

Cassandra Johnson

Make Your Move

Akari’s sudden text telling me to come downstairs because she needed to speak with me, I really didn’t know how to react. Instead of ignoring the message like I would do with Karliel when he would show up unannounced at ~~three~~ ~~three in the morning~~ ~~3am~~ ~~3am~~ drunk and completely ~~disun~~ ~~disun~~ oriented, I leaped up from my bed, ~~f~~ ~~t~~ ~~t~~ossing on my ripped jeans and crisp black T-shirt.

I was met with her back facing me, her long thin midnight colored hair shimmered off the streetlights adding shimmer to the night sky. She was encapsulated with a strange energy. As if she sensed my presence she spun to me instantly, “Hi Xaden.” Her voice was quiet and sad.

“Hey Akari, what’s up?”

I asked with concern that I was unable to hide no matter how much I tried. She began to fiddle with her thin charm bracelet she got from me during the school festival a few weeks back, ~~As~~ ~~as~~ the stones glistened in the light she spoke, “I am moving back to Clinton.”

Her voice ~~was~~ sharp, her facial features unwavering no matter how much she shifted her weight. I knew she was serious.

“Why the sudden change? Didn’t you say you hated living in Clinton?” I ~~ask~~ ~~the~~ ~~weight~~ I felt in my chest ~~felt~~ heavier, making it difficult to breathe.

“I mean you aren’t wrong, but I can’t stay here.” her eyes ~~drifted~~ ~~drifting~~ away from mine as she began lightly scratching at her left wrist with her ~~other~~ ~~right~~ hand.

“I know it’s sudden, but I can’t keep doing all this.” Her sudden change in tone from sad to passionate shocked me ever so slightly. I knew she was stubborn, but I never thought that would include her moving back to a town she hated, ~~that’s another story.~~

“Akari explain, I really do not understand where this is coming from. Didn’t you say just yesterday thinking about Clinton made your skins crawl?” Confusion washed over me as I questioned all she’s told me about and how her hometown was a nightmare. She isn’t the kind of person to just accept defeat, tuck tail, and run away. From the day I first met her she never gave way to stigmatization and rumors. She made her own choices and kept to them.

“You’re a strong individual and I can’t understand how you can return to a place that fills you with dread.”

“It’s better than staying here and being forced into a corner unable to escape no matter how hard I might try. Xaden, everything about me is a lie.” Her voice spiked and her hands balled into fists.

“Everything you know about me, my favorite food, color, book and even movie are all lies.” My heart sank, her classic riddles bewildered me this time around. What was she saying?

“Akari wha-” She raised her hand to me and shook her head, eyes down to her feet as her hands returned to her sides.

“I can’t keep doing this Xaden, I can’t deny him any longer and the longer I drag this out the more it hurts. I just can’t do what he’s asking.” her eyes went dark, empty capsules to the soul.

“I just want to be a normal teenager, failing classes, skipping school, going to an arcade, watching movies with my friends, going to prom, dancing to Nickelback and eating all the snacks I can imagine. All things I have no control over! All my free time is taken from me to do horrible things to innocent people, I just can’t anymore.” Akari’s voice went from steady to breaking as she continued to speak.

“Xaden, I can’t give you the answer you’re looking for and I can’t stay here no matter how much I might want to.”

Her eyes were now cloudy with tears, “I can’t tell you how much I regret about my life without telling you everything I have done to deserve this. You once asked me what my job is, all I can tell you is I am a reaper, a deadly creature, one who was sent here for a reason and that reason is why I must leave.”

“Akari you know I can’t comprehend your riddles, let alone right now.” Flabbergasted, I took a few steps forward.

“Xaden stop, any closer and I will leave.” Her voice was stern but coated in fear and unmistakable longing.

“Akari. Please just explain what’s going on. I want to help you even if only a little bit. Plea-” her posture tightened as she hastily cut me off.

“I can’t Xaden.” The silence between us rang out a moment before her words put me into shock,

“Xaden... I just can’t lie anymore. I love you okay, and because of this, I can’t stay.”

“Wh- What the hell?” I said, frustration leaking without restraint.

“Akari, how could you say that to me? You’re saying you love me, but you want to leave? Have you gone mad?” The surge of emotions were leaking from me without filter.

“You have to tell me what's going on Akari.” I felt defeated, I couldn’t process all this at once.

“This isn’t your fault, Xaden; I shouldn’t have said that. Not now. But the selfish part of me just wanted you to know.” Her gaze filled with the slightest second of hope as she froze, a mere second later she spun away from me wiping her eyes vigorously.

“It’s not something you could ever understand Xaden.” She said the personality slowly returning to her voice, if only for a fleeting moment.

“You know Xaden, you gave me something I never honestly thought I could have. I never thought I would feel the warmth of the emotion called love again after I was abandoned by my mother at 6 years old. Sure, I had a “father,” but he caused my life to change into a game of cat a mouse. He took my weak fragile state and turned me into an inland taipan and made me strike so many innocent mice just to keep food on the table. I am now a nuclear weapon, if I don’t eliminate myself now nothing good can come from this.”

These riddles were starting to get old, all this talk about death, killing and the appearance of a delicate mouse turned evil is starting to get old.

“Just spit it out already, all this metaphorical talk is really starting to irritate me Akari.” My tone became more coarse than then expected, and I began to walk toward her slowly.

“I didn’t move here from Clinton. I have lived here in Jordan all my life. I am also not 17, I’m ~~min~~ 21. I graduated 3 years ago. My favorite colour isn’t purple, it’s orange. I hate scalloped potatoes and I am allergic to hazelnuts.” With the conversation headed a whole other direction I lost focus.;

“What are you talking about?” I protested.

“My favorite movie is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* - live action of course. I hate chick flicks. My favorite places to go include parks and local hiking trails. You know that time you held my hand while watching that stupid black and white movie? ~~for a class~~ Then, I was happy.”

Her voice ~~became~~ becomes weak, “All of what you know of me is a lie. Even down to my last name, it's Thorn not Pine. Nothing of what you knew of me before is who I really am.”

I was standing right behind her at this point, and I was so close I could see the slight blush to her pale skin on the back of her neck. “Akari, you must have had your reasons. If you didn’t have this guilt and fear ~~what~~ you’re feeling now wouldn’t exist. There’s one thing you could never hide from me, and that’s your kindness and warm heart.” I lifted my right hand to her right shoulder, brushing my callused covered hand over her mesh strap.

“You went out of your way to help Zoey raise money so she could come on the school trip with us this fall. ~~Y~~ you spent over ~~eight~~ 8 hours selling your old clothes, movies, and knickknacks just to make her happy. You joined in with John for the school play, so he didn’t feel as nervous when he was on stage. You got cast as a tree just so you could be on stage with him for comfort. You helped our homeroom teacher with their lesson plans ~~in~~ your free time instead of fooling around or studying.”

I slowly gripped her shoulder tighter, “Akari... I love you too. Please don’t leave, not now.” My fear ~~caused~~ causing my body to tremble in chaotic motions, my mind racing.

She spun to face me, ~~and~~ the smile on her face ~~was~~ pained. ~~H~~ Her eyes grew dark with passion, and I could tell she was holding back. Her face then morphed to a grimacing smile, “You can’t very well love someone who was sent here to kill you, now can you?”

*Included is the first email correspondence with the author + one example of a follow-up response to showcase the type of back-and-forth communication we've been having since my first substantive suggestions. Other querying has been done through comments on Google Docs.

First Round of Edits for "Make Your Move" By Cassandra J.

Hi Cass,

I've been having a great time working with this story and I'm really glad you've decided to include this one in the anthology. I think many readers will find value and excitement in the suspenseful plot surrounding Akari and Xaden's vibrant personalities and the conflicts they are unraveling together.

Since you've been working on drafts of this piece for awhile, I knew the writing would feel eloquent and put together by now, so many of the notes I have written in the doc are just suggestions that you're free to rework or reject altogether if they don't fit your intended vision. Many of my comments simply touch on rephrasing passages to help with the flow and consistency of the story. Otherwise, my main notes surround the *why* of Akari's actions since her internal conflict is not fully explained throughout the piece and rather alluded to. When claiming the reasons she can't stay and must go back to Clinton, readers may not understand why she doesn't want to return here and what has caused her to be shunned from staying where she is now. Throughout the piece, she gives Xaden reasons to be unable to stay such as, "I am a reaper, a deadly creature [who] was sent here for a reason", "I love you okay, and because of this, I can't stay", and "I am a nuclear weapon, if I don't eliminate myself now nothing good can come from this" - all of which don't fully explain the reality of why she has come here to kill him (which we learn by the end of the story). I really appreciate her sneakiness and that she is elusive, not letting him know the *real* reason she is here, but since readers are not let in on her internal dialogue, they too will be confused as to the real reason she cannot stay here and why she must leave. Of course, you don't have to flat out tell the audience these answers, but perhaps narrowing in on the actual reasons Akari is facing this situation will help streamline the conflict a bit so that readers are following along with the suspenseful plot with more of an understanding as to why she is acting in this shady way.

I'd love for you to look over the comments I've made and let me know what you think. I'm hoping that we'll be able to make any necessary edits by the **end of Week 8 (Friday)**, to then give us time to go over any copyediting needed before it goes to print. However, if you're dealing with too much this week and need some extra time to go over my comments that's no problem, please just keep me posted on your progress so we can make sure we hit our goal dates together. Once you begin looking it over and need me to clarify anything, you can shoot me an email and I'll jump over to the doc to check it out.

Thank you for your trust in looking over your work. I hope you find some of the suggestions helpful and if you feel like we need to go over any areas I've overlooked we've got time to query.

All the best,

Allie Emberson

Second Email: Answering Queries for “Make Your Move” by Cassandra J.

Hey Cass,

Thanks so much for sending over such an insightful and thoughtful letter highlighting our process of working together so far, I feel like I have a much clearer understanding of your intentions for the piece and the direction you're hoping to take our final edits. I've been having a great time working with someone as passionate and talented as you :)!

I really love that you want to play with the suspense and confusion surrounding Akari's character, so at this point we can resolve a lot of my initial queries by simply acknowledging that putting the pieces together slowly is *part* of this piece and not all of the plot has to be intentionally clear from the get-go. Sometimes when I make initial edits it's just to get us both thinking about other possibilities, but knowing your intention for these characters and how they should behave makes a lot of sense and I definitely don't want to change that!

I've still gone over the questions you have for me and given them some thought the past few days, so thank you for your patience in waiting for my response. I'll highlight the answers to your queries here so they're all in one place, but I have also responded in the doc itself so we can sharpen up the second draft to your preference. I appreciate that you put the newest draft in the same doc; I ended up removing the first part so we can focus on the updated changes, but I have the original copy saved elsewhere so we can keep track of all the changes we've made so far. Once we've agreed on any other alterations to this draft within the next couple days, I'll save the newest copy too before we go in and make any final copyedits before the end of this week. Overall, it's looking great and I'm so excited to share this with the rest of the team soon once we're satisfied with the next draft!

To answer some of your substantive queries (you can find responses with specific suggestions in the doc, these are just my overall thoughts):

Why is she telling him all of this now/revealing her actual personality at this point in time?

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I initially asked this just considering that they have clearly known each other for a long time, so Xaden may be confused why all of this is coming up *now* and not at another time they've spent together; but honestly it makes sense now that I'm aware that she is trying to throw him off her track by telling him a bunch of reasons why she has to leave so she doesn't have to reveal the true reason of her being there to kill him. I think the audience being a bit confused like Xaden is actually works in this situation, so readers too have to wonder what her true motives are until they reach that last line where she reveals that she came here to kill him. So as long as we agree that it becomes clear by the end that these were tactics used by her to push him away so she can

avoid being forced to kill him, it all makes sense that she is stalling and expressing different parts of herself in this moment to hide her true reason for being there.

What does it mean that she is a nuclear weapon? ->

I totally get that this is an intentional metaphor about how she feels inside, so I just want to ensure that readers are on the same page and don't assume she is an actual weapon (perhaps someone with powers or supernatural abilities) that is here for destruction. Perhaps saying something along the lines of, "I **feel** like a nuclear weapon" or "it's almost like I'm some nuclear weapon..." would further explain that it's how she's being treated and controlled that she feels this way, rather than being an *actual* weapon. So honestly just tweaking the phrasing a tiny bit like this will keep the intention the same but just clear up any potential confusion. The same could go for the reaper line - saying something like, "I feel like some sort of reaper, a deadly creature outcasted and sent here for reasons I can't get into..." would show that she is under control and not just dark and evil of her own volition. These tweaks would make readers aware of her unwillingness to take part in this and add a layer of suffering to her character as well, showing that she is just as much a victim in the situation as her target Xaden.

Suggestion of redacting some use of character names in dialogue ->

I think the dialogue is looking great, at first I just wanted to be sure that when they *do* use each other's names that it's in purposeful moments and turning points in their situation, just like you mentioned in your email back to me. So, when the characters do use each other's names it feels heavier, more personal, and more intentional. As of now, I think each mention of their names feels purposefully placed, so don't worry too much about removing any more because the times their names are present is a good way to show that they do have that rapport and one-on-one connection and they're not just strangers, so a few instances of calling each other by their names is important for sure.

Akari changing reasons for needing to leave ->

Initially it wasn't as clear to me that she really does love Xaden and longs to leave to save him, I thought maybe she was just making up a bunch of different excuses to lie about her real reason for being here to kill him. At this point, with the subtle additions we've made and being more aware throughout the piece that she's *torn* and having a difficult time dealing with the fact that she's an assassin when she really longs for things to be different for the two of them, it makes total sense as is. If anything, you could add in small tidbits of what Akari's body language is like when they talk or the way she looks at him to even further clarify her internal feelings about him and that she really does care for his safety, but as of now I think it's all making more sense and the metaphors tie together more seamlessly so the reasons she is giving him show she is just trying to talk herself out of having to follow through with what she's been sent here for. So, for now I'd just say we can move past this point since you do have that desire to keep her real intentions somewhat unknown and elusive until we find out what she's here for by the end, which is cool!

Giving more insight into her motives and job ->

No problem at all not wanting to announce that she's an assassin, I totally get wanting to keep that secretive and interpretable until the end. The only thing you could potentially add in for some context that still keeps things suspicious is maybe **why Xaden?** - if you want this to also be

up for interpretation that is totally fine too because we can keep it simple in that this is what's happening and we are watching it unfold, not needing the "why". If that's the case, readers may just have some deeper questions as to "what made her turn on him? Why him? And how did her feelings for him change so quickly?" since they don't know from the excerpt that he is a high-profile individual like you shared with me in your email. Adding in this one detail about why she's coming after him may help readers be like ohhh okay that's why things are changing between them so quickly, she *had* to come after him, not that she wanted to. To accomplish this, near the end you could add in something right at the ending dialogue like, "Haven't you heard about that bounty on your head? You can't very well love someone who was sent here to kill you, now can you?" – it doesn't necessarily have to be a bounty but something like this shows people are out to get him and that's why now is why she is coming out and doing all this, not at a random time for no reason, if that makes sense! But honestly, with the adjustments we've made to the other metaphors and giving further explanations about how she is internally struggling and not wanting to change their relationship by doing this is enough context if you don't want to add in why she's targeting him specifically. If you want it to be unknown and just something that "is what it is" then that works well too!

You don't have to incorporate all these suggestions, but just wanted to answer your initial responses to me so we know we're on the same page about the plot and characterization from here. It's looking great, so if you wanted to make those final few adjustments by around Wednesday this week that would be great so I can make any necessary copyedits Thursday and we can go over any final suggestions by Friday of this week. No worries if you need more time, that's just the initial timeline we're working with, so if it takes you longer to brainstorm just let me know.

As always, I appreciate your time and enthusiasm in working together to make this piece as strong as possible, I think we've made great progress thus far. I'm eager to hear back once you've gone through those final few queries for the second draft.

Warmly,

Allie Emberson