

The Last Refuge

Christina Bacilieri

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A girl comes of age via resistance, trespassing into a magical world, in the epic fantasy novel The Last Refuge.

In Christina Bacilieri's fantasy novel *The Last Refuge*, a damaged world is overseen by an autocratic government that suppresses magic even as it relies on it.

Atterah's six continents are overseen by a ruling board that employs surveillance technology, issues harsh punishments to keep its citizens in a state of fearful obedience, and denies people access to the magical powers that make the world habitable. Etabon, the region where magic resides, is overseen by a power-hungry and malicious despot, Hollowfeld, who oversees a tournament pitting magical humans against one other; their energy is channeled toward Atterah's healing.

In this world, stubborn, determined Kiera was raised by a loving single mother. When she crosses the magical threshold into Etabon by accident, Kiera is transformed into a powerful feline form. Hollowfeld is impressed by Kiera's rare transformation; it's a sign of her inchoate potential for magic. Thus, Kiera strikes a bargain with Hollowfeld to avoid punishment from the Ruling Board. She enters the tournament; if she wins, it will guarantee the protection of her mother and classmates.

This is an action-packed novel featuring startling fight scenes and formidable opponents to overcome. Its progression also features refreshing surprises including a queer romance. Atterah itself is fleshed out as a place in which idiosyncratic magical bargains are made and transformations are possible. Its enlivening elements include a radio scrambler that masks conversations, roving drones, and hover planes; some of these details, though, emerge and disappear with speed amid the suspenseful action scenes. Still, the magical possibilities in Atterah are promising; it's a world of inexhaustible potential.

Hollowfeld makes an excellent villain—the perfect foil for likable Kiera, who exemplifies strong moral judgments and an innate desire to save others from harm. As a heroine, she inspires those around her with ease. Still, her straightforward convictions risk flattening her characterization. Further, those around are also developed along a binary—either evil and power-hungry or good, moral, and steadfast through impossible circumstances. Still, as Kiera benefits from the help of allies that she makes in quick and easy form—including Attalin, whom Kiera saves from a poison dagger, and Wrenley, her paternal trainer—the novel achieves swift satisfaction.

In the immersive fantasy novel *The Last Refuge*, oppressed people band together, using magic to protect each other, resist evil, and create a better world.

MIKE GOOD (April 11, 2024)

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