

# **Waking The Dragon**

by

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I jerked upright, the sting of cold water on open cuts cutting through the bliss of non-awareness.

“I’m glad to see you’re still with us, Mr. Smith.”

The last two words came out as a sneer from the man standing in front of me. An impeccably dressed man totally out of place in the squalor of the prison cell I shared with the old man. I glared back defiantly, but that only brought a chuckle from my tormentor.

“Breaking you will be a pleasure,” he said, smiling as he moved closer. “Not a challenge thought. It never is these days,” he continued wistfully, as though I weren’t there.

I thought he was within range, and lunged for him, only to be stopped, inches from his throat, by the chains that bound my hands.

He laughed, and rage flowed through me.

“You’ll never break me!” I screamed at him, struggling to close the all too small gap between us.

He stepped back, slowly, demonstrating that he was in total control.

“They have all said that, Mr. Smith,” he replied slowly and deliberately. “All the hundreds who have come before you, and all the hundreds who will come after. That is the nature of our world, and you will come to see that truth soon.”

I sagged against the wall, the chains preventing me from collapsing completely. Deep inside, I knew he was right. And I knew that, even now, I was beaten.

I heard the sound of the door close, and knew that we were alone again; the old man and I. He had been here before I’d arrived and had suffered at our tormentor’s hands more than I had. And yet, he did not appear to be broken. At least, not mentally. His body looked as though he had no skin left, blood covering every inch that I could see. He hardly moved. He should have died long ago. I know I would have from the wounds, and I knew that my death was not long off. Why he was in here, I didn’t know. He had not spoken a word in all the time I had been here.

But his eyes! They shone with a light that burned! A light that could never be broken. A light that spoke of a power so much greater that I had ever known. And I knew that it was this light that our tormentor hated.

I’d had a glimpse of that hate the last time he had come to torture the old man. Even though he was outwardly calm and composed, the intense hatred of the old man radiated as a palatable aura from the tormentor. His eyes especially. In them an intense anger dwelt. An anger I had never seen directed at me, and hoped, never would.

He had been brutal to the old man that time. I don’t know how the old man had survived the brutality that had been unleashed on him. There was nothing I could do but watch silently, any movement on my part sure to bring the anger down on myself.

But the old man had survived, and, that time, our tormentor had broken his cool composure. He had screamed at the old man. Not a cold, calculated scream, but one born of immense frustration at having

been thwarted so completely. Why he hadn't killed the old man then and there, I'll never know.

The only thing I did know was that with each blow the tormentor lay on the old man, the brighter the light in his eyes shone. It was then that I realized that this old man was no ordinary person. What he was, I didn't know, and that frightened me more than our tormentor did.

A slight cough brought me back to the present. I slowly raise my head and looked to the old man.

"This body will not last much longer," he said in a shallow, raspy voice. "And, I fear, neither will our world if these people continue."

"What are you babbling about old man?" I said with an anger I immediately regretted.

Whether or not he had noticed the anger, I didn't know, but he continued in that slow voice.

"The world outside, my friend. You know what has happened. And you don't like it, or you wouldn't be here."

I sagged in my chains. He was right. The oppression. The cruelty. The injustice. The hallmarks of our diseased society. A society controlled by a small group of very powerful people. People who maintained their power by extreme oppression. The group I had fought against.

Fought! I almost laughed at the thought. Was distributing flyers asking for fairness in the treatment of those peacefully opposing the powers that be, truly fighting? I hadn't thought so. But I had been wrong. I had discovered that any voice raised against them was not tolerated. I knew that they wouldn't like it, and I had been prepared to back down if they showed their displeasure. I am not a brave man and had agonized for months before taking action. My life had been meagerly comfortable and I hadn't wanted to give up the little I had. My heart had gone out to those who had demonstrated against the regime and had been jailed and killed in the process, and it had taken those months before I knew that I had to do something. Agonizing months of fear for my safety and the growing knowledge that I could not live with myself if I did nothing.

It had been such a small act. One I thought would be ignored, or at most, receive a slight punishment for.

But that was not to be. I'd been given no choice. I'd been arrested and brought to this prison. No trial. No contact with the outside world. No visitors. And now, no hope.

I slowly raised my head to again look at the old man.

"What would you give to change things?" he asked.

The question sounded so simple, yet I knew he was asking much more. I didn't know what to say.

"I have nothing to give," I eventually replied.

"Nothing?"

Anger welled.

"Nothing!" I cried. "Anything I had before is gone! Even my life is not mine anymore! I will die here no matter what I say or do. I have nothing to give you!"

"Not me," he replied slowly. "The world."

I laughed, despite the pain it brought on.

"The world? What can I give the world? And why should I give anything to a world that has brought me here?"

"The world is why we are here, my friend," he continued. "It directs our lives for its own purpose. We can choose to align ourselves with that purpose or not. If we do, our hearts sing. And if we do not..."

He left the sentence unfinished as I looked at him in disbelief.

"You speak of philosophy as we are about to die," I sneered.

He looked back at me, solemn and commanding.

"Look into your heart and tell me you have nothing to give."

I opened my mouth to tell him to go to hell, but his eyes stopped me. The light I had seen before froze my tongue, and I slowly closed my mouth. I looked down at the ground, doing as he asked.

After a few moments, I lifted my head and looked over.

"I have no possessions, not even this body. They have it all now. The only thing I have that they don't is my soul, and that won't do anyone any good."

He smiled, and I looked at him, perplexed.

"Do you know the legend of The Dragon?"

"That fable?" I replied. "It's a child's tale."

"Not so," he answered.

"You're not going to tell me that you really know about The Dragon?"

He said nothing, but smiled at me. My head said that he was crazy; that he'd finally been broken and had escaped into an illusion. But in the depths of my heart, I wondered if he spoke the truth.

"That can't be!" I cried. "It's only story!"

"No, my friend. It is true. I was born over three thousand years ago, at the time of the last great empire. Like now, it was a time of great darkness, and, like you, I fought against it."

"That's not possible! No one lives that long!"

"It is a gift, or maybe a curse, of The Dragon. That is for you to decide."

"Me! Why me?"

"Because The Dragon has chosen you."

My mind wheeled in fear as the legend came back to me.

It was said the The Dragon protected it's people from the darkness. That at times when the darkness threatened to overwhelm everything,

The Dragon rose to do battle. And The Dragon always won, but at a cost. The legend said that the last time The Dragon appeared, the greatest empire of all time had been utterly destroyed and the world had fallen to near barbaric levels. Some people saw The Dragon as a symbol of hope, but others saw it as the ultimate punishment. Few spoke of The Dragon any more, but the ones who had, had seen it as hope in this time of despair. I wasn't so sure.

"I don't want it," I said softly.

"Then The Dragon dies with me," the old man replied slowly.

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly curious.

"The Dragon does not live outside its people. The Dragon needs a person to house it until it is needed again. In return, The Dragon protects that person for as long as is necessary. But The Dragon cannot protect a person forever. That is not within its power. Everything that is born must eventually die. The person housing The Dragon dies when The Dragon comes forth. But The Dragon dies when no one steps forward to keep hope alive."

I shook my head in disbelief.

"But surely there are others out there who will help. Surely there is someone better for this than me?"

"Perhaps there is. But if there is such a person, they are not here now. No. The world and The Dragon have chosen you. But it is up to you to accept or not."

My mind was blank. This was all too much. I laughed. It was not the old man who was crazy. It was me. I'd been broken and had fallen into a new nightmare. And I could see no way of escape.

"Okay, old man. You win. I accept The Dragon."

He smiled, and the light in his eyes erupted. A glowing mist formed around him and slowly took the shape of a dragon. As the mist shape left him, the old man's body dropped, and I knew he was dead. I watched, unthinking, as the shape flowed around me, and felt an unbelievable power seep into my very soul.

I awoke two days later, in a crater that had been the prison, a jumble of images that made no sense racing through my brain.

Over the next few days, the images gelled, helped by the stories I heard. The regime was gone, as were all perpetrators and all the institutions that supported them. The Dragon had risen from the prison, destroying the building and everyone in it in the process. It then attacked the regime, seeming to appear at many places at once. The military had fought back, but nothing they had had any effect, and any demonstration of force against The Dragon had been immediately and totally destroyed. It took less than one day for all resistance to be annihilated.

The world I had known was gone, still descending towards a simpler form. And the legend of The Dragon was gone too. Hundreds, if not thousands, had seen it. It was real now, as real as the destruction it had brought. But out of the destruction, hope was emerging. The people had been given their destiny back, and the choice of where to go.

I walk these roads alone. I help where I can in building the new world, but never stay long. The old man was right. The Dragon's gift is both a gift and a curse. I live outside the world now, watching it through vastly different eyes. In time, I may have to give up myself for the sake of the people. But right now, that time is far off. The Dragon has imparted many things to me, things that would seem strange to anyone else, but things that explain the workings of the world and the universe more clearly than I could have ever perceived. But there is one thing that is simple and clear. As long as there is a chance of love and hope for all people, The Dragon will sleep. And while he sleeps, I watch.