

I write for a variety of reasons: I enjoy it, it gets me thinking about people, it gets me thinking about myself. The biggest reason, however, is that there's not a lot of ways I can get my creativity out into the world. I'm not very artistic in terms of drawings, and I don't have the desire to either learn or teach myself how to do it. In the main field I'm looking into, which is game design and development, the classes I've resonated the most with have been the courses that heavily revolve around coding. My design-related courses, such as asset production and animation, haven't clicked with me, mainly because I'm not good with the tools and don't have the inclination to learn them. In that field, I'd rather spend my time doing what I enjoy and am good at. I would rather code than force myself through tools I don't enjoy working with in hopes of having another means of creative expression.

That leaves one path for my creativity to flow through: writing. I've had an active imagination for as long as I've been conscious. I've built worlds for my stuffed animals to explore. I've sunk hours upon hours of time into games with character creators, making a wide array of figures to build custom stories with. In my junior year of high school, I spent an entire trip over the summer writing out twenty or so bosses for a game I may never make, each with fleshed out movesets, designs, and dialogue if they could speak. Given my lack of artistic abilities in the other fields, and my lack of patience or time to learn them, I've funneled all of my efforts into becoming a more proficient writer, and I feel it's been good for me.

I had originally come into the class with hopes to expand a world I had barely begun to visualize. I had the basic framework: the magic schools, the rivalries and alliances within, basic character traits. Aside from that, I had very little else. I wrote stories to try to answer the prompts, and wound up focusing heavily on Rhea and her interactions with the pure mages. Originally, the Covenant had no name, and the mages Rhea fought were regimented pure mages

who just didn't like her. However, the more I played around with the story, the more I realized they needed personality, which led to them gaining their identity. Vivienne developed solely to fill the role of the horror movie protagonist for WE3, and that piece also further led me down the path of the Children of the Abyss.

Honestly, WE3 was probably the most important piece I wrote for this class. It's not the piece that I think is my best work, but it gave way to the most important dynamic of the story for one of my more favored protagonists in Rhea: The Eternal Choir. Their introduction has propelled the world in directions I had never even considered before writing WE3 and added so much depth to two magic schools I had not fleshed out beforehand. Their creation also led to me using them more heavily for following world exercises because I just couldn't stop writing about them. EFE 1, WE6, EFE 2, WE7, and WE8, as well as my final portfolio piece, all involve The Choir in some way or another, and their relationship with Rhea, Dante, and Vivienne's Coven is something I'm incredibly excited to continue working on.

However, my obsession with writing about Rhea and The Choir also drove me to explore other aspects of the world and work with characters I had on the backburner for months. With WE5, I forced myself to properly introduce Dante, Malakai, and Cirilia to the world and my group. Their introduction gave my brain something to toil over in the background as I continued to expand The Choir, and it led to me fully flesh out what I wanted each character to represent in WE9 and WE10. Dante became a favorite for both myself and some of the readers of my pieces for his laid-back attitude. Malakai's strained relationship with his parents and over-protective nature of Cirilia was able to take clearer shape. Cirilia's soothing aura and care for everyone, especially Malakai, was not as explored as I wanted it to be outside of WE5. However, being able to write, and then better depict, the trauma she went through will drive me through the rest

of her involvement in the larger story. On top of that, the door is now open for me to expand on their parents and how they view each of their children, which is imperative to their history and characters. Were there to have been more exercises, I likely would've either expanded further with these characters or introduced others, such as Elijah and Morrigan, who would round out the party of six and give a deeper context to holy mages and pure mages, respectively.

I continue to hope to improve in setting scenes and making sure that, while my characters are the focal point, the background and set aren't forgotten. I had plans to rewrite WE5 for EFE 3, with the main goal being incorporating the bar and its patrons more in the scene, as I and those who gave me feedback felt they weren't used consistently enough. With WE9, I felt like I had a similar problem, as the city Malakai was tearing through didn't have as much of a part in the scene as I had hoped. I tried to improve that in the rewrite for WE10 and feel I did a better job, but I want to ensure that I don't forget that my characters are in a *world* rather than just a set.

The other major piece I want to continue to work on is character interactions and the more social parts of the story. As someone who has struggled with social interactions and reading people for most of their life, I've always been uncertain about the interactions my characters have had with each other. Talking with people has been more manageable for me as of late, but I still have difficulty reading emotions and the subtle cues people give during conversations to try and guide them to the next phase. As such, I feel I sometimes fall into those same potholes as I write my characters, and also occasionally read more into my dialogue than others do. With WE5, WE9, WE10, and the portfolio piece, I wanted to lean more into the connection my characters have with each other and get a better feel of how they would express their emotions in various situations. I'm hoping it helps me a bit beyond my writing as well, especially as workshopping can give me the feedback I need for how natural the dialogue feels.

My main way of improving in these areas, I believe, is to continue to write them. The more I write those kinds of stories, the more conscious of the topics I'll become, and the more naturally their additions will come within my writing. On top of that, trying and failing to incorporate these ideas into my work will give me more experience with fixing it and ideas on what to look for when doing my own revisions. Having workshops is incredibly beneficial for this, as well as the rewrites, as it helps me understand what I'm missing from a perspective that's not my own and take another shot at fixing the issues. Hopefully, with enough time and effort, I can see leaps in improvement in these areas and build better scenes and characters that stick with my readers after they put my work down.

Finally, if I were to give one piece of advice to starting worldbuilders, it would be to get a base understanding for your world and what you want it to be, set up a couple characters, and have them run through basic scenes. Finding unique and different scenarios to have your characters play out can cause a lot of questions to spring up. How would they react to this monster? How do the events unfolding in front of them clash with their personality or worldview? How would those change based on the resolution? Why are they in this position? Who are they conflicting with? These types of questions aren't always the first ones you think of. Major characters and conflicts can be set up in advance, but until you place your characters in the world and explore the prompts you find, you don't know what other points need to be addressed before you can finish a piece. You can start with a small world, or a world you've been brainstorming for years and have pretty well fleshed out. However, you never know where your world will take you until you start writing within it.

In *The Nightmare's Call*, Wagner creates a gripping tale of two parts; one a harrowing trip through an Eldritch nightmare at the whim of an all-powerful entity, the other a warmer and more heartfelt story of two close friends, Dante and Rhea, as they come to terms with the deal the latter is given. Throughout the piece, Wagner drags readers through the terror and hopelessness the sea beneath the known plane can impose, using Rhea as the conduit for the twisted will of a being known only as The Eternal Choir. However, readers will find grounding in the comedic, yet thoughtful, words of Dante throughout, helping not just Rhea, but us as well, come to terms with the striking horror of the images found in her trip through the Abyss. By the end, readers will be awaiting with vested anticipation the next entry in Wagner's new world, ready for whatever secrets it has left to tell.

- Ashleigh Newfield, *The New New York Times*

Rhea sat in the middle of her single room hut in the desolate Basin, surrounded by multiple dark tomes, ancient arcana, and a singular mage. Her closest friend, a fire mage by the name of Dante, had assisted her up to this point. For many heatstroke laden days and frigid nights, they slaved over the old texts, searching for a way into the dark underbelly of the world they knew. And they did. Buried deep in a century-old chronicle dubbed “The Echoes of the Choir: Volume IV” laid the magic they sought: a way to create a portal into the Abyss. Now, it was all over but the trip beneath the floor.

Rhea took a deep, shaky breath. She was a strong deep mage, and she knew her powers well, but the risk she was about to undertake claimed many a stronger mage than her. She’d heard the stories of mages seeking answers and strength in the Abyss. Some resurfaced as shells of their former selves, others as hideously malformed creatures of pure deep magic. Some never returned at all. However, Rhea knew that if she was going to protect herself and her fellow deep mages, she’d need to find out what lurked in the darkness below. She’d need what it could give her.

Rhea looked at Dante with eyes torn between emotions. Dante read them well. “I’d ask if you were sure o’ this, but I can tell ya not,” he said. “I’m worried about ya, too.”

Rhea lowered her gaze and pushed back her short, dark purple hair. She dug her nails into her skull. Dante slid over to her side and gently pulled her hands off her head.

“Stop that. You’ll need what’s in there where ya goin’.” Dante rested his arm over Rhea’s shoulders and lowered his head to meet her eyes. “I know ya well. I know how hard this is for ya, and I know why ya doin’ it. We can find someone else who can go with ya, or-”

Rhea raised her right hand to Dante’s mouth. She knew he was trying to comfort her, but right now, she needed quiet. She wanted her emotions in check before making the descent. Every

book they read shared a singular message; “Go in with your intentions on your sleeve, clear and true. They will know what you want.” The thought of something, or some *things*, looking through her mind made Rhea’s skin crawl. However, she wanted to follow what she read to the letter. Should she deviate from the path, there’s no telling what would happen to her down there. No one who did returned to document it.

The two mages sat in silence for a few minutes before Rhea nodded and stood up. Dante followed suit and joined her. Rhea picked up “The Echoes of the Choir: Volume IV” and turned to the page with the spell. She looked it over and memorized the procedure before putting it back on the floor.

“Want me t’ set up a tether? Some way to bring ya back if somethin’ goes south?” Dante asked. Rhea shook her head. The first volume stated tethers were useless when entering the Abyss. They’d be severed upon entry.

“Y’sure? It’d make me feel better,” Dante said with a light chuckle. Rhea smiled faintly and nodded. Dante smiled, took a step forward, and wrapped his arms around Rhea. She reciprocated and felt the warmth coming off the mage. It briefly soothed her nerves.

Dante let go and looked Rhea in the eyes. Her gaze was still shaky, but held a much greater resolve than it did a few minutes ago. “I read it was cold in there, so I wanted to warm ya up a bit before ya went in.” Rhea smiled and nodded in appreciation. “They say ya might not come back, but I know ya will. I’ll be here with cookies when ya come back.” He flashed a toothy grin that made Rhea chuckle before stepping back. She’d need the space to create the portal.

Rhea took a deep breath and began to channel her magic. She recited the spell in her head as she channeled a black energy in her hands. The energy manifested as an orb, growing larger

and larger the more Rhea put into it. The wind from the magic began blowing the pages of the books on the floor away, before eventually sending them into the walls. The force was almost strong enough to knock Dante and Rhea back, but before it could, Rhea thrust the energy into the floor of the hut and created a swirling black hole. She stared deep into the portal and saw only an infinite darkness. However, somewhere deep within it, Rhea felt like something was in the depths, something that was staring right back at her.

She looked up from the portal and turned to Dante, who was stunned by the display of power he just witnessed. He shook his head clear and met Rhea's eyes. He saw a number of emotions within them: amazement, fear, uncertainty. Yet deep within, he saw the one thing he knew she needed for the trip: resolve. He knew she was ready, or at least as ready as she would ever be. Dante gave her an uncertain smile and nodded. Rhea did the same, looked into the portal, and plunged into the Abyss.



Everything was cold. Empty. Dead.

Rhea was in an endless sea of black sludge, caught like a beast in tar. Her hairs stood at attention all across her body from its frigid embrace. She could not move, could not see, could not think clearly. The agony she was experiencing made sure of that. Whatever she was stuck in was overstimulating her exposed skin, causing her a type of pain that she'd never experienced before. Rhea had thought burning alive was the worst pain she'd ever feel. Now, she wished she was. At least then her nerve endings would die.

Suddenly, what little space Rhea had began to shrink. The darkness started closing in, crushing her down towards her center of mass. The little air she entered the portal with was dwindling, causing her to suffocate. *“I’m going to die here,”* Rhea thought. *“I shouldn’t have tried. I should’ve stayed with Dante.”* The sensations began to fade, her consciousness began to slip. She would be lost somewhere in this dark, infinite sea forever.



“WAIT.”

Rhea began to channel everything she had into her core. Every bit of deep magic she had buried within her began to resonate, creating a purple haze around her body. She could still feel the Abyss closing in on all sides, but she felt its strength waning. With one final burst of energy, Rhea channeled all she had left into one, final expulsion of energy, strong enough to push the encroaching darkness back. She tried to move to fill the space, afraid that if she didn’t, it would be retaken by the dark, but she still couldn’t. Any attempt to move was met by the same resistance she faced before, only now she had no magic to keep it at bay. The Abyss once again began closing until...

It stopped.

Something had intervened, encasing Rhea in a kind of deep energy she did not know. The resonance was familiar, yet foreign. Whatever it was, it seemed to block off the sludge. The pain receptors beneath her skin slowly turned off as she found herself able to breathe again. She still couldn’t move, but the absence of the stimulus was enough to make her more relaxed. However, this relaxation did not last.

*“In the darkest recesses of your mind, the most depraved fragment of your psyche, the blackest part of your soul, resides a voice. A voice that echoes the horrors you’ve seen, the losses you’ve faced, the atrocities you wish to commit. A voice that can let loose the body to do as it pleases, unbound by the shackles of guilt and morals. We are that voice. **WE ARE THE ETERNAL CHOIR.**”*

Rhea heard the words flow like water through her skull. The voice spoke in phrases echoed seemingly thousands of times. Their words were seeped in a nectar of apathy and grandiosity, which stuck like honey to her thoughts. Their trace left visions in her mind, overtaking what little she was able to perceive in the Abyss. She saw Covenant mages assaulting a deep mage in front of his home in the Basin. They beat him within an inch of his life, his blood pooling on the sands beneath him, his cries in pain growing weaker with every hit of their Aether batons. Rhea tried to reach out to do something, anything to help him, but she couldn't. Frozen where she stood, she was forced to bear witness to the brutal display and watch helplessly as his lifeless body was dragged into a cart and sent to the Academy. She would never see him again.

Her vision twisted in spirals of light and dark before slowly settling into focus. Rhea, at age five, found herself peeking out of the cupboards of her old home, watching in terror as her mother was knocked to the floor. Rhea could see that her mother's left eye was blackened and her lip was bleeding. Their eyes met, and in her mother's eyes, Rhea saw something she'd never seen in them before: fear. She was quickly struck in the temple by an Aether baton, held by a woman Rhea'd soon learn was Vivienne, Right Hand of the Covenant. Vivienne struck again and again, beating Rhea's mother into unconsciousness.

Yet even through the attack, Rhea's eyes never left her mother's gaze. She told her to stay quiet and hidden, no matter what happened, but Rhea wanted to try and save her. She tried to exit

the cupboard, wanting to throw herself on her mother's body and plead for her safety, but found herself paralyzed again. She tried to cry out to her mother, for the assault to stop, for her to be spared, but nothing came out. Vivienne left a few moments later, when she felt her point was made. Rhea tried to leave her hiding spot to check on her mother, but her vision spiraled again before she could.

Rhea now found herself somewhere she'd never been. The walls around her were two stories tall and coated in bright blue crystals. The stained glass windows on either side of her portrayed images of the many Heads of the Academy throughout its centuries of existence. Tables covered with books and scrolls lined the exterior of the hallway she found herself in. The Aether energy in the air was palpable, each pulse causing her blood flow to cease before easing back into rhythm. She had to be in the Grand Archives, but she didn't know how she got there. Rhea only knew that something felt off.

She looked down at her arm and found it lined with a viscous black liquid, squirming and writhing in seeming anticipation. Within its grasp was the collar of Vivienne's vest, her near lifeless body hanging from the dark finger-esque appendages at the base of the arm. Her face was bloodied, blackened, and bruised from a beating Rhea knew was well deserved. She lifted the pure mage up to eye level and opened what felt like her mouth to speak. For the first time, words came out.

"You have preyed on us for too long, Vivienne. Allow me to show you what the other side feels." The voice echoed thousands of times, the words seeped in a vitriol so pure it spilled from Rhea's twisted lips onto the floor below. Her mouth opened wide, and from it sprang countless black tendrils that entered through Vivienne's eyes and mouth and extended down into her stomach. Rhea felt the tendrils slowly curling in, collapsing her innards into a single point as the

pure Aether blood of the Covenant's Right Hand burned Rhea's newfound form. The burning didn't hurt Rhea. It pleased her, empowered her in a way she had never felt. It felt intoxicatingly... ***RIGHT***.

Yet something about the scene was wrong. Rhea felt out of place. That wasn't who she was anymore. When she saw what happened to the deep mage in her adolescence, Rhea wanted this vision to be real. When her mother died in her arms at the age of five, Rhea wanted this vision to be real. Throughout the first half of her life, Rhea wanted nothing more than to annihilate the Covenant and anyone within it without mercy. She wanted to raze the Grand Archives and leave all of its members trapped within to burn for what they'd done. She wanted to watch the life drain from Vivienne's eyes personally, by any means necessary. *That* Rhea would've reveled in this vision.

That Rhea doesn't exist anymore, and it's all because of Dante. When he stumbled across her home in the Basin, both at the age of fifteen, he found a cold, isolated girl who was dead to the world and wanted it dead in return. He gave her a chance to see that world, to get to know those in it, and to try and reconnect with life beyond the Basin. Rhea begrudgingly took it, and it transformed her.

In the decade and a half that followed, Rhea's view of the world was shattered. The thought that the world despised her and those like her, an image painted by years of isolation and persecution at the hands of Vivienne's Coven, was slowly erased. Within each city that Dante took her, she found mages that sympathized, and even empathized, with her experience in the Basin. She found people she could relate to and spend long nights in bars with. She met mages of every school, and even some Covenant members, whose company gave her comfort. Every journey the two of them took brought Rhea further out of her shell. She was no longer the recluse

she once was, jaded after her mother's death, looking at the world through vengeful eyes. Now, she was a part of it.

As these scenes ran through her head, Rhea began to feel control for the first time since she entered the Abyss. Still trapped in the vision, she released Vivienne's body from her grasp, letting it fall down to the floor below. She turned around and saw the scattered bodies of Covenant mages, infected with the same black sludge that coated her body. Rhea recoiled at the scene, realizing that all of them were slaughtered by her malformed hands. A single thought crossed her mind as her vision began swirling again.

"No."



Rhea's vision returned. She found herself back in the Abyss, trapped in the bubble of unknown deep magic she had found herself in before. As her senses began to return, she felt multiple tendrils caress the folds of her brain and retract from her skull out her ears. Spiders ran across her flesh as the voice returned.

*"Very impressive, dear Rhea. Those who seek us out rarely possess the power to withstand the Abyss. Fewer still have the strength to bear our influence. However, **NONE** have possessed the **WILL** to overpower us. None until **YOU**.*

*"We know what you seek. You seek the dissolution of the Covenant, but not by brute force. You seek to erase those who ruthlessly hunt your kind, **OUR KIND**, without killing those who despise the practice. You seek to avenge your mother and eliminate Vivienne, but not at the cost of those you deem 'innocent.'*

“WE CAN HELP YOU.

*“Those who came before you were driven by strength, and would sacrifice everything to attain it. Their body, their soul, **THEIR WILL**. And we took it. We satisfied their lust for power, and in return, we took their mind. We granted them our strength, they imposed **OUR WILL**. However, your ambitions are nobler than theirs, and thus, our offer shall reflect it.*

*“The power to walk the Abyss is one not found above, not since the death of Anwir. **WE** will grant you this power, the freedom to traverse the void, to use it as a tool to ambush, to escape, to kill if need be. **WE** will allow you to use the endless sea in any way you desire to dispose of those who oppose you. In return, we ask not for your will, but for your **EYES**. We wish to see the world as you do, assist in your rebellion, and serve as a sixth sense. You need only listen to our voice. You need only **TRUST US**.*

*“We know you’re contemplating this offer. **WE** will return you to where you came. Return to us if you intend to accept our offer, and we will bestow our gift to you. But hear us now. If you intend to decline our offer, **DO NOT RETURN**.*

“WE WILL DROWN YOU.”

Before she could respond with a thought of her own, Rhea’s senses faded away.

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“Rhea? Rhea?!”

Rhea’s eyes slowly opened through the sleep crust that held them shut. Her vision was blurred, so she blinked rapidly to regain focus. When she did, she saw Dante looming over her head with his hands on her shoulders. She was laying on her thin straw bed in the corner of her room. She tried to sit up to gather herself, but Dante stopped her and eased her back down. She

felt a soreness run through her back and shoulders. Every muscle in her body ached, every joint was stiff. It felt as if she hadn't moved for weeks.

Turns out, she wasn't far off.

"You were gone in th' portal for a good three days," Dante started, taking a seat at the foot of the bed. "Then, I found ya on the floor on the third night after I woke from a nap. I tried to stay up for ya, but after three days, ya body kinda forces ya to sleep. When I saw you were back, I tried t' wake ya up, but nothin' was workin'. You were cold to th' touch, so I laid ya in bed and started a fire to warm ya up. Nearly burned the place down, but all's well, right?"

Rhea chuckled slightly as Dante shrugged it off. "I've been with ya since ya got back, which at this point I believe was about a week an' a half ago," he continued. Rhea's eyes shot open. "Don't worry," he assured. "I've taken care of ya as best I could. Found some books around here on how t' make sure ya fluids were up and that ya vitals were good. Haven't left this place once. Didn't want ya to wake up alone an' confused. Guess that was probly a given." He took a moment to pause. "Also, sorry 'bout not havin' those cookies I promised," Dante added with frown. "Kinda got hungry and ate them while you were out."

Rhea shook her head in understanding and waived it off. Given her current state, she probably couldn't eat them anyways.

Dante turned and looked out the window next to her bed. The sun was setting, causing the sands to shimmer in the fading light. "So I feel I should probly ask," Dante started, turning back to Rhea. "What happened in there?"

Rhea's face went through a series of emotions in a second, starting with fear, then confliction, and finally on questioning. She didn't know how to convey what she just

experienced, especially while she's bound to her bed. She tried to think of a way to express her emotions, but before she could, Dante raised his hand.

"Lemme take a quick guess," he said with his usual exuberance. Rhea gave him the floor. "So ya went down there, got stuck, met a weird entity that talked too fancy, and were given a deal that ya not sure of. I gotta be close, right?"

Rhea returned only an impressed, albeit stunned, look. "I knew it!" Dante exclaimed, pumping his fists in triumph. "Told ya I know how t' read ya!"

Rhea nodded as her face went back to the conflicted look she had moments earlier. Dante noticed and slid up the bed to put his hand on her shoulder. "Look, I'll admit, I ain't exactly an expert when it comes to pacts with unknowable entities, but I know what ya thinkin' of doin'. Ya tryin' t' take down the Covenant. They ain't exactly the type t' let a single deep mage take 'em down. Woulda happened already if it coulda. But I know how strong ya are, and I know how powerful ya will is. If anyone could withstand whatever hell that monster can throw at ya, it's you. I mean, ya already did once. Ya didn't try to kill me when ya woke up. Gotta mean somethin', right?"

Rhea gave him a faint smile and nodded. He gave her a big grin. "An' hey, I'm not sayin' ya should. Honestly, logic dictates ya probly shouldn't take 'em up on it. But it might be nice to have that bit o' extra help when the goin' gets tough. And they ain't gonna expect ya t' vanish in the floor, y'know?"

Rhea's smile grew bigger, and her eyes shined more confidently than before. She finally felt good enough to try and sit up again and, with Dante's assistance, she did.

"If ya want, I know a few people we can talk to t' get a better idea on what might happen t' ya if ya take their deal. Afterwards, I know a couple others who might be able t' help ya take it

to the Covenant. An' just remember! If anythin' happens to ya, and it won't, I got a very large fireball with however many names they got on it!"

Dante snapped his fingers and created two small flames, one on each hand. He quickly put them out, and when she made sure he did, Rhea gave him a warm hug. Dante, trying not to make her soreness worse, embraced her as gently as he could. The pain didn't matter to her. She didn't care how much her body ached. Rhea wanted to make sure Dante knew how much she cared for him, whether she could say it or not.