



Last Day

Midway between sunrise and sunset, midway between life and death, the old woman watched the sea crashing against the time worn rocks, the rocks covered with the green patina of the ages, so dark as to be almost black. The sun warmed her back as she sat facing the sea, watching the eternal erosive force of the waves wear upon the majestic indifference of the ancient rocks. A faint salt tang touched her nostrils, the cries of distant children at play reached her ears and with her eyes she watched as the occasional child would pause in play and wave to her.

She raised her eyes to the sky, crossed her hands across her chest, and said "Thank you. This day could not be more perfect." She lowered her head, closed her eyes and silently prayed. A few moments later she opened her eyes, gazing out over the heaving sea.

"You know, there was a time when I would have feared this day, but now I know that when you are ready there can be no fear. I've felt it coming, the night time twinges, shortness of breath, the quick pains in my chest, and the feeling of an approaching darkness. But this morning I knew there was nothing more I could give to my village, my people, and that from this day on I would take, not give."

She continued, in a whisper "And that is not my way."

The old woman allowed herself to dwell upon her memories, savoring the pleasures and the pains of her long life. She had ruled this tiny village from

girlhood, married, borne children, buried her husband and one child, and brought her eldest daughter to the place where she was ready to assume her mother's burden.

She smiled, said "I am complete, there is nothing left to prove, all is in place and now there is naught to do but do the thing. Are you ready?"

A few feet away there was a muffled, bassoon like snort and the giant head of the dragon moved but slightly. Stiff in her movements she picked up her cane and tapped the dragon's head sharply.

"Arise Yauqwurt, and do thy duty. Do you not lust for the taste of Godsblood, the feel of my bones in your mouth and a full stomach?"

Yauqwurt opened one large, red veined eye and glared balefully at his next, and only meal, for the day. It was the rule, when a dragon ate the Queen he had to fast three days and three nights. This would be Yauqwurt's first Queen, and he was already planning to cheat, but not until the next morning. There was always an early riser or two wandering about in the mist, low hanging fruit for a hungry, dishonest and lazy dragon. A tasteful memory drifted tantalizingly across his fore brain; a young, corpulent boy, Sithes his name; salty in the early sea mist, salty but tasty, and well seasoned with deaths terror, running strong through his roiling mind.

"Tis not a full stomach, na' even a goodly snack I'll achieve from dining on ye bony carcass, no matter how Godstruck ye may be. Ye Othernons should breed for fat, na' so much for mind strength." Nor such unpleasant things as bossiness, continued the dragon, but only in his mind, and low thought at that, as Nan Othernon was strong in the Tao of the Mind. But Yauqwurt consoled himself with the thought that soon she would be naught but his meal, and her knowledge and power would be but a fading memory within him, and after a few days even that would be gone.

"Yauqwurt, you are an unpleasant, lazy and dishonest scoundrel. I knew your father, Bless His Dreams, and 'tis a wonder he doesn't fill your night dreams with Fury. It is an unjust curse upon your kind and mine that only one of you may live at a time. Many's the time after Metuchen's demise I wished for his return, or at least another, another one to choose."

She smacked the dragon a sharp one, this time on his nose.

"Now arise, ye malodorous beast, and do thy duty!"

She moved to smack the dragon yet again but paused in mid-strike, as Yauqwurt unfolded his wings and arose in malevolent fury, blowing the queen to a crisp with flaming breath, then wrapping his lips about her in an almost dainty, mincing way, sucked her into his mouth and began to chew in thoughtful, deliberate manner. Spreading his wings full, Yauqwurt captured

the sea breeze and lifted off the rocks, then with steady beat of wing rose into the surf dampened sky and flew nest-ward, accompanied by distant cheers from the children of the village.

Alone over the rocky coast Yauqwurt continued to chew, the Queen proving to both tastier and filling than at first glance. Strange thoughts, emotions and concepts began a gentle assault upon his mind, but this was like no battle he'd ever been in. No anger, no hunger, no screams of defiance came to Yauqwurt, nothing but a small push against the citadel of his soul. Suddenly he knew the Name of his besieger; she was the Queen.

Ahead, pushed up against the rocky shore, stood a small hillock of sun-burnished stone. Yauqwurt alighted upon its highest point, the closest thing to an aerie the solitary dragon would ever have. There alone, he confronted the lady, the former Queen, and his last meal.

In his mind's eye he watched as she shook off death's shock, watched as her mind slowly, methodically reassembled. There was a brief, fleeting, glimpse of young Nan, before she was wife, Queen or mother, then the Queen appeared, questioning her place and this new, disembodied existence. He shivered as she first became aware of him, then penetrated with ease all his barricaded memories, discovered all his shameful thoughts and deeds, his most private fears and the flimsy structure of the false pride he placed before the world and called Yauqwurt.

She saw also that Metuchen had, in fact, invaded Yauqwurt's nights with Furies, that the reason he slept so much during the day was that nighttime slumber was impossible. As she penetrated the young dragon's deepest thoughts, memories and fears she finally came to see him as naught but a scared and lonely child cast alone upon a strange and rocky shore, without guidance or support.

"Yauqwurt?" she queried, probing.

"Yauqwurt, answer me!" she demanded.

"WHAT? WHAT DO YOU WANT, OLD WOMAN?"

His answer came like a mental storm force gale, with hissing harmonics echoing around and entwined within his thoughts and his shouted words overlaying all like a blackened thunderclap.

"You don't have to shout." she scolded, gently.

"As a matter of fact, you don't even have to talk. Just think the words, like I'm doing, and they will come to me. And Yauqwurt, lay aside your anger, it does neither of us any good. There is something here strange to us both, something we must explore, else I feel it will devour us both."

She waited a few moments, allowing the dragon time to calm. She felt, through him, the slow push of the sea breeze against her/his scales and feathers, felt the tumultuous cacophony of his thoughts slow to a dull roar of adolescent confusion. She felt him offer up his first, tentative, attempt at communication.

"What is happening here? Why are you talking to me, after I just ate you? The others, well, the others were just food, with a slight frosting of memory that never seemed to last. But you, you are talking to me! How long will that last, and am I just going insane, and talking to myself? And just what, I wonder, do I call you? The Queen? Nan? The Meal That Didn't Go Down Right? Or maybe, wait a minute, Acute Indigestion?"

Nan noted the crispness of Yauqwurt's thoughts, as compared to his speech. She realized that her language was not his mother tongue, and all her mind-speak up till now had been with her people, and with them there was never a difference between mind-speak or spoken speech. Her assessment of Yauqwurt's intelligence raised a notch or two. Pure thought apparently bypassed the clumsiness of language. And the young dragon seemed to possess a quirky sense of humor, as well.

She smiled, and the dark caverns of his mind lit up like someone had pulled the curtain on a darkened room, allowing the sun it's own grand entrance. Yauqwurt had never encountered true, personal beauty; he became mesmerized.

She was inside his mind, therefore privy to all within, but her depths were completely hidden from him. Deep down she felt a warm glow from his reaction, but she needed help in resolving the questions of their existence, not an infatuated young dragon. He needed something to think about besides her.

"Yauqwurt, will you do something for me?"

The answer came instantly, without the first smidgen of thought.

"Of course, Milady, what is it you desire?"

"Well, the first thing you can do is drop the Milady, my name is Nan, as yours is Yauqwurt. The second thing is..."

She had to stop and think, as this had just come to her, then she realized that yes, this was truly something she wanted.

"I'd truly love an aerial tour of my former kingdom. Do you think you could fly us around, at sufficient height not to scare the wits out of my People?"

Yauqwurt answered with an unseen smile in his thoughts.

"Yes Nan, I'll be glad to, but high enough to escape the occasional arrow aimed skyward, thereby not scaring the wits out of me. Some of, and I really

hate to remind you of this, what used to be your people, are uncommonly good shots. I have the scars in my hide and the arrowheads in my nest to prove it."

Yauqwurt launched himself, then turned inland so as to approach the village from the by now late afternoon sun. He was about to begin a colorful description of the land below when he "felt" her tap into his vision centers. Together they flew over the village and surrounding farm plots, fishing piers and hunting shacks that comprised the bulk of activities of her former subjects. They "talked" all the way, learning both the technique and about each other. The sun was hanging low over the distant hills when they turned south in the direction of his nest. They flew past the little hillock and on into darkness before landing with a great fluttering of wings in his nest wedged high in a treetop some miles inland.

She felt him ready himself for the coming night, not for sleep but for his father's attacking Furies, dreams so much worse than mere nightmares they were called Furies, and only by dragons. She felt the warning in his mind, something to the effect that humans could not survive the full force of an attacking Fury, and that, regretfully, he did not expect her to be with him in the morning.

We'll see about that, she thought, but kept the thought well hidden. She, too, prepared for the coming night.

The Furies came like thieves in the night, slowly, slinking, attempting penetration, and for the weak and unwary the fight would be brief, and fatal. But Yauqwurt was ready, and he was no weakling, and neither was Nan. The blackness swirled, took shape and became like an evil, blackened whirlwind, whipping, slapping and reaching for the souls of its victims. Like demonic knives, swords and hatchets the blackness tried to cut away pieces, but Yauqwurt and Nan blocked every lunge, cut or hack. The intensity increased, the sound of a million tormented souls screamed through their minds, and they felt a weakening in themselves.

"*Lookout!*" screamed Nan, as a particularly virulent wisp of blackness cut between them, stunning Yauqwurt. Another blackened missile came from behind, but together they blocked it, and in that moment time stopped as Nan felt herself sliding away into something unknown. Vertigo attacked, she felt herself spinning out of control, then felt the blackness give, change shape, a shape she knew, but could not remember. Hallucination gripped her, she faced a mirror, but saw not her face but Yauqwurt's, and he was just as scared as she was. Both the Queen and the dragon fell towards the mirror, met, melded and became one, then turned to confront the enemy.

Sort this out later, he/she/they thought, and bent to the fight, and felt the force of the Fury ebb before their onslaught. The Fury was still dangerous, but the dragon/queen could taste victory, not only victory but a final victory. This blackness was defeated, never to return, this was something they just knew. Moments later, the blackness broke, then seemingly drained away, leaving the dragon sprawled in weary glory in his nest.

As the last of the defeated Fury scuttled away into the night, the moon appeared in silvery splendor, casting pale moon shine over the tree top. Two ghostly but familiar figures descended slowly into the nest, illuminated by the reflective moon light. The dragon came to his feet, struggling to speak. Finally, speech came, but from the mind.

"Father!" cried the dragon.

"Mother!" cried the dragon again, but in a slightly higher pitch.

The silvery ghost dragon spoke first, while the ghostly human female leaned demurely against his hide.

"Yes, Yauqwurt, I am Metuchen, your father. And yes, I sent the furies against you, but I had to. You had to be prepared for this fight, against a fury I have no control over. This Fury would not attack until after you'd eaten the Queen, and neither one of you could defeat it alone. But together," and here he paused, grinning, with arms outstretched *"Together, you were undefeatable. And now, I'll ask my other half to finish the story."* With an introductory flourish, the dragon presented the human half of the duo.

The silvery figure stood in gossamer beauty, her hands together, and a smile upon her lips.

"The only sadness of the moment is that I cannot hold my favorite daughter, as she is now one with the dragon formerly known as Yauqwurt. You will have to choose another name, just as Metuchen was not always Metuchen. His was another name, one we have laid to rest and forgotten, just as you will with Yauqwurt. Metuchen honored me by adding a part of my name, Gretchen, to his. You will have to work that out as you go."

Gretchen paused, then smiled.

"He hasn't been much of a dragon, has he?"

The dragon shook his head, but everyone knew who was doing the shaking.

"They never are whilst on their own. Eat, sleep and fight, that's all they know. Lazy, mean spirited and totally without honor, that's the dragon way. Once a year they show up at the female pens, breed, then wander off again, to repeat the cycle. Except for one lineage, the one that Metuchen, and now you, belong to. Over a hundred generations ago a surly old dragon named

Gondelt stumbled over our little village, tried to eat every fat child in the place and was finally confronted by the first dragon Queen, Emerald. He fricasseed the lady, then gobbled her up, but not before she stuck him where he sits and he hopped off to let the pain wear off before returning to the village. But before he could return something rather strange and exciting happened. Before he could digest the good Queen Emerald she had somehow regained herself and decided she needed Gondelt's body more than he did, and the fight was on."

"To make a very long and interesting story short and interesting they finally came to terms and shared the dragon body, agreeing to oversee the welfare of the villagers in return for the occasional meal. And then it sort of became tradition for the dragon to eat the outgoing queen, and that tradition continues to this day."

The two ghostly apparitions waved, then merged together, then silently ascended to wherever dead dragon/queens go to.

The dragon formerly known as either Yauqwurt or Nan, at a loss for a name, decided not to worry about it, as dragons normally used epithets instead of names, and that usually just before the fight. He (and *that* wasn't going to change!) snuggled in for the first good nights sleep since the Furies began their attacks, and dreamt dragon dreams of long, philosophical conversations with himself.