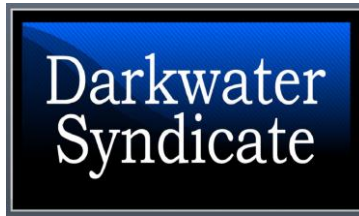


THE MANY
Deaths
— *Of* —
CYAN WRAITHWATE

R. PEREZ DE PEREDA

**THE MANY DEATHS
OF CYAN WRAITHWATE**

R. PEREZ DE PEREDA



The Many Deaths of Cyan Wraithwate
Published by Darkwater Syndicate, Inc.
8004 NW 154 Street #623
Miami Lakes, FL 33016

Copyright © 2014. All rights reserved. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission.

Darkwater Syndicate, the Darkwater Syndicate device, and associated marks are trademarks of Darkwater Syndicate, Inc.

The names, characters, places, and incidents contained in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, and people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

www.DarkwaterSyndicate.com

For my children, Roque and Petra.

PREFACE

The story you are about to read was written in 1967, in Spanish, on a hand-me-down Smith-Corona typewriter. Before it could be published, life intervened – as life has a habit of doing – and the author set aside his dreams of becoming a published author. The story sat forgotten at the bottom of a desk drawer for over forty years, only now to see the light of day.

The author and the editing team at Darkwater Syndicate have endeavored to provide you with an English translation that most closely follows the spirit and flow of the original text, given that it was originally written in Spanish, and the writing conventions of the day have changed in the intervening decades.

We are pleased with the result, and hope you will be too.

– R. Perez de Pereda

I

Cyan Wraithwate's campaign in the Elashi Southlands had come to a standstill. He was loath to admit it, even to himself, but he was terrified.

The battle fought a week from yesterday brought him closer to death than ever before. A chance arrow struck him dead-center in the chest, punching clear through his breastplate, knocking him off his horse. He awoke hours later in his tent, his wounded chest swollen and warm, in frightening contrast to how clammy he felt.

He sat cross-legged in his tent, elbows propped on his thighs, face in his hands.

He hadn't left his tent in days.

A rustle at the tent's entrance drew his attention.

"This had better be important," Cyan spoke into his hands.

"Good evening, Captain Cyan," said his visitor.

He did not recognize this man's voice. Cyan raised his head.

Standing by the tent flap was a lanky wisp of a man enveloped in yellow robes. Every inch of him was draped in yellow fabric except for his clean-shaven head.

Cyan frowned. No doubt this man was a wizard. Cyan had never met a wizard he liked, much less would trust with anything more important than latrine duty.

"Why are you here?" Cyan asked.

The man paced inside with an imperious air. "General Godfrey sent me. He is disappointed over the news that his shining young protégé has lost impetus."

"If all he sent you out here to do is recite the obvious, then you can save your breath and leave."

The man drilled into Cyan with his steel blue eyes. "I am known as Wren. And I did not come solely to discuss the obvious."

Wren reached over his shoulder and slung off a small shoulder pack. He withdrew a forearm bracer polished to a high gleam. Two serpents were embossed into the metal. One coiled into a horizontal figure-eight pattern and the other did likewise, but vertically, bisecting the first.

Cyan's eyes flitted down at the armor and back up to meet Wren's. "Apparently, you got your facts wrong," he shouted, yanking his shirt open to reveal the bandages on his chest.

"You jump to conclusions," said Wren. "Wear this, and you need not don any more armor."

"You're a closeted academic."

"Is it that you are afraid?"

"You're wasting my time."

"See that I'm right," Wren spoke over him. "Try it on."

Cyan held his tongue, but shot Wren such a look of derision as would make a nun faint. Grudgingly, he obliged. The bracer fit as though it was made just for him; the leather straps did not even need adjusting to fasten the armor to his forearm.

"And now?" Cyan asked.

"Now we do a test," said Wren, an instant before snatching a dagger from beneath the folds of his robe. Cyan roared with surprise as Wren's knife flashed before him. A chill entered his body through his neck.

Cyan fell, cupping his wound with his hands. Blood surged between his fingers. Everything went gray, then black.

* * *

Cyan awoke with a start and kicked off the ground, springing to his feet and hollering all the while. Wren pointed his fingers and launched a smoldering ray of fire at Cyan that exploded at his chest. The burst knocked Cyan head over heels, landing him onto his back with the wind knocked out of him.

It hurt too much to move. Cyan's body let up wisps smoke.

"I am going to kill you for that," he wheezed.

"For what?" Wren asked, arrogant as ever.

"For..." Cyan trailed off.

"For killing you?" Wren suggested.

"Yes."

"But did I really kill you?"

"No," Cyan stammered. "No, I suppose not."

Damn Wren for being right, he spoke the truth. Cyan touched his injured neck and found that the flesh there was intact. Even the puncture wound in his chest was gone.

"Now you see the power of the bracer," said the mage. "Each time you are laid low, it will bring you back and grant you monstrous strength. But there is a catch."

"Isn't there always?"

"You must not take the bracer off," Wren said with emphasis.

Groaning, Cyan brought himself to sit up. "Is that all?"

Wren nodded.

"Good. Get out of my sight."

II

Daybreak saw Cyan astride his horse at the head of his army. His troops fell into position around the palisade wall of an Elashi hamlet. This would be a difficult siege. The week-long hiatus had given the defenders plenty of time to make preparations.

He called out to the people behind the walls, "Open your gates and surrender, and we shall be lenient with you. Refuse, and we will burn you out of your homes."

The Elashi men on the palisade catwalks held out both hands with their middle fingers up. Cyan was unfamiliar with Elashi culture but knew enough to recognize this for a rude gesture.

He gritted his teeth. "You brought this upon yourselves!"

Raising his battle-ax, Cyan gave the signal for the battering ram to advance. His army gave way to a crew of engineers pushing a wheeled ram. The engineers butted the device up against the palisade gates, then rocked the ram's head back on its fulcrum to send it careening into the fortifications. The ram stuck the gate with a deafening crack of splintered wood.

Coarse yells went up just as the ram smashed the gate. Cyan's horse reared as Elashi ambushers surged from out of hiding behind the palisade's blind spots. The ambushers fell upon the siege engineers' flanks like a wave at sea, utterly cutting the hapless men down.

Suddenly the sky darkened as though by a swift moving cloud. Cyan looked up, for a moment taking his eyes off the action, and saw that iron barbs rained down upon them.

He had led his men into a trap.

Cyan tugged on the reins and his mount threw him to the dirt. His shoulder gave a sharp pop on hitting the ground. Wincing, he dragged himself along one-handed, fleeing from the defenders' charge. His horse gave a panicked scream as the hail of falling arrows tore into its flesh. It reared again and toppled over onto Cyan, crushing him under its weight.

* * *

He awoke in a panic. Facedown and gasping for breath, he spun onto his backside and sat up.

The sun was half set. The battle was over. The bodies of an entire Elashi legion were fanned out in a circle around him, with him at the center.

Cyan stood. The palisade was leveled. Beyond it, waning daylight shone through black billows of smoke as the Elashi settlement burned.

"By Nordon," he whispered. Had he done this? He wasn't sure. He held up his forearm for a better look at his enchanted bracer, turned it one way then the other for any clues it might hold.

This was too much. Wren had gone too far. Cyan's orders were to subdue the Elashis, not to decimate them. It might be years before the Elashis would be in any shape to offer up regular tribute. This would get Cyan court-martialed for sure.

He tugged at the bracer's leather straps. As he undid the first band the bracer began to grow warm.

"What the...?" he muttered, then broke into a scream. The bracer glowed with searing heat like a blacksmith's forge. Smoke rose from his burning flesh. Cyan clasped the bracer with his other hand to yank it free but scalded himself and tore his hand away.

As abruptly as it began, the burning sensation stopped. The bracer had become a sooty black color. The leather straps that fastened it to his arm were gone. It had become a solid metal tube fused to his skin.

The world spun. Cyan clutched at his temples. His vision rippled as though running water fell before his eyes. When finally his senses settled down, he realized he was no longer in his tent. Cyan stood in a cavernous library. Books were stacked in shelves that ran floor to ceiling as far as he could see.

He was not alone.

"You tried to take the bracer off, didn't you?" said Wren in a matter-of-fact tone.

Cyan spun to face him. "You!" he bellowed. "You tricked me!"

"Did I?" Wren asked. "I gave fair warning against taking it off."

"You didn't say this would happen."

"I felt I didn't need to."

Cyan glowered at him.

"Was I not perfectly clear?" Wren went on.

"Then how did you expect me to take it off once I was through with it?" Cyan asked.

"It would have been simple, if you had come to me first."

Touché, Cyan thought. "What do you mean *would have been*?"

Wren frowned at having to state the obvious. "I mean, it's now going to be a lot harder to take it off."

"So do it," said Cyan.

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" he shot back.

"It's too late for me to do that now."

Cyan reached between his shoulder blades and drew his ax. "I don't have patience for your word games, wizard. So you'd better start making sense before I cut it out of you."

"You don't understand the powers at work here," Wren explained. "That one bracer has more power infused in it than any living creature can ever imagine. With it on you can be like a god, undying and eternal. But to safeguard against someone taking this power from its wearer, it binds itself to the flesh of the user when someone attempts to remove it."

Cyan eased his stance, lowered his ax slightly. "So I'm a god now, am I?"

"You are immortal," said Wren.

"For how long?"

"For as long as you are alive."

"That's forever, right?"

"So long as you wear the bracer."

"What if it comes off?"

"It won't."

"So then I'm a god?"

"Maybe."

"Answer my questions!"

"I thought I had," Wren drawled. He clasped his hands at his chest. "You will forgive me, as I am very busy. There is other work I must attend to. Should you need further assistance, merely call my name."

Wren extended a hand and a small white card popped into being between his fingers. Cyan took it and glanced it over. Printed on the card was the mage's name and occupation - Wren, Owl Mage.

"So now what..." Cyan began, and cut off. He was back on the outskirts of the Elashi village. Wren and his library were nowhere to be seen.

"Hmph. Wizards. Always here one minute and gone the next."

III

Cyan yawned. It was late and the moon was high. *Such a thing for a god to require sleep*, he thought. He trudged into the village and spent the night in the burnt-out shell of a house.

He slept a scant few hours before the sky burned rosy orange from the rising sun. His pupils stung in the morning light. Cyan rolled over and faced the wall. Today he had no reason to wake up early. His campaign was over and so was his career – not that a god needed such things.

It was not too long after that Cyan finally roused. His parched throat yearned for water. He felt like he hadn't had a drink in weeks.

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes with the heels of his palms and stopped in mid-motion. The touch of cold iron against both sides of his face prickled his skin. Eyes still cupped, he blinked, then slowly drew his hands away from his face.

Both arms were covered in iron up to his elbows.

Cyan shook his head. He held up his left arm for a closer look at the bracer. On this arm was the one Wren had given him, he was sure of it – it was embossed with coiled snakes. The bracer on his other arm wasn't there yesterday. He held it up, searched for buckles and found none.

"H-how?" he stammered. Cyan clasped his mouth with one hand, staggered backward and fell on his backside. Raspy little breaths wheezed through his fingers. He rapped on new bracer with his opposite fist. It sounded hollow.

"How can this be?" He held his arm out and turned it around. His right arm from his elbow to his fingertips was encased in iron.

He felt the need to scream. At that instant, Cyan cocked his head back, clenched his eyes shut yelled Wren's name.

When he opened his eyes he was in a dark, stuffy laboratory. Fumes rose from cauldrons and open beakers, making the atmosphere heavy. Wren sat at his desk, looking more amused than surprised. His workspace was cluttered with notes and papers stacked messily atop it and peeking out from its overfilled drawers.

"I take it that you are having some kind of trouble?" Wren asked.

"Oh not at all," Cyan said with a sarcastic grin, "unless you call my skin turning to lifeless metal trouble!" He held up both arms. "Look!"

"Such is the price of immortality. Did you think it would come without a cost?"

"This is not what I signed up for."

Wren spread his arms. "What is more timeless than iron? Iron does not die. And with proper care, iron never corrodes. Look at all the statues of war heroes – they're all made of iron for a reason. And now you can be just like them."

A fine sweat broke on Cyan's brow. He was not sure whether Wren had meant Cyan would end up like the war heroes or their statues.

"I don't want this," said Cyan. "I want my body back."

Wren steepled his fingers. "I'm sorry."

"What do..."

"I said I'm sorry," Wren spoke over him.

"That's not good enough!" Cyan shouted.

Wren's eyebrows dipped sharply at the inner corners. "It is not possible to reverse the effects of the bracer now," he said flatly.

"There has to be a way."

"There isn't. No mortal has the power to undo the magic that binds the bracer to you..."

Cyan grit his teeth. "Then who does?"

Wren's mouth pressed into a tight line.

"Damn it, you know something I don't, don't you?" Cyan yelled. He reached across the desk and grabbed Wren by the collar, dragged him across the desktop.

"Tell me what I need to know!" Cyan shouted into Wren's face.

"Cyan..."

"What?!" He shook the mage to rattle the answer out of him.

"There..." Wren stammered. "There exist four sage dragons."

"Quit with the fairy tales, wizard. Dragons don't exist."

"They do exist!" Wren clutched Cyan's wrists in his hands. Much as he struggled, he could not wrest free of Cyan's grip.

Cyan cocked back a fist.

"I'm telling the truth!" said Wren.

Cyan drilled his eyes into the wizard's quivering face. If Wren spoke any lies, he would have detected them by now. "Keep talking, wizard."

Wren's eyes flitted between Cyan's and his fist. "Four sage dragons guard the treasures of the elements - earth, wind, water, and fire. With their powers you can undo the binding force of the bracer, maybe even revert your metal body back to flesh."

"How do I find them?"

"Put me down first."

"How do I find them?" Cyan repeated, shaking the mage with each word.

"I will give you a charm..."

"Oh no," he cut him short. "Not that again. I'm through with magic."

"No, no, it's harmless, really! Trust me!" Wren pleaded.

"Unless I try to take it off, right? Then what'll happen? For all I know you could be giving me something that will phase me out of existence for good."

"No, this charm is completely safe, I promise. Now please, put me down so I can get it for you."

Cyan paused a beat, then shoved Wren back across the desk. Wren rolled off the workspace and onto the floor. The wizard got to his feet and dusted himself off.

"Right... well..." Wren trailed off.

Cyan gave a slow, deliberate nod. Even without words, the message was clear: "Get on with it."

Wren went to his cluttered chest of drawers and dug through them, spilling papers onto the floor. "I found it," he said, holding up a crude necklace. It was nothing more than a loop of jade suspended from a cord.

"Put this around your neck," Wren said, handing it to him. "It's a wind charm. It will take you wherever you want to go instantly."

Cyan opened his mouth to speak.

"And no, nothing will happen to you if you try to take it off," Wren preempted him.

It was with no slight trepidation that Cyan slung the necklace on. To his relief, the wizard had told the full truth this time. Nothing utterly detrimental had stricken him. Yet.

"What do I do once I've talked to the dragons?" Cyan asked.

"You need for them to lend you their treasures, each representative of the elements they stand for."

"I need one treasure from any one of them?"

"No." Wren hesitated. "All of them."

Cyan scowled.

"They will test you," Wren went on, "to see if you are worthy of their gifts. Once you have all four you must return here, and using their combined powers I might just be able to free you from the bracer."

Arms crossed, Cyan could not believe what he was hearing. Dragons did not exist – they never did. They were beasts slain by knights in fairy tales. He shook his head. Almost as unbelievable was that, for a moment, Cyan actually thought Wren was telling the truth.

He gave a sigh. "What do these treasures look like?"

"No one knows," said Wren. "No one has ever seen them."

Cyan nodded. "So now what?"

Wren froze in the middle of straightening the creases in his robe. "Tell the wind charm where you want to go."

It occurred to Cyan that he didn't know where any of the dragons were.

"You're overthinking this," Wren said. "Just tell it you want to go to the abode of the earth dragon."

"Why should I go there first?"

Wren threw up his arms in exasperation. "Stop making this difficult. Just go."

Cyan snatched up the charm and gripped it in his fist. "If this thing drops me into a fiery volcano, I'm going to claw my way out and come after you personally."

It was faint, but Cyan saw Wren's throat bob as the wizard swallowed hard.

The charm glowed bright green in Cyan's hand. Wren's papers rustled as a gust of wind kicked up, swirled into a vortex that began to whirl around Cyan. The world beyond the rush of air stretched into streaks of color.

"A final word of caution..." Wren shouted over the noise. "Try not to die too many times."

"Or else what?" Cyan yelled back.

"I'm not sure," Wren said.

That very second there was a bright flash of green and the next thing he knew he was falling to the ground face first.

IV

Cyan fell from a height of six feet and landed head down into a soft floor of wet leaves, getting a mouthful of them. He leapt to his feet and wiped his face clean.

Massive trees surrounded him, most so wide across that he could put both his arms around their trunks and not have them meet in the middle. Up above, the tops of the trees were lost beyond the mesh of lower branches that prevented the light from shining through except for tiny pinholes here and there. A mess of dead leaves littered the ground beneath his feet, forming a carpet of decaying vegetation that yielded to his weight. With each step he felt as though the ground would give way and he would sink to his waist into that moldy earth.

He was in the oldest, darkest part of a forest, where his mother told him never to play when he was younger. Fairy tales spoke of places like these, where evil witches and ravenous wolfmen made their home.

He shuddered.

"My ax!" he said, realizing his weapon was nowhere to be found. Just how did Wren expect him to do battle with so powerful creatures as these dragons without his trusted weapon? More than ever, Cyan knew wizards were closeted academics with no grounding on how things were supposed to get done.

Suddenly there came a whistling sound from the heavens. Something large and heavy barreled through the forest canopy, rending a hole through the treetops. His ax buried itself halfway into the forest floor. A shaft of sunlight shone upon it through the hole in the treetops as though it were the holy sword of the king. He pulled it free and brushed off the mud before slinging it across his back.

After a short walk he arrived at the doorstep to a structure seemingly cut from a solid block of white stone. He could see no signs of brick and mortar. If the structure was in fact carved from a single block, then the boulder was one of massive proportions. The roof of the building soared twenty feet into the air, culminating in a rounded peak. Its width and breadth were incalculable from where he stood. The building was a perfect dome. This had to be the earth dragon's shrine. It would make an equally fantastic mausoleum.

The double doors were unlocked. He pushed one open and looked for any signs of trouble inside before proceeding, his ax at the ready. A dense, musty forest smell pervaded the inner chamber. Moss grew on the grout between the green floor tiles. Stained glass windows set in the dome's ceiling cast kaleidoscopic images onto the floor below.

Cyan glanced down at the images every now and then. One showed an ancient tree reaching skyward, its leaves all green and its massive, gnarled trunk a healthy brown. The next one depicted a wave at sea in bright blue. A third image was a blaze of orange and red. All in all there were six images portrayed, arranged in a circle.

Another pair of doors lay before him, no doubt leading to the earth dragon. He grabbed the brass ring mounted on one of the doors and pulled. The door would not budge. Frustrated, he hacked away at the wooden doors with his ax, leaving only superficial marks on their surfaces which magically sealed back up again.

"Come out, I know you're in there," he yelled.

"Entry lies through me," said a voice from behind him. He spun around and came eye-to-eye with a wolfman, much like ones his mother had warned him about years ago. Shaggy gray fur covered his body and peeked out from beneath the panels of his iron breastplate. He stood erect on two paws with his arms crossed, watching Cyan with deep set yellow eyes. A sword hung sheathed at his hip.

"I am Lupine, guardian of the shrine of earth," said the wolfman in an icily cordial tone. "State your reason for coming."

"I have come to see the dragon of the shrine."

"What business have you with my master?" The wolfman sniffed the air. "I sense anger in your heart, you have no doubt come to cause the master of the shrine harm."

"And I take it you will try to stop me?"

"That I will," said Lupine, snarling as he tore his blade from the scabbard.

"Lupine, stop!" boomed a voice that echoed throughout the shrine. "Let the stranger come. I shall deal with him myself."

Lupine bared his fangs. "As you wish," he muttered, putting away his sword. He did not take his eyes off of Cyan as we went for the door and pulled it open.

It struck Cyan as odd that he could not get the door to budge, yet it gave Lupine no trouble at all. Strange magic was at work here.

Lupine motioned for him to enter. The moment Cyan was inside the sanctuary, the doors closed behind him, barring his exit.

Cyan stood at the very heart of the earth shrine. The floor was no longer tiled, but instead consisted of finely packed brown clay. Far, far up above was the domed top of the building. Mounted in the center of the dome was a large stained glass ceiling mosaic that cast the image of the tree Cyan had seen earlier, but enormous in size. The image occupied most of the chamber's floor space.

The ground shook. A deep rumbling emanated from beneath the ground of the inner sanctum, as though the earth itself were growling with anger. Cyan crouched low to maintain balance during the quake, but was knocked onto his rear as a huge mound of soil rose up from the ground. When the trembling had ceased, his gaze came upon a mountain of raised earth. Soil trickled down the sides of the mound, first grain by grain then in long streams, until at last the outline of a very large four-limbed creature emerged from beneath the dirt. The creature shook off the remaining soil on its scales, and that was when Cyan realized he was face to face with the earth dragon.

He was huge. Cyan gawked as the green-scaled dragon brushed itself off then stretched each of his limbs one by one. The heart of the shrine, large as it was, seemed much smaller with the dragon present. The dragon measured no less than twenty feet long and eight feet in height, by Cyan's reckoning.

The dragon lay down on his belly and watched Cyan with his gargantuan blue eyes.

"I know why you have come here," the dragon said. "And it is not to pay me a friendly visit."

Cyan stood and reached back, fumbled for the handle of his ax.

"You want my treasure, don't you?" the dragon asked.

"Y-yes."

The dragon gave a deep sigh. "The medal of earth housed in this shrine helps maintain harmony and balance in nature. In the hands of a good man it can do much good, but in the hands of an evil man it can bring only pain. In you I sense a great anger. Though I cannot accurately divine your reasons for wanting my treasure, I know enough to tell that you are not worthy of it."

Cyan flushed. Bile rose in his throat. The nerve of this dragon to tell him he was not worthy! He clenched his jaw and tried his best at not betraying how furious he was.

"I am terribly sorry if you were inconvenienced by having to come all the way out here and return empty handed," the dragon continued. "Is there any other way that I may be of service to you?"

"Tell me your name dragon," he requested, not a hint of anger in his voice.

"My name?" the dragon parroted, slightly taken aback. "Very well. I am Malaya."

"Well, Malaya, today is the day you die!" Cyan gripped his ax in both hands and sent up a war cry.

The dragon was not impressed. "You plan to kill me?"

Cyan primed his ax for a sweep, aiming to sever the dragon's head at the base of his neck. He followed through with a half-circle swing that spun him fully around. The ax had failed find purchase - Malaya had vanished into a cloud of fine soil. Streaks of dust trailed Cyan's ax through the air.

"Show yourself!" Cyan yelled. "Let's finish this now!"

"This battle can only have one end," Malaya said, materializing out of the earth to Cyan's left. "And that is with your undoing."

"I think not!" he said, cutting off in a yell as he hefted his axe. The blade bit into Malaya's forearm just as the dragon turned himself into solid stone. The shrill peal of metal against stone echoed within the sanctuary. The impact sent painful tremors into Cyan's arms. He reeled, dropping his ax to the ground as he staggered backwards and fell over.

"You're too persistent for my liking," said Malaya, reverting to his normal self. "From earth were you made, and to it you shall return."

The ground beneath Cyan became very soft. To his horror he found he was sinking straight into the earth. He clawed at the dirt as it swallowed him but his fingers merely dug runnels in the soil. Soon he was up to his head, then that too went under until no trace of him was left.

There was no air. There was no light. Streams of dirt ran down his throat and nostrils. All around and inside him, the dirt was hardening, turning to stone, crushing

his body. He would die in his own grave – a practicality he might have appreciated were it happening to someone else.

The packed earth tightened, squeezing the breath out of him, collapsing him into himself, tighter, tighter, until...

Pop.

* * *

New life coursed through Cyan's veins immediately. Along with life came massive strength. Cyan clawed through the earth with his bare hands.

He pulled himself out of the ground snarling like a wild animal. His muscles burned with inhuman energy, his vision was stained red. Red was the one color he most wanted to see anyway. Only one thing was on his mind now – he would kill.

Before the startled dragon could defend himself, Cyan had already snatched his ax off the ground and swung it one-handed. The blade cut through the air, taking with it the head of the dragon guardian, severed neatly at the base of the neck. Malaya's head bounced across the floor, spraying blood everywhere.

Malaya's body did not collapse.

"Now look at what you've done," said Malaya's head, lying sideways on the floor. "What am I supposed to do, place my head above a mantle as a trophy? Yes, that's it – perhaps when I have company I can sit down and talk about it as it rests up there above my fireplace."

"Why don't you die?" Cyan shot back.

Malaya picked his head up with one claw. "Oh that's being considerate. You've decapitated me and now I'll bleed as much as I care to. Like I was saying, how do you expect me to breathe fire now? If only you knew how cold winters get around here. Winters are harsh without a source of warmth."

"Shut up! Just shut up and die! Please!"

"I cannot die!" Malaya roared, thrusting his head at Cyan to drive the point home.

"Then maybe this will help!" he yelled, and hacked into the dragon's left shoulder with a mighty downswing. The murderously sharp ax hewed into green scaled flesh, taking Malaya's arm. It flopped on the ground like a severed lizard's tail.

"You are becoming quite a nuisance," said Malaya, sounding genuinely incensed. "Not that it will help speed my death any, but if it's any consolation..." He lowered his tone. "That really hurt."

Gushing blood from Malaya's ruined shoulder splattered onto Cyan.

"Watch where you bleed," said Cyan. "You're getting that on me."

"Oh, I am, am I?" Malaya's body pointed his neck in Cyan's direction. Something like a muffled wet cough emerged from the neck, showering Cyan from head to toe in blood.

"Stop that," said Cyan, and cupped his eyes with his hands. It was bad enough that the smell was nauseating. The dragon's thick blood had blinded him.

"Or else what?"

Cyan growled, then voiced a full-fledged scream. "I'm going to cut you to pieces!"

Before he could move, the dragon thrust his own head at Cyan with his one good claw and bit down. Teeth clenched, the dragon yanked his claw back, ripping Cyan in half - his torso still in his jaws and the legs and waist lying where the man once stood. He promptly spat the man's limp body back out.

* * *

As Cyan lay dead, Malaya collected his body parts and put himself back together. New flesh sprouted to join the severed parts to his body.

Suddenly the dead man leapt to his feet - intact, strangely enough - ax in hand to do battle once more. This time, however, Malaya was ready for him. He let loose a blast of fire from his mouth that left nothing but charred bones where the man once stood.

* * *

The dragon watched, curious, as the blackened bones knit and layer upon layer of flesh covered them. Before long Cyan was whole and on his feet, clenching his teeth in frenzied anger. His eyebrows angled downward sharply as his face contorted into a hateful sneer, while the veins in his neck showed visibly beneath his skin.

Cyan stood in a half crouch, his knees hunched forward for a moment before rushing toward the dragon, brandishing his heavy ax with one hand. He had lost the look of a rational creature.

Not wanting to kill him again for fear that he'd only have to do so over and over, Malaya commanded a wall of earth to rise up from the ground and divide the chamber between him and Cyan. Cyan pounded against the wall with his ax, but upon noticing that he wasn't accomplishing anything, he turned his efforts toward scaling the wall instead. He leapt up and grasped the top of the wall with both hands, kicking against it with his feet to propel him upward.

Malaya made the wall rise to double its original height. The sudden surge shook Cyan off and he landed on his back. He leapt to his feet and began anew.

With both hands he swung his ax above his head and brought it down onto the top of the wall, anchoring it in place in the packed soil. Using the blade of the ax as a makeshift grappling hook he clambered up the wall once more, pulling himself up by the handle of his weapon, but when he reached the top Malaya let the wall collapse onto Cyan, covering him up to his neck in soil. The soil immediately hardened into solid stone that held him tight.

"That will teach you not to mess with me," said Malaya.

"Let me out of here!" yelled Cyan.

"Why?"

"So I can gut you like a deer! That's why!"

"Wrong answer," Malaya responded, his green scales beginning to turn brown like the soil in order to return to it.

"Wait," Cyan said in a new tone of voice. It didn't sound quite so much pathetic as it did conniving.

"Yes?"

"You're... you're not going to leave me here are you?"

"I just might. If you pose a threat to the medal of earth and I cannot vanquish you, then the only alternative I have left is to imprison you forever."

Cyan swallowed hard. Eternal life didn't sound quite so good anymore. "Please let me go."

"No."

"Please! I promise I won't hurt you anymore! Please don't let me stay like this forever!"

The dragon remained silent for a short while, contemplating what he should do. Those brief moments seemed like an eternity to Cyan.

"No," said Malaya.

That remark nearly caused Cyan to break into tears. How ironic it was that one who could not die would be sentenced to a fate worse than death, an eternity of confinement and isolation from the outside world.

"You can't leave me here!" Cyan yelled, and it was little more than a forceful whine.

"Oh I can't, can I? Tell me if you still think that after a few millennia."

"That's inhuman!"

"I'm not human."

"That's... that's cruel and unusual punishment!"

"So sue me."

Cyan's lip quivered. "Ple-e-e-e-ease don't leave me here!" he bawled.

"Oh, all right," said Malaya, at his wit's end. "Have it your way then. What with all your whining, I'll never get any sleep." The dragon slapped the mound of earth with his tail and the rock instantly became soft sand. As the dirt streamed off Cyan he fell over, landing on his face.

"Now get out of here," Malaya commanded. "Do not make the mistake of returning, ever."

The dragon's scales quickly turned earthy-brown and his body became as the soil before sinking into the ground beneath his feet.

What a mess I've made of things, Cyan thought, realizing his mistake. Without the medal of earth he would never rid himself of the blessing-turned-curse of immortality. And it frightened him to think what the dragon would do to him if he dared show his face in the shrine again.

"Are you still here?" Malaya's voice echoed throughout the chamber, though he was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm leaving now," he blurted, his words stumbling over one another in their haste to get out. He gripped his wind charm and the green gale lifted him off his feet, making his body lighter than air for a split second before disappearing in a flash of green.

END OF SAMPLE

**DISCOVER OTHER BOOKS AVAILABLE
THROUGH DARKWATER SYNDICATE**

The Gullwing Odyssey

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

"The Gullwing Odyssey rests solidly on the shaking shoulders of a good laugh – and that's what sets it apart from ninety percent of fantasies on the market."

– Diane Donovan, Midwest Book Review

A four-time award winning fantasy/comedy adventure. When an unusual assignment sends Marco overseas, he finds himself dodging pirates and a hummingbird with an appetite for human brains. Little does he know the fate of a civilization may rest upon his shoulders. In spite of himself, Marco becomes the hero he strives not to be.

Shadows And Teeth, Volume One

Ten Terrifying Tales Of Horror And Suspense

By: Various Authors

"I highly recommend "Shadows And Teeth" for fans of horror... Each story is uniquely written by a talented author, and the writing styles varied so that each story stood out on its own... I really look forward to future volumes in this fantastic series."

– Reader Views Reviews

Prepare for extreme horror. This collection of ten stories features a range of international talent, award-winning authors and new voices in the genre. Take care as you reach into these dark places, for the things here bite, and you may withdraw a hand short of a few fingers.

Your Life Sucks, Buy This Book:

Transform Your Life In Ways You Never Thought Possible Or Ethical

By: Cavanaugh Kellough Sweeny, MBA, JD, DDS, BS

Now a national bestseller (of no place on Earth), this book contains Cavanaugh K. Sweeny's proven *Your Life Sucks, Buy This Book* system of life fulfillment. Whether it's your career, your spiritual development, or your degree of personal fulfillment, the information in this book will do absolutely nothing towards making your life better, but your money will get Mr. Sweeny that much closer to buying another vacation home. A must-read for fans of self-help and business development books, or CEO's who love a good laugh.

Miami Is Missing

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

Discover a side of Miami so hidden even the natives don't know it exists. A space rocket abandoned in the swamp, a futuristic expo that never was, a city wiped off the map, a national monument at the bottom of the ocean. Photographs, addresses, and coordinates are provided to take a "then-and-now" look into the Magic City's hidden history.

Transit Dreams

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

Ever get kicked out of a Chinese buffet for eating all of their oranges? What do you do when bombs start dropping on your evening commute? And how on Earth did that red Buick punt that shopping cart into a tree? Step aboard with these twenty-two short stories that delve into the oddities of our daily lives. You're in for a ride.

R.A.G.E.: Roleplay Adventure Gaming Engine

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

Written by an award-winning fantasy novelist and avid gamer, R.A.G.E. is an innovative roleplaying game system. This enhanced edition produces unforgettable adventures for you and your friends. All you need to get started are some friends, dice, a pulse, and a sense of humor (roughly in that order). See why this game is all the R.A.G.E.

Forgotten Spaces: Poetry For A Pensive Mood

By: Steven M. Fonts, R. Perez de Pereda, & Antonio Simon, Jr.

These twenty-five poems explore the dark paths on our walks through life: addiction, bereavement, solitude. These are the forgotten spaces, blighted areas we pretend don't exist. Everybody's got one. Tread lightly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Cuba in 1941, Ramiro Perez de Pereda has seen it all. After fighting insurgent communists at home, in 1959 he left Cuba for the United States where he made a name for himself working with blue-chip corporations. He has since retired from the business world and now devotes himself to his family and his writing.

Ramiro writes under the name R. Perez de Pereda and is the author of several dozen short stories and poems. This is his first novel.

ABOUT DARKWATER SYNDICATE

We are Darkwater Syndicate. We're the publishing company with a defense contractor's name, and that sums up our approach to books. Our mission is to be your source for uncommonly good reading.

We refuse to be mainstream. Our authors are not afraid to push boundaries and buck trends. Pick up one of our books and see why we call them "uncommonly good" reading.

We are headquartered in Miami Lakes, Florida.

Visit us at www.DarkwaterSyndicate.com.

Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).