Potential revision focus

Your project shows an *extremely* strong foundation, and it's been a pleasure to give this a read-through. The characters are memorable, and the action, romance, and occult plot threads are engaging and emotional. Your comedic timing is also spot-on.

The major task facing your project right now is polishing its economy of narrative and pacing, then sprucing up the non-comedic dialogue and worldbuilding for maximum impact. In addition, the opening and closing chapters will require a little extra *oomph* to both lure readers in and deliver a meaningful payoff. Finally, exposition is occasionally repetitious—and some sequences are here that don't pull a lot of weight in either moving the story along or divulging new and useful data to the reader.

However, this manuscript is well on its way to a very polished draft. Kudos. Let's tighten this up.

Areas to prune

Visual description tangents

While your characters have unique and memorable appearances, there is a pattern in this work of interrupting all proceedings to describe them in deep detail, particularly what they are wearing. Sometimes this can take a full paragraph or more. While some visual flavor is necessary, too much is robbing your dramatic exchanges of power. If everyone in a scene stops talking so we can analyze the outfit choice of each new arrival, it makes pacing pause and stutter—essentially creating a feel as if all characters are floating in on a fashion runway. This can tear focus away from what might actually be important for the reader to learn so they can understand and appreciate the story at hand.

The level-best time to go over a character's appearances is often when we first meet them, and you do this. However, it's a great idea to interweave sensory description (and not just visual details!) with actions and dialogue, giving each bit in small chunks—this makes for a smoother, natural flow of reading. It forces us to learn not just what someone looks like, but how they move, how they sound, and how they act all at once, like we do in real life. Plus, it allows the plot to progress at the same time.

For a practical example, on page 83, this is your wizard's fourth appearance, and his third new outfit. A quick once-over of what he's wearing *is* good, particularly since his frequent wardrobe switches serve as a narrative device. However, this massive chunk of outfit description is delaying real, meaningful narrative. You delay for two fashion-focused paragraphs before you get to what he's doing and saying— and he's moving towards the paladin "like a drunken lion" while making threats! This moment's supposed to be a powder keg. Fork over the critical data that your reader needs up-front—the look of his socks and buttons is infinitely lesser in comparison.

However, you can let us know the color of his buttons *while* he's tearing open his robe to get at his hidden wand so he can attack. You can tell us just what his hat looks *while* he anxiously adjusts it and trades venomous dialogue with his enemy. Just **do not** sacrifice the scene's pacing.

I've called out about seven scenes that could use this kind of attention throughout the manuscript; check out the comments for more specifics.

Training sequences
Ah, the training montage. It's a decent shorthand device. But, it's very established that the team is full of fighters— we don't really need four separate "training" scenes throughout the tale that impart no useful data beyond their fighting skill plus some fun banter. If you need to update the reader on someone's abilities, it could probably be done in other scenes, including a few of the "for real" fighting sequences that are actively advancing the plot.

Like for the fashion edits suggested above, keep this editing mantra in mind: anything filler should be *ruthlessly* purged.

Name-drops
The care you've given to crafting your characters' family trees is obvious. You can really see the worldbuilding ethos here.

However, there can be too much of a good thing here. Character names are a bit like a seasoning, and dropping too many can overwhelm the dish, especially in a tale that targets "lighter" fantasy readers. Naming a character is very frequently authorial shorthand that a character is elevated above the unnamed masses for a *reason*.

For example, the princess acts as if she is obligated to tell us the names of her father's five brothers. But, none of them even appear in the story. I recall you

said one or two *might* appear in book three or four—however, are they actually going to be important there? And will they be so important that it is imperative to *this* story to discuss them now, even when you tell us nothing else about them? At first, while reading, I tried remembering them and many others, only to realize I could have saved that brain-space for more relevant things.

It's okay to keep those names under your hat, so to speak, until they're needed.

There's a handful of instances such as this, including the naming of various merchants and smugglers and so forth, and I've marked them in the manuscript. A good rule to follow is to only name characters of importance to the here and now of *this* book, and also characters which you know will *definitively* have major importance in books to come. Otherwise, it's alright for them to simply exist as unnamed presences—"the tailor", or "the one-eyed first mate", etc.

Groo and Thrawk
These two offer quite a few excellent comedic moments. However, they are, for all intents and purposes, the same person. I haven't sussed out a narrative reason why there needs to be two of them. In this case, pruning one would save you narrative space and time, and give the readers one less person they need to keep track of in this extensive ensemble.

Alternatively, you can expand them in slightly different directions from each other, making them complementary personalities that fulfill unique narrative roles.

However, with the current story structure, and given that neither of them are lynchpins on which the plot turns, it may be best to simply make a cut.

Areas to enhance

Setting
Overall, as I've mentioned, your worldbuilding is thorough. Your highlights of culture, customs, and turns-of-phrase are intriguing. However, a little more focus could be used in applying your worldbuilding to the setting readers see when you open up new scenes.

For example, on page 76, the main group convenes at an entrance path to a nearby forest. Though the properties of the artifact they discuss are carefully elaborated, there isn't much about their surroundings that sets them apart from the meeting on the beach a hundred pages later, or at the tomb fifty pages after that. All of these scenes could have been lifted out of their respective environments and placed in another's with little effect on the actions the characters take or the detail the reader receives. Without the grounding of what a setting means to a scene, the overall world feels less real—a small blind spot in an otherwise meticulous tapestry.

Some good questions that can help fill in the blanks for at least one of these instances: is this tomb scene in a warm climate, or does Azkanar need to pull his cloak in to keep back the chill of the grave? What do these burial grounds tell us about how this culture views and treats their dead (an important detail since we are dealing with a necromancer)? How does Azkanar feel about this place? Is the smell of death repugnant (or hauntingly familiar?) Is this a catacomb with the bones on display, or do we only see plaques/memorials? Are there visitors here, or does everyone else stay away?

You share very much about how characters feel about *each other*, and that is great. It makes the relationships real. The same goes for the objects, magic systems, and histories. But if you tell us how your immediate environments make your characters feel too, how it makes them react as they dwell in this carefully crafted space—that is how the *setting* starts to seem real. Definitely keep an eye to this as you flesh out these scenes.

Nadine's character arc
Nadine's tale is one of the cornerstones of your primary plot, but it doesn't end very well for her. Trussed up by the necromancer that killed her parents? Waiting helplessly as the rest of her friends come to save her? When the necromancer dies, she has no agency in that, and it feels as if it robs her arc of both satisfaction and closure.

You've told me you've very much wanted to create a "strong female character" here that will resonate with your target demographic. She is just this for much of the story—a farmer girl who can't even read but discovers she can use magic, who realizes she can fight if she chose to. She carries some great presence mid-book. But robbing her of agency for most of the third act is probably in conflict with your goals. You've spent a lot of effort to build her up—even if she doesn't get *exactly* what she wants, she shouldn't feel forgotten or an afterthought as others achieve her objectives while she sits useless.

That said, since she often avoids direct confrontation, making her the one to swing that finishing blow is not necessary. Agency can come in many forms. Perhaps she gets free and snatches the ritual items so the necromancer botches his spell. Or perhaps she uses her clever words to trick her foe. There are many possibilities here. No matter what you land on, a little payoff for Nadine by her own hands will go a long way.

Dialogue
Enjoyable—sometimes I really did laugh aloud. It's quite snappy when it's meant to be funny. I would say, though, that you should turn your eye on *any* and *all* conversations that are not necessary to the economy of narrative. There are some lines that repeat information already given, or don't really tell us anything meaningful (and even comedy can tell us something new about the story!)

One of the most useful pieces of advice I know regarding writing dialogue is this: when people talk in real life, it's fairly boring, with lots of redundancies. But when people talk in engaging fiction, it's more akin to exchanging live hand grenades. Every last line should try to have *impact*. This might mean revealing more about a character, lightening a mood that desperately needs it, advancing the story and/or conversation, or any number of other purposes. It can be several of these things at once. But it should never mean *nothing*. Read every single line of dialogue and ask if it needs to be said right there and then, if it serves a purpose. Snappy and clean is the name of the game. Even if a pithy one-liner is good, if it's surrounded by a sea of pithy one-liners, is it really accomplishing anything? Or is it filler? In particular, look to chapters five and thirteen for the more egregious examples (but audit the whole book).

Also, definitely take a close look at all of the times when you have your characters meeting up to exchange information they've learned. I've highlighted about ten such scenes in the manuscript. The reader was with your characters when they made their discoveries, and repeating it blow-by-blow for the sake of another character, tossing in a couple jokes—does this add anything new to the reader's experience? Or can it just be summarized, the good jokes saved for later? An example of a summary might be, "Frell told Sassafras what he'd learned in that dreary temple. It didn't seem to give the wizard any peace of mind." Saying something like this would eliminate several paragraphs worth of redundant dialogue from said scene which tells the reader nothing new.

A further dialogue note: the characters tend to use each other's names a lot. For example, from page 133:

> "Oh, come now, **Nadine**. You know I'm a thief." Pricklepie drummed his wine-stained belly good-naturedly.
> "I know, **Pricklepie**. I just wish *you'd* sometimes forget that." She sighed.
> Mischievously, the rogue's grin spread. "**Nadine**. Come with us."

This is a fairly common sort of construction throughout the book. A common habit in dialogue is for a writer to have characters overuse the names/nicknames of people they are talking to, when in fact this *only very rarely* occurs in natural English-language conversation. Watch yourself when speaking with friends or family—how often do you really use their names?

Finally, make sure you give clean paragraph breaks whenever anyone new starts to speak. This includes for internal monologues.

Unique character quirks
Your two primary narrators, Nadine and Frell, are easy to hold in the mind's eye. They are highly individual and memorable. However, a few of your side characters tend to exhibit the same "stock" fidgets and behaviors, making them seem strangely alike. Numerous women fiddle with their braids when anxious, or have their eyes glittering when they laugh. Most of the men, when spooked, "reach for the reassuring presence" of their daggers/swords/bows/etc throughout the tale. People have unique fidgets, smells, quirks of speech, and a lot more. Not everyone reacts to a situation the same way. You shouldn't have to go into intense descriptive detail for big chunks of text, but there should be some small words devoted to what makes a person's small actions *specific to them*.

Explicit romance
From what you've told me of your target audience, the semi-explicit sex scene in chapter nineteen may run afoul of parental censure. Obviously, most teens are accustomed to reading about sex in some capacity, and this clearly does not read as porn. However, it still may need to be toned down somewhat for these particular genre standards—perhaps the scene fades to black, perhaps you focus mostly on the emotional/romantic aspect, and/or perhaps you just don't name what exactly the genitals are doing. There's quite a few options. But as it currently stands, it may just be a *shade* too much.

First chapter

This is arguably your most important chapter. Your readers—or potential agents—are going to determine whether or not they want to read the rest of your story based on even your first page. Hooking the readers is critical here.

Unfortunately, your establishing shot of a sunny academy goes on a shade too long—4 pages, with description of everyday mage school life—to be particularly intriguing. It's enjoyable, and well-written. It's just not… a hook.

You don't have to follow the oft-repeated advice to outright drop the reader into a conflict. That works for some writers, but a hook is about more than "oh no, there's gunfire in line 1, what will happen?" Here, I can tell you have intended to set up an everyday magical student, and then add the intrigue in small doses. The only issue is that the intrigue doesn't begin quickly enough.

I would suggest, however, that if you reorder the chapter scenes slightly you could achieve both the opening setting exposition and hook the reader from page one. The interesting part begins on the fifth page, when Frell discovers that crumpled, hidden page of a book from the restricted section. We actually don't need a lot of introductory detail to immediately sympathize with this conflict: not only does a devoted student realize that someone around him is attempting to learn about highly forbidden arts, but we also know that if anyone finds him holding this page, he may stand accused of the crime and face immediate expulsion. Plus the page is cursed, and he can't actually put it down!

That's great narrative material.

If you can move that up in your introduction, your establishing information about the academy will take on a new light and create added interest for your readers, as it makes the coming details more noteworthy (and sometimes ironic). It's peaceful, this setting, and that will stand in high contrast to the plot tension as Frell nervously tries to move about his day as if nothing is wrong.

Last chapter
Your tale draws to a good close. You've left enough questions open to create the series you've mentioned, but you've also resolved the central conflict established in the beginning, so it feels complete and rewarding to come to the last page.

With one exception: Nadine's arc. I mentioned this above in "Areas to Enhance". With some tweaking of her role in the final conflict, her peaceful

feelings at the very end will make a lot more sense. As it stands, it feels somewhat out of character for her to be so mellow about what happened to her when she ultimately could do nothing about it. That detracts from an otherwise solid wrap-up.

Midpoint
I would label your book's "midpoint" roughly between chapters eight and fourteen.

An extremely common issue among many writers is sustaining tension and pacing throughout a work. The midpoint is almost always where things start to noticeably sag—you're trying to move the story from A to C, but that middle part is often never quite so clear in the planning stages.

In this book, this holds a little true. Your characters achieved getting ahold of that special amulet by the end of your first act, and realized they needed to journey to find an ostensibly mad wizard before they can take down the necromancer at the end. The problem is the journey, which largely consists of wandering from scene to scene on the tides of chance rather than design. It's almost episodic, as if the scenes are monster-of-the-week asides on TV: the team raids an old castle library, but are set on by assassins (ostensibly sent by Azkanar, but how did he even know about them? This incident is never mentioned again.) They take a side trip to a haunted hot springs. They get wrapped up in a feud between thieves.

And the issue with it all is that very little happens *that actually matters* by book's end. There's some excellent hilarity, and some good illumination of character personality that should absolutely stay. The individual episodes are enjoyable on their own. But for large swaths, the plot almost goes on hold, and that can be a drag on the attention span of a reader invested in said plot.

However, you do hint at a few things that would very much repair that. The subplot of Sassafras's trail of riddles and relics actually could serve to connect all of these isolated incidents and make them mean something. I know Frell just says it as a joke, but that would quite literally fix the problem. What if, instead of visiting the hot springs to cool off, the team learned from their secret library adventure that there was a clue in those springs regarding Sassafras's location? What if the haunting there is caused by one of his leftover relics that then would continue to send them to Sandia—where another clue is held by those overly ambitious thieves?

No matter what you choose, tying these incidents together to the main plot would go a long way to pick up the narrative sag throughout the midpoint. If you'd like to discuss ideas you have with me, feel free.

Antagonist(s)

Many who work with me know I take a special interest in a work's antagonists. I wanted to take a moment to call out that Azkanar is particularly well-developed. Tales of simple good vs. evil can be interesting, but unfortunately many writers fall into a trap where they feel they don't have to develop a villain as powerfully as a protagonist, leaving their motivations simply at "because evil." This is what makes Azkanar a refreshing take on how very evil a person's actions can be even when they fully believe themselves to be the hero of the story. His descent as the tale went on was believable, and it elicits many complicated feelings—wanting him to win in small ways, and wanting him to fail because of how much his victory would cost this land and its people.

Needless to say, that is the good sweet spot to hit. Extra kudos on the jokes that he doesn't monologue his sinister designs to anyone who will listen, so no one knows what he's up to.

Protagonist(s)

Excepting above suggestions on how the side characters may be further developed, your heroes, particularly Nadine and Frell, are quite relatable, with their own flaws, strengths, and unique voices. Further, Nadine's plot arc resolution aside, you've employed a "reluctant heroes" narrative to good effect.

However, Frell takes a little longer to get into "likable" territory than Nadine does. By the middle of the book, I was rooting for him, no problem. But at the beginning… he comes off as a little whiny. I suspect the intent here was for him to be a sort of jokey, sarcastic teenager who has some insights into the ridiculousness of the regimented magical student life. Unfortunately, it doesn't land 100%. Having some ill will towards school is largely a universal human experience, but he tends to laser in on how things inconvenience him rather than how they are necessarily bad. This is what skirts over that gray line into "whiny" territory.

For example, like Frell, a teenager might not like going to class with a particular teacher, and they might say it's because there's too much homework, and because the professor is *oooooold*—so why should they listen? This does come off on the adult ear as silly and whiny… like Frell

sometimes does, in the beginning. However, the truth of the matter is typically something far more relatable, and the reason why teenagers don't perceive *themselves* as whiny. Usually, a teenager wants less homework because the constant barrage of assignments from classes is vast and never-ending, and they desperately want time to themselves, or to enjoy time with friends, like all people do. Maybe the "ooooooold" teacher has demonstrated profound ignorance on a specific modern issue important to a student, damaging their credibility as a knowledgeable authority in general (and questioning who should be an authority is a huge part of growing up.)

If you reframe Frell's jokey complaints to target specific reasons rather than general stereotypes adults tend to dismiss, it will do wonders to make him relatable, particularly for teenage readers.

There are also a handful of spots throughout the narrative where Frell and Nadine's emotional states or logic aren't 100% explained in an easily understandable way. It is relatively minor and can be managed with a few additional sentences—as you go through, you should ensure sure the reader is never baffled about where your protagonists are getting their conclusions. I've marked these spots out in the manuscript so you can quickly pinpoint them.

This is a shorter analysis than I often deliver, but truly, beyond these broad points, your draft is genuinely solid. However, as mentioned, I've also attached an annotated manuscript to highlight some finer details. Let's hop out of the high-level view and into that. If you have questions or need clarifications, feel free to message me, as always.