



JACOB RHODEN'S
ENGL 3040 PORTFOLIO

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Introduction

I write science fiction and fantasy, mostly because it's a way to imitate people who I respect and who I wish to be like. The way in which I write usually imitates this. I will think of something I thoroughly enjoy, or which I find very interesting. This is usually a world, a power system, a character, or a piece of lore. Then, I either try to write expanding on one of these things, creating a world around that thing which I enjoy. I saw the design of Ramiel, the fifth monster-of-the-week in Evangelion, and I loved it. It was *just alive enough*. It morphs like a geometric shape, spinning into itself, like a quantum glass sculpture. It does not have hair, or skin, or limbs. But when it attacks, it screams a terrible scream, a shrieking shrill noise, before shooting, rather than a generic charge-up. It's a great sound effect that reflects the nature of the world of the series. Something that should not have lungs is screaming. I liked this a lot, and so (uninspiredly) wrote a story that was about smaller creatures, like Ramiel, attacking Earth. Don't watch Evangelion, by the way. The designs are stellar, but it is indicative of the teenage male audience it was

made for, despite the best efforts of those who created it. It's really just tactical plagiarism, (though I swear I added more to that story!) though I do create my own ideas, sometimes. I really liked this story, Paradise, but I can't find whether it's made by Olivia Murphy or if that's just the comments on it, since there's no name of the author, and I can't see who made the Doc. It builds a world without having to force too much exposition, and it creates a strong base for a narrative. It's simple without being uninteresting. I really can't find anything I dislike about it, which is what I'd eventually like to say about my own stories, though I also understand that a project which doesn't take any risks might not be interesting unless it has a *really* strong baseline, like Paradise does.

Writing Toolbox

Week five and six's concepts about strong character writing and dialogue are very important to me. I consistently felt that my ability to create likeable, entertaining characters was lacking, but this class helped alleviate some of that feeling through giving me the tools to create better characters. Dialogue was also a weak point, which was characterized by many of my stories being focused on the world I was trying to create while ignoring the characters that live in it, even though those are what make a world truly unique or interesting. This is because I disliked writing dialogue, and I disliked writing it because it came out consistently terrible. While it feels obvious in hindsight, the simple tool of trying to write your characters as close to real people as possible is helpful. Are these motivations realistic or is the character's reaction overblown? Would they

really talk like that, or talk about what they're talking about? This is a specific example, but I've found this is also a good tool for examining whether your character is a good question-asker or not. Diegetic exposition relies on somebody asking questions, so if you require a certain level of your world to be explained to the reader, you might want a question-asking character. That's probably a bad way to go about it, but it works as a bandage until I can find a better way to do loredumps. Making most of your characters personable also means that the characters that don't match the mold are particularly special. This can make a nonhuman or nonhumanoid species or character in your story especially cool. If every character in your story talks like a human, but there's one weirdo that talks like Dagoth-Ur, you're going to remember them! I've tried to go back to one of my previous stories from before this class to apply this learning, but because there's not much opportunity for dialogue between normal humans, since the two primary characters are one human and one nonhuman. This presents unique opportunities and unique challenges. If you have a human character and need to explain sci-fi or fantasy elements to them, you could have a 'Did I just freaking do that?' type character which, despite being realistic, is still unenjoyable. I don't know. I'm just gonna tread lightly around dialogue and character and try my best to use the advice the modules gave me.

Piece 1

I like this untitled blacksmith story that I did for week six because I really tried my best to drive home the ideas which weeks five and six tried to teach about characters and

dialogue. I'm fairly proud of how I wrote the dialogue and interactions between the characters here, and even though they're fairly generic, I like the characters in the story.

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“There... better be... a terrific reason...”, says the Abbot, gasping, face red from effort, “that he’s put his smithy... on top of a blasted mountain!” The abbots' light brown cloth garbs are wisped around however the wind pleases, as the trail curves left and right aggressively, snow dappling the gravel and stones, wind slamming into the three climber’s sides like a spiked hammer, the cold digging and stabbing into their bones.

“The reason he’s special is *because* he’s on the mountain. Must this be explained to you incessantly?” The knight speaks through his tall helmet, a frog-mouth helm, muffled. Strangely, he opted to wear it for the climb, despite its difficulty. Chainmail on the rest of his body, and a gambeson underneath. The only part of his body that indicates he was going on a climb at all would be his shoes.

“Even so! I am a man of god; one of his chosen disciples! This is not work suitable for me!” The abbot’s long, lanky legs are wobbling.

“Do you have a second pair of lungs to complain with?”

The abbot scoffs. “How close are we?”

“Nearly there, I believe. The stakes have become more numerous.” A number of wooden poles are stabbed into the ground, where the rocks have spread apart enough to reveal permafrost. Red cloth, carefully tied, waves in the sharp skin-slicing wind. The knight is barely able to see an opening in the mountain above, marked with a hanging lantern. The oil inside is still burning.

When they finally reach the top, the abbot rushes in—perhaps he has a second set of legs

for finding a chair, too—and collapses. The knight walks in after him, taking more note of their environment. The room is a natural cave, though parts of it have clearly been chiseled and carved away to make room for storage, or spots to work. The furniture is utilitarian and uncomfortable, the only nicety a kettle on top of an ancient-looking stove carved out of the face of the cave and a bed warmer, presumably still full of hot embers, underneath rough-hewn covers on a straw bed.

“...does he really live like this?” The Abbot says, looking around the room, eyes wide. He runs his hand over the unsanded wooden table, sucking on a finger after he gets a splinter.

The knight snorts behind his helmet. “Your affinity towards marble and gold is not universal.”

“I, well... a man of the cloth must, ehm...”

“Yes, yes. I understand. Golden candlesticks and whatnot. Perhaps the smith could make you a world-renowned cross.”

“Don’t upset me, boy! I’m the one paying your salary!”

“Yes, cancel my contract so you can go back down the mountain alone. Very fiscal of you, *Father*.”

The abbot is noticeably silent, before the blacksmith walks up through a doorway in the back of the room. His skin is warmly colored, a heavy-looking black apron hanging over his sweat-drenched flesh, well-rounded muscles across his body, the ones on his biceps and forearms thick enough that the skin covering them looks like it might snap. He’s wearing thick black leather pants, crudely made, though they’re held up by a fairly ornate belt and buckle. Thin cloth covers where the apron does not. As he walks, there’s a quiet whistle with every movement of his limbs.

“Business?” His voice is unsettlingly powerful. As loud as a scream, without having to

yell. The Abbot shrinks back slightly.

“Yes, Smith. You don’t have to speak. I understand your condition.” The Knight says, voice comparably quiet, coming from a small slit in his helmet.

“We sent notice. We’ve come to collect our commission.” The Abbot speaks quietly. The Smith nods, putting up a hand as he lights a fire in his stove, filling the kettle with water and herbs from a small jar. The crudely brewed tea smells strongly of mint and nettle. The Smith grabs the hot kettle with his bare hands and downs a large portion of it, steaming hot as he guzzles it. He wipes his mouth and walks through the door he came through. The Knight and Abbot follow.

The Smith is noticeably quiet. In the semi-natural cavern they walk through, their footsteps echo, their path only lit by the occasional flickering candle on the floor or in the wall. The Knight and Abbot walk far behind him. “You know what you ordered?” His voice almost clatters against the stone walls.

“Y-Yes. A sword. Your skills were-”

“A sword. Do you know what a sword does?” He takes a heaving swig of the kettle. The Abbot is sweating.

“It...”

“It kills.” Speaking slightly louder than before, his voice is enough to knock the Abbot off his feet. The Smith and The Knight continue walking, as he scrambles to catch up. “I did not ask God for these lungs.” He coughs aggressively, rubbing his throat. He speaks as quietly as he can.

“But it is your duty to use them.” The Knight says with conviction. “For the people, and for your King. For God.”

The balling of the Smith's calloused fists sounds like leather wrapping around steel. "You wanted a warrior, but I refused. Because I wanted to create." He coughs violently, hard enough that he has to lean forwards, putting a hand on his knee. It's an unexplainable pain for him to keep speaking. "But I could not make art, and I was not allowed to carve, or chisel. You forced me to smith."

"You have a privilege so many would beg for. You could be the strongest warrior in the world. You dare complain?"

The Smith's voice bellows. The Knight is forced to kneel, and the Abbot is slammed against the ground, both of their heads ringing. "Then let them beg! Let them take this burden! I cannot speak, I cannot cry! This is no life, this is *servitude!*" He falls to his hands and knees, gasping from the pain. Every cough is another smattering of blood, soon to dry on the cold stone steps. Yet, after his throat relaxes slightly, he puts his hand against the wall, and he stands again. And he slowly continues stomping, into the depths.

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Piece 2

For my piece Sandship Garuda, I wanted to really try to better my ability to create a world. I had a couple ideas in mind for this story; I wanted it to take place in a world-spanning desert, with a deeply inhospitable surface. I didn't want any sort of animal threat, like Dune, I wanted it to be more of a Mad Max person versus person situation, where resources are tight so there's often fighting over them. I thought it'd also be interesting if magic was involved, in some way. Not some Harry Potter shit, like, some magic-magic. I took a lot of notes from this RPG game I remember reading and watching

a lot of. The setting is a steam-age fantasy world, where there's elves and orcs and zeppelins and steam trains. However, in this world, magic understandably causes trouble with machinery; summoning a fireball creates energy from nothing. You can understand the havoc that plays on the laws of physics, so it's sort of a traditionalism vs modernism type of setting. I thought it would be interesting to incorporate that into this story, somehow. I also feel like I wrote far more for this piece, and so I'm a little confused that it's only two pages long, with a lot of that first page being exposition that I'd probably delete if I revised it, and that little opening quote. Maybe I'll work more on this eventually.

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To the blind, the thing might be a hundred heaving, whistling anchors, dragging and stomping through the sand. To the deaf, a towering monster, what seems like infinite legs outstretched into and past the dunes, hauling a great rusted tanker. And to those with neither sight or hearing, who only have the vibrations of the sand below, tears. For something so heavy, so vast, in this desolate desert, could only be God, finally come to retrieve his rotting children to Nirvana.

- Nayseth Emmert, 5609 AD. 'Beast of Jannah'.

Sandship Garuda

Generally, there's little need for combat training on the Garuda. Rather, it's only a select few that receive the training over the course of their lifetimes. This is done for a multitude of reasons. Peacekeeping is simpler when a smaller number of people have formal combat training,

and violent incidents occur less often. Since few roles require it, it's a waste of time for most to receive it. But most of all, it serves to reinforce the feudalist system that is already in place. If those that clean the pipes and service the maintenance hallways and maintain engines are capable of leaving, forging their own way, then they could leave. Not that they would. Few chicks are so dumb as to jump from the nest that cradles them.

“Hyperion.” Overseer Rhea has a voice like sandpaper.

“Yes?” The tone of Rhea's voice was unpleasant, too. There's a meagre level of pleasure she receives from handing out unique tortures every morning; like a child burning ants. Her lips don't move to smile, but her eyes shift, ever so slightly.

“There's a leak somewhere in the water intake roughly below the rear boiler. The pressure to the hind legs is suboptimal. Take care of it.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Just nearing the boiler, the water pouring from the pipes becomes scalding. Thankfully, this time, Hyperion isn't being forced to patch anything coming out. People came through the doors of the tunnels and the steaming rooms bright red, like they were steamed alive. It was so-so, in the grand scheme of a pipebug's duties. At least they weren't being sent to the terrible gears to die just yet.

Hyperion heaves the bulky toolbox up below their armpit, clutching it tight. It reeks like oil in the meeting room; considering it's just a large repurposed intersection of the maintenance tunnels, they're thankful the room has chairs at all. Almost no other place in the tunnels is as wide as the meeting room is, or as comfortable; the steel wire mesh on the floor is thick enough that boots can't slip through, and the pipes on the walls are insulated or obvious enough that it's difficult to bump against them and burn yourself. Most of all, the lighting; proper electric lights rather than terrible little oil-burning lanterns hanging from hooks, occasionally swinging so hard

from the swaying of the Garuda that their glass breaks and litters onto the floor, slashing into the cheap boots the pipebugs are provided. Hyperion's gotten quite good at sewing them; scraps from already-broken boots are plentiful.

Hyperion sets out. Outside of the meeting room, there's little lighting to guide them. Fortunately, the layout of the Garuda is practically in their genes, like second nature. The walk isn't made any shorter by this knowledge, and the Garuda's length feels innumerable, even though they've walked across the thing so many times.

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Piece 3

For my third piece, I wanted to try to combine aspects of a few other important parts of my writing. I wanted to focus on character interactions, like I did with my blacksmith story. I feel like this was slightly successful; I think the interactions between two of my characters were really interesting, but I'm not super sure whether they're a big improvement from the blacksmith story at all. And beyond that, I wanted to make a really cool world with this one. I wanted there to be lore, sort of, which gives the characters and the world more depth. These were both very broad goals, and I think I did *okay* with both of them, I guess? The power system that I wanted to use for the story was inspired by Witch Hat Atelier. In that series, magic is created through runes, which, when finished, perform special magical effects depending on the rune's quality, specifications, size, and the materials it was created on. The antagonists of the story perform a taboo, which is to etch runes in flesh and skin, granting them specific abilities, powers, etcetera. I wanted to

explore a world where magic was only possible if done through flesh. I think it's a very visceral version of the typically nonliteral 'price' somebody pays to understand and perform magic.

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'The world is balanced on a runestone.' This is a saying parroted from generation to generation, through classrooms and through the mouths of the wizened old craftsman or manarats. Mana is existence's basest aspect, as it flows through the Earth, and through living things. And so, before Mana Engineering, bodily sorceries were mana's manipulative peak; flesh as a conduit, which guides mana from the heart to the limbs, hand and scar molding it like a thumb on a hose. But technology develops, and heart-to-hand sorcery becomes antiquated. The mining of Runestone, the resource which shares a name with the new technology developed from it, makes itself the end-all be-all of mana manipulation. The only concern is how to better refine these resources, so as to create a more compact, powerful technology. Today, it is used in hospitals, in weapons of war, in entertainment and in sports. 'Life is Runecraft, from conception to carcass.'

Andreas is deeply confused. Hours ago, he was violently shaking, engaging in deep ritual research in the stone-and-mortar lab beneath the Andravian estate, with a peculiar subject. Now, he's chained by a strange set of baby-blue chains that seem to flicker beneath the equally strange lights in the ceiling. They blare constantly, not flickering, like a continuous casting of a light-producing spell instead of candlelight. The chains that bind him are equally odd; they have a mana-sapping quality, which he understood (and was attempting to nullify, resolute as they are), but they were connected directly to the wall rather than being directly created by anybody. Theoretically, these effects could be created through clever trickery and labor, but these lights

spanned the full length of the hall he had been walked through before entering this room. It would take an extremely skilled sorcerer to produce these effects alone, or a multitude of them, but magic requires a direct connection to the body. And he really, really can't think with the constant broken English the man and woman in front of him were spouting, looking over him like jewelry.

"No shit. Seriously? You're fucking with me.." Agent Jeffries rubs his temples.

"Yeah. He's the real deal. We dated his clothing, and it's all accurate to the era. We're getting some linguists in later to study how he speaks," Agent June replies.

"Christ." Jeffries laughs a little, hands covering his face.

"We better not fuck this up, man. This is like, a thousand promotions sitting in front of us. Not to mention a marvel of technology; how the fuck'd this guy get here?"

Jeffries sighs, recollecting himself. "They think maybe some sort of natural mana phenomenon? No chance this guy could've done it himself. Look at 'em." He lifts up the long robes at Andreas' cuff, letting them drop.

"Alright. One second, I'm gonna go get some coffee. Don't let him out of your sight. I'm gonna lock the door, just in case." The lock clicks behind June as she closes the door, leaving Jeffries alone with the man in the antiquated robes.

The man in robes feels just as confused as they are. However, finally, there's a chance for Andreas to break out. Though his ability to impact mana is lessened by the chains, they are made of the stuff. Andreas begins drawing in the mana violently, attempting to draw as much of it as possible into his own body, exhausting the user manifesting the chains. This doesn't work, strangely enough, though the lights flicker overhead, clearly indicating to him something is happening, though he doesn't understand it. Though this other method is more of a party trick or

a tool for bullying, Andreas has become curious. He begins moving with the flow of mana, forcing as much of it as he can into the chains from both his arms. He hears something crack violently, a little bit like a chisel into stone, as the chains dissipate.

The prisoner is rubbing his wrists as Jeffries looks down, with some strong feelings. *How the fuck?* was the primary one, with the secondary one being *Oh, shit!* The man in the robes speaks, for the first time in a while.

“Dass war nicht sehr gemütlich?” He says, looking at Jeffries expectantly. After standing up, he looks far taller.

“I’ve got no clue what... god.” Jeffries gives up talking and puts up a big X with both of his arms, standing in front of the door. Andreas smiles.

“अतिथिं फसितुं न बहु शिष्टं, किम्?” Jeffries is even more confused now, the dumbfounded look on his face making Andreas sigh with disappointment. Andreas motions for Jeffries to move aside. Jeffries shakes his head insistently. The exchange looks like two mimes in a hallway, trying to get around each-other. Andreas sincerely laughs.

“It’s not funny, man!” Jeffries is desperately trying to keep him inside before remembering the door is locked. He exhales in relief, moving to the side so Andreas can try to open the door, which is strangely difficult. He figures out how to press down the handle, but it doesn’t budge. Of course, there’s no internal spot to turn the lock open or closed, as Andreas picks at the groove of the thing with his fingernails, before standing back up straight.

Jeffries wants to laugh, but the person they were supposed to keep imprisoned is currently trying to open the door to leave, so he stifles it for now. He looks through the tiny window and sees June standing outside, holding two cups. The look in her eyes is clear as day to Jeffries, since they’ve been working together a while; abject disappointment. Which makes

sense, considering he was literally chained up. Jeffries certainly couldn't explain how he did it, but he got out, so now it was both of their jobs to deal with it. Andreas had other ideas, unfortunately for the two agents. He had full access to his mana again, and strangely enough, it seemed like there was a strong airborne mana all around them. The door was made of a material foreign to Andreas, but he hoped it was still breakable. The man backs up a few steps, taking off his cloak. It hangs off him at the waist, where his belt is. There are a number of holes in his back, each of them carved with different widths, in different clusters. Two are on his lower back, one on the back of each shoulder. Andreas looks at Jeffries with a smile, before turning back to the door. At first, it's a quiet, perturbing whistling. Then, a sound like wind from the end of a tunnel. A breeze, then a hurricane, before, in what feels like an instant, a blast of air comes from his back. Andreas locks his arms in an X in front of his chest before flying at the door hard enough that it smashes off the hinges, knocking June to the ground behind it. The magician screams in pain before gasping a couple times, all the air knocked out of his lungs, before erupting in a raucous laughter.

Andreas is cheering in his mind, as he starts to limp down the hallway. *I've still got it*, he thinks to himself, as he barely wobbles down the hallway, before collapsing on the floor. Jeffries stares down the hallway in amazement for a few moments, as people come pouring out of offices having heard the slam and the scream. He realizes after a moment June is pinned under the door, using all his strength to flip the crumpled thing off her body

She's barely conscious. "You totally... blew it." She passes out, bleeding from her nose. A few other agents start walking over to investigate, as Jeffries tries to parse what just happened.

Andreas feels like there might not be as simple a method out of here. The walls are all a pale blue, like the chains were before, which were newly bound around his arms, legs, and torso, rather than just his wrists like before. Struggling itself felt like it sapped the energy out of him, which was incredibly frustrating; he was a scholar, a man who once served directly under a nobleman. His situation was irritating because he was unaware of where he was being kept, as well as because the magic on display was beyond even his capabilities. What place was this, able to create such extraordinary effects with so few people? The last thing Andreas experienced was odd, certainly, but not odd enough to be transported to a new continent, with technology unknown to him; he was delving into a cavern near the Northeastern corner of Abirania's border, famous for high mana density in and around its depths. After delving a little too deep, he fell and injured himself in the cavern. Eventually, he saw a light, like the lava from the center of the earth had started pooling below him, before passing out and eventually waking in a strange keep, towers of stone and glass that seemed to defy logic, with perfectly smooth paved streets. He tried to speak to the passersby, but their language was different enough he couldn't communicate with them. Their clothing was impossibly soft-looking, skin like they were nobles. It was fascinating, and Andreas could only imagine the wealth of the country if their average citizen wore fine silks with soft hands. If they would have hired him as a court magician before, they probably wouldn't now, considering he assaulted what he presumes to be a guard. Ever the bridge burner, apparently...

"I'm not certain what he's saying, really. He's speaking multiple languages, clearly. Either he's using two different languages, or I'm worse at my job than I thought." The doctor fumbled through notes on a clipboard, scratching at their chin occasionally, like a tic. "I think it's

European? But he's speaking something sort of..." She looks down closer at Andreas. "Maybe Middle-Eastern? I'm throwing darts blind right now."

"Sie nicht verstehen Dies? ich Gedanke ich war gut mit Sprache."

"Like, see? It's... it's nearly there. I feel like it's on the tip of my tongue." The doctor scratches the back of her head with a pen.

"That sounds familiar. You're historically trained, so are you thinking too old? Maybe it's a little more modern, or something?" June replies to the doctor.

"Maybe. I dunno, is it like... here, can you talk again, man? Well, you don't know what I'm saying." The doctor motions opening and closing her mouth over and over, looking at Andreas.

"Dies Sprache, oder ein anders eins?"

"Fuck." She bites her nails, sitting on the stool on the opposite wall of the room from them. "It's... wait, actually. Some kind of..?" The doctor walks over to Andreas, swiping the hat off Jeffries' head and tapping it a couple times. Andreas rolls his eyes.

"Hut."

"Oh, shit. Um..." She taps her belt a couple times.

Andreas sighs. "Gürtel."

"Ohhh, okay. No. I get it, I think. Wow, holy shit, guys. Wow!" The doctor is pacing around the room, hands on her chin. "I'm gonna explain so you guys can understand." She stands at the front of the room, next to Andreas. "I think this man was a mercenary employed by a small kingdom, sitting roughly around where Geran is today."

"Sure." June is vaguely beginning to connect the dots.

"...Sure." Jeffries is not.

“During their vague final era, they drew in a large amount of mercenaries, because their personal forces had dwindled from tons of conflict beforehand. You know how Geran is so diverse today? That’s why. They settled down there after the wars in the region had finished.”

“Do you really recognize the language, doctor? You’re sure?” June is the only part of the duo still listening.

“Yeah, I think so. It’s the real deal.”

“Shit. So they’re really from the past.”

“The number of people in the world with the kind of bodily modifications you described has to be one in a hundred-million. The chances of one of those people also knowing an ancient language, well. You can guess the odds.” The doctor is running a hand through her scalp. “Christ. I mean, we could rule out a few more things, but really! This is a man from the past! The Romantic era of magic!”

“Are their bodymods illegal if they’re from the past?” Jeffries asks sincerely.

“Iunno. We aren’t lawyers or historians, Jeffries. I think we’ve got some calls to make. I’d like to confirm this is absolutely true, before this gets out to the public.” June moves to leave again, before standing in the doorway, turning around. “Don’t let him escape this time, please.”

Jeffries laughs nervously. “Yeah. Won’t happen again.” June sighs before leaving to make the calls. Jeffries presses his hands into his cheeks before pulling down, like he’s trying to pull his face taut, before letting go and turning to the doctor. “So if you know the language, can you talk to the guy at all?”

“Well, I recognize it, but I’m not fluent or anything. Uhh…”

“Ich Wunsch Sie Menschen wurden wiser. Ich kennt zwei Sprache, Warum machen Sie nicht?”

“Oh, lord. Umm... Was's Ihre namo?”

Andreas seems to laugh boisterously. “Andreas! Andreas. Was's Ihre Namo, Frau? Ich'm froh jemand Hier kann sprechen meine Zunge.” (What’s your name, woman? I’m glad someone here can speak my tongue.)

“Not sure what that last part was. Ich’m Avens.” She thinks for a moment. “Arzt Avens?”

“Ein Arzt! ich'm froh ein Frau von Ihre Ebene ist sprechen mit mich.” (A doctor! I’m glad a woman of your level is speaking to me.)

The doctor scratches her chin. “I’m pretty much out of options here, now. We should call in an expert, maybe get a Translation artifact, or something. I’m going to go see if I can make something happen.” She abruptly leaves through the same door in the back, leaving Jeffries alone in the dim max-security cell with Andreas.

Piece 3 (Revised)

In my revised version of this piece, so far, I’ve added two large sections. Initially, I wanted to begin expanding the ending of the story. Obviously, this was not a very satisfying ending, so I was attempting to improve it by adding more explanation to the magic system before allowing a final conversation between Andreas and a modern person. However, after I started writing that, I reread the story and realized that the introduction was incredibly lacking, too. I began writing that and got pretty heavily invested, and so I tried my best to make a pre-timeskip introduction, in the era which Andreas hails from. I also wanted to add a specific side-character I had been imagining since the start of the story, making more character interactions possible.

‘The world is balanced on a runestone.’ This is a saying parroted from generation to generation, through classrooms and through the mouths of the wizened old craftsman or manarats. Mana is existence’s basest aspect, as it flows through the Earth, and through living things. And so, before Mana Engineering, bodily sorceries were mana’s manipulative peak; flesh as a conduit, which guides mana from the heart to the limbs, hand and scar molding it like a thumb on a hose. But technology develops, and heart-to-hand sorcery becomes antiquated. The mining of Runestone, the resource which shares a name with the new technology developed from it, makes itself the end-all be-all of mana manipulation. The only concern is how to better refine these resources, so as to create a more compact, powerful technology. Today, it is used in hospitals, in weapons of war, in entertainment and in sports. ‘Life is Runecraft, from conception to carcass.’

“I’m not certain of your intentions, sir.” The pickaxe clangs against the stone. The light of the sparks melds with the glow given off by the stone on impact, an orange-blue glare flashing every strike. The oil lantern hanging behind the pair illuminates them from behind, backs glistening with sweat. The taller one’s skin is tan, musculature befitting his work. Faded scars line his back, different in size and shape, chunks of flesh torn by axe and sword and dagger and spear. A gash on his shoulder from a claw is the latest.

“We’re engaging in research.” Chunks of stone tumble to the ground as the two dig. The shorter man’s skin is a deep black, his figure skinny, barely enough muscle lining his back to move. Most striking is what, at first glance, looks like open wounds in his back. Large holes

surrounded by smaller ones gape in his skin, below his shoulderblades and down his back, six in total and three to a side, methodically arranged. Miniscule holes come out from his spine.

Terrible, brilliant scars connect all the holes, glowing beneath the skin with a latent potential.

Dust falls from the ceiling with every resounding strike against the wall of the cavern. The short man is gasping after every swing, the taller one beside him working with great diligence, though he gasps as well; the air is thin so deep below the surface. The path behind them is blocked, but their goal is not to escape. The short man feels a tingle in his spine, a feeling he experiences rarely. It enraptures him, taking hold of his senses for a moment, fingers twitching, eyes aglow. It takes the sound of his pickaxe falling from his limp hands to the ground to wake him from his mana-induced trance.

“Sir Andreas? You’re certain this is our best method of escape?” The rocks crumble slower and slower, becoming denser as they dig. The glow that flashes when they’re cracked open is almost blinding, flashes of orange light like gunfire as the mana captured in the stone escapes, a nearly silent hiss as it spreads through the small cavern. It flows through Andreas, as the mana in the air becomes more and more compact. Samuel cannot sense it, but Andreas does. Every rock broken is another plume of mana, passing through Andreas, as he compacts it in his lungs, breathing in deep of the dust of the cave, and of the air he needs to live, but most importantly, mana. His heart pounds unnaturally, like hands clapping, then a hammer against stone, before topping out at the sound of a drum, resounding through his head as he swings his pickaxe.

“It is not the easiest path, Samuel. But it does flow with mana. Meaning a route to the surface, I presume.” A fascinating feeling. The sensation in his spine grows stronger as the rock finally crumbles. The ennui in his spine turns into near-ecstasy, as Andreas clutches the wall to

remain standing. He hobbles in front of Samuel into the opening created in the stone.

Samuel follows him into the hole. The light inside is blinding, his eyes used to the darkness of the cave. The cave assaults all his other senses; the sound of rushing water, slamming against stone, wind buffeting against his skin and past his hair, his skin freezing and burning all at the same time. Samuel wants to escape, crawl away from the terrible, overwhelming sensations, but his knees refuse to buckle. He follows behind Andreas.

The sensation in Andreas' spine only grows stronger. Samuel may be overwhelmed, but Andreas is basking in the sensations, relishing in them, as the environment's excess mana flows through his body. It takes all his effort to stay in the Rubicon, but he's had enough experience that he manages to stumble forwards, further into the pale, ceaseless void. Andreas can hear Samuel's hands and knees scraping against the white stone crags that make up the ground and walls of the strange hollow they've dug into.

Andreas is deeply confused. Hours ago, he was violently shaking, engaging in deep ritual research in the stone-and-mortar lab beneath the Andravian estate, with a peculiar subject. Now, he's chained by a strange set of baby-blue chains that seem to flicker beneath the equally strange lights in the ceiling. They blare constantly, not flickering, like a continuous casting of a light-producing spell instead of candlelight. The chains that bind him are equally odd; they have a mana-sapping quality, which he understood (and was attempting to nullify, resolute as they are), but they were connected directly to the wall rather than being directly created by anybody. Theoretically, these effects could be created through clever trickery and labor, but these lights spanned the full length of the hall he had been walked through before entering this room. It

would take an extremely skilled sorcerer to produce these effects alone, or a multitude of them, but magic requires a direct connection to the body. And he really, really can't think with the constant broken English the man and woman in front of him were spouting, looking over him like jewelry.

"No shit. Seriously? You're fucking with me.." Agent Jeffries rubs his temples.

"Yeah. He's the real deal. We dated his clothing, and it's all accurate to the era. We're getting some linguists in later to study how he speaks," Agent June replies.

"Christ." Jeffries laughs a little, hands covering his face.

"We better not fuck this up, man. This is like, a thousand promotions sitting in front of us. Not to mention a marvel of technology; how the fuck'd this guy get here?"

Jeffries sighs, recollecting himself. "They think maybe some sort of natural mana phenomenon? No chance this guy could've done it himself. Look at 'em." He lifts up the long robes at Andreas' cuff, letting them drop.

"Alright. One second, I'm gonna go get some coffee. Don't let him out of your sight. I'm gonna lock the door, just in case." The lock clicks behind June as she closes the door, leaving Jeffries alone with the man in the antiquated robes.

The man in robes feels just as confused as they are. However, finally, there's a chance for Andreas to break out. Though his ability to impact mana is lessened by the chains, they are made of the stuff. Andreas begins drawing in the mana violently, attempting to draw as much of it as possible into his own body, exhausting the user manifesting the chains. This doesn't work, strangely enough, though the lights flicker overhead, clearly indicating to him something is happening, though he doesn't understand it. Though this other method is more of a party trick or a tool for bullying, Andreas has become curious. He begins moving with the flow of mana,

forcing as much of it as he can into the chains from both his arms. He hears something crack violently, a little bit like a chisel into stone, as the chains dissipate.

The prisoner is rubbing his wrists as Jeffries looks down, with some strong feelings. *How the fuck?* was the primary one, with the secondary one being *Oh, shit!* The man in the robes speaks, for the first time in a while.

“Dass war nicht sehr gemütlich?” He says, looking at Jeffries expectantly. After standing up, he looks far taller.

“I’ve got no clue what... god.” Jeffries gives up talking and puts up a big X with both of his arms, standing in front of the door. Andreas smiles.

“अतिथिं फसितुं न बहु शिष्टं, किम्?” Jeffries is even more confused now, the dumbfounded look on his face making Andreas sigh with disappointment. Andreas motions for Jeffries to move aside. Jeffries shakes his head insistently. The exchange looks like two mimes in a hallway, trying to get around each-other. Andreas sincerely laughs.

“It’s not funny, man!” Jeffries is desperately trying to keep him inside before remembering the door is locked. He exhales in relief, moving to the side so Andreas can try to open the door, which is strangely difficult. He figures out how to press down the handle, but it doesn’t budge. Of course, there’s no internal spot to turn the lock open or closed, as Andreas picks at the groove of the thing with his fingernails, before standing back up straight.

Jeffries wants to laugh, but the person they were supposed to keep imprisoned is currently trying to open the door to leave, so he stifles it for now. He looks through the tiny window and sees June standing outside, holding two cups. The look in her eyes is clear as day to Jeffries, since they’ve been working together a while; abject disappointment. Which makes sense, considering he was literally chained up. Jeffries certainly couldn’t explain how he did it,

but he got out, so now it was both of their jobs to deal with it. Andreas had other ideas, unfortunately for the two agents. He had full access to his mana again, and strangely enough, it seemed like there was a strong airborne mana all around them. The door was made of a material foreign to Andreas, but he hoped it was still breakable. The man backs up a few steps, taking off his cloak. It hangs off him at the waist, where his belt is. There are a number of holes in his back, each of them carved with different widths, in different clusters. Two are on his lower back, one on the back of each shoulder. Andreas looks at Jeffries with a smile, before turning back to the door. At first, it's a quiet, perturbing whistling. Then, a sound like wind from the end of a tunnel. A breeze, then a hurricane, before, in what feels like an instant, a blast of air comes from his back. Andreas locks his arms in an X in front of his chest before flying at the door hard enough that it smashes off the hinges, knocking June to the ground behind it. The magician screams in pain before gasping a couple times, all the air knocked out of his lungs, before erupting in a raucous laughter.

Andreas is cheering in his mind, as he starts to limp down the hallway. *I've still got it*, he thinks to himself, as he barely wobbles down the hallway, before collapsing on the floor. Jeffries stares down the hallway in amazement for a few moments, as people come pouring out of offices having heard the slam and the scream. He realizes after a moment June is pinned under the door, using all his strength to flip the crumpled thing off her body

She's barely conscious. "You totally... blew it." She passes out, bleeding from her nose. A few other agents start walking over to investigate, as Jeffries tries to parse what just happened.

Andreas feels like there might not be as simple a method out of here. The walls are all a pale blue, like the chains were before, which were newly bound around his arms, legs, and torso, rather than just his wrists like before. Struggling itself felt like it sapped the energy out of him, which was incredibly frustrating; he was a scholar, a man who once served directly under a nobleman. His situation was irritating because he was unaware of where he was being kept, as well as because the magic on display was beyond even his capabilities. What place was this, able to create such extraordinary effects with so few people? The last thing Andreas experienced was odd, certainly, but not odd enough to be transported to a new continent, with technology unknown to him; he was delving into a cavern near the Northeastern corner of Abirania's border, famous for high mana density in and around its depths. After delving a little too deep, he fell and injured himself in the cavern. Eventually, he saw a light, like the lava from the center of the earth had started pooling below him, before passing out and eventually waking in a strange keep, towers of stone and glass that seemed to defy logic, with perfectly smooth paved streets. He tried to speak to the passersby, but their language was different enough he couldn't communicate with them. Their clothing was impossibly soft-looking, skin like they were nobles. It was fascinating, and Andreas could only imagine the wealth of the country if their average citizen wore fine silks with soft hands. If they would have hired him as a court magician before, they probably wouldn't now, considering he assaulted what he presumes to be a guard. Ever the bridge burner, apparently...

"I'm not certain what he's saying, really. He's speaking multiple languages, clearly. Either he's using two different languages, or I'm worse at my job than I thought." The doctor fumbled through notes on a clipboard, scratching at their chin occasionally, like a tic. "I think it's European? But he's speaking something sort of..." She looks down closer at Andreas. "Maybe

Middle-Eastern? I'm throwing darts blind right now."

"Sie nicht verstehen Dies? ich Gedanke ich war gut mit Sprache."

"Like, see? It's... it's nearly there. I feel like it's on the tip of my tongue." The doctor scratches the back of her head with a pen.

"That sounds familiar. You're historically trained, so are you thinking too old? Maybe it's a little more modern, or something?" June replies to the doctor.

"Maybe. I dunno, is it like... here, can you talk again, man? Well, you don't know what I'm saying." The doctor motions opening and closing her mouth over and over, looking at Andreas.

"Dies Sprache, oder ein anders eins?"

"Fuck." She bites her nails, sitting on the stool on the opposite wall of the room from them. "It's... wait, actually. Some kind of..?" The doctor walks over to Andreas, swiping the hat off Jeffries' head and tapping it a couple times. Andreas rolls his eyes.

"Hut."

"Oh, shit. Um..." She taps her belt a couple times.

Andreas sighs. "Gürtel."

"Ohhh, okay. No. I get it, I think. Wow, holy shit, guys. Wow!" The doctor is pacing around the room, hands on her chin. "I'm gonna explain so you guys can understand." She stands at the front of the room, next to Andreas. "I think this man was a mercenary employed by a small kingdom, sitting roughly around where Geran is today."

"Sure." June is vaguely beginning to connect the dots.

"...Sure." Jeffries is not.

"During their vague final era, they drew in a large amount of mercenaries, because their

personal forces had dwindled from tons of conflict beforehand. You know how Geran is so diverse today? That's why. They settled down there after the wars in the region had finished."

"Do you really recognize the language, doctor? You're sure?" June is the only part of the duo still listening.

"Yeah, I think so. It's the real deal."

"Shit. So they're really from the past."

"The number of people in the world with the kind of bodily modifications you described has to be one in a hundred-million. The chances of one of those people also knowing an ancient language, well. You can guess the odds." The doctor is running a hand through her scalp. "Christ. I mean, we could rule out a few more things, but really! This is a man from the past! The Romantic era of magic!"

"Are their bodymods illegal if they're from the past?" Jeffries asks sincerely.

"Iunno. We aren't lawyers or historians, Jeffries. I think we've got some calls to make. I'd like to confirm this is absolutely true, before this gets out to the public." June moves to leave again, before standing in the doorway, turning around. "Don't let him escape this time, please."

Jeffries laughs nervously. "Yeah. Won't happen again." June sighs before leaving to make the calls. Jeffries presses his hands into his cheeks before pulling down, like he's trying to pull his face taut, before letting go and turning to the doctor. "So if you know the language, can you talk to the guy at all?"

"Well, I recognize it, but I'm not fluent or anything. Uhh..."

"Ich Wunsch Sie Menschen wurden wiser. Ich kennt zwei Sprache, Warum machen Sie nicht?"

"Oh, lord. Umm... Was's Ihre namo?"

Andreas seems to laugh boisterously. “Andreas! Andreas. Was's Ihre Namo, Frau? Ich'm froh jemand Hier kann sprechen meine Zunge.” (What’s your name, woman? I’m glad someone here can speak my tongue.)

“Not sure what that last part was. Ich’m Avens.” She thinks for a moment. “Arzt Avens?”

“Ein Arzt! ich'm froh ein Frau von Ihre Ebene ist sprechen mit mich.” (A doctor! I’m glad a woman of your level is speaking to me.)

The doctor scratches her chin. “I’m pretty much out of options here, now. We should call in an expert, maybe get a Translation artifact, or something. I’m going to go see if I can make something happen.” She abruptly leaves through the same door in the back, leaving Jeffries alone in the dim max-security cell with Andreas.

Andreas screams as she leaves, the first and only person he was able to communicate with leaving as quickly as she arrived. He felt he was in quite the unique pickle, and it upset him deeply. Andreas locks eyes with him, opening them wide. While the curious blue walls and chains seemed to heavily sap the mana from his body, it was not enough to totally prevent his ability to cast lesser sorceries. Andreas rarely used his ability to Manaspeak, despite the spell’s usefulness. Though the spell does speak into someone’s mind, it was unable to be cast long distances, meaning it only had use as a tool for secrecy. In that regard, most of the people around him, either directly trained as sorcerers or nobles trained to manipulate mana at lower levels, could hear the spell traveling if they were attempting to listen, regardless of whether they were the focus of it or not. In this rare, specific scenario, the sorcery’s third trait was most important. It directly translates symbols into mana, in a way that transcends language. While culture or language specific quirks are left out, the brain attempts to crudely translate the symbols it receives. For example, someone from a desert and someone from a forest might speak to

each-other. Cactus might be translated to ‘Medium spiky tree.’, if the person from the forest has never seen a cactus. Flower might be translated to ‘Ground bud.’, if the person from the desert’s only experience with something like a flower is the bud of a tree or a cactus. It’s an incredibly basic system, but it functions for day-to-day conversations well enough. Andreas was going to attempt to use this to communicate.

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Conclusion

I think I’m fairly proud of what I’ve been able to accomplish in class. I was not able to be as present as I should have. I’m proud of the ideas I had, and I think that’s one of the few parts of writing that I can confidently say I’m happy about myself with, though I’d much rather be the execution guy than the ideas guy. In the future I want to be able to create better prose. I think that what I left the class with is better than what I came into it with, but I still want to vastly improve simple things like my vocabulary and whatnot. This class definitely also helped me get to writing more consistently, and my goal outside of class will be maintaining this consistency. We’ll see how that goes. I appreciate everybody’s feedback, and hope that what I was able to eek out was able to help other people improve their writing. Thank you very much.

