

Cover Letter

In Fall 2022, we took HON 2010: The Cultural Works of Comics together. Through that class, we learned more about the different ways that comics can perform cultural work, and more importantly we got to bond over our shared love of comics! For our final project, we were challenged to pitch an idea for our own comic that would perform some cultural work. Both of us are really passionate about mental health, so we knew we wanted to tell a story that showed the reality of dealing with stress, and more importantly, encourages readers to recognize their support systems.

As a fan of the tabletop adventure role-playing series *Fantasy High*, Christian wanted to adapt this universe and its characters into something meaningful. Instead of focusing heavily on world-building, we put our energy into depicting a story full of adventure, heartache, and discovery (both of this imaginary world and of the characters themselves). The world of *Fantasy High* detaches the audience from the real world, yet remains relatable for young adult readers. The characters encounter magical spells, monsters, and magical items while also balancing social norms, school work, and family life.

With our world nailed down, we began to think of ways that we could integrate everyday struggles into our story. We especially wanted to normalize that these hardships can affect everyone. Tying in our experiences as Clemson National Scholars, we realized that Adaine would be the perfect character to embody our message. Our goal was to convey that anyone can experience mental health struggles, and we wanted to build her character as someone who, from the outside looking in, seems like they have it all figured out. However, as the story goes on, there are moments that show even individuals in these positions also need help sometimes. For example, Adaine's success in school and invitation to the faculty awards dinner hides the pressure from her parents. Despite these successes, her family still regards Aelwyn as the model child and leaves Adaine right as her life seems to be coming together. The audience is able to witness the effect this has on her as she struggles to keep up in battle. When the group fights the Sandpeople, Adaine cannot seem to muster together even a simple spell and is more of a burden than a hero. Her anxiety takes over and gets in the way of her passion, friendships, and duties. Through her friends, Adaine finds comfort in opening up about her struggles and seeking support in those around her.

The overall aesthetic of this comic book series is very light-hearted. The writing of this story, similar to *Fantasy High*, is filled with humorous situations, hilarious dialogue, and uplifting messages. We chose a cartoon-like style for the main artwork to stay true to the story's original roots. However, we brought in some other artists to highlight the complex nature of this series. For example, Mark Ledgerwood is serving as what we have coined our 'divination artist'. During scenes when Adaine is performing magical spells, she enters into a somewhat dreamscape that reflects her subconscious and her magical powers. Ledgerwood's abstract interpretation of the human form allows for the creation of this magical world. These two very distinct art styles reflect the duality of Adaine's world. She is excelling in school and is well-loved by her professors and friends; however, she is still living in the shadow of her older sister and remains burdened by her anxiety. This fantasy world is backdropped by Karl Kersch's sketch-like style that helps this magical place come to life.