

Rune

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

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Abstract

Fantasy as a genre has grown in popularity over the past few decades. *Rune* is a fantasy short story set in a completely unique world. In this short story, we follow Eshka as she grows up and discovers who she really is. When Jaro, the wizard, shows up, her life changes in ways she couldn't foresee. *Rune* is a story about a young woman who discovers who she really is, grows up and leaves her old life, and discovers her past and the fate of her mother. The world of *Rune* is set in a typical fantasy pre-modern world, where technology hasn't advanced to the point of automobiles, the printing press, or guns. Magic and deities exist and influence the world, changing the course of history. It takes inspiration from popular fantasy works such as *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Lord of the Rings*.

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Process Analysis Statement

I started writing *Rune* with a concrete idea of the conflict that would spur the story forward, but the journey to the resolution of the conflict was a mystery to me. I was striving for a cohesive story based in a realistic fantasy world with strong characters, but it took a lot of thinking to make that happen. However, once the end of the semester was closing in, it really started to come together. I took inspiration from other Fantasy literature to craft my work. These sources include George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (especially *Game of Thrones*), *The Ice Dragon*, and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and his *Legendarium*. *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Tolkien's work have been continuous sources of interest for me for much of my life. The people I listed in my acknowledgements were incredibly helpful because they gave me ideas and honest criticism which I used to shape my story. I did not focus on making sure my writing was technically correct, like in fiction, because of the creative writing nature of *Rune*. Similar to *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but unlike Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, I made my characters morally ambiguous. My process involved a lot of thinking, writing, and researching.

Rune went through many different iterations that brought it to the final product it is now. Many ideas and storylines were scrapped for alternate ideas and storylines. Originally, I planned to include maps and creature drawings but during the process I decided to opt out of that for a longer short story. This gave me more time to develop the characters. Additionally, the volcano was meant to have much more significance to the story. Instead, I chose to highlight Eshka's journey towards discovering who she is and reuniting with her mother. The volcano became the location of summoning of Akaenash, Eshka's mother, as well as a symbol to the people of a coming war. The adjustments I made were much more fitting. The common saying in writing, "Show don't tell" was something I tried to keep in mind.

I spent a significant amount of time researching the correct way to write Fantasy literature. There are many different ways to write it. For example, *Game of Thrones* is written from a limited omniscient perspective taken from one of eight characters. This means the narrator only has access to one character's perspective during a chapter. I contemplated writing my own story like this, but I didn't like it as much. It didn't give me the freedom to say and do what I wanted as the narrator. I chose instead to write in an anonymous, omniscient third-person narrator which meant I had an all-knowing perspective and the story was about the characters *in the story*. Dialogue was something I improved on a lot. In my first draft, my dialogue was messy and when a new speaker came along it was difficult to recognize. After looking at other fantasy literature and talking to my advisor, I learned how to create appropriate dialogue. When somebody new speaks, I put a paragraph break to let the reader know.

My process for each draft was to come up with a general idea of what I wanted to write, then keep writing until I reached my goal. It was very effective and kept me on track. I wrote 5 pages for the first draft or two, then I bumped it up to ten pages for the rest of the drafts to reach my goal a few weeks before the end of the semester. Each draft lasted about two weeks. This gave me the time I needed to explore different avenues of thought, edit based on comments and the direction of the story, and write a well-written additional 5-10 pages. Things didn't come together until near the end, in the last two drafts. I focused a lot on bringing things together and making sure everything made sense. This meant deleting scenes that didn't make sense as part of the story. Near the end of the semester, I met with the writing center twice to go over *Rune*. The feedback from both meetings with a different writer each time—one of them being very good at creative writing—helped me improve my short story.

Virsheem was originally going to be the main character during the first iteration, but that quickly changed. I left the Virsheem storyline to write Eshka in The Waste meeting Jaro, a wizard. I thought it would be temporary, but I kept writing about Eshka. Her character intrigued me and soon enough, she became the main character in *Rune*. By the time the second draft rolled around Eshka was already a bigger part of the story. Eshka's people are an important part of the story because of their history and uniqueness. They are a clear element of fantasy as a nearly extinct, blue-skinned race of people from a land they've forgotten. Before I wrote them into the story, I had a vague idea of a race of people with a blue skin tone. I clarified and expanded on that idea as I wrote, seeing where my thoughts took me. A clear comparison could be made between them and the Giants from *Game of Thrones*.

In a lot of fantasy literature, wizards are powerful, intelligent, and blatant users of magic. Wizards from Dungeons and Dragons, a popular fantasy tabletop game, are an example of this. I decided to continue the tradition of intelligent, powerful wizards in fantasy with the wizard Jaro. He reflects these qualities very well.

My biggest insight during the process of writing was realizing Eshka should be a deity. After I realized this, everything started coming together like puzzle pieces. Before that realization, it was a challenge for me to fit all the puzzle pieces of the journey together. Eshka being a deity forced me to answer *why* and *how* she was a deity. The answer came in the form of her mother, who was also a deity. At this point a significant amount of the story was written, so I had to go back and add new scenes. I tried to look at things from Eshka's perspective while also building towards a satisfying ending, so I alluded to her mother throughout the story from Eshka's perspective. These scenes establish an important part of her character, her desire to see

her mother, and how that might go awry because of Eshka's mother's lack of involvement in her life.

I thought that runes (sigils that perform magic) would be more important to the story than they actually became. Early on in the development of my short story, I imagined floating platforms traversing a desert at high speeds powered by rune technology, transporting people from one place to another. During writing my story I decided to exclude these things because I didn't want my readers to feel that magic was easily accessible, even though it might have been widely available and very important to the story. In the world I was creating, magic should be rare in a general sense. Since the story deals with deities and wizards, a lot of magic happens. The main character, Eshka, performs various feats of magic throughout the story but she's the exception to the rare magic principle, not the rule. I decided to write multiple scenes of Eshka using magic as a way for the reader to understand she's good at it and does it frequently. It also serves the purpose of building up to the final confrontation with her mother where she has to use her knowledge and skill with magic to defeat her.

Another magical component in my story was the inclusion of a soft magic system, which means that the rules of magic aren't clearly defined. Many popular fantasy works use this sort of system, such as *Game of Thrones* and *Lord of The Rings*. It was a tough decision for me to decide between a hard and soft magic system because as I was writing, I felt compelled to provide an explanation of the magic, which would have made it hard magic. A hard magic system would require a lot of thinking about the specifics of just the magic system, rather than focusing on the cohesive story. I decided upon a soft magic system because, ultimately, my goal was to create a cohesive story rather than precisely define a magic system.

Moral ambiguity is an important aspect of *Rune* but not as emphasized as it was originally going to be. Good vs evil is a common theme in a lot of writing, regardless of whether or not it's fantasy. People tend to place individuals in boxes such as good or evil. I wanted to counteract that by creating morally ambiguous characters that don't fit neatly in good or evil boxes. The most prominent example of this is Eshka, the main character, who is morally ambiguous.

My Honors thesis serves as an example of an original fantasy story that's set in a unique world with strong characters.

Rune

People had the power of rune magic for thousands of years. They've used them to invent what only their imaginations thought possible, even to control the forces of nature and summon deities. Those who mastered the art of runecraft were given the title of Rune Master. They were the utmost experts in the power of the runes, and few of them existed.

She had very little in the way of a life outside her work, and found it difficult to acquire friendships, being what others called a half-breed, caught in between two worlds. As she grew older, this mattered less and less to her. Those with parents from two different species faced extreme prejudice in most societies. For Virsheem, people talked, as they always did, and said how "evil" and "dumb" she must be, directly in contrast to her continuous groundbreaking achievements. Virsheem put very little thought into how they viewed her, though, as she knew from her youth that caring about what other people thought of her would get her nowhere. Rather, it motivated her to prove to everyone what she was worth. People who knew her well were aware of her evasive personality, which faded with time, but she always treated others with kindness if they did the same.

Due to her skill with runecraft, she was able to amass a large amount of wealth relatively young, but at a grave cost. However, she was no longer young and her wealth only grew in the time since then. She was one of the wealthiest individuals in her city. She used much of this wealth in the pursuit of her research goals, and would often fund her colleagues projects.

Dream

Virsheem saw herself at the foot of the mountain. The sky was as dark as tar, and ash littered the ground of the stone city. People were screaming and crying, it was chaos. There was

an old man with a long white beard, turned black by ash, on his hands and knees, coughing relentlessly. The man was her father. She tried to call out to him but started choking on the toxic air instead. She couldn't breathe.

She awoke in the middle of the night, breathing heavily and covered in sweat. Her cat was curled up in a ball at her feet, and looked at her inquisitively. "It's okay, buddy," she said while petting it; the cat gave a low purr of approval. She fell back asleep for a few hours and when morning came, she set off to work at the library, but not before greeting her father. She left her room, entered the communal area, and saw her father sitting down on the hard bench. He had a knife in his hand and was slowly carving something out of wood.

As she was walking there, she kept looking down. She was distracted, unable to get the dream out of her head.

The Waste

The Waste is a vast and barren desert spreading across much of the continent where only the hardiest creatures specially adapted for this harsh environment survive, with the rest of them ending up as food for the scavengers, their skeletons soon buried under layers of sand by the billowing sandstorms, never to be seen again. Under the hot desert sun, the sand ebbs and flows like running water while glimmering dunes tower above the landscape. Once the sun goes to sleep for the night, the desert begins to shiver. From atop these dunes in the heart of the Waste, the seemingly endless desert is all that can be seen across the hazy horizon. The dry heat radiates across the desert and is nearly unbearable. Water is scarce, save for one large river that pours down from the mountains through the desert and acts as the lifeblood of a great and old civilization as well as the desert itself. The flowing, hazy landscape can play tricks on the mind

of thirsty travelers looking for an oasis. Those who know the barren landscape of the Waste can traverse it safely, but even they must be cautious since danger lurks around every corner, whether from scorpions, poisonous snakes, the deadly sun, other people, or the barren landscape itself. Nowhere is safe.

One of the last groups of a previously valiant and powerful race, now near extinction, traverse this desert as nomads. Their ancestors originate from a land far away—the location of which is now forgotten to them—where their civilization flourished until a great calamity struck them and the survivors fled for a new home. They're known to the people of the Waste as the Ceruleans, this name given to them because of their blue skin tone. Their lives are harsh in the extreme desert climate, but they manage to get by on what little food they can find or trade for.

Years ago, a Cerulean man sat on a brown horse within the Waste wearing tattered clothes with a sword hanging at one side, and a bag on the other. He was carrying a waterskin full of water to stay hydrated, but its flavor was tainted by that very waterskin. The sun broke over the horizon only a short while ago and as the sun climbed higher into the sky, the darkness faded, and the shadows in the desert grew shorter. The man on the horse was surrounded by tents and a few other Ceruleans milling about, but many of them asleep. He commanded his horse to move forward by clicking his tongue. His voice was deep and oddly powerful.

Across the dune, the man spotted something waving through the sand. He furrowed his brows, hopped off of his steed, and began carefully treading towards the waving thing. As he got closer, it became clear to him he found exactly what he was hoping for, a cobra. With his curved saber at the ready, he got as close to the snake as he could and with one swift move dashed its head off. The snake fell to the ground, limp and in two pieces. The man took the snake and

stuffed it in the animal hide bag on his horse. His head filled with thoughts of the delicious snake stew he'd soon make.

The hairs on his neck twitched as the wind picked up behind him. He turned around, and saw a familiar whirlpool of sand particles and white light. A form took shape—that of a much taller Cerulean woman. At first her head was covered in a dark cloak, but she folded it back to reveal an image of beauty unheard of among the small number of his nomadic Cerulean people. The man noticed she was carrying a very finely crafted weaved basket in one hand. The woman spoke in a calm voice and looked him directly in the eyes, “Hello, Armin. I have something for you.”

“What are you doing here, Akaenash?”

“I’ve brought you something.” She looked at the basket and then back at Armin, clueing him in to the obvious.

Curious as to what she might be referring to, Armin asked, “What is it?” He had a feeling he already knew what it was considering the basket she glanced at and how long it had been since he had seen her, but he didn’t want to admit it to himself just yet. He needed her to say it.

“It’s our child.” She said the words he was expecting, but Armin was still shocked by them. His mouth opened up into a loud laughter while a half smile appeared across his face.

“This is a joke, right?”

The woman’s tone was continually neutral, despite Armin’s increasing heart rate. “I’m afraid not. It’s a girl and you’ll have to take care of her.”

“Well, how do I know you’re telling me the truth?” For the first time in their conversation, Akaenash displayed emotion on her face, annoyance. Her face twisted almost as if to say, “really?” Her tone soon matched her face.

“Please, Armin. You know I’m telling the truth. I know you haven’t forgotten the time we spent together.” Armin figured that line of questioning would take him nowhere, so he decided to tell her exactly how he felt.

“I don’t even know how to be a father, much less at such short notice. Why are you giving her to me? You should take care of her, my life is not suitable for a child.”

“The life you live is the only life that is suitable for her. You’re her father; she’s a Cerulean, and there’s few Ceruleans left. Her place is with you.” She extended her hand with the weaved basket towards Armin and placed it in front of him. For the first time, Armin could see his daughter under a silky blue blanket.

“I’ve taken steps to suppress her abilities for now, but it won’t last forever. When she reaches maturity the suppression will start to fade.” Armin was listening, but just barely. A question started to form in his mind.

“Have you named her?” he asked.

“I thought it would be better if you did, so that’s up to you, Armin.” Armin didn’t like that answer.

“I’m still not taking her, I don’t know how to take care of a child. You can’t dump this on me, especially after disappearing for so long. You could’ve at least given me a heads up, why didn’t you? Where have you been these past few months?” Akaenash was done with the conversation. She had done what she needed to do. The woman began to teleport away with particles of sand twirling around her like a coiling snake.

“Akaenash, stop it!” Armin shouted to no effect. He reached for her hand, but by the time he reached it there was nothing but a misty figure left behind, and that disappeared soon as well. He yelled into the wind, inadvertently causing the baby to cry. After taking a deep sigh, he bent

over and grabbed the weaved basket with the baby girl that was now his. He hopped on his horse and headed back towards the Cerulean tribe, thinking of a way to somehow explain this to the others because he knew there would be questions. Babies don't just appear out of thin air. After he brought the baby girl back to the village, it took him weeks to finally decide to name her, but eventually he decided on a name for his daughter. It was difficult for him to choose because he didn't want to personalize her, and not so secretly was still hoping her mother would come back for her and take her away. But, he eventually settled on Eshka when he realized she wasn't coming back and it was time for him to take responsibility for her. He named her after his grandmother who died only a few seasons ago, and he hated that his grandmother could never meet his daughter. He knew she would have cared for her and loved her like she deserved. As much as he hated it and continued to hope for his daughter's mother to return, at least with some sort of explanation for abandoning her daughter with him, she was starting to grow on him.

As a young child she was always causing trouble, just like her mother. Her father could never control her, no matter how much he tried. The answers she was given never satisfied her. At age 14 her tribe of Ceruleans were camping near a town. It was the middle of the night and Eshka couldn't fall asleep. The thought of seeing the town she had no name for was keeping her up. Eventually, she decided she'd had enough. She threw off her sheets and got dressed. She put on a dark cloaked hood so she wouldn't be spotted and headed to the town. As she got closer, she noticed the town was surrounded in a clay wall a few feet high. The gate was a simple arch, and she walked into town unnoticed. The houses were as simple as the wall surrounding the town. Totally unimpressive. But, to Eshka, it was stunningly beautiful. She loved everything she saw in the town, from its short sandy pathways to the chipped clay on the houses.

The town was dead silent, except for distant voices coming from somewhere within the town's walls. Eshka was curious what those voices might be, so she went towards them. She found a large building with people going in and leaving. She went inside and sat down at an empty table, hoping she would be lost in the crowd. Instinctively, she took her hood off. That was a mistake. Within seconds, half the people in the building were looking at her.

"What're you doing here?" said a feminine voice from the crowd. Eshka didn't respond, and wasn't completely sure the question was directed at her. Someone in the back of the crowd shuffled to the front.

"Hello, Cerulean. I'm Jay, the captain of this town's police force. How about you come outside with me?" Eshka stood and followed Jay outside.

"Listen, it's not safe for you to be here by yourself so late. Let's take you back to your parents."

"I'm not supposed to do that." Eshka said in a worried voice. She didn't realize there would be so much attention on her.

"Okay, that's fine. How about we walk with you close to your camp, and then walk back?" Eshka nodded approval, but was silently worried. Another two people followed closely behind Jay as Eshka led them towards the other Ceruleans. Eventually, they reached the outskirts of the camp and they stopped. Jay spoke up.

"Alright, now make sure to stay out of the town. Some of the townsfolk aren't as keen on strangers as I am."

During an argument with her father, she remembered visiting that town.

"People can be nice, dad. Why do we always have to avoid everyone?" Eshka's face filled with fury.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re only twenty. People are cruel, where do you get these ideas?”

Eshka was losing her temper. She was done with his attitude, as well as the attitude of her friends and family in her tribe. She wanted to experience what the world had to offer instead of living off of a desert her whole life. She began crying, but tried her best to cover it up from her father.

“I’m so tired of living in this desert. I know there’s more to life than this.” Her father sympathized, but didn’t know how to console her. He knew this was the best life for them, the safest life for them. One of the tears from her eye began to glow bright white. It dripped off her face, and hit the hot sand. The sand changed and turned into green grass, while a tall stem was growing exactly where the tear fell. Eshka was stunned.

“What?” she said to nobody in particular.

The plant kept growing until it was taller than Eshka herself. It looked exactly like a large yellow flower she had wanted to see from a book, but never had the opportunity to. A circular clearing of grass and other kinds of plants, such as flowers, grew around this giant yellow flower. Eshka’s father seemed unfazed.

“What is this, dad?”

“You’re growing up, I knew this would happen eventually. Now cover this up so the others don’t see it.” He bent over and covered the grass with sand, and pulled the stalk out of the earth. Eshka just kind of stood there, thinking. When he was done, he opened up.

“I know I haven’t been open to you about your mother, and, well there’s a reason for that. She’s from far away. Far, far away. When we first met, I was young and she was something I didn’t expect. She came to our tribe as a Cerulean and told us she wanted to join us, and she

stayed with us for a time but not long. Before she left, she told me who she really was. She wasn't really a Cerulean, she was a powerful deity that could travel to different worlds. Months after she left, she came back and left you here." Eshka stood there stone-faced and nearly unblinking, listening to this.

"What does that make me?"

"I don't know. A god, maybe. You have powers, obviously, so I'm not really sure."

Meeting The Wizard

"Hello?" Eshka called out hoping for an answer, but nobody replied. In the distance, she saw a vague figure standing on a hill, it looked like her mother. She looked exactly like she did in her father's drawing. She wasn't wearing any shoes on the sandy ground, and darkness swirled around her. She felt lost and didn't know what to do so she ran towards her mom. "Mom! Help me!" Tears streamed down her face as she got closer to her mom. Her feet burned on the hot sand that was getting hotter by the second. Eventually, it was too much and she collapsed in pain. Eshka's whole body caught on fire and she was screaming out but nobody helped her. Her mother just stood there, as if she was a life size drawing.

Eshka awoke, breathing hard, with her clothes soaked in sweat. It was still dark out, the desert was still cold. She laid back down and pulled the sheets back over her, but she didn't dare fall asleep again. Eshka wasn't that foolish, she thought to herself. Soon enough, the sun came up.

The river wasn't far. Eshka left her stuff and walked towards the river that gave the Waste life. Still standing in the sandy desert, she bent over and placed her hands next to each other on the ground. She closed her eyes and imagined a large glass container. The sand shifted a

little, and then she opened her eyes. Eshka dipped her hand into the sand, and with a grunt pulled out the same glass container she thought of. It was full of sand, so she flipped it over on the ground and dumped the sand out.

Eshka made it to the river. Grass, trees, and other plant life surrounded it. Reeds stuck out of the river itself. Eshka walked close enough to dip her hand inside of the water, but she didn't. Instead, she held the large glass container out with both hands and a silky stream of water made its way into the glass container. Soon, it was full and heavy. While looking across the river, a faint glimmer of light appeared in her eyes and near the river's edge closest to Eshka, two streams of water began to dance upwards. They took the shape of her parents, holding hands. Her father was closest to reality, while her mother involved some guesswork based on the drawings Eshka had seen of her. They walked up to Eshka, still standing on the river's water, and the one that took the form closest to her mother reached out to touch her upper arm. The light in her eyes dulled, and the watery form of her mother turned back to ordinary water, spilling back into the river. Then, she turned around and walked away. Eshka lugged the water container back to her campsite, boiled it, and the majority of it inside of her old waterskin. She threw the glass container on the ground, to be swallowed by the desert.

Eshka was packing her tent when the wind only ten feet in front of her started to swirl, pulling up a mini dust storm. Within the swirling dust, only a few feet from Eshka, was a glowing light that took the shape of a person. The light radiated toward Eshka and beamed off her blue skin, then suddenly a man appeared in a tattered gray cloak. The mysterious man was carrying a tome with him, the signature of a wizard. With surprise in her face, Eshka spoke in the nearly forgotten tongue of her people, "A wizard!" It failed to dawn on her that the mysterious man before her might not understand what she was saying.

The wizard looked at her and tilted his head, failing to recognize the words coming out of her mouth. He noticed that between her brows sat a hard diamond shape extruding from her body. He spoke, "Hello, I'm Jaro. Are you from the ... nomadic tribe of Ceruleans that roam through the Waste?"

Although he spoke a different kind of speech, she understood him and replied to him in his own tongue, "Yes I am, as is fairly obvious by the look of me. But I think you knew that."

The wizard looked around the sandy desert, seeing this new stranger quite noticeably alone, and asked "Why are you alone? That's quite unusual for your kind, is it not?"

Eshka looked away from the wizard, towards the ground, and remembered the dream from that morning while fiddling with the tent. "I no longer travel with the other Ceruleans." The wizard could see by her demeanor and voice that she was saddened by this, so he did not inquire further. Instead, he quickly tried to change the subject of the conversation.

"I see." He waited a few moments before speaking again. "Well, I've come because I need the help of someone who understands the language of your people, but your people are notoriously difficult to find. I know no others who have such knowledge." He paused, then flipped through his book. "I took a piece of the text I need translated with me. Would you be willing to take a look at it?"

"Sure, come over here and I'll give it a look." The wizard walked over and knelt on the hot sandy ground next to her. He held the book open towards her and she told him, "I understand this language. It's a bit... different than what I'm used to but legible all the same. It's talking about some sort of volcano summoning."

The wizard stood up and extended an offer to her, "Me and the people of my city need your help. There's a looming war that if allowed to happen, could take many lives. The Deities

have been restless, and the volcano's been trembling. Peeew!" While voicing the sound of an explosion, he opened and raised his hand in an arc. "The mountain has been rumbling for months now, it's a sign of the looming war. We've been desperately looking for someone to help us translate this book because it's a set of instructions for how to summon a god, someone who could save us. If you're willing, could you help me make a translation? I'll pay you for any and all services and time rendered." The wizard took his hand and shook a brown sack hanging at his side. Eshka could hear the coins jiggling against each other in the bag.

Eshka, bent over still packing her tent, looked at the wizard with bright eyes and a shocked face. "I'd love to! I'm Eshka, by the way." She completed packing her tent and other things and then asked the wizard, who was reading his book while she finished up. "So, what now?"

The wizard replied, "Now, you take my hand and I'll take us to my tower through the use of teleportation." She walked up to him and grabbed his unexpectedly soft hand, but she didn't think much of it. He opened his book and chanted something. The symbols in the book glowed while the wind and sand started to twirl all around them. Suddenly, through a misty vision, Eshka could see something taking shape. Then, she, along with the wizard, were standing in a large room.

The City

Eshka looked around with wonder and apprehension. She asked herself, should she really have agreed to stay with this strange wizard? He was such a strange person, and she barely knew him. Her tribe always aired on the side of extreme caution when interacting with outsiders, so why was she so trusting all of a sudden? The room she stood in was laden with old stonework

and there were many bookcases full of books, some of them covered with dust, dispersed throughout it, as well as a desk towards the front and a fireplace firmly placed within the wall. The room was messy, with clutter sitting on the windowsills, on the floor, and on the wizard's wooden desk. She could easily trip over something if she wasn't careful. The wizard spoke up. Her tribe valued knowledge, and taught all their members to read and write both in their mother tongue and in the common language, so she was excited to one day read the books on the bookcases.

"Let me show you the kitchen, I'm sure you're starving. I make a wonderful stew." He opened the only door in the room and led her through it, and up a set of stairs. They opened another door higher up the staircase and entered the kitchen. There were pots and pans everywhere, and one of them was floating in the air scrubbing itself. Floating candles danced in the air while a small reptilian creature calmly sat on the kitchen's island. Eshka stopped to look at everything she was seeing, especially the lizard.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. She had never seen a creature like that before. The wizard, however, wanted it to get off the island.

"Shoo!" he said while bringing his hand down on the creature's tail, playfully jerking it and causing no real harm. It gave a fowl hiss at him and calmly walked to the edge of the island counter, then jumped onto the ground.

"What is that?" she asked the wizard who was sorting through the papers on his desk.

He glanced over at the creature and said "That's my chameleon. Quite harmless, really."

"May I pet it?" She stepped closer.

His eyebrow arched. "Sure, but watch the mouth and nostrils. Shadow has a nasty bite and can spew flame. If you get bit it's on you, really." She petted the creature and it emitted an

odd reptilian purr. It was almost like a cat. While it was purring, it changed colors and looked like a blurry rainbow. Suddenly, it perked its head up and went completely invisible, yet Eshka could still feel it in her hands.

Eshka was shocked. “Woah! How can that thing go invisible?”

The wizard chuckled. “It’s a chameleon, they blend in with their environment to hide from predators of which there are many. They don’t get very big so they have to rely on this innate camouflage. My chameleon’s name is Shadow because it’s practically my shadow, and I found it abandoned as a baby on one of my research adventures.” The wizard thought now would be a good time to change the subject.

“So, are you ready to try the best stew you’ve ever had?” he asked.

“I sure am!” Eshka said with vigor. The wizard sorted through his many pots and pans, and found something suitable for his purposes. He started gathering foods, such as potatoes, and told Eshka to chop them up and put them in the pot. While she was doing this, he leaned down over his fireplace and, using his magical abilities, uttered an incantation that made the fire spark. It took them no more than half an hour to finish prepping the pot, and then they set the pot in the fireplace and waited for it to finish.

“While we wait for this to finish cooking, I’ll show you the observatory,” he said with excitement. He left the room while she followed, and they went to the top of the tower. The first thing Eshka noticed was how decluttered it was compared to the rest of the tower, which she thought was a nice change in aesthetic even though the clutter didn’t bother her. The room was a large dome, with a few windows that peered out over the landscape. She walked over to one of them and could see a huge, sprawling city below. She was high up, and now she knew it. She

was getting nauseous, so she pulled herself away from the edge with some force. There was a telescope peering out of one of the windows, but Eshka had no idea what it was. She inspected it.

“This is a telescope. It allows me to see things that are very far away,” the wizard said as he placed his hand on the telescope itself. After Eshka was done sightseeing, the wizard brought them both back to the kitchen.

“It looks like our stew is done, Eshka!” The wizard grabbed two bowls to put the stew in, one for each of them. He took the ladle he used to test the deliciousness of the stew with and used it to pour a bowl for himself, then for Eshka.

“Here you go,” he said as he handed a bowl over to her. He placed down his own bowl and reached for a third one, which he similarly filled with soup. Then, he walked over to where his chameleon, Shadow, was resting and set down the bowl in front of him. Shadow smelled the delicious stew and lapped it up with some ferocity. Eshka tried the stew and her eyes went wide with a world of flavor.

“This is delicious!” she uttered.

“Thank you! My mother taught me how to make it, she said it was her secret recipe.” His lips grew into a small, sweet smile. When they were done, he brought them both back down to the room they first came in, the library.

“Now, Eshka, do you know how to write in the common language?” Eshka stood up and grabbed a feather pen from the table and a blank piece of parchment. Then, she began to write.

The wizard said, “I see that the answer is a yes” and walked over to the bookshelves, reached to the highest shelf and grabbed a dusty book. “I need you to transcribe this book into the common tongue.” He wiped the dust off and placed it on the table, then grabbed another book on the shelf. “Here’s an empty book, you can transcribe it here. I have a spare room in the

tower that you can stay in, and I can pay you double the usual amount a transcriber would be paid for this work. Does that work? ”

Eshka thought about it for a moment and replied, “Yes, that works.”

The next day Eshka was continuing the work the wizard set out for her and the door swung open. Virsheem, an associate of the wizard, stood in the doorway and spoke. “I see you’ve finally found a Cerulean!” The wizard smiled while Eshka turned to look at Virsheem and was stunned by her elegant clothing and fancy necklaces, but also noticed her aged face. She looked like she was nobility, and thought she might have been part of the royal class here. Regardless of this difference in status, Eshka became more and more aware of how her clothes were practically tattered rags compared to hers. It made her self-conscious about it and she wanted to change them.

“Yes, I have! It wasn’t easy, either. It took a lot of sweat to find someone who can speak Cerulean,” the wizard spoke earnestly.

Virsheem walked up to Eshka and asked, “What’s your name, mysterious stranger?”

“I am Eshka. Who are you and why do you have such fine clothing?”

Virsheem noticed the peculiarity of the way Eshka spoke. “I’m Virsheem, I’m a rune master here in the city. As for my clothing, well I suppose I prefer this kind of clothing! If you’d like, I can bring you something similar.”

“I would really like that, yes, please.” Eshka was thrilled. It was at this point the wizard left the room to do something, or maybe he was just bothered. Virsheem thought this would be an excellent time to take Eshka on a trip into the city.

“Now that the ruiner of parties is gone, we can get outta here and I can show you around town. What do you say?” Eshka’s face lit up at the thought of seeing more of the city. She had to say yes.

“Yes, I’d love to go see the city with you.”

“Okay, get up now and let’s go.” Eshka pulled her chair back to stand up, when the wizard walked back into the room. He saw Eshka and Virsheem heading towards the door and became worried.

“Where are you two going?” he asked.

“We’re going to go tour the city,” Virsheem shot back.

“Are you sure that’s such a good idea? Her looks could get her in trouble.” It was a fair point, and Virsheem knew it.

“Perhaps, but I think she’d prefer that over staying in this stuffy tower all day. Plus, there’s lots of different people here in the city. I’m sure we’ll be fine.” The wizard scoffed but let them go.

From the outside, the wizard tower looked even more grand, though certainly not luxurious. It was large, and tall. The tower was second only in height to the Grand Palace in the center of the city. You could see the whole city from the base of the tower. The city was magnificent in its design. Stone architecture was everywhere and this included buildings, roads, statues, and columns. Much of this looked old and rugged, which suggested this was an older city, but some of it was new and polished. Eshka’s face showed her excitement to explore this new place, a place that wasn’t full of sand, bandits, and deadly creatures that made her life exhausting and hard. For the first time, she knew she made the right decision when she left her friends and family.

As Virsheem led Eshka down the stairs, she told Eshka, “We’ll head to the agora first.” The agora was the main marketplace and the center of the daily lives of the people in the city. The whole way there Eshka was wide-eyed like an excited child. She had never seen a city such as this before and had been taught to steer away from such places. But she wasn’t like the rest of the Ceruleans, she wanted to explore and see new things. The agora was bustling with activity. There were people everywhere of all shapes, sizes, and races. Many, if not most, of them took an uncomfortably long moment to stare at her before getting back to whatever they were doing. Eshka noticed, however, that there weren’t any other Ceruleans in the agora. This did not surprise her.

While walking down a bustling cobblestone street within the agora, Eshka thought of the relationship between Virsheem and the wizard. After a few quiet moments of wondering, she asked Virsheem, “How long have you known the wizard?” Virsheem laughed.

“His name’s Jaro, so you know.”

“Oh, yes he told me when we first met.”

“As it happens, I don’t exactly remember when we first met but I’ve known him for a long time. Decades, in fact. The people in our profession are limited, even in this large city, so it was fate that I would become friends with him.”

One of the market stands caught Eshka’s eye. It was a table on the street covered under a tarp to protect the people and things from rain, typical of many of the market stands. This one looked slightly more run down than the others on the street. There were wooden cages with creatures inside laid about on the cobblestone road as well as the table itself. The creatures inside of the cages had their heads hanging low, almost as if their will to live had been taken from them. They were too weak and broken after being caged for so long to even cry out for help. She

pointed to one of the cages and said, “Hey, that one looks like the wizard’s chameleon.” This was true, but the protruding spinal bone spurs were noticeably different from the wizard’s chameleon. Since neither Virsheem, Eshka, nor the exotic pet trader himself were well versed in exotic pets this fact went unnoticed by them. Eshka, excited at the prospect of getting a chameleon just like the wizard had, ran up to the exotic pet trader and said “Hi! I’m Eshka. How much would this chameleon cost?” At first, the exotic pet trader was quite shocked to see such a rare creature standing in front of him. But then he cracked a wicked smile at the thought of charging her an absurd amount for a common chameleon and said “Well, I’d say one gold and three silver.” Eshka looked disappointed because she had money, but not enough. “I only have seven silver.”

The exotic pet trader replied “Well, I-” but was cut off by Virsheem.

Virsheem looked at Eshka and said, “I’ll buy it for you.” Then, she walked up to the trader and pulled out the amount of money he was requesting, and laid it on the table.

He grabbed the cage and placed it next to them on the table and said, “Thanks for your business. Come again.”

With her new animal in hand, Eshka continued walking down the streets of the agora behind Virsheem. She saw many things and people she had never seen before. It astonished her. Virsheem took this time to stop at a fruit vendor. The stand looked similar to the exotic pet trader’s stand but was noticeably cleaner and better looking. Eren, the fruit vendor, recognized Virsheem in her elegant clothing and said, “Well, look who it is! Back to see your favorite person again?”

Virsheem laughed and replied: “Of course. Now... I think I’ll take three suckle fruits today. I hope your wife is well.” She grabbed the suckle fruits and put them in her bag.

Eren responded, “My wife is well but she’s been very busy as of late with the farm. It’s been a bad season for us.” Virsheem looked saddened by this news and offered to help him.

“If you need another loan I’d be happy to extend my services.”

Eren shook his head, “I couldn’t ask you to do that again. I’m sure we’ll manage.”

Virsheem bowed, placed her arm across Eshka’s back, and both of them walked away.

In the agora, a large wooden stage stood in front of a gathered crowd. Virsheem and Eshka stood inside of the tightly packed gathered crowd.

“Oh, let’s not stay here. Let’s get through this crowd,” Virsheem said to Eshka. While they were rushing through the crowd, Eshka held a firm eye on the wooden stage and tried to keep her vision from being obscured by the rest of the crowd. She witnessed people standing on the stage in heavy metal chains. They were wearing less than tattered rags, having only the minimal amount of dirty clothing needed to keep them decent. Most of these people were human, some were not. Once they were finished being sold, a single Cerulean was dragged out to the front of the stage and given special attention, presumably because it was the one with the highest value. A woman at the front of the stage spoke about the Cerulean while Eshka listened intently.

“This Cerulean has been owned three times before, by very powerful individuals. It’s been well taken care of.” Eshka stared relentlessly at her with dim glowing eyes. The woman on the stage then began the bidding at an absurdly high number, but still within reason. A whip hung at her side. Whilst speaking, the woman choked up. Her neck glowed a bright pink red and she fell over. A person on the opposite end of the stage ran over to help her. They knelt down and tried to look at her neck to see what was wrong but didn’t know what to do. She grasped at her neck but it didn’t seem to be helping much. At the same time, the Cerulean on stage screeched in pain while blood red wings grew out of his back. At full size, they were enormous.

They started flapping, seemingly by themselves, and the Cerulean man lifted off the ground. Virsheem was blind to all of this because she was trying to leave as quickly as possible, and the events on the stage were muffled by the sound of the crowd. Virsheem and Eshka were close to leaving sight of the area and once they made it out, the Cerulean man was only a blip in the sky.

They had made it back to the tower as the sun began to set.

“Thank you for showing me around, Virsheem,” Eshka said. “And I agree, what happened in the market today was really crazy. I’m not sure what could do that.”

“I’m sure the city guard will look into it and find the culprit. It was my pleasure. Stay safe! Toodle doo,” Virsheem said before turning around and heading down the stairs that led to the wizard tower once more.

The old wooden door creaked open at the bottom of the wizard’s tower and Eshka carefully sauntered in, carrying the cage which held her new pet in one hand, and carrying her pristine and expensive robes in the other hand. Jaro was inside reading a book.

“Jaro, this is a little off topic, but what should I name my chameleon?” she asked. The wizard stroked his beard again. Eshka noticed he did that a lot.

“Well, how about Spike? He has large spikes, even compared with my chameleon.” She thought about it for a moment and decided it was a fine name.

“That’s a pretty good name. I’ll go with that.”

Translation

Eshka sat in the wizard’s chair transfixed to the volume of text in front of her. She was slowly transcribing her people's language, understood by few, into the more common one.

“Oh my,” Eshka exclaimed.

The wizard, hovering in the air with his book in the middle of the room, slammed his book shut, dropped on the ground, and said, “What did you find?” The wizard's chameleon went invisible from the sudden loud noise.

“I found some very interesting things,” Eshka said.

“Well, what are they?” The wizard replied.

“It was difficult to translate because things about the language are slightly different than what I know about it. But, I managed to mostly piece it together. Now, if you look here,” Eshka pointed to an illustrated symbol on the page. “This means power from god, or maybe a god.” She continued, “If we keep reading it says power from god was taken and used for something.”

“For what?” The wizard seemed taken aback by this knowledge.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t found anything about it yet,” Eshka said. “However, it does say the god’s power corrupted the people, my people, and made them unable to bear children.” Both of them realized the implications of what the text was saying. It meant that her people were brought to near extinction because of the corruption, if what it says is true. “The text suggests that the god could still be lurking in The Isles, waiting for my people to return so it can corrupt them again.”

The wizard, stroking his long beard, asked, “Does it say anything about what would happen when a god dies?”

Eshka wondered why he was asking such an odd question. “Well, no, I don’t think so.”

The wizard continued stroking his gray beard. Eshka didn’t notice it before, but it looked like it was singing. “What about a staff, or perhaps some sort of gem?”

Eshka looked through the text and stumbled upon something similar to what he was speaking of. “Yes! It does speak of a staff, and apparently it's the final and most grand creation

of the god. Whoever wields it holds great power. But, the text seems to imply a warning suggesting it could be dangerous or even cursed.” Eshka took a few moments to comprehend what the rest of the text said. “It says that it was lost in The Isles after the great flood.”

The wizard reflected on all that he heard. “Thank you for this information, Eshka. Your continuing services are greatly appreciated.”

The Staff

Eshka walked into the wizard’s tower at dusk and called out for the wizard because she wanted to tell him about her day with Spike. It had only been two weeks, but he had gotten noticeably bigger. “Jaro! Are you there, Jaro?” No response. Maybe he was in his room, she thought, so she dropped her things and climbed the stairs to his room and knocked on the old wooden door. Still no response. As she stood there, she had a strange feeling wash over her. It was a feeling she felt before, but standing in front of the door made that feeling stronger. There was something on the other side of the door, something familiar. It was a strange sort of familiar, something foreign but not. She attempted to turn the door, but it was locked. That was okay, she knew another way inside.

As Eshka placed both of her palms on the wooden door and pushed her body against it as hard as she could, she started to feel a tingly sensation within her palms. They melded into the door, but as they went further in, Eshka winced in discomfort. Soon, she was all the way through to the other side and bent over to place her palms on her knees, breathing hard. After catching her breath, she stood up straight. The wizard's room was, unsurprisingly, a mess. It was just like the rest of his tower, only noticeably worse. Eshka glanced around the room and saw a strange wooden box at the other side of the room lying on the floor. She knew that was what she was

looking for, the source of her strange feelings. The box looked new and a strange star was carved into it. She tiptoed over to it, over the cluttered mess in the room, and kneeled down next to it. The strange familiar feeling was now the strongest it had been since she first felt it. There was a keyhole in the box. She tried to pull the top open, but no luck. Fortunately, she knew another way to get what she wanted.

Eshka took both her hands and placed them flat down on top of the box. Again, they melded into the wood, but the resistance she felt was almost too much. The box did not want her to go inside. While halfway through the wooden exterior of the box, her hands couldn't go any further, so Eshka summoned all her strength to force them through. As she did, her hands glowed with a white light. Soon, she felt no resistance on her palms, and her hands were through, but the box was still resisting and wanted her out. Eshka rifled through the box and felt something long, it seemed to be some sort of stick or maybe a staff. She grabbed it and felt a strange sensation travel through her body. The staff made her feel stronger and more confident, but something about it didn't feel right. Eshka made sure she had a firm grip on the staff, and pulled it through the box with ease.

The staff was fully made of wood, and elegantly carved. At the top was a crystal wrapped in the staff's wood. Eshka inspected the staff for a long time. She ran her hand up and down it, feeling its intricate carvings. Confidently holding the staff in her hands she walked up to the door and placed her hand on it. She felt the old wood on her palm, and then pushed her hand right through it. She felt no resistance at all. She walked right through the door as if it were simply air. Eshka stood in the hallway for a moment, and then walked to the library room. The wizard was standing there, reading a book, and didn't see her walk in. He turned and saw her, and asked, "What are you doing with that?"

“Is this the staff I read about?” She said.

“I think so. I left it in a secure, locked and magically protected box. How did you get it?”

“I was looking for you, and I felt its presence in your room. So, I took it out of your room. Are you going to use it to kill the god you summon? Is that why you were asking me about how to kill a god when I translated the text?”

“Trying to kill a god is an exercise in futility, at least generally speaking. But I think your people did it, a long time ago. I was hoping you’d be able to find out how, so maybe we could do it too and use the Deities powers to stop a war.” Jaro sat down at the desk where Eshka translated the Cerulean book. “I’d just use the staff but it’s corrupted. Anything that you try to do with it will backfire somehow. It’s just too dangerous.”

“Do you think a demigod would be able to use it?” Eshka said.

“I mean, maybe.” Jaro frowned, “It’d be worth a shot, but you don’t find those just anywhere.”

“This may come as a shock, but I’m actually a demigod.” Eshka’s eyes lit up and she made the staff float above the floor, in the empty space in front of her. “If it’s okay with you, I think I’m going to keep the staff as a security measure. Plus, I feel a connection to it.”

“I can hardly believe it! Well, if we have you we may as well not even try the summoning.” He paused to think for a moment. “Actually, I think it’d be better to go ahead with the summoning. Best not to take chances on a corrupted magic item.”

Ending

Twelve wizards stand around a circle at the height of the volcano. A slight sulfurous scent mixed with the warmth of the volcano fills the air. One of them is Jaro, the wizard in the

tower. He holds in his hand a staff made of wood and wears an ominous, fine robe, which contrasts with his usual tattered clothes. At the top of staff, a crystal orb snugly fits within wooden vines. A tablet lays on the ground in front of each of the wizards, with a rune carved into it. Eshka and Virsheem stand on the outskirts of this circle, near each other.

The wizards chant and as they do the runes carved in stone at their feet glow a bright yellow in response, getting brighter with every passing moment. The wind picked up as a cylindrical wind tunnel appeared in the center of the crater, high above the crater floor and distinguished by the dark dirt caught inside of it. The heavy stones with the glowing runes carved into them began to float, and Jaro called out, “Yes! It’s working! She has accepted the summoning.”

With a curving path, the stones flew towards the wind tunnel and stopped on its edge, floating in a circle with the glowing runes facing outwards. The symbols together in that arrangement looked as if they spelled something. The stones stopped spinning and floated towards the center of the wind tunnel, slowly smashing and melting into each other. They formed into the familiar form of a humanoid, and then began to take on characteristics such as a blue skin color and bright yellow eyes. It was a tall, slender Cerulean woman in elegant, yet unfamiliar robes.

“I have not been summoned to this world for some time. I must say, I missed it.” she said.

Jaro was in awe at the floating Deity. “We’ve witnessed your signs of the coming war, oh great one!” He got down on his knees and placed his palms on the blackened ground. “You have our attention. What do we need to do to prevent war, to crush our enemies?”

“Nothing. I will not help you.” She turned her head towards the staff Eshka was holding in her hands, a few feet behind the wizard. Eshka couldn’t take her eyes off of the Goddess, she was the spitting image of the drawings her father made of her mother. They locked eyes.

“But why?” He asked her.

“Where did you get that staff?” Eshka wasn’t sure how to respond to the Goddess’s request, so she stayed silent. Jaro glanced at the staff in Eshka’s hands, and then back to the Goddess with worry on his face. “Give it to me, Cerulean.”

“Are you Akaenash?” Eshka asked the Goddess.

“Yes, I am. How do you know my name?” Akaenash, the Goddess, asked her.

“I’m your daughter.” Eshka watched as Akaenash’s eyes widened and her eyebrows rose as her head tilted back, in shock. Jaro and the other wizards were similarly shocked, though not as completely as Akaenash. Eshka felt a familiar sensation brushing against her, making the hairs on her arm stand up straight. It was the wind picking up as Akaenash was teleporting away.

“NO! You’re not leaving!” As quick as the blink of an eye, she took her staff and aimed it at her mother. Eshka’s eyes lit up with an intense white light as the wind died down and an intense multi-colored light pulled itself off of her mother, stretching towards the staff as she resisted its pull. Eshka was visibly shaking; it took all of her strength to hold the staff in place, towards her mother as she was resisting its pull. But it, too, was shaking. Eshka feared it may snap in half.

“Aaagh!” Her mother cried out, but Eshka was relentless. A beam of light pulsed from Akaenash’s entire body, blinding Eshka temporarily, but she still continued. The multi-colored light ripped itself from Akaenash and flew through the staff into Eshka. Akaenash radiated

smoke as she closed her eyes and fell into the canyon like a rock. A loud thud cracked in the air as she slammed into the rocky ground.

Meanwhile, Eshka felt her mother's power surge through her body, the power of a Deity, while she held another Deity's power within the staff in her hand. Thin streaks of lightning randomly blipped out of her snapped the ground near where she stood.

“What have you done?” Jaro said.

“I took her power from her.” Eshka replied. She stared coldly at him while saying it, and walked to the canyon's edge to look down at her mother. Blood pooled from her cracked skull and shattered bones, and her body was twisted in way's it shouldn't be.

“She's dead!” One of the unfamiliar wizards shouted out.

Eshka stepped forward into the canyon and hovered down towards her mother's corpse. A stream of blood collided with her foot. She leaned over and placed her palms a few inches over her mother's body, and then a warm yellow light came out of her palms. Her mother's body twisted and cracked while the cuts and scrapes faded away, with the blood that was on top of them clearing away to leave her blue skin smooth and clean.

Akaenash opened her eyes and gasped for air as Eshka's warming yellow light gave her life once more.

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