Hi Meredith,

Your story, “Shards of Midnight,” is a horror-fantasy story about a coroner who sets out on a quest to uncover a government conspiracy.

**What’s working**

The story has extensive world-building, and it feels like a lot of thought was put into the setting and how the feeling of the world interacts with the tone of the story at large. By melding fantasy elements within a Victorian-inspired world of horror, an exciting product emerges that makes it unique. Although one would assume that because this is a horror story, it must focus solely on horror; however, the fact that it subverts this expectation by instead being about a government conspiracy involving horror-fantasy elements is unexpected and refreshing.

The world of the story feels very real with your descriptions. I can see everything clearly in my head. I felt like I was looking at the flying districts of the primary setting from a faraway distance, and I could feel the sewer's damp, cold, confined quarters.

My favorite character, hands down, is Cain. His smart-ass attitude and smarminess make him instantly rememberable and likable. His relationship with Harper is fantastic. You can tell they’ve been around each other for a long time and are really close.

**What needs work**

With that said, the characters—except Cain—felt flat. There were descriptions of their appearances, but while that provided a visual image for the reader, I couldn’t decipher their personalities. At the end of the story, I couldn’t remember the characters’ names besides Cain because I didn’t get a feel for their character. When reading the story, I felt like I was watching blank mannequins going through the world. This forks into another issue where there was too much telling and not enough showing when the characters reacted to something. Usually, it was “[X] made a face.” Describing how a character physically reacts to something makes them memorable and offers a peek into their inner workings, which is something this story desperately needed.

There is extensive world-building, and it’d be safe to assume that you put a lot of work into it, but there was too much. Weird, unfamiliar words constantly appeared. I would see them, not have them explained, then move on to another weird word. I honestly can’t remember the name of the setting, the country, or the town where these chapters take place. All I know is that they were weird. I know that when writing, it’s easy to assume that your reader is also in your head and understands everything on the page. Still, an explanation is sorely needed to keep the reader oriented and engaged in the world when dealing with a fantastical setting.

Additionally, there was too much exposition at once, and I felt overwhelmed by it. Personally, I’m not too fond of exposition in dialogue because it makes it feel fake. If the characters were real, then what they’re saying would already be known and redundant. The exposition also fell victim to the weird word problem. Along with a word being introduced, the word would tie directly into the exposition, so not only was the word confusing, but the exposition was also confusing. I know you had a word limit, but exposition in fantasy-inspired settings should be drip-fed to the audience to get them acclimated to the world; later, when everything alien is known to the audience, then you’re freer to up the information dumping.

The assault of exposition also hurt the pacing. Two sequences come to mind that was paced well: the fight in the sewer and the scene in the morgue when the higher-up comes to visit Harper and Cain. Not only was the exposition a lot to take in at once, but it also happened rapid-fire, and it felt like the exposition was being pushed out as quickly as possible to move on to the next plot point. If you slow down and expand these exposition scenes, it will also help the confusion a reader would have when reading this for the first time. Works of fantasy are often long because they must decompress and unpack a lot of information for the reader to melt into the world. Slow and steady wins the race for a reason.

**Answers to questions**

1. Harper and Alliaster were forgettable; their personalities were a mystery to me, and I wasn’t invested in them.
2. Neither feel like established characters. They’re just there.
3. Cain was a good side character. I want more of him and his relationship with Harper.
4. The world-building is confusing, and there’s too much of it.
5. The flow of information is too fast; it needs to be slower.
6. The setting feels like a real world with rules to how it operates, but the use of weird words amongst exposition that are required to know hurts the setting establishment.
7. I didn’t notice at all that Alliaster had barely any description. If anything, it hurts him and makes him feel like a faceless antagonist instead of a future co-protagonist.

It’s very good, but the amount of exposition, the vocabulary of foreign words, and the characters need work. I want to read the revision.

All the best,

Payton Ison