*Escape*

*The Dragon’s Path*

*Written by*

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**CHAPTER 1**

 The cave’s gaping hollows and constantly winding and narrow passages were overwhelmingly endless. The stark, cold, rocky floors gave way to columned towers – stalagmites and stalactites – with quartz, onyx and sulfur encrusted walls that occasionally sparkled by the dim, restricted light. No warmth was offered the woman by these cold, uncaring caverns; no guidance to safety, no route of escape. Life had become a perpetual nightmare… running, yet unable to truly move forward… hiding, yet unable to be unseen.

 Everywhere throughout the caverns and passageways lay crates of pearls and gemstones and chests of gold and silver – the overwhelming riches of The Dragon’s enticing resources. Their cold brilliance gleaming in the least light offered. To her, it was as if the innumerable riches themselves knew that their wealth was useless. No amount of them could buy what she wanted most – safety and peace. Their vivaciousness was as cold as the Grinch’s smile.

 But it had not been so at first. No, not then. She had been drawn in so tenderly, so gradually, by the power and intensity of life that The Dragon exuded – she had not seen. HE was, in fact, a magnificent creature to behold, handsome, even beautiful. The life he offered her, the life he so boldly manifested, was so very far from the meager, unsure, drab world she had seen built around her. HE had seemingly offered her a life of self assurance, beauty and opulence. HE had allured her and wrapped himself and HIS world around her one layer at a time. Now the chain of the truth was her prison.

 The Dragon stood before her, hypnotic with his long, gracious, tapered neck. It broadened gradually to the massive, muscular chest and back. HIS wings flowed like a master painter’s stroke up and outward, spreading by his side as he stood. They were enormous and covered the entire back half of his torso. A long, winding tail that was twice the length of the rest of him lay draped across the ground in front of him. Even His legs were beautiful, like a stallion’s, firm and proud.

 The woman had watched, quietly, from the sidelines that first day. She was quite literally awed by what she saw. HE captivated her even now, in spite of everything. The image of the first time she had seen… HIM… still seemed so clear. Never before had she seen such a beautiful creature!

 Constantly followed by an eager flock of young guys, HE emanated the power and self assurance they all desired. His clear blue eyes gazed right through her as The Dragon turned to peer at what ever had momentarily intrigued HIM. He gracefully lowered a long, supple neck in balletic fashion to better see something below HIM. She stood at the edge of the small clearing and was breathless as she viewed the panorama before her.

 In retrospect the woman realized that his followers did not adhere themselves to HIM because they were like HIM; they were each greedily in hopes of gleaning some small portion of that marvelous power for their own. How many, she wondered now, had paid the price for their gleaning?

 It had taken a long time for the importance of this question to become clear. Even now, HE held a great power over her. His hypnotic charisma still overwhelmed her senses. She still felt that same desperate, grasping emotion she had experienced the first time she’d seen The Dragon, when HE gathered up his eager band of followers and flew away – gone as quickly as HE had appeared.

 The ostensible fact that, at first, HE had not noticed her did not seem to matter in the least. What mattered was that she had seen HIM! Never before had such a flourish of pleasurable emotions taken her so by surprise. Jumping, squealing and twirling about, the woman fairly bounced as she walked. From that first vision The Dragon had hypnotized her.

 For days she came, again and again, watching and waiting. Trying – still so unsure of herself – to capture HIS attention, even if only for a moment. The desperation, the addictive need to meet him grew with every passing day till it fairly overwhelmed her. Then, The Dragon noticed little, meek, simple her – she found it quite intoxicating.

 If only. Oh, the thought of it! She had shivered with anticipation. HE talked to her, petted and strolled with her. Each visit seemed more incredible than the last. Occasionally he would make little suggestions to her. Her hair, the way she dressed, some make-up, but it was always the most flattering of suggestions. It was as if she were being sculpted into something other than herself. Someone pretty, attractive and self assured.

 Once invited into The Dragon’s realm, the woman felt dreamily blissful. Surely such a world did not exist! Yet, it was here and her every waking moment revolved around HIM. HE offered her gold, jewels, riches, beautiful clothes and all his attentions and adoration. In fact, she felt HE was offering her everything she felt her life, and the world she had grown up in, lacked so completely. Further and deeper into HIS world, enwrapped by the power HE exuded with every sweeping, tender, gracious step, she had gone willingly. Like a roller coaster, faster with every turn, each downward spiral was more fun than the last.

 Then one day, it all seemed to come to a screeching halt. HE became frighteningly infuriated, enraged with one of his followers. What ever the poor sole had done, his anger was very sudden and severe. It took her aback as she watched the unlucky fellow whipped around and tossed against the wall like a rag doll. HIS eyes were red with rage and fury as the fire within HIM bellowed out and he roared at the sky above, burning the source of HIS anger to ashes.

 But, HE would never direct such anger at her, surely, she had reasoned. HE was so gentle, so attentive, so kind to her. Initially, this was so.

 Before the woman realized the gravity of her situation, she was much too far in. The maze and magnitude of the cavernous realm was interminable. The way out was completely elusive. “But,” she would remind herself (as long as HE was not angered) “HE was so very wonderful, so grand.” Constantly HE showered her with gifts, told her HE loved her and could never live without her. HE showered her lovingly, except when she displeased HIM.

 Besides…

 The red rages were never directed at her – were they? Instead, HE directed it at the things around HIM. If HE ired over something she had done or said, HE would roar deafeningly – at the ceiling. Pillars of furied flames ravaging the walls, the beautiful blue in his eyes fired red with the anger that poured out of Him uncontrolled. Fists pounded at the walls, claws ripped the cold stone to dust all around her.

 These scenes frightened her horribly, but…

 After all, it was not ever directed at her, was it? Besides, if she could just avoid doing the things that angered HIM, everything would be perfect. Blissful. Sometimes, she could be so insensitive to HIS feelings that it surprised her. Certainly HE had every right to be angry, didn’t he?

 If only.

 The woman resolved herself to try harder. After all, HE was the one that was hurt by what she did. Thus, she began to do things for HIM all the time: fixing HIS meals, cleaning, bringing HIS coffee or cool drink. It was the least she could do. Wasn’t it?

 Then one day she realized that HE had come to expect these services of her. No longer was it a matter of giving – it was now an imperative. No longer could she dare to ask HIM to do this or that. She was never allowed to be too busy to stop for what ever HE asked of her, no matter what it was or where.

 Besides.

 HE ingratiated HIMSELF to her with an unending flow of elaborate gifts. HE offered her so very much and asked so little. How, then, could she refuse HIM? She could be so insensitive sometimes, how could she expect any other response than anger? Did HE not always try to shower her with gifts, with affections? What had HE ever done to deserve such cruelties as she inflicted upon HIM by refusing to perform the simple tasks HE asked of her? It was all true. It was only reasonable that HE expected these things of her. Yet, she felt unable to conform her unworthy heart and mind to avoid the inconsiderate behavior that ired him so.

 She was truly incapable. Each failure resulted in the same response – no, the woman admitted to herself, it was more than that. Each successive failure resulted in a more and more physical response until HE no longer vented the red rage at the world around her, but directly at her.

 And the red rage came – in full, firing, blinded fury. She was consumed by fire. From the first time, and every time afterwards, the rage HE vented on her was always completely unexpected. Out of no where, HIS clawed fist flew directly at her, hitting her hard enough to throw her across the room. It left her shocked and confused. How could one so handsome, so beautiful, become the red seething fire she experienced? How could HE, whom she had come to worship unreservedly (to revere, even), cause her so much pain?

 It all seemed so clear though, after HE calmed down and would explain the reason why he had gotten so angry. She had really hurt HIS feelings. After all, HE asked so little of her. Could she not do the things he asked? Surely, HE would ask her, it was not so hard.

 Apologizing profusely for her selfishness, she resolved, again and again, to try not to be so insensitive or inconsiderate. How could she hurt someone who had done so much for her? If only she could always be good to HIM; she would not have to worry.

 If only.

 If only. If only. If only is a pipedream. As time went on the excitement and thrill of The Dragon became riddled with terror as life careened, totally out of her control. HIS rages only worsened, despite her best efforts to prevent them. Each one was more frightening than the last. Blinded, red, raging fury.

 Each time HE inflamed, she was forced to climb further and further inside of herself. She began to reach deeper into her own being for the only refuge she could find and so very desperately needed – any refuge was better than staying in the inferno.

 The fire, the fury, the tearing claws, pounding fists, roaring, seething, reddened, unrestrained rage… it was unrelenting, unending and torturous. Each phase of HIS powerful wrath reached ever deeper into her soul – into the very corner of her mind that had become her only refuge. The Dragon tore at her, breaking her and destroying the meager mental barriers she had been able to uphold until this moment. No longer did she even have that little “corner” within herself in which to hide. It was as if HE had found her there, hiding, and she had paid very dearly.

 When HE finally relented this time, his change in mood was just as sudden as when it had begun. No apparent reason, HE just stopped and walked away. For a very long time the woman would lay stock still, frozen in fear of HIS return. As she crawled, ever so slowly, to shakily peer out of “the corner” into which HE had reached, the woman knew that HE could kill her – would kill her. There was, now, truly no safe refuge from HIS blinded rage where she could retreat in relative safety. Not even within her own mind!

 In the complete darkness of fear she waited for HIS return. When she realized HE was gone, for the time being, the coldness of the caverns engulfed her. Paying as little attention as possible to what The Dragon had done to her physically and the resulting pain, the woman carefully arose and ran.

 Blinded by the cavern’s darkness at first, she ran through the caverns and passageways, stumbling, falling, and frantic. There had to be a way out! If only she could find some small opening, a shimmer of promising light somewhere within these uncaring walls.

 If only. If only hope still existed.

 Completely alone as she ran, isolated as The Dragon had designed, the adrenalin served to feed both her fears and her sudden, driven need to escape – to find a way out!

 And so she ran.

 There must be a way out.

 If only.