

Dear Krista,

Thank you so much for allowing me to read “The Empire Girls.” What a fantastic story! I was completely charmed, and read straight through to the end without pause.

Your descriptions are fresh and colorful. I particularly liked, “[deleted]” The prose sparkles.

I do feel there are a few things you might look at as you move forward with revisions. First of all, I wondered if the title could be made more evocative of the story. The piece is fantastical, beautiful, and feminine, but I wouldn’t pick this title out of an anthology as a good bet for something I’d be drawn to. I wonder if it needs more lightness to it, something to soften the hard edge of “empire”? The story does have a striking contrast between hard (the empire, the Agent, the machine, the room, the samurai) and the soft (the hair on the girls bodies, the silk, the stories about snow monsters).

However, my main concern is that the end of the story seems to come too easily for the Katya. I wonder if the conflict might be deepened, by forcing her to struggle a little more at the end, thereby making the final payoff more rewarding?

One way to achieve that might be to deepen the conflict/relationship between the narrator and Del. If Del is standing in as a complex mother figure, how could that be exploited in the sequence of events? As it stands, Del’s decision to stop reeling is sudden and not well explained. What causes the shift? What is she hoping to accomplish? Could we see some discontent earlier on?

Another way Katya might have to work harder is if we see her having to win the other girls over to the cocoon-building. I like the idea of her leading them to find their samurai selves, and bringing that idea out at the end could provide a nice symmetry. This would also give you a chance to develop more distinct personalities (as you have done with Halen) in a couple more of the girls (particularly Tima on page 28, who helps with adjusting the reeler and seems to appear out of nowhere).

I also wonder if Katya’s inner struggle would benefit from a little more development. I’m concerned that her dark fantasy about hurting the new girls isn’t well enough explained. My gut sense is that she sees herself in them, and she’s angry at herself for choosing her fate. If that is the case, I think we need to get a hint of that anger, and a hint of how she sees herself in the new girls, before we hear about her dark fantasies of hurting them. Her inner conflict seems to revolve around the angry knowledge that she alone is responsible for her fate, and I think the story would have even more impact if that were emphasized a little more.

Another thing that you might look at is the Agent’s deception and her eagerness to follow him. How does he play on her insecurities/dreams/ego in order to get her to come with him? What is it in her character that causes her to want this so badly that she ignores that niggling

feeling that something is not right? I worry that readers may wonder why she'd leave so easily and so fearlessly, and that they might question her motivation for drinking the tea.

The transition on page two might be a little rough, in the paragraph that starts, "[deleted]". I wonder if the beginning of that paragraph gives away too much too soon? I do like the second half of that paragraph, though: "[deleted]."

You have created an intriguing world, with a lot of unique detail. The woodpecker as a counterpoint to the fantasy is brilliant- it adds an everyday touch to the story that both grounds the story and elevates it. In a few places I think the detail could be expanded further might help your readers to visualize the world even more clearly. The picture of the room could be refined- a couple more strokes of description here might be all that is needed. The weaving method is not quite clear, and it's hard to tell if that is a separate action from the spinning. Also, you might consider adding a little more sensory detail relating to how the new body feels, and a more tactile description of the skeins. Are the skeins hard for the girls to give up? And I particularly struggled with this image on page 24: "[deleted]."

Lastly, a few small questions/concerns:

Page 2: Why does she take more of the drink and grow less hair than the other girls? I'm worried that will feel counter-intuitive.

Page 2: How do they throw little parties when they have nothing? I like the idea of it, but what makes it a party? Maybe call it a celebration, or make it into more of a ritual? It could make a lovely addition for the girls to be developing rituals or even hinting at the genesis of a religion of some kind.

Page 2: I'm concerned that the general nature of the "new recruits" might make the introduction of Tima and Eden later in the story seem repetitive. Could the two girls be introduced on this page?

Page 6: I think it needs to be referenced that Del doesn't immediately greet the new sisters because she is eating. I figured this out, but it gave me a small hitch in the beginning. It's also confusing that the young girls talk about their trip before Del has crossed the room to speak soothingly to them. Why are they not afraid of/disgusted by her?

Page 15: Why does the Agent leave the room? To get a fresh, living worm? I'm concerned that readers may stumble over this. The ingredients were apparently fresh enough to work.

Page 18: "[deleted]." These two statements feel a little contradictory.

Page 19: Typo: "As the forest as night" should be "as the forest at night".

Page 26: If the human part of her is kept alive by the memory of her terrible choice, are the others becoming less human in their minds? This could be an interesting thing to explore or hint at.

Page 28: “[deleted]” Why does it occur to the girls that she might be doing something with the silk other than handing it off to the old woman? What makes them think she might be planning to make something?

Page 32: I assume she spins and weaves her own cocoon, green, although that is not mentioned.

Page 33: “The food will stop now.” I think it already did, the night before.

Thank you so much for a great read. I’m looking forward to the next draft.

Sincerely,

Kellelynn H. Riley