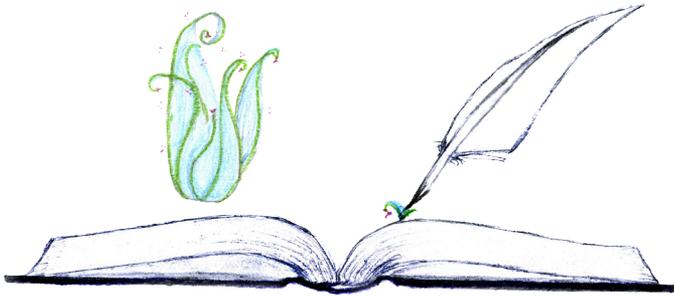


Wheaton College | SPRING 2015



SUB~CREATION

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In association with



WhInklings



Editorial Team

Joseph Abdelmelek

As an ex-English-major-turned-Conservie, Joseph feels that he is better suited to criticizing others' work than submitting his own.

Beth Potterveld

Beth got her M.A. in Biblical Exegesis from Wheaton in May 2011, and married a particle physicist the next day. The Wheaton College Tolkien Society was founded her last semester here, and she has actively participated in it ever since. When the club president suggested a writing club (the Whlnklings) and a literary journal (*Sub-Creation*), she jumped at the chance to help make these a reality.

Bianca Wooden

Bianca is an English major with a concentration in Writing and Cynicism. Her favorite writers are F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sylvia Plath.

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Editor's Note

In this issue of Sub-Creation, I hope you'll particularly enjoy Anna Tipton's "Morning Star," which is what I would consider a loose allegory. There are strong theological applications throughout this story about a Fall from the King's grace, but at a certain point, the analogy cannot be forced any further than the author's wishes.

You'll see a lot of allegory, metaphor, and cautionary tale in works of fantasy and other genres, even when the authors are not drawing humorously on sarcasm or dangerously on the day's political tensions. Why do we do this? If our purpose is simply to communicate a message, why do we wrap in metaphor what we could just state clearly?

In short, a spoonful of Story helps the message go down. While facts, figures, and eloquent argumentation might help you understand why an issue is important, it's the story behind the issue that will make you take action. Also, while a well-crafted essay can present an idea and help you understand it, present that same information as a story, and you'll never forget it. Think of Francis Bacon's quote: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested..." While exposition will get the point across just as well as metaphor, the metaphor will get your mind coming back to it again and again, just to have the taste again and to see if there wasn't another layer there that you didn't notice before.

Enjoy!

Beth Potterveld

PROSE

Tsukino Shinya (‘???)

Tsukino Shinya is a mysterious biology major on campus. His name is not in the Wheaton students list! He has a burning passion for dystopian fiction and cosmic horror stories. His hometown is 6,500 miles away from Wheaton. Other than the fact that he attends Whlnklings meetings regularly and that he always sits in the balcony in chapel, there is no information on his identity. He promised to draw a manga picture of the first person who finds him. Good luck...

David Querfeld (‘13)

David Querfeld graduated with a B.A. in Communication: Media Studies. He also holds a M.Sc. in Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. As a classic Wheaton grad, he finds his greatest inspiration in J.R.R. Tolkien’s work, particularly *The Silmarillion*. He is currently working on a large-scale world building project of his own, some of which he releases in small snippets in *Sub-Creation*. He has cultures, languages, maps, legends, stories, you name it. He is also a firm believer in Nanowrimo (National Novel Writing Month. Seriously, check it out!).

Anna Tipton (‘15)

Anna Tipton is an English major who hails from northwest Indiana. She enjoys drinking loose-leaf tea while reading literature—her favorite writers including John Milton, John Keats, and Marilynne Robinson.

PROSE

Anna Trujillo ('17)

Anna Trujillo eats cookies for breakfast, cake for lunch, and ice cream for dinner. Her hobbies include skiing, drawing, and teleporting home to Alaska a few times a week for snowball fights. After college, she plans to join a hermit commune.

Children's Crusade: Chapter 1

by Tsukino Shinya

It was a white room. All sides were a mirror image of each other. If there had been no gravity, it would have been impossible to identify the ceiling and the floor. I had a black robe on. In my hand, there was a sheathed sword; nice and heavy, like all other good swords.

“.....”

Numerous figures in long, white robes were watching me. They were completely covered with the white, snowy, fabric – head to foot – so I could not identify any of their faces. There were tall figures, short ones, big and small ones. All of them were facing me. No one spoke a word, but they occasionally let out small laughs and giggles, as if playing a silent game that I do not know about.

“.....”

There were no doors, windows, or openings in any of the white walls. I was trapped. Another giggle tickled my ears. Suddenly I realized what they were laughing at. Me. I let out a small sneer. This feeling is very familiar. I was trapped in a room, with a sword on my hand. The walls are white; the observers are clothed in white, and I,

black. Are they mocking me? Are they making fun of my life?

Impulsive anger boiled inside my heart. You know, they are right. I will be a knight; I will be humanity's sword, I will kill for them and die for it. I am trapped, imprisoned for the people's freedom.

But it was never about me. You see, I never asked for this. Do I admire the brave hero who saves humanity? Screw it. I'm not interested. I am a true egotist at heart. I was an ordinary student, concerned about video games and talking with girls.

But you forced me into *this*.

The rushing emotion filled my mind, and my entire body started shaking.

I moved my fingers. The cold metal vibrated in my hands.

My mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, all of my friends, all of my neighbors... they were all fake. Well, at least my sister sincerely wept for me, shouting "don't leave" when I was dragged from home. My life was a lie, and I was born to be a war-machine regardless of my petty emotions.

They tore my heart apart. They did it on purpose. Well, it makes sense, who else is crazy enough to fight those hellish monsters? They did a damn good job on it too. I lost my family, I lost love, I lost my life, and I lost my entire world. They twisted my mind. They warped my emotions. And then they handed me a sword. What else can I do but whirl this thing around rest of my life?

I am not a kid anymore. I am a weapon.
Not a being, but a *thing*.

My hands? My feet? Too late, they're not mine anymore.

I am not even human, since more than 70% of my body is artificial material.

You know what is funny?

Those guys I believed to be my family, who were ever so loving to me, were all in the same group with the people who ripped my body apart, to send me to war. Oh, not just any war, but the war with the humongous bugs that slaughter men and feast on children's live flesh.

I have no future. It was stolen. What is in front of me is not glory and honor, but sorrow and death.

There are thousands who share my miserable fate, and they are children, under 20—under 15. Tens of thousands of children died under the "glorious" name Knight.

Those sick, devilish bastards.

Who crack open and twist the bodies and minds of countless children who can't even defend themselves.

Justice is dead, and reason lost light.

You are nothing but hideous abominations, thirsty for blood and hungry for flesh.

Are you truly blind?

Do you not see the bloodstained tears of our sisters, pouring into the ground?

Are you truly deaf?
Do you not hear the tormenting curses of
our brothers, screaming into the air?

Damn you,
Curse you.
Be gone, away, to the Kai-ju lair.
Live as live feed to those dreadful monsters.
May they gnaw on your flesh and let you
regenerate, to be eaten all over again!
Live long, never die, for death is too much
a blessing for you to enjoy!
Even hell has no place for your dark, wretched
souls.

As if they understood what I was shouting
within my mind, the observers in white started
emitting vulgar laughs in unison. Burning anger
consumed my soul. My mind was in overdrive with
intolerable rage. My sword was already drawn. I
was screaming, no, screeching, with agony, ter-
ror and fury. I will kill you now. I was in a complete
frenzy, shouting and crying like a madman, whirl-
ing my sword in all possible angles. But my sword
did not even touch the white cloaks; it was cut-
ting nothing but air. They warded off my blows,
fluttering their white garment in the air. The laugh-
ing sound was even bigger.

Why, but why?

I swung my sword at maximum speed. My
sword drew marks on the air, but the laughing did
not stop. My mind was burning. And finally, I lost

it. Insanity consumed me. I let go of my limiter. Tendons in my arms began to snap out. I felt my bones cracking. My entire nervous system was overloading. Ignoring the pain, I added more weight in my sword. Every time I thrust my sword, pain pierced my bones. The pain piled up as anger. And anger tightened my grip, further hurting me with pain. I shouted again.

*I will kill you.
All of you!*

At last my body succumbed to my anger. My twisted muscles tore apart. My hand succumbed to the brute pressure, and crushed into a messy pile of blood. My feet collapsed. I fell to the ground, drenched in my own blood. I coughed heavily into the air. I lay there, helpless and defenseless. The white cloaks approached me.

And they laughed at the poor kid covered in blood.

I felt my iris crack open. I let out a horrifying screech, kicking and writhing violently. The next moment, something unbelievable happened – hundreds and thousands of blades sprang out of my body, stretching out in all directions. The white robes stopped laughing. They started stepping back. One of them stumbled. I opened my torn eyes.

I got you.

Instantly, all of the blades stabbed the observer in white. Blood sprayed everywhere and pieces of flesh flew in the air. Insanity and rapture violently mixed together in my mind. My body quivered with satisfaction. The robe was white no more, but crimson red. I grabbed its hood and tore it. A face appeared.

The face I reveled – was...

My beloved sister, Rei Panceloffe.

.....

.....

No way.

I stared at her dead body. The tormenting laughs of the white robes faded away.

All of my sensing organs went numb.

Soon, I was screaming again.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

A loud noise crushed the boy's vision. When he opened his eyes, the white room was there no more, and the luxurious cabin room came into sight.

"....."

A dream? What in the world... The boy smirked a bitter grin. His whole body soaked with sweat, and his artificial hand wiggled involuntarily from intense tension. His grin turned into a laugh. I feel like a five-year old getting scared of going to school.

"I really need to chill out."

The boy held his hand firmly until it stopped shaking. He raised his tired body and swung his right hand in the air. Instantly, a large clear screen with huge letters appeared in his sight.

[Celestial year 629, Month 2, Day 17.]

[Standard time 6:32:43]

[Humidity 50%]

[Atmospheric pressure 0.7G]

[Oxygen level - optimized]

The boy closed the window, and crawled back into bed, muttering, "The early worm gets caught by the bird."

However his attempt to sleep was interrupted by grunting and a groan. He rose from his bed and bent his body.

"No pain, they said. Automatic recalculation, they said."

Occasionally, the artificial muscle would miscalculate the linking point of the nerves, triggering a sharp pain on the user. The boy pushed the small button on his ankle and initialized his nerve positioner. He searched his mind, thinking a way to somehow pull a real good prank on his physician. *Maybe I'll secretly unplug my heart pulse measuring device and play dead for a while. Hmm, hacking into his artificial limbs might be fun. Nah, too much work.* The boy rolled around his bed, attempting to sleep. But the pain had put an end to his slumber. Finally, the boy stood up, threw his clothing into the washing machine and walked into the shower.

The moment he pressed on the shower button, his vision blurred and a red window that said

[Alert! water] popped up. So what, this thing is waterproof. The health diagnosis system scanned the shower while he was in it. The boy felt his mind clearing as the water poured on. *Hmm? What is this?* A new window appeared in the shower. *Milk bath? Green tea?* Wow, these guys are really serious on service huh? The boy pushed on the green tea button, purely by curiosity. Instantly, the water emitted an herbal smell.

The boy jumped as he let out an involuntary cough. The health system had initialized his lung filter. He smiled. *Just can't ever get used to it.* Another window popped up as the boy left the shower.

[Heart – maintaining high blood pressure. 169/109 bp. 34 bpm.]

[Artery – decrepitude 21% – maintenance advised]

[Lung – Filter check: normal]

[GPS – software updated]

[ECCM – software updated]

[Brain cushion – decrepitude 3%]

[Artificial blood cells – decrepitude 4%]

[...]

Darn it, not those arteries again! I am so, so tired of that surgery. The boy roughly read the contents and opened a bottle of dental fluid. He quickly poured out the contents into his mouth, feeling the GMO bacteria and nanorobots sweeping around his teeth. *You know, it really feels like a million worms crawling around.* The boy moved his gaze into the mirror as he spit out

the gelatinous liquid.

Splat –

A boy in his mid-teenage years was standing there. His rich, blonde hair matched his ocean blue eyes. Aside from his white pale skin and his severely depressing expression, he still looked like a normal teenage kid.

“.....”

The boy put his hand over his own cheek. The touch and appearance of it was clearly of human skin. *But it isn't human skin.* Impulsive anger took ahold of him. *This was not what I wanted. I never asked for this.* The boy removed his hand and opened a drawer. A small butterfly knife was inside. He took the knife, quickly exposed the blade, and pressed it on his cheek.

“.....”

Without any remorse or hesitation, the boy drew a linear mark on his cheek. Some blood oozed out from the cut. The wound healed immediately, not even leaving a trace on his skin. The irregular healing speed of his skin was disturbing. It was not natural. It was fake.

“.....”

Suddenly, a strong impulse to break the mirror shook the boy. But he let down the thought. *That would be way too cliché.* The boy walked out the bathroom, typing [*decent casual clothing.*] in the drawer.

Beep! Beep!

Instantly, a clean, nicely folded outfit popped out of the drawer. The boy dressed himself quickly. He shot a glance at the mirror once again, smiling. *Ha, simply horrible. But the hanger*

makes up for it.

“.....”

Coffee? The boy typed in several commands in his hologram generator in his wrist. At once, the smell of burning beans filled the room. The boy let out a yawn as he shoved his knife in his pocket. His hand moved into his waist. Good, water-reserve is full. *Oh, I almost forgot.* The boy pulled out a packet of vitamin powder from the shelf. *Clumsy clumsy...*

He glanced at his wrist. *I still have a lot of time...*

The starlight outside the window seemed to be shaking more than usual.

The boy walked to the main lobby, following the glowing lights in the floor. Then he turned to the dining area. The place was near empty. Only a few early risers were having breakfast. Avoiding any eye contact, the boy sat on a table near the corner.

[Welcome, Mr. Panceloffe]

The menu appeared instantly as the boy put his hand over the table. Hundreds of food options filled the monitor. The boy made a sulky face. *You know, I really have no appetite in space. I can't even taste well here. Oh well, might as well just grab a bug burger.* A new burger that the boy never saw before caught his eye. *What's this? The*

Rockrill burger? It's the most expensive burger on the list. Fine, I'll try. It better be worth it. A message appeared as the kid chose his burger.

[Your order has been placed]

The boy fumbled with his hidden knife in his pocket. About a minute later, a flying robot approached him. It was the one that is currently very popular with serving food. It had four propellers, a small body and two claws that held the dish.

[Your Order, #14 Rockrill burger is ready. Have a good meal, Mr. Pancelloffe]

A well-coordinated human voice sounded from the robot. *It's still fake*, thought the boy. He grabbed the burger and took a quick bite.

"Hmm?"

The unexpected good taste widened the boy's eyes. *Hey, this is pretty good stuff. I think it's even better than water-roaches. I didn't know bugs could actually taste good.* The boy pulled out his wrist. He typed in the name of the bizarre bug he was munching on.

"Hmm..."

Habitat: southern region. Size is about a human arm. That's pretty small for a bug. Can I get a picture? Eww, yuck. This is why I hate entomology. Living things that actually look more grotesque than fake things. Yuck. It looks kinda like a thorn-armor. The meat is a delicacy in some regions. Yup, defiantly tastes better than my average bug burger. I gotta remember this...

The boy finished his burger in a flash. He turned his neck. A thin cylindrical tube popped out of his shirt. He drank some water from his water-reserve. He reached in his pocket for the knife. Something else was in the pocket. *Oh, snap. I forgot to put my vitamin powder in the burger.* The boy shrugged his shoulders, and dusted the fine powder into his mouth. He coughed a bit, and took some more water.

After searching some random data in the internet, the boy stood up and left the dining area around 0700.

He roamed around the lobby for a few minutes. The stars outside the window were still shaking. Gahh. After letting out a groan, the boy sat down in one of the chairs. He closed his eyes, trying to remember his anxiety training. But the stars still quivered when he opened his eyes. *Nope, not working.*

The boy rolled his eyes to the left. An old lady with a big bag was approaching him. She had black hair with some strands of white and wore unusual clothing with beads, knots, and exotic writings all over it. She was most likely one of those far-Easterners. *Perhaps that is why nobody offered her a hand.* The boy tapped on the armrest. He eventually rose from his seat, straightening his clothes.

“Need a hand, granny?”

The boy put forward his hand. The old woman looked at the boy. She looked confused at first, but soon her wrinkles moved into a graceful smile. The boy took her luggage.

"Ja-ja wrei noloj dan fei."

The universal translator automatically turned on. The boy adjusted the attachment in his head. He fumbled on the buttons located on his temple.

"Auto-detect eastern dialect."

Soon enough, text messages began to appear in his eyesight.

"Uggn, Gnom yier"

The machine converted his voice into another language immediately after the boy spoke.

"Thank you so much, young man."

A small face appeared behind the woman's robe; it was a little girl.

"This is my grandchild Yoon. Say hello to him. Come on honey, don't be shy."

The boy smiled. The girl hid behind the old lady. *Not so social, eh?*

"Hello kid."

"Who, who is he?" The shy girl chirped in a tiny voice.

"Why, he is the gentleman who is going to carry our luggage for us."

Her head popped out from cover. "Delivery boy?"

The boy rolled his eyes. *Oh, yes yes. Delivery boy indeed. Absolutely.* The boy rubbed his chin. *Now that I think about it, delivery boy might not be a bad idea. No threat of death in my teenage years. Sounds like a pretty good job. Better than a Knight, of course.*

"So, where are we headed?"

"To the garden in the second floor. I wanted to see some flowers."

The boy blinked his eyes. *There is a biosphere in the vessel? I didn't know that. Blast, those stupid officers never give me important information.*

"Uh, why carry your baggage to the garden then?"

"I was worried that someone would steal it."

"What's in here?"

"Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that. My talisman, gemstones, frog eggs, my big bug head, some snake bones..."

The kid cocked his head a little bit. *O...K? I guess this has to do with something with her cultural background. But why in the universe is she carrying a bug head?*

The boy was still thinking about this even when he arrived at the second floor garden. The cool breeze took away the boy's sweat and his thoughts. It was a marvelous garden; the floor was all in greens, the air was refreshing, and flowers were blooming everywhere. Red, blue, purple, yellow... it was a carnival of colors. The boy had not seen such a sight in years.

"Wow..."

It... was beautiful. More importantly, they were *living*. They were *real*.

"Just... amazing..."

The old lady smiled as the awe-struck boy dropped his jaw. He would have stood there for hours if the lady had not tapped on his shoulder. The little girl giggled as he snapped out of his stupor.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about that. Let's go."

The woman stopped about midway into the garden. After digging in her bag, she quickly

set up camp. Various mattresses and carpets with unusual geometric designs covered the ground. On top of that, an old-fashioned electric stove with big and small pans were set up. The boy's eye widened as the woman took out boxes of cooking supplies from her bag. *How did she stuff all this in that bag?*

"Would you like some lizard tea, young man?" said the lady as she pulled out her elegant Chinese tea set.

"Uh, sure," replied the boy, hoping the word "lizard" was a mistranslation. The boy let out a relieving sigh when he peeked at the stove. *Good. Green powdery stuff. No dead reptile in the water.* The boy was smiling as he received his cup.

"Thank you very much."

The smell wasn't bad at all. The tea was a clear, light-green. Probably some sort of green tea. The boy took a sip. Unfortunately, it wasn't. The boy's face immediately turned white pale. He barely succeeded at maintaining his grin. The boy then began weighing the losses and gains in his mind; spitting the dead lizard powdered hot water out or being polite. It took a while for him to gulp the nasty liquid down the hatch. The boy shivered in disgust. *Today's lesson; have confidence in your speech translator.*

"Would you like some more?"

"No thanks," said the boy with a very, very firm voice.

"How about you, cupcake? Lizard tea?" asked the lady to Yoon.

The girl frowned and stuck out her tongue. "No, that stuff is nasty. It tastes like salted silk-

worms.”

The boy smiled. *Thank you for saying that after I tried it.* “You don’t like silkworms, dear?” he asked her.

The girl shook her head, rather determinately. *Good. I think I can be friends with this girl.*

“How about you, good sir? Silkworms?”

“No thank you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.” The boy smiled very hard. *I think I can’t be surer in my life.* Both the boy and the little girl shivered when the lady started munching on her snack. The boy quickly moved his eyes to the greenery to get rid of the unpleasant feeling. He felt better pretty soon; a big, plump bumblebee buzzing around for honey caught his eye. The small bug tried to land on a small flower but failed to land, due to its weight. Yoon must have seen it too. She giggled and looked at the boy. He said nothing, so she quickly turned her head away. Then she looked at him again. This time she slightly opened her mouth. A little more this time. Her eyes shook as she looked at the boy, hesitatingly. Finally the boy asked her.

“What is it?”

“.....”

Looking and pulling back, again, and again. It was the third time when the shy little Asian girl finally let out a tiny, little whisper.

“Play with Yoon.”

The boy blinked his eyes. He really had no experience with little girls. “What do you want to play?”

“....seek”

Yoon made such a small sound that even the boy's audio enhancers couldn't catch her words. "What?" he asked.

"...and go seek."

"I still can't hear you."

The girl blushed, and mumbled a little more. "Hide and go seek."

The boy blinked again. He secretly pulled up his wrist and swiftly searched for this game in his database. A quick glimpse and the boy was ready to play the ancient earthborn game.

"Ok, who is *it*?"

The girl pointed her tiny finger to the boy. The boy chuckled.

"I thought it was ladies first."

Yoon made a face – the boy quickly realized that she was going to cry if she didn't have her way.

"But, but Yoon is not a lady yet."

"Ok, Ok. I'm *it*. I'll count to ten, so go hide yourself."

Yoon glimpsed at him, and carefully examined his expression.

"Thirty seconds."

The boy smirked.

"Fine. Thirty seconds. You better hide now. One... two... three..."

Yoon fled with surprising haste. Well, it really didn't matter how far she went. The boy was trained to locate humanoid objects making respiration movements from hundreds of meters away. Too bad, but you can't win. Finally, the count was over.

"Ready or not, here I come."

The boy lifted his sight. *Even if she ran as fast as she could, ordinary girls can't possibly run more than 200 meters in 30 seconds.* He designated four areas of the ground in his mind. He rolled his eyes. *Area one, no movement in sight. Area two, small flying objects. No humanoids present. Moving on. Area three. Granny. No small, cute, Asian girl in sight.* The boy smiled. *Which means the girl is in the fourth region... what?* The girl was not there. Puzzled, the boy searched his four regions again. Nope, no small humanoid breathing patterns. *Is she holding her breath? Quite impressive.*

After spending some time fumbling through the green foliage, the boy raised his eyebrows. His hands began to move in superhuman speed. Three worms and a caterpillar were killed in the process, but the girl was yet to be found. Finally, he stood up. He had enough.

"Activate heat-seeker vision."

Instantly, the boy's eyes glowed a light blue. The beautifully green colors inverted in his sight. He looked around. To his amazement and frustration, he still failed at locating the girl. He let out an irritated breath.

"I give up! You can come up now!"

But Yoon didn't come out. *What now? Did I miss something?* The boy pulled out his wrist again. According to his search, the "it" must cry out "olly oxen free" to signal the players to return when no players were found. The boy smirked.

"Olly Olly Oxen Free!"

"I'm here!" chirped the little girl, hiding behind the old woman. She had the happiest face as a glorious victor. The boy had to make a face

palm. *I am a moron.* “You win.”

“Yay! Yoon wins!”

Yoon stood up to the boy, in triumph, and shouted out “Penalty! Penalty!” and the boy made a bittersweet smile.

“Ok, what is the penalty?”

Yoon put her hand under her face. After a short umm sound, she happily shouted out the penalty.

“The evil drawing of shame (宮刑)!”

The boy blinked again.

“What’s that?”

No explanation was needed when the girl pulled out her brush from her bag. She dipped it in a glass container labeled: black ink. *Oh. Great. Just wonderful.*

The discontent boy soon got an involuntary drawing of a clumsy black cat and some far-eastern letters in his face. He turned his face toward the old lady, who had just finished the last of her “snack.”

“Hey Granny.”

“Yes, my dear?”

“What does this say? On my face.”

“Oh.” After a snicker, she told him: “I lost to a girl.”

Yoon was smiling. The boy smiled back, in a very passive-aggressive way. *This girl is quite the little devil.* Either knowing or not knowing his thoughts, Yoon let out a playful laugh. “You’re funny.”

“Umm, so when am I allowed to erase this?”

“After one hundred years!”

“But I’ll be dead in that time.”

Yoon put her hands on her cheeks. "Ok, I'll erase it when you die."

The boy smiled. *Girls these days are pretty creepy you know.*

"Yoon, do you even know what dead means?"

The small, dark-jade eyes of the girls seemed to sparkle. "I do! I do!"

"What is it?"

"Sleeping forever. Some things make people sleep like that. Like the Kai-ju!"

The boy almost frowned, but he changed his attitude rather quickly.

"Umm, I guess close enough?"

The old woman quickly took the girl in her arms. She had already packed her giant bag.

"There, Yoon. Let's go now. We shouldn't bother him much more."

"But- but..."

The old lady smiled at Yoon. To the boy's amazement, the little girl obediently nodded her head.

"Now, what do we say to him?"

Yoon put her small hands together, and bowed her head down to the boy.

"Thank you for playing with me. I wish you good fortune."

Eastern customs were not the boy's strong suite. He awkwardly bowed his head in return.

"Oh, uh, yeah. I quite enjoyed myself too."

Yoon smiled. The old lady smiled too. "Thank you so much for helping."

"No problem."

Before they departed, the old woman took

the boy's hand. She probably felt the unnatural coldness of his fingers. It was such an unexpected behavior, that the boy didn't know what to do. The lady held his hands for a bit, and looked directly at the boy's blue eyes. His eyes were shaking.

"Your hands are so cold.... Young man, I don't know what you have been through, but be strong."

"Umm, thanks."

The lady smiled again as she let go of the boy's hand.

"Mind if I write something on your hand?"

"Go ahead."

Curious, the boy lent his hand again. After a while, an oriental character appeared in his right hand.

"What does it mean?"

"Patience (忍). I hope this helps you some day."

With that, the mysterious lady and the little girl left the boy. He stood there, idly. After some time had passed, the boy looked at his hand. The glossy black ink reflected his blue eyes. It was not shaking anymore.

The boy flew his body to the bed. He opened his hologram screen. *Blast, still eight hours from arrival.* He let out a long yawn. *Now who said space travel is fun? Well, at least this ship has artificial gravity. If not, I would have been forced to exercise every four hours.* After rolling around the bed for a couple minutes, the boy kicked his bedding and stood up.

“Gah, I can’t sleep!”

The boy stared at the wall. It was white. *Wait. Why is it plain white?* Suddenly the unpleasant dream flashed on his sight. The boy shook his head. *No way I’m keeping it.*

“Computer, change wallpaper to an urban night themed one.”

“More than 12500 results. Use night view of the central knight academy?”

Ooh, why not. The boy smiled, and the wall instantly changed into a beautiful night with glittering neon lights. He added a small avatar of himself flying through the academy with his sword drawn. *Now that’s more like it.* The boy sat down in his bed again.

Now what. Games? Games.

The boy quickly moved his fingers. A head-gear popped open from the bed. It looked like an ancient knight's helmet, only without an eye slit. It was mostly made out of plastic, and was colored black. One of its lights turned on as the boy put his finger on it. Three alphabets appeared; EVW – entrance to the virtual world. If connected with a stable digital network, it can connect the user to the vast virtual world. After its invention hundreds of years ago, countless numbers of different worlds were constructed in its limitless universe.

After laying down flat on the bed, the boy slipped on the EVW on his head. The apparatus hummed quietly as the boy selected several buttons on its screen.

[Brightness – Auto]

[Sound – Auto]

[Language – Universal commons]

[Language auto translate – Yes]

[Visual aid – No]

[Alarm – after 8 hours]

[Allow mods – Yes]

[Allow mod update – Yes]

[Allow pain emulator – Yes]

*[Main software is ver.0432 update needed
– postpone]*

[Anti-disturbance program – On]

*[Warning! Anti-disturbance program will
shut down all sensory signals]*

The anti-disturbance program is a feature of the EVW that caused great dispute centuries ago. It forms a specialized electromagnetic field that blocks the senses of the body to the brain. By doing so, while connected with the virtual world the user cannot see, touch, smell or listen to anything in the real world. Back on Earth, when this system was invented, a psychotic programmer trapped thousands of players in his game using this. *What was his name again... was it Kayaba Akihiko?*

*[EVW is not responsible for any accidents
involving the anti-disturbance program.]*

But no gamers today stop using anti-disturbance because of health hazards. *Why? Because it's simply way too fun. That includes me.*

[Proceed? – Yes]

[Please type in username]

The boy took a deep breath as he closed his eyes. He slowly moved his virtual fingers.

The machine hummed, and he was in this world no more.

The boy's name blinked in his screen.

[Lyouell Panceloffe]

Children's Crusade: Chapter 2

by Tsukino Shinya

Millions of color pixels filled Lyouell's sight. He let out a rather bitter smile as he returned to his fake little world. Moments later, he was in a room filled with flamboyant colors and brilliantly realistic animations. He hastily selected his choice of game by touching one of the fighting animations. A window labeled "loading" briefly flashed in his view. The logo of the game, [the Duelist] appeared. It was the most popular player-vs-player game at the time. The rule of the game was simple; you select your avatar, armor, and your weapon of choice, and engage the opponent player. There were several duel types and rules, but of course the most popular one was the "knight duel", where players are set to fight like real knights. Since the armor and weapon were highly customizable, it was very uncommon to meet an opponent with similar costume. The most popular attire was the knight uniform. However since it was only given to the most talented and most dedicated players in the universe, it was nearly impossible to obtain. The boy chuckled as he pulled out his knight uniform out of his virtual closet. He walked into the game lobby, where players wait for their opponents, carefully selected by the computer. Already, some of the

players noticed his famous gaming ID.

Lyouell's avatar looked much like himself, only without any mechanic implants. It was definitely not a trendy customization; most players liked cool bio-implants and flashy neon tattoos. His avatar had on sunglasses as a minimal identity protection. His instructor would be horrified if he found out Lyouell was playing as a character pretty much identical to his real body. After letting out a prideful smile as other players noticed his knight outfit, the boy touched the [Entry] hologram with his right hand. The glossy black oriental writing was still there. Lyouell blinked his eyes in confusion. Did the EVW scan his hand? Or did the computer somehow pick up his curiosity on the writing? The boy shook off his uneasiness as a window appeared in his sight, informing him of his opponent and the selected terrain for the game. Lyouell quickly rolled his blue eyes.

[Map: Metropolis]

[Player ID: Mr. Insecticide]

[Opponent ID: Exotic]

[Touch the Engage button when you are ready]

His opponent looked like a speed-type close combat fighter. He had white hair with a custom-made military uniform. The glittering jade dagger he was holding indicated that he was a named player. The golden medal he was wearing revealed his identity even more. Lyouell widened his eyes in excitement. *Ooh, he must be one of the grand masters!* The boy quickly selected a

duel-blade as his weapon of choice and punched the [Engage] button with all his might. The count-down started, and his avatar was transferred into a city-like terrain. Lyouell smiled as his opponent appeared in sight. *This is going to be good...*

The fight ended in Lyouell's complete victory. The grand master was miserably outmatched. Lyouell smiled as he received a great sum of game money by winning against a named player. *Well, to be honest, it was not fair.* The boy was a knight-to-be, after all. Lyouell walked into the in-game bar, and ordered clementine juice, as usual. He took a sip as he shot a gaze on the electric display. A few familiar players were fighting each other in the virtual arena. The enthusiastic shouts of loud commenters and the cries of both delighted and horrified gamblers could be heard throughout the match. Lyouell was frowning as he took another sip of his juice. It was remarkable to think that so many were spending remarkable amount of energy on this *fake world*. Fighting in the virtual arena had nothing to do with muscle mass or physical training. It was *fake*. *The fighting is fake, the gambling is fake, the bar is fake, and even this juice is...*

Clank!

The sound of the glass hitting the floor and shattering rung through the bar. The broken fragments quickly vanished into blue, red and green lights. Lyouell prepared for his next matchup.

Perhaps the heat of the fight would ease off the boy's depression. He hit the [Entry] hologram once again. A window appeared immediately, as if the computer picked up the boy's desperate urge to fight someone.

[Map: Oriental Garden]

[Player ID: Mr. Insecticide]

[Opponent ID: Meari]

[Touch the engage button when you are ready]

Lyouell blinked his eyes in disbelief when he gazed on his opponent's avatar. *She's a girl! A fairly pretty one too.* It was a girl with long, jet black hair and captivating dark black eyes. Oriental, exotic clothing covered with unrecognizable patterns veiled the mysterious warrior girl. The texture of the clothing was light and silk-like. A small section of the garment was floating in the air by an unknown force. *Is that even possible?* The girl held her hands together and bowed down. *Oh, foreign customs again?* Lyouell mimicked her gestures, rather clumsily. The girl opened her tiny mouth. Her voice was quiet, but held dignity.

"May the war-god smile upon you this day."

Lyouell was unsure if the girl was role-playing, or not. He scratched his head before taking out his weapon. Very few female players make it to the upper league, and Lyouell found out that most of them get very distressed after losing. Some of them even cried. *That shouldn't happen. Oh well, I guess I am playing kinda light this match.* Lyouell chuckled when his opponent took

out her weapon. It was a spear. The design was very unusual; the blade part of the spear resembled an oriental dragon opening its mouth. The other end of the spear had something shaped like a turtle on it. Was it a decoration? Lyouell was not sure. What he did know, that spear users in this game get a ridiculous speed penalty. Lyouell whirled his sword twice. *No way am I losing to a girl lancer.* He had the most confident look as the countdown started. The girl put up a faint smile. She grasped her spear vertically from the ground, and held her right leg apart from the ground. She gracefully spread her other hand horizontally, creating a *Mudra* with her hand by touching two of her fingers while extending her third, fourth and fifth fingers. Her stance resembled a white crane opening her wings. It created a remarkable harmony with the cherry blossoms flying through the air.

[3]

[2]

[1]

[Engage!]

The boy and the girl kicked the ground simultaneously, and their weapons clashed with each other. Lyouell was slightly faster than her, but the girl's weapon had more reach. Lyouell gave a slight twist in his arm. Upon landing on the ground, the girl dodged Lyouell's sword and launched a forceful counter attack. Lyouell was barely able to block. The dragon head narrowly missed Lyouell's head and cut through the boy's

lips. He was pushed back and lost some hit points. He touched his lips. It was a rather deep cut. Blood dripped on his hands.

“Quite the tomboy, aren't you?”

The girl responded with a playful smile. Lyouell jumped in, and the pair exchanged fierce blows. The metallic crack of the colliding swords echoed throughout the oriental garden. Since both players were able to effectively cancel out each other's attack, the match seemed to be even. Lyouell raised his eyebrows. *Huh, not an ordinary girl gamer, eh? I am rather impressed.* Lyouell prepared for impact as the girl whirled her weapon. She was on the offence this time. *Clang.* The metallic sound of blades clashing rung in the boy's head. Now, it was surely his turn... or was it? The girl still had her mesmerizing smile on her face...

BAM-

Another blow smashed through, and Lyouell's avatar flew through the air. He crashed into the ground, shooting dust into the air. Confused, the boy glared at his opponent. The girl straightened her clothes. She was holding her spear in reverse. Suddenly the boy understood; the girl had hit the boy with the other end of her spear. She flung her spear so precisely that she could conduct the spear like two separate swords – canceling out the speed penalty. The girl glared at him. Her eyes glittered at the moonlight shining upon her. She waited for the boy, as if following some kind of a knightly code.

“Get up.”

Lyouell eventually got up. He had lost a

large portion of his health by getting hit. He would lose the match if he got hit again. Lyouell clicked his tongue. *Ok, Ok. No more Mr. Nice Guy.* His blade made an intimidating whistle as he wielded it. The girl replied with her dragon-spear. The massive reach and the threatening whirling sound of her spear discouraged the boy to take the offensive.

Crack!

But he took the shot as soon as the dragon head disappeared from his sight. A vicious blow struck his sword. He raised his left arm to block the upcoming counter attack. A terrible blow. His left ulna was sure to be broken. But he bought just enough time to deliver a piercing attack with his sword. Lyouell chuckled. *I have won.* But what is this? The girl let go of her weapon, and hit his blade with her bare hands. Blood oozed in her palm, but she was able to deflect the sword away from her vital organs. A following elegant kick knocked Lyouell's weapon away from his grip. Suddenly, the duel turned into a fist fight.

"Hiyaaaaa!"

The girl let out a resounding cry. The next moment she was gone from the ground. Lyouell barely caught up in her kicks and punches. The boy was sure that he was losing the fight; not only was his left hand completely out of use, but also the girl's fighting style was completely unknown to him. Lyouell had a great interest in martial arts, but ancient fighting techniques were definitely not his expertise. The girl flipped and jumped in the air, seemingly hitting the boy in all directions. Her attacks were persistently aimed at his face. Just before she landed a powerful punch in his

face, the boy shot his right elbow upward, connecting with her fist. Blood splattered in the air. The girl jumped back, frowning. Her hands were bleeding out from her previous wounds. She let out a muttering sound. "...Ouch."

They glared at each other. Lyouell quickly checked his life bar. Only a tiny speck of health remained. The next attack would judge the winner. He glimpsed at his weapon. It was only about twenty steps away from him, but the girl's spear was more close to her position. If he jumped to his weapon, the girl probably would have enough time to make an attack first. The boy stared at the deep black eyes. He carefully calculated his next move. After drawing some possible angles of incoming attacks, he dashed to his weapon. Almost instantaneously, the girl made her move. She was far faster than Lyouell's prediction. She was already pursuing the boy with the spear in her hand. Lyouell bit his lips. He quickly flipped his body in a no-hand cartwheel, locking his eyes on the girl's weapon. The spear made a wide stretch backwards. An image of the dragon head ripping through his side flashed on Lyouell's mind. Lyouell grabbed his blade amidst his cartwheel, while his foot was still in the air. The spear was now charging forward. *Now it's a matter of speed.* Lyouell closed his eyes. It was glowing bright blue when he opened it again. The frame rate of his eyesight seemed to drop. The world was now moving very slowly. Lyouell squeezed his strength to raise his sword. It was rather difficult to focus in-air. He did not have enough momentum to swing his sword high. The hiss of the flying spear was near. He

could see the confident smile on the girl's face. She gripped her spear, as a lioness clutching on to its prey. The spear would impale him in a matter of seconds. Lyouell flung his blade sideways. His eyes were fixed on the dragon head. His sword barely touched the spear. The dragon was about to take its bite on the boy's side. *Just a little more.* The boy stretched his fingers.

Clank!

A metallic sound allowed the boy to smile. *I've won.* The beheaded dragon flew in the air. The boy finished his cartwheel. The girl was very close to him. The girl jumped up. *Fool! You have trapped yourself.* Lyouell's next swing would defiantly make a direct hit on her stomach. The boy's blade sliced through the air particles. Just before it hit flesh, a window appeared on Lyouell's sight. It did not announce victory. It read [DEAD]. Blood splattered on his view. His blade slipped out of his hand. His avatar sank to the ground, on his knees. Lyouell dropped his jaw in astonishment. The dragon head was deeply imbedded on his chest. To his amazement, the girl had caught the dragonblade in the air with her small fingers, fumbled it around in position, and unleashed the spearhead on the boy—before touching the ground. *Impossible.* The victor landed on the ground with a soft muffle. She straightened her clothes again before letting out a deep sigh. She put away her broken weapon, and drew a cross with her fingers. No, it was not a cross... some kind of oriental character. The black ink written on her hand caught Lyouell's eye. It looked familiar. It shouldn't be. He did not know anything of oriental writing. Or did he? The girl bowed her head, in the most polite way.

“Respect. You have fought like a true warrior.”

Lyouell blinked his eyes. He was unsure how to respond to her.

He typed in, *[Uh, thank you. Sorry about your spear.]*

The girl grinned. Lyouell blinked his eyes again. *Wow, she really doesn't care.*

[You are really good at this game.]

“You are a worthy opponent. The glory is yours.”

The boy rolled his eyes. The girl's odd gaming ID caught his eye. *Meari?*

[Hey, by the way, what does Meari mean?]

The boy caught a glimpse of her bittersweet smile, just before his avatar was transferred back into the game lobby.

“Echo in the mountains.”

Lyouell played several games after fighting *Meari*, but not against noteworthy opponents. He stopped by the in-game bar again, and re-ordered his previous purchase. After another glass of clementine, the boy rested his cheeks in his hand. The dazzling oriental warrior seemed to be flickering in his brain. He tried to distract himself by fixing his eyes on the electric display. But he could not focus on ongoing fights. The elegant pose of *Meari* flashed again on his head. Lyouell finally gave up resisting and let his mind sink into its own thoughts. The girl in his mind seemed to be smiling. The boy carefully recalled her moves and attack positions. She was really brilliant. Angles of attack, accuracy, agility... everything was superb, especially her reactions. The boy frowned as

he dug deep into his memory. The final blow from *Meari* was simply unbelievable. It was definitely not a calculated strike, since Lyouell chopped the spearhead off. However, she carried out the attack in the most professional way. Lyouell blinked his eyes again. *Who is she?* Not a lot of players remain victorious against the knight-to-be boy. But this player was clearly the strongest opponent Lyouell had ever fought against. *Could she be a real knight?* An applause from the electric display disturbed the boy's thinking. The next moment, the world shook a little bit. Two windows popped up in the boy's retina display. It was a message from the spaceship captain.

[Alert – We are experiencing turbulence.]

[All virtual world users must disconnect for safety measures]

Lyouell let out a discontent mutter. He quickly logged off from his favorite game. Thousands of color pixels surrounded his sight. It was not long before the boy's mind left the fake digital world.

Ma'ory and the Basilisk by David Querfield

It is said that in the ancient past, a great king ordered the construction of the Obelisk. It was not simply an obelisk, but the Obelisk. It was to be the greatest structure of the world, a monument to the king's greatness and the greatest fortress the world has ever seen. That king's name was Thedro of Zarkulon. Though he did not live to see his creation completed, his successors ensured that it would be completed.

Thedro's kingdom, or empire, was unlike the rest of the kingdoms in the world. It was the only place in which Mages were born. Each mage had the ability to control a single element out of five: Fire, Water, Wind, Lightning, or Moving. For the most part they were helpful to the kingdom with their powers. They kept the peace and helped the King when it was needed. These mages were the primary builders of Thedro's Obelisk, as it came to be called.

They dug the foundations for the Obelisk deep into bedrock beneath the desert sand and unknowingly caused their doom. They began to place the gargantuan bricks required to build the base of the structure. Mages themselves were not enough to raise such an impressive structure. Common folk helped as well by preparing food or arranging for the quarrying of the stone needed in the construction. Before long, cities began to grow around the base of the Obelisk.

The cities grew so much that King Thedro decided to move the royal seat to the base of the Obelisk. The city was renamed Hyarr Estokal, which, in the language of the time meant City of Kings. It truly lived up to its name. The city was grand, not only for its location near the Obelisk, but because all the best craftsmen of the empire came to live in that city, using their skills to improve it. Since then there has not been a city like it.

Centuries went by as the Obelisk slowly grew. During those years more than twenty kings had ruled from Hyarr Estokal. They continued the building of the Obelisk out of sheer pride. Each wanted to be the king that completed their ancestor's dream. Finally, eight centuries after the work had begun, the Obelisk was completed. The kingdom celebrated its completion for over a year. They were very proud of their achievement.

At the end of the year of celebration, disaster struck. Unknowingly, the people of Hyarr Estokal had built the Obelisk right above the lair of one of the ancient creatures of the world. It was known by many names in many tongues: Basilisk, it was named in the West, Ouroboros to the Elves, Father of Dragons to the Dwarves, and many other names besides. Its name in its own tongue is known only to the gods. Its shape is like that of a great serpent, but it is one of the embodiments of the spirit of the world.

The Basilisk had been slumbering for ages uncounted since the creation of the world, content to remain in its deep lair while the world above continued. The building of the Obelisk, particularly the digging of the foundations, had disturbed its sleep. During the time it took for the Obelisk to be built, the Basilisk

slowly came awake. Finally, the Basilisk awoke and rose from its lair and laid waste to Hyarr Estokal. The people living in the city fled from the Basilisk's wrath. They ran in every direction, even across the Great Desert, though very few survived that journey.

Of those who traveled across the desert only a small handful survived. They reached a large grassland beyond the tallest mountains they had ever seen and built a small settlement on the side of a huge lake. For a while the people there were happy, but none of them forgot the horror of the Basilisk in its wrath. They told the story to their children, hoping to teach them not to repeat the errors of the past.

Ma'ory, the son of the town's stone mason, was a child who listened attentively to the stories. Ma'ory was as proud as the ancient kings, and as stubborn as the rock his father quarried. He decided at a young age that he would defeat the Basilisk and gain glory back for his ancestors. To that end, he began to train himself to fight with any weapon he could. By the time he was a young man, he was the best fighter in the small city. Even so he was not content.

When he came of age, Ma'ory decided to visit an elder of the city who could test him to see if he had the aptitude to become a mage using ancient methods. When he told Ma'ory that he was, indeed, capable of becoming a mage, Ma'ory was ecstatic. He asked to begin training then and there, but the elder denied him.

"It is not for me to teach you," he said. "I am not capable of it. You must seek out mages who have set up a school. All I can tell you is that it is rumored that a school lies east from here. A mage you may become, but only if you truly desire it."

Ma'ory did not hesitate. He gathered his few things and left behind the town of his birth. He told everyone who asked that he was going out to seek the mages. Most people laughed at him, saying he was chasing myths. They said that there was no such thing as a school for mages. The elder himself was uncertain as to whether it existed or not. Ma'ory did not listen. He knew he would find them. He wandered for a long time, his heart always set towards the east. Even when he reached the Eastern Sea he knew that he still had to continue eastward.

He searched north and south for any ship that would take him eastward, but none would. There were only small fishing villages along the coast and they did not travel very far. Ma'ory was getting desperate. He did not want the school to send him away for being too old.

One evening, Ma'ory saw a thin stream of smoke rising from within a small sheltered cove. He approached cautiously, not wanting to startle whoever it was. Luck was with Ma'ory that day. That sheltered cove was the harbor of the sea-dwellers, named the Ra'amanar. Very rarely were any of those people seen on shore. Their cities were all deep in the ocean, and never did they allow outsiders to see them. Ma'ory encountered them as they celebrated an ancient festival of their people, reminding them of the time they interacted with the land-dwellers.

"Good people," Ma'ory called to them. "I mean you no harm. I only wish to know if you have a ship that could bear me to the east. I am on a quest that bids me go in that direction."

"What is this quest and what do you seek?" the Ra'amanar asked Ma'ory. "We do not give passage to any such as you on our ships."

"I search for a teacher." Ma'ory responded. "I am on a quest to become a mage, in order to avenge an ancient wrong that my people suffered."

"That is indeed a noble quest." the Ra'amanar answered. "We know where a master could be found for you, but we do not give passage lightly. A price must be paid."

"Name your price and I will gladly pay it." Ma'ory said.

"Our price is this," the Ra'amanar said. "If you achieve your quest and your vengeance, then you will come to us and deliver the secrets of your power to us. We would know your power and its inner workings."

"I will pay this price gladly." Ma'ory said. "Now bear me to this master you speak of."

The Ra'amanar withdrew from the beach. Ma'ory watched them leave, wondering whether they would keep to their promise. He waited for a full day until he saw them returning. They drew out of the deeps a silver ship, made of timbers Ma'ory had never heard of.

"What is this ship made of?" Ma'ory asked.

"That is a secret we will not sell for any price, Ma'ory." the Ra'amanar answered.

Ma'ory did not press them, but set foot in the ship. The Ra'amanar drew the ship out into the open sea and set sail eastward. The silver ship flew smoothly across the water under their expert handling. For four days they sailed. During that time no one spoke to Ma'ory. The Ra'amanar spoke to each other in a strange rhythmic language. To Ma'ory's ears it sounded like the sound of soft waves on the beach while being full of the mysterious depths of the ocean. It

was entrancing. Only by sheer effort of will was Ma'ory able to remain awake to watch them.

On the fourth day, Ma'ory saw land on the horizon. The Ra'amanar's ship began slowing down. They did not make shore until the sun was below the western horizon. Ma'ory thanked them and set foot on the island.

"Remember the price you paid, Ma'ory." the Ra'amanar said as they returned to the sea. "We will not forget it."

"I shall not forget the price I promised to pay." Ma'ory said in return. "I will return if I can."

With that, Ma'ory set off into the island to search for a teacher. He wandered through the land for days, and never once did he see a sign of habitation. He began to wonder whether this was the place. When he thought that, he realized that his heart was set on this island. It no longer yearned for eastern travel, but instead seemed at peace. Ma'ory decided that the teacher he was looking for would be somewhere nearby, he just had to search harder. Finally, on the tenth day of his search, Ma'ory discovered a small town in the southern reaches of the island. As he approached the town, a delegation of three men came out to meet him. Before Ma'ory could say anything, each man asked him a question.

"Are you strong of mind and body?"

"Are you willing to obey in both mind and body?"

"Are you determined to learn the secrets of the mind and body?"

"I am strong of mind and body." Ma'ory answered. "I have trained in weaponry and masonry since I was a child. I am willing to obey in both mind

and body. I am determined to learn the secrets of the mind and of the body. I will become a mage.”

“Be welcome, then, to the town of Lu’meria.” the three men of the delegation said at once.

They led him into the town and into a small hut on the far side. In the hut was a man with graying hair and sharp dark eyes. When Ma’ory looked into those eyes he could see the power that lay there. Without hesitating, Ma’ory knelt.

“I have finally found the teacher that I have been searching for.” Ma’ory said. “Stand, young one.” the man said standing from his seat. “I have not yet told you whether I would teach you or not.”

“Surely no one else can teach me.” Ma’ory said, remaining on his knees. “I can see your power through your eyes. You are the one I wish to learn under.”

“Did you not say you were willing to obey before you came into this town? I tell you to stand. I will not teach you if you refuse to obey simple commands.”

Ma’ory stood and looked the man in the eyes. They stood like that for a long time, eye to eye. Ma’ory found himself lost in the depth of the eyes of who he hoped would become his master.

“I will teach you.” the man said finally. “But you must obey everything I tell you, no matter how strange you find it.”

“I promise to obey, Master.” Ma’ory replied.

“You may call me Master Kellen.” the man said. “How am I to call you?”

“My name is Ma’ory.”

“Very well, Ma’ory. Your training will begin soon.”

“Thank you, Master Kellen.”

Thus Ma'ory began his apprenticeship under Master Kellen in Lu'meria. It was a long and arduous process. Ma'ory was taught to control the power of his mind and convert it into the element he had been given power over. Ma'ory soon learned that the element of Fire was his to command. Master Kellen refused to let him use his element for two years.

“You must learn control and discipline before you use your element.” Master Kellen said.

“But, Master Kellen, other apprentices are already using their elements in their training and they arrived a year after I did.”

“That is no excuse, Ma'ory.” Master Kellen said. “The Flame Element is not as easy to control as you might think. None of those new apprentices are Flame Masters. You will be. You must learn control first.”

Ma'ory wanted to disobey, but he was a man of his word. He had promised to obey, and so he would. He would not ruin his chance at gaining this power only to satisfy his own curiosity.

And so it was that Ma'ory learned to control his power. Four years after he arrived in Lu'meria, he took the tests and was raised to the level of Flame Master. Master Kellen was proud of his achievements.

“Ma'ory, you have done well.” Master Kellen said to his pupil. “You now have two options. You may stay here in Lu'meria and teach new students, or you may leave and wander the world. Know this, however. If you leave Lu'meria, you will never be allowed to return and teach. If you leave, you also may not use your power to harm others. That is not the reason we have been given the power we have. The power was given to us to protect others.”

"I understand, Master Kellen." Ma'ory said. "I have already decided that I must leave Lu'meria. I am grateful for all that you have taught me and I promise not to use my power to harm other people. There is a task I must do."

"Very well, my friend." Master Kellen said. "My heart is saddened by your departure, for I feel you go to your doom."

"Do not despair, Master Kellen!" Ma'ory exclaimed. "You have taught me better than anyone could hope for. I hope to make you proud by my achievements in the world."

"Go, then, and make me proud, Ma'ory, but grant me one wish."

"If it within my power, Master Kellen, I shall surely grant it."

"Allow me to accompany you on your quest. There are no other students here I could teach."

"I will grant this gladly!" Ma'ory exclaimed. "But I will also require one condition. I am embarking on a quest of my own, I ask that you do not interfere in the end. The task I have appointed to myself is difficult, this I know, but I wish to accomplish the final deed alone."

"I will abide by this, Ma'ory," Master Kellen said, "though my heart warns against it."

Master Kellen and Ma'ory left the town together. Ma'ory was saddened by the departure for he had come to love the town of Lu'meria. At the same time, his heart yearned for the task he had set before himself as a child. He had no need to summon the Ra'amanar to cross the sea this time. Instead, he built a small boat with his own hands to take him back to the mainland. It took nearly a week for his small craft to cross the sea, but he did it safely.

Ma'ory and Kellen landed safely on the beach of the mainland and drew their boat up out of the water. Though it was the work of his hands, he did not mind leaving it behind as he continued his journey. He decided to visit his hometown first, to show Kellen the town and to see how the town was faring. Unlike his previous travel, Ma'ory did not wander, but went directly home.

When he reached the town, Ma'ory was disappointed. People looked at him suspiciously when he told them of his travels. When he showed them his power, people stepped away from him in shock and anger.

"How dare you perform sorcery here!" the townspeople said. "We will not allow you to corrupt our children and our town! Be gone!"

"You do not understand!" Ma'ory pleaded with them. "This power is not sorcery or any kind of evil. This power has been given to me to protect and help you."

Only one person would speak to Ma'ory: the elder who had sent him off in the first place. He told Ma'ory and Kellen of a series of attacks in the region by a number of mages the year after Ma'ory left. Kellen was aghast that any mages would attack innocents.

"We know not where they came from or where they went." the elder said. "But they slaughtered and murdered wherever they wanted before disappearing. Mages have become a symbol of despair and tyranny here. It may be better for you to leave."

Ma'ory tried once more to convince the townspeople that he and Kellen were different from their aggressors. His words fell on dead ears. In fact, they only seemed to make the situation worse and worse.

To Ma'ory's despair, his own father then spoke against him. "We would rather die than depend on evil sorcery such as this for our defense. I refuse to acknowledge you as my son. I would rather accept a demon as my offspring than you!"

Ma'ory and Kellen left the town in anger and sadness. As they fled, the townspeople shunned them. No one would help them in their plight. Ma'ory went into the wilderness hoping to find solace in the silence. All he could find in the silence, though, was despair. He remembered the angry and terrified faces of the townspeople he had grown up with. Each face brought with it a wave of pain. Eventually, the pain became anger. Finally, Ma'ory had had enough.

Kellen watched the despair creep up on his former pupil. He tried to console Ma'ory, but it was to no avail. Ma'ory's anger grew until it finally exploded.

"I will show those ignorant fools what my power is truly for!" Ma'ory said. "I will seek out the Basilisk in its lair underneath the Obelisk and defeat it as I said I would when I was a child. When I defeat it they will know what my power is worth. They will no longer mock me or consider me a devil. I will regain the love of my people!"

Ma'ory and Kellen headed off toward the Great Desert. Their power helped them, for they could move faster than other people. They crossed the Great Desert and headed north, toward where the stories said the Obelisk had been built. They found it amidst the ruins of an ancient city. The sand of the desert had reclaimed most of the ruins. All Ma'ory could see were small bits of stone walls sticking up out of the sand as if they

were small teeth poised to devour travelers.

"Here is where I will require you to stand by, Master Kellen." Ma'ory said. "This is now my task, and mine alone."

"Do not be a fool, Ma'ory!" Kellen said. "You cannot defeat that beast. You will die."

"If that is my fate, then, so be it." Ma'ory said. "I will not run from this."

"At least let me help you. The two of will be more powerful together."

"No. I must do this alone."

"Then I will weep for you." Kellen said relenting. "I will weep."

"So be it." Ma'ory said with finality.

Ma'ory approached the Obelisk. At its base he found the entrance to a deep, dark cavern. He had found the Basilisk's lair.

"Come out, you foul beast!" Ma'ory called into the cavern. "You have much to answer for! You destroyed cities and nations and peoples. You murdered innocents and slaughtered children. My name is Ma'ory and I have come to bring you to justice!"

Ma'ory called out much more, naming the crimes the Basilisk had committed. Eventually, he ran out of crimes to call out. Then he fell silent. A slight rumbling in the ground soon began. Before long it had turned into an earthquake and Ma'ory knew that his calls had aroused the Basilisk. The creature emerged from its lair and it awed Ma'ory.

It had the shape of an enormous serpent. Its color was hard to determine for the light glistened off its scales and shone in every color of the rainbow. The golden yellow, reptilian eyes in the creature's head stared at Ma'ory unblinking for a long time. Ma'ory endured its gaze and even returned it.

“Who are you to presume to bring justice upon me?” the Basilisk spoke. “You are naught but a man, insignificant in my sight. I am Basilisk, Ouroboros, Father of Dragons, immortal creature of the depths of the earth. No one but the One Who Made All or his highest servants can call me to justice. You do not have that right.”

“Even so, I claim it.” Ma’ory challenged. “It was not them you wronged, but my people. Who else should bring you to justice but those you harmed.”

“You are no match for me.” the Basilisk said. “Leave me now and you may preserve your pitiful life. Remain, and you will most surely die.”

“I choose to remain, Vile Serpent. You cannot do worse to me than has already been done.”

“Thus you claim your doom.”

Then Ma’ory attacked. He drew upon his power and summoned fire from the sky to sear the Basilisk’s body. The Basilisk remained still, as if turned to stone while the flames rained down on it. Ma’ory was proud of his attack. It had caught the creature unaware.

“Is that all you bring against me, pitiful human?” the Basilisk asked when the flames disappeared. “Know this. The elements are part of me. Your power will avail you nothing in this battle.”

The Basilisk struck back, attempting to bury Ma’ory within the sands of the desert. Ma’ory threw himself aside, barely avoiding the attack. In desperation he drew upon his power again and threw flames at the Basilisk’s head. Ma’ory saw how they sputtered and died against the creature’s scales. Despair began to grow in Ma’ory’s heart. If Fire would not harm it, what other weapon could? Fire could melt steel and level forests. There was no weapon as powerful as his Fire.

Ma'ory resigned himself to his fate. He had been too ambitious when he took on this task. He knew he would not survive. The Basilisk resumed its attack. This time, Ma'ory was destroyed. His body was claimed by the desert sands and Ma'ory, the Flame Master of Lu'meria was no more.

"Come out of your hiding place, human." the Basilisk called. "Do not attempt to deceive me. I know you are there. You cannot hide from me."

Kellen stepped out from behind an ancient wall of stone with tears streaming down his face. His pupil—no, his friend—had just been slaughtered.

"Do not weep for this man." the Basilisk said.

"Why should I not weep for him?" Kellen said. "You destroyed him without mercy or pity."

"That is true." the Basilisk said. "But I only treated him as he treated me. I face opponents on an even field. I refuse to give them any special consideration. It is not the correct way to battle."

"You would do that even when you know that the one you are facing has no chance at defeating you?" Kellen asked incredulous.

"Yes."

"Then you truly are a devil and a creature of death."

"If that is what you choose to believe, then so be it."

"Why did you not simply destroy me as well?"

"You have not challenged me. I have no need to destroy you."

"If I challenged you would you destroy me as you did my friend?"

"If you truly wish to challenge me, then, yes. I will destroy you. But I do not think this is your purpose."

If you did love this man, do not waste your life by challenging me. Instead, carry his story to others like him. Teach them to not act foolishly, but to think clearly. But also teach them to hold to their ideals. The man I just faced did not back down or plead for mercy even when he knew he was defeated. He refused to let himself be made less at the moment of his death. Teach the others of your race to live like that, without fear of death.”

“I shall.” Kellen said, wiping his tears. “I shall endeavor to teach the world to be as strong as Ma’ory. His name will live on.”

“I hope it shall.” the Basilisk concluded as it returned to its deep lair.

Kellen returned to the east and began to tell Ma’ory’s story. Many people took it as a tragedy and cried for the death of the hero. Others recognized the lesson in the story and learned to be strong. Master Kellen encouraged those he taught to see the lessons in the story.

Be strong and courageous. Strength of body will avail you little. Strength of mind and purpose will see you to the utmost end. Do not fear death, but also do not seek it.

Never forget the importance of his story. Never forget the story of Ma’ory and the Basilisk.

Morning Star by Anna Tipton

It was ugly. Ugly and muggy and dank, no doubt a garden where ticks waited to crawl onto your skin and suck your blood, where you got your feet and dress muddy and the trees had bark faces that sneered and leered and laughed. It was the color of dirt and wet roots and bark and oak leaves.

The king gestured me to go through the gate into the garden. He put the key to the garden back in his cloak. I looked at the part of his cloak where the key was.

“Morning Star,” he said, “are you unhappy?”

I said, “No, I’m not unhappy, not at all. Thank you for the garden, Father. And why can’t I have the key?”

“I’ll keep it safe, dearest. You only need to ask me whenever you want to come in, and I’ll unlock it for you. It would be my pleasure.”

He closed the gate behind me and left me there, alone. I stood in front of a gnarly tree that winked at me. It either understood or scoffed.

I wandered around and brushed my hand on the noses of the trees and reached up to pinch leaves on the boughs. This was undoubtedly the closest thing we could get to the hateful forest outside the kingdom—the place where people died from some danger. I leaned on a tree and crossed

my arms and looked around. I picked a wildflower and plucked the petals off and then threw the stem away. I wrapped my hand around a bough and looked at the bough and at my hand. Then I let go. Nothing had changed.

It would be his pleasure. What was pleasure when it was at the expense of one's daughter? When it meant she couldn't have what she wanted and he got to lord it over her whenever she told him she wanted it? He got pleasure by making me acknowledge his ownership over the key; he got pleasure by making me beg to him like a servant. How could permission be one's pleasure when it meant you had to ask someone to get the key? And wouldn't it be better, easier for him, more pleasurable for her—after all, it was for her, wasn't it?—to let her have the key? To come and go as she pleased? I sneered back at a sneering tree.

In the evenings my father and I usually fellow-shipped as we ate dinner.

"How do you like your garden, Morning Star?"

"It's fine."

"I thought perhaps on your birthday we could have a picnic in it. We could invite your cousins—they would love to see you again, and I know you've missed them."

I imagined us all sitting in the garden with the bark-faces scowling at us. "Yes, that sounds lovely."

"Are you upset about something? Why doesn't that excite you?"

"I just don't understand why you won't let me have the key. What's the use of having a garden if I can't go in?"

“But you can go in. All you have to do is ask me to unlock it for you, and it would be my pleasure when you ask—not a bother. I think this is best for you.”

“Why can you have it and I can’t? It’s not fair. It’s just a key, not a crown.”

He threw his napkin by his plate and leaned back in his chair, eyeing me like I was someone else’s child who was disrespecting her parent. “Do you have an attitude, Miss?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I wouldn’t if you—”

A guard hurried into the room. “Sire, we’ve lost another man to the forest. Three guards were hunting, and one of them went missing. My lord, we must find some other way to get game.”

The king looked away from me and shadowed his face with his hands. “What was his name?”

“William, my lord.”

“William,” he told himself.

He stood, whispering William to himself as though he were going senile, and followed the guard out the room.

I crossed my arms. He should have given me the attention to finish our conversation. This was our time to fellowship, and he wasn’t fellowshipping with me. I was his daughter, the one he loved best, his future, his hope—and off he went at the sound of a stranger’s name—a guard. Dozens had died by the forest; why did he still take them personally? But his daughter? I didn’t deserve him to leave me like that, not when something was bothering me. My hair fell in my face. I couldn’t get up and leave if he had a problem and we were talking about it. He could always do what he wanted, and I couldn’t. I blew the hair furiously out of my face. It wasn’t fair.

I spent time in the garden, especially because I didn't like it. A week after my father gave it to me, I twirled my finger in the pool and watched the water reflect me and ripple my reflection. My father hadn't let me touch the key.

I traced my finger through the reflection of my face in the water.

Perhaps he didn't love me. If he did, wouldn't he trust me to keep the key myself? Wouldn't he desire me to have the key, so that I could freely come and go? And why didn't he want that for me? What was it to him, anyway? It was just a key.

I slapped my watery reflection.

"He doesn't trust me."

I began to pace. I touched the leaves and flowers and bark, but I didn't feel them.

The next day I walked around the outside of the garden, wishing I had the power to be inside, rubbing my hand along the hedge. The sticks and spikes and nubs scratched my hand. I paused and dug it deeper in the hedge. I pulled my hand out of the hedge and looked at the red lines and peeling skin on it and wondered what was inside that hand. I didn't feel the scratches. It was like the hand wasn't part of me. I clenched it and went inside to my father's bedroom. I sifted garments in his wardrobe. I heard footsteps and voices. My father's was one of them, and I folded myself into the wardrobe. I peeked through the crack and saw him and an advisor.

"And what was his name?" my father said.

"Inan."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"No. We wanted to know how we should watch the forest, sire."

My father took off his cloak and draped it on the back of a chair. If he opened the door, I would not be able to name the feeling I would have had.

“We will need to assign greater forces to watch the forest and make sure no one goes there. It’s unacceptable to lose anyone else. Life is too important.” My father walked toward the wardrobe and I covered myself in one of his cloaks. He looked inside. It could have been five minutes, or it could have been an hour: I only knew life and death. It was as if I was the one lost to the forest, but now the evil was his breath. He shook his head sadly, never looking at me, and grabbed a different cloak. He closed the wardrobe, and I breathed. He did not see me.

They walked out of the room. I waited. I opened the door and reached my scratched hand for the king’s cloak draping on the chair. There, in an inner fold, was something thin, cold, and metal.

The key.

I removed it from the cloak as though I were lifting a rock. I could not name why it was heavy. It was, after all, just a key. I was just taking a key. There was nothing strange in that. My father took a key all the time. So could I, and I would mean nothing by it.

But I was taking the key.

I lifted it to my face and pressed it against my cheek. It slipped on the sweat. I felt small dents in the neck. The three circles on the end were not the same size. It slid down my cheek and I felt like I was capable of anything—sacrificing myself for my father or murdering him—there was nothing too small or great for me.

I felt like that, and I was never the same.

I slept in that garden that night, holding the key close to my face. I did not sleep. I felt that if anyone were able to see me they could read my mind. I sensed someone was looking at me, but there was nowhere I could go to get away from that sense.. I didn't want to go back to my chambers, and the only place where I could get away from people was this garden, which now seemed to me to be a cauldron of secrets and decisions that were not right, and it reminded me of myself. I could not get away from my self.

I spoke to my self.

I said, "What have you done? Should you have done that? You shouldn't have done that."

"But all I've done is take a key from my father's room. He wouldn't mind. He wants me to be free. There's no harm in taking a key. Now I don't need to wait on him all the time."

"It's not about the key. You disobeyed your father. You need to answer for yourself."

"But it's my garden. It's rightfully mine. What's wicked is to not let me have what I deserve."

I clutched the key as I paced, sometimes looking at it to make sure it was still there, sometimes at the moon, sometimes at my face in the water because I wondered if the turmoil in my mind was metamorphosing it.

If I was going to have freedom, I would have to have it this way, with darkness and sleepless nights and hiddenness. No one would see me as I was. The starlit sky loomed overhead and took its seat on the garden, making way for the fall of the morning.

The morning fell and someone else was in the garden. I hid behind a tree which had an old-man face that made an O with its mouth.

“Where are you, Morning Star? It’s your father.”

I could not hide and showed myself. Three guards were with him and a wizard who held a wand. I watched the wand.

“How far she’s fallen from her beauty,” he muttered to himself, his face turned from me, as though he couldn’t look at me. I heard him.

I couldn’t look him in the face. I said with a smile, “Look, I have your key.” I showed it to him but didn’t like showing it because I may as well have been showing my liver, or my mind, and its power paled compared to the power of the wizard’s wand. I swallowed. “Now it’s really my garden, and I won’t bother you anymore.”

The king balled his fists and paced back and forth. Several times he stopped, looked at me, and opened his mouth; but he couldn’t yet pull out whatever was in him to say and kept walking.

After a few minutes he said, “Do you know what you’ve done? Do you know what this means?” He lifted his hands in the air helplessly and cried. Between gasps he said, “What happened to my daughter?”

I stepped toward him. “Father, dear, don’t you want me to be free?”

“You have taken it with your life. I’m so sorry, Morning Star: I need to sever you. The kingdom will not hold together if it’s disrupted.” He gestured to the wizard, who stepped forward and pointed that wand at me. The king shielded his eyes from me—like I was dead—and wept.

“Father, I didn’t do anything. Have it back if you want. What are you doing?”

“It’s the only way I know to keep you from hurting yourself.”

I fell and saw red and then black. Someone wailed and said, “Take it back!” When I opened my eyes, they weren’t my own any more. They were sharper and were on the sides of my head than in the front of the face. Hands that were once my hands weren’t my hands anymore, but paws with claws and scales. I looked behind me and saw a tail. I lifted my head and it lifted higher than my head had ever gone, and saw a body of toned muscle, scales, spikes, and claws.

What had I become?

A monster, a beast, a dragon. I opened the jaws and screamed, but it was like the roar of a lion. I tried to scrape the scales away from my chest, but I felt those claws, and I felt that flesh. It wasn’t mine, but I felt what it was.

“What have you done to me!” My voice rasped.

He was on his knees and clasped the wizard’s cloak.

“Take it back! Take it back!”

The wizard said, “Remember what you told me. If you asked me to take it back, I shouldn’t listen to you—not till you’re in your right mind.”

I snapped the jaws at the king, and he fell back. I spread these wings and leapt into the air and flew away, away from that monster.

I had never been this deep in the mountains before. The wind was sharp and refreshing on my

hot skin. I just needed to find some place to dig my head in the earth and weep.

The forest swept the mountains like a blanket; tree-branches tangled and wove the blanket together. I was warned to never to go there. Sometimes guards went there to hunt, but some never came back—the Williams and the Inans.

I went into the forest. The trees were fat and gnarly and confronted me like grotesque faces. The soil was rich and moist, and I could smell the sharp, burnt smell an insect made in defense against my presence. There were *who-ing* of owls and buzzing of bugs. The forest cramped me: the trees grew too close together and dense, cold air hovered over the ground. The ground was thick with decomposing leaves and mushrooms and yellow mush that must have been mold. I would have run away if I were a man or a woman, but now I didn't.

I heaved myself against a tree and tried to sleep.

My mind wouldn't rest. I wished I had a room in that place I once called home. I wanted a cushion and a bed. I wanted those warm colors and soft textures of pillows and bedspreads and curtains and rugs. Yet I didn't need to be comfortable. The rocks didn't hurt my tough scales, and I liked how the cool stone felt on my hot skin. It was like a craving for a place of my fantasy – a place I knew I would never go to and where I would never be comfortable, but just the idea of it struck my fancy. Like when I was a little girl and imagined how lovely it would have been to live out in the country and have a small cottage and cook all my own food and make all my own things that I would need. I

wouldn't really enjoy it, but I found pleasure in fantasizing it. I ached with pleasure when I thought about how I wanted a large bed and a wardrobe with exquisite dresses and polished marble floor and stately candles and clocks.

If I were in that room, I wouldn't like it. What would a bed feel like for my massive frame and spiky limbs? It would collapse and dip in the middle, and my claws and scales and tail would tear the bed apart. What would a marble floor do for me? I would scratch it up, and it wouldn't sink to the form of my paws like this soil. I couldn't wear the garments, and I wouldn't want to because they wouldn't fit and it would all remind me of the day when I was weak and fawning. I didn't want those days anymore.

Hunger woke me. I pounced on a rabbit and chewed the head off, but I didn't want to eat the body. It fascinated me. I lay it on the bed of grass and made an incision with a claw lengthwise down its underneath side. The skin and fat were attached to the bones and organs, so I cut away at the connecting tissue so I could peel the fur and skin back to see what was inside. I had never seen the inside of a body before; perhaps in the heart or the brain there would be something unlike body matter – something like a soul. The blood was like a pool with rocks and fleshy mud and fish. What I thought was the heart twitched once. I pinched it with my claws. There was a tangled white tube and round chunks that were covered in films and a ribcage as light and delicate as the roots of a flower. I lay my paw on the tissues and squeezed. It felt soft and satisfying.

I found more rabbits and opened them up, and they were all the same inside. Then I found an owl and plucked its feathers and opened it. Its bones crumbled like crackers in my fist. I wondered what it would be like to open a human body. Humans were different from animals. They had reason, and they were the rulers of the world.

A few nights later I landed on the cobbled streets of the kingdom with feline agility. There was a darkness of midwinter when the sun goes down and the moon and the stars look and the snow looks back, causing a glow between earth and sky. I looked in the window to the dining room and saw the king eating dinner with two friends.

—or at least, the woman I thought I was—had sat at that table with my father, and we had broken bread together and drunk wine. I was ten or so, I spent the whole day running around with his advisor's two boys and girl. We were having so much fun playing outside, so when I came late, my knees were red and soiled, my dress was snagged by prickly weeds, and my cheeks were like the red circles a toymaker paints on a wooden toy. I had been afraid my father would be stern because I was late and didn't look like a lady. Instead he laughed.

"Morning Star, you look like you've exercised in the wind and plants all day. You must be hungry. Sit here, and let's eat."

Perhaps what I did then—choosing the summer earth and air over dinner—wasn't much different from what I had done to make him shun me. Could I go into the dining room with scales instead of mud, and blood on my claws instead of sweat

in my hair? Could I go in, panting and apologetic, and ask, “Will you let me eat with you? I’ll be like I was before. I’ll be good.”

But there the king sat laughing and talking with his friends. It was like he didn’t need me.

He saw me and clutched his armrests; laughter ceased. The friends looked out the window and stood when they saw me, nearly knocking over their chairs. One of the guards disappeared.

Time stopped, and it was like the earth held its breath.

And could I have? Could I have put down the claws and shut the jaws and folded the wings? Could I have come home and been good? And my father, would he have taken me back? Would he have opened the gates of his garden once again and let me splash in the banks? No, not even that. I could not have asked for that much. But would he allow me to live there, only as a running girl in the kitchens, or a seamstress, or a cotton-picker? If only I could have been his servant once again, for the first time.

The guard reappeared with several more.

“No, no!” the king said, raising his hand to the guards. “Let her—let her be, for now. She won’t do any more than that, yet.”

No. It was not possible. Only in my fantasy could he take me back. And I wouldn’t even want to if I could; it’d be better to have my freedom with my misery. I felt my body, the weight of my tail and my claws digging into the rooftop I perched on. If he had loved me, he would not have banished me. He would not have taken my body, my identity, from me. That was not love. Love would have

born with me even if I was ugly. Love would have claimed me as his daughter and fought for me to stay. Love would condescend, with grace. That would have kept me from severance. I could have stayed in his presence, in goodness, if only he had kept me as his own. He could have kept me from this death if he wasn't so self-centered. He was the one who was corrupt, who needed to be banished.

I leapt from the rooftop and soared into the sky. I flapped my wings in the cold air and came into the forest. I felt anger like the color red deep under my thick skin, like there was fire brewing under my scales. The forest was dank and smelled of musk and eggs. I dug my claws into my tail to feel what it felt like he did to me. My skin was too tough even to feel, but I poked my claws under my scales to make myself feel. My blood oozed and looked like ink in the slender light. I smelled it, licked it. It tasted like metal and salt. I wondered what I looked like inside.

I was the first to know what it was like to say what I shouldn't have said, to touch what I shouldn't have touched. There would be others who would follow me. Now, I could either die with my head in the soil—a coward—or take from him what he took from me, making chaos of his order. Yes, I would make chaos of his order. I would make the night of the forest become his day. I would call it, unleash it on him. It might kill me, but I had nothing to lose. I never had anything to lose. I knew that now.

I didn't know pain in my other life—not real pain, the kind of pain that sticks in your soul like claws tearing away the connecting tissue to see and squeeze what's inside. There was glory in this

misery—in the inky black blood and the soft soil and the solitary shelter of a dark forest, in aloneness and dispossession and injured merit. Now I knew what was inside of me.

I stepped deeper into the forest.

Fallen

by Anna Trujillo

“Civilization’s Gone Soft!” all the commercials complained, and billboards along freeways criss-crossing the continents bore slogans like “Is Peace Poison?” and “Sparta Had It Right” and “International Skirmishes Build Character (And Empires).” And the movement didn’t stop at mere propaganda. Scholars noted that warlike past societies had produced figures like Solomon and the Caesars and Alexander the Great, while today the best we could come up with were Lady Gaga and Palin and that baby spitting up mashed sweet potatoes on YouTube. Something was wrong, the governments decided, and for once they took decisive action and initiated their Regress to Progress plan, modeled after the philosophy that had guided history’s greatest empire: Rome.

The bread I could live with. Everywhere I turned now, government-sponsored bakeries had sprouted up, selling croissants and rolls and crusty loaves with thick slabs of meat or sharp cheese to put on top instead of jelly or jam, because culinary anthropologists theorized that mushy modern food fads like fro-yo and smoothies were a contributing factor to the alarming softening up of humankind that had taken place in recent centuries. The circuses, though, were another story. The sports

channels on TV offered live coverage of poisoned-cleat football, synchronized swimming with sharks, and full-contact golf. You could sign your kids up for horseback jousting lessons or a junior bayonet-badminton league. Every sport, it seemed, now demanded blood as well as sweat.

So as I lined up for the start of my cross-country ski race, I tried to ignore the screams echoing from the course.

The racer in front of me took off, steel pole tips flashing in the winter sun, and the electronic clock started counting down the fifteen too-short seconds until my turn. I scooted forward so that my shins, bundled in knee-high woolen socks and bunched-up long underwear and my hideous spandex uniform, pressed against the plastic wand that would record my start when I shoved through. The official manning the starting line looked at me and asked, "So this is your first Gladiator Loppet?"

"Is it really that obvious?" I started to ask, but then I realized my knees were knocking together and winced behind my balaclava.

Beep. Beep. Beep. The electronic clock flashed through the final seconds.

Wait, I thought. I don't want to—

BEEP.

Adrenaline pushed me through the plastic wand and shooed me down the trail at my fastest V2.

I was moving fast, but I felt like crying. I hadn't wanted to enter the Gladiator Loppet. I was twenty years old and a skilled skier, but I preferred good old-fashioned long-distance tours or classic sprints to this new sport of endurance and gore, enthusiasm for which now gripped the Scandinavian countries and

the upper half of North America. In this regard I was the opposite of my sister Sheila, who was twenty-three, tough as a bear, and lauded as the world's fiercest Nordic Gladiator under the quarter-century mark—outside of Norway, of course.

But I hadn't had a say in my entrance in the Gladiator Loppet. Mom had bought my bib as a twentieth-birthday gift (more like a twentieth-birthday unpleasant shock), exclaiming, "It'll be fun!"

"It's an opportunity to do your bit for the reform of civilization," Sheila had said. "Consider it a rite of passage."

"I could die out there," I'd protested, but no one else seemed concerned with this slight complication.

"Come on, sis—we can do it together," Sheila had wheedled. "You'll make me proud, right?"

After that I had no choice. Sheila always knew just what to say.

And now, despite the shaking of my limbs and the exploding-snowball sensation of fear in my gut, here I was, flailing up the first hill. The throngs of spectators lining the trails—devout fans who braved the elements to witness blood and frosty eyelashes—faded to mere scenery, their cheers and clanging cowbells to background noise. The course was wooded, sparkling white, groomed to corduroy perfection—picturesque, even, if I ignored the frantic percussion of my heart.

The Gladiator Loppet had an interval start—fifteen seconds between each athlete—and right now I could see neither the skier in front of me nor the skier behind. Perhaps I wouldn't catch up to anyone and no one would catch up to me. Perhaps

I could ski the race in solitude and place decently enough that Sheila, who was a minute or so ahead on the course, would beam when she watched me cross the finish line.

I had just begun to allow myself to think that this would be the case when I heard the *swish-crunch-swish-crunch-swish-crunch* of someone skiing up behind me. My half-formed fantasy of Sheila's proud embrace vanished as I snapped my head around. The racer behind me, tall and broad in blood-red spandex, was bearing down on me like that boulder in *Indiana Jones*.

I broke into a sprint. I didn't want to fight. No, I *couldn't* fight. I was a twenty-year-old amateur and was still perfecting my jump-skate, for goodness' sake, and all the other skiers in the Gladiator Loppet were seasoned athletes who could draw blood as easily as breath.

But I wasn't fast enough. The woman behind me came so close that I could feel her ski tips clacking on my tails—feel steamy, eager breath soaking through the back of my balaclava to tingle on my neck. I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye as my pursuer flicked my hang pole out from under me, and before I knew what was happening I was sprawled on my side on the ground with the red-uniformed racer looming above.

The spectators, smelling blood, let loose a clamor of whoops and shouts. I had no escape. The skier lifted her poles—I got a better view than I desired of their wickedly sharpened tips—and prepared to stab twin holes in my undefended chest.

"I who am about to die," I tried to say, but my chattering teeth wouldn't let me get the words out.

I wasn't sure what happened after that. My attacker staggered, someone behind her grunted, and my attacker howled in pain and whirled around. When she did so, I saw a hole in her back. Blood seeped through her uniform to dye the spandex a darker, wetter red.

Spectators cheered.

The chattering in my teeth had spread to my entire skeleton, but I managed to stagger to my feet and ski away down the course, too terrified to feel relief or any curiosity at which of the two Nordic Gladiators behind me finished the other off.

After that, the race transformed into a disjointed dash down the trail. I came upon a slower-moving skier on a downhill and zipped a wide curve around her without getting in range of her poles. A minute or so later, I heard someone else skiing up behind me and dove into the trees, scratching up my skis and face, to hide behind a snow-draped spruce until two racers locked in life-or-death pursuit rushed past. Once, perhaps a mile farther along, something whacked me on the shoulder and I screamed and batted at air until I realized I had not been attacked by another skier but rather by a chunk of snow that had fallen from a breeze-stirred branch overhead.

My fear didn't fade as the race went on, but as exhaustion crept into my limbs, it became too taxing to imagine all the ways I could be killed. The only image I could keep fixed in my mind was the ever nearer, ever dearer goal of crossing the finish line with all my blood still inside and collapsing into Sheila's proud embrace.

The crowds of spectators thickened and their cheering swelled in volume, letting me know the finish line must be just a turn or two away. I tucked down a short downhill, step-turned around the corner at its base, and veered to a sloppy hockey-stop just in time to avoid crashing into the two Nordic Gladiators battling in the middle of the trail.

One of them was Sheila.

The other athlete had her back to me. She had long dark hair and blood running down her blue spandex sleeve from a wound in her shoulder. But Sheila looked the worse for wear. She had blood on the front of her right thigh and running into her eyes from a scratch just beneath the rim of her buff, and as I watched, her opponent grabbed her slashing pole by the shaft just above the basket and ripped it out of her hand.

The yank made Sheila overbalance and fall on her face in the snow. She tried to roll to face her attacker as the woman in blue advanced, but her skis had gotten tangled up, and the best she could manage was to twist to her side.

The woman in blue hissed in pain from the wound in her shoulder as she lifted her poles to strike. Sheila, lying injured and defenseless on the ground, seemed smaller than I'd ever seen her, but she still managed to twist her face into a stoic expression and shout the words that would allow her to die with honor: "I who am about to die salute you!"

I didn't know who "you" was—the government or the spectators or the nearest race official or that baby on YouTube. But I did know, in a sudden flash of certainty, that Sheila had been right

that day Mom handed me my bib. This was a rite of passage. We were in this race together. And the best way I knew to do my bit for the reform of civilization was to keep that civilization from murdering my sister.

I shuffled up behind the woman in blue and stabbed her in the back, once—her body arched—twice—she doubled over in pain—and a third time, with my whole body's weight behind it, driving my pole's spear-like tip deeper and deeper into grisly tissue until the woman toppled forward, dead or unconscious, into the snow.

I yanked my pole free and looked at Sheila, who had regained her feet and was strapping her pole back on over her glove. The crowd was going crazy, cheering and dancing and waving scarves and bells, and my pulse thrummed through my whole body in either repulsion or exuberance at what I had just done.

"Good work, sis," Sheila panted. "Straight shot to the finish from here."

I followed the jerk of her chin and saw that the finish line really was only eighty meters away. I couldn't hold back a grin that crackled my frozen balaclava. I wasn't just a bread-munching pleb. I was a Nordic Gladiator, reformer of civilization, courageous as my sister and as tough as a bear. My overworked heart felt fuller than it ever had.

Or at least it did, until Sheila stabbed me in the chest.

"I who am about to die," I tried to say, but the words wouldn't come. The snow beneath me was much too hard, as were the poles in my hands and the spectators' roar. I've fallen, I realized. Rome fell,

too. But I couldn't hold onto that thought because everything started fading to sharp steel gray—everything, that is, except the image of Sheila V2ing, alone and victorious, across that so-close finish line.

POETRY

Claire Reck ('18)

Claire is an English writing major from Rockford, Illinois who enjoys reading, writing, and sketching. She primarily writes poetry and short stories, and often likes dreaming up new art projects. She is excited to be a part of *Sub-Creation!*

Catching the Quiet by Claire Reck

Fish out of bowl slipping into blue-green
Clear child's eyes reflecting rain, the sadness of a
parting
Winged yellow-orange friend, alighting quietly
Kissing the edge of water and sky before choosing
Umbrellas tilted wearily, the tired reassurance that
blue-time in evening is momentary
Preceding the ritual spilling of sun
Must come the puddling of fish tears and rain
Fogged light dancing hazily and smelling of slick-
washed linoleum tiles
One square blue: the next green
Walking away, remembering
The bird clock that only sounds like a robin
And the melancholy of jazz, on the porch, by the
pictures of family worn by time
Childhood slipped into a river before dinner
"He will be happier in his new home," they tell her,
Noticing the stains of tears on the green polka dot
pillow
In three days her friend forgotten

Sub-Creation | Spring 2015 | Poetry

Hopscotch and chalk and carelessness in summer
The spokes of the beloved pink bike, running over
to play with her neighbor
How soon it fades

Sam
by Claire Reck

She was quiet, that girl
Sitting on air vents in winter to stay warm
Watching her breath spiral into nothing but cold
Eating ice and the fizz on cream soda, while looking
at the Culvers sign:
“Cookie Dough 3-piece Cod Dinner”

Contemplating the importance of spaces under
stairs and between objects
Watching black-and-white-movies, road-tripping,
looking through windows
The light a distraction from the inside world, warming
without consequence of wind

She found safety in the familiar:
That tree with the rusted chain on the way to school,
Her mother putting on Carmex and the fancy black
dress with flowers,
That crack in the glass of a picture over the stairs

She didn't like hot drinks, sledding, sand between
fingernails

Sub-Creation | Spring 2015 | Poetry

The uncomfortable, the abnormal, the unfamiliar
Burned out signs without apostrophes, waking up
early, swimming pools

She was afraid to speak
Being called on in class and bottling up emotions,
Carefully dusted and put on sagging shelves
Organizing chaos, pretending that everything was
mint chocolate chip ice cream and Christmas
She waited in corners, secluded with notebooks,
blackberries, bare feet
She was afraid to be, that girl

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

- We welcome submissions from any member of the Wheaton College community, whether student, faculty, staff, or alum. Only two pieces from any one author may be submitted per issue.
- For copyright reasons, we must limit our published selection to original characters and worlds only. Please, no fan-fiction or fan-art.
- While the journal's main emphasis is on fiction, we will also consider poetry, non-fiction, essay, and art for publication.
- The journal will only publish genre fiction. The genres included are:
 - Science fiction
 - Fantasy
 - Mystery
 - Action/Adventure
 - Horror
 - Western
- We are interested in any mix of these or similar genres. If your piece falls under a genre we missed, please contact us and ask about it. We will most likely welcome your story!
- Short fiction is preferred, but chapters of longer stories may have the opportunity to be published serially.
- Essays and other non-fiction submissions may be on these genres themselves, authors who write in them, personal experiences with genres, reviews of popular works of genre fiction, etc.
- Art submissions must have as their main subject something to do with the target genres. Please submit your work as a high-resolution PDF.

Deadlines

Submission deadlines are:

- Fall semester—October 31
- Spring semester—March 17

We will accept submissions at any point during the semester, but only those submitted before the above dates will be considered for the current issue. Submissions should be e-mailed as attachments to *SubCreation@my.wheaton.edu*. If your piece is too big for an e-mail attachment, simply contact the same address for further instructions. Please include your full name and Wheaton e-mail address with your submission.

Contact Us

You can find out more about the journal and our community of writers at our website and our Facebook page. Just Google “Wheaton Sub-Creation,” and there we’ll be. Also feel free to e-mail us at *SubCreation@my.wheaton.edu*.

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