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THE DEATH OF WYAC

by Geoffrey Reiter

Wyac will die by my hand.

These were the first words to enter his mind as he awoke in an alley, cold mud and fecal matter lathered across his pallid skin. How many murky autumn nights had he been roused like this, in the shadow of a dingy inn whose walls creaked with the force of intense, angry lust? He could recall nothing, his past as indistinct and ephemeral as the mist that hung above the cramped avenues of the city and smudged the stars. Memories he had, but they lay strewn about his soul like the pieces of a dismembered corpse, too horrific to reassemble or even to contemplate very long. But one memory was darkly vivid among the entrails of his past: the smug, clean-shaven countenance of King Wyac peering knowingly into his own unflinching eyes.

The kingdom of Veywel belonged to Wyac VI, the mighty warrior who laid siege to Abontru's Wall, the sovereign whose boundaries stretched through the Endwyk Mountains to the shores of the Wyal Sea, where it is said that humans first were formed in the ancient days. Yes, the tall grey eyes of Wyac had seen many wondrous sights in distant lands; but they were blind to the sufferings of his own people.

Accompanying the lusterless image of Wyac in his mind was a name, a name that his mind clawed after, took hold of, claimed as its own: Cwylav. "Cwylav...I am Cwylav, the seeker," he announced to the veiled sky and the slime of the unpaved alley, "for it is Wyac that I seek." He clutched the hilt of the sword that lay submerged beneath the mud, lifting it confidently into the air. It was heavy but comfortable in his hand, and he could feel the steady swell of training in the way his joints and tendons responded to its presence. There were letters of a script that had long passed from memory engraved in its blade, but he did not wipe away the caked and drying soil to reveal them. Rather, he clung to the crusted hilt and vowed in an archaic yet familiar diction, "I shall gaze once more into his eyes. Then, with this sword shall be wrought upon him every secret agony that he has allowed to befall his people. He shall be stained with their dirt, and by his spilt blood only shall it be washed away."

He stood up, the viscous umber of the mud clinging to his stiff indigo mantle as though the earth were grasping at him, trying to claim his body. He tore free from its clutches, though sticky remnants formed a brown motley upon his cloak. Stretching from his thick belt, he felt a scabbard, scarred with age and rust but still strong; and he slid the filthy blade of his sword into it.

Emerging from behind the inn, he found himself in a wider street, the sod grown coarse from horses' hooves and an unceasing caravan of boots. The inn leaned lazily against an adjacent stable, which in turn teetered beside a neighboring blacksmith's hovel. This was, in fact, the tatterdemalion plan of all Gavlyn. Each structure in the city had been erected as hastily as possible, and now there was no lodging or house that did not seem to sway or tilt

precariouly, nuzzling any contiguous wall like an unsteady kitten against its mother's side.

Above them all billowed the dark, dizzying architecture of Wyac's palace. It had been built millennia ago by the dragons in honor of Ylahdi. In those days, frolicking light played within the immense cathedral of jasper, topaz, and chrysoprase. Its arcing vaults and steadfast buttresses, set high upon a hill flushed green in the youth of Ehrat, must have echoed with the resonant canticles of the wyverns. But mankind was created, and the dragons removed themselves to the northern archipelagoes, taking with them their heat, their light, and all their joy. Now, the northeast coast of Veywel was laced with a preternatural chill, and the lush verdure of the hills turned brittle with early frosts. The first kings of this land had found the great structure unoccupied, and it became their palace. Its vertiginous bulwarks had long ago lost their luster, and winds from the Lesser Southeastern Sea deposited upon the walls soot and ash from the crater of Eeavylway and the plunging tectonics of Paramar.

So the unsturdy shanties of Gavlyn now bowed in obeisance to the unholy sanctuary of the palace that loomed above like a lifeless idol. The people of the city seldom saw their ruler, save for the occasion of his return from the battlefield, flanked by soldiers clad in burnished carapaces and leading an exotic cavalcade of foreigners captive in their train. These slaves from far distant lands would serve in the palace, giving them more of an audience with the royal family than the folk of Gavlyn would ever have. The king's victory marches proceeded down the main thoroughfare, which bisected the crescent of the city and knifed directly into the side of the hill that supported the palace. Inside the hill, the straight path became tortuous and sprouted serpentine veins that wended deep beneath the earth. Rumors persisted of the dread sentinels that patrolled these passages; but rumors they remained, for none who sought to penetrate their depths had returned.

He knew all these things, this seeker, but he did not know fear. It had sloughed from his soul like the grime that so strove to claim his body. And though some clay still clung to him, he felt cleansed and refreshed, as if a sheet of dawn's dew had anointed him from the heavens. His past remained distorted, like a reflection in turbulent waters, but his future was clear.

Few left their homes in the evening now, for bandits roamed the street unchecked by the king's patrols. In fact, the soldiers of Veywel were frequently the worst offenders, charging into houses to sift through their occupants' few belongings in search of valuable materials. If the soldiers were in sporting humor, they might rape the women who lived in the house—perhaps even the men, or the children. At times, they were ordered by the king to find girls pleasing to the eye and bring them to the palace, though not without first sampling the merchandise themselves.

Cwylav himself was well-acquainted with such stories, though he could not recollect where he had heard them from, or if he had beheld such horrors as they occurred. In fact, he did not even know when it was he had seen the king's face, or why his vituperation for the ruler was so intense and so personally felt. He tried to sift through his jagged thoughts, but only shards of memory remained, curiously devoid of context. They slipped like polished

glass from his grasp, splintering into even smaller fragments, yet slicing more deeply into his heart because of it. Only the picture of Wyac's aloof face—his jaw set like stone, his middle-aged forehead uncreased from lack of concern—only that image remained. But it was sufficient.

The city sloped downward to the base of the hill that supported the palace, and he followed the incline as it led him through the city. He avoided the main concourse, the trough where so many of Wyac's patrolmen gathered. Instead, he wove his way through the warp and weft of narrow alleys and streets. Where he saw people in need, he sometimes hesitated, considered pausing on his journey to drape his cloak over a shivering prostitute's shoulders or using the coins that jingled loosely in his pockets to buy food for a naked child so gaunt he cast no shadow in the lantern light. Yet Cwylav chose to continue his progress through the city, reminding himself that by succeeding in his quest, he would be helping many more people than these.

As he drew nearer to the gate, his eyes caught a sight most disturbing. On an intersection of two twisting roads, a body had been mounted upon a stake. It had once been a man, probably of fifty winters, but the corpse had decomposed too much to be certain. The brown hair and beard with trickles of grey had grown matted and messy from recent rains. Drying, dying, weathered skin was peeling like parchment from exposed muscles and bone. His clothes were those of a pauper, cobbled together from canvas and sackcloth. Yet great care had been taken in his mounting, for the stake had been meticulously driven up from between his legs until it emerged from the top of his skull. Such elaborate punishments were only inflicted upon those Wyac wished to make into examples. Cwylav haltingly walked up to the rotting body and tore off a piece of the unknown man's clothing, which he placed in a pocket of the tunic beneath his cloak.

Then he continued on his way, until at last he reached the entrance to the hill. It was a vast doorway made of coarse granite. Etched with difficulty in the middle was the serpentine form of a salamander spiraling down into a chalice brimming with flame: the House of Wyac's royal seal. Cwylav knew he could not open the massive gate with his own strength, but this did not concern him. Somehow he would gain access—this was the beginning of his journey, not its end.

And as he stood at that dread entrance, he caught in the air a scent he did not know, though he remembered it. It was the heady, saline smell of the seashore, yet fresh and new as an infant's tears; but there curled about it a far less savory odor, like the smoke that rises from a burning body. Somehow, Cwylav knew it was a scent as old as the race of man. Upon detecting it, his warrior's instincts were alerted, and he crouched down until his form was smothered in the darkness. Nothing was present, however, no stirring at all save the faint teasing breeze.

Then Cwylav realized that the smell was emanating from his own scabbard. He stood up and pulled out the stained sword that was his only companion. The sword was what gave off the scent, and it was glinting as well—not glowing steadily, yet in places, bright flecks of

light sparkled like waves at daybreak over its surface. Moreover, he could feel the blade tugging at him, guiding him as though it possessed its own sentience. He allowed the sword to pull him onward until he found himself on the far-left side of the gate. There, almost at the point where the adamantine surface plunged into the decrepit earth, he saw a small, vertical crevice. Kneeling to the ground, he slid the blade into the crevice for a moment, then drew it out again.

The gate opened, slowly but without hesitation, the salamander escutcheon splitting in two as the massive stone doors swung inward to reveal a vast corridor. Keeping the sword drawn, Cwylav advanced, steadily but cautiously crossing the threshold into the deep underground that lay beneath Wyac's mighty palace. As he continued on, the doors ground shut behind him, and he was alone in the fastnesses of stone and antique thought.

The way was lit by chandeliers of torches that dangled from the high ceiling. The corridor was not straight, and ahead he could see that it descended slightly and angled to his right. It was a fearsome sight, watching the curvature of the cavern as it distantly plunged into the darkness unknown, but Cwylav's course was set, and he did not pause on the journey.

While he was walking, though, he began to hear a voice. It was a human voice, the voice of one no longer a boy and not yet a man, a warm whisper that grew louder the nearer he drew to the source.

"Are you our salvation?" it called. "Have you come for us? I ask you, have you come to set free the prisoners?" Cwylav marched on without speaking, and after a moment the voice beseeched, "Why do you not speak? Come, warrior, we are many, and long have we been held in these halls!"

"Who are you?" Cwylav wondered, for he saw no one, even as he followed the tunnel deeper and deeper into the rock. As he followed the tortuous path on its descent, the walls grew narrower, the ceiling grew lower, and the concentric rings of fire above his head were replaced by torches affixed to the sides of the corridor.

"Help us, please. We are prisoners, the lowly and forsaken children of Ehrat. Tell us your name, warrior, that we might thank you." The voice was closer now but more plaintive. Yet Cwylav could see no source to it.

As he proceeded, he found that the path was torn in two up ahead; one corridor appeared to slope down farther into the depths of stone and earth, while the other sloped gently but perceptibly upward. He could tell that the adolescent voice was ascending to him from the dark breach to his left, the corridor that wound into the furthest recesses of rock. In his silt-caked palms, he could feel the subtle tug of the sword urging him to choose the leftward course. Cwylav peered into the shadows that seemed to beckon like desiccated arms.

"My name is Cwylav," he told them.

"Cwylav," repeated the voice, the words shining with saffron hues of awe. "You are the prophet, the one who dances and sings deliverance for captives. Ylahdi be praised for your presence!"

"Save your praises, I cannot help you," Cwylav announced, his own voice dark as the

cavern around him. “Your release must await another quest.”

The voice continued to beseech him, and it was joined now by others. Men and women, children and grandparents, with accents from lands distant as Barathou and Kuperea—they all cried out Cwylav’s name, their words stretching out where their arms could not. But he would not allow those words to sway his purpose. He sought Wyac, and Wyac was to be found in the voluptuous heights of the palace. Though his blade prompted him otherwise, Cwylav bore right and began to stride upward. Soon, the cries from the other passage became mere muffled murmurs, until at last they were devoured by a ravening silence.

The silence was far less natural than any call for help. It was predatory, consuming all sounds as though they were fresh flesh, exposed, raw, and dripping. Cwylav could not hear the soles of his sandals as they trod the worn mineral floor. Though he inhaled with voracious abandon, his breath made no noise. He thought to speak, but even as he opened wide his dry lips, he could feel his words being disemboweled before they ever emerged from his throat. Placing the sword back in its sheath, Cwylav ran, ran as frantically as he could, ran until he thought his chest had been torn two and only a tattered cavity remained. His pace grown increasingly frenetic, he never noticed that the passage had begun to spiral downward again, that he was plunging into the very profundity he had thought to avoid. The torches became less frequent, and the shadows clustered stealthily around him. By the time his thoughts regained coherence, he was lost in a silent black gulf, tentatively shuffling forward on numb feet into an unnamable night.

Cwylav did not know how long he was trapped within this night, but at last he felt a sweltering breeze begin to furl itself around his face. That breeze carried on its back the scent of the sword, its meandering aroma taunting him with stray memories too impossibly ancient to be his own. His eyes still saw nothing, but in his mind, he observed a cobalt sea beneath a nascent crimson sun, wave crests tinted deep red like a midwife’s fingers. Then, the tides in the image abated, and so too did the silence. He could once again hear the gravelly friction of his shoes as they trod a path of loose stone. And his tongue could taste the bitter infertility of the dust kicked up by his feet. He coughed vehemently to free his lungs and was grateful just to hear the faint resonance of his own hoarse voice.

But the breeze grew hotter and hotter as he descended. Far ahead, he could see a distant light, flickering in the barely restrained way that flames flicker. The dust of his walking commingled with a plume of smoke that traveled along the seething wind. Cwylav stopped for a moment, staring down the tunnel. He clenched and unclenched his hands, now so soaked in sweat that the dirt from his palms was being washed clean. He spared one final glance behind him—but it was no true glance, for there was nothing to see but the sticky abyss from which he had escaped. Drawing in one last breath free of acrid pollution, he turned again toward the source of the blistering exhalations and advanced.

The tunnel opened up into a titanic vault, its ornate intradoses rising so high that the ceiling seemed a sky in itself. Its spandrels were carved with majestic arcs of wyvern script and bas-relief illustrations of scenes from the days before Ehrat had known the name of

humanity. The immense walls were crafted from polished jasper, the smoky red surfaces alive with a malignant light that seemed out of place in such a reverent rotunda. That light was produced by the fire.

For the center of the chamber was an inferno, great limbs of flame flailing from the floor. The fire had no apparent source; it sprouted from the ground, which was no different from the path of pebbles and soil that supported Cwylav's feet. Once, perhaps, the earth had been tiled with the intricate mosaics that were said to support the feet of the dragons in the northern isles, where pure light and heat could still be found. But the blaze had ripped that tiling away, and now only a blasted and barren surface remained. The smoke from the blaze did not rise; this was not the fragrant offering of burning incense. Rather, it drifted listlessly along the ground, sweeping toward Cwylav and the passage which he had just exited. His eyes, already aching from the fire's brightness, now stung from the pungent heat of the clouds billowed lazily around him.

In the midst of the smoke and the flame and the immense pendentive vault stood the salamander.

As with all the heretical species of dragon, the salamander was slender and serpentine, its limbs not vestigial but greatly reduced. Its skin was shiny and smooth, like aloe, but its teeth were jagged and uneven and its eyes had the cold, coarse look of raw, fractured gems. Those eyes were narrow and frosty blue, a shocking contrast to the glossy vermilion skin. Its elongated jaws were curled into the sort of shrewd smile that would never cross the face of a true dragon. Then it spoke, with a voice that crackled like the fire and hung in the air like the smoke.

"So at last you have come. I have long expected you."

"How do you know me?" Cwylav inquired. He drew his sword; the metal had grown hot, and it seared his moist hand, but his intense gaze never wavered from the salamander.

"Unlike my brethren, I hold little regard for prophecy. Yet I knew the Wyac line was ripe for judgment. And when I heard the name of Cwylav echo through the rock to my abode, I knew that judgment was at hand."

Cwylav tried to keep his breathing steady, even as the smoke surrounded him and the salamander eyed him knowingly. "Would you grant me passage, then?"

The fallen dragon snorted derisively, steam shooting forth from its nostrils. "Passage? Do you take me for a fool? Be it destiny or chance, judgment or fortune, you have entered my prison. You will set me free, or you will watch as the molten skin slowly drips from your blackening bones."

"Were you the voice calling to me?"

The salamander snarled, its massive upper lip curling to display two teeth as broken and sharp as stalactites. "I will brook no condescension from you! Do not identify me with those frail, mortal...*humans!*" The last word was spat like an invective.

"Even if the power resided in me to release you, I would not do so."

A roar echoed round the vault, so terrible that it seemed to seep into the walls and turn

them a deeper crimson shade. "I will not bandy words with a *man*. The dragons invented words before the first parents of your race were cast naked upon the beach like pale kelp. Brace your soul for judgment!"

The salamander opened wide its mouth, and Cwylav could see salivary flame gathering up in its throat. He rolled away just as smoldering expectoration was spat in his direction. The blast missed its target, but a sliver of fire burrowed into Cwylav's purple cloak. It fed off the cloth and grew, quickly and gluttonously, until his mantle was awash in flame. Cwylav thrust it off his shoulders, leaving only an umber tunic to cover his body. Meanwhile, the salamander had not hesitated and was collecting more fire from the conflagration within his bowels. Cwylav darted about erratically, rolling and racing without conscious thought, and the mighty creature's second salvo again went wide of its intended victim.

But Cwylav knew he could not maintain this precarious dance for long. He needed to slay his bestial adversary, energized by the lustful flames in which it dwelt. And so, as the salamander collected enough blazing spittle for a third burst, the seeker charged directly toward the great pyre. The salamander opened wide its jaws, and Cwylav could see the long tunnel of its gullet flaring with such heat that the air rippled like water. Then, the brutal dragon released its igneous fuel. Too late, the salamander realized that Cwylav had been too fast. The third globe of flame spattered harmlessly on a jasper wall. Cwylav, meanwhile, had rolled under the jaws of the beast and was standing beneath its throat. The salamander's glistening red skin, surrounded by fire, was now sheltering the seeker. Closing his eyes, Cwylav burrowed his sword upward to the hilt in the shiny scarlet flesh of his enemy. Then he pulled it out without hesitation and dove away from the fire and the denizen of the fire.

Bubbling vitriolic blood spurted out of the salamander's wound, and the creature collapsed sprawling in its nest of flames. No longer could it speak, but its eyes met with Cwylav's. The expression was no longer one of rage but the wet, drooping look of betrayal, as though it had been denied something that it was owed. Then its blue eyes frosted forever, glazing like ice.

Cwylav sheathed his sword and placed the charred cloak back over his tunic, then walked around the inferno, which appeared now to be ebbing in ferocity somewhat. On the other side of the immense chamber, so distant that it looked like a smudge on red fabric, he could see a door. Cwylav walked steadily but slowly, trying to savor the breathing that had been obstructed in so many ways of late. As he made his way across the vault's expansive area, he thought of the salamander, wallowing in its filthy flame. A shard of memory embedded itself in his thought, a single image without context. It was a room, a small cell ablaze with living light. This was not the furious, blotchy fire of his opponent, but a clean, golden flame. Where the pyre behind him grasped, this fire embraced, like a father cradling his helpless infant child.

So intent was Cwylav on contemplating this memory, he did not realize he had arrived at the door until it was directly in front of him. He pushed gently on it, and, unlike the gate at the foot of the rock where his journey had first commenced, this entrance opened for him. It

was heavy, and he had to exert himself in the effort, but he was able to push open the deep blue entrance.

He was inside the palace itself now, apparently in a turret at the base of a great staircase that coiled upward for hundreds of spans. The architecture here was noticeably less elegant, the steps chipped out of the rock with none of the solemn majesty of the vault. The vassals of Veywel's sovereigns had carved out this ascent; it lacked the gracious, fervent purpose of the dragons' designs. The wyverns built for Ylahdi; mankind built for mankind.

Cwylav was weary and longed to rest. He wondered if his journey would have been different if he had followed the blade's prompting and the voice that sought his aid. That voice resonated in his mind, and he eagerly wished now that he could return to that decision and choose otherwise. Yet he also treasured the memory, for the choice and the memory of the choice were among the few things he had which were still his own. *A man, he thought, should always have something that is his.*

He started to climb the stairs, and it was a grueling climb indeed. Whatever his earlier life, he had developed an impressive musculature, and yet it had been taxed beyond what he thought any man should have to bear. Dredging up expletives from some fragments of his former vocabulary, he cursed the harshness of fate that would have him endure such a travail. But curse as he might, he maintained his steady, grudging progress until at last he reached the top of the staircase.

Upon walking through the simple stone arch, he found himself in what appeared to be a great banquet hall. The walls were flanked by great statues of imposing men dressed in coats of mail but wearing delicate filigreed crowns. They were the graven images of the Wyac line, a proud race of warrior kings, and each statue stared blankly across the room at its counterpart. Between these quarried husks, a great stone slab table was spread with food, in obvious preparation for a meal. Plump purple plums rested in bowls beside bread that all but pleaded for butter. Dominating the center of the table was a platter of roasted yale. Great flagons, all adorned with the salamander sigil, were filled foaming to the brim with mead. Cwylav longed to bury his face in the fragrant meat and to feel mead touch his lips like a sweetened kiss. Perhaps one day he would partake in such a grand feast. But he knew that this day he would have to deny his cravings.

And, indeed, it was well for him that he did so, for a moment later, two men walked into the hall, conversing softly. One man was elderly, and all the white hair that he owned was clinging sparsely to his face, which looked long, as though some unseen hand were pulling him by his beard and stretching his features unnaturally. He shuffled with a slight limp, his gait painstakingly slow and frail. The other man was younger, with a full beard that was red as rust. Submerged within all the hair was a pair of eyes that were cold and opaque as the salamander's. They both wore finely woven clothing bedecked with medallions and tassels and many other ornaments that served no purpose. Their voices were hushed, but in the sly acoustics of the stone room, their words were carried to Cwylav's ears, and he listened intently.

"Where is the Queen?" asked the younger man gruffly, with a tone like thunder heard indoors.

"She is in her bedchamber," the old man answered, his voice the sound of old bones snapping. "And you know, Hwæn, that she will remain there."

"It is not fitting that she should," protested the man called Hwæn. "She alone bears the king an heir. And when the king returns, he will look to us to see that she has been well fed."

"I love Yglina as a daughter," replied the aged one. "I, too, would see her eat. But she has many troubles that beset her."

"She need not be troubled, Gweyl!" protested Hwæn. "No threat could ever breach these walls."

"What of Cwylav?"

"Cwylav is dead."

Crouching in the shadow of a statue of Wyac V, Cwylav chuckled, then ran his blistered hand along the steady metal hilt of his sword. *Cwylav is not dead, you foolish counselor*, he laughed inwardly. *It is Wyac who shall die, the moment he returns.*

"We must always be vigilant, Hwæn," cautioned Gweyl. "Our duty is to the line of Wyac, and we can never rest easily, for there will always be dangers that afflict them—from without...and within."

Hwæn did not respond at once. He strode ahead and sat down at the table. With a great knife, he carved a slice of yale and dropped it on the table in front of himself, then took a bite so large that little slivers of meat fell into the folds of his great hedge of a beard. "If the queen starves herself, that is her prerogative. But no man will keep Hwæn from a meal. And I will dine in peace, old man, because I know the king and his bride are secure under my protection."

Gweyl said nothing; he merely shambled on in the direction of the table. Cwylav felt sorrow for the fragile, wizened man but did not wait for him to reach his destination, instead standing up and creeping along the wall toward the far exit. The swarthy monuments to the Wyac lineage cast great spreads of darkness across the room, and Cwylav was able to melt into those shadows, away from Hwæn's granite gaze.

Upon escaping from the banquet hall, Cwylav found himself in a corridor with several doors. As he had at the inception of his journey, he pulled out the blade that had been his only solace through many trials. Once again, it gave off the salty smell of lost youth, assembling in his mind images he knew were not his own. Once again, it guided him, and this time, he did not oppose its leading. He passed from room to room, from corridor to corridor, for a lengthy interval. The palace was immense, for it had been built to the dragons' scale; the smallest of rooms could have contained dozens of Gavlyn's tenuous shanties. Finally, the sword brought him to an entrance with a large oaken door that had clearly been added onto the original design. Doors conceal, and dragons have no need to conceal. Opening the door, which chafed on its corroded hinges, Cwylav entered the queen's bedchamber.

The room was large, but Yglina was not far away. Her bed, a cedar canopy that was

almost a room in itself, rested against a near wall, and she lay motionless upon it, staring sightlessly ahead, apparently unaware of Cwylav's presence. The queen was scarcely a woman; she could not have seen more than nineteen winters. Tiny red pimples bubbled along her left eyebrow. Her frame was still thin and ungainly, except for her abdomen, which was swollen with life. With her pregnant belly juxtaposed against her bony limbs, the girl looked impossibly disproportionate, practically a caricature.

"You are Queen Yglina?" Cwylav announced. The girl started, sitting up so suddenly that he could see her distended stomach bounce. She looked around frantically, her limpid lake-blue eyes widening when they fell on Cwylav.

"Have you come to kill me?" she asked. Her voice was not even a voice it was so soft, a series of syllables falling like snowflakes in his ears.

"No," he replied, his tone gentle. "I have come to kill Wyac."

"That cannot be," Yglina objected. "Why do you mock me so?"

"I do not mock you," he insisted. "Tell me, my lady, where is King Wyac?"

"My lord," she whispered, "you know. *You* are King Wyac."

He stumbled backward, though he never turned his eyes from her. She was a torrent of frenzied trembling now. He felt as frail and as weak as Gweyl.

"You need not lie to me, lady," he told her. "I am Cwylav the seeker, and I have but one intent—to kill Wyac."

"Cwylav is dead, my lord," said Yglina softly. "His body has been mounted in the city street for all to see."

He thought of the corpse he had seen, so carefully prepared to be an example. Rifling through his pocket, he touched the fabric from that man's clothing, the coarse woolen fabric of a peasant. Then he ran his fingers over his taffeta cloak, a deep royal purple beneath a crusting of black-brown mud and the blackened scorch-marks of the salamander's flame.

"Tell me all, Yglina. Tell me of Cwylav and of Wyac."

Yglina clearly did not wish to speak, but she looked too afraid to hold a defiant silence. He had to strain to hear her fluttering words as she talked.

"You entertained Cwylav the mage at the palace a week ago, my lord. You thought perhaps he might provide good sport for you. But when he told you of your...when he claimed that you were a wicked ruler, you chose to execute him. Before he died, Cwylav laid an injunction upon your head in an ancient tongue. Perhaps he cursed you, or ensnared you in a harsh geas. But the next morning, we could not find you. Gweyl was worried, but Hwæn thought that you were testing us and that you would return shortly. And you have returned."

He did not speak. Beside Yglina's bed was a small stone table, upon which rested a mirror of polished silver. He walked slowly to the table, then held the mirror in his hands and lifted it to his face. The face he beheld was the face he had recalled upon first waking. Small dark hairs peppered his cheeks, and his skin was ruddy and singed, but he beheld the same unflinching grey eyes.

"I am he. I am Wyac, sovereign of all Veywel. And I am the greatest of fools."

Memories began to assemble within him, splinters connecting to form full pictures. He remembered his father telling him proudly of the salamander that Wyac the First had imprisoned alive as a trophy and a sentinel in the vault hall built for the worship of a god he had rejected. He remembered the blade, forged from ores mined by his slaves at the Wyal Sea. He remembered first seeing Yglina in the street of Gavlyn coming back from a campaign, her hair golden even under the thoroughfare's slime. He remembered throwing prisoners in the dungeons beneath the palace, crowding them in the darkling depths carved through rock and clay. He remembered Cwylav, the mage who danced, whose babbling was like a child's—until he prophesied Wyac's doom.

"Come with me," he said to Yglina, taking her hand in his. He did not need the sword—*his* sword—to guide him now. New memories were pouring into his mind with every step he took. The young queen could scarcely keep pace with him as he darted through halls and doors that suddenly he recognized. They would pass by servants, and he knew their names, knew each time he had beaten them for serving undercooked yale or overripe apples. All around him, the icons and symbology of the dragons, their sublime architecture and their worshipful art, seemed to be watching him, as though his own palace were constructed not of minerals but of an immeasurable host of eyes.

At last, he arrived at his final destination. It was the smallest room in the palace. Before men occupied the building, this room had been a chamber in which to place infant dragons when first they were born. It was a cell that had been forgotten by all those who lived in the palace, save the Wyac kings themselves, who passed on the secret with each succeeding generation. It was the cell that he had seen in his mind immediately after he killed the salamander, and the golden flame remained even now, gleaming like the sunlight it was. He stood beside Yglina, looking at the pure, clean fire, then turned to face her.

"Raise our son well, Yglina," he said to her. She looked as though she might object, but he shook his head faintly, and she remained silent. "May he be a man so unlike his father that the land of Veywel will be whole again. May he be a man like Cwylav, who would dance in the presence of his enemies and seek that they turn from wickedness. Have Hwæn free the prisoners from the dungeon; he will not be pleased, but he will obey. And eat dinner with Gweyl—he longs for your company."

"What of you, my lord?"

"Think not of me. That was the lesson that Cwylav had to teach me. I have an oath that I must fulfill. And when I have fulfilled it, please place me here in the cell, that it may be the place of my final refining. Will you do these things, Yglina?"

She nodded, nothing more.

"You are a fine queen, and you will make a fine mother. I cannot say that I love you...but if I had been wiser, I surely would have."

He shrugged off his burnt mantle and tore off the earthy tunic beneath it. He then unsheathed his blade, this Wyac VI, gripping the hilt in his hands and savoring once more the fragrance of his origin. He touched the shred of Cwylav's clothing, then ran his fingertips

along the dried Gavlyn dirt that caked his blade. Looking once more into the cell, he knelt to the ground and fell upon his sword.

The queen stood motionless for a great interval, looking at the weapon protruding from her husband's back. She neither wept nor smiled, but she did run her hands softly across her belly. Then, with all the strength her ungainly body could muster, she rolled the husk of Wyac VI into the cell forgotten by so many, and she watched as the golden arms embraced him.

Mara

by Christian Dickinson

A darkened alley in a silent street;
 A fall into the deep abyss below;
 A deadened face beneath the moonlight's glow;
 The flames of Hell enwrapping you in heat.
 Vanlandi, king, forsook his Finnish wife;
 Who, in her grief, did bribe the Wyrldling, Huld.
 A demon from the underworld she culled,
 Which, in his sleep, bereft the king of life.
 If pleasant sleep is wracked by terror's fright,
 Or straightened hair is tangled when you rise;
 If weight upon your chest your breath constrains,
 Then blame it not on nature-caused pains,
 But on the fiend who takes sleep from your eyes—
 When ridden by the *Mara* of the Night.