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Golden Fantasy: An Examination of Generic & Literary Fantasy in Popular Writing

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Golden Fantasy

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Walk into any bookstore and you can easily find a section with the title “Fantasy” hoisted above it, and you would probably find the greater half of the books there to be full of vast rural landscapes, hackneyed elves, made-up Latinate or Greek words, and a small-town hero, (usually male) destined to stop a physically absent overlord associated with darkness, nihilism, or/and industrialization. With this predictability in mind, critics have condemned fantasy as escapist, childish, fake, and dependent upon familiar tropes. Many a great fantasy author, such as the giants Ursula K. Le Guin, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and others, has recognized this, and either agreed or disagreed as the particulars are debated. After all, fantasy is a vast genre, and the clichés listed above only capture a subset of fantasy. And yet, such trite novels make up the great host of bookshelves under the fantasy label. But to simply dismiss them, as many critics and academics have, is rash. The role they play in America’s cultural identity, and how they have affected perceptions of fantasy, has been dramatic. And most importantly, scorning generic fantasy titles has caused critics to struggle to identify the value of a subgenre of fantasy literature that rests between the literary fantasy and generic fantasy, and which I have taken it upon myself to label as golden fantasy.

Since the explosion of popular fantasy at the advent of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, there has been a steady growth of popular interest in it as a genre in mass media. Unfortunately much of what the writing community has produced and what the reading community has received has failed to embrace the truly imaginative power of fantasy. This has caused critics and writers in academic circles to divide fantasy into two separate genres: true fantasy literature, and fake genre/generic fantasy (Grant 21). This is an effort to replace two points on a line with two entirely separate worlds. It ultimately fails to

acknowledge the use of the space in-between, along with the natural ambiguity of the genre, which is its primary strength. This space in-between, which is an important part of the landscape of fantasy and storytelling as a whole, I call golden fantasy. To prove its existence, I will need to examine the argument that generic fantasy is not real fantasy, identify the definition of fantasy as a genre of literature, identify the qualities of generic fantasy, then show that generic fantasy is in fact fantasy for all intents and purposes based on the definition, and finally explain how golden fantasy factors aspects of both literary and generic fantasy, landing in the space between the two points. Examples of golden fantasy will also be adduced. It is no small task, but a simple grasp of logic and a reasonable familiarity with the history of fantasy writing and theory is enough to arrive at my conclusion. I will begin with John Grant and John Clute.

It has become commonly agreed, as suggested by the comprehensive *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* by John Clute and John Grant, that if a work of fantasy is not subversive or unusually original, it is not true fantasy (396). While under the entry on fantasy in their *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, they “do not claim these [generic] texts are not fantasy, nor that they are inherently inferior to more ambitious attempts to exploit the freedoms and obligations of the genre” (Grant & Clute 338), their language suggests otherwise. If generic texts do not match the “obligations” of the genre, how can they be considered part of the genre at all? Clute and Grant show their real feelings about the matter under their entry on genre (which Grant later explains he wish had been entered in as “generic”) fantasy. After listing some tropes of the form they summarize, “In short, genre [generic] fantasy is not at heart fantasy at all, but a comforting revisitation of cozy venues, creating an effect that is almost anti-fantasy” (396). This is a contradiction to

their earlier, less poignant quote above. If they truly believe generic fantasy not to be fantasy at all, then why suggest otherwise in their entry under fantasy?

In 2000, John Grant enlightened readers to the answer by writing his own essay titled “Gulliver Unravels: Generic Fantasy and the Loss of Subversion.” Through this rather fiery essay, he made it clear to the world that he and Clute believe while “some generic fantasy is extremely well written, it’s just that it’s not fantasy.” He explains that their editor, Gary Westfahl, convinced them to not be so pointed in their *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* so that they wouldn’t offend potential buyers. After explaining how he believes fantasy came to be publically associated with its generic trope, Grant clearly lays down what he believes a piece of fiction must do to be proper fantasy:

In order for a fiction to be fantasy it must be prepared to dance with the Tygers: it must take risks by exploring precisely those dangerous territories where no one has ever ventured before and that are still the demesnes of the wild animals. It must meddle with our thinking, it must delight in being controversial, it must hope to be condemned by authority... it must be at the cutting edge of the imagination, it must flirt with madness, it must surprise, it must be doing what other forms of fiction cannot. (Grant 1).

Despite being a tall and rather vague order, Grant’s false dichotomy between real and fake fantasy represents the larger academic community’s thoughts. They have been regarded, after all, as leading critics and scholars of the subject. Grant has drawn a line here, between that which is acceptable, and that which is not - that which is true fantasy, and that which is next in line to be excreted “into the toilet bowl of the book trade” (1). The idea is that fantasy primarily exists as a form intended to subvert. It resists

conventional didacticism and embraces the unclear and wondrous potentials of the human imagination. Many a great writer from different periods, like Rosemary Jackson and C.S. Lewis, has come to the similar conclusions. It's not a bad way to see the genre, but you cannot simply throw out all generic fantasy from its privileged title, or else you risk losing an important aspect to the genre's landscape. Nor can you simply reduce fantasy to that which is "subversive." Surely, fantasy extends beyond simply that which subverts.

If any understanding of the difference between generic fantasy and literary fantasy is to be achieved, one must first understand fantasy literature's definition. Generic fantasy can then be identified as either an outsider or a member of the family based on how well it fits into a definition of the genre. Unfortunately, the topic has been hotly debated since fantasy has been recognized as a genre, and its particulars are never quite certain. The very concept of fantasy seems amorphous and full of exceptions. It is common for someone to claim certain key traits as the signposts of fantasy, but then discover that such chosen signposts have glaring exceptions, further confusing the effort. In the end, the most proper definitions of fantasy cannot help but include generic fantasy, no matter how much they might like to reject the ugly duckling in the family. The inclusion of this ugly duckling, will then allow for the space of golden fantasy, and its existence will further explain the phenomenon of such popular culture works like, *Harry Potter*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and even popular books from other genres and movies like *The Force Awakens*.

A good place to start is the fantastic in fantasy, and as an example of a standard that is easily broken, the fantastic role in generating wonder in fantasy. Tolkien called this an "arresting strangeness" (Tolkien 60). It is the quality fantasy has when it inspires

in the reader a sense of wonder, which can only be kept from degenerating into disbelief by maintaining “secondary belief” (61). It is essentially what many people expect from well-written fantasy. Yet it is difficult to achieve, as Tolkien puts well: “To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible... will probably require labor and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft” (61). This immediately gives fantasy something to distinguish it from other genres: it must learn to take the wondrous and make it believable, a difficult task worthy of a great artist. Yet this does not diminish the wonder inspired in the reader, as a green sun would remain something other than the world the reader experiences. This gives fantasy a special mark.

But this definition cannot hold under scrutiny for a number of reasons, not the least being Farah Mendelsohn’s identification that a whole sub-genre of fantasy downplays this sense of wonder in the reader, trivializing the fantastic. Any discussion of fantasy genre criticism isn’t complete without her groundbreaking book, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, where she breaks all fantasy into four primary sub-categories based on their construction. They are portal-quest fantasies, immersive fantasies, intrusion fantasies, and liminal fantasies, and she reserves a chapter for those inevitable examples that stretch the categories.

Portal-quest fantasies fit this understanding of the fantastic and the wonder it generates perfectly, as “the portal fantasy is about entry, transition, and exploration” (2). Both the reader and protagonist are aliens in the world they enter, whether it is through a portal (as in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*), or through a quest they must go on (as in *Lord of the Rings*). But while portal quest and intrusion fantasies deal with seeing the fantastic for the wonder that it is, immersive fantasy does not.

Instead, immersive fantasy desires to trivialize the fantastic: “we are alerted to the fantastic not through the awe and amazement characteristics demanded of the reader in either intrusion fantasy or portal fantasy, but because that which is taken for granted by the protagonists is frequently marked by an ordinariness of description” (73-74). This is a “casualization” of the fantastic, and it is what often delights the reader about immersive fantasy. It gives them the opportunity to put themselves into a different world, and perceive the pleasure of being familiar with it even as it is normalized. Thus wonder cannot act as our only signpost, but instead serves to help simply inform what kind of fantasy we are dealing with.

A careful look through Farah Mendelsohn’s different categories betrays only one common string: the presence of the fantastic, or the impossible. No matter how the fantastic is approached, it is undeniably there, and how it is approached is often for Farah Mendelsohn how she decides to categorize each work of fantasy. This leaves the definition of fantasy incredibly broad. Even as Mendelsohn provides examples for each of her categories, she covers many a story that the public mind would not rightly consider fantasy. To many the word “fantasy” means fully independent secondary worlds, or at the very least, some form of magic that intrudes on our world. But Mendelsohn points out that intrusion fantasy often takes the form of horror, and she uses *Dracula* (128) and even H.P. Lovecraft’s (134-135) world building to demonstrate this idea. H.P. Lovecraft might be considered by many to be more science fiction, or even a separate genre of horror distinct from fantasy, but it does indeed carry many fantastic elements many would consider sufficiently magical.

This then leaves us with a vast understanding of fantasy, and we already begin to see that generic fantasy is usually understood as a much more narrow category within this genre, as it has certain expected forms that rarely touch the real wonders of immersive fantasy or the delightfully subversive and self-questioning regard the liminal fantasies have for the fantastic. But it is still fantastic. Fantasy as an entire genre can be more vastly defined by the tidy (if not unbreakable) definition provided by Clute and Grant in their *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*:

A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is *impossible* in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms. (emphasis added) (338).

I added emphasis to the word “impossible” here because it helps distinguish fantasy from science fiction, which often assumes a position of plausibility. The first sentence of the definition argues for the need for self-coherent narrative as a means of distinguishing fantasy from “surrealism and postmodernism” which “manifestly decline to take on the nature of story” (338). Fantasy is thus able to remain a vast genre, but this helps us grasp a fundamental landscape for fantasy, while also making it clear that generic fantasy, perhaps by its very nature, does not need to occupy this vast space, but can dwell comfortably within it, despite what Grant, Clute, and other critics might have us believe.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ve yet to identify what makes a generic novel generic, and if it can properly exist within this broad space of the “impossible”. When thinking on it, the markings of generic fantasy may seem deceptively intuitive due to popular culture’s proclivity to consume the generic like fast food. I’ve lost count of how

many ugly, little paperback fantasy novels passed through my fingers while working in the donations area at the tiny Mercer Island Thrift store, and I cannot argue that any of them exercise the subversive and imaginative potential that is offered in the freedoms of “fantasy.” There are many of them. It has become a game for many to create a list of the worst fantasy novels they know, and a number of websites have done this, including *Good Show Sir* (a blog devoted entirely to posting the worst science fiction and fantasy book covers) and BestFantasyBooks.com, which is normally in the business of trying to find good fantasy and science fiction. And it is not difficult to recognize such novels for their plot driven stories, and great evils that must be overcome by some relatable young, and usually male hero. Even now, I hold in my hands Dennis L. McKiernan’s *The Dark Tide*, which opening lines are as follows:

With a final burst of speed, the young buccan Warrow raced through ankle-deep snow... In one hand he carried a bow already nocked with an arrow, and he sprinted to-ward a fallen log, clots of snow flinging out behind his flying boots; yet little or no sound did he make, for he was one of the Wee Folk... “Whang! Right square in the center, Tuck!” cried Old Barlo as the last arrow thudded into the mark. (McKiernan 17).

This little character is one of the “Wee Folk?” Does he mean hobbits? And did he just say Tuck? Perhaps he means Took, as in Peregrin Took? Although the writing may be of a passible style, this is unabashedly derived from Tolkien’s own world to such an extent that it’s almost appalling. In fact, in some circles it is believed that McKiernan intended his books to be part of the same universe as Tolkien’s. Such “fan fiction” would make any self-respecting critic lean back in revulsion. While the inclination to simply disown it

is natural, it is still a fantastic story with a fantastic setting, despite not being subversive, or particularly original. When asking why it even exists, we must look to its origins.

The problem of generic fantasy as we know it today began with Tolkien, and identifying how generic fantasy differs from this concept of golden fantasy, which rides the space between generic and literary fantasy, also begins with him. It is no mistake that when we think of generic fantasy; our first thought is often of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series (referred to as LOTR from here). It was Tolkien's skill in weaving a fantasy that is both nostalgic, and subversive that made his world the standard for many of the fantasy tropes to come. He, along with the work of Gary Gygax's *Dungeons and Dragons* universe (which borrowed many ideas from *LOTR*) standardized the common sites of the now negatively labeled "Fantasy Land". Diana Wynne Jones collects many of these formulas for us in her book called *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*. Reading her entries on dark lords, innkeepers, elves, and armies will echo Tolkien's novels and the mess of books that have followed in his wake. Indeed, in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, LOTR is cited as "the most influential fantasy novel ever written" (Clute & Grant 951). Tolkien set a new standard for authors, allowing them to fully immerse themselves and their readers without apology (951) into their imaginative universes.

Unfortunately, Tolkien's genius has not been well honored. Many authors have elected to simply copy his world rather than make one of their own, and it was this trend that started the cult of generic fantasy. Grant and Clute explain how "countless purveyors of genre fantasy have reduced the secondary world to the Identikit fantasyland" (951). While Tolkien broke new ground and took the world by storm in doing so (arguably perfecting the secondary world), many others have simply exhausted his tools through

endless repetition, defeating the purpose of his own creative break from the norms. What's more, many misunderstand his writing, as Farah Mendelsohn points out in her book, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, "hundreds of 'Tolkienistas' have failed to notice that *The Lord of the Rings* is not a quest for power, but a journey to destroy power" (4). She goes on to state that Tolkien codified "much of how the quest fantasy deals with landscape, with character, with the isolation of the protagonists into the club-story narrative and with reader positioning" (30). Tolkien set these standards, being plenty original himself, and weaving a story that "seemed a perfection of a particular type of fantasy" (Mendelsohn & James 47). But while Tolkien conducted active battle against those who would reduce the fantasy as a whole to "escapist" and "childish," his followers have only lent the opposing party strength by failing to exercise the greater strengths of fantasy.

However, many critics, rather than argue that these copycats dishonor Tolkien's name, have claimed that Tolkien himself was part of the problem, confusing the effort to properly identify the signs of generic fantasy. If Tolkien cannot be regarded as good and original fantasy, then where can the line be drawn, and does such a line even exist, as fantasy is such an amorphous genre? Certainly a definite one is impossible to achieve; it is hard enough to do so with so many detractors from fantasy as a whole, but as a general rule many a fantasy detractor will acknowledge the genius of a particularly brilliant or subversive work.

While Grant, Clute, and other popular fantasy critics like Tom Shippey claim Tolkien as their champion (951), other reviewers have lambasted him. Edmund Wilson's criticism of Tolkien's work in 1956 is famous, and Judith Shulevitz writes in her review of his work titled, "Hobbits in Hollywood," for the New York Times: "Tolkien dominates

fantasy today because he gave his imaginings the aura of inevitability. But as a storyteller, he was betrayed by the very pedantry that made his creations memorable.” And yet, critics like John C. Hunter claim Tolkien is a champion of true fantasy through subversion. Which is to be believed? Clearly not all fantasy is so easily cut between the two categories, even if they are all included in the halo of the genre, so how can a proper understanding of generic fantasy be defined that will allow us to categorize Tolkien as good or bad fantasy?

Generic fantasy is a creature of diminutive size, historically belonging exclusively to portal-quest fantasies, and only sometimes to immersive or intrusion fantasies. This is largely the cause of the common cultural perception that fantasy must involve magical worlds, elves, evil overlords and a quest. Mendelsohn suggests, “from 1977 onward, quest fantasies in particular came to in particular came to dominate the bookshelves of many book stores, to the degree that in many minds, it was thought of as the default form of fantasy” (43). It is this quest format that Gary Gygax based his dungeons and dragons tabletop roleplaying system on, and what so many future video games would come to imitate in their quest and reward-based gameplay. It is here that we find classical generic fantasy. This again leads us back to Tolkien, as it was his quest fantasy that established many of the tropes today, and the current “fantasyland.” Indeed, the quest fantasies’ origins “lie in epic, in the Bible, in the Arthurian romances, and in fairy tales” (Mendelsohn 3), which are inextricably associated with fantasy in the public mind, and were key to Tolkien’s development of LOTR.

The signs of generic fantasy then become very easily identifiable: “Since the late 1970’s, genre fantasy has frequently been signaled by these two devices: the map... and

the fixed narrated past” (Mendelsohn 14). These were qualities set by both Tolkien and Lewis, and now they can be found in nearly any portal-quest fantasy. In fact nearly anything found in Diana Wynne Jones’s *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* could be considered a sign of the cliché. But there is a difficulty in this too: there are too many things listed in her satirical guide. Although each subject from A to Z is treated with humor and draws attention to the conventions, many a great work might include some of these tropes simply for conveniences sake. To understand what critics object to in generic fantasy, you cannot simply point to the tropes.

Thus, it is not a use of the tropes that makes fantasy generic, but its more broad lack of creativity and subversion of expectations, which seems to be expected of *good* fantasy. It is not uncommon, in an effort to defend a work of fantasy, to draw attention to how it makes use of subversion and creativity. As mentioned above, John C. Hunter attempted to do this by drawing attention to how Tolkien subverts the expectation of timelessness and cultural identity while simultaneously creating a desire for those qualities in its readers. Similarly, Clute and Grant say that the great authors of fantasy “almost invariably engage deeply with the transformative potentials of fantasy” (338) as opposed to generic fantasy which is “a comforting revisitation of cozy venues,” assisting “unimaginative readers who, through the reading of genre fantasy, can feel themselves to be, as it were, vicariously imaginative” (396). In other words, generic fantasy (while still considered fantasy by many) fails to embrace the greatest strength of the genre; its ability to be imaginative and subvert expectations. The war over whether or not so many popular works of fantasy are in fact generic or quality rages on, but the fact is now clear, generic

fantasy exists, and it exists within the family of fantasy, and it is not always clear what works of literature it contains, and what has transcended its hackneyed halls.

At what point does a piece of fiction become sufficiently creative and subversive enough to be considered real fantasy? Each text must be examined on a case-by-case basis, and there will likely always be those who disagree on how to properly evaluate any given piece of fiction. Does generic fantasy exist at all? Yes, and it is very poor fantasy. It is the kind that C.S. Lewis would suggest we would read only once to satiate some simple desire, then move on and never look back (Lewis 120). It must be fantasy though, because there is no other term for it, and it inherently draws from the greater world of fantasy.

In the end, even these stories match Grant and Clute's loose definition of fantasy, and they should be treated as such. It can also be agreed, that any single piece of fantasy probably carries at least some original ideas and subversive qualities. It is this simple fact, that generic fantasy and literary fantasy must share a space, that I argue that there is a space in-between. It is evident enough from the fact that critics cannot always agree on how to categorize works like Tolkien, or the efforts of other famous authors. The fact that a piece of fiction can be both derivative and original at the same time (perish the thought!) is a necessary and obvious conclusion.

Many critics seem to force themselves to ignore the existence of how a work of literature may be both obviously derivative and subversive at the same time. Is it out of a need to fall into a camp, or perhaps to give off the impression that they've come to a definite conclusion? Grant's desire to divide fantasy into real and generic seems to be a

reactionary stance, rather than a rational one. Whatever the answer, a space must exist in-between, and we shall call it golden fantasy.

The “golden” refers to Aristotle’s golden mean as spoken of in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is the doctrine of the mean, or as Aristotle puts it, “the equal part is a sort of mean between excess and deficiency... whatever is equidistant from the extremes, which is one and the same for everyone” (40). This is taken out of context, but the idea is that the golden mean is naturally appealing to us, as it occupies an almost neutral state, avoiding repellent extremes. The Greeks also invoked this golden mean in architecture, and used it to guide the creation of sculptures that captured perfectly proportioned human bodies, inherently appealing to the eye. The golden mean also implies inherent quality, and desirability. It is, after all, golden, the most precious substance among the three classic metals gold, silver, and copper. In this case, golden refers to those works of literature that are appealing to mass audiences because they are familiar; they invoke familiar rural settings, a sense of nostalgia, character tropes we enjoy, while also having value through its own original (if few in number) ideas and potentially subversive elements. By being this, it appeals to a large number of people, granting it a value almost greater than either purely literary fantasy, or purely generic reproduction. Tolkien sits in this space perfectly, not by copying fantasy writers that went before him, but by invoking nostalgia.

Under obvious pressure to acknowledge the greats, Grant cannot help but admit the likes of Tolkien’s novels “were in their own way subversive” and in the encyclopedia they include in their list of great (and subversive) authors the likes of Tolkien, Kenneth Morris, and H.P. Lovecraft, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

John C. Hunter demonstrated how Tolkien subverts the desire to maintain “fantasies of permanence” (Hunter 143), but he also acknowledges that by doing so Tolkien’s novels evoke in us “our desire to preserve a space where the most pressing spiritual and material problems of modern life cannot plague us” (144). In a sense, Tolkien brings nostalgic thoughts of childhood to us. His hobbits support this imagery. The hobbits desire to stay in their sheltered Hobbiton, but are soon forced to face the reality of the greater world outside their doors. Nostalgia, LeGuin points out is a “suspect emotion these days” (86), and she is referring to the critics again. Plenty of well-meaning critics will look at Tolkien’s marvelously whitewashed elven lands, the distinct lack of active female characters, and the glorious battles with eastern orcs that are never once granted or considered deserving of pity and grace, and quite rightfully turn their noses, even if the story simultaneously subverts many of these outdated western ideals. The ending alone, where Frodo sits down and declares “I’m back” to his family, suggests that he has returned to the world he knew before, but the words are simultaneously subversive of the reality of the situation that Sam faces: that the world around him has changed, the people he’s loved have passed on, and things will never be the same. What’s more, in light of traditional literary analysis, none of *LoTR*’s characters are particularly dynamic, even if they are complex. Yet Tolkien has created his own language, weaved an impossibly complex world into being, and has built a narrative that is in every sense of the word timeless. Countless academic articles can and have been written on it, and its popularity as a work of literature is never likely to die.

This places Tolkien’s work, firmly into the category of golden fantasy. It is neither too dense, strange, or otherworldly to be offensive to the casual reader, nor too

shallow, hackneyed, and derivative to turn all the critics away. It makes excellent use of traditional ideas, mythic lore, nostalgia, and the Golden Age of “green country” (Le Guin 86), so as to appeal to such a wide audience in America, to become its own cult, to create such a splash in people’s imagination, and to generate countless imitators. And appropriately, there has been an every increasing number of studies from the world of academics on Tolkien’s famous novels. This is the balancing act that Golden fantasy must maintain. While LoTR is nostalgic for its readers, it subverts the nostalgia. While it plays with traditional ideas, it is also complex and detailed enough to provide many potential interpretations. Thus it can appeal to both the common consumer, and the great scholar looking for more than entertainment. This is the essence of golden fantasy.

Then there is Ursula K. Le Guin. It is no question that much of her writing has been incredibly imaginative, and her work has been praised universally. But one only need to read the first couple pages of her popular book, *A Wizard of Earthsea* to begin to wonder why it’s so loved by critics and fans alike. It begins in a small village with a young man that goes on to become a powerful wizard who travels the world. On the surface, it involves many of the traditional tropes. It follows a quest-fantasy style, yet is so well written and genuinely engaging that almost any fantasy critic will agree that it is a work of art, and worthy of being called true fantasy. What’s more, it is a story rich with meaning, and many articles have been written on it. For example, Patricia Dooley wrote an article for the *Children’s Literature Review*, that talks about how Le Guin’s Earthsea novels use magic as a metaphor for art, and more importantly, show that art is a force, “in lie which, like all powers, may be abused.” Other articles play with this idea of magic through language, and Christopher Robinson has written a most engaging essay on how

the Earthsea novels show language and names can be used violently against people in his article, “The Violence of the Name: Patronymy in Earthsea.” I could go on, but it should be clear that critics have recognized the value of Le Guin’s fiction.

But is it original? No, not from a world-building perspective. There is no one trope that a novel might follow that forces it into generic status. *A Wizard of Earthsea* is testament enough to that. But more importantly, it is important to understand that while Grant and Clute may disagree, being derivative is not an inherent weakness of fiction and does not exclude a piece of literature from being considered proper fantasy, as any work will always be derivative in some sense. I am not arguing that something that is poorly written and lacking in originality is not somehow poor fiction, but that simply copying many of the conventions of a genre does not make it automatically generic. The act of imitation itself is not a crime. Ursula K. Le Guin points out in her essay “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” that “there is a great deal of quite open influencing and imitating going on among the writers of fantasy. I’m inclined to think that this is a very healthy situation” (88). It is not only a healthy situation, but it provides the novel with a special appeal, as we recognize patterns and language in the story that we readers are familiar with, even if unconsciously. This is again the appeal of golden fantasy.

And finally, a special discussion should be afforded to one of the most recent examples of golden fantasy, and one of the most well known: the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling. First and foremost we must understand that, despite what many people might think, the central conceit of the novel (a school for wizards and witches) is not terribly original. In a humorous essay written by Ursula K. Le Guin titled “The Critics,

the Monsters, and the Fantasists,” she begins by relating her first experience hearing about the popular *Harry Potter* novel:

People would call me up to say, “You must read this wonderful book about a school for wizards, it’s so original there’s never been anything like it!” The first time this happened, I confess I thought they were telling me to read my own *A Wizard of Earthsea*, which involves a school for wizards, and has been in print since 1969. (83).

Obviously, the idea had been done before, and Le Guin goes on to explain that people tend to think such ideas are original because they are simply ignorant of the rich history of fantasy literature, as even her own idea of a school for magic was not entirely original.

But as has been discovered in the course of this essay, originality is not necessary to make a work worth studying. *Harry Potter* also falls into the category of golden fantasy. It is incredibly derivative at moments, making use of such tropes as chosen heroes, sacrifices that overcome evil, and the magical power of love manifest. Thus, while being primarily an intrusion fantasy rather than a portal-quest fantasy, it carries many of the tropes of fantasyland with it, and it also borrows heavily from familiar European western-fairy story traditions. Yet plenty of critics have supported the Harry Potter series as not only a well-written and brilliantly plotted work of fiction, but also a genuinely thoughtful and subversive experience that breaks many a reader’s expectations. The story simultaneously resonates with its readers, and then excites them with clever inventions or surprising perspectives. Each book that follows in the series grasps deeper themes and develops its style. And perhaps most importantly, from the very beginning, J.K. Rowling is a brilliant weaver of plot. The very first book gives the reader a sense of

what is to come, and foreshadows future plot movements, such as the significance of Potter's salvation from Voldemort's hand, and the fact that Voldemort was not confirmed to be dead, and would thus appear later. Her brilliant plotting put all this and more into motion from the very beginning. It is really quite brilliant, and thus lands itself into the category of golden fantasy as well.

One might ask why would we spend time on defining golden-fantasy when the argument raging around the place of certain works of fantasy would lead most to a natural sense of this sliding scale. The answer is expressly because of the framing of this argument. Such an argument tends to polarize opinions concerning the significance of loved works of fantasy (as evidenced in Grant's article), and being able to identify how they both appeal and deter is an important part of the process of critical analysis. The reason such arguments usually rage is that many people love such works because they are familiar. Grant was not far off the mark in his article when he said that readers of generic fantasy primarily derive "archetypical reassurance" (2) from these books. Golden fantasy is usually derivative enough to appeal to wide audiences, as it is familiar to them, while also attracting the ire of critics expressly because of this derivative element. But because these fantasies maintain some element of originality and artistic integrity, plenty of other critics will sing their praises. The explosion of interest in the Harry Potter novels could be seen as the classical rebirth of a golden-fantasy series.

Perhaps the other most important aspect of golden fantasy is that it is a term that could be applied to almost any genre of fiction, and mode of story-telling. There is significant evidence to suggest that no critic takes the plot line from the recently released *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* very seriously. The plot follows almost the exact pacing

and feeling of previous installment, and many of the characters are rather simple variations of beloved tropes. And yet, the acting is good, the writing is decent, it is graphically gorgeous, and the story simultaneously pays homage to the earlier movies' scenes while finding new ways to interpret them. Take for example, (spoiler warning!) the scene where Han Solo is killed by his son, Kylo Ren, in *The Force Awakens*. The scene obviously mirrors the death scene from the original *Star Wars: A New Hope*, where Darth Vader strikes down Obi Wan in front of Luke. Just as this defines a coming of age moment for Luke, In *The Force Awakens*, the scene represents primarily a coming of age for Kylo Ren, Han Solo's son, who fully embraces his dark side in that moment. The film in a sense, chooses to reverse the death scene from one of positive character growth in the first movie, to one of negative character growth in the following, showing how a death may be capable of helping someone grow, but could also be the final act of condemnation for the murderer. In the first movie, the killer Darth Vader seems wholly unaffected by his triumph over Obi Wan, but for Kylo Ren, this is a defining moment. The scene may be derivative, but that is its strength. It reinterprets a previous idea. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is a golden fantasy.

Golden fantasy could be found in mystery novels, romance stories, science fiction, or even in historical fiction. Its significance is that it identifies a trend in the mass production of art, rather than simply identify a single use in fantasy. It would likely benefit many critics to study its appearance in other genres of fiction, and existing mediums of entertainment. It could be argued, however, that it is particularly distinct in fantasy, as fantasy tends to particularly evoke certain nostalgic tropes such as happy endings, rural landscapes, and magical escapism.

Thus golden fantasy fills in the space that many critics might forget. It is identified by being simultaneously derivative, original, and in some cases even subversive. But it is primarily appealing, as its chief strength is its ability to be popular, while garnering the interest of those intellectuals that we desperately need to keep the public accountable. Any attempt to dichotomize the world of literary analysis is bound to fail, and perhaps Grant understood this. His essay, after all, is more satirical than a serious piece of argumentation; it is meant to shock people awake. Do grossly derivative generic fantasy novels exist? Yes, but this does not mean that we can simply exclude them from the world of fantasy. Golden fantasy is their sibling, and it is the child of literary fantasy. At the end of the day, they are all still part of the same family.

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Faith Component Addendum:

It took me a long time to come to a place where I was comfortable with my passion for fantasy. Although many of my family and friends were supportive of my interest, I had held a subconscious sense that entertainment was a distraction from the “real world,” and so every hour I put into it I was both wasting my potential and letting hard-earned brain cells rot. This may sound like an exaggeration, but sometime it felt like I could literally hear the inner critics deriding such a superfluous use of my time, and when I reflected on my particular love for ‘high’ fantasy and other worlds, their voices were particularly poignant. But, it was ultimately my faith and Tolkien’s words that gave me the freedom to embrace this passion. This was particularly true of fantasy.

I am a committed Christian and was raised in the church, so the language of the Bible is a part of me, ingrained in my mind. Although the Christian story never promises an easy life and in fact promises, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33), there is an even greater promise. We as Christians are told to look to the future and await Jesus’ coming. At the corner stone of our faith, John 3:16 reminds us that “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The reality of the Christian story is that there is a happy ending.

But this is not the world I saw in literary fiction. Modern and postmodern literary fiction seem to have an obsession with the unanswered questions of life and psychological disorders. I appreciate this, and have thoroughly enjoyed scratching my head, drying tears of sorrow, and learning intently from the stories of great

authors who take this messy world by the bullhorns. There is much to learn and enjoy by these author's hands. But while in high school and college, I quickly discovered that such fiction could be emotionally and intellectually exhausting. By spending so much time in it one can lose sight of the Truth we hold to by our faith. We are not destined for this world, but for a better one. I think, thus, the desire to escape this world for short periods of time for the sake of respite is a natural one.

But there is another important piece here, and it is what relates directly to my topic in the essay above. Golden fantasy is a type of written fantasy that follows many of the conventions of the generic fantasy, one of these convictions, and one that I think is rather important, is the happy ending. I did not touch particularly in the above essay, but Golden fantasy, unlike other literary fantasy, or really subversive works of imaginative chaos, is interested in the hero's journey, and triumph over evil, as it is interested in providing the reader satisfaction in the end. This is one of the primary reasons it is often so successful with audiences. And this, I think, is why it's also important to the Christian story. While listing the marks of fairy-stories in his famous lectures on the topic, Tolkien added that happy-endings are key to good fairy-stories, as they are symbolic of the hope Christians have in Christ (Tolkien 23-24). There must be struggle, there must even be loss, but there must also be victory over evil in the end and a sense that something better is coming; peace might one day be achieved. Tolkien provided many other examples of ways a fantasy story should relate to the Christian story, but that one point I think is perhaps the most important piece to understanding why people tell stories that take place in fantastic settings.

In fiction that takes place in the real world, one is bound by the realities of our often tiny and gritty lives. Fantasy, however, allows us to remind ourselves that life is important, strange, and special. It allows us to experience what it is to be the hero of our own story. When fantasy is at its best, it reawakens in us a sense of wonder even in the mundane. It allows us to escape to a place where we can experience the truth that is the happy-ending, Christ's Truth. This respite is needed, and I have slowly come to a place where I believe that when I am experiencing this respite myself in the pages of a book, or working on making it for others, I am not simply investing my energy and time in nonsense, but God's work. Golden fantasy is the kind of fantasy I want to write, because I want to appeal to people's sense of good triumphing evil, and draw them a little bit closer to the light, and the Kingdom of God. Call it a cliché, or even boring, but I'd pick it every time over the alternative.

Creative Project

The following is a series of three, consecutive, original chapters to a novel that I've written to both demonstrate my ability to produce a work of creative writing and golden fantasy. Although there are currently only three chapters, these are the first steps towards building my first complete fantasy novel, and they portray the qualities listed above of golden fantasy, including traditional tropes of the genre accompanied by some original ideas and sufficiently well written characters and plotting.

The King's Confederacy

By Zechariah Morrison

#1

The earth birthed the Dwarves, and she sent her daughters with them. They crawled forth from the caves into the light. The Earth's daughters guided them. When the Dwarves saw the light, they called it the Father and vowed to protect the two holy parents forever. The Dwarves became the protectors.

The sky cried for the fallen Auraden, and his tears became the Elves. He laid his children down in the forests, and left them alone. But the gods had pity on the Elves, and raised them in the light. The Elves became the scholars.

- Excerpt from the Daedalus Pages.

"If you learn to rely on your armor you'll be dead before you draw your sword," Samuel said when Asher had first asked to wear it at the green age of twelve. Asher had reasoned with Samuel that in most dangerous situations he would already be wearing armor. His trainer responded that Asher first had to learn to fight without it. There was no point in arguing, as the old man had the final say. Fortunately, Dr. Emergold had recently begun to encourage the use of the armor. "Fine." Samuel had said, "He can almost keep up, scrawny as he is. Let's put a casket on him and see how well he waddles." He had chuckled to himself at that.

Now Asher had his armor and his shield. He felt like a fortress. A very *awkward* fortress. His armor was well enchanted, and one particular spell made the armor very light, but the joints in the metal severely restricted his movement. He rolled the shoulder pads, trying to loosen them. It had been three weeks since he had worn it last. And gods! It had gotten so hot outside that even this room, despite being deep inside the cliff side, had gone blistering. He wondered if there was a way

he could get Ruby to make his suit temperature controlled. In his studies he recalled reading somewhere that there was a spell for it.

Across from him, Samuel was wearing his leather shoulder pads and breast strap over a cotton shirt. With both hands he grasped a great-sword. He was a thickly built middle-aged man with rough, chiseled features, and a scar that ran from his lower lip to the side of his neck. His peppered white hair was clumsily tied up into a ponytail. His eyes were blue, tired, and deeply set, suggesting a quiet yet attentive demeanor. When he spoke, unless provoked, it tended to be short and direct, although sometimes he would grunt loudly to clear his voice.

He was a bit of a legend on the battlefield, having supposedly only been bested in a duel once by the hand of the legendary Bristler. Asher had never beaten him, but had gotten close a few months ago when they were still practicing regularly and Asher wasn't wearing armor. Ruby said that with mage eyes you could see Samuel's aura from a mile away. Asher believed it.

The audience that watched in the sparring room was sparse. There was the dwarf, Dr. Emergold, stroking his silver beard in the corner, and Ruby the kasha with her feline face and form standing beside him, relaxed. There was also a troll. This troll was almost nine feet tall when standing, although at the moment he sat in the far corner of the room on a large stool made from one solid stone. His slack arms brushed the floor, and he was hunched over, providing him a very dull look. But his pinpoint green eyes that faintly glowed watched Asher and his trainer. He was also chewing on something, grinding his enormous tusk like teeth to make the most awful sound. It made Asher nervous, even nauseous, and in this closed room, with the heat, he did not feel well.

He hoisted his shield to his side, gripping the grapple carefully so it felt right. It was made of diamail, a pale silver blue that had white painted steel worked around the edges. It was remarkably light despite its size, and he loved it.

Balancing his short-sword against his shield, he faced towards Samuel. The shimmer of the guard-spell on the end of his blade flickered. He planted his feet firmly on the soft ground. He steadied his breathing.

As Asher focused, a sense of his aura came upon him, and he found strength and vitality deep inside his chest. He assumed a basic dragon scale stance, and noted to make careful use of this internal energy, relying on his shield until an opening presented itself. The first time he had been too aggressive, even clumsy. Samuel had spanked his armored behind. It was quite humiliating. This time he intended to be careful and think through the fight.

He took a deep breath and nodded. Time seemed to slow. His vision tunneled. Samuel charged.

His blade sung with a quick cut at Asher's right, but he caught it. Samuel danced to flank Asher, moving from the shield. Asher rotated with him, shield out. Samuel leaned forward and hit at the boy again and again.

It felt like thunder.

Samuel was using the tapper stance, involving quick dodges in and out. Asher traced the shield with the blade smoothly, watching. But Samuel moved with almost inhuman speed. A cut slipped past and Asher barely caught it with his blade. They locked, right shoulder to left shoulder. Asher brought his shield to bare against the blade but Samuel held his ground.

"Comfortable, your majesty?"

"No, You?" Asher said.

"Hm. I'm still dancing."

"You're always just dancing."

"Yes. That's right."

Samuel pushed Asher away, and Asher again noted how the armor did nothing for his stability. He got his footing and swung his shield. Samuel hit it back with his wrist guard and spun around him again. His footwork suddenly changed. He moved in and out and around like he really was dancing. Asher looked carefully for an opening from the safety of his shield.

"Don't be foolish, Asher," Samuel called with a crooked grin, "If you expect me to misstep, then you've never fought me." He swung around Asher's side. "You've read about fighting with a shield, you've practiced the techniques, you have to make

the opening. Think! Especially before your opponent forces you to use your aura. Like this!”

Samuel went in with another strike and Asher raised his shield, but Samuel feigned the attack and dived to Asher’s right. Asher saw it, and swung his blade down to catch him. Samuel caught the blade with his, moving in close; he pushed their blades over their heads. Asher panicked as he saw Samuel was going to headbutt him. His instincts took hold, and he felt his veins surge with his reserved aura. He pulled their blades down between their heads despite Samuel’s greater strength and swung his shield back around with intent to slam. But like fluid the master disengaged and rolled out of harm’s way. Asher swung hard into nothing; his shield arm strained with the force of the empty strike, and something popped. He reeled forward for a moment and tried to regain his footing. He felt his left arm scream with pain, and then soothe as the healing gem in his belt leaked a spell into him. Ruby’s magic craft was quick. But he still felt hot, and he was beginning to sweat profusely.

Samuel’s blade came back and back again. Dropping his shield arm to the side Asher responded in kind and they started hitting blades, both leaning into each blow. Asher had dropped the dragon scale stance and was countering Samuel’s tapper with his own. It was a battle of weight and strength now and Samuel had the advantage. The student was getting tired. Then he saw it.

Samuel’s blade swung slightly farther to Asher’s open side and Asher knocked it with his blade as hard as he could. Opening made. He swung his shield and smashed Samuel’s arm. Samuel grunted and Asher charged shield up, and put his entire aura into his legs. Like a bull, Asher shot forward and smashed into his trainer. He had the master’s sword at bay with his, and Samuel went into the air with a thud and a crack. Then there was a groan and Samuel grinned as his eyes glowed for a moment. Samuel’s free hand lifted up and grabbed the shield. With his one arm he lifted himself off the shield and swung his feet over, glided, and kicked Asher in the face.

Thwack!

Asher fell and his trainer rolled over him. With a crash the young man landed on his back.

It was over.

Asher lay there for a moment while his head spun. He felt like he was choking. Then the refreshing healing spell from Ruby's gem flowed through him and he came to, looking up at the end of Samuel's blade.

"Gods" Asher wheezed. Sweat ran into his eyes. "That's not fair. We didn't even use the guard spell. Did I do anything to you?"

The old man lifted his free hand to the base of his own ribcage and pressed with a grunt. "You broke a rib, but I believe I fixed it," he lifted his sword up onto his shoulder and leaned back, "Clever thinking, letting the shield drop shortly. Although it costs more strength using your blade to block, you have better odds taking control of the fight from your opponent. Never fight passively unless you know your opponent can't break the defense. Against me that won't work," He sheathed his sword. "I'm still leagues ahead."

"But as he is leagues ahead of you, Asher, you are leagues ahead of the finest soldiers," said Dr. Emergold as he came to Asher and gave him a hand in getting up. He was a wizened old dwarf, short even for his own kind. His features were old and exaggerated, but his face had a youthful brightness that some manage to retain for their entire lives, not from natural physique, but from an internal perspective. Accompanying this, he had a quick and bouncy affect. He continued as he looked up at the young prince and stroked his beard "Your timing and execution were superb. Oh, yes. You only lack the years Samuel has had to strengthen himself. Quite right, and quite nice."

"No, he still needs to learn more stances. Strength alone won't help." Samuel said. "Tapper and dragon scale are not enough for a prince. If it was a real fight..."

"Then he would still outmatch his aggressors immensely due to your remarkable training. Am I wrong? Tapper and dragon scale are excellent martial stances; most soldiers, or even assassins aren't trained in them. Asher's thoroughly mastered both. His time would be better expended in study. I know I'm right."

Samuel waved his hand dismissively, "Studying comes naturally to him. The prince doesn't need a bigger mind. He needs more practice. Especially if he is to impress folk from Valorom. You should know better than anyone the value that is placed on martial prowess among the kingdoms."

"He would be even better served by understanding their languages..." Dr. Emergold countered with a grin and flash in his silver eyes. Samuel responded nonchalantly. They continued like this, as if the young subject of their conversation didn't stand right next to them. The point was moot of course; Asher's father had already commanded Samuel to start the training again. They had been traveling the last couple months, and it had made finding practice time difficult. But they would argue about it anyways, as they seemed to enjoy it. Especially Dr. Emergold. Asher soon realized that with time these two old fellows had become friends.

Asher turned away from the argument to catch his breath, and he struggled with his shield for a moment in an effort to attach it to the hook on the back of his armor. Ruby approached to help, but he fixed it before she got there. He picked out the healing gems from his belt and handed them to her.

Ruby, as a kasha, had the features of a great cat. Her face and head were like that of a remarkably expressive tiger, and her lithe but strong body was covered with orange and black fur. She had a long graceful tail and wore a robe of white and green that specified her status as a life mage, a master of healing and defensive magic. While she always walked with a relaxed stride, her large cat eyes and twitching ears betrayed how little passed her unnoticed. Many of Samuel's royal guards shared this quality: a great inclination for a reserved awareness of one's surroundings, suggesting intentionality towards everything in life. He said he prized it above all other traits in a guard, although when questioned closely he could not express clearly how he recognized it in someone. Ruby was Samuel's second in command of the royal guard, the same guard that personally protected the lives of Asher and his family.

She accepted the gems from Asher, offered him a rag to wipe his face with, which he accepted, and was about to speak when the troll approached them.

Asher took his blade, and handing it back, said in the best troll he could muster, "Thank you my friend. It's a fine piece of steel."

"It's a good practice sword," the troll grunted back in the trade language, accepting the relatively tiny blade in his huge hands. Asher noticed that the troll was avoiding eye contact, and there seemed something ridged to his movements. The troll left their party to return to his adjoining smithy, and the sound of heavy feet falling followed him out. Asher turned back to Ruby.

"You have a meeting to attend, don't you? Let me refill the healing gems, and then you should go quickly," Ruby said. She spoke with a slight accent. She held the two small evaro gems in her hand and touching them both with her free hand murmured a spell beneath her breath. A green light flowed from her claws into the gems, causing them to glow faintly. Evaro gems were one of the few substances that could store spells indefinitely till use, and these were crafted to easily fit into Asher's belt. "How does your arm feel?" she asked.

Asher rotated his left arm carefully, "Good, and please don't hurry. The meeting isn't for awhile, and I need to return a book before I go." The meetings were predictably long and boring; the lords and ladies of the house always bickered incessantly about the smallest thing. His father, the King of Solaria, had once jested that if someone sneezed, the House of Lords and Ladies would spend the day debating if it was proper to cover with one's hand or arm. But the father required the son to attend.

Asher knew the reason, and this meeting was special. This request also came with the added requirement of wearing his armor straight from practice. "A prince ought to look grand and dignified," his father had said in an affected voice, which he only used with his son, "At a meeting like this that's especially important. One has to command respect. So wear it like you're privileged and you know it." It was only a half joke, Asher knew.

Ruby nodded knowingly, "Ah, you already found a library here? Is that where you have been hiding?"

"Oh, it's simply splendid! The library is built for trolls, so it has very tall shelves and these huge books! It goes deep into the canyon side and is lit by magic

pale purple lights in the back. It's mostly deserted, so I've already found a small spot in a corner alone to relax with a good book when I can spare the time." He spoke with particular animation.

"Hm. You should tell us where you are going. Your father worries about you. The whole guard worries about you when you disappear on us." She didn't want to say "I worry," for she wasn't sure if it would offend him.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. It is like the doctor said. I can defend myself. I'm never without my sword. And really, so rarely does anyone try anything, the likelihood of an attempt on my life being made when I happen to be alone is unthinkable."

He wasn't wrong, but Ruby also knew that when Asher escaped to read, he was focused on everything but the world around him. She looked back at the gems and handed them to him. "Dr. Emergold wasn't far of the mark, prince Asher. And your fights with him have been getting longer, which means you're getting closer. You *mostly* lack the strength of aura to beat Samuel. I know it has been a long time since you trained, but even so, you clearly have dueled him enough times to memorize his many styles. You now need to focus on how to wear him down. He can't use his aura endlessly before he will begin to exhaust it, and you have the defensive strength with your shield."

"He's too good at breaking my guard. It takes everything I've got to hold him back. He said so himself."

"A result of Samuel's good use of his own energy. He has more of it so he can afford to use his aura to break your own and engage yours. Unfortunately, such fights often come down to sheer size and strength. Have you ever thought of using the crane's shield stance?"

"I know how it works," Asher said as he lifted his shield arm up so that it was perpendicular to his body, "but it's a rather complex." He swung his shield around gracefully and focused. He had already learned three martial stances, the dragon scale being his favorite. It was also easy to learn, and most soldiers knew its basics. The dragon scale involved a simple crouch and focusing on one's arms and the base of one's feet. With short steps and careful shield thrusts you could safely beat back almost any attack and eventually derail your opponent by pushing back on each

advance. The other was the turtle, and that was only used to stop incoming spells. The crane form was a far more advanced style, and it sacrificed close defensiveness for greater maneuverability, providing a means of more quickly responding to incoming missiles or clever maneuvers, which Samuel favored. It came from the weaponless guardian monks of the Northern Mountains, but had been adapted among the kingdoms for use with swords and shields. While Asher focused at this moment on moving his aura into his legs and hands he realized that the armor joints interfered with his balance. As he tried to gracefully lift one foot in the air to place behind him, he felt the steel joint at his knee catch and he stumbled backwards. Ruby laughed. He noted that the heat had started making him rather nauseous. Ruby noticed and pulled a small refresher potion from the pouch she had with her and handed it to him.

“Maybe we should slow down the training. We could also start your aegis spell lessons once again. It is possible we could find a better way for you to fight by adding a little more magic.”

“It’s been awhile since I practiced any spells.” Asher said as he downed the blue liquid in the small vial. He immediately felt better, and as he popped the cork back on, he looked away and tried to remember a few of the spells he had studied. He had enjoyed losing himself in the endless memorization of those runes. Ruby was his most recent instructor, and he found her presence more calming than Samuel’s or his father’s. She had a softer way than the men that Asher had spent so much of his life with. Asher suspected that this was at least partly the result of the natural enchantment aura that Ruby possessed due to being a kasha. He had been warned to be careful of kasha and their manipulative power over humans. But knowing this didn’t make the pleasant experience of learning under her any less real. The feeling was akin to losing oneself in a good story, where time and place seem to fade away.

Both studying and reading were among the few times he could forget about the world around him, the arranged marriage, all the endless politics and paperwork that awaited him, the world of assassins, poverty, economics, and drunken lords and ladies. Gods, he hated all the parties, where many of the lords and ladies, his advisors and lawmakers, got wicked drunk. It felt wrong. And it disgusted

him. It really disgusted him. Insects. They would walk up to him and talk, stumbling on their words, offering him their favorite drinks, and talking about future arrangements, as if they were in any condition to be making decisions that would affect hundreds of lives. He recalled one instance just over two years ago when a lord, Mendel, the lord of a small providence in Brilista, approached him, wearing a great purple robe, and setting his hand on Asher's shoulder began to speak to him. The lord's breath was heavy with wine, and he occasionally cut his words off, or strung certain consonants together. "Prince Asher, you look soOOoo good tonight," he had said, "How are you? You remind me of my daughter. She wasn't able to join us. A real pity. Yes. But she'd like to meet you. You should meet. She's good with business. I've had her making errands for my, ah, what was, well, my logging business, and she does an excellent job. If you'd receive her perhaps we could... she's a pretty thing," and he went on. The young prince soon realized that this lord was offering his daughter in exchange for favoritism. Asher was not especially fond of the princess Naomi, his future wife, but the idea of accepting such a bribe caused a sick shiver to run down his spine. Oh, gods, to think how the Elven Theocracy would react if they knew he was unfaithful. Truly unthinkable. The whole scene, the affluence of human, omixu, and kasha lords and ladies made him really sick. His father, the good king of Solaria, was not like that. It was for a different reason, Asher knew, but he still respected him for it. He was, somehow, above it all. Far too busy to get drunk, which to Asher was an ultimate vice. But Ruby was talking...

"Perhaps I can find someone from among those captains who can start your training again. They'll be busy once we arrive, but I'm sure at least one can spare the time for the prince. Do you still have your spell book?"

Asher nodded. She grinned again and patted him on the back affectionately, "Maybe one day I'll be calling you master mage."

It was a bit patronizing, but he played along. He placed his hand elegantly upon his breast, kneeled with an exaggerated sweep and said, "Even when I have achieved such heights of scholarly achievement, I shall never forget to be grateful to those whose time I stole to get there. A mage, never forgets." He said this last bit with great affect, and Ruby smirked.

At that moment a man dressed in the garb of the royal guard burst into the room and yelled.

“Lord Asher! You are late to the meeting of the guilds! Your father has sent me to collect you!”

The prince turned pale. Hastily he picked up his own sword lying nearby and then bolted for the door where the guard stood.

“Wait!” Dr. Emergold cried at Asher as he turned to run. “Take the library book you stole before you go!” he handed the young prince the green book with fraying pages.

“I didn’t steal it,” Asher began to explain.

“Go!”

Asher was gone with the guard, and the three were left alone in the training room in silence.

“He’s going to get another lecture from lord Osbear ... about the duties of young royalty,” Ruby said suddenly.

“A lord has no right to lecture his future King,” Dr. Emergold said.

“Like you and I lecture him?” Samuel said.

“We’re paid to lecture him.”

The great northern canyons that rose up to the Sterling Desert Plains were known as the Dymornum Cliffs, and they were originally the home of the trolls. Now the dry canyons housed trolls, dwarves, humans, and tengu. When the dwarves discovered the rich deposits of evaro in the cliff walls and had begun to move in over 900 years ago, it had only taken a simple misunderstanding to cast the area into war between dwarves and trolls. The war, fortunately, ended quickly, and now the Link Fortress rested at the top of Jam’s Cliffside facing east; a peacemaking gift from the dwarves to their new allies. It was old. It had once shone brilliant silver, and resembled a great dragon rearing up on its hind legs with its back up against the cliff side. Now it was rusted, and many smaller troll and dwarven settlements had

populated the cliff side beside it, giving the fortress the appearance of an old rusty monster with great black wings that spread across the cliff face.

The Link Fortresses' highest tower reached far above the surrounding rock formations, and during this quiet evening Dalis found its top rampart the perfect private perch. He could see miles and miles to the east, and he imagined he could see the dusk wood beyond the horizon. The view was very relaxing, but it provided him little comfort as he kept turning from it and paced nervously. He wrung his hands together, and then checked the time.

It was rather bleak. It was as if he was looking down at his future, and the similar futures of countless others. He noticed that his feathered hands were shaking as he massaged them. At this moment, he simply wanted to be left alone.

Dalis was a tengu: a large people resembling thin birds with long arms and clawed hands. Dalis's body was covered in white and speckled tan feathers that had begun to fray with age, and on his back he had two great smooth wings folded comfortably to his body. His face was like that of a great barn owl, with fat dark eyes. He wore a purple robe, and embroidered into its chest in golden lace rested the sigil of the Mage's Guild, a triangle with a staff, wand, and potion bottle all crossed within it. In the fading light of the day, Dalis seemed bent and very tired. His figure was actually quite large even for a tengu, and he felt as if a great weight was pulling him down. He took a seat on the bench along the balustrade circling the tower, and breathed out of his beaked mouth one long breath.

"A fine thing," he clucked grimly to himself in his native tongue, "a powerful mage like myself being troubled so." He murmured a basic legerdemain to himself, and his hands stopped shaking.

Soon the door to the tower beside him opened and a younger tengu entered. He had a youthful bob to his gait. His face was a smooth and pink with more human like features and fewer feathers; his feet and hands were long, thin and featherless; his wing feathers were a mess. He looked crude as he approached the grand owl-like tengu. For hundreds and hundreds of years the tengu had carefully bred the more honorable traits of their race into the sages and scholars, while breeding them out of the working class. Yet this ugly young tengu was robed in a fine yellow cloak and

wore a pendant of silver worked into the shape of a crescent moon wrapped in chains. When the young tengu stood he was about six and a half feet tall. He smiled a very human smile at his elder as he approached. It looked strange, even absurd.

“Dalis! It’s been too long,” the young one said in tengu.

“Far too long, Arman,” Dalis replied in kind. He stood up from the bench to his full height, which was an impressive seven feet. He grasping Arman by the arm and gave him a hug. “How is your family?” Dalis asked, not missing a beat, although his heart wavered.

“Well enough. My son will be six years old from the nest in three weeks time. The little wing has his mother’s eyes and my fight. But come, you didn’t call me here to talk about family,” At this Armin glanced behind him and then turned to lock the door. They were now alone atop the tower and Armin turned back to Dalis with another absurd smirk, “You called me to talk strategy, didn’t you?”

Dalis sighed and turned away from the young captain of the guard. “You’ve done well here. You’ve kept the ravenous bunch under control, and no one suspects a thing. What is your assessment?”

Arman joined him at the balustrade, looking over the horizon. “I am no fool. Our mission is a difficult one. But I am confident in my team’s ability. Many of my own are among the fortress guard. And you did not give me a poor infantry. They are as you said, a ravenous bunch. I will direct their energy effectively. You have my word,” Arman lifted the small pendant of the moon from the chain around his neck and squeezed it, “may El judge the souls of our enemies, and find them guilty.” He looked towards his elder, and saw that he looked onward with an empty stare. “no?” he asked.

Dalis turned and eyed Armin carefully. He had heard many good things about this young tengu. He was supposed to be intelligent and clever. Whatever his looks he would be the sort that would help build a bright future for their people one day. Dalis looked back to the sunset and rubbed his hand uncomfortably.

“I’m pulling your forces and moving them to Eterna.”

“What! Why? Is our champion angry with me?”

“I’m making the decision,” Dalis said, “ Our ‘*champion*’ trusted me with it. You are a good soldier. But, Arman, there are just not enough troops to spare for your plan. We are too hard pressed. And although your own are skilled, you cannot take this fortress. If you should fail, it would be a disaster. Forces lost for nothing. And you odds are not good. They do not call the trolls the tireless soldiers for nothing. Even if you successfully breach the fortress’s defenses, you will find that the trolls will kill a hundred for every one of their own. That, and the trolls are suspicious of your people. No, this fortress will not be taken, but will be left as an outlier. We only need Eterna and the capitals to secure our victory.”

Arman ground his human-like mouth angrily; it produced a terrible sound. “If that is the case then why didn’t you send me more troops? Why did you send me any at all? What did you expect?”

“If I’m honest, after I had heard of your previous experience, I had thought you’d come up with a plan to overthrow the trolls. Perhaps a scheme to lead them outside before the fighting began? After all, this would be a useful position to our cause, to say nothing of the evaro gems. But when I arrived I saw only a shoddily organized band of tengu, and the rest of the rabble is only just under control. Did you expect me to miss the reports about goblin raids along the southern edge of the cliffs? How long do you intend to lie to your superiors here in the fortress? It’s no wonder the trolls and their dwarven allies are uneasy. I’m honestly surprised you haven’t completely exposed us. It could happen any day!” Dalis waved his hand in the air to silence Arman’s protests, and then looked him in the eyes carefully. He held his gaze for almost a minute.

Arman grew pale, and he dropped to his knees, shaking. “Please! Give me this chance to prove myself. I can do this! Let me put the fear of the tengu in these dumb brutes.” There was a strange color in his eyes now. They looked distant.

Dalis laid his hand on the young tengu’s shoulder. “Relax wing brother. You will have a chance yet to prove yourself. But it will not be safe here once the fighting has begun. I want you to move you and your family away from the fortress and to Eterna to help us.”

Arman looked confused. "But they know nothing of the chaos that is coming. How should I explain it to them? Surely the trolls will suspect us. But perhaps, I can suggest my own place of hiding?"

"You haven't told your family anything of our plans?"

"Nothing. They do not even know that this meeting is taking place. As you and our great leader instructed us all. They only know that I am looking expectantly towards the future."

"Ah, I understand. Then it will be easier for your widow and son."

"I'm sorry? I do not-"

At that moment, Arman's words trailed off and he slumped onto the ground. A kind of wispy green light lifted off his feathered body, then faded, and with it faded his breathing.

Dalis lifted the hand he had laid on Arman's shoulder up into the light and examined the small evaro gem that had been hidden carefully beneath his feathers. A small green light within it steadily dulled till the gem resembled a mundane crystal. His hand started shaking again, and he quickly hid it beneath his cloak. He looked at the body lying at the ground, and shuddered.

"I, I am sorry. It *is* bleak. But I promise your son will live to see the new world we are making." He turned back to the sunset, which had turned from orange and red, to a deeper and deeper purple, till the sun disappeared entirely.

Asher rushed down the halls of the fortress as fast as he could with the green book in hand. He was a young man of nineteen with almond eyes and pale blond hair. As a human whose family had long lived among the elves he had very fair features, and was rather tall. He was handsome enough to be possessed by some vanity, but his character was full of a hurried and honest air. His face carried the genuine naivety of youth, hidden only by his intelligent, even sharp gaze. He still wore his armor from practice, and he hoped that his rather unkempt hair and sweat would not offend anyone at the meeting.

One of the royal guards, Barry, an older member of Samuel's team, ran with Asher. They didn't speak much as they rushed down the hall, but then the guard slammed into something rounding the corner. He bounced back into Asher and they saw that he had crashed right into a tengu that resembled a great barn owl. He had spilled a pack of papers onto the floor and was now stooping to pick them up. He looked strangely familiar to the young prince.

"I am so sorry." Barry said as he reached down to help the tengu with the papers, and then stopped as he realized he had a job to do. But Asher dropped down to help too.

"Ah!" the tengu exclaimed. "Your majesty! It is perfectly all right. I am merely heading to a minor gathering. Please, you do not need to help. Surely it is below the prince of Solaria..."

"It is my duty and honor to help," Asher said as he and Barry hurriedly got the last pages and handed it to the white-feathered scholar. Asher noticed that the old tengu's hands were slightly shaking, no doubt nervous about waylaying the prince of Solaria. Asher put on his princely smile as best as he could muster and looked into those unexpressive, big, owl eyes, "I suspect we may be heading towards the same meeting. A pleasure to meet you." He offered the tengu his hand, which was received.

"It is truly an honor, Prince Asher of Solaria," the tengu said as he bowed low before the young man, "My name is Dalis, and I am at your service. But please. You will be late, and I cannot have you be late on my account," he, hand now free, gestured down the hall. "After you, your majesty."

#2

From water grew the treants. They called the mortal spheres home and tended the gardens. In patience, they watched the years go by and sang their songs of praise to the gods and the great creator.

From fire rushed the humans. They called the mortal spheres home and saw to their growth and security. In ambition, they spread and praised the gods and the great creator.

That is why people say, "see now, humans are on every mortal world. But where have the treants gone? The wisdom of humanity rules. The treants have been forgotten, and with them, their quiet wisdom."

- Excerpt from the Daedalus Pages

Vixidy was staring at the mirror when the knock came to her door.

"Yes?" she answered, not moving from her seat.

"Miss Vixidy. The presentations will begin shortly. You'll be expected soon."

"Thank you. I'll be there," she said glancing at the clock on the wall.

She looked back at herself. Vixidy was a half kasha. Her face and figure were that of a human. But cat like features manifested in prominent canines, cat-like green eyes, and pointed ears that rested atop her head. She had a long and black tail that she wrapped around her chair's leg tightly. Her straight hair was jet black and her skin was a pale white. She was studying this face carefully, looking for something.

Sucking in air she took another deep breath.

She was a student at the Elven University of Inquiry.

It had been a long journey, but she had finally made a name and home for herself. A *home*. It seemed almost strange, but she loved the sound of it. But why, she

wondered, did it also fill her with longing? She was full of a strange feeling... now all too familiar. She knew she would be leaving it all soon.

She was ranked second in her year, and had already won praise from all her professors. Beside the mirror on her desk rested several small steel plaques awarded to her for winning contests and regularly performing above and beyond the expectations of a life mage.

But now, she was graduating, possibly, if this presentation went well enough. If the board approved, the university might invite her to stay on as faculty, and she could apply to the mage's guild in Jaramia. But it all hung on this speech. She was about to present to well over a hundred people the proposal she had been working on for the last three years. It was on a notorious topic, and she was nervous. Steadying her breath, she tried to relax. After all, even if it all went to Akvana's hell she would still have a future in the army, even if that was not what she wanted. Yet she was also perplexed, even agitated. Something else was bothering her. She had a terrible sense that something was wrong, and it terrified her, despite her inability to put her finger on it. Was it in the speech?

Vixidy took her notes one last time and glanced over them. The parchment was wrinkled from use, and each page was splashed with so much ink from edits as to be incomprehensible. How many times had she drafted, and redrafted it before Colux had told her it was ready? She had lost count.

Her eyes scanned the pages again, looking for any little improvements she could make. She needed this to succeed. She had worked so hard to get to this place, she couldn't just land in the Confederacy's army, or in some small town patching up minor colds and wounds for the rest of her life. After all, it was just a proposal. Her subject was just that. It couldn't do any harm. She gritted her teeth, stood and paced the room. A glance at the clock on her wall told her she still had twenty minutes before she would be expected on stage. She walked to her window and looked out over the university's garden. It was an excellent view in the moonlight, and below she could just pick up the familiar coo of the kingdom-fowl that wandered there. A warm summer breeze that smelled of pink flowers drifted in from outside, and she leaned out and took another deep breath.

She reflected on how she came to this place, and all the people she knew, till she came to Colux, the one who had set her on this path. Today's result would define much of her future, and Colux had shaped how she had come to this place. She felt for the wood panther on her necklace against her skin. That too had come from Colux. Really, Colux had directed everything in her life shortly after coming to the university. It was strange, feeling so dependent on someone.

In a week from now she would have known madam Colux for five years.

Of course, she had known of madam Colux before that, but she had never expected to draw the attention of a full-blooded kasha.

Among the kasha of her homeland she had been an anomaly due to her human features. When Vixidy had walked through the village with her mother, tribe members like kasha Daivo would yell at them, "You have a monster following you, mother sister. Better get rid of it before the gods punish us for this impurity. The panther does not rear boar children." And her mother would snap back, "Mind your pipe, elder brother, and leave me to mind my litter." But, mother gradually brought Vixidy's brothers and sisters instead, leaving her at home. Vixidy could still remember kasha Daivo's name.

In those days Vixidy lived with her mother and siblings. Their home rested a good ways from the village, as their mother was a kingdom-fowl herder, although they had a different name for them in their language. While the oldest boys would help their mother with caring for the fowl around the compound, the rest would tend to the house and food within the safety of the wall. Vixidy was put in charge of the household as soon as she could speak, as she was the oldest daughter of the family, and her mother preferred to keep her from the public eye for her own safety. Vixidy had been a scrawny child, and although they had plenty of food, she had grown up unusually thin, and ridged. At first, her mother was not sure she would survive. Human-like children seemed much less hardy than kasha. But Vixidy proved tough, and far smarter than could have been expected of a half-breed.

Vixidy could still remember days caring for her younger brothers and sisters, but not with any particular fondness. The younger siblings needed constant

attention, and the house, the stone wall, and the little they grew there always needed more labor. She was good at her job, but she was good at everything. She wanted to see more than just that wall that kept them safe. She wanted to leave the compound; the jungle outside was always on her mind. She sometimes wondered what her mother was really keeping her from. She was often caught dreaming.

Of her several siblings she liked little Rolxi the best. He often helped her with the chores by choice. He was also the first to listen to her stories. He did not share her human heritage, but she really didn't care. Everything she knew was kasha. She was the only thing that was different in her world, and from a very early age she had begun to wonder if she could travel like those adventuring kasha that had left Kixin to see the world. Maybe somewhere there was a home that suited her better and was waiting for her to arrive. She wondered what the human world was like, and if humans would even be interested in sharing their space with her.

Rolxi however was a true cub, a real kasha of the panther. He was beautiful, and very empathetic. He would always recognize when she was upset, or focused on a task, and join her. The company wasn't always welcome, of course, but she appreciated his intentions. Every litter had its soft paws. He cried very easily, which was an annoyance, but she also knew how to dry his tears. He was ashamed of his tears, which made him cry all the more, but a good story about the brave Kasha Holxin, who cried when he fought the monsters of the jungle (the monsters were lost spirits), would quickly catch his attention. Before long, everyone at home wanted to listen to Vixidy's stories. She was a good storyteller. But mother was concerned. Stories were all fine and good, and she admired her daughter's sharp mind, but it didn't get the chores done any faster or attract a worthy mate. Their world was far too practical, even cruel, for dreamers. Fortunately, her fears would soon be laid to rest.

Once each year the village's healing mother would come through and look at all the young kasha and see if any of them had the eyes and ears to hear the deeper thoughts of the world. She examined everyone, and even included Vixidy, much to the surprise of the village.

Almost immediately, by the time Vixidy was eleven years old, the healing mother picked her out as special, and started teaching her the basics of the magical arts. Although the young kasha was wary at first, she was soon enraptured. Simply by going through certain motions, chanting certain verses, and focusing, she could make dying plants gain new life, heal wounds, and even command simple-minded creatures, like the kingdom-fowl. It was incredibly exciting to feel powerful; the villagers stopped looking down on her and even came to tolerate her presence. Her family rejoiced in her new place of regard. But she wanted to know more. Now it was the healing mother's turn to be surprised. Never had a student learned the basic spells so fast, and had such endurance.

But Vixidy was only half kasha, so there would be no inheriting the healing mother's place in the village. Theirs was a small and very traditional village, fairly far to the northern borders of Kixin.

"My child," the healing mother had begun in their language one night in her hut, "You are the most skilled student I have ever trained. Do you know this?"

"Yes, mother." Vixidy said, sitting cross-legged before the old healer. The healer was an old Kasha, who had lost many of her teeth, and who had lost a part of her snout in a battle when she had attempted to heal a collapsed warrior whose aggressor had not yet left the fallen. Her soft black fur had begun to bristle and gray. But her eyes still held a fierce green light in them.

"Then my child, do you still wish to learn the ways of magic?"

"Yes, mother."

"I know you do. You have a fire in you. It is there, although you feign modesty, as you've been taught to. You want to challenge the world. I know this too. Although you have not yet met your Oumi, as you have not yet come of age, I believe that it is a powerful spirit, which will drive you to become a great a sorceress one day. But I cannot train you any longer. I must find an apprentice who can inherit my role in the village. Do you know of the elves who come to our town to trade and exchange?"

"Yes, mother."

"Good. Daughter, if you want to become a sorceress like in the old tales, you must show them your magic. Once they have seen what you can do, they will take

you to one of their great universities, where they train young mages to become powerful sorcerers. There you may find the home you seek, but I suspect” and she said this part almost under her hissing breath “you will instead find a fire to fan.”

“Yes mother.” she said as calm as possible, although she could barely sit still.

Never had the young half-kasha been so excited and frightened. Although the elves that came each month had white skin like hers, their faces were always severe, and their hair was always pale white or yellow, and they wore strange clothing. They were also very tall, almost like giants, standing seven feet tall most of the time, and they moved with a kind of unearthly gracefulness. Most kasha agreed that while the elves were good people, they were not of the earth, but of the sky, and that is why they seemed so distant. The kasha respected them, and the elves did the same, but the kasha were wary to never take what the elves said too seriously. They seemed to know very little of the world’s thoughts or of the god’s words.

The day finally came when a group of these traveling elves were staying with the healing mother, as they often did when they traveled, as her house was the second biggest in the village, and the mother called Vixidy to present her before them. Vixidy showed how she could conjure the natural forces of healing magic, and command a beaver to dive below the lake’s surface, or rise back up.

The elves were not impressed, and were about to leave when one of them, a she-elf, asked the healing mother what Vixidy used as her focus.

“She does not need one,” the healing mother said smiling a mostly gummy grin, “She began casting the spells I taught her before I even had time to explain how to use a focus to ease the process.”

Now the elves were impressed. And perhaps a little concerned. They lectured the mother on the proper safety measures that must be taken when training a new student, to which the healing mother listened while occasionally making a sneezing sound. Vixidy knew she only ever made that sound when she was laughing. She never laughed like a normal kasha.

And so Vixidy was recruited by the elves to join their Elven University of Inquiry. She was nearly fluent in the trade language, but the name meant very little to her. She was simply excited to go to a place that would teach her more magic, and

where, perhaps, she would be allowed to go where she pleased without attracting attention. The elves had told her that many different kinds of people lived there.

She was fourteen years old when she got ready to leave her mother's house with the elves. Her younger brother, Rolxi, had approached her and given her his lucky stone, saying in their native tongue, "Now stay safe, and this stone will help. Watch out for the bad people." He had many proud stories about how his lucky stone had kept him from harm. It was gray with a single black spot on its perfectly smooth surface. She accepted it and did everything it took to stave off the tears. Rolxi openly cried, and so before they left, she told him the story of the brave kasha warrior one last time.

As they walked through the village Vixidy stopped by the healing mother's house, and the healing mother came out to give the young half-kasha her blessing. After she had laid her hand on her head the healing mother leaned into Vixidy's ear and said. "Learn from these elves, but look out for yourself. The sky is too proud to understand the earth. Do you understand?"

"Yes, mother."

"Good. Then go in peace and confidence. Watch out for your own kind, even if they don't turn to you. You will succeed. Remember, you are strong, and, yes, you will succeed. I know this." It was the greatest blessing she could give, but she whispered so no one else could hear her.

Thus they set off. The troop that Vixidy traveled with were a group of topographers and researchers affiliated with the university. All of them were elves, and they were on their way back to the university, which was a long journey south.

Once Vixidy left everything was exciting and new, but also very strange. At moments Vixidy could barely contain her excitement, but occasionally her thoughts drifted back home. One of the elves, the grand she-elf who was named Felicia, whose face seemed young, but full of confidence not found in youth, cared for her. It was very strange. She did so many things for Vixidy during the journey: providing food when Vixidy was hungry, and extra blankets when the night was cold, but she had a strange, unearthly air about her. Vixidy soon realized that it was because she never smiled or frowned. This elf was neither friendly, nor cold, but instead simply talked

to Vixidy about a great many things, mostly concerning geography, and asked her a great deal of questions. Vixidy wondered if this was what it was like to speak with an air spirit. Felicia spoke so fast, and her trade language was so sharp, Vixidy struggled at first to understand everything she was saying. But the half kasha learned quickly, and before long she came to enjoy the company. Felicia was so constant and attentive it was refreshing. And before long, Vixidy started to observe these strange elves' mannerisms. It was true they rarely seemed to feel anything that resembled anger, sadness, or happiness, but soon she noticed that they did in fact smile when they were happy, it was just so subtle it was barely noticeable. It made her proud to realize that she made Felicia smile when she talked with her, answered her questions, and demonstrated her magical abilities. Felicia seemed to like her and continued to share what she knew. Soon they spent all their time together, even forgetting the other elves and kasha that had joined their company. Felicia seemed very pleased with Vixidy. Was this what it was like to have an older sister?

Along the way down south their small company stopped at many different villages, and Vixidy saw kasha with fur patterns she had never seen before. There were ones with black stripes that flowed like rivers through their orange fur, and tan kasha that had white circles around their eyes, and ears that ended in little tufts of fluff. And soon she started seeing humans. She had only seen a couple humans before, and she found them ugly and loud, but before long she also grew accustomed to their rather crude and clumsy physiques. But she never understood why humans talked so loudly when they were right next to each other. Perhaps it was because their ears were so small, even smaller than a monkey's ears. She wondered what her mother had seen in her father or what he was even like that a kasha of the panther should notice him. She watched these humans carefully, but she soon noticed that they tended to avoid her.

Eventually they arrived at Port Vondis. She had never seen such a loud and busy place. So many elves, kasha, and humans, all crammed into one place. Before she could even find her bearings, she was on a boat. But it wasn't like those small

boats her village had for their lake. This boat was huge, and she suspected it could carry possibly over fifty people. She dashed along the poop deck to the railings and back again, till the captain yelled at her to stop. That was also a surprise. The captain was neither an elf, human, or kasha, but a strange mouse-like creature with long rabbit ears that stood perfectly straight, and in the middle of his forehead was a small gem that glinted green in the sun. She quickly guessed that this mouse captain was a magical creature from beyond their realm.

“He is an omixu,” Felicia said when she saw Vixidy’s surprised expression. At once Vixidy remembered the stories. Their village had even hosted an omixu once, but she hadn’t gotten the chance to go and see it. It resembled a mouse only in the most basic sense, as its face was a good bit flatter, and it had more human like hands, even though they were terribly small. The omixu wasn’t much bigger than a child that had just learned to walk, had great tall ears that twitched every direction as it barked orders at the crew, and a thin tail that swished back and forth as it hunted about. It wore a small blue suit with golden buttons, and had a strange piece of cloth wrapped around its neck making it look even shorter.

“Wait!” Vixidy said grabbing hold of Felicia’s arm “If that little person, I mean, omixu, is a captain of this boat, perhaps this boat...”

Felicia made that almost-smile again, and nodded.

It was true! It was actually true! Vixidy had wanted to believe it, but it seemed almost impossible. Boats that could fly without the aid of wings, but instead great sails and strange four pronged wheels that spun without rims. Before long the boat was lifting out of the water into the air. Vixidy nearly died from both fear and excitement so that Felicia had to take her below deck to calm her down. Her head spun for some time after that. It was all just too much to take in.

The following days rolled by with such speed that even as Vixidy would recall them, she had trouble telling which events happened first. They had arrived in the elves’ Columns Forest, landed in a small elven town, and went to the nearby university. It had taken some time before her training had all come together, and

although she met Colux early on, they did not come to know each other till much later. It was Felicia who escorted Vixidy to the university when they had finally arrived. They had been expecting her, and before she knew it, she was saying goodbye to Felicia and being escorted to her own room, which she soon discovered she shared with another she-elf just a little older than her named Camellia. They did not speak much at first.

Vixidy surprised herself when the first thing she wondered when she arrived was how she was supposed to pay for all this. Elven currency was very different from the village method of trade. But each student was responsible for helping maintain the university grounds, assisting by assignment in the making of food for the faculty and students, and participating in the instruction of younger students. That was how she and her peers earned their keep, and that was all there was to it, as long as they maintained their lessons and never fell too far behind. It was not difficult for her to fulfill these requirements. In fact, she relished them.

Once she was introduced to all this in orientation, life began to blur once again. The days sped faster than she could keep track, but soon she fell into a rhythm. Felicia would come by sometimes and visit, and Vixidy quickly learned that she was more expressive than most other elves. Even as she developed more relationships with others of this enigmatic species, she discovered that most seemed to be completely separated from all their emotions save intellectual interest. Camellia was particularly bad, and only ever spoke with Vixidy to confer information concerning how they kept the room clean, or shared their things. She was intimidating, till Vixidy discovered that Camellia was failing most of her studies.

But that came well after the first year. Or perhaps it was sooner? Vixidy spent most of that year either in class, or studying in the garden that rested at the center of the university between all the buildings. From there one could see the large canopies of beautiful green leaves that rested above, and see the four enormous trees that supported the campus. In the garden lived a small flock of kingdom-fowl, the same enormous flightless game birds from home. They were just there to add some color to an otherwise deep green environment, but to Vixidy they were the best of friends. Vixidy discovered she was free to do as she pleased when she wasn't

in class or performing some service, but freedom was bought with loneliness. Those fowl were witness to more than one of her lonely nights spent alone studying. She would sit down next to them, even rest against their enormous feathery bodies, and talk about her studies and thoughts. They would coo back.

It was in this garden that Vixidy and the rest of the incoming class were first introduced to the faculty. It was also where Vixidy first caught sight of Madam Colux. She was a wizened old kasha with dark and grey fur, and immediately she reminded Vixidy of the healing mother from her village. The resemblance was uncanny. But she quickly turned her attention to her peers.

Most of them were elves, while the rest were humans, kasha, or omixu, and one or two were these large bird-like people, but she didn't come to know any of these students till her second year. She first came to know the faculty, who as the months went by were surprised at how quickly she surpassed the other students, advancing to the top of the life mage's class, and performing second only to an elf named Erluis who was in the world mage's class. People started to take notice.

It took a year before she found her way into a study group of elves that welcomed someone of her talent. Most of her time out of class was then spent with them. She needed the companionship, and elves were something wholly different from kasha or humans. The other kasha didn't speak to her, which she had expected. There was nothing she could do about it. But the humans were something else. Some gave her rather unwanted attention, taking particular note of her looks. But others seemed to avoid her altogether. She noticed this from the very beginning.

"It's because you are part kasha." Felicia had told her one day when she came to visit. She took Vixidy out to the nearby elven town where she lived, and together they shared dinner and a traditional elven dance celebration. "You see, you wouldn't know this because you lived with other kasha all your life, but your kind exude a natural enchantment aura, causing humans to feel, how to phrase this, simple-minded and sleepy while near you. It allows your kind a natural advantage over other simpler races. Elves are immune to the aura, and omixu are partly resistant to it. You probably don't have an aura quite as strong as most kasha, but you look partly human. And you're also a young female, so the other humans, especially the

males, probably fear that your enchantment aura might make them simple-minded while around you. Your kind does have a history of manipulating other races for your benefit. To a common human who hasn't yet learned to harness his aura, you are a dangerous enchantress. To someone who has, you are still a risk."

Vixidy had not yet heard this, but she wasn't entirely surprised. This elven friend of hers had said other things like this before, and although it didn't entirely sit well with Vixidy, she had learned to take this sort of discovery in stride a long time ago.

She focused on her studies, but she also studied these elves. Slowly, she came to understand elves better and better, and likewise her friends learned about her. Her fellow students in her study group scrutinized her skills and behavior closely.

"You have an unusual aptitude for memorization," they would say, or "it's remarkable that a half-kasha would demonstrate such skill. Well done."

They meant no offense at this. She realized elves practiced an emotional reticence, which was ubiquitous among the race. She caught herself watching to see hints of arrogance, happiness, or sadness. It was clear that they still understood such emotions, even though they didn't seem to express them openly. Their world was perfectly ordered, proper, yet Vixidy was surprised at how easy it was to speak with them. As long as one was guarded against being offended at what they might say, very little of what one could suggest seemed to offend them, as long as it was posed as a question, suggestion, or comment.

They were also each unique, despite this common trait. Each had their own interests, ideas, and methods for approaching any given topic. They also seemed to enjoy relating their experiences to each other, and they told each other stories, although Vixidy noted how their recitation lacked a particular flair. At moments, sitting in the garden with these elves, Vixidy felt like she indeed had found a home for herself where she could simply be, and that was enough, as these regal folk seemed to simply accept her; they appreciated her contribution. She had often wondered then if the healing mother from home had been wrong.

During their second semester, Vixidy came back to her room, expecting to find Camillia studying. Instead, the room was empty. She entered and set her things on her bed, and looked across to Camillia's desk. Noting that it was almost always

spotless, Vixidy saw that today there was a large, crumpled up piece of paper on it. She looked around, although she knew no one was there. She stepped over to the desk, and took the paper in her hands, and unraveled it.

It was a letter of dismissal from the university, addressed to Camillia. Vixidy had known that she was struggling to keep up with the course material, but she didn't know it had gotten this bad. She read it over carefully, till she heard the door creak open.

“What are you doing?”

“I... I was just...”

“You little rat! Get out!”

“I was just. I'm sorry Camilla. I just wanted to understand.”

“Get out!” Camilla roared. Vixidy had never seen one of these fair elven faces contorted so.

“Now hold on! This is my room too. I just wanted to help.”

At that moment Camilla's expression changed. She pushed her way past Vixidy, took the paper, and folded it carefully.

“How can you help? You're not an elf, and you do not understand what it means to be one. To come, you see, from a family of distinguished mages. To be expected to perform at least passing quality. An elf, and nothing less. You're a kasha. Excuse me, half-kasha. Born in some primitive village. Born to a father who didn't want you. There are thus no expectations of you. Everyone expected you to fail. And why shouldn't they? Aren't all kasha born up north brutes?”

“Stop it.”

“The kasha that rejected development and real magic. They were the ones that moved their villages further northward to avoid the advance of progress. That held to their primitive ways, if you will. What good did it all do them? You've taken a history class. You've even witnessed it.” she turned to Vixidy. “Its no wonder a human male from the south would leave your village, and his daughter. It's only logical when faced by that kind of life. Why, it must have been like growing up among animals. Simply unclean.”

“I said stop it!”

Before Vixidy had realized what was happening, she had slapped Camillia. There was silence for a moment, then Camillia spoke slowly, "Please, don't act like you can know what it is to be an elf."

Vixidy made no response.

Camillia moved away shortly after that. To this day Vixidy remembered that event vividly, and wondered if she could have helped Camilla. At the very least it had helped Vixidy realize several things.

First, it had taught her something about elves: they were not free of fear, and perhaps, bitterness, although they could certainly hide it. Second, it helped her to better understand herself. During the short time she had been at the university, she had become less quiet. When she looked in the mirror that evening, she no longer saw the thin, quiet, wary survivor she had begun her life as. She had become expressive, fuller, and determined. She noted now how with her study group of elves she had become more expressive; she defended herself, and spoke with a kind of relaxed and friendly cadence. Something that Camilla had never possessed. But she was still herself. She was not flirty, capricious, or especially observant. She was determined, was still thoughtful, prone to long silences and drifting thoughts, and intensely focused on her desire to succeed. It made her appreciate how much growing she had done, and how much she probably had left to do.

And it was then she realized, from a deeper layer of her being she had been defending the kasha against the cold gaze of the "civilized" elves. She wondered why... The kasha had rejected her. Perhaps because of her family, and the healing mother? It was true that her family had been ashamed of her, but they had also loved her in their own way. The elves gave her a home, one she hadn't had elsewhere, but it had been a long time since she held anyone in her arms. In moments like that, thinking especially of her youngest brother, with his black fur and deep green eyes, she truly missed them. She missed the sensation of being touched. At moments like that, while she was reflecting, behind the locked door of her room, she would cry to herself.

At the end of her second year she found the strangely familiar bond in her tutor. This old kasha named Colux had offered to work with Vixidy after she performed her first healing rite at the second year's presentations. Madam Colux had approached her afterward, backstage, creeping up behind, so that Vixidy jumped when Colux spoke in her native tongue. At first, Vixidy had been uncertain of the offer, wondering if it was some obscure joke; no full-blooded kasha had ever offered something like this since the healing mother had offered to train her back at the village. But the young mage accepted; she could scarcely do otherwise. Colux was the eldest and most skilled spirit healer at the university. She was a strict tutor, and she guided Vixidy in more than just her studies: She introduced Vixidy to her culture, which Vixidy was surprised to find she desperately wanted. They began working together at the end of her second year at the university, and before long Vixidy looked to her for everything, and spent most of her time with the old kasha, even sacrificing time with Erlus, who had offered her the place within the elven study group.

"That was quite the impressive demonstration for someone your age," Colux had said the night after the healing rite. It was their first official meeting and they were in madam Colux's office, dimly lit by candlelight and haunted by stacked books on every side. It was very stuffy, and Vixidy wondered how many secrets a mage could hide in such a room.

"Thank you, madam Colux," Vixidy said.

"You may call me Colux," she said with a white and toothy grin. "Here, have some tea. And no more of this trade language. Let us speak in our native tongue." What followed were many days of studying under Colux's watchful gaze and exacting instruction. It was this old kasha that introduced Vixidy to her Oumi. Her personal god.

"Your Oumi, child, is the spirit of a passed warrior. She tells me she was a princess, a fierce kasha who slaughtered hundreds of beasts and kasha to honor her tribe. She will drive you to achieve great things. But when she is mad, she will

torment you, for she is upset that she must be the Oumi of a half-kasha, who has human blood. That is why you will struggle on the road set before you.”

The blessing she had received from the healing mother had finally become clear, more defined.

As Vixidy stood at her window, she reflected on everything Colux had told her, and helped her with. The speech that she held her in hands, was inspired by Colux. It had been her idea to break the taboo. This was clear enough.

Vixidy remembered sitting in that cold classroom during the first semester of the first year here at the university. She had been sitting in the back row, and the elven professor who was introducing them to the basics of magic had begun loudly, and in a monotone.

“There are three major schools of study at this university. Each three contain three subcategories, which together match the nine fundamentals of the universe.” The elven professor proceeded with a diagram on a large chalkboard. He drew an upside down triangle, and within the triangle he drew three small circles. In each of these three circles he inscribed a small symbol representing one of the nine fundamentals, and then he finished by placing the other six fundamentals around the outside the triangle, one at each side, and one at each point. As he went he described what each of the symbols meant, and what the magic associated with each could accomplish.

When he came to the corners of the triangle, the corners that represented the aspects of war, he started with the fundamental of fire, then the fundamental of water, and then went to the fundamental of death at the bottom. Here he stopped.

“Students,” he said, turning to them, “the use of death magic has been forbidden across the kingdoms of Arosha. The decision was made by the Mages’ Guild over 75 years ago after the advent of the infamous necromancer, Rawlsguard and his followers. This decision has been taken up by the Elven Theocracy. Those of you who study to become war mages must understand that while you will study water and fire magic, death magic will be excluded. This is for your own safety, as well as the safety of the school and the kingdoms as a whole. The cost of studying

death magic is too high. Life mages will be taught how to counter known spells that make use of death aura, but this should be sufficient to sate your curiosity. You are thus hereby forbidden to study this dark art as long as you are a member here. If you should be found involving yourselves in these matters, you will be expelled, or worse. That is all we have to say on the matter. From this point on, let it rest.”

Many of the non-elven students expressed curiosity, but there were no books in the school on death magic and on the road to necromancy, and no professor or trainer would touch the subject, and so for the most part it faded from their minds.

But then one night while Vixidy was studying in Colux’s office, the old kasha rose, and closed the door. This was common behavior, as students talking in the hallway often distracted her. But then she turned to Vixidy and said, “Child, what are you going to do for your final proposal?”

The student looked up in surprise. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m researching a potential solution to the problem of the impermanency of enchantments and spells.”

“Yes, yes.” Colux said waving her hand. It was odd, she almost never forgot anything. Vixidy watched her carefully.

“Child,” Colux began again, pacing the tiny room, her gaze resting on the floor, “have you found anything of interest beyond existing theories?”

“No” Vixidy said turning to her notes. “Unfortunately this topic has been already covered exhaustively. Do you think I should change subject?”

“No. I think it’s simply time we throw something else into the pot.”

“What do you mean?”

“The elves are all far too scared of what they don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Vixidy, you’re not going to like it, but don’t worry. I’ll support and help you all along the way. It’ll be a new road for me too, but I think together we can make it. If they are, yes. It could work. Ah. No. But perhaps you will not like it.”

That day was the beginning of their secret studies, and Vixidy, in fact, loved it, although she did not say so, and worried that they might be found out. The idea of getting her tutor in trouble, or disgracing her teachers and herself mortified her. But they continued. Colux knew many things about death magic, but her understanding

was only basic and mostly historical rather than applicable. But soon, Vixidy had a theory she was sure she could pursue.

“But will they be upset?” Vixidy asked, thinking of the school board members, of which Colux was part.

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

Perhaps the Mage guild representatives that are there will be intrigued enough to hear us out.”

“And if they are not?”

“Child. You and I have powerful Oumi. We are destined to succeed. We will overcome such obstacles as they come. Now is not the time to be timid.”

But that wasn't enough for the young student. There had to be greater assurance. So one night, shortly after they had begun, she could take it no longer, and Vixidy asked Colux to approach the board on the matter. She couldn't stand the idea of simply springing it on them.

Colux thought for a moment, and looked out her window. The old kasha agreed to broach the topic in private with them. She warned Vixidy that the topic would not become public, since until there was better evidence, they would not want to open those doors to the students. It was simply too much. But she would, she promised, ask the rest of the board.

Vixidy thanked her profusely. Her mind finally put to ease; she could enjoy their studies. As she departed from the office she was suddenly stopped by Colux's call. She turned, but found that a stack books obscured her tutor's face.

“Yes ma'am?” she called back.

“Don't bring this up again. Have,” she hesitated, “some faith.”

There it was. As Vixidy stood at her window she suddenly felt like she was going to buckle over with the realization. She did not trust her tutor. Colux had cared for her, but there was always that side of her Vixidy could never understand. She knew her tutor, but she didn't *know* her tutor. There was always the part of the teacher covered by books, quiet, thoughtful, and absent. If Colux had lied, or if this

project really was immoral, it could all fall apart. But was it wrong to question the old kasha? Had Vixidy really simply ignored this important part of their relationship for so long? Had she wanted to ignore it, and now when it really mattered she finally faced it? But it was too late. Colux had so much power over her. Vixidy stood bent over for a moment. The weight in her chest had become a burn, and she tried to sort out the sudden crowd of thoughts that distressed her.

No, it was not the time to let this drag her down. Not before the speech. She clutched the necklace and pulled the panther out from her shirt, and, straightening out, she walked back to her mirror and took one last look at herself. She was still young. Twenty-one. No matter what happened, she still had so many opportunities before her. She could succeed. Now was the time to take risks. Although, she was steadily realizing that perhaps this risk was greater than she had hopped.

Vixidy wondered if her Oumi would rise to help make her speech, or drag her down. She nervously played with the small wood carving of a panther that Colux had made for her. Surely, even if this went south, it would carry her on. Perhaps, she did have faith. In Colux? Did Colux really go before the board? Did it matter now? Her tutor wouldn't have lied directly to her. But then, faith? What a question. It was too hard to sort out right at this moment. She had begun to sweat.

"I will capture your Oumi in a vessel, child, as would have been done for you had you stayed among our own people," Colux had said the night she made the dark wood figurine. "It will contain her rage, and when you are in trouble, you can then pray to soothe her."

It was time. Vixidy let the necklace fall on her breast, so that it could be seen. She offered a silent prayer, then grabbed her papers, opened the door, and stepped out into the dark hallway.

Whatever the outcome, now her story would really begin. And it would be no one else's, but hers.

#3

The kasha and the omixu were the last of the first born, and they were born as brothers in the mortal realms. But the kasha were loved by Thanam, god of magic, while the omixu were loved by Cogiki, god of knowledge. In those times they were the best of friends, and the kasha father said to the omixu father, "You and I are the same. Let there forever be kinship between your children, and my children." The omixu father agreed.

But the father of the kasha tricked his brother, and he ruled over him by the rule of law. Cogiki saw this and cursing his brother, gave the omixu the power of the third eye. But the kasha were jealous of this gift, and so they slew their brethren in the fields, and took their third eye.

The Kasha soon discovered that a third eye couldn't grow on bloodied soil.

- Excerpt from the Daedalus Pages.

Vixidy walked down the dark hallway, past the rooms that belonged to her peers. She smoothed her dress. It was a white and red piece made of fine cotton and fashioned in an exaggerated style resembling the traditional life mage coat.

Soon she had exited an archway and was outside in the warm summer air, and in the moonlight she navigated to the auditorium, weaving in and out among the trees and night flowers. She could hear the cooing of the great fowl and see their rotund bodies stalking around in the darkness among the bushes. They loomed about her, and she could see their dark eyes glint as they peered at her from the darkness. She smiled back at them and their blank stares.

For one last time, by moonlight, she looked over the words she had underlined in her notes. Everything was in order, and soon she was through the garden and could hear the faint murmur of people in the distance, and see the pale lights that lit the way to the back. That feeling from before crept back like a chill

over her spine. She picked up her pace and went around the stage to the back behind the curtains.

She reached a small group of the people and joined her peers also waiting to give their presentations. There were only two others dressed to present. One was missing.

“You’re worried,” a voice behind her said. She whirled around and looked up into the eyes of her friend, Erius. In the dimness of the backstage he seemed like a looming tree. She smiled at him and he continued in a hushed voice, “you should not be worried. You are one of the university’s finest students. I am confident that you will perform above expectations. You have never in the past given us cause to suspect otherwise.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” she snapped back in a hushed voice. “You’re an elf! You’re in perfect control of your emotions.”

“I am simply pointing out the reality of the situation.”

“I can’t help but be a little worried.” She was a more than a little worried, and suddenly in disgust she realized she was sweating quit a bit. She whirled her hand and murmured a legerdemain to clean herself off.

“Does it relate to your decision to not share your final project with anyone but Madam Colux?”

“Yes, that is exactly why I am nervous. I’m not sure my subject will interest the board.” She wondered how much she should say. “At least yours is something that the university is interested in.”

“I am not confident my project is unique enough. Much study has already been conducted on the possibility of simplifying antimagic formulas for the commoner’s use. But at the very least, I expect to be well received. But you must consider the fact that General Valis, of the soon to be united armies, asked to speak to you. Even if you do not please the board, your rare talent has already been widely recognized. And you are well liked by the faculty. Little bars your way.”

She thought about that, wondering if he really knew the risk she was taking with this project. Perhaps he was right, and she wasn’t gambling her career at all.

“At the very least, this board member is already satisfied with your work. Soon they will be too.” The two turned to see Madam Colux approach. In the dim light her white and black fur almost sparkled, and her deep blue eyes shone like the moon. She grinned, baring her old but still sharp teeth. “I am confident you will do well, child. What will *you* be presenting on, Erlius?”

Erlius was about to answer when they heard the announcer begin to speak on stage. Through the work of some basic thought magic, the stage manager had made the announcer’s voice much louder than it actually was. This elf spoke for a short bit. He thanked the audience for being there, said a little about the impressive university, the mage guild representatives attending, and then spoke about the students who would be presenting. There were four of them, and Vixidy was the second in line. The first was an elf woman who was from the western plains of Brilista. She had dark skin, and silver hair. They listened to her presentation silently from backstage, while Vixidy tried to breath steadily to calm her raging heart.

The elven woman’s project was about the difference between the use of holy magic bestowed by gods, and the use of neutral magic drawn from one’s own aura, and how holy magic was proven to be more effective at healing, and most importantly, restoring cursed or wounded spirits. She had several examples from her own research to back her claims, as she was a practicing cleric herself. It was an interesting argument on a rather edgy subject currently on the faculty’s mind, and the appropriate camps in the audience applauded her once she had finished. Her presentation was almost an hour long.

As she stepped off the stage she nodded to her peers, and the other three nodded back in approval. Next it was Vixidy, then Erlius, and then an omixu.

The elf gentleman from before stood back up on stage and began, “Thank you Iliia. Now it is my honor to introduce you to our next student. All the way from the prayer islands of Kixin, she is one who has risen up among the ranks of her peers to distinguish herself as a promising life mage. Members of the university, please welcome Vixidy.”

There was applause and then a hush as Vixidy walked around the curtain, out from the side, and took her place by the podium. The light provided by the stage

illusionist was blinding, but she could see the audience along the sides. They all looked at her intently, and there was no shortage of curious faces from the guests in the audience.

She felt she could read their minds. Who was this half-kasha? It had been years since anything remotely human had been granted special regard by the university, and now this half-human half-barbarian stood before them. How perfectly amusing.

She laid her pages down, and then faced the audience. It took her a moment, but she saw Colux's face in the back. Her eyes reflected the lights around, making them glow pale. Vixidy took a great breath and began.

"Colleagues. Professors. Honored board members. Guests. Please permit me to ask you a question that is as old as the Elven Theocracy itself. How does one make an enchantment permanent?" At this, the audience audibly chuckled, but Vixidy was sure a good number more shifted forward attentively. She continued, listening to the sound of her voice boom over the audience.

"Across Arosha mages are in constant demand for their magical skills. Yet whatever enchantment they might cast on an object or person eventually wears off, requiring the mage to be called again in short order. This last year, the Solarian confederacy spent well over 200,000 gold pieces on magical enchantments for its small fleet of twelve airships. It is an economic necessity that this question be solved, which is why so much capital has been invested into finding the answer. I stand here today with an answer." At this she paused, then continued.

"We are all aware of how certain materials like iron, glass, or blood retain idle aura longer than other materials, and the use of evaero gems has extended aura's storability indefinitely, but none of these produce aura themselves. The problem, as it has long been understood, is a problem of consumption. Aura is always consumed by the creation of magical effects, and without a living thing available to provide aura, magical effects cannot last. It is also known that permanent enchantments do indeed exist. Abundant accounts survive describing magical artifacts that have retained their properties for hundreds of years, and the mystery concerning from where they might gain this seemingly limitless reserve of aura has remained elusive.

The current leading theory is that permanent enchantments are capable of being made by establishing a connection between an item and a deific being, such as a god that can provide the aura, similar to how clerics today derive their holy powers from gods or goddesses rather than from their own auras. But so far, little progress has been made on this front. There is a simple reason for this. It is that we are looking in the wrong places." Vixidy took a moment, then, "We have, in fact, been unable to look in the right place because it has been barred from our research. Of the nine fundamentals of magic, current laws have dramatically curbed the study of one. The field I speak of is death magic."

The audience erupted into a wave of murmurs. But Vixidy continued. There were many accounts of ancient artifacts discovered with strange magical auras that seemed to be generated out of nothing. Upon proper study they always lacked the signs of divine influence signaled by an evocation aura, and when subjected to a dispelling, the source of aura would permanently disappear. She gave several examples from reliable accounts, and then moved onto other current beliefs concerning how permanent enchantments might be achieved, carefully picking apart each one. Once she had finished discrediting the three most popular ideas, she related her argument to the work of two leading authorities on the existence and nature of spirits. Colux was one of them. She reminded the audience that recently it was discovered that living things possessed different kinds of spirits, and powerful spells had divined that even the smallest of spirits gave off aura, which could be used for spells when wielded. According to ancient texts, the study of death magic was primarily interested in the augmentation of spirits and their interaction with aura and the physical world.

She was ready to say what she had been building up to. She had imagined a pause before would express the severity of this coming claim, but it quickly slipped out of her mouth as she realized she had been gaining speed: "This theory hinges on the possibility that spirits, are not in fact undying forces destined for eternity after death, but malleable energy sources, capable of having pieces of their essence broken off and bound to physical objects besides their bodies of birth."

Vixidy breathed, the fowl nearby cooed, and the audience remained silent.

“Thus I propose,” she began again, more slowly. “That a study be made of the few sky gems that power our greatest airships. And if we could locate the legendary warrior, Bristler, I suspect an examination of his ancient glaive, Freyja, would prove my theory has weight. This would require someone with experience in practicing death magic.”

“You mean to say,” a tall figure in the back obscured by the light in her eyes declared, “That you have not conducted any personal studies of your own?”

Vixidy tried to shield her eyes to get a view of the naysayer. Her heart sank a little when she saw that it was Arukum, the elf who headed the university’s board. He sat at the back above the rest of the audience with the rest of the board members. She pressed forward in response, “I wasn’t able to perform any personal research because it is illegal to practice necromancy that tampers with spirits, and I would need to travel to the major magical artifacts currently known to be able to conduct any kind of tests. And I am not sufficiently skilled to actually conduct tests to the extent that would be necessary without assistance. What’s more, such experiments are beyond the scope of this project, which is merely meant to develop a theory based on previous research, and to inform future research.”

“So you assumed you could conjure the answer to a question that has plagued experts for over 100 years in the two years you are allotted for this project? And you would presume to break our sacred rule against the study of death magic, a rule made to protect the noble members of this university. Would you then also be so bold as to suggest that we as an administration invest time into your theory, devoting resources to break laws that have been in place for long before you were born? Do you really treat such matters so lightly as to reveal this to us now?”

Vixidy turned pale, and stammered, “I am not finished. I have yet to explain how a study of these artifacts could be safely conducted without the use of death magic to determine if my argument is true. This system I’ve developed is the crux of my project.”

Where was Colux?

“And furthermore!” he intoned over her. “You, a student who was graciously allowed admittance to this prestigious elven university, dares to blaspheme against

the sacredness that is the mortal spirit, granted to us by the great creator of all living things, even the gods.”

“That was not my intention!” She said, raising her voice.

“Do I need to remind you how much damage three infamous necromancers did to this land over the course of several hundred years until their defeat? How dangerous magic can be, as the coven of west from beyond the mountains has reminded us time and time again? Death magic is not, as you might suggest in your youth, taboo because a group of elders arbitrarily supposed it would be best to take precautions, but because the natural end of the dark arts is the destruction of the sanctity of life, the degradation of individuality, and a rebellion against the god’s intended order. Souls and spirits are not resources to be exploited, but sacred gifts. We will not permit their degradation.”

“I am trying to help! If you would just allow me to-.”

Arukum held up his hand and with a flick of his wrist she felt her mouth close under the force of his spell.

So it was over.

But where was Colux! Vixidy searched vainly for the pale eyes, but she couldn’t find them.

The light above her had faded, and the stage master had already dimmed her voice. She wanted to scream, but couldn’t make so much as a peep. Without the ability to speak she couldn’t break the spell that was holding her mouth against her will, and she didn’t know the technique used to resist such a spell’s effect without the use of conventional spoken magic.

“Ms. Vixidy. We do not doubt your intentions. But you are making a fool of yourself and your superiors. Please excuse yourself before any more shame is heaped upon this gathering of honest scholars. We have heard enough. The board will speak with you later.”

The audience stared coolly at her.

Vixidy wanted to cry and roar at the same time, but she carefully gathered her papers and went back stage as composed as she could manage. When she stepped down and arrived at the back everyone avoided eye contact, save one. Colux

approached her, and laying an old and clawed hand on her shoulder said, "Well done child. You tried. Go to my office, I will meet you there." Vixidy looked at her with fire, and then brushed past Colux to leave. As she went she checked to see if Erius was looking. She saw him, but he hadn't made eye contact. She waited for a moment to see if he would look at her. He did not. She left.

When she was gone Erius looked up from his notes and approached the old kasha, who was standing a little hunched over. She looked tired.

"You have made one of our finest students a mockery with your clear absence of proper guidance."

"Silence, you twit!" she growled, and for a moment, her eyes glowed a deep green. "You do not understand what good has been done."

In Colux's office Vixidy sat on a small stool by a desk that had been added there for her almost two years ago by Colux. The only friends present were the books haphazardly stacked around her. She looked at her own piles of notes and research, and absent-mindedly paged through her spell book. She had stopped crying and cursing herself, and was trying to piece together everything that had happened. She felt the comforting softness of the pages of her spell book between her fingers. She had almost filled half of the pages now with the spells she had learned during her time at the university, and each rune she had inscribed over the years seemed like an old familiar face.

This small office, she reflected, had become a home for her the last four years, and Colux had been like a mother, stern but comforting and encouraging when she needed it. She had instructed her student in everything. For the first time in awhile Vixidy asked herself again, why? She asked it bitterly. Why had Colux taken her under her wing? Before Vixidy simply believed it was because she had rare talent. When the relationship had developed further, Vixidy suspected Colux wanted someone to inherit her work. Why else would the old kasha give so much attention to a single student when she could have tutored plenty of other full-blooded kasha

in the school? The madam must have wanted someone who could handle the level of skill required to carry on her work.

But now, Vixidy wondered why Colux had instructed her in these fascinating but taboo theories. How many hours had they wasted talking idly concerning death and life magic? What was the point if it was all going to end in nothing? Why did she encourage her? Would she even graduate now? Without a degree she wouldn't be able to join the mages' guild, and now the university would forever distrust her and watch her closely.

Vixidy shook her head in frustration. Would the board implicate Colux along with Vixidy? It seemed almost certain. Her head ached with the weight of the questions, and the more and more she thought the angrier she became. Was she now doomed to join the military as a healing mage consultant! What had Colux done? And why?

Vixidy turned from her desk and faced the empty desk on the other side of the small room. She was shaking.

She waited a couple minutes longer. She resisted the urge to get up and pace the room. There wasn't much space to pace in anyways. Instead she played with the edge of a bookmark, until she had torn it into tiny pieces. Then she took the panther at the end of her necklace, and took it off from around her neck. She stared at the little figurine for a moment, and then squeezed it as tight as she could. It did not break. She bundled it up and put it in her pocket.

The door creaked open and Colux entered. Vixidy stood up and stared fiercely at the old kasha. Colux looked at Vixidy, so young and full of life, and felt that old twinge of jealousy she had often felt and stifled before.

"Sit down, child. I know you're angry."

Vixidy sat, and stared at her tutor as she carefully got behind her desk and took her seat. Three stained glass windows on the wall behind framed Colux's desk, and through them the moon filtered a ghostly red, green, yellow, and red light upon her fur. Colux reached forward and lifted a small teapot over and poured cold tea

into a cup. She glanced and gestured at Vixidy. Vixidy shook her head, so Colux set the teapot back down and sipped thoughtfully at her cup for a moment in silence.

“Alright, Vixidy, speak your mind.”

The student turned white in the face again, and for a moment, she didn't respond. Then, when she stood, everything came loose: “Why!” Vixidy said, just short of shrieking. “Why did you lie to me? You lied! You said you were going to speak with them. But you lied! And now it's all gone to hell. What was the point? Oh gods,” she fell into her seat and let out a sob.

Colux stood up, and coming around the desk laid a hand on Vixidy's back. Vixidy was only twenty-one years old. She had joined the university when she was fourteen, and this had been the only home she had known since then. Her good work alone had provided her a place, and now she felt like she was going to lose it. Colux understood this, but she also knew that this half-breed was young, and still had plenty of life left in her.

“Child, you still have a future. I know you're angry. You've been humiliated. But you still have a future. Tonight you and I have made a protest that soured in the mouths of the board members. But you made your argument very well. Although I wish you hadn't responded to Arukum's prods and continued with your speech.” She took a single clawed finger and put it under the young girl's chin, and lifted her face to look her in the eye. This half-breed's face so resembled a human's, save its great crown of soft, pitch-black hair, pointed cat ears atop her head, and those eyes. Those were kasha eyes, but the tears were human, she knew, the tears that the girl's Oumi rebelled against. Colux wondered if this young half-breed's warrior spirit would help her achieve greatness or drive her to an early grave. She was counting on the former, despite her own dislike for impurity of blood. But this disgust was mixed with a feeling of protectiveness.

How confusing emotions were.

Still looking in her eyes Colux began again. “You have a bright future. I know that General Valis who spoke with you was recruiting for the new united army. They need skilled life mages to act as healers. I was the one who made sure to recommend

you to him.” Colux dropped Vixidy’s gaze and returned to her desk. “I always look after my own.”

“But I don’t want to join the army.” Vixidy said, regaining composure. She brushed her hair back and stared at the old kasha.

“You don’t have much of a choice. I cannot protect you.” Vixidy looked away and bit her lip, but Colux continued. “My own place on the board will be suspect soon. You did not take this risk alone, my dear. But please keep in mind the army is no small opportunity. Mages who consult for the army are given benefits, and I’m sure you will be outfitted with a suitable study to continue your work. You’ll be paid well, and will be working with members of the mage’s guild also hired by the army. You’ll get to meet hundreds of important people.” Colux smiled dryly.

But Vixidy turned to avoid her gaze.

The old life mage sighed and looked up at a stack of books on a shelf above. “I want you to take the job, Vixidy. I want you to leave this place. It’s no good for a girl who deserves to be free to study as she wishes. And you’ll have much more freedom in the army. I have heard they encourage their mages to experiment more freely than other organizations. As a consultant, you won’t be as watched as closely, which is more to hope for even from the mages’ guild. You should leave on the first airship to head south and then onto the capital, Eterna” She got up and pulled a couple books off the shelf, and from behind them lifted down a large package bound tightly in strings and wrapping parchment. She took it to Vixidy and handed it to her. “This is a gift. I want you to open it when you have left the university.”

Vixidy accepted the package and looked it over. She recognized several revocation runes written along the wrapping, suggesting it had been enchanted to prevent any auras from passing through, and the enchantment she could feel was fresh. Judging by its heavy weight and shape, it was probably a great tome. Colux returned to her seat again and faced Vixidy. Vixidy breathed out one long breath, slowly, and for a moment, she seemed incredibly small.

“I don’t have any experience fighting.” Vixidy murmured. Then after clearing her throat and more clearly, “I’m not sure I am suited for the army.”

“Don’t be silly child. You’re a life mage, not a war mage. You’ll be acting alongside healers. You won’t have to hurt anyone. And remember, your Oumi is a warrior. You will know what to do if you find yourself in a tough place.”

Vixidy touched her necklace and looked at her tutor, and Colux regarded her back. It seemed like a wall was growing between them, and for a moment Vixidy felt like the ground was flying out from beneath her. She resisted the urge to cry. Instead she stiffened and looked Colux in the eye.

For a while, silence ruled.

Colux wondered if she had ever been so young and full of passion. For a moment, she felt truly sorry that she had set this young one on such a road. But it needed to happen, now more so than ever. She had to get that book out of her possession and into the hands of someone more capable. Someone younger.

She wondered if Vixidy had heard how the mage’s guild was based in the cosmopolitan city of Jaramia and if she had hoped to meet other half-breeds. No doubt Vixidy now felt more betrayed than ever. She was alone. Had this young half-kasha ever had anyone she could completely trust? Vixidy would have to say goodbye to the elves she knew. Colux reached into her heart, and tried to find the words to comfort her student, but it came out as a tired piece of instruction, “Vixidy, when you get to the new capital, I want you to make friends with the first person you meet. Understood?”

Vixidy turned her head away again. Then she said through her teeth, “I wish there was a spell that could make you stop feeling things.”

Colux gave her a curious look. “Well, there is, but I won’t teach it to you.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is forbidden.”

Vixidy watched the ground and its inhabitants fade below as the airship rose into the sky. Boarding had been quick and unceremonious. Colux had been the only one to see her off. Despite herself, Vixidy gave her a parting hug.

“I may not remain here long,” Colux had said. “The university is going to investigate my work to see if it is appropriate to maintain me on the board. It is just an excuse to find something wrong and remove me from my position. Perhaps I will come and visit you in Eterna sometime.”

The porter who had showed Vixidy to her small room had been very sweet, asking her questions and being generally gentle. She appreciated it, although she didn't trust humans. Now she rested on her tiny bed and looked through the glass of her single porthole. The room was too small, and her trunk of things was cramped up against her bed, clumsily thrown in with her pack. She felt like an animal stuffed into a cage.

After the ground was long gone and all she could see was the endless sea of thick treetops rushing below, the captain came by and introduced himself and asked if she needed anything. She thanked him and said no. The trip was straight to Eterna. It turns out this trade ship had stopped by to pick up supplies, potions, and a re-enchantment for its flying gems on its way to the new capital, and she had lucked out in catching it. She had all her papers in order, and knew that an orientation specialist would receive her when she arrived, but still she felt lost. The feeling was akin to when she had left her island and her village in Kixin to go to university with the recruiters. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the perfectly smooth black stone, and gave it a little kiss, then put it back.

She played with her small black panther, which she was wearing again, and wondered if she should read to pass the time till she fell asleep. Then she remembered.

She reached over to her trunk and wrestled it open. She pulled out the package bound in magic and set it on her lap. “Dispel,” she said waiving her hand. A little bit of blue light circled her fingers and a series of blue runes flashed before her eyes. The spell on the packaging faded. A shiver ran down her back. She hesitated, and then tore the wrapping off.

It was an enormous, frayed book with thick leather binding. It had to be a spell book. But Vixidy had never seen it before in Colux's study. She opened it to the first page, and nearly screeched. Written in dark green ink, the first page read,

“Colux’s Complete Tome of Death Magic,” and beneath it a subscript in fresher ink,
“be careful, Vixidy. This is our legacy.”