

Wave by Wave: A Fantasy Author's Guide for Refining a Creative Writing Style

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2022

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Abstract

Writing a novel is a great undertaking. Many would-be writers have set out to create a novel and give up halfway through, uncertain where or how they failed. This project aims to help prospective authors get past that barrier. By analyzing one's own writing style, a writer can ascertain greater insight into the strengths and weaknesses of one's own work and therefore help rectify mistakes one might make otherwise, or learn to see a chapter from a new angle. The author will demonstrate this method on himself first by way of focused revisions. A sample chapter of a fantasy novel, written by the author, will be provided as a baseline, and then the author will rewrite that chapter four different ways, focusing on a different element of storytelling with each rewrite: plot, character development, dialogue, and theme/tone. Following the baseline chapter, an analysis section will then dissect and analyze the author's writing style, pulling excerpts from the rewrites, and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses so as to provide a model for other prospective writers.

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Ask a child what they want to be when they grow up, and you might be surprised at how many want to be writers. As the years pass, however, few accomplish this goal or give up partway through a prospective novel. Burgeoning writers get caught up in inconclusive plot lines, two-dimensional characters, flat dialogue, or even their own purpose. A lack of clarity in any of these areas can prove a significant challenge to new writers. At some point, a serious writer will see the flaws in his or her work and ask, "how can I improve?"

I wish I had the answer. However, I am just like many of you: an amateur, trying to become a professional. It is my hope that by the end of this thesis, this journey will serve as a guide to inform your own writing; a lifeline to help writers who are stuck in their own process so that one can discover one's own method. Thus, by exploring the methods I use in my own revision process, I aim to give prospective writers a way to analyze their own writing so as to easily pick out both its strong points and its flaws. The goal here isn't to produce a publishable novel. Rather, I seek to provide authors with the tools to finish a draft.

I will test this process by a simple method that I have designed. The premise is this: I will use a chapter from a novel that I have been writing to serve as a baseline. This chapter will remain unedited, so as to provide a clear picture of how I write at a first glance. Then, I will re-write this chapter four different times, again leaving each one unedited, but each rewrite will be shown at the very end of the thesis. I will still pull examples from each rewrite in the analysis section, but the point here is not to deliver a polished product. Rather, I aim to illustrate a process. To that end, each rewrite, and each section of the analysis, will therefore focus on refining one of the essential elements of storytelling: plot, character development, dialogue, and

theme/tone. In my own writing, I have found that isolating a problem to its most basic parts quickly reveals a chapter's shortcomings, which is why I approach each rewrite one element at a time.

After the baseline chapter comes the analysis section. In this part of the project, I will be my own critic. While it is certainly beneficial to seek critical aid from outside sources such as writing groups, established authors, and professional editors, self-analysis is a useful tool for preventing mistakes in the future rather than simply catching them post-process with the help of editors and critics. That is why I will aim to be brutally honest with myself, comparing each rewrite to the baseline to give myself an accurate analysis of my writing style's strengths and weaknesses. I will attempt to discover what worked best (or better) in each rewrite compared to the baseline and what failed to measure up.

The analysis section will also serve as an artist's statement of sorts; I will go into detail explaining the choices I made for each rewrite and expound on helpful research I gathered along the way (this is largely composed of guides and advice from other authors who have attempted to nail down their own writing style). The purpose here is utter transparency – in analyzing why I chose to write what I did, I aim to spark some of these questions in my readers.

Essentially, this thesis will serve as an analysis of my own writing style, and as a guide to aid future authors in refining their own writing style, giving some answers to that age-old question: “how can I improve?”

Unedited Baseline Chapter: Preface

Before I begin this chapter, and with each of the rewrite analyses going forward, I will give a brief background as to the characters and setting that I chose to include.

Now, on to the background: the baseline chapter is set in the middle of an ongoing fantasy novel that I am writing. The story takes place in the garden city of Kanaloa, capital of Matoa, which is rebuilding in the aftermath of a siege. The story centers around two main characters, Nyssa Mandrakos and Levixion Kallis (Levi for short), and one secondary character, Husk, who is technically a part of Levi (he is a spirit bound within his body, but that is largely irrelevant right now). This chapter was centered on Nyssa's perspective since the plot of the chapter focuses on her sister, Iris' supposed death. Briefly, allusions are made to larger organizations – the Deepwatch, which are a sort of priestly military force, and the Saurian Horde, a swarm of Lovecraftian-esque sea monsters who are one of the major antagonists of the book.

As I mentioned above, this is geared more towards fantasy/fiction writers, and if the basic premise doesn't sound like it would be helpful towards discovering your own writing process, it may help to seek for a guide more geared towards your own preferences. Now, without further ado, here is the unedited, baseline chapter.

Sample Chapter: Unedited Baseline

In war, Matoans did not mourn.

Her people were born from ascetic monks and sailor priests; they had crossed hostile oceans at the end of the world and fashioned gardens out of sterile mountains. They would survive today.

Matoans did not mourn. They sang.

Nyssa could hear them even this high up, both legs dangling over the flat stone railing of this tower on the southeastern edge of the city. Smoke still rose from sections of the city, and craters pockmarked a large section near the docks. The terrace farms had been set alight, and blood still ran down the gutters.

But her people still sang.

If Levi was here, he would still be able to pick out the exact words she was sure, but all Nyssa could hear was the occasional faint note. A prayer to the Martyrs, maybe? Or one of the war-chants from the days their ancestors set out across the sea – strong and steady and full of steel. Whatever it was, she was sure it radiated endurance and hope.

Nyssa envied them. What was there to sing about now that Iris was... gone? Right now, there was only one tune she was interested in playing. It was bitter and wrathful, requiring only one finger and steady aim.

She took apart the rifle in her hands, counting each and every part. The Deepwatch had golems that could perform weapon maintenance flawlessly, but right now, she needed to do it herself.

Whenever she was upset as a child, Nyssa liked to take things apart. Clocks. Chairs. Once, she took apart Iris' bedframe, and they didn't speak for a week.... *No. Don't think about that. You have a job to do.* Nyssa took a deep, steadying breath, running her fingers over each nut and bolt and rivet until they felt one and the same. Taking her time, she counted them all, over and over again until her hands felt a little steadier and her heart felt a couple drops lighter.

Slowly, humming an old war song, Nyssa began to put her rifle back together. She ran her hands over the folded steel and triple checked the spare canisters of pressurized steam, scrubbed out the barrel twice and re-calibrated her sights. For good measure, she tightened up the trigger mechanism and began the process of re-consecrating her bullets, courtesy of a few swiped vials of holy water from supply caches around the city. The Deepwatch had plenty. They wouldn't miss these.

As she began to lay out the ritual components, Nyssa paused. She pulled out a note from her satchel. *Look around.*

Nyssa spun, leveling her rifle at a figure leaning casually against the door frame. “How long have you been following me?”

The figure stepped out into the light, unconcerned. “Long enough,” Levi said. For some reason, he was smiling. *Smiling.* What was there to smile about at a time like this? “I slipped that note into your bag at least two hours ago. Come on, Nyssa, put the gun down, let’s talk about this. I have some news you want to hear.”

“I’m leaving.” Nyssa didn’t lower her rifle. “Don’t try to stop me.”

The smile faded from Levi’s face, and he sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle. “Just hear me out for a minute. You want revenge. I get it. But there’s something you should know first, and rushing after the Horde in a suicide charge won’t bring Iris-”

“*Don’t* say her name! My sister...” Nyssa trailed off, her bottom lip trembling. With a visible effort of will she tamped down on her emotions as she clicked off the safety. “Levixion Kallis. Take one more step and I swear by all the Martyrs I *will* shoot you.”

To her credit, her voice didn’t waver. But her hands betrayed a different story, as did the blurriness in her eyes.

Levi stared at the barrel pointed at his chest. He looked away, gritting his teeth, and when he turned to face her again, his pupils had narrowed into slits, his face filled with a cold, almost bored expression that she associated with the logic-trance.

“You know that won’t kill me.” His tone was flat, expressionless, as he took a deliberate step forward. He was close enough now that the end of the rifle was only a foot away from his chest. “But you don’t want to listen? Fine. Prove to me that you’re ready to get out there. Land

one clean shot. But I have some news you're going to want to hear, and when I win, you're going to hear me—"

Nyssa fired.

Immediately after, she felt the rifle fly out of her hands.

Nyssa didn't see him move, but she could hear him laughing before the smoke cleared. Levi hadn't bothered to dodge. He didn't dissipate into an illusion. He had simply *caught* the bullet, pinched between two singed fingers. Levi's other hand rested her stolen rifle on his shoulder.

When did he get so fast?

"Cheap shot, Nyssa." A small grin flickered across Levi's face as he dismissed the logic-trance. He shook out his fingers, and she could see the scorch marks already beginning to heal.

"But I'm afraid you've already lost."

Eyes widening, Nyssa reached for her pistols, only to find them already missing.

"Sloppy." A guttural voice spat from behind her. It was Levi's voice but hungrier. Crueler. She turned around to see Husk sitting on the edge of the balcony, twirling Nyssa's pistols around ethereal fingers, every movement trailing a hazy afterimage through the air. Husk's face twisted into a disgusted sneer, and Nyssa shuddered. That *thing* might share Levi's face, but the dream hydra had a vicious streak that Levi never had.

"She is weak," Husk snarled, "She is prey. A mere hatchling would slay her in this state. But against the Saurians?" Its voice dripped sickly sweet as Husk began to pace along the railing, heedless of the drop below. "You are but a *child*; you may have fought them here, but you do not truly know them as I do. You have seen their madness, but you haven't *felt* it, felt it rip and claw

and rend your body and your mind, as all you can do is watch, watch as your flesh changes before your very eyes and your mind collapses-”

“That’s enough, Husk.” Levi said, and Nyssa felt his fingers entwine with hers.

Husk eyed the two of them, growling, but he dispersed into Essence, flowing back into Levi’s body.

Nyssa rounded on Levi, eyes flashing. “They *killed* my sister, Levi-”

“I think Iris is still alive.”

“-so, I’m *sorry* Levi, but you can’t just expect me to sit around with you and... what?”

“I can’t be sure, but we didn’t find her body after the siege. And I didn’t pay attention to it at first, but during the battle, I sensed her talking to... something. It wasn’t human, or a golem, or a Saurian. It was... I couldn’t *sense* it, Nyssa, whatever that being was. Do you know how terrifying that is for me? It wasn’t invisible, or immaterial, or anything like that, it was just a blank spot on my perception. One minute she was there, and the next, she vanished. And she wasn’t the only one. There are researchers missing. Historians. Scholars. Archivists. Linguists. Something bigger is going on here, I’m sure of it.”

Nyssa felt a chill run down her arms, but it was quickly overshadowed by shock, joy, and another, more comfortable emotion right now. “Levi.” Nyssa’s voice was dangerously sweet. She untangled her hand from his, and casually reached over for one of her pistols. “Why didn’t you tell me this two hours ago?”

Levi swallowed, and he took a half-step back. “Like I said, I can’t be sure. If I was wrong, I didn’t want to hurt you again. But if my hunch was right, if we’ve stepped into something even bigger than the Saurian invasion, I needed to be sure before I told you.”

“You were scared.” Nyssa put the gun back down.

Levi looked away, out at the smoke still rising from sections of the city. “I’m terrified. What if we go after Iris and it ends up being worse for everyone else? What if we end up unleashing something worse than the Saurian horde? And – I’m sorry, but I need to say this, Nyssa, what if Iris really is... gone?”

“Then we’ll find her, or we’ll avenge her. Once we’re strong enough. Whatever we do, we’ll get through it, together.” Nyssa wrapped her arms around him. “Or at least until we all die horribly.”

Levi chuckled darkly. A few moments later he murmured, “I’m sorry, Nyssa, I should have told you sooner.”

“No, I’m glad you waited. I wasn’t thinking clearly.” Nyssa grinned up at him, nose scrunching. “I’m not sorry I shot you though.”

This time, she drew a full laugh from him. “Of course not.” He matched her smile, and they stayed that way for a while. Watching their city rebuild, and their people heal. And together, they sang.

Developing a Personal Writing Style

Basic Parameters

Before launching into the analysis of the rewrites, it would be beneficial to establish what exactly my primary objective is. Why did I choose plot, character development, dialogue, and theme as the central tenets of this project, and not, say, setting or point of view? That is not to say that setting and point of view are not important. Quite the opposite, actually. When talking about how he wrote his critically acclaimed novel *Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card stated that “[he] didn’t have even the seed of a good science fiction story until after [he] had a clear idea of the world in which the story would take place. The same thing is true of fantasy.”¹ Therefore, I didn’t start off with setting or point of view, because ultimately, if one is already writing a story, one likely already has the setting established and point of view, especially in fantasy or science fiction, where setting and characters can be wildly imaginative. An author’s individual tone, setting, and his or her chosen point of view is unique to each author, and this thesis is not designed to diminish the creativity of a new author trying to create a unique world. In short, my goal in this thesis is not to aid in the starting of a story, but in the development of a fairly established one, which is why I focused solely on plot, character development, dialogue, and theme. It is also why I am not editing or polishing these chapters. I want to show my own thought process at work here, free from the cleanliness of a fully polished piece.

To that end, let us begin with Plot. Plot is the central tenet of any novel, and also its most malleable aspect, often going under so many revisions that the end result will look completely

¹ Orson Scott Card, Philip Athans, and Jay Lake, *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction: How to Create Out-of-this-World Novels and Short Stories* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2013), 27.

different than the original idea.² The section on plot will analyze whether or not I effectively managed to see the forest without missing the trees so to speak.

Character development is another central pillar of storytelling, and yet it leans on two of the others for support, that is, setting and plot. Therefore, I placed the section on character development second in this project because I believe that characters rely on plot and setting as fixed foundations in order to work effectively. As author Linda Seger stated, “characters don’t exist in a vacuum. They’re a product of their environment.... Understanding a character begins with understanding the context that surrounds the character.”³ This section of the thesis will thus analyze my attempt to clearly distinguish between a multitude of supporting characters while making each feel distinct in his or her own way.

The section on dialogue builds off of character development, but in this case, I narrowed it down to two characters so as to maximize the interaction between the two of them. In this section, I will analyze the efficacy of my attempt to make every line of dialogue feel important and every interaction feel like it is deepening the relationship between the two characters.

Finally, we will end with the section on theme/tone. I placed those two next to each other because I see theme as more than just “what is the meaning behind your story?” Theme and tone are what your story feels like, as much as they are what the story means. While some of this aspect is more in the hands of a reader than a writer, since a writer can only partially direct what a reader gleans from the text, I believe that any author can at least focus the direction of his or

² Ibid., 33.

³ Linda Seger, *Creating Unforgettable Characters* (New York: Henry Holt and Company LLC, 1990), 5.

her tone with practice and insight. However, this is also the most esoteric part of writing any story, hence why I saved it for last.

Baseline Chapter Analysis

The baseline chapter was designed to be an unedited sample of my writing, and therefore this part of the analysis section will be the shortest. I will explain a few creative decisions I made about the narrative structure. I will also highlight elements which were present in the baseline that I later changed or felt were irrelevant later.

Perhaps the biggest question one might ask me is why I chose to start in seemingly the middle of a story instead of at the beginning. The answer is simple – the beginning of my novel didn't have enough material for me to analyze my own writing style like this chapter did. The beginning of my novel starts off too slow for the purpose of this project; it follows Levi's introduction to the Deepwatch, which didn't have enough content for me to do a suitable rewrite for the plot and character development sections. For this project I wanted concrete, established characters who would have no trouble interacting with one another, and a major turning point in the plot (Iris' disappearance and the introduction of the primary antagonist) to spur on dialogue and questions about the characters' end goals (or the theme of the novel). This was also why I chose to use a chapter from a novel instead of a standalone story; I wanted to use characters who clearly had history with each other and with the created world as a whole. With a short story one only has a chapter or two to go off on, and in my mind, that isn't solid ground for a thorough analysis.

I chose to write this chapter from Nyssa's perspective. Since the plot in this chapter was focused on Iris' death, I thought it might be best to highlight the reaction of the person who knew her best. Ultimately, that was a decision that I later changed. Over the course of these rewrites, I

realized that Nyssa's reactions to Iris' death were easy to predict, and while it was easy to write about Nyssa's reaction, it didn't make for an interesting story to me. The predictable response became a problem. What I found more interesting were the interactions between a grieving Nyssa and the rest of her friends. I asked myself, how would an outsider feel? Someone who had known Iris but didn't share the same familial bond that Nyssa did would be an interesting perspective in my opinion.

In short, this is a decision that you, too, will have to make as a writer when considering point of view. Sometimes the straightforward angle is simply overdone, and it might be better to tackle a well-worn scenario, like a grieving sister, from a different, more oblique angle. What are you as an author most interested in conveying with a specific scene? What are the subjects of your interests and how might you mix things up? For example, one question to ask yourself is if a plot point is more important in the moment than a character, or if the story doesn't matter so much as the message behind it.

Putting this philosophy into practice, as I finished this chapter and went into the first rewrite, I took some space away from the work to think. I re-read the story a couple of times, toying with different character reactions in my head, and I ultimately came to the conclusion that Nyssa's direct perspective didn't contribute as much to the emotional impact as other rewrites had the potential to.

Whether you are reading for dialogue, character development, or just searching for extraneous tangents like I have mentioned above, taking some space to consider these questions can greatly aid your revision process.

Furthermore, another tangential aspect of the story that I felt was unnecessary after stepping back for a bit was the whole tableau around the note that Levi slipped in Nyssa's bag. It felt like a good idea in the moment, as it would highlight Levi's enhanced perception, his capability for stealth, and Nyssa's unstable emotional state. However, midway through the plot rewrite, I realized that the scene felt frivolous and overly melodramatic, and that it would be more appropriate to either play it off lightly or cut it out entirely.

These sorts of realizations are a large part of the revision process, which author Anne Lamott calls "the child's draft," where you just let your writing flow unimpeded and sift through it later.⁴ She states, "there may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love... you know now what you're supposed to be writing about... but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages."⁵

All in all, the baseline chapter gave me a lot of room to step back and explore a little bit. An example of my thought process looked something like this: how could this chapter better serve the greater story as a whole? My mind immediately jumped to my antagonist. This chapter came after a great conflict, but that didn't mean that I couldn't incorporate my antagonist's influence. I asked myself if there were ways in which I failed to keep a consistent tone throughout the story, or moments where something fell flat. I found this flaw in the scene that I mentioned above when Levi slipped the note into Nyssa's bag. Figuring out which scenes are extraneous and which can become something more is a critical aspect of developing one's own

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Bird By Bird* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

writing, one that only develops with time and testing. This leads me to the changes I made in the plot rewrite.

Plot Rewrite Analysis

Before I get into the thick of the story itself, you might consider some overarching elements that you may want to pay attention to as you write your own plot. There are books and lectures aplenty on the minutiae of writing a plot, but for the purpose of this thesis, I will go through some of the aspects that I focused on as I tried to tie this story into the greater plot. Specifically, apart from the mechanical aspects of writing a plot, something that I challenged myself to focus on in this rewrite were the goals of the individual characters and the overarching factions, and the tension that came from those conflicting desires.

This section I focused much less on dialogue and interpersonal relationships, and more on the significance of Iris' death to the overall plot. Regarding some changes I made from the baseline, I chose to center the chapter from Levi's perspective, with Nyssa playing a more minor role. I thought of having Nyssa play a larger role, but I ultimately decided against it, since her reaction, while important from a character development standpoint, was more or less irrelevant to the larger plot. There was much less dialogue here, but I built the chapter along a series of flashbacks, bringing out a little bit more of my magic system (specifically, the powers of eidetic memory and enhanced perception) into play here. I also strove to deepen the interactions between Husk and Levi, as well as went into more detail about Levi's enhanced senses and eidetic memory. The goal here was to frame the tragedy of the story within the tension of the greater plot. How could I tell a story about the "death" of one of my characters and escalate the larger conflicts of the novel at the same time? That is, the struggle between man and magic, and the primal war between the Saurians and the rest of the world.

To that end, I went into a little bit more physical description of the Saurian Horde, and I touched the surface of Iris' summoning powers. I also briefly introduced the primary antagonist of the novel here, who is not named on purpose, since the main characters don't even know who or what he is until the very end of the novel. Ultimately, the goal of this rewrite was to tie it in to the larger plot of the novel while still aiming to keep the pacing and importance of the individual scene. One of the ways that I did this was to cast suspicion on her death, thus tying the grief of the moment to the larger story:

It had been a long time since Levi had lost his family, and he was surprised at the depth of emotion that threatened to break the logic-trance.

Iris. Something was off. There was something he was missing, something strange about her death. They didn't find a body, but that was hardly unusual when dealing with Saurians. Some variants were infamous for their powerful acidic capabilities.

It didn't hurt to double check.

This helped to improve pacing as well. By having Levi actively search for information about Iris rather than passively grieve as he did in the baseline chapter, the action was carried in the tense moments before the discovery of Iris' survival. The scene still hinges on Iris' supposed death as the linchpin, but now I believed that the curious nature of her demise provided a link to the larger plot.

While it is not the rewrite that I felt was my best or most polished one, ultimately, I walked away from it feeling like I accomplished an important exercise. As professors Atsushi Ashida and Tomoko Kojiri stated while devising their method on developing plotlines, "Some authors create plots with insufficient content and without awareness of the story's existence. Checking the plot from the sequence of events in the narrative world, such as the story, may

highlight such insufficiency.”⁶ In short, that was what I aimed to do with this rewrite – check how this chapter held up to the plot and see if I could spot any insufficiencies.

I felt like I succeeded in that regard. The chapter opened up more smoothly to the greater plot as a whole while following on the heels of the primary conflict up to that point – the Saurian invasion. What I wasn’t satisfied with, however, was the introduction of the main antagonist, Rasa (he is not named in that scene, and in fact is not named until the end of the novel). For context, this was the physical description I gave:

It looked largely human, though it was clearly a constructed being, but more advanced than any golem he had ever seen. It was impossibly intricate. A thin layer of glass-like skin rippled and shimmered on its form like oil on water. Beneath it, he could see a faintly glowing network of tendrils that writhed around its body as though its bones had been replaced by neurons. And its face... its face was horrible. It constantly shifted between different faces and expressions, each one bleeding into the next like fresh paint being poured on a canvas. Some faces came in more slowly than others, giving the creature a bizarre, half-melted look. And in that brief fraction of a second before the creature turned invisible again, Levi saw the face of the linguist that had been taken earlier, his expression frozen into a look of sheer terror.

Levi unfroze the memory, and in a heartbeat, the creature turned invisible again. Iris’s portals snapped shut, the few unfortunate creatures that had made it halfway through dispersing into Essence. Her eyes widened in shock, and in the next moment, she was simply gone, disappearing from the plaza as though she had never been there.

The introduction of the antagonist felt flat in my opinion, maybe because it wasn’t a physical introduction and only a glimpse of the primary antagonist, or perhaps because so little is known about him in that current scene. No one knows his motivations, his powers, or even really what he is. I thought that this mysterious, hidden introduction (we only see Rasa for a fraction of a second in Levi’s memories) would be more interesting than it turned out to be, at least to me. I think the reason it fell flat to me was because the introduction of the antagonist and the

⁶ Atsushi Ashida and Tomoko Kojiri, "Plot-Creation Support with Plot-Construction Model For Writing Novels", *Journal Of Information And Telecommunication* 3, no. 1 (2018): 57-73, doi:10.1080/24751839.2018.1531232.

antagonist himself was too abstract, too detached. As one editor states, villains ought to be able to be loathed and loved at the same time, they should introduce a visceral response in the reader, and I simply wasn't feeling it.⁷

However, this was the draft where I was happiest with the portrayal of my magic system. Compared to the baseline chapter, the introduction of the magic system and its importance to the novel felt much smoother. For example, in the baseline chapter, I included the scene where Levi caught the bullet. While it was showy, it was a pointless display. In the plot rewrite, however, I dove into Levi's powers of enhanced perception and eidetic memory, directly using these abilities to further the plot. The magic, therefore, felt less shoehorned in since I was using it to solve something, as opposed to the magic just being there. So, as I wrote this rewrite, two questions came to the forefront of my mind: how can I integrate this chapter into the main plot, and how does my novel's magic system play into the story? These are questions that you too, as a prospective writer ought to ask yourself, especially if you are planning on incorporating fantasy or science fiction elements like magic or miraculous technology.

Fantasy, as one knows, is a genre defined by the impossible. But magic needs to have limits, rules set in place so that characters need to strive to attain their goals. In this, I followed the advice of acclaimed author Brandon Sanderson, whose advice has been more influential for my own writing than any other author, especially regarding his approach to magic. In his essay on the first law of magic, he states: "an author's ability to solve conflict with magic is directly proportional to how well the reader understands said magic."⁸ This is typically done in one of

⁷ "Your Guide to Writing A Convincing Villain | NY Book Editors", NY Book Editors, Last modified 2017, <https://nybookeditors.com/2017/01/guide-writing-convincing-villain/>.

⁸ Brandon Sanderson, "Sanderson's First Law | Brandon Sanderson", Brandonsanderson.Com, Last modified 2007, <https://www.brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-first-law/>.

two ways: through what Sanderson calls “soft magic” and “hard magic.”⁹ These are essentially magic systems with few rules or magic systems that have strict limitations, respectively. In this case I used hard magic, treating “the magic itself [as] a character, and by showing off its laws and rules, the author is able to provide twists, worldbuilding and characterization.”¹⁰ I did this through Levi’s range limit on his powers of perception and his eidetic memory, focusing more on what he could not see as opposed to what he could. For instance, I wrote this following section on the scope of his powers:

He was back at the siege again. Instead, this time, he felt at the edges of his focus, paying attention to minor, unimportant details, relying on his enhanced smell, hearing, and even taste to fill out blank spots. An overturned grocery cart filled with fresh fish, spoiling now in the afternoon sun. A child’s doll, trampled underfoot by steel-shod boots, each step a small ping on his hearing. A single boat, half a league away, drifting through a small canal in the Lyceum district.

Levi frowned. He couldn’t sense any passengers on board, but he could feel their weight pressing on the water’s surface. Why couldn’t he see them?

In that excerpt, I was able to use magic directly to spark the inciting plot incident in that chapter, using it as a plot device and a character in a sense. In comparison to the original baseline chapter, the utilization of magic felt much more important. For example, I wrote this scene in the baseline chapter:

Nyssa fired.

Immediately after, she felt the rifle fly out of her hands.

Nyssa didn’t see him move, but she could hear him laughing before the smoke cleared. Levi hadn’t bothered to dodge. He didn’t dissipate into an illusion. He had simply *caught* the bullet, pinched between two singed fingers. Levi’s other hand rested her stolen rifle on his shoulder.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

While I liked the action of the moment, the magic itself didn't contribute in that moment to the development of the story not like it did in the plot rewrite. Ultimately, you as a writer will need to make your own choices on how much magic, or the lack of it, will inform your own writing process. Do you want to treat magic or sci-fi tech as a main character, or are you content to have these elements more as peripheral background features?

To that end, I will continue to borrow from Brandon Sanderson. As he put it, in in his second essay on magic, "limitations are greater than powers."¹¹ This is doubly true for revealing plot points as it is for creating magic systems. In fact, I would say that it applies to all facets of writing a novel. This rule applies when one is worldbuilding – one ought to consider the effects of climate, ecology, technology, and religion on how people live their daily lives.¹² Cultural or ecological differences can affect the plot as much as interpersonal conflict. Off the top of my head, here are a few examples. A mountain pass may be blocked by a rockslide, preventing aid to a city under siege. Or perhaps a certain group of people favors wearing tinkling beads and sleeveless wraps, making it difficult for an assassin to enter unnoticed, forcing him to change his approach.

This philosophy also applies to characters; what can't characters do, or, on the opposite hand, what will characters not allow themselves to do?¹³ Finding out what your own characters can or can't do in the plot is largely a game of trial and error, tempered by time. When I plan out my plot, one exercise that I like to do is to treat my protagonists as my enemy, picturing scenes

¹¹ Brandon Sanderson, "Sanderson's Second Law | Brandon Sanderson", Brandonsanderson.Com, Last modified 2011, <https://www.brandonsanderson.com/sandersons-second-law/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

from the perspective of my antagonists to discover how I might foil my own characters. Another trick that I learned from mystery novelists is to work backwards from an end goal or final scene, slowly puzzling together how my characters arrived at a specific scene. This can be a slow process, often taking days or even weeks, and each other ought to figure out their own method of doing so, but the results can be rewarding. As Sanderson stated, “what your characters have trouble accomplishing in a plot is going to be far more interesting than what they can do easily.”¹⁴ This brings us to the next stage of this project: character development.

Character Development Rewrite Analysis

Before I wrote this rewrite, I tried to consider how could I truly focus on developing my main cast? To that end, I wanted to prioritize character *distinction*; I challenged myself to take each member of my main cast and make him or her stand out from the others. I wanted to make each character’s grief and pain feel real. I wanted to try to tie the past in with the present, to make evident my characters’ history with each other, with the Deepwatch, and with their own culture.

I do not believe that I succeeded.

This was the chapter I had the most trouble with, and I loved it for that reason. Trying to balance so many different perspectives, show them as distinct individuals, and analyzing their reactions to not one but two major pieces of news proved to be a difficult challenge for me. This was especially difficult because you as the reader of this thesis are not starting from the beginning of my novel; you have not seen these characters interact and grow save for this one chapter.

¹⁴ Ibid.

This rewrite of the chapter was focused more on relationships between the main cast, and thus introduced a lot of supporting characters. To give a bit of background that would have been present in prior chapters of the book, I'll go over the new characters briefly.

There are the twins, Adrian and Odessa, from the Caelian Isles (imagine Rome) who were forcibly conscripted into the Deepwatch after their family fell out of favor. Yamato joined their squad as part of an exchange program between the Karashi Empire (sort of a cross between Japan and the Mongolian Empire; they are a nation of sea nomads) and the Deepwatch – the Deepwatch would protect Karashi convoys in exchange for fresh recruits. Gwynn is a bit of an outlier here; he was the only one who volunteered to join the Deepwatch. After his people, the Dallic (think Ents or spriggans), were displaced in the Apostasy of Ash, he joined up mostly because he didn't have anywhere else to go. Finally, there is Orion, their mentor, a sort of Gandalf-like character.

Essentially, my primary goal for this rewrite was to explore how the group would have reacted to the news of Iris' death, while making each character feel distinct. To that end, what helped me the most was to consider each character's history – how they as individuals would react based on their personal experiences with grief. Furthermore, I realized after I wrote this section that it might be helpful to consider cultural ways of grieving as well. For example, how would each character hold funeral rites in their own respective cultures? If they could find Iris' body, what would they do with it? Would they want to bury her? Cremate her? Would they give her body to be planted in the hanging gardens, or entomb her bones in the walls of the city, so that she could protect and serve even in death? As you write, consider how you too can react creatively to opportunities like this. Admittedly, I feel like I didn't go as far creatively as I

should have with this rewrite, had I given it more time. I became so caught up in each character's reaction to the present moment of Iris' death that I forgot to truly incorporate the past.

In hindsight, there is so much more I wish I could have worked with in this section. From Levi's time in prison, being experimented on in the Maw, to Adrian and Odessa losing fame and fortune, desperately enlisting in the Deepwatch to avoid death for unpaid familial debts. Yamato's journey to find both self-confidence and humility, as he learns to eschew bravado for true competency. Gwynn's search for a home and family, adrift in a foreign land, resigned to seeing his people fall. Nyssa's struggle to keep her family together as life beats her down again and again. and of course, Iris. She is the outlier here, the only flat character that I have planned out in the main cast. She is defined by her faith, her unshaking, unwavering hope in a better future, in her friends, in humanity even as it shows its ugliest side to her. She is the unseen rock which I build all my other characters off of, and I wish I could show her to you here.

But that is not the point of this rewrite. The idea is to see how well, or how poorly, I can show individual characters in this chapter alone.

To that end, some of the best advice that I have received when creating characters came from the words of E.M. Forster in his book, *Aspects of the Novel*, where he stated, "in daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confession exists. We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy."¹⁵ But characters in novels do not have such limitations. They are known, especially in third person, in a more omniscient sense. However, this too, can also be a

¹⁵ E. M Forster, *Aspects of The Novel* (RosettaBooks LLC, 1927), 35.

pitfall. I found this passage from author Linda Anderson after I finished the character rewrite, where she expounds on character development as follows:

Be specific and particular when imagining your characters. New writers sometimes reach for abstractions and generalities, thinking that this is the way to indicate the wider or universal significance of a particular plight. But the more specific and grounded your stories are, the more they will illuminate the human condition.¹⁶

In this area of the rewrite, I would say that I failed. I portrayed individuality, but not adequate depth, at least not to my liking. One example of this from the character rewrite chapter is when the team reacted to Grandmaster Orion's news about Iris:

Adrian and Odessa began to badger the Grandmaster with a barrage of questions. Yamato was so shocked that he crushed his pottery wheel under a pair of massive fingers. Laughing, Gwynn bund the broken shards together with a quick tug of Essence, twirling the wooden ring over his fingers. And Nyssa turned to Levi, jaw tightening, looking for all the world like some primal deity of wrath.

There are too many points of view vying for attention, and in trying to include all of them, I sacrificed depth for quick, shallow responses. Each character felt like a rapid snapshot, rather than a full picture. But that is ultimately alright. Revision is a fluid process; the development of any part of a story takes time. To paraphrase Orson Scott Card in his novel *Characters and Viewpoint*, good characters need invention, construction, and performance, but this is not some mechanical process; characters need room to grow.¹⁷ And in that regard, a couple of characters stood out to me as I wrote this as not having enough page time in particular.

Yamato was the most notable outlier. His character arc is the most subtle, but it was also the most muted as well. On my first draft of this rewrite, I do not feel that I adequately portrayed his character struggle or his dreams, desires, or motivations. He was just there. I counted the

¹⁶ Linda Anderson and Derek Neale, *Writing Fiction* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), 40.

¹⁷ Orson Scott Card, *Elements of Fiction Writing - Characters & Viewpoint* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2010) 3.

number of times that he showed up in this rewrite: he was there five times, only three of which had dialogue and none of which felt emotionally deep or connected to his backstory or the larger plot as a whole. His character needs the most work by far, or he may even need to be cut from the novel entirely, not just this chapter, if his arc doesn't end up meshing with the greater story as a whole.

As you write your own fiction, consider if you have any main characters who would not detract from the story if they were removed, and ask yourself if they might be better off being cut out entirely or merged with another character to create a richer, deeper background. If a character of yours feels too static, more of a plot device than a person, consider cutting them out entirely.

Gwynn was another character who I felt was underdeveloped, although that may have been due to both poor choices of his role in the party when mourning as well as just general ignorance. I have never been engaged or married, and I had difficulty imagining the kind of sorrow that losing someone who is that close to you would evoke. As Orson Scott Card said, “people are what they have done, and what has been done to them.... Our past, however we might revise it in our memory, is who we believe that we are.”¹⁸ I came to realize that I didn't know my characters, Gwynn specifically, as well as I thought I did. I think Gwynn has a lot of potential as a character arc, but I realized that I need to put significantly more time into his character development.

In short, in comparison to the other rewrites, this was the section that I felt needed the most improvement overall.

Dialogue Rewrite Analysis

¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

I was hesitant about this rewrite at first. Back when I first started writing, dialogue was the area which I needed the most work on. So, after writing this chapter, it was refreshing to see how far I have progressed in this area since my cringe-worthy first attempts at dialogue as a teenager. Funnily enough, this was the only chapter out of all of them that I finished in one sitting (the rest were written bit by bit over a series of days as I pieced together the direction the story needed to take), and it felt the most polished to me.

This rewrite was focused exclusively on Levi and Nyssa, with Husk as a periphery character in the background, mainly introduced in the end of the chapter to convey a major plot point. I am building off of the character development chapter here in a small way, since I am learning from each rewrite as they all foreground one another. However, here I wanted to home in more on Nyssa's reaction to Iris' death, as well as the growing relationship between Levi and Nyssa. I wanted to focus more on one intimate interaction between two characters grieving together rather than work to develop a whole cast. Death can bring out some of our most human emotions; moments in time where we are truly honest with ourselves because losing a loved one is a major paradigm shift, and the goal of this rewrite was to convey Nyssa and Levi as *humans* above all else. As people seeking solace in each other, both having lost family. And if death doesn't provoke honest dialogue, what will?

While I believe that Levi and Nyssa's conversation here could be tightened up a lot, I was happy with the dialogue rewrite. However, in order to help you as a writer create your own process, I will begin with the two most common pitfalls that I am guilty of. To paraphrase screenwriter Rib Davis, writers either attempt to emulate conversational dialogue in all its clumpy, half-finished mess, or they treat dialogue like a game of ping pong ball, more like a series of speeches that are broken up into neat little segments, or like a ball passing between

courts.¹⁹ In retrospect, I saw this second form of writing pop up quite a bit in the character development rewrite; rather than having conversations loop around and branch out, I kept trying to include each character's voice and that made the dialogue in the character development section fall flat. For instance, near the end of the character development chapter, I wrote:

He [Levi] gave Nyssa a shaky smile, squeezing her shoulder. "I think your sister is going to be alright."

"I don't think it matters." Yamato's smooth voice poured out over the silence like heavy silk. "Right now, the future, your sister, is like clay. Malleable. Uncertain. But even a finished piece or a broken one can be re-made with the right tools."

Adrian groaned. "Enough with the art metaphors, friend. What are you saying?"

To their surprise, it was Gwynn who spoke up, the sound of wood creaking as he flexed his shoulders. "It is plain as daylight. We need to grow. Stronger. Better."

Each character felt like a shallow echo chamber in this section, merely bouncing off one another instead of engaging, whereas in the dialogue section, where there were only two characters who could play off of one another, it was much easier to write something closer to a casual conversation. One way that I did this was through Nyssa's monologue about her story of Iris as a kid, trying to learn a musical instrument when I wrote:

She sighed, a melting pot of emotions dancing over her face. "I was persistent in my cruelty. But Iris was just as stubborn as I was. She was a little four-year-old with pudgy fingers, but she would play until her hands ached, trying to get the notes right, no matter how many times I broke the damn thing. It wasn't until our parents passed that she... stopped." Nyssa shivered. "I wish she didn't. Martyrs above, I miss that sound. Her voice and the zither, always playing the wrong notes but never giving up."

Furthermore, it was easier to include Levi and Nyssa's desires, memories, and subtext by just having the two of them instead of trying to include the whole cast. What both characters wanted in this scene was clear – a way to remember Iris, an attempt to honor the dead. Author Heather Sellers breaks this process down into four basic building blocks. While her advice is

¹⁹ Rib Davis, *Writing Dialogue for Scripts*, 4th ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 2-11.

more geared towards designing general story structure on the sentence level, it applies neatly to dialogue as well. Through character sentences, relationship sentences, plot sentences, and backstory sentences, one can make every line of character interactions feel important.²⁰

In the character development rewrite, the underlying desires were missing for a couple of the characters. As the reader, one can see the general goal for all of the characters – they are all grieving Iris. But what about beyond all of that, what did the individual characters want? These were the questions that I asked myself as I consider how I could portray these undercurrents in the dialogue. In the dialogue section, where I was only focused on two characters, it was easier to portray both Nyssa and Levi’s underlying goals, the currents beneath the conversation that cause collisions and spark new branches. In short, subtext. On a sentence-by-sentence level in the dialogue rewrite, I had more room to incorporate Heather Sellers’ four building blocks of sentence structure so that each line pushed the creative narrative along, whether that was through plot, backstory, etc.²¹

For example, Levi wanted to get Nyssa not to blame herself for her sister’s death and start her down the road of moving on as shown in the dialogue rewrite when I said: “‘Your sister,’ Levi took Nyssa’s hand, ‘tell me about her. Something. Anything. What do you want to remember her by?’” The physical contact pushed forward character relationships, whereas the pointed question “what do you want to *remember* her by” was focused on the subtext, on getting Nyssa to let go. On the flipside, Nyssa was consumed by guilt for how she treated Iris over the

²⁰ Heather Sellers, *The Practice Of Creative Writing: A Guide For Students*, 3rd ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2017).

²¹ Ibid.

years without having the chance to make amends, which I portrayed through the use of a physical motif – a broken musical instrument.

As you go through your writing process, I would urge you to consider how you craft your own dialogue? Where can you fit in elements of backstory or tiny fragments of plot? How do your character’s motivations inform their spoken and unspoken interactions, not just in relation to each other but in relation to their past, their goals, and the overarching plot?

Finally, as a general tip for refining one’s dialogue, one of the most important tips that I learned when trying to improve on my own work is to try and keep things concise. As one author explains, “keep it spare. Allow gaps in the communication and let the readers fill in the blanks.... It’s the absences that make dialogue live.”²² For example, this piece of advice was most beneficial to me in showcasing Levi’s responses to Nyssa’s rant. Rather than trying to match Nyssa’s rambling, I aimed to provide a stark contrast between the two with his shorter, more clipped responses. This philosophy applies to general sentence structure as well; contrast makes for good pacing. It helps highlight important moments in a story, which leads us to the next topic: theme.

Theme/Tone Rewrite Analysis

Theme and Tone are rather similar when one talks about writing, at least in relation to their place in a novel. Both deal with the question of greater purpose – theme is indicative of the ultimate goal of a novel, whereas tone focuses on the smaller meaning that a reader takes away from each line and scene. Essentially, this was the rewrite where I wanted to nail down what my story *felt* like. What sort of imprint did I want to leave with my readers? With my characters in

²² Harry Bingham, "9 Top Tips for Writing Dialogue In Fiction | Jericho Writers", jerichowriters.com, accessed 2 February 2022, <https://jerichowriters.com/writing-dialogue/>.

the novel? With myself? Furthermore, I asked myself how I could make each scene move towards that goal, how could I make the environment itself, the imagery in every scene, have the same message behind it as the plot or the dialogue for example.

To that end, in this rewrite, the story takes place the day after everyone receives the news that Iris is alive. The main cast, Levi, Nyssa, Gwynn, Adrian, Odessa, and Yamato, all meet up at a local restaurant called The Long Lamp and discuss where they want to go from here? What is their greater goal, essentially? Through the imagery present in the chapter, the different ways that each character helps the city rebuild, and the conversations they have, I aimed to send off this chapter with an overarching theme of redemption and a hopeful tone.

So, what do I mean when I say that this project focuses on theme and tone? Theme is typically defined as the overarching meaning of a novel, whereas tone is what a novel feels like – its ambience and attitude. The little glimpses of a novel’s greater meaning present in every word. I chose to combine the two; theme felt evocative of the whole novel’s purpose, while tone uses imagery to highlight the greater theme. As one author puts it, “the whole novel, and every action scene in it, begins with a goal.... On both the micro and macro levels, what the character desires provides the frame of the story.”²³ In essence, I felt that the imagery of the novel, the micro level, could not be reasonably separated from its overarching themes of redemption and found family, the macro level.

For that reason, this section of this project was a different from the other rewrites in that it took place the day after Iris was discovered to be alive. I held a lighter tone this time, trying to make even the more serious moments be seen through a hopeful lens. I also attempted to use

²³ Tasha Dunn, *Plotting A Fantasy Novel* (Self-published, 2021), 96.

imagery to this end. Imagery is not just the environment around a character, there is a real psychological component to it as well. As Dustin Stokes states in his article in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, “what kind of mental state or process is imagery? Perhaps imagery can be unconscious, but it is often experiential.”²⁴ Imagery and setting, therefore, are just as important at setting up the theme and tone of a novel as dialogue, plot, or character development. Hence the exposition about the restaurant overlooking the sea, teeming with life: I wanted to create an environment that exuded hope, potential, and a sense of family. I will include that section here for context’s sake:

Like most buildings in Kanaloa, The Long Lamp had its own private garden. Pikake flowers grew along the railings and twined up the columns of the balcony, mingling with the scent of freshly broiled crab to bathe the whole restaurant in a sweet, homely air. Below them was a steep cliff face which bottomed out into a reef, so that they had an unfettered view of all the colors of the sea.

It was beautiful. And after the events of the last couple of days, the whole group needed to take some time to unwind and process. Iris was alive. That was cause for celebration.

I was also pleased with the way the dialogue turned out, especially with the number of characters I had. As I mentioned above, I still need to flesh out Yamato and Gwynn more, but I felt much better about the dynamic between the twins this time. Even in the more extraneous comedic moments, the story felt to me like it was moving along smoother. The question of re-enlistment specifically forced each character to consider their own motivations and what they had to go back to. Adrian and Odessa had a lot to lose. Gwynn is searching for a home any place he can. Yamato struggles to find self-worth. The list goes on, but ultimately, the conclusion that my characters arrived at was that they did have a home with one another, even if it wasn’t the

²⁴ Stokes, Dustin. 2019. “Mental Imagery and Fiction.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (6). Cambridge University Press: 731–54. doi:10.1080/00455091.2018.1442965.

family they had originally dreamed of. As one author put it, theme is about “giving your character some sort of motivation beyond his job title.”²⁵ Characters need a reason to seek out a higher purpose, a greater theme. For some, that means giving a character a point of no return and forcing him or her forwards; inversely for others, it means showing a character what he or she has to lose.²⁶

Ultimately, this was the rewrite that I was the most satisfied with. It felt like everything else, plot, character development, and dialogue, all came into perspective when I considered the overarching theme, the *why* behind the writing. And while there are certainly parts of my writing that need a lot more work, at least now I feel like I learned a valuable lesson – my own writing style works best when I have a greater goal in mind. I came to this epiphany as I was reading over the various rewrites. I was searching for a greater goal all along. In the plot section, I had to consider the goals of the various colliding factions. In the character development rewrite, I had to try and work through how each character would seek closure from Iris’ death. In the dialogue section, I needed to look at personal goals between the two characters I focused on. And the theme section was where the realization hit in full force. Plot, character development, dialogue, and theme were all secondary to the *why* behind the writing. If I knew what my ultimate goal was, for each scene, character, and bit of dialogue and framed it all within .

Concluding Thoughts

If this analysis was as informative for you as it was for me, I will walk away satisfied. It is clear to me that I need the most work in character development. To me, that is an amusing

²⁵ William Miller, *Crafting Fiction Vol. 1 Hard Boiled Outlines*, (1st ed. Self-published, 2017), 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

conclusion; I was certain that dialogue would be my weakest skill. In the end, however, taking the time to step back and really analyze my own style was greatly beneficial, both to me and my characters.

Perhaps this project was beneficial to you as well. Maybe by going through my process and seeing where I accomplished my goals and where I had to learn from my own failures, you too will gain an understanding of how your own writing style works, or at least walk away with a point of reference to determine your own process.

As I close out here, I will leave you with an anecdote from Heather Sellers' novel, *The Practice of Creative Writing*. In chapter nine, the revision chapter, one quote stuck out to me, which I believe frames the goal of this entire project: "'Don't edit' Karissa recalls. 'Re-see'"²⁷ Ultimately, that was the point of this thesis, learning how to see my story in a different light rather than merely revising what I had already written. It was why I started each rewrite fresh, and left each draft un-edited and un-polished, full of my own mistakes and misgivings, so that both you and I could see the process in all its messy progress rather than walking away with a couple of polished stories, having gleaned nothing.

Refining your writing, or just writing in general, feels a bit like watching the ocean. A writer may often look at fully published and polished drafts like the smooth sand of a beach and wonder why their work doesn't look the same. Why don't they measure up? I hope this thesis has shown you that the revision process is often messy, with drafts and ideas overtaking each other like so many waves, until eventually you can wear down your writing into something smooth.

²⁷ Sellers, *The Practice of Creative Writing*, 387.

Hopefully, this thesis will leave you with some ideas for how to start your own revision process, or how to analyze your own writing so that you too can improve.

Chapter Rewrites

I am leaving the full, unedited rewrites below. Hopefully, you may be able to glean some insight into your own writing from the progress and the mistakes I've made throughout, as well as get an idea of how you might conduct your own analysis of your writing style. Or maybe you just want to read them for fun. Regardless, I hope these rewrites are helpful to you, whether that is just to show you the messiness of the writing process or to give you some sort of greater insight.

Rewrite Draft One: Plot Focus

Levi wandered through the streets of Kanaloa, thoughts churning and stomach roiling. Most of the gore had already been cleaned off the streets, although the canals still ran red. Smoke drifted in dense black clouds through sections of the city – of little impediment to Levi with his heightened senses, but he focused on the clouds where he could.

It was easier than seeing what remained of his home.

Eventually, the sights grew to be too much. Levi sequestered himself deep in the logic-trance, finding comfort in its alien calm. His stomach stopped churning, and his hands grew still. His breathing grew steady and measured, and he gazed at Kanaloa with an air of clinical dispassion.

But with the naked precision of the logic-trance came a certain clarity, and he knew why he was really out here, wandering through the city instead of helping with relief efforts. Iris was gone. And try as he might not to feel it, her death still weighed on his mind.

He wasn't the only one. A couple blocks ahead of him, Nyssa was gathering supplies for her journey, taking great care not to be seen, but she was clearly distracted. Even this far away,

Levi's enhanced perception picked up on her hurried steps, her shallow breathing. When he got close enough to slip a note in her satchel, he could feel her rapid, erratic heartbeat.

She was filled to the brim with a cocktail of grief and rage, and it made her sloppy. Careless.

Prey.

No. Those were Husk's thoughts. Levi focused his perception inward, into his own soul, where he sensed the dream hydra pacing around his mind, agitated.

Husk didn't like to feel weak. And the truth was, despite their victory over the Saurians here, none of them were strong enough.

Iris. His thoughts circled back to her like an amputee grasping for an arm that was not there. This deep in the logic-trance, Levi didn't show any of the physical symptoms of grief – he couldn't under the logic-trance – but something still ached deep inside of him. It had been a long time since Levi had lost his family, and he was surprised at the depth of emotion that threatened to break the logic-trance.

Iris. Something was off. There was something he was missing, something strange about her death. They didn't find a body, but that was hardly unusual when dealing with Saurians. Some variants were infamous for their powerful acidic capabilities.

It didn't hurt to double check.

"Husk." Levi called, and the dream hydra materialized in front of him. Husk was always eerie to look at; it was like staring into a mirror and seeing a monster staring back at him.

"This is a fool's errand," Husk growled, not unkindly. It was Levi's voice, but with a low snarl beneath it. Ancient. Primal. But gentler than usual. "The girl is gone. A vain search for her corpse will bring you no satisfaction. Let the dead take care of their own."

“I need to be sure, Husk. Search the market for clues and return if you find something.”

Husk grimaced. “Your thoughts are my thoughts, oh slayer mine. And your will is my will. It shall be done.”

As Levi continued to follow Nyssa, his thoughts turned back to Iris. What was he missing? He closed his eyes, trusting his enhanced senses to handle maneuvering about the city, and, steeling himself, he dove into the recesses of his memory.

An earthshattering boom split the air as a massive Saurian crashed through the gates. The heavy steel doors weren't broken so much as ripped out of their foundations, crushed and thrown aside like a bundle of papyrus. Tossed casually between the Saurian's four gargantuan claws, the gates resembled children's toys. The monster stood some one hundred and twenty hands tall, a writhing mass of muscle and warped skin. Eyes dotted the creature's body in odd places, some festering and blind. What Levi first took to be spines, he realized were in fact teeth. Hundreds of screeching mouths that rip and tear at everything around them, including the creature's own limbs. Behind it rush Saurians in the thousands, a rising tide of scales and rot and madness. As the city's defenders rushed to fight the Horde, Levi's attention was drawn to...

He blinked. That was the point, wasn't it? To draw attention. A headlong charge at the gates in plain view of the city's defenses was the height of stupidity for an invading army, unless the army wasn't the point. The invasion was a smokescreen. But for what?

Levi shook his head. He had been thinking about this the wrong way. He needed to look for clues that he glossed over, instead of trying to find something new. He stepped into a nearby alley, settling down into a meditative pose. With a flare of Essence, he dove back into his memories.

He was back at the siege again. Instead, this time, he felt at the edges of his focus, paying attention to minor, unimportant details, relying on his enhanced smell, hearing, and even taste to fill out blank spots. An overturned grocery cart filled with fresh fish, spoiling now in the afternoon sun. A child's doll, trampled underfoot by steel-shod boots, each step a small ping on his hearing. A single boat, half a league away, drifting through a small canal in the Lyceum district.

Levi frowned. He couldn't sense any passengers on board, but he could feel their weight pressing on the water's surface. Why couldn't he see them?

He followed their journey through the city as best he could. His perception at this stage of advancement was only about a league and trying to track this group down was tricky. They seemed to slide away from his senses as though he was trying to catch an oiled fish, changing boats and methods of travel constantly. Then, the first person went missing.

He was some linguistics expert; Levi had never met him, but he had seen the man occasionally consulting for the Deepwatch in the Hall of Mysteries. Then, another person disappeared, this time an archivist holed up in a safehouse near the western plaza. As Levi stretched out his perception, he noticed more and more people go missing. Wherever the unseen assailants went, more and more people vanished into thin air.

Then, they got to Iris.

Stretched at the limit of his perception, Levi could just barely see in his mind's eye halfway across the city, although her attackers were a blank void on his senses. They spoke. He couldn't make out the exchange – not this far away – but her assailants were clearly intelligent, and try as she did to fight, she too quickly vanished.

Levi paused. Vanished. Not killed. Taken! The joy he felt in that moment surged through his chest like a fresh-lit bonfire, snapping him out of the logic-trance. He leaned against the back wall of the alley, wetness streaming down his cheeks. She was still alive!

He had to tell Nyssa.

But something still nagged at the back of his mind. Just who were her attackers? Mustering up a shred of self-control, he pushed himself back into the logic-trance and fell back into his memory.

He paused at the moment when Iris fought back, slowing down his perception until the world felt like it was crawling by. She shouted, slamming her staff into the ground, dust blasting away from her in a ring. Cobblestones cracked as the air rang with a pure chime, and rifts in the air tore open as she called a small army of summoned creatures forwards...

What was that?

Levi forced the memory to grind to a halt, a headache beginning to bloom in the back of his head. The ring of dust had reached someone, a creature that he couldn't see save for that brief moment before it turned invisible again.

What he saw made his blood run cold.

It looked largely human, though it was clearly a constructed being, but more advanced than any golem he had ever seen. It was impossibly intricate. A thin layer of glass-like skin rippled and shimmered on its form like oil on water. Beneath it, he could see a faintly glowing network of tendrils that writhed around its body as though its bones had been replaced by neurons. And its face... its face was horrible. It constantly shifted between different faces and expressions, each one bleeding into the next like fresh paint being poured on a canvas. Some faces came in more slowly than others, giving the creature a bizarre, half-melted look. And in

that brief fraction of a second before the creature turned invisible again, Levi saw the face of the linguist that had been taken earlier, his expression frozen into a look of sheer terror.

Levi unfroze the memory, and in a heartbeat, the creature turned invisible again. Iris's portals snapped shut, the few unfortunate creatures that had made it halfway through dispersing into Essence. Her eyes widened in shock, and in the next moment, she was simply gone, disappearing from the plaza as though she had never been there.

Levi snapped out of the memory with a gasp, reeling against the wall. Just how powerful was that thing? Levi was specialized in infiltration and perception, but it would take all of his focus to make himself half as difficult to perceive as that creature had been, and even then, expending that much power would drain his Reservoir of Essence in a matter of seconds. Whatever that creature was, it was capable of evading not just him but the entire city – a whole garrison of humanity's greatest defenders and Grandmaster Orion himself!

What the hell was that thing? And more importantly, what did it want with Iris?

He had to tell Nyssa, stop her from doing something rash. If Iris was alive...

He stopped in his tracks, the realization finally hitting home. Iris was alive. Alive! The smile that split his face in that moment made him feel like he could conquer the world.

He had to tell Nyssa.

Sending a mental command to Husk, Levi tailed closer to Nyssa, wandering through the ashes of what used to be the Sundancer gardens. With Levi's enhanced perception, finding her was child's play. Husk and Levi found themselves at the top of a tower in the eastern section of the city. A miniature garden hung in small pots and hanging vases off the edge of the railing and vines wound up the columns to the roof. Half the plants were dead and browning from a lack of

water, and sections of the ceiling bristled with mold, but Levi didn't care. To him, it was the most beautiful thing in the world right now.

There, perched on the railing was Nyssa, legs curled up to her chest and Levi's note clutched in her hands. She glared up at him with bloodshot eyes.

Marching right up to him, she poked a finger in his chest. "I got your stupid note. How long have you been following me?"

Levi looked at her, her head barely reaching his chest, and with an expression on his face that screamed bloody murder. He couldn't help it. He laughed.

Rewrite Draft Two: Character Development Focus

No one spoke. No one slept.

The day of the battle was over. Victory was theirs, but no one felt like celebrating. Not after Iris had fallen. So, they waited. Their squad was stationed at the eastern edge of the city, sleeping on some rich man's rooftop garden for the night while the Deepwatch garrison was rebuilt.

In any other circumstance, it would have been beautiful, Levi was sure. Flowers wound their way around artfully positioned obelisks and tumbled over the edge of the rooftops. Water trickled slowly through a dozen tiny fountains and a maze of miniature canals, weaving under elegant bridges and twisting around statues of the owner's ancestors. Soft music seemed to echo all around them, and the whole garden was enclosed in a thin bubble of Essence, letting in only a faint, but steady breeze and a clear view of the stars above.

Their host was probably rather important for the whole group to be sleeping in luxury like this, but Levi just didn't care anymore. From the haunted expressions on his friends' faces, they didn't either.

Huddling around a large firepit in the center of the garden, they looked varying degrees of miserable.

The twins, Adrian and Odessa, were uncharacteristically silent. They hadn't bickered or teased each other once since the battle ended. Instead, they strung up two hammocks on a pair of nearby columns and broke the crackle of the fire every now and then with weary, whispered conversations.

Yamato sat across from Levi, the firepit between them. Occasionally, the large man tossed a chunk of clay into the fire, dully staring at the splotches of earth that clung to his thick

palms or absentmindedly rubbing a loamy smear into his beard. At this point, Yamato's rich robes were caked in wet clay and his normally immaculate beard was a tangled mess, but no one stopped him, least of all himself. Every now and then, Yamato set a new chunk of clay on a small wheel and went through the first few motions of creating a new piece only to sigh and throw it into the fire to join its brothers.

Gwynn was completely silent.

The Dallican man had always been quiet and reserved, but this was different. It was deeper, emptier, almost dead. Levi didn't know exactly what the relationship had been between him and Iris, but the Gwynn clearly felt her absence more keenly than the rest of them save for Nyssa. Tears of sap slowly fell on a small object Gwynn cradled in his wooden hands, a pair of odd hewn rings.

And Nyssa... Nyssa worked. The tears had long since dried from her eyes, and now she furiously paced the length of the garden as she tinkered with her guns. Miniature storm clouds formed in the air behind her, crackling with tiny flickers of lightning, until they eventually solidified into tiny bullets. She created bullets until her Reservoir depleted, and then she consecrated them while she waited for her Essence to regenerate. At this point of the night, half the garden stank of the metallic smell of ozone, and Levi had long lost count of how many times she had repeated this process. Her hair stood on end like a crimson, fuzzy porcupine, and, coupled with the redness in her eyes, lent her a mad, manic look.

Levi had tried to speak with her, a couple hours ago about a theory that had been bubbling in the back of his mind. A thin, tentative hope. Nyssa simply shoved him back with a wall of smoke, not even bothering to turn around.

Levi gritted his teeth. He felt like he was back in the Maw again, powerless, confined, watching helplessly as the people around him suffered. The truth was, he didn't know what to do, and not even the logic-trance was much help in these social situations. And there was no way he was going to consult Husk for this.

Should he tell Nyssa about his theory? What if Iris really wasn't dead? But if he was wrong, wouldn't it be worse to raise her hopes and then crush them again? Should he at least go and talk to her, let her know that he was there for her?

No that was stupid. But then why did he feel... guilty?

Levi saw the looks the twins gave him. He knew how he looked in the logic trance. Flat, slitted eyes. An unwavering, emotionless tone of voice. A flinty, almost bored expression, as though he had never cared about anything, and he never would.

But he did care. It was just too distracting to feel right now. And, in the revealing light of the logic-trance, if he was being honest with himself, Levi knew that he was scared. Scared of what he would do if he let go of the logic-trance, allowed himself to feel. Would he share Nyssa's rage? Retreat into himself like Glynn? Maybe he would throw himself into work like Yamato. He didn't have the luxury of a sibling like the twins did, at least not anymore.

He didn't know how to mourn. But it was idiocy to go through it alone.

Just as Levi prepared to drop the logic-trance, the fire-pit flared, and a man stepped out in a burst of scintillating Essence.

He was an older gentleman, with the ebon skin of a man from the Sefusi heartland. White hair dusted his beard, and shrewd grey eyes peered out from a maze of wrinkles. A burning circle of light hovered behind his head, illuminating a face that they knew so well.

“Grandmaster Orion!” Yamato rushed to his feet and bowed, as was his people’s custom, then fell into a stiff salute, Levi not far behind him. The twins sat up curiously in their hammocks, never much for decorum, and Gwynn wearily rose to his feet, eyes dull, antlers scraping against a hanging flowerbed.

Nyssa didn’t bother to salute. She marched right up to Orion, thunder crackling behind her and her pistols gripped tightly in her hands. “Did you find my sister’s murderer?”

Orion arched an eyebrow at her unruliness, but he dismissed it. “Not quite.”

Nyssa’s knuckles whitened on the hilts of her pistols, and her jaw clenched. “Then why the hell are you here?”

Orion’s expression cooled, and Levi saw in him the legendary commander of the Deepwatch. “Mind your tone child. I am not your enemy. In fact, your grief may very well be misplaced.” His expression brightened, a grandfatherly smile crossing his face. “I come bearing good news! Levi, it appears your theory was correct. Eyewitness reports were exceedingly scarce, and your creature covered its tracks well, but we lucked out. A figure matching the description you gave was seen briefly at the plaza when Iris disappeared. There is a distinct possibility that Iris may very well be alive. It is my personal hypothesis that she has merely been captured, not killed.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then havoc erupted.

Adrian and Odessa began to badger the Grandmaster with a barrage of questions. Yamato was so shocked that he crushed his pottery wheel under a pair of massive fingers. Laughing, Gwynn bund the broken shards together with a quick tug of Essence, twirling the wooden ring over his fingers. And Nyssa turned to Levi, jaw tightening, looking for all the world like some primal deity of wrath.

“I can explain,” Levi began.

“Can you?” Nyssa hissed. Joy and rage warred for supremacy over her face, and tears pooled at the corner of her eyes. “You knew she was alive, and you didn’t think that maybe, just maybe, I might have liked to know?”

Levi grimaced, but he held his ground. “I wasn’t sure that she was still alive. I didn’t want you to suffer-”

“Oh, *don’t* give me that.” Nyssa marched towards him; pistols drawn. “I saw you sitting by the fire, so *calm*, so *collected*. But what did you care? All your family is *dead*. You don’t have to feel anything anymore.”

“Nyssa, stop it.” Odessa laid a hand on Nyssa’s shoulder, her brother not far behind her. “That’s not fair. You know Levi never does anything without a reason.”

Nyssa rounded on them, eyes flashing as a literal storm cloud congealed into existence behind her. “Oh, have the rich kids finally come out to play with the peasants? Where’s *your* family, huh? Your brother’s right here, alive and safe. What about the rest of them? Sipping on Caelian wine on some nice island orchard? Gambling away their fortune betting on races? The two of you have everything.”

Adrian and Odessa shared a glance, and while Levi didn’t know the implications of that look, he could hazard a guess. He had seen the letters that Adrian tried to hide, and Odessa’s frenzied need for pearls, taking every odd job she could get. The way that Adrian grew skittish whenever their comrades gambled, as though he desperately wanted to join but didn’t trust himself to stop.

They were in debt.

But putting all of that on Nyssa wouldn't be fair right now, and clearly the twins thought the same.

The silence stretched. After a while, when Nyssa spoke again, her voice was dull and hollow. Horrified, but resigned. "Iris was all I had. Now she's out there rotting in a cell. Or worse. Who knows, maybe today is the day they sacrifice her for the Horde, or torture her for information, or turn her over to the Sefusi for secret tech while they experiment on her in their twisted labs."

"Not everyone in the Sefusi Enclave is a mad scientist, child." Orion frowned. "But I'm afraid those outcomes are indeed possible."

Everyone grew quiet at that.

"Oh Martyrs." Nyssa sank to the floor, a cold sweat breaking out across her brow. "Martyrs above, preserve me. I hate to say it, but a part of me can't help myself, can't help but think that maybe... maybe she would have been better off dead."

Orion knelt beside her, taking her hands in his scarred, weathered fingers. "Child. I said that those outcomes were possible, not that they were likely. Isn't that right, Levi?"

Levi joined them on the ground, and the rest followed suit. All except for Adrian.

Adrian held up a hand, blond ringlets shaking. "I love you Nyssa; you're like a sister to me, but I also really love these pants and the floor is-"

"Oh, get down here brother."

They all stared at Levi, his eyes shrewd and calculating in the grip of the logic-trance. Finally, he spoke. "The Grandmaster is correct. The entity that took Iris, whatever it was, didn't seem interested in hurting her. In fact, it took special care during the fight not to harm her." He

shook his head. “Whatever that thing was, it wasn’t human, or Saurian. It behaved more like a golem. Dispassionate. Precise. But not cruel.”

Levi dropped the logic-trance, and the full weight of the emotions he had repressed for so long caused him to stumble. He gave Nyssa a shaky smile, squeezing her shoulder. “I think your sister is going to be alright.”

“I don’t think it matters.” Yamato’s smooth voice poured out over the silence like heavy silk. “Right now, the future, your sister, is like clay. Malleable. Uncertain. But even a finished piece or a broken one can be re-made with the right tools.”

Adrian groaned. “Enough with the art metaphors, friend. What are you saying?”

To their surprise, it was Gwynn who spoke up, the sound of wood creaking as he flexed his shoulders. “It is plain as daylight. We need to grow. Stronger. Better.”

Yamato nodded. “Levi can stave off madness. Odessa can heal near-lethal wounds. And that is *now*. We have all seen what Grandmaster Orion is capable of. If we all grew to be half as strong as he is, what could we accomplish? Could Levi restore even the most broken mind? And Odessa, legends have told that some of the greatest healers could even bring back the dead. I see that potential in all of us. It doesn’t matter what state we find Iris in, because one day, we will be strong enough to undo anything that happens to her.”

Gwynn knelt before Nyssa; head bowed. “I love Iris. That truth is plain as daylight. And I swear to you, on this promise, that one day we will see her again.” he held out the strange wooden rings he was carrying before.

“Are we supposed to know what those are, or were you planning on telling us sometime soon?” Adrian asked, a light smirk on his face.

Gwynn looked taken aback. “Is this custom truly unfamiliar to you? I don’t know how you propose marriage in your countries but-”

The whole group erupted at that, and for the first time since Iris had disappeared, Nyssa smiled.

Rewrite Draft Three: Dialogue Focus

“Tell me about her.” Levi asked as he swung his legs over the edge, joining Nyssa on top of the wide stone railing. They sat on the edge of a rooftop terrace, watching the first moon rising in the east, and below all that, their home. Their city. Their loss.

There were a few moments of silence as Nyssa wiped at her eyes. “...What?” she asked, her voice hoarse and hollow, barely audible over the wind whistling below their feet.

“Your sister,” Levi took Nyssa’s hand, “tell me about her. Something. Anything. What do you want to remember her by?”

Her jaw worked for a moment as she stared out across the city, towards a black plume of smoke where the western plaza used to be. Her fingers trembled where they clutched Levi’s and she stifled a silent sob.

“That’s where Iris... died.” She didn’t point to the plaza. They knew. They had all felt her fall. “You know they didn’t find a body? None of her clothes, or possessions? Everything she treasured, she kept on her, and now I don’t even have a robe or a dress to remember... oh, Martyrs. Martyrs. Have mercy on me.”

“I know.” Levi murmured, tongue leaden. He pulled her into his chest. “I helped lead the search.”

Nyssa broke then, clinging onto him like a lifeline in a storm. She wept, and it felt like an eternity passed between them and no time at all.

After a time, Levi felt her heartbeat speed up, and her breath came in shallow hiccups. She opened her mouth. Closed it again. she seemed to be working up the courage to say something.

“What killed her?” she whispered, and after those words came out, they burst forwards like a flood, a feverish pitch to her voice, “What would destroy her so completely? Was it a stray mortar shell? A rift in space?” her breaths came quicker, rapid and hysterical “maybe it was Saurian acid, burning, dissolving-”

“Nyssa, stop.”

“-oh Martyrs, maybe one of those things ate her, swallowed her whole as she boiled in its stomach, alone in the dark-”

“Nyssa-”

“Or maybe she turned into one of those *beasts* and we were the ones who killed her and her corpse is burning in the pyres with the rest of those cursed creatures and I’ll kill them, I swear to every Martyr that ever lived I’ll send every last one of those demons screaming, *screaming* back to the watery depths of hell-”

“Stop it!” Levi clamped a hand over her mouth, and she whimpered, shaking so badly that her guns rattled against the stone railing. “When Iris... died, I felt her vanish. In the periphery of my senses one moment, and then just... gone. But I didn’t sense any pain, Nyssa. She went quickly.” He cupped her cheek in one hand, brushing a lock of red hair out of her eyes with the other. “She didn’t suffer. I swear it.”

Nyssa exhaled, and it was as though a great millstone was dropped from her shoulders. And while she didn’t quite smile, there was an element of mournful peace that was draped around her body.

They sat like that for a while finding comfort in each other as their people rebuilt below. The sun fell over the mountains behind them, painting the terrace farms and scattered canals in brilliant hues of orange and gold, and the moons began their rotations in the sky.

There was something calming about watching the sky. All of their problems seemed smaller in the face of those celestial bodies.

After a while, when the first stars began peeking over the horizon, Nyssa spoke. “There is this one thing I remember. I... we were children, and whenever I got upset or angry or frustrated, I liked to take things apart, and then put them back together again. It didn’t matter what it was. Clocks. Chairs. Watches. Anything.”

“One time, Iris and I got in a big fight. It was over something stupid; I don’t even remember what it was about anymore. But our parents had just gotten her this brand-new, custom-made zither – it’s this stringed instrument, really popular in the Caelian Isles. Anyways, I took it apart, and then put it back together again, but I broke it on purpose, so that it would never play the right notes.”

She sighed, a melting pot of emotions dancing over her face. “I was persistent in my cruelty. But Iris was just as stubborn as I was. She was a little four-year-old with pudgy fingers, but she would play until her hands ached, trying to get the notes right, no matter how many times I broke the damn thing. It wasn’t until our parents passed that she... stopped.” Nyssa shivered. “I wish she didn’t. Martyrs above, I miss that sound. Her voice and the zither, always playing the wrong notes but never giving up.”

Sniffling, she continued. “I was so cruel to her. She always forgave me because she wasn’t bitter, not like I was after mom and dad died. I had to protect her and figure out how to earn enough pearls for a living and put food on the table and she got to play. So many nights I would go to bed hungry, just trying to give Iris a little bit more to eat, and it wore on me, after a while. The truth was, I *envied* her, Levi. There were days when I was so jealous of her casual happiness, and it took so long for me to stop seeing her as just another mouth to feed but as a

sister and a friend. Now she's gone." Nyssa stared down at her trembling hands, jaw working furiously. "I'll never be able to tell her how sorry I am."

Levi took Nyssa's hands in his, sending Husk some quick mental instructions while he was thinking. The dream hydra was still searching the plaza, looking for any clues about Iris's death, or at least a token of some sort to bring back.

"It's been a long time since I lost my family," Levi said, "do you want to know what I remember about them?"

"Everything. Relationships aren't just good memories. They are filled with pain, and regret, and every negative emotion in the book. Peleus, my father, was distant and demanding. Attention was rare, and praise from him was a mere myth. My mother, Bellanca, was quick to play favorites. She always doted on my cousins more than her own family – I don't think she ever wanted boys. My older brother, Acheron, was arrogant to a fault. And there were a lot of days when I hated them for that. But you know what? I wouldn't have traded them for the world. Because my father, for all his stiffness, was also gentle, and honest. A single word of hard-earned praise from him was worth more to me than all the accolades of my tutors. My mother knew her flaws and always sought to make things up later for the children she spurned in the moment. And I always knew that I could rely on Acheron if I was upset, because at the end of the day, it didn't matter how much we fought, we were still brothers. We relied on each other. Family relies on each other. Even when it's painful."

Levi paused. He could feel Husk getting closer, like a shadow growing in the back of his mind. The dream hydra no longer scared him like he used to. In fact, the monster's presence was somewhat familiar now. The dream hydra's surface thoughts pinged relentlessly on Levi's mind – for some reason, it was elated. Joyful even.

But Levi pushed those thoughts aside. “Nyssa, I need you to hear this. Iris loved you. Hell, she idolized you. Don’t hurt yourself over the moments where your relationship wasn’t perfect. Celebrate for the times when it was.” He paused, hearing Husk’s footsteps crest the top of the tower. “Actually, if my timing is right, Husk and I have a little surprise for you to remember her by-”

As Husk burst through the door to the rooftop, Husk’s thoughts were so overwhelming in that moment that Levi finally grasped what the dream hydra had been trying to tell him. The smile that split his face in that moment could have outshone the sun.

“You know what? Scratch that. You’re going to give this to her yourself, when you see her again.” Levi took the zither from Husk. It was a glossy chestnut color, string with soft phosphor bronze. It still had the price on a small wooden tablet hanging from the end – about a year’s stipend for Levi, but he didn’t mind. The look on Nyssa’s face was worth every pearl. “I come bearing news,” Husk said with a triumphant growl. He and Levi shared a grin, enjoying the incredulous look on Nyssa’s face. “Your sister. She’s alive.”

Rewrite Draft Four: Theme/Tone Focus

In the wake of the siege, all were kin.

Street urchins mingled with nobles, Nulls and golems with Impressionists, all worked together to help rebuild. They doused the fires raging across the terrace farms and ziggurats, replanting flower beds along every balcony, rooftop, and pillar.

Impressionists cleared the area of hazards – there was Nyssa, helping to re-consecrate some of the city blocks that had fallen into minor corruption. Gwynn worked alongside a local water sect to purge the canals of toxins and excise blighted fish and crops. Yamato’s talents with clay and stone proved invaluable at sealing up the cracks in the walls; the lordling worked tirelessly alongside a team of golems and alchemically enhanced Nulls to rebuild homes and fill in the craters of mortar-fire that were peppered throughout the city. His team singlehandedly helped restore the western walls, lifting massive blocks of stone with their bare hands, merging them so tightly together that they couldn’t slip a knife-blade through.

Adrian received a crash course in impromptu landscaping, working alongside other sword Impressionists to banish a section of the market square that had fallen completely to Corruption. Levi had seen it himself – it was a mess of twisted architecture that warped and writhed into bizarre shapes, alleys which opened up into yawning caverns and alien stars, buildings that turned into screaming masses of flesh or dissolved into a million scattered leeches made of eyes. It would have driven the whole city to madness had it not been halted in its tracks, but in they cut off that section of the city entirely, leaving a stark canyon in the side of the mountain.

Odessa and Levi worked together. Under Grandmaster Orion’s direction, the pair was sent with a team of healers to recover the wounded, dig out survivors, and restore the minds of citizens who had been claimed by the Deep. It was gruesome, grisly work. Most of the survivors

were so claimed by madness or curses that not even Odessa could bring them back. To those, Levi granted a swift and painless death. But not all were lost. Odessa had a bit more luck with healing the more mundane, physical injuries, and so, despite a crushing number of fatalities, the group walked away with the joyful cries of hundreds of survivors, reunited with their families.

At the end of the day, Levi's squad found themselves in The Long Lamp, an old father and daughter restaurant situated on Kanaloa's northern border overlooking the sea. It was one of Nyssa's favorite restaurants as a kid, and as his squad sat around a cliffside table, watching the sun dance over the horizon, Levi could see why.

Like most buildings in Kanaloa, The Long Lamp had its own private garden. Pikake flowers grew along the railings and twined up the columns of the balcony, mingling with the scent of freshly broiled crab to bathe the whole restaurant in a sweet, homely air. Below them was a steep cliff face which bottomed out into a reef, so that they had an unfettered view of all the colors of the sea.

It was beautiful. And after the events of the last couple of days, the whole group needed to take some time to unwind and process. Iris was alive. That was cause for celebration.

And so, Levi and his friends sat around a table by the cliffside, exhausted but hopeful, enjoying each other's company and the meal set before them.

"Where do we go from here?" Adrian asked. He flicked an olive at his sister. "We're going to train our asses off, sure. We're going to get Iris back, fine. I get that. But what about after our service is over? What are we really trying to accomplish here?"

"Odd time to wax philosophical, little brother." Odessa nudged him, tilting her drink so that a few drops of mango juice spilled on his shirt. She grinned. "I'd expect those questions to

come from our resident tree here. ‘Ah friends, come, see the harmony in nature. Doesn’t this stump just evoke the grandeur of the heavens?’”

“Hey,” Gwynn protested, a skewer of grilled vegetables halfway to his mouth, “I’m not some dopey old moss beard with his head in the clouds.”

Skeptical smiles flashed around the table.

“I’m not!”

“Your words, not mine, friend.” Odessa drawled. “But seriously, Adrian. What’s gotten into you?”

Adrian found color rising to his cheeks. “I don’t know. I just... helping the people at the market today, cutting out the corrupted sections of the city. It felt... good.” He blinked. “Sweet Martyrs, I’m going insane, aren’t I? Next thing you know, I’m going to end up like Levi, rushing blindly into danger for total strangers.”

“Oh, come on.” Levi mumbled, swallowing past a mouthful of crab as the others laughed. “I saved your life.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all grateful.” Nyssa teased, but her smile was sober. Everyone remembered the island. A week spent on rocky shores as the dream hydra that was now chained to Levi’s soul picked them off one by one, every night spent wondering who was going to die next.

Odessa shook her head. “Adrian, developing a conscience. Who would have thought we’d ever see the day?”

“Nah.” Adrian smirked. “It’s still you and me, sister. Us against the world.”

“But It doesn’t have to be,” Levi leaned forward, “you said it yourself. Helping those people felt good. Don’t you want that?” He looked around the table at the rest of his team.

“Don’t all of you want something more than to just survive? Our squad is called the Condemned for a reason. Not all of us had a choice to join the Deepwatch. But it doesn’t matter whether we were forced into service or not, we’re here now. Shouldn’t we make the most of it? Try to help out whoever we can? I don’t know all your stories. I don’t know where you came from, or what you have to go back to. But I know what I’m going to do. After we get Iris back, after our conscription is over, I’m going to re-enlist.”

Stunned silence fell over the table, broken only by the cries of the gulls, circling over the reefs below.

“You’re serious.” Adrian muttered.

“Yes.”

“You know how crazy this sounds? You saw what the Saurians did to your city. They corrupted an entire city block just by *being* there. Everywhere they go, death and madness follow. We’ve only seen a tiny fraction of them, the weakest of their number. And you want to go back?”

“I do.” Levi took a shaky breath. “And I’m not asking you to give me an answer now, but when the time comes, I hope you’ll join me.”

To their surprise, it was Yamato who spoke up first. “I can’t give you an answer now, Levixion.” He wiped at the corners of his mouth with a napkin, back straight and bearing regal. “But you brought up a god point. what do we really have to go back to? Does anyone here have a purpose that could be greater than this?”

Nyssa shrugged. “If no one else is with you, Levi, Iris and I will stick by you. The Deepwatch took us in as children, and Iris and I intend to repay the favor when we get her back.

But Yamato asked a good question. You're the one who wants to re-enlist us all. What are you running from?"

A mournful look passed across Levi's eyes. "I'm running from everything, I suppose. Before I met you all, I was serving time in the Maw. I wasn't living. I was just existing. Waking up to be led to and from my cell as they experimented with my mind. At least out here I have a chance to do some good."

"Martyrs, Levi." Nyssa rested a hand on his arm, eyes lingering on his. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No. I'm glad you did. I can't keep burying the past."

"Well." Adrian brushed off his hands. "That sounds truly horrible Levi, my deepest condolences, but unfortunately, Odessa and I *do* have a life to get back to."

"No, we don't little brother." Odessa shook her head. "The truth is, we're in debt. A lot of debt. The day we return to the Caelian Isles will be our last." A thin smile curved the corners of Odessa's lips. "You were right about one thing, Levi. Helping those people did feel good. I don't know if my brother and I are crazy enough to re-enlist, but I might try my hand at being a healer for a while."

"My family cast me out," Yamato said. He pushed away his plate, food forgotten. "I was the most expendable son. The one no one would miss if I died in the Deepwatch or was lost at storm in the Sea of Scars. Who wouldn't make that trade? A worthless artist in exchange for a lifetime of protection."

"You aren't worthless, Yamato." Levi said, "You'll always have a place among us."

Yamato inclined his head in a short bow.

“I’m with you, Levi.” Gwynn said. “You are all the family I always wanted. And where Iris goes, I will follow.” He cast a sideways eye at Nyssa, “assuming her crazy sister approves.”

“I’m not crazy!” Nyssa threw a lump of crab meat at him. “But honestly Gwynn, I couldn’t be happier for the two of you. You and Iris are perfect for each other.”

The moment was broken by a bellow of laughter from Adrian. “Aww, look at the lovebirds, all happy. Sister, if we all survive this, do I see a wedding in the future? Maybe two?” he looked pointedly between Levi and Nyssa, and this time, the whole table pelted him with a barrage of food.

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