

****This sample is from a 95k YA paranormal romance. Length of memo will vary.****

Thanks so much for giving me the chance to work on this novel! First and foremost, remember that my feedback is only an opinion—and every editor will have a different one. It's up to you to decide which of my suggestions fits your vision for the manuscript. You can incorporate all my ideas, some of them, or none of them. As this is genre fiction, there are certain norms that influenced my feedback. By no means do you have to adhere to these norms—I just feel it's important to understand the norms and when you are veering from them, so you can make a conscious choice to do so. As the author, you have the ultimate decision. You know your story and characters best.

That said, I hope you find my notes helpful!

Worldbuilding:

You've got a good idea here, but the worldbuilding needs work. The most important part of any world is *consistency*. The rules of a novel's universe need to be the same from beginning to end—and if they change, there needs to be an explanation. You'll see a lot of margin notes about how something isn't consistent with what was previously presented. In more than one case, it directly contradicts what you've said before. In smaller instances, it's a quick fix to delete one reference. In some of the bigger plot issues though, there is going to have to be some larger revision.

You also have an advantage of an outsider heroine. This means that you can cheat to a certain degree. For instance, if Vanessa and Arthur are discussing something, but it really isn't the time or place for you to explain it to the audience, Blaze can simply think something like "She didn't know what they were talking about, but now didn't see the time to ask." Or "She wondered when it would stop feeling like they were talking in code." This can help keep the pacing up and also keep the reader from getting overwhelmed by unnecessary details, while still letting us feel immersed in the world you've created.

You do a pretty good job of how you disperse the information—for the most part, we aren't overwhelmed with data. I do think perhaps you give us too much extraneous info that could be left until later. For instance, before things like Cardinal, Fixed, and Mutable are explained, I don't think there is any need to mention them at all. It gets too confusing for the reader to try to parse out an explanation when it isn't important until the point where you present the chart.

Are there any differences between Terrans and Zignas, other than where they were born? There are no visual differences? Because the characters seem to be able to

mostly point out Terrans and Zignas—even the Terrans with Zigna technology. How do they know the men with guns are Terrans? We need reasons.

A major issue I didn't understand was how Arthur received his powers. Logically, the 33rd group of UM would only start to receive their powers once the previous UM were dead (we know it can't be after a certain number of years, because you told us that this group is starting much earlier than the usual 300+ years). But Arthur thinks his father might still be alive. So what triggers the powers? It can't be a ritu, because that hasn't been performed yet. So if death or a ritu does not trigger it, what does? Normally I would suggest making death the trigger and having Arthur's journey be about finding out how his father died, but that doesn't work because of my next issue.

If not all the UM are dead, how does the ritu give them new names? This applies in two instances, Victor and Arthur. I think, first, we need more clarification on the usual process when the guards change. Usually it happens every certain number of years, yes? So what happens to the old UM when the new UM is announced?

In the case of Victor, how does the ritu produce a new name if he is still in his position? And in the case of Arthur, they already have a list of names, and Arthur is on it. How do they go about getting a new name, as Mrs Nair wants near the end of the book? They can't just perform the ritu again, can they? So it seems impossible at this point to get a new cardinal, whether or not he has defected. The idea that they can just replace him is inconsistent with the reality you've shown us. Since they all basically decide they aren't giving up on Arthur, I think this should be revised to say that they can't replace him, so they have to work to turn him back to their side.

The message system seems weak. Frederick's message to Arthur is a Hail Mary at best, and I didn't realize other signs might use sand messaging until Risa says it at the very end. Surely with all the Gemini technology, they would have come up with a good way for Zignas to message each other?

I was very confused about the door situation. In the beginning, I feel we are led to believe that there are limited doors from Zigna to the Terran world, and they only open so often, etc. But then we learn that one Oppidum is basically Amazon.com, and plenty of Zignas live in the Terran world. Can you clarify?

I don't understand the role of the Delphi. For most of the book, I felt we are led to believe that the Libra UM is the Delphi—it is one role. But then when Risa becomes Delphi, it is suddenly two roles: Blaze's role as Libra UM and Risa's role as Delphi. If the Delphi is not part of the original 12 UM, how is he or she chosen? I understood there are 12 names, and a Rex, Regina, and Delphi are part of that 12. This is a situation where it feels like you've broken your rules for your own convenience, without giving us a reasonable explanation. You could do something like saying this is the first time the Delphi has been different than the Libra UM,

and Mrs. Nair was just as surprised as the others when she had the vision of it (or something to that effect), and she doesn't know why it is happening. But you have to acknowledge the inconsistency at the very least.

Another major issue I had is that characters are always saying ZU is great because you can be yourself. But we are shown how untrue this is over and over. People like David and Risa are ridiculed if they don't fit into what their sign is "supposed" to be like. This is exactly how it is on the Terran world, so I'm confused as to why Zignas keep saying otherwise, and why they think they are so superior. Clarify.

Tense/POV:

Blaze's POV is strong, and she's a natural storyteller. But you have a tendency to "head-hop." Headhopping was very popular years ago, and there are one or two big-time authors who still employ this technique. But now, it is generally preferred that you stay in one character's POV for an entire scene (or most of it), switching POVs with a scene or chapter break (a scene break is denoted by an extra blank line, or three stars ***). That way your reader is staying in your character's head for a while, and not getting whiplash by jumping back and forth between heads. Most editors and agents will see headhopping as something to fix rather than a stylistic choice.

Besides Blaze, other valuable POVs would be Victor, Mrs. Nair, and possibly Arthur. I would avoid other characters, as it can get messy once we add in too many. (The exception is the first chapter, which I feel we need and can only be in Frederick's POV.)

Writing Style:

Overall the writing is fairly smooth, and even more impressive considering it's not your first language. One weakness I found was your tendency to tell us things vs showing them to us.

Examples:

Telling: Blaze decided to ask the question on her mind. "Where where you?"

Showing: "Where were you?" asked Blaze.

In your particular case, you tend to tell then show, so I deleted a lot of the unnecessary telling.

Another weakness was repetitiveness. This showed up in both word choice and information. Sometimes you tell us the same thing three sentences in a row, when we only need the one sentence to accomplish it. (You'll note I deleted much of this.) By trimming the fat, as it were, you stay on pace and keep the reader engaged.

Pacing:

For the most part, the pacing is good. I would keep the chapters you had in question (1, 8, 9, and 10). I do think some other scenes can be cut.

I think we don't need to return to her house twice before going to ZU. Once is fine, but twice feels a bit too repetitive and doesn't feel like it furthers the plot. Is there any way for a sister to steal the Horologium while she is still at school, so you can eliminate that scene at the house? I don't think we need her talk with Mrs Brown, so moving the theft would accomplish two things.

I think we can skip when Blaze sees some Oppidums through the window at the treehouse. This feels very repetitive once we get on the train with Risa, and I think the tour feels more natural on the train.

I think you should cut the scene where Marie "sees" the confrontation between Victor, Frederick, and Mrs. Nair. One, that scene is really confusing (Is it normal that she can see things like this? Is this happening in the past or present? How does an object of the Dux Cancer lead her to see a scene that doesn't involve the Dux Cancer? Etc). If you don't want to cut it, I think the other option would be to put it in Victor's POV. Since it does seem like it's in the past, we can see him remembering the confrontation, perhaps while plotting his next move. I wouldn't mind a few more sprinklings of Victor's POV, actually.

Plot:

The overall plot and conflict is solid. It's clear you know your genre and have a good sense of how story arcs should flow. My questions are mainly asking for lots of clarification and explanations about character motivations.

The class structure Blaze refers to is not one I have heard of. Class Six versus Class One? In most American schools, Blaze would be considered a sophomore, and she would be able to choose honors classes individually. So it's not an all-or-nothing proposition. Is she in some sort of magnet school that does things differently? I really would advise against this. You have enough to explain in the paranormal world without having to explain a different school structure as well.

Why would Arthur use a bomb in Seven? I felt like we never got a good explanation for that. Plus, with his powers, why would he have to use a bomb? A bomb is much too indiscriminate—he wouldn't be able to control who got hurt and who didn't, so it's a really poor plan if he wants to save people here. Can he use his powers instead?

Julia's plotline felt unfinished. What happens to her after the big revelation? I'd prefer to see her again, but even hearing about her from another character would work.

The first fight scene with Victor is a little too convenient. They can easily talk without him noticing, he is feet from them and yet he doesn't notice that Vanessa turns into a torch, etc. I get that he talks a lot, but I think this has to be mostly hand signs or a few one/two word sentences, nothing more.

I want to see the note Mrs Nair receives from Victor. See her open it, drop it in shock, etc. Also, we should be told there is another piece of paper that looks like a photograph, or something. Blaze refers to it later and it feels like it comes out of nowhere.

I really didn't buy that Blaze kept forgetting her phrase. It's a two word phrase, and they all begin with the same word. This felt like you were trying to force drama where there wasn't any. I don't think you really need any tension here, but if you want it, make it about mastering the skill. Perhaps she crash lands after she flies because she hasn't had enough practice, or something like that.

It felt odd that Blaze never asked to see the prophecy. I know it doesn't end up referring to her, but it seems like a natural thing that if everyone told her the prophecy was about her, then she'd want to see it as soon as possible.

Mrs. Nair says Frederick's message is a trap. But we know the message was meant for Arthur. Why would he lead his own son into a trap? Or are we meant to understand that Mrs. Nair might be lying here? At the very least, Arthur has to ask why his father would lead him into a trap. The question doesn't have to be answered, but needs to be acknowledged.

If Victor needs the Cardinals alive, why does he entrap them in cells that might kill them? Perhaps a character can speculate that they aren't meant to be there long enough for them to die?

Why does the Horologium give them a fifth name? If it keeps giving names, then why do they need a ritu at all? This was very confusing. Again, you can say this is odd, that the Horologium has never done this before, or something like that. Or you can clarify so we understand why this is happening.

Arthur is surrounded by steel, but water is his sign's weakness (at least, it is Frederick's weakness, so logic says it should be Arthur's too). Is this not a giant clue to the others that Arthur is clearly working with Victor? Either it needs to be changed to water or one of the characters needs to ask why Victor would use the wrong kind of cage.

The ending doesn't work for me. Cliffhanger endings are hard to pull off, and I don't think this one works. It feels like you've got slightly too far, like the natural ending of the book is once Risa leaves, and then Blaze has some introspection. No Arthur. You have enough continuing story threads for the next book that we don't need this.

Characters:

Heroine: Blaze follows the pattern for a paranormal YA heroine pretty well. There were a couple things that weren't quite believable for me.

Mrs. Nair clearly cares for Blaze and was very careful placing her with a family. So why does Blaze not know her birthday? Surely Mrs. Nair would have told Blaze's protectors. Blaze not knowing made complete sense until the end when we find out Mrs Nair is her mother. Since her mother was involved and tried to keep tabs on her (as opposed to her mother dying/abandoning her on a doorstep), I think there needs to be some explanation for her not knowing her birthday.

Also, Mrs. Nair says she picked the Browns. If that is so, why did Blaze spend time in other foster homes before coming to the Browns? Explain.

I also think you've made things unnecessarily complicated by giving Blaze a "power" that we don't ever see her use. Her ability to scan people never really comes into play. Either you need to expand it more and let us see her actually using it regularly, or delete it. Personally, I suggest deleting, because once she gets her other powers, it all gets too confusing.

In the Terran world, Blaze comments about how her family is not the wealthiest, etc, but she has a lot of habits that cost money—namely, coffee before school and going to Seven every day after school. Eating fast food costs money, and usually is the first thing to go when families don't have money. So where is she getting the money for this?

Blaze has a tendency to protest too much about being not special. It's a dead giveaway that she's not, and gets a little tiring. There is a fine line between "believable protesting" and "protesting too much." Some resistance is natural, but I would stop after two references.

Her relationship:

Her relationship with Arthur was a bit problematic for me. Certainly in YA, there is always some suspension of disbelief (meeting their soulmate so young is not common, but the reader accepts it), but here, we need something to go on. She sees him, and in effect falls in love with him without any further prompting. This is part of the reason I wouldn't delete chapters 9 and 10. We need to see them interacting MORE, not less. We need to see them connecting, see them discussing something personal (not UM stuff). One scene is enough to do the trick.

Secondary:

Your secondary characters are good. Victor, Arthur, and Risa are particularly intriguing. I hope we learn even more about them in the next book!

Conclusion:

Like I said, the idea is a good one, but the worldbuilding really needs to be much more solid. (I have a feeling you know the world inside and out, it's more about translating that to the page. As I said in our emails, the reader only has the book, so you have to make sure everything is explained in a way that they don't need a supplemental document.) This isn't the only zodiac YA novel out there, so you need to fill in all the holes in order to compete. If you can do this, I think you've got a good story and characters that fit nicely into the genre.

I hope my feedback helps you toward your publishing goals!