

As Emma's breathing gradually slowed, she scolded herself for letting the past haunt her. It was time to believe that it was behind them; otherwise, it could destroy their future just as Sarena almost did.

They embarked on a new start, an opportunity to reconnect and mend what had been shattered. Emma nestled against Peter's side, finding solace in the rhythm of his heartbeat. Occasionally the scars of the past would throb, serving as a reminder of their triumph over adversity. Every morning brought with it the promise of healing. She kept her gaze fixed on that glimmer of hope until sleep gently embraced her, their entwined hands grounding her in optimism, affection and the future they would forge hand in hand.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Wedding

Emma stood in front of the mirror, her reflection engulfed in a gown made of ivory silk and delicate lace. The dress flowed gracefully, adorned with pearls and sparkling crystals that shimmered as she moved. Yet it was the joy shining in her eyes that truly illuminated the moment; the long-awaited day had finally arrived.

Her mother entered the room, tears glistening in her eyes as she embraced her daughter. “Oh, my dear... You look absolutely stunning,” she whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

Arm in arm, they made their way toward the doors of the chapel. They paused for a moment to absorb the sight of friends and family gathered in celebration. This was more than a wedding; it represented a fresh start, forged through seemingly endless trials and moments of darkness.

As Emma entered the chapel, everything else seemed to fade until there was only Peter waiting for her at the altar. His eyes were filled with awe and an undeniable love that served as Emma’s anchor amidst all else.

The ceremony itself was intimate and deeply heartfelt. They exchanged vows that now held even deeper significance. With understanding of the weight behind their words, they promised to stay by each other’s side through happy moments and challenging times. They sealed their renewed commitment with a lingering kiss as applause echoed around them.

The reception that followed was a whirlwind of laughter, dancing and pure happiness.

Emma was surrounded by her friends, who had smiles of happiness and relief on their faces. They acknowledged the challenges of the journey they had been through, but were now ready to celebrate.

As dusk settled, Emma looked up at the twinkling stars with a mix of hope and melancholy in her heart. A subtle, sweet floral fragrance in the night air sent a shiver down her spine. She shook off any fear, determined not to let the past overshadow her joy.

Returning inside, Emma and Peter entertained their guests with stories about their love, as laughter filled the room. They danced late into the night, leaving behind shadows from days gone by.

Finally alone in their suite together, Emma and Peter embarked on their next chapter as husband and wife. As Peter carefully unpinned her hair, Emma felt a chill— a reminder of Sarena lurking in silk-draped chambers long ago. She nestled into Peter's embrace, focusing solely on the moment.

Their marriage was genuine, sacred, and resilient.

The past lay behind them. They eagerly welcomed the future. They fell asleep holding each other close, their hearts brimming with optimism and affection.

Yet in the stillness of the night, a lingering uncertainty hovered at the fringes of their thoughts. The victory had been achieved. Could it truly be considered complete? Only time would tell.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Brief Respite

A gentle breeze tousled Emma's hair as she stood, mesmerized by the view of their villa's infinity pool extending towards the ocean. Their honeymoon had been nothing short of a dream— days spent basking on white sandy beaches, nights reserved for intimate celebrations. The tropical paradise, scented with blooming hibiscus and warmed by the caress of sunlight, was a world away from their vow renewal ceremony back home.

She felt Peter's arms encircle her from behind and leaned into his embrace. "What's on your mind?" he whispered softly, his lips lightly brushing against her neck, carrying a lingering hint of coconut from their breakfast.

Emma gazed up at him with a smile. "Just how incredibly fortunate I am. How I wish this feeling could last forever."

Peter turned her gently until they were face to face. "It doesn't have to end," he said tenderly. "We're together now in this moment. The challenges are behind us. We've reaffirmed our vows and promises to each other— it's a new beginning."

Emma's heart filled with hope at his unwavering conviction. She prayed with all her soul that they had finally triumphed over adversity.

After enduring relentless darkness, they truly deserved this simple joy, this opportunity, for a fresh start.

That night, beneath the twinkling fairy lights that adorned the villa's courtyard, they swayed together in a

dance. In her heart, Emma silently wished for their happiness and the challenges they faced to have molded them into something stronger. The music's soothing rhythm blended with the sound of waves, bringing her a sense of the peace she had longed for. The future stretched out before them like a shining path filled with possibilities.

The following evening found them seated on the terrace, their eyes fixed upon the sunset while Peter uncorked a bottle of champagne. With a smile, he handed Emma a glass filled with effervescent bubbles. "To us," he toasted, gently clinking their flutes together.

"To second chances," replied Emma softly as she savored the crisp fizziness on her tongue; it tasted like beginnings.

They effortlessly fell into conversation, discussing the dreams and aspirations they had set aside. Peter spoke with enthusiasm about his plans to expand his business, while Emma shared her goal of pursuing a writing career. Laughter filled the air, as they reminisced about memories and carefully intertwined their plans.

That night, surrounded by swaying palm fronds and serenaded by the sounds of wild creatures, they made love. Emma's breath merged with the air as she moved in sync with Peter.

In this place where haunting memories of home were absent, their connection brought them complete happiness. Afterward, they lay intertwined, their skin glistening with perspiration and their hearts overflowing with contentment. Emma gazed up at the stars, in awe of the journey they had embarked upon. In Peter's embrace she found solace as their renewed promises illuminated their path.

As sleep gently embraced her, she offered a prayer of gratitude for being saved from despair. A subtle sense of

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unease lingered in the air, like a breeze drifting over ocean waves. However, Peter's steady heartbeat beneath her cheek served as an anchor of hope.

The past was now behind them; they were free to embrace the present and eagerly anticipate a future filled with love.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Stranger

Emma strolled slowly through the farmers market, savoring the array of colors and the lively symphony of sounds surrounding her. After returning from their honeymoon, she and Peter had settled into a routine, cherishing these weekends together as treasured moments from another time.

While she was admiring some eggplants, a sudden shiver crept up Emma's spine. Looking around, she saw nothing but couples and bustling families going about their weekend tasks. Yet an unsettling feeling persisted at the fringes of her awareness.

Shaking off the sensation, she stepped away from the produce stand and almost collided with a stranger who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Startled, Emma stumbled back with a gasp as her heart raced.

"Apologies for startling you," said the unfamiliar man in a voice that carried an aura of mystery. Emma took in his appearance: he had aristocratic features framed by long dark hair streaked with silver. The gaze of his piercing eyes seemed to penetrate her being.

"Please forgive my intrusion," he added in a tone dripping with falseness.

"But I believe we might have a shared acquaintance," he said, pausing significantly to make his point.

Peter, who had overheard the conversation, approached cautiously and asked, "Who are you?"

The stranger's eyes sparkled. "Someone who knows more about what you've been through than you could

possibly imagine. I possess information that might pique your interest. Perhaps we could arrange a meeting to discuss it further?”

Emma’s mind raced as she grasped his insinuation. “Why should we trust you?” she inquired with a hint of fear in her voice.

The stranger seemed to sense her apprehension and continued, “Trust isn’t required. However, the knowledge I possess could prove valuable to both of you. How about meeting at your home tomorrow evening? Rest assured, I have no ill intentions.”

Emma and Peter reluctantly agreed, reassured by the stranger’s claim that he already knew their whereabouts—a detail that sent shivers down Emma’s spine.

With a nod, the stranger vanished into the crowd just as suddenly as he had appeared.

Emma’s heart raced with panic as she rushed over to Peter, feeling the weight of the stranger’s words echo in her mind like a foreboding prophecy. It seemed that their past wasn’t ready to let go.

As they left the market, Peter’s face turned pale. His voice trembled with fear. “This can’t be... She’s gone. We’re finally free from her,” he whispered.

Finally, with determination in his voice, he declared, “No more running. We managed to escape her. If she has returned, we will find a way to do it again.”

Their uncertainty and terror hung between them like a cloud. However, Emma clung onto a glimmer of hope as she leaned into Peter. They had already survived an ordeal together; they could overcome it again. No more hiding from their nightmares. The time for bravery had come again.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Unveiling the Unknown

The room was filled with silence, disturbed only by the giant ticking clock in the corner of the room. Emma, busy making tea, couldn't shake off a sense of unease. A mysterious man with an air of mystery sat patiently, his eyes seeming to hold knowledge beyond the ordinary. (Visualize the foreboding stranger through exclusive art at rumizen.com/sketches)

Finally, Peter broke the silence with a quavering voice. "You're aware of Sarena, aren't you?" His anxiety was palpable.

The man's eyes narrowed as he spoke in a resonant tone. "Indeed. Those who tread mystical paths are acquainted with your struggles against the entity that haunts your dreams."

A shiver ran down Emma's spine. The stranger's words and presence hinted at a world veiled in secrets and concealed perils. They had believed their nightmare to be over. This newcomer's arrival suggested otherwise.

He proceeded to recount stories about dream creatures that dwelled within the shadows of human consciousness. He spoke of individuals consumed by their desires, rituals steeped in symbolism, and a realm where dreams melded into reality.

From within his coat pocket, the stranger produced a book bound in weathered leather, its pages yellowed by time.

As Emma and Peter leafed through the pages, they noticed drawings of symbols and rituals that seemed familiar.

“These markings belong to those who have summoned the entities of dreams,” whispered the stranger, his voice barely audible. “They serve as a connection between our world and theirs.”

Emma’s hands trembled when she recognized a symbol from Peter’s dream journal. The realization hit her like a blow. They were still trapped in the nightmare; it was far from over.

The stranger’s eyes were deep and mysterious as if piercing into her soul. She couldn’t but shiver under the intensity of his gaze. “The entity you encountered seeks a vessel,” he cautioned. “It isn’t finished with you yet. It waits patiently.”

Before leaving, the stranger handed Emma a card with his bookshop address on it. “If you desire understanding, you know where to find me,” he said solemnly.

As the door closed behind him, Emma and Peter clung tightly to each other, their minds spinning with these revelations. The past was not behind them; it lived on, breathing and biding its time for the moment to strike.

In the days that came after, they grappled with the realization. The fear lingered, a companion murmuring softly in their ears and sending shivers down their spines. The struggle was far from finished; it had only just begun.

As they lay restless in the silence of midnight, listening to the winds howl and the house’s unsettling creaks, they were aware that the shadowy presence persisted. It was patiently biding its time and observing their every move.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Echoes from the Past

Emma hurried down the lit street, feeling the biting wind cut through her jacket. The narrow, winding alleyways seemed to be watching her every move. As she approached the worn door of the stranger's bookshop, menacing shadows danced around her.

Ever since the visit from this figure, Emma and Peter had been grappling with its weighty implications. The relentless fear gnawed at them. Eventually, they came to an agreement—they needed to confront him. They had to delve into the darkness to understand it.

As Emma entered, the shop bell chimed oppressively. Inside, the musty warmth offered little comfort. As expected, the angular shopkeeper appeared silently from amid stacks of books. His eyes resembled those of a hawk, and held a sympathetic expression as they pierced through Emma.

“You've come seeking answers that bring no solace, but only haunt,” he said in a voice that blended chilling wisdom and sorrow. “Are you certain you wish to embark on this path?” With a nod from Emma, he gestured for her to follow him toward a table tucked away in a secluded corner of the shop. Taking his seat, he interlaced his fingers before speaking. “I was a few years older than you when I first encountered one of those entities known as Sarena,” he began. As he told the story, Emma listened with a mix of horror and fascination. The harmless dreams, the consuming obsession and the gradual draining of a lover's spirit. It was

Peter's own ordeal retold in painstaking detail. However, this ancient tragedy held more sinister implications.

"She nearly drained me completely before I summoned the strength to push her away," the man concluded with a sigh, his face bearing visible scars from his past experiences. "Traces of her presence remained... just as I suspect they do for your Peter." His eyes bore into Emma's soul, filled with pain. "To have any chance at freedom you must bring closure to what was started."

Emma's heart raced within her chest as she expressed gratitude to the man, her mind spinning from his revelations. Walking home alone under the stars, his haunting tale continued to echo in her thoughts. The chilling wind seemed to whisper Sarena's name while the shadows reached out for her with sinister promises.

The nightmarish web that entangled them was made up of more threads than she had ever imagined.

As she got into bed, sensing the presence of Peter next to her, she realized that they hadn't attained true freedom yet. The remnants of their past still lingered, patiently observing. The struggle was far from its conclusion.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Ominous Threat

Emma anxiously watched as their mysterious visitor gathered his hat and coat. The tea they had shared grew cold, forgotten amidst unsettling stories hinting at the nature of the entity that had cast a shadow over their lives.

“You're not yet done with your trials,” the man said gravely as he made his way toward the door. “The thing you thought you banished was merely a glimpse of the menace. It will return, hungry and harder to defeat.”

He fixed his piercing gaze upon Peter and Emma, “I'm sharing this not to discourage you but to prepare you. Don't underestimate your foe.” His eyes lingered on Peter as if there was something he saw. With those foreboding words hanging in the air, he slipped away into the night.

In the ensuing silence, husband and wife turned to each other with worried looks. Emma could see in Peter's face that he, too, realized this wasn't a mere demon they were up against. It wouldn't relinquish its hold easily. Any respite they had experienced thus far was nothing more than a deceptive dawn; darkness still lay dormant.

“So our peace was merely an illusion,” Peter said bitterly. “I've brought this upon us with my weakness. Can you ever find it in your heart to forgive me?” His face bore the marks of anguish etched into his features.

With tender affection, Emma gently touched his cheek and reassured him, “They targeted you because of your light. Together we possess a strength that surpasses this darkness.” She managed to conjure a smile and grasped his

hand, leading him away from the doorway where the lingering shadow of their guest seemed to persist.

Within the confines of their home, they traversed corridors haunted by remnants of a past they believed they had left behind. The memories of Sarena's haunting presence infiltrated their minds, casting shadows over their tranquility.

That night, as Emma lay in bed beside Peter, she listened attentively, as his breathing gradually deepened into slumber. However, sleep eluded her. The dire warnings of the stranger weighed heavily upon her in the darkness. The talons of this malevolence had left scars on their hearts once before. Emma dreaded that if it were to strike again, it would deliver a devastating blow.

As the night dragged on relentlessly, Emma's mind began to wander towards the book owned by the stranger—the symbols and rituals contained within it had filled her with terror. She wondered if there was a way to completely defeat this entity, once and for all. Would they be doomed to endure its presence for eternity?

Outside, the wind howled fiercely while every creak inside their house felt like a reminder of the lurking danger that surrounded them.

Emma pulled Peter closer, seeking comfort in his warmth. The fear lingered like a companion.

As dawn approached, a soft whisper reached Emma's ears—a melody that was both distant and familiar. Her heart tightened as she recognized it. It was Sarena's song.

A sudden realization shook her to the core: their lives would never be the same again.

The darkness still loomed, patient and watchful, ready to strike. This time, victory wouldn't come easily.

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About The Author



Rumi Zen Zapp, is the author of *The Dream Wife* and your personal guide through the labyrinthine corridors of the human subconscious. With his debut thriller, Rumi takes you on an expedition beyond the ordinary, diving deep into the complex tapestry of dreams and unreality. Rumi Zen Zapp was born in New York City, and grew up, and currently still resides, in New Paltz, New York, where he discovered the art of writing. Rumi was homeschooled by his father, and studied many topics, including computer technology, music, business, and health and fitness. He has always enjoyed reading thriller novels, and hopes you enjoy his first attempt at that genre.

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