

May 30, 2012

Dear Xander,

Learning about the editing process through working with *Elementals* was a project I really enjoyed, and I want to thank you for sharing your work and allowing that enjoyment to happen. When I finish writing a story, I often feel nervous about the first reader's reaction, and can only imagine the boldness it takes to allow an entire class to read and dissect something you hold so dearly.

I was interested in the concept of *Elementals* right from the start, and think you've laid the groundwork here for a story that will resonate with a lot readers. My wish is that my suggestions help you say what you want to say in the most efficient way possible, and that my ideas help spur your plan of attack for your next draft.

I find it helpful in my writing to mold the intricacies of plot lines by starting with believable character actions, rather than starting with each plot line set and skewing the characters to hit each point. For that reason, my letter will be focused strongly around my character impressions, and will then segue into a few plot suggestions and notes from my read-throughs that I wanted to share with you.

Again, I can't thank you enough for giving me the opportunity to work with an interesting manuscript.

## CHARACTERS

**Cyrus and relatability.** It was not clear to me that Cyrus was the protagonist until about twenty-five pages into the manuscript because we are told so little about him. I found myself becoming easily frustrated with him because I couldn't relate to him and didn't understand his actions. Slowly, the more I began to learn about and understand Cyrus, the more enjoyable I found the story.

The more a reader knows about Cyrus, the more likely they are to identify with him; and the more they identify with him, the more likely they are to root for his survival and success. You have the pieces: Cyrus's horrible childhood and the creation of the characters of Jed and Jezebel, but I think the story would benefit from a higher amount of this information, and being told it much earlier on.

The detailing of Cyrus's past doesn't have to be through dialog. Perhaps Cyrus could detail flashbacks while he's training—brief remembrances of fighting for survival in alleys triggered by elemental battles—or, like some of the Seth interludes, individual

chapters could involve more detailed stories of Cyrus's youth. Rather than Cyrus or Julian relating the tales through conversation, a chapter could revolve around Michael killing Cyrus's mother and dumping him in the alley. This would give us a glimpse of Michael's rise and create sympathy for Cyrus very early on. Framing these scenes as "in the moment" rather than as Cyrus's dialog will add more immediacy and leave the reader feeling like the outcome is less predictable. When we hear Cyrus retelling a story, his relation of it tells us that he's moved past it some, but when we are in the moment, the emotions are more raw.

Any glimpse at Cyrus's difficult past significantly raised my acceptance of some of his more objectionable behaviors. However, these behaviors were still a big roadblock in my acceptance of Cyrus as a hero worthy of the praise he received from others. Julian, for example, tells us that Cyrus is complex and good-natured, but Cyrus's actions don't seem to hold up to Julian's perceptions. Julian says:

"He doesn't classify people as useful or disposable. He sees the qualities that can make them valuable allies, but he has an exceptionally strict moral code that he never contradicts... I caught a glimpse of his mind today. He's doing it for the right reasons." (137)

These proclamations are overshadowed by Cyrus's actions because, generally, we are more apt to trust what we see than what we are told. Instead of just being told that Julian knows Cyrus is brutalizing other students for the right reasons, we need to see more examples of Cyrus's strict moral code and him treating his loyal followers well so that we can judge that for ourselves. These passages seem to contradict with the other character's statements that Cyrus treats his followers with respect and kindness:

"Can we have a moment to talk it over?"

"No," Cyrus said calmly, amusement dancing in his eyes and in the upturned corners of his mouth. He looked as if he might laugh and tell them he was joking. They waited for him to do so, but Cyrus went on watching them with the same amused look. The joke, apparently, was that he was serious (61)

“Since I’ve chosen you as my voice for the earth elementals, if they question your orders, they’ll actually be questioning my orders, which will not be tolerated” (104)

Cyrus’s brutality, resistance to authority, and recruitment by fear were particular character traits that I thought went too far and undermined his likability as a hero. It seems very cruel and unnecessarily brutal to seriously harm people who wish to surrender, like Cyrus did in battles when he didn’t want an opponent to yield. I thought it would strike enough fear in the other students that such strong opponents were terrified to face him. Unfortunately, not only does Cyrus not allow some students to yield, he and Luke completely dehumanize them by branding them like cattle and swinging them around by their hair:

Luke followed suit and branded his victim with a single swift flow, then communicated an idea to Cyrus in the form of a picture. Cyrus showed his acceptance by reaching for the hair of the man beneath him as Luke did the same. In a final surge of brutality, they swung the pair of heads together, using their hair for handles. (78)

Cyrus definitely has a distinct ethic. My main impression of him is that he does not have respect for rules or law—he makes his own rules and is his own, judge, jury, and executioner. Who is a captain, who isn’t good enough to join the cause, and which gang members should be allowed to continue living are all decided by Cyrus’s judgment. Cyrus can feel like he has to put himself in a position of ultimate authority to succeed—that having followers in deference to him is the only way he can succeed—but perhaps after his breakdown he might learn that his self-imposed loneliness and fear tactics were not the only or optimal way to lead.

Cyrus doesn’t have to be a Boy Scout, and with the life he’s had, nor should he be—he should be how you, the author, imagine him—but the more marginalized his actions and beliefs are, the harder it’s going to be for readers to relate to him. This does not mean he has to be passive, malleable, or changed to fit the ethics of the average reader. There are ways you can keep Cyrus the same at the core, while still garnering sympathy

for his character. The rest of this letter has more of those suggestions peppered throughout.

If you feel the more drastic scenes of Cyrus's behavior should remain, such as the branding scene, adding in more of Cyrus's regret and conflicted feelings about the people he's killed, humiliated, or hurt would help readers connect with the character better. Perhaps scenes where he's alone with himself, questioning his actions, and struggling with what he feels he has to do could accomplish this. Thinking, "Is this the right way? What if this doesn't work? What if all the pain I've caused isn't worth it?" and "Have I crossed a line?" would help give him dimension and appeal more to the average reader.

There are a few hints that his breakdown in "Every Night" is coming, but I think it would be more effective if there were more moments and a bigger arc leading up to it. It seemed very sudden to me; building up to it more overtly with additional vulnerable admissions by Cyrus would take the great hints you already have and get what I think was your intended result out of them. Here are some of Cyrus's sympathetic admissions that I think are effective:

Cyrus had never known the loving touch of a mother, so he could only miss it with the longing ache of lonely imagining. To know it and have it taken away without any warning was something else entirely. (88)

He was disgusted with himself for rationalizing it, but he set his jaw and did what he deemed necessary, putting his feelings aside for the time being. (141)

And of those who suspected the truth, only Luke fully understood that the distraction of their company was the only thing that would spare Cyrus from himself. (171)

Cyrus took a deep breath and began trying to loosen the lockdown he'd become accustomed to maintaining. It felt like trying to see through squinted eyes. He continued until he had only a general impression of his surroundings. It wasn't easy for him. (267)

The more I learned about what made Cyrus who he is, the more I understood his actions and the less unlikable I found him. Once I knew Cyrus was hurting, that his brutality affected him, that he was forced to murder on several occasion as a child, and that he didn't actually believe he was always right, I began to sympathize with him. Focusing on Cyrus's internal conflict more and telling us more about him earlier on could help readers understand him better and not become as frustrated with his actions.

\*Note: I found in my second read through of the manuscript that everything was far less confusing than the first read through because I already knew all the relevant information. I noticed a lot of clues and pieces of story that were linked that I didn't notice before. With a reorganization of the information given to the reader, I think the first read through for future readers can be just as enjoyable as my second read through was for me.

**Character background.** While Cyrus's methods for assembling a following frustrated me, I quite enjoyed all the storylines dealing with the world outside of the battle school. I particularly enjoyed the insights we got into Michael, Seth, Jed, and Jezebel. I wished there were more of them to link Cyrus to the aboveground world and learn both about him, Michael, and the setting all at the same time. As with Cyrus, I think flashbacks for them would be helpful in giving readers a greater sense of their relation to Cyrus and the interesting world they inhabit.

Michael: Michael is given his own chapter, "An Incessant Pounding," and appears in the Seth interludes, but other than this, we know surprisingly little about him and how he came to power. I found myself wondering what Michael's motivation was and why he killed Cyrus's mother and attempted to kill Cyrus.

Michael is first mentioned on pg. 20, but isn't brought up by other characters again until pg. 86, and isn't physically present in another scene until "An Incessant Pounding" starts on pg. 151. I did not know who he was when he was mentioned on pg. 86 until I looked at the document I had created for my character notes. As the main antagonist of the story and whose defeat the story revolves around, he didn't have enough of a physical presence, especially in the first half of the story. Cyrus focuses on Markus in the first half, who seems inconsequential when we learn more about Michael and his

oppression of the aboveground world later on.

When we learned about Michael's charity and charismatic front on pg. 191, I thought it added an interesting dimension to his character, but because we weren't told it until about two-thirds of the way through the manuscript, it didn't have as big of an effect as I think it could have. All the Michael scenes could have a bigger effect if his background was explained earlier and his story was more evenly woven throughout the manuscript. Additionally, if we were physically shown him doing more evil tasks, we would be more likely to actively root for Cyrus to defeat him and would be more engrossed with finding out if or how Cyrus will do so.

\*Note: When Cyrus used his flow to obliterate Michael and all his followers in the final battle, it felt too easy; it made me think of the ability as a *deus ex machina*. I also found myself skeptical that Michael wouldn't know about that tactic, because it feels like an action so evil and chilly that it would be his signature move.

Seth: Seeing Michael horribly abuse Seth helped reveal the evilness of Michael, but other than this, it didn't seem like Seth had as much of a purpose in the story as he could have had. Much like Michael, there are big leaps between the mentions of Seth. He appears first on pg. 19, but not again until pg. 140 when he befriends the lizard. A similarly large leap occurs between his appearance at Michael's charity event on pg. 191 and his presence in the alley with Magnus's dead body on pg. 290. To be as effective as he could be, I think he needs to have a more active role in the story.

As a reader, when Seth died trying to kill Michael, I felt cheated. The character went through a horrible, torturous life with Michael and died having no effect on his demise. In order to give Seth a greater purpose and make his story matter, I felt like he should have had a bigger hand in killing Michael. If Cyrus were only able to defeat Michael because of the split second distraction of Seth, as an example, than that would give Seth a very important purpose in the story and his death more meaning. Both sons would get their justice. Without an added purpose, Seth's interludes could be erased and filled with more Michael background and it wouldn't affect much else in the manuscript.

\*Note: You say that he and Cyrus are maternal twins, but say Seth is twenty-two years old on pg. 20 and Cyrus is twenty years old on pg. 287.

Jed: Reading the first chapter of the manuscript had me very confused, and only because I wrote Jed's name down on my character list was I actively waiting for his reappearance in the story. When he did reappear, on pg. 286 of 314, I was a bit underwhelmed. His lack of presence made his character seem unimportant, but in the story's reality he was and will be a big part of Cyrus's life. Adding flashback scenes with Jed, Cyrus, and Jezebel could make his reveal as Cyrus's uncle more meaningful, as well as tell us more about how the aboveground world operates with Michael in charge. It would also give us more sympathy for why Cyrus is as hardened as he is.

\*Notes: Jed has a very distinct dialect in the final chapter, but in the first chapter has no dialect at all. I was also confused as to why Jed didn't adopt Cyrus himself. Was it to try to prevent Michael from knowing Cyrus was alive?

Jezebel: Due to Jezebel's quite late introduction in the story, when Cyrus said he had almost forgotten that she existed on pg. 288, I was a bit curious to what her purpose in the story was going to be with thirty pages left in the manuscript. It seems like you wanted to set up an actual family for Cyrus above ground, but because Jed and Jezebel's introductions are so late, what it ended up doing for me was diminishing the familial love Cyrus and Julian felt for each other, because with an actual family, Julian was no longer as important a male figure in Cyrus's life. Giving Jezebel a bigger presence and purpose, like Jed, would make her character more effective, rather than taking away the roles of other characters in the story.

I think I would really enjoy a flashback of her and Cyrus meeting in the alley where she was fending off four men, as opposed to Cyrus relating it to us through dialog. She can still be a mysterious presence throughout the manuscript, but having her show up at the end with no forewarning really did make it seem like she was "forgotten." Weaving her into the story by showing flashbacks of her and Cyrus surviving on the streets and with Jed would increase her purpose and effectiveness. Then when Cyrus rescues her in the alley at the end, the reader can be pleasantly surprised and delighted that she's showing up in Cyrus's present, rather than just appearing in his past.

**Making sure each character has the right importance.** It's often more effective for each character to have a different purpose, and for each to bring out a different aspect of the protagonist's personality. For *Elementals*, I made a list of the number of times each

character's name appears in the text to hopefully help you figure out which characters aren't mentioned enough for their role and which characters are mentioned too much.

List of character mentions:

- |                    |                  |                    |
|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Cyrus (1133)    | 10. Juliana (80) | 19. Angela (11)    |
| 2. Luke (354)      | 11. Ryan (43)    | 20. Maurberry (10) |
| 3. Julian (212)    | 12. Alden (42)   | 21. Kristy (9)     |
| 4. Michael (164)   | 13. Jade (36)    | 22. Devan (8)      |
| 5. Dwight (149)    | 14. Jed (35)     | 23. Victor (8)     |
| 6. Markus (123)    | 15. Magnus (33)  | 24. Brian (6)      |
| 7. Astor (93)      | 16. Cynthia (28) | 25. Jezebel (6)    |
| 8. Tristan (86)    | 17. Seth (27)    | 26. Lorelei (2)    |
| 9. Prof. Wulf (82) | 18. Ludo (12)    | 27. Tom (2)        |

Julian: Julian is the wise, skilled, grandfatherly master to Cyrus's pupil in *Elementals*, but, to me, the way Cyrus sometimes treats him diminishes his importance in the story. Julian is very important at the start of the story because he is Cyrus's primary teacher and introduces him and the audience to the world of manipulating elements. However, he disappears for about fifty pages in the first third of the novel when Luke and Dwight take over the duty of training Cyrus. When Julian resumed training Cyrus again, I was left wondering why he had stopped. Were Julian and Luke working together?

Ex: Luke deemed [Cyrus] ready to begin learning to manipulate the next element with Julian. (93)

In real life, a lot of people contribute to life events, but in fiction, it's cleaner to have a single person fill a certain role. It made Julian less unique when Luke began teaching Cyrus and Julian disappeared from training scenes. Maybe Julian should be the only one giving Cyrus the big lessons on how to manipulate energy. Cyrus can go to Luke and his friends for practice, but if Julian is the only character giving Cyrus direct lessons and wisdom, it raises Julian's importance to the story and to Cyrus. This could also strengthen their grandfather-son-like bond.

I also thought Cyrus's lack of respect for authority undermined his relationship with Julian. Cyrus was outwardly disrespectful to both Professor Wulf and Julian on several occasions, and quite often went against Julian's advice. When these instances occurred, both older men relented or bowed down in submission to Cyrus, in essence justifying



his insubordinate actions. Cyrus can certainly think for himself and disobey authority, but it would be more fulfilling if he realized sometimes that his elders were right. Otherwise, he comes off as disrespectful and not in need of their advice. If Cyrus doesn't need Julian's advice and authority to train, he doesn't need Julian, and Julian's main purpose no longer exists. For example, Cyrus says this:

Ex: Cyrus was confused, but knew better than to question him. Julian's judgments were always infallible, whether Cyrus understood his reasons or not. (97)

However, twelve pages later he negates this thought in a scene with Luke:

"Julian hasn't begun teaching you to manipulate air yet," Luke said...  
"He says I'm not ready yet," Cyrus said...  
"You are. I'll teach you." (109)

Markus: When I was making my list of characters to discuss, I completely forgot about Markus. The idea of Markus drives a huge part of the manuscript, yet his actual presence in scenes is very small. Besides the duels between him and Cyrus, in only four out of 123 mentions is Markus physically in a scene doing something to Cyrus (this is when Markus first bumps into Cyrus in the hall). Otherwise, most of the other appearances of his name are people talking about him.

I found myself thinking how awful I thought Cyrus and Luke were acting far more times than I did Markus. In fact, I felt *bad* for Markus on several occasions. Like all the students hate Markus because they witness him do terrible things in the world of *Elementals*, we need to see him do terrible things, too, so that we also hate him. We can't take the narrator's word that Markus is bad, we have to *see* it, and seeing it will make us sympathize with Cyrus's desire to usurp him.

For instance, we see Michael horribly abuse his child and murder innocents in this chilling scene:

She shuffled into his arms with the purest look of gratitude, laid her head against his chest and began to weep. He leaned back against the door and

slowly eased his hands up toward her head. Then, before she so much as felt his hands grip the front and back of her head, he broke her neck.

She slumped suddenly against him, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. He released her, and as her frail body slid down the front him, it folded and crumpled with what Michael thought was considerably more grace than she had had in life. (152)

But Markus's half-hearted attempts to antagonize are only mentioned by the narrator before the focus shifts to Cyrus or his follower's retaliation to it:

Markus ordered his followers to focus their attention on one of Cyrus's elementals to discourage the rest. Cyrus was impressed by how quickly and effectively his captains retaliated. That night, there were hundreds of accidents in the halls. Elementals accidentally tripped, ran into, fell on and otherwise coincidentally battered all of the students who had bullied the elemental earlier that day. None escaped without at least a small bruise or scrape; many limped back to their rooms. (163)

While the first example makes me hate and fear Michael, the second example makes me disregard Markus as a threat. To make him a true antagonist worthy of Cyrus's time, we need to witness him physically harming and bullying people more often. Then we can relate to Cyrus's desire to take Markus down.

Professor Wulf: Professor Wulf is the first character other than Cyrus that's introduced in the story. This, and Jed telling Cyrus that Wulf is Cyrus's best chance of survival, build Wulf up like he's going to be a big, important character. Unfortunately, his primary task ends up involving holding out a bag of tiles. His big introduction and then subsequent small presence made Wulf's story feel unfinished. I kept waiting for his big moment. I think he can be de-emphasized or Julian could take over his role altogether.

Dwight: Dwight symbolizes a big fear of Cyrus's—the loss of innocence in war—and the character has a big presence, but his scenes always seemed supplemental to me. Like Wulf, he is built up by his introduction to be a big character, likely to be Cyrus's

best friend, but then is surpassed by nearly every other friend-character. I think the reader needs either more or less of him. Just being the symbol for Cyrus's wish to preserve innocence might be enough to trigger his anguish at Dwight's death.

\*Note: Dwight's death did seem contrived to me, though. Perhaps if it wasn't him mistakenly walking right into Michael's hands, and was Michael somehow penetrating the school and murdering him in cold blood, it would add immediacy to the sequence and support the "war is hell" theme common in films that I think Dwight represents.

Ryan: Because conflict is weakened when it's spread across two or more characters, I might test out the idea of making all of Ryan's actions Markus's. As the antagonist, Markus would be more effective if he took the lead in all the bullying scenes, but if you want to keep the scene where Luke duels Ryan and then drops him at Markus's feet, perhaps that could be Ryan's biggest scene. Alternatively, maybe Ryan could have his own mini conflict with Luke so he doesn't split Cyrus's attention but still has a presence.

Small characters: Characters can be small but significant, but there are a few characters mentioned so scarcely that you might consider cutting them to make the names the reader has to remember a little less expansive. Unless there's a payoff for the character in the end, either in this book or a sequel, I would consider deleting scarcely mentioned characters. Conservatively, I would put Tom, Lorelei, Brian, Victor, Devan, Kristy, and Ludo in this category.

Miss Maurberry: The interaction between Miss Maurberry and Cyrus was so interesting that and I think it could be really effective if there was more of it. When Cyrus goes back to the school during his emotional breakdown to see Julian and she intercepts him, I was reminded that Cyrus is, at his core, is a kid who has never been cared for or loved by a mother or father.

"Ok," Cyrus said, allowing himself to be led into her room like a child. He had never been treated like a child by anyone. (217)

When I read that sentence, I hurt for Cyrus. That Miss Maurberry is able to bring out this emotional heart in the story makes her a very valuable character. Cyrus can still feel

like he doesn't need anyone, but when he does and they offer him kindness, it makes it that much more poignant. If you want to tug at reader's heartstrings, Miss Maurberry is a good way to do so.

## PLOT

**Rising action.** Typically, as a story progresses, obstacles become harder and harder for the protagonist and the conflicts become more and more dangerous—the stakes rise. It didn't feel to me like Cyrus's conflicts were becoming more dangerous because he rarely struggled. It always seemed like he was the best, and if he wasn't, all it took was a little bit of effort and he was. He needn't always be right and always win; he needs to struggle and sometimes fail.

Cyrus's ability to fail will give the story a bigger sense of urgency and cause the conflicts to escalate. Perhaps if Cyrus had more run-ins with Michael—I would say at least one before the final battle—or if Cyrus learned Michael was his father earlier on, it would raise the stakes. He needs a more believable drive than a feeling of hatred for Michael in his gut. I didn't feel like that made the most sense, given Cyrus's history with Michael, as the answer to why Cyrus was willing to put his life on the line to defeat him.

Cyrus should not only be struggling to become strong enough to defeat Michael, there should be real stakes as to whether or not Michael will kill him before he reaches his elemental height. Like the scene with Cynthia on the train, I would add more scenes where Cyrus fears for his life. I never really asked myself what would happen if Cyrus didn't succeed, because his success seemed inevitable. If we don't feel like he is ever in jeopardy, there is nothing to keep us turning the page. Being aware of the possibility of Cyrus's failure and the clear and definite risks associated with the outcomes it would produce would help the stakes rise as Cyrus and Michael inch closer to their final battle.

Cutting out all unessential information—characters, plot threads, dialog, and exposition—is another strategy to fashion a clean, forward moving story where the action always rises. As Pixar says in what I found to be a very helpful list of story rules, "Simplify. Focus. Hop over detours."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David A. Price, "Pixar story rules (one version)," *The Pixar Touch*, <http://www.pixartouchbook.com/blog/2011/5/15/pixar-story-rules-one-version.html> (accessed May 2012).

Simplify—Limits of element manipulation: There are many passages covering the physics of energy flows and element manipulation, but after a while I found myself skimming over them because they didn't help me understand duels much better. It might be easier and more succinct to explain the limitations of element manipulation; what it *can't* do.

One minute everyone's surprised that Cyrus is levitating, the next he's flying through the air and burrowing into the ground with little effort as he makes his way to Alaska. This left me confused as to what was possible and what was not with energy manipulation. Cyrus and Tristan's journey tells me that teleportation isn't possible, but I can't think of anything else elementals can't do, and that makes the "magic" of the story seem too limitless to me. I often wondered how manipulating energy allowed a person to read another's mind.

Simplifying the rules of element manipulation would cut out a lot of extra scenes that halt momentum and also make the limits of manipulation clearer to the audience. Instead of explaining everything elementals can do in with their flows in training scenes, tell us what it can't and save the exciting visual descriptions for battles. Then battles become a spectacle for the reader and it's more likely they will look forward to them because they'll get to see creative flows in action.

You also mention how dangerous inexperienced element manipulating is, but we never see the results of a person mishandling it. Though I found the scene where Cyrus levitates for the first time compelling, if I had known the risk of Cyrus's actions while the scene was occurring, it would have given the events even more tension and anxiety. Juliana says afterwards:

"Cyrus, you could have died doing what you did. By all rights you should have. Every decent elemental knows that very few things are technically impossible, but in practice, what you did shouldn't have worked. The smallest mistake could have damaged the microstructure of your body beyond repair and killed you." (136)

Other mentions of the dangers of element manipulation:

“By any chance, do you know what would have happened if I hadn’t countered your flow?”

Cyrus’s mental exhaustion was so severe that he barely comprehended the question. He shook his head wearily.

“A sphere of energy would have expanded outwards in all directions, burning everything it touched until it expended what little energy you had left.” (24)

“You’re not likely to slip something past a teacher, but I don’t want you to get in the habit of lashing out wildly. In addition to being energetically inefficient, it’s reckless. Remember that everything we do is bound by the laws of physics. Our bodies do not store exceptional amounts of energy. The only thing that separates us from everyone else is that we can manually manipulate our energy through the elements. If you deplete your body’s energy beyond a certain point, you die, just like any other living being.” (27)

Perhaps mention an historical event in the world of *Elementals* where massive destruction was caused by out of control energy, or include a character that experienced a tragedy because of the dangers associated with mishandling energy. Having a character die from the dangers of mishandling energy would make us nervous for Cyrus, raise the stakes of using element manipulation, and pack an emotional punch.

Focus—Elemental duels: It was hard for me to be engrossed in Cyrus trying to defeat the small fish, Markus, when I knew the big fish, Michael, was looming overhead. It almost felt like a detour. Focusing Cyrus’s rank advancement more with training to defeat Michael and less with working to end the reign of Markus at the school—which seems inconsequential in comparison—would give more purpose to the dueling rank storyline.

I also think that Cyrus has to learn something new in a battle to justify its inclusion in the story. If he visibly struggles through each duel, and doesn’t only fight them to humiliate the people that don’t like him, the reader will see his progression and relate to

him more because we won't see as many instances of his brutality against those that don't have any chance of defeating him.

If there is no challenge for Cyrus in a battle, there's no excitement for the reader. The very beginning of the duel between Cyrus and Markus was exciting because I was actually worried Cyrus would get hurt and didn't feel like I knew what was going to happen to him (180). It would help keep the dueling rank storyline focused if all battles had a purpose other than Cyrus's rise in rank and, like the beginning of the battle with Markus, incorporated a sense of uncertainty about the outcome.

Focus—Individual chapters: Like the overall story, the action in each individual chapter should rise consistently, too, so that the momentum carries one chapter to the next. Breaks in chapters slow down their momentum because one story is ended, then another started and finished with its own arc. They can work sometimes, but many of the breaks within chapters in *Elementals* could be organize to make them separate chapters. For example, a Seth interlude splits up the chapter titled "Congratulations." The first section ends with Julian dropping a rather large revelation that he's helping Cyrus because he knew his mother. Then the next section abruptly introduces the reader to Michael and Seth, before another returns the reader back to Julian and Cyrus with no more mention of Julian's relationship with Cyrus's mother. The events aren't connected enough, and in this case completely dissipate the rising momentum the chapter originally had.

Hop over detours—Gangs: I found the storylines surrounding Cyrus's eradication of the gangs of New York interesting, but I wasn't sure how it fit in with the rest of the story. Because it doesn't advance the main storyline, and deleting it entirely would change very little, the gang storyline can be categorized as a detour from the protagonist's main course of direction. If you decide that you agree, you don't have to scrap the storyline entirely. I think you could save it and use it in another story in the future, but as is in this first draft, it seems tangential and halts the rising action.

Instead of fighting gangs, perhaps Cyrus and Luke could formulate their plan to assassinate Michael from afar during the aboveground training scenes. I thought that plan was a good insight into the character I believe you desire Cyrus to have—it expertly shows him as a boy who doesn't lust for vengeance, but simply wants justice

for the people Michael has oppressed. Learning this added to my respect for Cyrus and helped me relate to him.

### MISCELLANEOUS SUGGESTIONS

**Character description.** You do a great job of assigning characters short, visual descriptions, but while I was reading and making my character list I noticed that a lot of the descriptions were similar. Particularly, many characters were described as having blue eyes or another eye color.

#### Described by eye color:

1. Cyrus (pg. 3): "blue eyes"\*
2. Miss Maurberry (pg. 6): "twinkling blue eyes"
3. Markus (pg. 13): "blue eyes"
4. Cynthia (pg. 20): "dark blue eyes"\*
5. Dwight (pg. 32): "eyes were alight with childlike innocence"
6. Juliana (pg. 32): "green eyes"
7. Luke (pg. 34): "stark blue eyes"
8. Angela (pg. 115): "smoky eyes"
9. Michael (pg. 228): "glittery dark eyes"
10. Tristan (pg. 241): "sharp green eyes"\*
11. Alden (pg. 259): "steel colored eyes"

\*Listed multiple times as a characteristic

Detailing eye color is a great way to make a character distinct, but if most of the characters are described this way—and with the same color—the characteristic is no longer distinctive.

**Character introductions.** When characters were introduced but we were not told what their name was until paragraphs or pages later, I had a harder time associating their names with their character descriptions. I often would re-read my character sheet and be surprised at an aspect of a character I didn't remember copying over. If I had not kept a list of all of the characters and their traits, I would have been quite confused about what characteristics went with what character.

#### Words between presence and name given:

- |                 |                  |                    |
|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Cyrus (10)   | 4. Michael (369) | 7. Astor (718)     |
| 2. Luke (322)   | 5. Dwight (29)   | 8. Tristan (971)   |
| 3. Julian (189) | 6. Markus (260)  | 9. Prof. Wulf (19) |



10. Juliana (79)	16. Cynthia (0)	22. Devan (1431)
11. Ryan (27)	17. Seth (561)	23. Victor (0)
12. Alden (26)	18. Ludo (4)	24. Brian (0)
13. Jade (682)	19. Angela (141)	25. Jezebel (171)
14. Jed (27)	20. Maurberry (43)	26. Lorelei (21)
15. Magnus (0)	21. Kristy (0)	27. Tom (0)

\*(0) means the name was mentioned before any description or dialog of that character was presented

Because the third-person narrator knows each character's name, it shouldn't be an issue of whether or not Cyrus knows the person's name before it's introduced. Here are two examples of a confusing character introduction and two examples of a successful character introduction from four of the characters that had over 300 words between their first mentioned presence and name:

- Luke (pg. 33)—Cyrus sees Luke in his peripheral vision when he first meets the group at the lunch table, but after he notices him, another male character, Brian, is introduced. I thought Luke's first mentioned characteristics were Brian's until my second read-through. When Luke is finally introduced by name 322 words later, I had forgotten about the previously detailed characteristics because of the length between name and description, as well as the inclusion of so many new characters in such a short amount of time in the first lunch table scene.
- Michael (pg. 19)—Michael is given no name at first and is described as the captor and tormentor of a prisoner Seth hears being interrogated outside of his room. The tormentor tells Cynthia to kill the prisoner and seems to disappear from the action. Cynthia kills the man and then Seth's door is slammed open suddenly. Someone says a line of dialog and the first mention of Michael's name is given in the dialog tag, but there is no name or appearance to connect him to the tormentor mentioned roughly 300 words ago. I assumed he was the tormentor and would be an important character after re-reading the chapter, but on first glance, there were so many new characters and situations being introduced that I was very confused as to who Michael was. When his name was mentioned for the second time on pg. 87, I had to look at my character list to confirm that Michael was the name of the big-bad character introduced briefly seventy pages

ago. As the main antagonist of the story, it may make him seem more significant if he has a more memorable, clearly stated, and physically descriptive introduction.

- Seth (pg. 19)—In contrast, when Seth's name is given in this same chapter section after 561 words of the narrator describing his perspective, it isn't confusing because he is the main character of the chapter section.
- Tristan (pg. 241)—Likewise, when Tristan first appears, she is the only character to be introduced in the scene and is given the distinctive description of having sharp green eyes and long dark braid. Additionally, her and Cyrus's eventual meeting is built up to by their mutual magnetic interest in one another. This kind of mystery in character name for nearly one thousand words didn't bother me; in fact, I thought it was fun. I was only bothered when the delay between description and character name confused me.

My favorite introduction was the first appearance of Alden:

As he took his second step, the door opened to reveal a man who bore a strong structural resemblance to Professor Wulf, contrasted by a few very distinct differences. Where Professor Wulf reminded Cyrus of polished granite, Alden was the type of man who seemed to have stubble even when he was clean-shaven, and seemed to be composed entirely of wood and rope. (259)

The very essence of Alden is described very distinctly and his name is given in very close proximity to these characteristics. I thought it was a lot easier to associate Alden's characteristics with his name and had a good concept of who he was right from his introduction.

\*Note: If you can find a way to add Alden in to the story more, I would enjoy that as a reader. I thought his and Tristan's training scenes with Cyrus were very clear and interesting, and enjoyed the character insight we learned about Cyrus through them. I was hoping that the lessons he learned in Alaska would come back to help him in the final battle with Michael, though. I think that would give Tristan, Alden, and the lessons he learns in Alaska more meaning and importance in the story.

Xander, I want to thank you again for giving me the opportunity to read your work. All my story suggestions are just that: suggestions. I had no intention of telling you what you *should* write—the examples I offered were merely a way make clear the suggestions I was trying to convey.

According to your author biography, you write forty to fifty hours per week. Doing that requires extreme discipline. I hope I have harnessed a similar discipline in my analysis of your work and that you find useful information in this letter to help you with any revisions you choose to make.

Best,  
Kate Burkett