

# Chapter One

WHEN SHE WAS ELEVEN, A CRAZY OLD MAN taught Amandine how to breathe backwards. This trick made all else possible, launching her sideways journey through the bright and shadowed places of Penance. The encounter was not what she hoped for—or feared.



Amandine’s stomach quivered as the train settled onto the station, the last stop before the circus grounds. She cued her music and closed her eyes, mentally running through her routine again.

*What if I’m not good enough?*

She glanced at Elsbith, who’d chosen to be her mother against all common sense. Elsbith held her hand without talking and for once Amandine was grateful that Seekers kept silence in their pockets, next to the tissues and noter. A legacy of their Earth Quaker ancestry.

Amandine took a deep breath.

*I will be great.*

But even if she amazed them, would they let a leopard into the troupe?

“Sweet Light, will you look at that,” said Elsbith.

Amandine bit back a scowl, hating to be interrupted mid-routine. She glanced at the plum flowers of a cottonball shrub, one of nine evenly spaced between fatal-snout trees, no more remarkable than all those square ponds they’d seen earlier, with their lone gazebo trees on a diamond-shaped central island.

“This far out, we should be seeing native plants and wildlife,” said Elsbith. “The aliens only disneyed the settled areas. We did that—”

“*Mom.*”

(Sorry), Elsbith answered, her gesture right over her heart. Like everything else she did, her body speech was quietly potent. “No lectures. I promise.”

Amandine returned to her rehearsal. When she finished and looked up, Elsbith was staring out the window, knuckles pressed against her lips. Twenty kilometers later they passed a circular break in the woods, followed in due measure by an identical picnic area. Elsbith’s frown deepened.

“What is it?” Amandine asked, squeezing the end of her scarf. The rest of it was wound around her face and head, leaving only her eyes exposed.

“Nothing, Dearheart.”

*Nothing dangerous, then.* She cued the music for her best move, the split pinwheel around the trapeze. She’d messed it up yesterday.

“I was really looking forward to showing you a natural forest.” Elsbith sounded like she’d been expecting a warm buttered muffin and received a bowl of overcooked kale instead. Amandine paused her noter and looked out at the woodland, mostly oak or whatever interspersed between tall bottlebrush pines.

“How can you tell it’s not real?” she asked, actually curious.

“Natural forests don’t have built-in picnic areas or topiary.”

“What’s topiary?”

“A bush shaped to look like a creature. Like the trail markers in Drunk Goat Woods.”

*No dragons in Earth forests? How sad.* Amandine drummed her fingertips on her noter. She stopped a moment later, smiling sheepishly.

Elsbith smiled back, then sighed. She turned Amandine’s noter back on. (Go on).

An hour of silence followed, with Elsbith’s nose so close to the window field Amandine expected to see sparks. Unfathomable. Amandine had expected so much more. After all, the section of Penance they inhabited was larger than Jupiter. How could it be so empty and boring between cities? She tugged her scarf lower on her forehead and dug her hand into her pocket, bunching the fabric in her fist.

After another hour, Amandine began to scan the landscape, desperate for a safe distraction: her face, warm and prickly when they first set out, now itched fiercely, but she couldn't scratch. If she smudged her makeup, everyone would see she was a leopard.

A boy across the aisle said, "Papa, look!"

Five equilateral peaks frosted with laser precision: the Penance version of the Alps, welcoming them to the city of Trump Point. The train slowed as it swung around the base of the staircase-staggered range, past strips of barrel cacti, prairie grass, and swamp oak. Perched on the oaks' highest branches, Japanese macaques hurled cacti at the dingoes circling below. A grazing Galápagos tortoise craned his neck, trying to catch one of the missiles.

Grinning madly, Amandine rose and stood by the door as they approached the station, tapping her fingers against her leg. They slipped out before the door fully opened, into a crowd that was a hundred times larger than any she'd ever seen. She stopped short. Someone pushed her from behind. Amandine jumped.

"This way, Dearheart," said Elsbith. Snippets of conversation snagged Amandine's attention as they shuffled through a sea of coats, momentarily pulling her focus away from the ground and the dreaded sound of thick-heeled boots. Holo ads popped out of every support beam, adding to the din. Her shoulder blades tingled with the awareness of all the bodies behind her. A gap opened to their right. Amandine saw a flash of white. She held her breath until the crowd shifted and she saw it was a hat, not a Plaguellant's hooded cape. *Idiot. It's too crowded here for Plaguellants. They might be touched by accident.* This station was probably one of the safest places for a leopard in the whole colony.

The crowd shifted, revealing eight exit doors. Amandine breathed easier.

Just a few steps short of the exit, a man stepped in front of them, thrusting his hand toward Elsbith. "Jom Merkel, medical genealogist." He flashed a plastic smile at Amandine. "I help smart young people like you evaluate their medical risks."

*Not people like me.* She said, (No thanks), with a reasonably polite gesture. She didn't need to worry about which organ to select for lifetime coverage. Though entitled to the colony's universal health care of immunizations plus one organ, she'd never use it; a hospital meant too much risk of exposure.

Out on the street, the crowd was much thinner and she could see all around her. Amandine took a few calming breaths. She squeezed and released her hands in her pockets.

“The circus is only five kilometers from here,” said Elsbith. “Should we jog, to help you warm up?”

Amandine smiled and sprinted ahead—did her mother think she would ever say no to speed?—backpedaling until Elsbith caught up. Her pulse spiked when she glimpsed the big top. The gate to the circus grounds bore the troupe’s logo, a silhouette of a glassblower holding a pipe into the air, breathing life into a sparkling Earth globe circled by big tops. She walked slowly to take it all in. Her body hummed. Scarlet flags snapped in the wind, cricketing as they rubbed against each other.

Across the main tent a vid showed Grace Kittredge, owner and artistic director of Cristallo, flipping like a Jacob’s ladder over and around a swath of silky fabric. Her smile was so bright Amandine wanted to steal it. Grace dropped onto a trapeze, arching backwards over the bar until her paprika hair brushed her heels. She flipped her legs over and, using her magbelt, floated upside down in mid-air, near but not supported by the trapeze. Dancing with air.

None of the Seekers understood the allure of air. When Amandine said it felt like velvet, they’d rub her cheek and say, “Like that, sweets?” She tried so hard to explain how air could place a sound in your hands like a gift, make your heart slow and swell. But they moved as if air didn’t exist.

Grace Kittredge understood. She’d say, “Air has textures you haven’t even dreamed of, ma petite. Up here, air is dream.”

Amandine swallowed hard. *I’ll work harder than anyone else*, she promised silently. *Please let me fly with you.*



A receptionist checked them in and directed them to the performers’ warm-up tent, a spaceship hangar invaded by Dr. Seuss. Amandine looked up first, at the multi-tiered grid that could be configured any which way, unlike the beam in the Seekers’ barn. *Oooh, is that a topsy-turvy trapeze behind the aerial cube?* She pictured herself doing a suicide drop off one end, the trapeze

rotating so she could catch the other end in a rainbow straddle, then she'd—but she wouldn't have to limit herself to one trapeze, would she? You could rig three in a row here, or a whole circle, or...

"Sweet Light," she whispered, awestruck.

To her left, a fan three times her size blew on a rack of costumes that fluttered as if anxious to dance. Two looked like they would fit her. Evening gloves of every color lined the edges of a laundry bin. On a shelf above, hats perched on mannequin heads, their charms and bells chattering. One skullcap had a partial face, just a beaky blue nose and *aha!* eyes. With each sweep of the fan, its black dreadlocks slapped one cheek, then the other.

The tent walls seemed flimsy, white fabric stretched across carbon filament framing, each piece numbered and marked with an up arrow. A factory hose as high as her bellybutton snaked along a padded mat near a wall of mirrors, humming loudly as it blew warm air onto her feet. Oh, she thought. Of course the heating had to be as portable as the tent.

"Not too many people get to see the guts of the magic," said Elsbith. "The teardown and setup are a show all by themselves."

Everything was on wheels or magcarts and every trunk looked like it could be dropped from a cruiser without damage. Such complexity and professionalism. Could she possibly meet their standards?

She kicked off her shoes and stepped onto the mat, stretching her arms as she walked. A section of the tent's wall lit up, announcing:

**Date:** 19 Sept. 2375

**City:** Trump Point

**Warm-ups:** Jango, Beena, Motch, Bix

**Juggling teams:** Peladin, Abby, Kameko

**Version:** cloud swing/fire flight

**House:** 95%!!!

*Some day my act's going to be up there,* she vowed, laying her coat next to her shoes.

Elsbith walked around while Amandine stretched, then waited by the portable dressing area, five long rows of wheeled trunks, each surrounded by curtains on rolling racks. After Amandine finished, Elsbith beckoned her into one of the makeshift cubicles and pulled the curtains closed. She held out a tube of makeup remover. "Coach's orders."

Amandine stared open-mouthed. “Why?”

Elsbith tilted her head, signaling an impending Seeker lesson. “Why do you think?” Her mother hummed. Amandine unwound her scarf and slouched onto the folding chair, facing a tall mirror. Tucked in its frame was a holo of a male performer in full makeup with a superimposed chart. Clown white was “C1” and the poppy red eyebrows “R9.”

*Birthright Seekers must have more Light in them than the rest of us, no matter what Mom says. That’s why this stuff makes sense to them.* Amandine rolled a makeup wand in her fingers. There was more makeup on this guy’s trunk than could be found among all the women she knew. She’d been worried that her makeup was too sedate, and now the coach wanted her to take it all off? Why?

The explanation popped into her head, spreading a chill across the nape of her neck. “You told him,” Amandine said in a low voice.

“Of course. And Grace Kittredge. I had to know they’d keep you safe.”

Amandine’s chest tightened. She knew the rules would change, but hadn’t considered this possibility. Lord knows she didn’t need another parent, but she’d take twenty if that was what it took to get into the circus. Reaching for the makeup remover, she pretended she was wiping a stripe of R9 from a perfect face. When the lawn of hives emerged, her throat closed up.

“Oh Sweet Light, not again,” said Elsbith.

Why did the coach have to see her markings now, when she looked even stranger than usual? Amandine frowned. Why did he need to see them at all? Didn’t Squirrelman Jim believe Elsbith? Her frown deepened. Then it came to her: he didn’t need to see, she needed to show.

“He wants to know that I’ll trust him completely,” Amandine said slowly. Elsbith nodded. *Ya, that makes sense. In a circus, doubt is dangerous.*

Amandine’s noter beeped her five-minute warning. Her mother’s face turned serious. She set her hands on the trunk, enclosing Amandine in a wishbone.

“Dearheart, I love you.” The warmth in her voice made Amandine’s belly cramp. She owed her life to the Seekers, especially Elsbith, who’d found her abandoned and adopted her.

If she failed the audition, she’d be trapped with them, grounded forever.

She stood up, still caught in her mother's arms. She was about to duck under them when she noticed Elsbith's hands clutching the edge of the trunk so tightly that Amandine could see her bones flaring from wrist to fingers. Elsbith's eyes were closed, the lids tense.

Amandine was a connoisseur of eyelids. She'd logged 468 hours of serious study from the hour and a half spent in silent Meeting each week. She knew the degree of smudginess that signaled insomnia for each person. She could mimic the semaphore of Aunt Linnsey's left eyelid—three quick blinks, pause, twitch, slow blink—as she silently upbraided herself for thinking too hard when she was supposed to be centered, and imagined putting both thumbs under the scrumpy eyebrows of the oldest members, slowly pulling up to smooth out the rolls of wrinkles that gathered above their lashes. Then she'd let go, so they'd snap back like an antique window shade. She'd watched time and again as her mother's eyelids buttered into a deeply meditative state, that Seeker place of mystery and strength. She'd never seen them tense like this.

“What's wrong?”

Elsbith opened her eyes. “This is just so much harder than I imagined.” She stepped back, her voice betraying the same bewilderment as her arms. “Be careful, Amandine.”

Amandine heartwaved, rolling her hand from her heart out toward her mother with a grand flourish, her gaze on the floor so Elsbith wouldn't see the smile trying to burst out.

Elsbith kissed her head, holding her lips against her hair as she took a deep breath. She nudged her forward. “Good luck.”

The door opened onto a dark room and a swell of voices. Amandine's pulse skittered.

She peeled back the thick curtain before her and peeked through. The stage glowed with a mist of color. A training holo, complete with audience! She grinned. A woman swept toward the front of the orchestra section, silver curls flashing all over her creampuff hairdo. Hair forks! She was a Titan, one of the rich colonists. The hair forks were much smaller than Amandine thought they'd be, the tines sized for a baby's mouth, the handles, curled like a scorpion's tail, probably no longer than her little finger. Yet there were enough for a table service for forty. A bald man sat down next to the Titan. He wore a crest of hair forks down the center of his head, each made from two adult-sized forks curled so their tips met in the center. How much was all that silver worth? More than the Seekers' yearly harvest?

Amandine's mouth dropped open. This really was a different world. She stared for a few more seconds, then scanned the rest of the room. She could only make out a word here and there. Would she hear the audience when she was on her trapeze? She moved the curtain back a little more. That scary-looking kid who was glued to his noter—could she make him applaud? Amandine focused her will on him, holding her breath. He glanced up.

*Oh, ya. You'll look.*

Her blood flowed faster, hotter. That mysterious feeling built in her, growing too big for her skin. She wanted to pour its heat into the crowd and then gather it back into her arms.

The middle orchestra doors swung open. Squirrelman Jim and Grace Kittredge strode in. Amandine sucked in her breath. They glided toward the stage, Squirrelman in an acid yellow ringmaster's suit lined with stripes, small shiny globes in each gray dreadlock jingling against his broad shoulders. Madame K. was barefoot, in black leotard and tights. Even at this distance, her eyes sparkled and she filled the room. She took a seat in the tenth row.

"Amandine should be here," said Squirrelman, still standing.

"I am," she answered, stepping through the curtain.

The house lights dimmed, throwing the audience into darkness. A spotlight focused on center stage. Squinting, Amandine walked toward it. Squirrelman leapt up and joined her.

He had brown eyes, like hers, but his were flecked with gold. Was that real or a circus thing? His skin was just as striking, nearly cinnamon. On her best days she looked like an old oak spoon that desperately needed oiling. *Now, with the rash...* Heat raced up her cheeks. That would make the rash look even more horrid, she realized. The blush deepened. She took a deep breath and held her head up.

He looked right at her. A chill raced down her sides. Her hands grew so cold she wondered if ice floes had formed in her veins, blocking her circulation. It was so hard to hold his gaze her eyes began to feel unnaturally large. Then Squirrelman smiled and the corners of his eyes crinkled. It was a real smile, the one reaction she'd never expected from a stranger.

She blinked several times. Warmth trickled down into her tributaries.

"I'm Squirrelman Jim, aerials coach." He tilted his head and his hair globes jingled. "Tell me, Amandine, do you know where inspiration comes from?"



*Aaahh.* She was used to fielding difficult questions that came out of nowhere, craved the spotlighting. The mysterious feeling surged inside her again and broke all the logjams. She concentrated. Finally, she said, “No, but I think I know what it feels like.”

“Like what?”

A dozen words jumped into her mouth, none of them quite right. Impatient, the force inside her just shoved the words aside. She closed her eyes, following the memory of inspiration with her hands, drawing up from her core to her heart, swooping out to the sides, rising naturally onto the balls of her feet. The air itself seemed to swirl her. She dropped her head back and spun faster. Her nose tickled as if she’d gulped a big shot of soda bubbles. Nine spins, ten, until the heat slicked her throat. She stopped. She opened her eyes, the laugh stretching her face, roaring out of her.

“Not like so?” he asked, dropping onto his back into a turtle spin. He popped back to his feet.

(No), she said emphatically, fingers spread wide. A second later, she remembered who she was talking to and sucked in sharp. “At least, not for me.”

Squirrelman smiled. “It is a little bit different for all of us. But the source, Amandine, that is the same for everyone. And that is the secret all great performers know.”

She leaned forward a little, holding her breath.

“This I share with you because no matter where your career leads, all circus folk are kin. So we begin where it all begins. Kneel.”

She dropped to her knees. The springy floor pushed back as she pressed her toes up and down. Air billowed between them. She wondered if he tasted it.

“To breathe is to inspire. Breathing is in-spir-a-tion,” he said. “That’s an ancient Earth word; it means ‘divine guidance.’ You breathe in the Muse, then you let it dance the world awake.” He spiraled his hands in the air. “*This* is the secret: breathe with intent and awe. Allow your body to be possessed by joy.”

*That’s it?*

“Breathe,” he said.

Amandine pulled her breath in through her nose, exhaling through her mouth in an exaggerated fashion. Another breath, then another. She tilted her head toward him.

Squirrelman knelt beside her and put her hand on his stomach. He smelled a bit like summer, only cleaner, like a chore well done.

“Observe,” he said. “Breathing backwards.” His belly ballooned as he took a deep breath in through his nose. He breathed out slowly, while sucking in his stomach. She could see his ribs emerge. He snapped his fingers, keeping the count: *In...one two. Out...three four five six.*

“Now you,” he said. “Breathe backwards.”

Back somersault, back walkover, back handspring: she could do anything backwards. This should have been easy. *Breathe in, push out. Breathe out, pull in.* Yet Amandine kept tripping over her breath.

“From your diaphragm.” He tapped her belly, and then set his warm palm against it. He guided the next breath firmly, easing up as she began to get the rhythm. Three backward breaths, then she stumbled again. Squirrelman stopped her.

“Everything flows from the breath: rhythm, control, power, balance, awareness.” He rose, gesturing her up. “Backward breathing will teach you that. It is the talisman of the gift. Once you’ve mastered it, then you will be able to breathe like a flyer, into here.” He moved his hands over his upper ribs. “Now—” He raised two fingers into the air.

A trapeze dropped above the center orchestra and spiraled down toward the stage, low enough to grasp. Amandine nervously tightened the band on her high ponytail.

“I will run your tech. One last breath together,” said Squirrelman, “and then you fly.”

(Thank you), she said.

(On three), he indicated. *One, two...* This breath expanded her like prayer. He smiled as if he could sense that. Squirrelman jumped off the stage and disappeared into the darkness.

Her pulse kicked hard as she took her mark and waited for the opening crash of her music. It began with a crack so loud it pitched her heart into her throat. Amandine jumped, arms and legs splayed in the air for a sizzling instant before she fell to the stage. She somersaulted forward, back, the music thundering against her skin, twisted this way and that as the beat grew frantic, rolling through her body as if she no longer knew the correct arrangement of her limbs. She whipped her head left and right to shake off the anger of being grounded. The *wrongness*.

Another loud clap, then silence. Silver music, curious. She rose to one knee, grabbed the trapeze with one hand, and ran the other up that arm until both hands cradled the bar. Cautiously, she skated the top hand to the other side. The trapeze began to rise.

She rolled her legs over her chest and up to the bar until she was upside down in a one-knee hang, driving the heel of her folded leg into her butt. She straightened the other leg and slowly circled it halfway round, tasting the space.

A single-leg roll-up flipped her up onto the bar; Amandine ran her hand up one rope in a timid caress, repeating the motion on the opposite side with virgin deliberation. No need to fake that sense of wonder—even after years of practice, the moment when her hands first stroked the ropes still filled her with the sensation of chocolate melting in her mouth.

Amandine pulled herself up off the bar and rolled backwards into a full split. Still upside down, she hooked the rope with the back of her knee, struck a gazelle-like pose, and rotated around the rope, letting the round melody flow through her. The air was warmer up here; it was always hotter up high. But it also seemed silkier—from the spotlight? She wanted to scoop up two delicious armfuls and never let them go. For several moves, she worked from one rope to the other, swinging from horizontal to vertical and back, feet never touching the bar. Gradually, the music tightened. With her final slow stretch, she brought both feet to the bar, facing front. Now more instruments rushed in. Her blood surged.

Her first big move.

She chicken-winged both arms and tipped down into an arabesque so deep her forehead swung toward the bar. That Titan gasped. At the last second Amandine somersaulted forward and caught the bar split between her legs. Perched for a second, she slid both hands down the ropes onto the bar. She kicked out and pinwheeled around the trapeze, chest high, legs as long and straight as a ballerina's as she spun. Around and around, not a wobble left or right. Her heart surged each time her head swung down. Five more times, feet still in perfect pointe. Again and again and again. Now she passed Luc Alicot's mark. A howl swelled in her throat. After a dozen pinwheels, she caught the ropes as she stopped her rotation. The audience clapped, the sound reverberating in her chest like a second heartbeat, speeding her own. She moved sideways on the bar, but not far enough, and had to scootch to position herself correctly. *Sloppy*, she thought, wincing. She slipped into a single-knee layback. Then she turned her face to the audience and

touched her foot to her head. She flashed them a smile. A quick transition and she was standing on the bar. She pumped like mad, pushing the trapeze into a strong swing. *So free*. Her whole body smiled.

Forward and back, forward and back...

Her blood began to buzz. The next seven seconds were make-or-break.

Amandine pulled a breath up to her eyeballs. Just as her forward swing was about to descend, she plummeted below the bar into an ankle hang, then popped herself back to standing. Then right back into another ankle hang, only this time she did a horizontal pirouette above the bar and ended up seated pretty as you please. She slipped backwards into an upside-down arrow and shifted until her torso was level under the bar, then opened into a full split that she held out and back.

*Aiiieee! Now—*

Swinging below the bar by one arm. But this was no simple Amazon: she rotated her free arm forward, pulled it down in a *shazam!* pose and then crunched up to slap her opposite foot. On the return swing, she tucked into a backward roll-through; as she came forward, she freed one arm and did another *yow!* pose, which she held as she pivoted around and caught the trapeze, facing front now.

Back and forth, her arc long and strong.

Amandine pulled herself up into a front balance, the cool bar pressing into her stomach. She flipped onto her back and dropped into an ankle hang. From this, she flipped into a seated position, then slipped forward enough to tuck into a backward somersault. As her legs swung through, she crossed them at the knees, resting her feet on the ropes. She dropped her arms to complete the figure X and beamed at the audience as she swung upside down, feeling gravity tug on her ponytail band and pull her hair into a column.

She could have stayed like that all day. Instead, she flowed back into a standing position. How could it be over this soon? Amandine jumped backwards off the trapeze and twisted into a jellyroll. Someone gasped as she rushed headlong toward the stage. She flipped upside down at the last moment, the air net shimmering green around her feet.

Her next breath filled her with sunshine.

“Bravo!” shouted the scary kid in the audience, leaping to his feet. A second later, the two Titans in the second row joined him. There were three kids in leotards halfway up that section. They hadn’t been there at the start. Who were they? What were they doing there?

Chest heaving, she stepped out of the spotlight toward the front of the stage, blinking back spots as she sought out Squirrelman Jim and Madame Kittredge. Was that a nod? *Sweet Light, please let it be.*

“Thank you,” Grace called out. “Please join us.”

The vid disappeared.

The three kids did not.

*Real. Real kids, not holos.* Her breath backed up in her throat. Even at this distance, they’d see she was a leopard, her one white eyebrow bright as a signal flag. She felt like the dowels had been blown out of her joints, leaving one bone perched precariously on the other.

Squirrelman gestured. Amandine didn’t recognize the sign. Maybe it was circus speech, or some eastern dialect. He held her gaze. *Doesn’t he understand? How can he expect—*

Because she was supposed to trust him. Completely. If she joined Cristallo, she’d have to put her life in other people’s hands.

The flying part of her audition might be over, but the leopard still had to pass.

She couldn’t move. Her shoulders and neck clenched, pulsing an ache into the sockets of her jaw. Sweat chilled on her body. Part of her wanted to disappear and part wanted to fight and part wanted Elsbith to walk in and fix everything, the way she always did, with that magic Amandine hoped she’d develop if she ever became a good enough Seeker.

Amandine inhaled. Under the heat of three stares she started up the aisle, heart slapping. The smaller girl’s face was pinched and red. The tall girl’s face was perfect, with smoldering eyes, gorgeous lips, and skin like porcelain heated by an inner flame, exactly what Amandine would have picked for herself. The boy was about her age, maybe a little older, his platinum hair spiked into an asymmetrical outrage. Amandine’s right calf tensed so hard it almost charley-horsed. She’d never felt so ugly in her life.

(Hi), she said, the gesture weak and trembly, utterly pathetic.

“Freak.” The short girl’s nostril ruffled. “I thought you all just had spots and streaks. Do you have pimples all over your body? That’s soo disgusting.”

The tall girl rolled her eyes. “Just once, Destiny, try thinking before you open your mouth. Those are hives. And if you had a rash like that you wouldn’t be flying, you’d be sitting on the ground whining.”

“Beena, let be,” said the boy.

In Destiny’s eyes, a denial that left a cold gray smear on the air.

Amandine took a deep breath. *There is Light in her*, she thought. *Reach it and anything is possible*. She swallowed hard.

“What are you doing here?” Destiny asked Amandine.

“Dreaming. Same like you?”

“Nothing like me.” Destiny’s pupils widened until her eyes looked black.

(That’s right), Beena said, leaning back into a pose that was both jazzy and regal. (She’s good).

The boy jumped to his feet and held out his hand. “Better than good. That was kushti.” His eyes sparkled. “I’m Jango.”

Madame K.’s son. He didn’t look much like her, except for the high-wattage smile that zinged her pulse. Amandine shook his hand, hoping he couldn’t feel hers tremble. Jango held her hand a little longer than was polite—trying to prove he wasn’t afraid to touch a leopard?

Amandine tilted her head toward Squirrelman and Grace. (Got to go), she waved. She cut in two rows in front of them, and stood before the seated legends.

“Well done,” said Squirrelman. “You have explosive power, and I felt your passion.”

Madame K. nodded. “Pinwheeling so many times was very gutsy. I know people twice your age who wouldn’t dare that. The whole thing was exciting, especially that dismount. I am sorely tempted to steal that from you.”

Amandine blinked rapidly, sure she’d misheard. “I’d be honored,” she croaked.

“You are a very strong flyer and a good actor, although you rushed the transition,” said Madame K. Amandine nodded seriously. “The fixed-trapeze portion of your routine was a bit short. I would’ve liked to have seen more lyricism, but I’m sure the poetry is in you.”

“Boom boom boom,” Squirrelman said. His bells chuckled this time. “We will work on your patience. You are very good. I will make you great.”

Madame Kittredge beamed. “Welcome to Cristallo.”

Amandine heartwaved her thanks with both hands. Then she started trembling. Her eyes teared. She gulped, covered her mouth, and closed her eyes. Sweet Light, she was going to rattle apart.

Squirrelman stood. “Come. We will speak more later. You need to stretch now.”

As soon as the adults rose, Jango walked toward them, chewing his lip. Madame K. flattened her son with a look that told Amandine the kids were not supposed to be here. Her heart flipped. *This wasn't planned?*

Would these adults really be able to protect her?

She inhaled. She'd risk it. It would be worth it. For one season or... She closed her eyes. One week. Sweet Light, she'd risk her life for a week in the circus.

“The doors were locked,” Madame K. said to Jango, “and you were supposed to be at the ballet.”

His Adam's apple bobbed. “We wanted to work on a new trick. In private.” Madame K. made that mother noise in her throat. (I'm sorry), he replied. “I thought you were testing out a new holo sequence.”

Amandine gripped the top of the chair. Ya, a holo would seem more believable than a real leopard.

“Well, Amandine,” Squirrelman said, inhaling deeply, “time for improvisation. Another crucial performance skill.

“Bashka,” he called out. Zabeena looked up. “You, too, Destiny.”



The children followed him in silence toward the warm-up tent. Beena sauntered. There was hardly a ripple around Jango's muscular body, though Destiny was spitting like frying bacon. Amandine pulled out her hair band and ran her fingers through imaginary knots when all she wanted was to veil her face. She felt like a giant bellows, full one minute, then wheezing.

The others kicked off their shoes before walking onto the blue mat. Both adults sank into full splits, easing side to side to stretch deeper. Grace made introductions, then led them through a series of individual stretches, ending with a back bend. Amandine snuck a look at Zabeena,

whose back wasn't nearly as scooped as hers. She smiled to herself. They paired up, she with Jango, Madame K. with Destiny, and Squirrelman with Zabeena.

Jango's feet pressed against hers for support as they bent slowly from their hips, seesawing toward each other.

"You ever fly with a partner?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. The balls of his feet and the cushy part of his palms guided and followed her, warm and steady. She became aware of his breath. The air brightened. She felt stronger.

A few beats later, she realized they were breathing together. She grinned ear to ear.

Madame K. cleared her throat. "We have just offered Amandine a place in our troupe."

(What?) Destiny screeched. She stared openmouthed at Madame K. "This is some kind of joke, right? Because you'd never risk Cristallo for a—a—"

Jango pressed his sole against Amandine's foot.

"Leopard," Squirrelman replied. "Say it, Destiny."

The girl didn't answer. She bowed her head, glowering at the floor. Madame K. tugged hard, until she looked up.

"We're adding a freak show?" said Destiny. "That's so lubberly." She clutched her ankles and rocked back and forth, arms tight by her sides. "And isn't it dangerous? What if the Plaguellants found out it was for real?"

Amandine's pulse beat wildly. The room narrowed to the space between her and Destiny. And in that moment, she knew that all of her mother's warnings were true. It didn't matter how many scientists said leopards didn't cause plaguepox. The first leopards had been born when the newly virulent strain emerged, a coincidence that many people didn't really accept. They blamed leopards for the disease that, a century later, was still humanity's boogieman.

Maybe it wasn't just the Plaguellants who'd kill leopards.

Amandine crossed her arms, holding her elbows. The official tally of murdered leopards was already higher than last year's, and it was only September. Now that she knew, really knew, how big Penance was, Amandine was certain the real number was much higher. Who would know if a thousand spotted infants were abandoned in all that emptiness?

Squirrelman rose and walked to the chef, a wall unit that was as sleek as the one back in the Seekers' kitchen was clunky. He returned with a tray holding six glasses filled with something



thick and violently green. He handed the first to Beena, who sipped without comment. The seedy drink clung to the back of Amandine's teeth.

Squirrelman exhaled unhappily. "All people are covered by the Universal Human Rights Law, but it's rarely enforced." (Earth law), he explained with a crude gesture that said much about the colonists' regard for bloated government.

The Seekers worked tirelessly to make that law real. It was hopeless. The colony's skeletal government only handled the basics. Amandine tried to swallow the lump clogging her throat. She didn't want to cause them any trouble. She just wanted to fly.

"As for us—" Squirrelman honored the children with an adult expression. As he talked, his hands moved and his bells clacked angrily, his body saying all the things she was feeling. She knew she was born to speak this language. That nut in her throat refused to budge.

Madame K. said, "We will assume all of the responsibility. If they closed the circus, you would be able to continue your careers elsewhere."

"*Moulti tiva*," Zabeena swore quietly. Anger simmered in her eyes.

So she was feeling threatened now, too. Amandine stared into her drink. This wasn't fair. Her dream shouldn't ruin theirs. But if she walked away, wouldn't that be just as wrong?

"Why would you do this?" Destiny asked Madame K. "She's not even family."

The breath trapped in Amandine's mouth turned hot and nasty.

"She's a Vázquez," Jango said, gesturing carelessly over his shoulder at Destiny, shifting to block Amandine's view of her. "Twenty-millionth generation, four times removed."

From the legendary Miguel Angel Vázquez of Earth, the first flyer to complete the "impossible" quadruple somersault, one of the greatest flying trapeze artists of all time. Jango said it like a joke, only it wasn't. Cristallo traced its roots back 523 years to the Cirque Napoléon, where Jules Leotard invented flying trapeze. Madame K. was the ninth generation of her family to run Cristallo.

*Moulti tiva*, Amandine thought. She had to be great, beyond her wildest dreams. Anything less wouldn't justify this.

"Why would we do this?" Squirrelman repeated. "Because this is what circus is all about, Destiny. To do more than others can even dream, you must care more, and risk more, than they dare."

Madame K. smiled at Amandine and nearly stopped her heart. (It's true). She gazed at each child in turn. "And that's why I want you to help us create a haven."

*Haven?* Amandine frowned. She already had one, and it wasn't what you'd think.

"This is a proud part of our heritage," said Madame K. "Imagine the magic when circuses traveled to an isolated town and those children saw such different people working together, making a thing of beauty and wonder." Her eyes glowed. "Circus was always a world beyond. And aerial acts in particular were very important. Over five hundred years ago, we flyers blew away assumptions about innate gender differences, because male flyers were graceful and female flyers were daring and physically strong. The only thing that mattered to a booking agent was how good you were, not your nationality, or race, or class, or even which language you spoke. There was equality in the air long before it reached the ground." She heartwaved to Jango. "I want to leave you a better circus. Even though we'll have to keep this secret, I think it will make us stronger. And it will matter."

Zabeena sullenly swept her foot along the floor. She had very long legs, a beautiful line. "So we're supposed to be her friend?"

Squirrelman steepled his fingers. "Friendship, like love and art, comes when it will," he said, in the voice that made odd things sound utterly natural. He tapped his forefingers. "We aren't asking you to pledge your friendship. Only your silence."

"Sure," said Jango. "You'll be safe here. I'll see to it."

With an airy wave, Zabeena said, "If I were a leopard, I'd join the Spots and fight back." She prodded Amandine with her foot. "Are you a coward or did they reject you because you're so scrawny?"

"Amandine's a Seeker," Squirrelman said. "They're nonviolent, a modern offshoot of the Earth Quakers. She'll find her own way to fight for freedom."

"Tra-la-lilia." Zabeena ruffled her shoulders. The gesture reminded Amandine of a lord bird, bringing to mind a picture of Zabeena with a crest of long curved feathers, squawking as she picked up her foot to register complaint. Tense as she was, a laugh tried to worm between Amandine's lips. She was afraid she'd make some horrid snorting noise.

Zabeena flared her crest. "Don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

"What if I don't want to be your friend?"

“Like you have a choice.”

Amandine turned away, biting her lip. Why had she lashed out like that? She wanted to be magical, like her mother.

*And like them.*

After a moment, Destiny asked, “Do you have marks all over your body?”

Were they staring at her shock-white eyebrow? The black spot high on her cheekbone that looked like an engorged tick? Her long-sleeved leotard hid eight black spots and the ugly burnt smudge that ruined her right elbow, while the tights took care of the other nine spots and smears. She was barefoot. They might’ve noticed the blond streak on the bottom of her right foot. She wanted to tear off the left sleeve of her leotard and wave her unblemished arm in Destiny’s face.

“Come with me,” Madame K. said to Destiny, Beena, and Jango. She patted Amandine’s hand. “Don’t worry. You *will* be safe here. We’ve always made magic onstage, and now we’re going to have our very own backstage magic, too.”

Once they were alone, Squirrelman sighed. “You’re staying in Trump Point tonight?” Amandine nodded. “Good.” He pulled a notepad out of his pocket. “I recorded your audition. We’ll go over it in the morning. Your head is too full now.” He smiled sadly. “Your mother’s been waiting a long time. Go tell her before she bursts.”

She scooped up her belongings and raced to the reception room, where she found Elsbith pacing. Amandine dropped everything and barreled at her, pulling her into a mad spin. On the third rotation, her mother shrieked and stopped them. She squeezed until Amandine’s breath oofed out of her.

“I’m so proud of you. Tell me everything.” Elsbith buried her face in her hands. “Oh, Dearheart, we have so much to do. After lunch, we’ll get you tattooed so you won’t be harassed by those medical genealogists again. Then we’ll go buy the kind of mobile home the troupe uses. They’re called kens. I’ve made arrangements to stay with you for three months. You’ll want some city clothes, I imagine.”

Amandine nodded, finally releasing her breath fully. Under her giddiness was this deep confusing ache. She wanted to explain it all, wasn’t sure if she could.

One thing was painfully clear: breathing backwards was child’s play.

But nothing would stop her from flying.

## *About the Author*

Jill Shultz earned her B.S. in Biology from Cornell University and M.S.T. in Environmental Sciences from Antioch University. For most of her career, she zigzagged between environmental and arts organizations. It seemed she'd bag every independent Audubon Society in New England, but she missed by half. She's been a land steward, zookeeper, lab assistant, naturalist-teacher, science writer, and the program director of Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, her second-favorite job (#1 is being a novelist). Born in Brooklyn before it was cool, Shultz now lives in upstate New York with her love, Bill Altman, where she dreams of a well-kept garden and enjoys slurping books, visiting museums, hanging out with friends, and watching wildlife.

Please visit the author's website at: <http://www.JillShultz.com>



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