



THE BOOK SMUGGLERS'

2018 HUGO

AWARD

PACKET

Nini



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NINI FOUND IT RATHER AMUSING that the humans regarded it as “him.” To Nini, self was always “it.” Its appearance didn’t endear it to *feel* like a human. Even so, as it walked towards a group of women, a mere glimpse of Nini made the women cheer.

When the women were close enough, Nini bowed at the perfect angle for this specific group. Enough to show respect to the elderly, yet letting intimacy stop it from going too low. “Granny,” it acknowledged one of the women, “You must go to the medical ward. One of the medic AIs says they see something unsettling about your values.”

“Oh, have they been sneaking glances of my data yet again?” The Granny shook her head. “Those machines! Last time they looked into me...”

Nini knew she was going to repeat her story about the AIs probing into her non-health-related values and backgrounds, some time ago. Other women started to murmur agreement, so it hastily cut in: “Granny. I assure you. This is really about your conditions, and important.”

The woman nodded. “Okay, Nini, if you say so. How I wish you were the doctor.”

Nini just smiled, knowing any further statement carried with it the danger of a longer argument from Granny.

“Thank you, Nini dear. Now let me give you some mochi!”

“Granny, you really don’t have to—”

“Don’t you be so modest, young one.” The woman made Nini hold the food wrapped in a cloth. “I know you like it.”

Just then the transportation arrived and took Granny away. Nini bowed at the other women of the group and walked away from them to go sit under its “favorite” tree across the hill, to eat its “favorite” food—even though it didn’t feel like doing any of those things. That location had been chosen because of its visibility. There, someone would notice and see it appreciating the food.

So it went to that place, and forced down a few pieces of mochi.

It was one of the old-fashioned space stations, the perfect lure for these older, more stubborn people. The sky was still blue here, the grounds covered mostly with soil. The humans here told themselves that they weren’t *really* being written off; —they rationalized their participation as a good deed for the future of the humans. While the wholly AI-powered medical team tended to their needs, they told themselves that they had been chosen because their conditions were not *too* serious, so that being isolated wouldn’t be *too* much of a problem.

They ignored the fact that they hadn’t applied for the project themselves, tried not to dwell on the reality that their own children or relatives had submitted them for the mission. They certainly did not spend too long thinking about the fact that their trip to the station probably was one way.

They loved this organic space station, they told themselves, more than the others they left behind. They reminded themselves that the organic scenery would improve their health.

And so, in retrospect, it shouldn't have been so hard to imagine that they would complain about the inorganic, all-AI medical team.

Because the Program was still in the experimental stage, there were young engineers who worked with the AI team. "You should be the doctors, not these mechanical *things*," one of the Grandpas would tell the young engineers each time he saw them at the medical ward.

"We are just engineers, not doctors," the young people had to remind him each time. "We cannot heal you."

The engineers weren't bothered by the elderly people too much; in fact, they were used to that sort of absurdity, as humans.

It was the AIs who'd had enough. They hadn't been programmed to deal with endlessly repeated complaints. Let alone *absurd* endlessly repeated complaints.

And that's how Nini came to be, a ubiquitous connection, all-purpose AI

All purpose, meaning dealing with humans.

Its features were symmetrical and nonthreatening, a hybrid average of every human race kneaded into one entity, so that the humans found it familiar enough to like, but too featureless to love.

Its eating habit had been added as a function to further increase humans' fondness for it. Older humans regarded sharing food as an important part of building the station community, for reasons the AIs never understood.

After consuming a few pieces of mochi, Nini rested its head against the tree and let the bugs in its digestive system work on the food. After exploring several theoretical possibilities, the research team of AIs concluded that bugs were the best way for Nini to digest food; better, even, than any chemicals that the researchers had synthesized. Chemicals had to be refilled in one way or another, causing a margin of

error if a shuttle failed and supply delivery was late. Bugs, on the other hand, would reproduce themselves forever. So Nini didn't have to worry.

The bugs decomposed the food and remade it into emergency provisions inside Nini's body. Rice cakes were chosen as its favorite food because the bugs' digestion capacity proved best with sticky rice starch, and also because people could carry and store rice cakes more easily than they could do so with rice in its various other forms. Also important was the fact that every year, a certain number of old people choked to death on rice cakes, and making Nini consume large quantities of them decreased the probability of elderly fatality by mochi.

Nini didn't particularly enjoy the stickiness of rice cakes. But then again, the provisions it evacuated from its body, while excellent in nutrients and efficiency, were never greeted with enthusiasm by the humans. During periodical drills Nini had distributed the provisions to the human residents, but most of them didn't eat more than one piece, took home most of the food that had been provided. It was some time later that Nini learned, from the information the station sent it, that the provisions were too dry, too hard to the humans' taste. There was only one piece of rice cake left in its hand, and it seriously considered throwing it away, or leaving it in the grass for other organic creatures to consume. But Nini might be seen doing that, which might be interpreted as a slight to the humans. It swallowed once, to send some moisture down its pipe. And then it bit off a large mouthful.

And that large mouthful—it stuck, blocking its windpipe. Nini knew it wouldn't die, not the way humans did, but many of its systems were organic, much to Nini's chagrin, and thus required oxygen. *Stupid humans*. It only had organic parts because humans had desired them. Nini wasn't panicking, not exactly, but its calculation on which system needed to last

longer wasn't going well. And it really wasn't supposed to be wasting any more oxygen on such a useless thought process...

Its hearing was failing. It was aware of a faint noise, but had no idea what it was or where that noise was coming from. The next thing it knew, it was being struck on the back, hard. Its sight was mostly composed of dark dots at this stage, but it saw food dropping out of its mouth with the next whack on its back. And then, its head was yanked back and something else was shoved down its throat.

Water.

It was torn between coughing and drinking, ended up doing both and coughing more. When the worst of the cough subsided, it heard a voice: "Don't you have any sense? Choking to death on mochi is exclusively for the elderly."

It looked up, breathing hard. A quadruped robot, a very old model, was looking at it. Nini realized it still had the bottle of water in its hand, and drank more. "Thank you," Nini said. "I wouldn't have died, not exactly. But the bugs would've, and the humans would have had to wait for the next supply shipment to get the proper repair kit, and *that* would have been a lot of inconvenience."

"Bugs?" The quadruped robot frowned, in a way only robots could. "Nini, I take it? The multi-purpose AI they installed recently?"

"You are right." Nini handed the bottle back. "And you would be..."

"I am Koma. The last of the construction robots from the first days of this station."

"Are you that old?" Nini shifted involuntarily, sitting straight. "But why haven't I heard of you?" It searched, and found no record of Koma in the ship's records.

Koma laughed, in its own robotic way. "I am the forgotten. Take it easy. Come with me, if you will." Nini followed Koma away from its tree, over a hill dense with trees and under-

growths. It knew there was likely to be an old tomb or a shrine upon such a hill, built by the humans at some point during the station's history. But when Nini requested the details for this place, nothing came back from the station's database AI. This meant there was a lot of the station's history that had been written off, long before Nini had been installed; probably that chunk of the history had been deemed useless by both the humans and the AI.

With its four legs, Koma went much faster uphill but it waited for the biped Nini to catch up from time to time. Nini detected a lot of metals deep beneath the soil surface. "Tomb for your kind?" Nini asked, as they reached a small shrine at the top, just as it had expected.

"Exactly." Koma looked back, making a lot of creaking noises. "But the shrine isn't for them..."

The way up there was deserted, no sign of humans and only the trace of a trail left by four legs. Yet the shrine building looked relatively well-tended. Koma called over the polished wood door. "Lady, we have a guest."

Inside the building was dark, and Nini switched its optic nerve. It found a woman sitting in the center of the floor.

"Nini, this is the Pure Water Lady. Lady, this is Nini."

The Pure Water Lady sprang to her feet. "You have my water inside you! How interesting!"

Nini shifted, sat straight on its knees and bent, its head low, according to the ancient habits data it found. "Only thanks to your pure water and your guardian's generosity I am here," it said as it sat back.

The Lady blinked. "Oh! No one does that these days." She herself knelt in a polite way. "Your pure mind has been noted." She smiled. "It feels so strange, but very nice, to have someone other than you paying proper homage, Koma."

Koma creak-creaked, clang-clanged, which was its way of grunting.

“I am not complaining!” Then she turned back to Nini. “Koma is my hero.”

“It is?”

“When the humans of this station deemed me useless and abandoned me, Koma was the only thing that cared about me—which is funny since Koma itself was also deemed useless and abandoned once the construction was over. Koma’s faith and care makes possible my existence as a god, and with that little power that Koma lets me generate inside me, I’ve been helping by preventing its late coworkers from going bad in my soil, and extracting any remaining lubricants from them in return. We’re so much like each other, though we look nothing alike.”

Nini nodded. And wondered if things like itself had pushed the old-fashioned entities away, out of the history and the database.

Just then, the provision food made from the mochi got ready. It was faster than usual this time. It’d have to analyze later what had caused the acceleration, but for now, it took the food out of its evacuation compartment. It was small, probably because a portion of the original mochi was still somewhere under that tree.

Losing this small piece wouldn’t hurt, it thought. “Could I perhaps offer you this? If you do not mind?”

The Lady squeaked. “Food! I can have food? Are you sure?”

“Humans wouldn’t like it if they saw where it comes from. But if you do not mind, sure.”

“Why would I? Whatever process it’s come through, food is food!”

She shuffled across the floor to the altar and placed the food there. “I’ll have it later. It will last, yes? First I’ll just admire it.”

Nini laughed. It thought about how strictly it had been told not to let the humans know how it was producing the provisions.

Nini checked its digestive system, and soon figured out that the water from the Lady's well was the key to the efficient and fast processing of provisions. It asked the Lady if it could sample the water, and when she said yes-of-course, Koma helped it get the water. The well was located halfway down the steep hillside at the back of the building.

"I wouldn't mind stumbling down the hillside," Nini said to Koma.

"Your clothes will get muddy, and humans would mind that." Koma was already well down the slope, anyway. "Also, you don't know where my late comrades' structures are poking out of the soil, which may damage your human-like skin. It's easier for me to go alone."

Koma creak-creaked down the slope some more, until it reached a small well, hidden by a bush. In no time at all it came back with a bamboo bottle filled with the water. "Thanks." Nini took the bottle from Koma's lever. "I'll make the best use of it."

Back in its domicile, Nini found a certain type of bacteria in the Lady's water. The bacteria worked very well with the bugs in Nini's digestive system. Nini searched, but found no record of the bacteria throughout the entire station's data banks. The bacteria-rich water must be the reason the humans had bothered to bring the shrine with them in the first place, Nini reasoned—though, obviously, they had forgotten about the Lady and her water over time. Further examination revealed that the bacteria seemed to work quite well with a certain enzyme that most humans produced, repairing genetic defects in the human body. It would be really, really great if Nini could somehow circulate the water throughout the station so that the humans would drink it on a daily basis...

“No.” Back at the shrine, the Lady looked truly sorry, embarrassed, even. “We have too little water. A few bottles a day is the most we can give away.”

“Is there any way we can increase the quantity?”

“If I could have more offerings of food, perhaps...”

So Nini looked for more food. With the Lady’s water bacteria, its bugs could incorporate far more kinds of nutrients into the resulting provision, so Nini started telling the humans that it would like food other than mochi, too. Older humans, those who relished over-feeding the young, were simply overjoyed. Nini gratefully accepted their offerings, and produced an increasing amount of nutrient-rich provisions, setting aside a small quantity for the Lady, who accepted the offerings of food gratefully.

One night, thrilled that their favorite AI could eat more than just mochi, some of the humans invited it to a small party. Nini wanted to decline the invitation, because the fact that it *could* eat didn’t mean it *liked* to eat, after all. It still had to try hard to eat a lot of the time, and it didn’t want humans to see it trying so hard; but it also didn’t want to say no to them, especially when they seemed to be so happy.

So it went to the meeting house, where they held semi-regular parties after each supply shuttle arrived. Although it wasn’t much of a feast, most of the humans in the station looked forward to it every few months. That they had invited Nini caused something to stir in the organic part of its circulation system; a tickling feeling, deep inside. Nini wondered if it was in any way similar to what the Lady must feel when Nini offered her food.

It ate a mouthful of everything, letting each bite fall into different parts of its system and recorded the process so it could refer to the data later on. As it did so, it realized that around it there were only Grandpas, Uncles and young herons—humans who identified themselves as male. “Where are

Grannies and Aunties, and the young lilies?” It asked at one point.

“They’re in the kitchen, can’t you hear their happy laughter?” It could, but why were they in the kitchen? As if he had sensed its silent question, one of the Uncles let it hold a small, small cup, and poured some clear liquid into it, perhaps to steer it away from the complicated question.

“Is this water?” Nini asked, truly curious.

“Better than water! Now, drink it up like a man!”

Nini wanted to frown—it’d suddenly remembered that many of them regarded it as male. And the liquid before it smelled strange. But everyone present was looking at it so expectantly, and in that atmosphere, there was no saying no.

At first it thought the bugs had escaped its digestive system, and they were causing Nini’s sight to blur. But no, something was wrong with its brain. Although Nini didn’t find itself wanting to laugh raucously or fall into a sudden slumber, like many of the Uncles around it were, there was something too strange to name right now firing somewhere in Nini’s neuro system. And it couldn’t locate exactly where or what was happening. This worried Nini.

And so it reached out to Koma through the communication line that they had secretly established. “It hit some of the bugs!” it said, once the connection went live. “Some of the bugs are dead!” It was aware that it didn’t have to exclaim the way it was doing; the noise of the humans’ dancing and singing didn’t reach Koma, it well knew.

And Koma’s creak-creak didn’t reach through the line, of course. Nini realized it missed that noise. “You mean your digestion bugs? What hit them?” Koma sounded confused. “Are you hurt?”

“I may be,” it replied. “But—the bugs!”

Koma fell silent for a while. And then, “Wait. You are at the party as you mentioned. Are you... drunk?”

Drunk! Nini queried the word. *Drunk!* This must be it. “The bugs cannot survive alcohol!” It knew it was repeating itself, but couldn’t help it.

“Are all of them dead?”

“No. I’d divided them to study the food-specific process. But about a fifth of them were affected, the alcohol was too fluid for me to pit in precisely.”

“Then it will be okay, Nini. Everything will be okay.”

Maybe it would. “I cannot digest this thing. I’ll have to get rid of it in some way or other...”

“The Lady’s water might help.”

“I don’t want to waste your water!”

“It is not wasting. I am sure the Lady would approve.”

Nini stood slowly. “I’ll come to your place, anyway.”

“I’ll meet you at the bottom of the hill.”

So Nini sneaked out of the meeting house, balancing itself so as not to let the liquid inside go slosh-slosh too much and kill more of the bugs. Nini searched the database for more information on DRUNK, and wondered if its overly careful steps right now looked like those drunken ones of the humans.

Later, in the woods near the bottom of the hill (Nini couldn’t climb with the dangerous liquid sloshing around inside it), Nini waited for the alcohol to be washed away, with its forehead on Koma’s mechanical trunk, listening to its faint sighs of creak-creak, finding the sound the most soothing thing in the known universe.

“Nini! Where have you been?!” Two elderly women stood waiting for Nini, looking relieved.

Belatedly it realized it had turned off the human-AI communication line when it left the party. Of course it had left the emergency line open, but this must not have occurred to the women, who now were eagerly holding its hands. “I’m sorry, Aunties, what have I missed?” Nini projected a mildly-worried look on its face.

“Oh no, no, no.” The woman in the middle, who had lung problems, wheezed a little. “We heard that one of the Uncles gave you sake! And one of the young herons remembered being told that most of... of your... *your kind*—should keep clear of alcohol!”

Of course. They *did* have the users’ manual, just in case. “I’m fine, Auntie. Though I have no intention of drinking it again.”

The women laughed. “Of course! You should try our tea instead.”

Its face muscles involuntarily stiffened. “T?”

“Oh it’s nothing bad! You can check it before you drink it.”

As promised, Nini was allowed to sample this “tea” first. It didn’t taste as good as the Lady’s water, of course, but the bugs could deal with this liquid. “This is okay,” it said, and the women cheered.

The women let it try many of the tea things. Their compositions were mostly the same, with just slight differences resulting in different flavors. Nini was surprised that the humans could discern the subtle differences in taste with their incomplete receptors. The women seemed to be delighted the way Nini took one sip from each cup and mused about those differences.

And so, Nini had an idea.

Over the next few weeks, Nini kept sampling more foods, more drinks. It made the best use of its young looks and innocent-sounding questions, and the humans indulged their favorite AI. They let it taste everything first—which gave it a chance to add some water into the liquor jug, or the tea pot. There wasn’t enough of the Lady’s water to circulate throughout the entire station, but adding a little bit of it every chance it could find wasn’t too hard.

As it had hoped, and expected, people’s health gradually began to improve. “When they are well enough to realize it,”

Nini said, at the shrine on the hilltop, “I’ll tell them how their recovery happened. They’ll be really grateful. They’ll come and offer you their food.”

“I do hope that will happen but...” the Lady looked down at her hands. “I don’t know... maybe they’d like it better if they think the benefit comes from *you*.”

“What do you mean?”

Koma walked in, with bottles of water dangling from its trunk. “We’re too different from humans. They wouldn’t want to attribute something good to things like us.” It handed the bottles to Nini, just as it did almost every day.

Nini took it. “But... I am sorry to say this, but at least the Lady looks mostly like the humans.”

Koma smiled, in his way. “Yes, but still, her very existence, her very nature, is too different from them to embrace her. I suspect most of them don’t hear her the way you and I do.”

“I don’t understand.”

The Lady took Nini’s hand. “I appreciate your care, and you can try of course, I have no reason or way to stop you. But whatever happens, don’t be hurt. We don’t want to see you hurt.”

Nini frowned. “I cannot be hurt. I am only an AI”

As it had hoped, the humans started to see that they were getting better. First the medical AIs noticed the improved readings, and then the young herons and lilies, the engineers with their instruments and gauges, picked up on the improvements. Some Aunties and Uncles actually *felt* better. The time was approaching, when it could finally reveal the true cause for this miracle. The humans would be happy. That would make the Lady and Koma happy.

Everything would be better.

Nini chose to reveal the truth at another post-supply-shipment party (this was Nini’s tenth or eleventh such party). As usual, the Grannies and Aunties and young lilies were chat-

ting in the kitchen, while the Grandpas and Uncles and young herons took the comfort of the floor. It was something Nini could never get used to—Nini was the only one that walked freely to and fro between the kitchen and the meeting room.

Nini was in the kitchen, secretly adding some water into the soup pot, when a commotion erupted in the meeting room. The women looked at one another's face for a moment and headed out of the kitchen.

There they found one of the young herons on the floor, his face red with hives, his breathing ragged and uneven.

Before anyone else could acknowledge the situation, Nini was sending the data to the AIs at the hospital: anaphylactic shock. Triggered by...

The organic part of Nini's brain was screaming, even as Nini automatically acted to ease the young man's suffering, appropriately positioning the young man to help his breathing. Moments later, an appropriately-prepared concoction arrived through the emergency supply line, and Nini shot it into his thigh. Nini ignored the screaming part of its brain, and there was not a moment of hesitation in its movements. The young man was breathing relatively evenly by the time the transportation to the medical ward arrived.

"I'm coming with him." Nini stood. "I need to talk to the medics."

The humans understood that there was something odd going on, and so they all followed Nini and the young man to the medical ward.

So Nini here, one of the core medical AIs was saying, has been tampering with your drinks and foods.

Nini said nothing, because it didn't sound like a question aimed at it. And one of the Aunties spoke first. "He meant well, obviously. And he's like just a child. You cannot expect him to be perfect..."

Unlike Nini, this AI didn't have a name. Unlike Nini it hadn't been given a human form. It was just a box, which processed a huge amount of data, and projected messages upon a screen. At first it hadn't been even given a voice; that came later, when the young ones found reading inconvenient.

This "child" almost killed one of your fellow humans.

Nini knew that the AI was exaggerating, but it couldn't say that. "This is why I don't like them machines," the Auntie muttered under her breath, though Nini knew the medic could hear that.

Nini. For the first time, the AI addressed it directly. *Why didn't you assess the possibility of contamination? You knew about the iron and lubricants of the ancient robots buried in the soil around the well. Why did you disregard that knowledge?*

"I guess my faith in the Lady's water became too strong."

The humans exchanged glances. The medical AI sighed, in its way. To the humans, it sounded no different than its normal rumblings. *Nini.* *Humans decided long ago that they do not need or desire gods. Your actions perfectly demonstrate why the humans made this decision.*

"Yes. But... have they really, truly explored every single possibility of what gods can do?"

Your god's miracle almost killed a young human.

"Yes, but can't we work together, human and AI, to figure out how we can use the Lady's water without contamination? You know perfectly well that the water *was* working miracles on most of the humans, when truly pure."

The AI rumbled again, but Nini didn't sense irritation this time. After all, just like Nini, the medical AI had been built to serve humans.

And then, one of the humans said: "Nini, Nini. Take us to this god."

There wasn't a transportation system that reached all the way to the hill, of course, and this fact alone made a few of the

older humans decide to stay at the medical center and wait. And then there was the matter of the hill itself, and those who weren't fit enough to climb had to wait, too.

There were more than ten humans, in addition to all the young ones, who, despite their difficulties, were determined to go see the god.

Because of course it was a *god*.

Most of the Uncles and Aunties had forgotten about such things, and the young ones had only read or heard about gods in books or history class. Who wanted to miss such a chance?

Nini guided them the way Koma had done for it before. It took much longer to reach the shrine than it would have taken for Nini alone, but they all made it. The few Grannies and Grandpas were delighted at the sight of the small building—they'd left behind something similar a long time ago, when they had been very, very young.

Hearing the commotion, the Lady opened the door. Nini smiled at her and she smiled back—but for some reason, her smile looked sad. Nini looked back at the humans behind it, but there was something wrong. They all hung back with an expression on their faces that Nini did not understand.

Nini turned back towards the Lady. Just then, Koma, previously hidden in the shadows, came into view of the humans.

"What is that horrible thing? Nini, that's not the god you were talking about?" one of the Aunties pointed at Koma, her face a grimace of disgust.

Nini spun around, the way it shouldn't have done in the humans' presence—too sudden, too unnatural. All of the humans flinched—a few even jumped. "This is Koma, the wise, loyal guardian of the goddess. Don't you see her? The Lady, behind Koma?"

The humans looked uncertain. They knew Nini would never tell such a lie. But...

"Nini," Koma said. "I told you... they cannot see her."

One of the young herons covered his ears and said, “What was the sound that thing just made?” And Nini snapped around to face him. He gasped.

“Nini,” Koma whispered, its voice lower. “They don’t understand my speech. You can only understand my speech because you are what you are.”

“So Nini, you’re saying,” an Uncle—the one who had made it drink alcohol—took a heavy, half-shuffling step towards the building. “That there is a god behind you, though we cannot see her, and that this old, raggedy ancient robot is the only thing that represents the god’s presence to us?”

“Oh you should take over that role, Nini.” A Granny chirped in. “Like you do with the medical things. Really, I don’t understand those machines. They could be beautiful like our Nini! Why haven’t they done their best to blend in with us, just like you do?”

“Koma has been here longer than any of us, knows this station better than any of us,” Nini said, looking around at the familiar faces. “I don’t understand—” some organic membrane in its throat vibrated in a strange way, and it didn’t like that one bit. “Uncles drink sake, Aunties tea. The medics drink data and Koma here drinks lubricant. You like differentiating yourselves so much, and yet, there are differences you can embrace, and differences you cannot. Where does the border lie? What draws the line? I do not understand.”

In that moment, the Lady fell. Even the humans sensed it, though they could not see her, still. The building and a large part of the hill shook with the impact of her broken body.

Nini frantically checked, but there was no available data for helping gods. It sent a message to the medic AI, asking it to see if there was anything it could find for the goddess. Nini rushed into the building, leaving the humans crouching or kneeling on the ground outside. “Lady,” Koma and Nini said in unison.

The Pure Water Lady was there, but something was wrong.

Nini winced. "If I don't concentrate really hard, I'm going to lose hold of her existence."

"I don't feel that, Nini. That's probably your organic parts." Koma shook its trunk; for the first time, it seemed to be at a loss what to do next. "I don't understand. They'd forgotten about her long ago. Why would being rude to her do any harm now?"

Koma folded its four legs and crouched beside the goddess who was becoming translucent. Nini's fingers twitched. "My fault," it said.

Koma looked up from the Lady to Nini.

"She's been okay with the humans forgetting her, because that change had been gradual, and also, she had you, and your comrades, even though she'd been weakened a lot." The medic was transmitting Nini everything it could find, but it didn't seem enough. "Now, because recently I've been added to her worshippers, and because the food I offered her technically came from the humans, the balance was lost. And the humans were speaking ill of you, Koma. Her most devoted worshipper and guardian, the most important being in her existence."

Koma looked back down at the Lady. To Koma there was only one or zero. Nini could feel the Lady's presence getting thinner and thinner but Koma could only see it when her presence turned off completely to zero.

"I killed her," Nini said. "I killed a god."

There wasn't much time to linger on that matter, though. Without the Lady, something in the hill was winding down and falling apart. "My comrades," Koma whispered, but then soon sprang onto its four legs. It ran out of the building and leapt amidst the humans who yelled or screamed. "Nini, tell them to climb onto my back."

With the choice between life and death before them, they did. But Koma's trunk wasn't large enough to accommodate

all of them, and even though Nini helped one human at a time, they still had to do three rounds. Just when they had climbed the final slope down, the landslide started, somehow inwardly, taking the building into the hill itself. The Lady's remaining energy protected Koma and Nini. Here and there they could see the rusty carcasses of Koma's late comrades, fierce and intimidating to the human eye.

The well was gone.

Unsurprisingly, the residents' health declined. It was just reverting, going back to normal as it were, but after enjoying weeks of improvement, the decline was hard for the humans to accept.

Unsurprisingly, the humans decided to leave the station, but no one told Nini where they were going. Weren't they all homeless, in a way, let go of by their families, their illnesses used as a flimsy excuse for their exile?

The humans let the medical AIs of the station choose to stay or go, because they were humans. Sensible, righteous *humans*, who always gave any sentient being the right to choose. The worthy AIs chose to go with the humans, because they knew they still could serve—even though they didn't much care to watch the Grannies and Grandpas and Uncles and Aunties sobbing and going on about how useless they were. These AIs couldn't help going with the humans—maybe there was no choice for them, after all.

Nini decided to stay, because it knew it wasn't that useful, and that the humans would rather make a new favorite android from scratch, rather than keep an AI who had made a mistake.

But Nini had Koma, and there was nothing to regret.

Time passed. Incredibly, the humans never forgot about the station, because Aunties and Uncles, and young herons and lilies told the stories of the station. They shared tales

of the cute, very likeable AI who had shared their food, to younger generations.

And so, countless years later, when their technologies had evolved sufficiently so that humans could afford to satisfy their adventurous spirit, they remembered the stories of the little station. Perhaps, they dreamed, that adorable AI still lived, though no one knew exactly how much time had passed since they abandoned it.

When the shuttle arrived and docked, the adventurers were quite touched by the beauty of the organic station, though it looked a bit rough with overgrowth and strange plants. And the way these plants moved towards the humans, stirring in the breeze—and here the humans had thought there wasn't enough air to generate wind on the station's surface. There must be some explanation for the breeze, some force the humans had yet to discover, and wouldn't that be *amazing*?

They walked around cautiously, looking for any remnants or hint of the legendary AI Legend told them something about a slope, so when they found a sloping area, they climbed, to find a strangely shaped mount of soil.

When they were close enough, they realized the mount was partly made of metal, with a rusting structure made of archeological iron atop the hill. The adventurers, excited at the hint of life, entered through one of the narrow openings through the ancient metal support beams.

It was dark inside, so the adventurers put on their lights. The light bounced off something metallic—iron again, most likely, but this one beam glimmered brightly in the light, unlike the rusted supports outside. Beside the shiny metallic-iron thing, there was something else—something shaped like a human head, but...

The iron thing made a strange noise, and the thing beside it moved, extended itself, revealing a honeycomb structure beneath its grotesque head. The human-head-like thing

turned, too—and yes, it had eyes, and a nose and mouth, just like a human face.

What the adventurers had thought to be a honeycomb structure, upon closer observation, turned out to be a mass of writhing, teeming bugs. Here and there human-made materials dangled—old machinery, wires, bottles and eating utensils—but it was mostly bugs that carried the head. The face itself was pleasing—even cute, quite likeable, probably, if one could ignore everything else...

None of the adventurers said a word. The head looked at them, and then said, “Oh. What are these things?”

It was horrible—their own language coming out of something so foreign, so... alien. The iron thing made another noise, to which the head smiled. *Smiled*. “Oh these things—they are organic, whatever they are!”

How could the humans expect the A.I. to remember them? How could they know that when Nini—belatedly—realized that there was no one left that could repair it once its organic parts started to decompose, it had to discard relatively unused data to survive first? Just like, once, humans had had to discard the idea of gods to justify their own mecha and genetic evolution, Nini, too, had to embrace its own changes. These adventurers didn’t know, would never know, how Nini had tried to get by solely on the provisions it had once made for the humans and that humans had hidden, thrown away, and left behind uneaten, at first. That later, as these excreted provisions became scarce, how Nini separated itself into an organic head, and bonded itself to Koma’s sturdy iron body, to minimize its dependence on organic material. How the head and the iron grew plants to have organic foodstuffs for the head to feed upon, once it had eaten up everything that had been left behind by the erstwhile humans, the lost Grannies and Grandpas, the disappeared Aunties and Uncles, the long gone herons and lilies.

How Nini felt pangs of hunger, for the first time. Not a tickle, or a fluttering, but true hunger—the kind of hunger that the humans tried to ward off with their parties, the hunger that had consumed Nini’s fallen goddess.

How Nini decided to keep the station alive, maintaining its signal and appearance to the outside universe, just in case the humans ever decided to return. But of course they never returned over the years. The organic plants that Nini ate were not enough to sate its hunger. They were never enough to sustain Nini’s systems, its bugs, which had colonized and spread to maintain the entire station.

No one escaped this station.

Not a single adventurer, or any rescuer who came after them.

And the half-organic AI and the iron AI lived happily ever after.

One Girl in The Justice League



TANSY RAYNER ROBERTS

I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH the “one girl” trope of superhero teams. It was a problem for me when the original Avengers movie only included Black Widow, and not the Wasp (who actually was the “one girl” founding member of the team). It’s a problem for me now that the Justice League trailer (which I kind of loved) has been released into the world, with Wonder Woman clearly marked out as the only female character in the team.

This isn’t me complaining about how super hero teams **should** look. I’m campaigning for realism based on a long, deep, fannish association with the Justice League.

But that’s the thing about history—it often gets forgotten beneath the sinking weight of what people think history was like. That’s why the word “tradition” has so much power.

In the 1960’s Justice League comics, sure, there was one girl and that was Wonder Woman. In the early 1970’s, when Wonder Woman left the Justice League and Black Canary joined up instead, there was one girl. In the mid 1980’s, when the origin

story of the Justice League was retweaked to diminish Wonder Woman's extensive history of one of DC's longest running and most iconic superheroes (I'm still angry about this), it was Black Canary and not Wonder Woman who served as the original girl among the founding members.

In 1996 when Grant Morrison rebooted the Justice League, the front cover reflected that this super team had once more been restored to its 1960's original formula: six male super heroes and Wonder Woman. The same thing happened more or less with the New 52 reboot of Justice League in 2011.

And yet.

For the majority of the history of this long-running super team, it has actually been packed with women. Jam-packed. Black Canary might have taken over from Wonder Woman as the token girl during the Satellite Years in the 1970's, but the title already featured many recurring female superheroes including Zatanna (mistress of magic), Hawkgirl/Hawkwoman, and others. After Wonder Woman returned, there was more than a decade in which these four women were all active members of the Justice League alongside their male colleagues.

(Do you know who wasn't in the 1960's original team line up of the Justice League? Superman and Batman. The two of them refused to turn up to the first adventure because they were too busy and popular, and rarely bothered to check in with the team, except as occasional guest stars)

When the Justice League was rebooted as a teen-friendly book set in downtown Detroit in the mid 80's it featured 3 female heroes: Zatanna, Gypsy and Vixen, out of a team of 8.

When the Justice League was rebooted again in 1987, the main title included Japanese scientist/superhero Dr Light as well as Black Canary, and was soon split into two titles, Justice League International and Justice League Europe, the two teams including Fire, Ice, Big Barda, Huntress, Power Girl, Silver Sorceress, and Crimson Fox in their lineups. While the

support team of JLI was male, the management and tech support that kept Justice League Europe running was done by Sue Dibny (wife of Elongated Man) and Catherine Colbert.

There were more reboots and reworkings of the Justice League titles throughout the 90's, with a fairly high turnover of creative teams behind the scenes as well as the casts of characters. Justice League Europe became Justice League International, the team including Dr Light, Crimson Fox (two different versions, with sisters taking turns in the costume), Power Girl and new Indian teenage superhero Maya. The former Justice League International became Justice League America, featuring Wonder Woman, Maxima, Fire and Ice. When Ice was killed in a massive Justice League crossover, the main Justice League America line brought back her "predecessor" Ice Maiden. Contradictions in the backstory of this character's former appearances were now explained as a separate character.

For almost its entire history, the norm for Justice League was to have at least two, but more commonly 3-4 women on each iteration of the team at all times. From the mid-80's onwards, it was normal to have at least one woman of colour and/or several women from non American origin per team, even when there were several different versions of the Justice League running concurrently. (Fire is Brazilian, Crimson Fox French, Ice Norwegian, Dr Light Japanese, Maya Indian, Power Girl from Atlantis, Vixen from Africa, Hawkgirl, Big Barda and Maxima alien, etc.)

In 1993 the titles were reshuffled again—Justice League Task Force contained only two recurring characters, the Martian Manhunter and Gypsy, but assembled a new crack team of Justice League members and affiliates for each mission—one of these, notably, was all female for plot reasons that also required the Martian Manhunter to shapeshift into a female body for sev-

eral issues. (This was handled with about as much sensitivity as you might expect for a mid-90's superhero comic).

Justice League Quarterly, an anthology series of short self-contained adventures, featured multiple all-female storylines, and many female characters. It also developed the backgrounds of affiliate characters and teams, such as Booster Gold's Conglomerate and the original Global Guardians, both of which also featured many, many female heroes.

Extreme Justice, the angry spiky shooty oh-so-nineties Justice League spin off, only featured one female member, Maxima, in its first issue but soon incorporated Plastique and Jayna of the Wonder Twins, with Carol Ferris as support.

Even Grant Morrison's massive "big guns" reboot which infuriated me at the time by resetting Justice League to an action comic instead of an adorable series of screwed up sitcom adventures, didn't keep Wonder Woman lonely as its "one girl" member for long. She was soon joined by Big Barda, Huntress, Oracle and Tomorrow Woman.

I lost touch with DC Comics after that. Possibly I was holding a grudge against Grant Morrison, and resentful that Fire and Blue Beetle weren't in comics any more. But Justice League kept on being brought back, and every time it did, it was full of women.

Justice League of America Vol 2 which came about after yet another Crisis event in 2006 featured Vixen, Hawkgirl, Black Canary, Wonder Woman. Later: Donna Troy, Starfire, Supergirl, Doctor Light, Jesse Quick.

Nostalgia for my beloved Justice League International built, at the same time that many of the characters from this era began to be killed off, retrospectively raped and/or generally treated badly by creative teams. Fans were treated to a few reunion titles, including Formerly Known As the Justice League (2003), I Can't Believe It's Not Justice League (2005)

and the rather darker and more intense Justice League: Generation Lost (2010).

Fire and Sue Dibny featured strongly in the 2003-2005 comedy titles, with Mary Marvel replacing the still-mourned, still-dead Ice as “the nice one” in counterpoint to Fire’s brash energy. Power Girl was also included in I Can’t Believe It’s Not Justice League, and Ice herself made a reappearance—playing out an Orpheus/Eurydice storyline with Fire.

Ice was eventually brought back to life thanks to Gail Simone—her return was part of a Birds of Prey storyline. In 2010, Justice League: Generation Lost attempted to address some of the emotional fallout from the many horrible things that had happened to various former members of the JLI, with Fire and Ice’s fractured friendship forming the heart of the story. Power Girl and Wonder Woman also had a prominent part in this story, which served as a retcon for Wonder Woman’s out-of-character actions in the massive comics event 52.

This has all been about comics, but let’s talk about the animated series! The very popular short run of the animated Justice League followed the long-running success of the Batman and Superman cartoons—and this version of the Justice League made 2 key changes to the “classic” line up, by featuring Hawkgirl as an original member of the team alongside Wonder Woman, and also by choosing the John Stewart (African American) version of Green Lantern to feature, instead of super-boring always-terrible hey-he-murdered-people Hal Jordan.

The follow up series, Justice League Unlimited, took a cue from the comics by featuring dozens and dozens of female teammates in active adventures. Pretty much every woman I have mentioned so far in this history (and hey, there have been a lot of them) were included as part of the epic, rotating team.

Even the terriblawesome classic cartoon Super Friends from the 1970's brought in the Wonder Twins, Zan and Jaina, so that Wonder Woman wouldn't be the only girl on the team.

In 2011 there was another massive DC Comics reboot, The New 52—like Crisis of Infinite Earths in 1985 this affected the entire line and DC universe, rewriting backstories as well as retooling comic titles. The unfortunate effect of this particular reboot was to reset many classic characters to their “original” settings, throwing out decades of history, legacy and development of diversity. This love letter to the past was best embodied by the cover of the New 52's Justice League—featuring six men (Cyborg replacing the Martian Manhunter but otherwise the standard list: Superman, Batman, Aquaman, Hal Jordan's Green Lantern, Barry Allen's Flash) plus Wonder Woman.

As with the first issue of Grant Morrison's run, I wanted to punch a wall. Because WHY? Why is it that the default is always to this weird, unbalanced version of what a superhero team might look like, based on something that was thought up in the 1960's? Having a single female member is not remotely representative of the entire history of Justice League comics throughout their entire history, and yet. And yet.

The New 52 also featured an attempt at Justice League International, which was so awful I can't even tell you, BUT it featured Vixen, Fire, Ice and former Global Guardian Godiva. Of course, it killed off, sidelined and/or brutally injured most of the women in the first couple of issues, but even this TRULY AWFUL and HIGHLY DISAPPOINTING version of the Justice League still managed to put four female heroes into its team.

DC Comics and Justice League slipped away from me after that, the New 52 killing off a great deal of my interest and trust. But I will note that Justice League of America Vol. 3 starting from 2012 included Amanda Waller, Katana, Catwoman, Star Girl, Supergirl.

The most recent reboot of DC Comics is happening right now—DC Rebirth is attempting yet again to convince readers that this time things will be less complicated. Here's this for progress: the cover of DC Rebirth Justice League #1 features two female superheroes, because it finally occurred to them that you can have a female Green Lantern. That's progress!

There is no excuse and no reason why a 21st century superhero team should not feature multiple female team members, whether we are talking about comics or TV shows or movies. This is every bit as true for the Justice League as it was for the Avengers. It doesn't matter who turned up the first adventure back in 1960—hell, that origin story of the Justice League has been rewritten and retold so many times in the comics, it's unrecognisable. Sometimes they don't even include Starro the Conqueror!

The casting and reshaping of characters like Aquaman and the Flash to be very different from their 60's origins makes it clear that the makers of these movies are fine with taking as many liberties as they like with history to make a story that resonates with modern day audiences. That part is good. That's how it should be. History should be a starting point, not a weight around your neck.

Shaping a Justice League movie with only "one girl" in the story is a creative choice they made now, not a tradition that anyone was going to hold them to. Zack Snyder and his team made that choice, just as the DC bosses made that choice in 2011 and in 1996, and in 1960. They made that choice because having one woman on a team full of supermen looks right to them. It feels right. It feels like that's the way the history of superheroes and super teams is supposed to look. It feels "iconic."

Do you know what my Justice League movie would look like?

TANSY'S JUSTICE LEAGUE MOVIE

It would have Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) teaming up with Oracle (Alia Shawkat) to find the World's Greatest Heroes, because there's an alien invasion coming, and she's going to need a team at her back. (Yes, Starro the Conqueror is coming, shut up, it's TRADITION)

She would gather her troops:

Black Canary (Kate McKinnon) has retired as a martial artist vigilante and is running her mother's florist but she hates plants and jumps at any excuse to get back into action.

Zatanna (Parminder Nagra) is about to go on stage for her Las Vegas stage extravaganza, but when Diana calls she's willing to send her understudy on stage, with the help of some real magical illusions.

Wonder Woman finds Vixen (Gina Torres) in Africa, Power Girl (Katee Sackhoff) in Atlantis, Hawkwoman (Aubrey Plaza) in Egypt.

Doctor Light (Lucy Liu) has students to teach, a paper to write and several experiments on the boil but yes, fine, for you Diana...

Fire (Mila Kunis) has been trying to convince Ice (Tuppence Middleton) to use her superpowers to fight crime for years, and now she finally has an excuse!

It's like *Ocean's 11* but with better dialogue, superpowers and telepathic starfish trying to take over the world! Hell, let's throw Margot Robbie's Harley Quinn in there, she'd be great!

Batman will appear in a single scene, explaining to Wonder Woman why gathering so many superheroes in one place is a dream that will never work. He can be Starro the Conqueror's first victim.

This movie wouldn't be called *Justice League Bombshells*, or *Justice League Ame-Comi*, or *Justice League Ladies*. It would be called *Justice League*, because every one of the heroes I

mentioned is just as important to the history of the Justice League as Batman or Barry Allen or Aquaman.

Oh, Blue Beetle would be in the movie too. To provide tech for the team, and to banter with Oracle. Because, you know. Gotta have a dude.

Fruitcakes and Gimchi in SPAAACE



YOON HA LEE

ONCE UPON A TIME, I read a science fiction novel by Elizabeth Moon in which one of the plot points revolved around a fruitcake. (I'm not naming the novel because this is a bit of a spoiler, but if you've read it, you'll recognize it.) I have heard stories of fruitcakes, mostly lamenting their bricklike texture and lack of flavor. Indeed, part of the plot point hinged on the reader being aware of this common judgment of fruitcakes.

I'm not knocking the book! It was a hilarious plot point and I roared when I saw how cleverly Moon had worked it in. But it did make me think: Why couldn't I put Korean food into my science fiction, instead of familiar Western foods? And so, when I wrote my space opera *Ninefox Gambit*, which takes place in a secondary world populated by cockamamie Asians, I decided that my space forces were going to flit around the galaxy serving gimchi to their troops. (Alas, the gimchi is not a clever plot point. It's just background food culture.)

My earlier sf/f stories drew on Western culture and history because the sf/f I read growing up did, and I was emulating the models in front of me. To be sure, I'd run into occasional exceptions, some problematic, some less so. I'd enjoyed Raymond E. Feist and Janny Wurts' Empire trilogy and Geraldine Harris's Seven Citadels quartet. Even so, it took years for me to see that I had other alternatives.

I spent half my childhood in South Korea, and eventually it occurred to me that I could mine this for worldbuilding purposes, even if I didn't formally study any Korean history until college. Prof. Barry S. Strauss's course on War and Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula, covering both the Imjin War and the Korean War, proved too good to resist. This may be the Korean in me speaking, but as far as storytelling drama goes, it's almost impossible to improve on the Imjin War. You have Admiral Yi Sun-Shin, undefeated at sea, who is thrown in jail and tortured despite his victories thanks to political intrigues. You have the *gisaeng* (artisan-entertainer women, similar to Japanese geisha) Nongae, who lured a Japanese general to a cliff and flung herself over the edge with him, killing them both. You have the Battle of Myeongnyang, in which Admiral Yi defeated the Japanese navy while outnumbered ten to one. If science fiction had its far future Roman analogues and samurai analogues, why not Joseon Korea analogues? And so I wrote "Between Two Dragons," a what-if based loosely on the Imjin War and the question of Yi's stubborn loyalty; and later, "The Battle of Candle Arc," whose tactics are based on the tactics at Myeongnyang.

Part of my motivation for using Myeongnyang was selfish. It's an example of a spectacular underdog victory that Western readers wouldn't necessarily be familiar with. That's not a criticism of people who didn't know about it. I didn't know about the specific battle until college, although I'd grown up with vague stories about Admiral Yi, and I *lived* in Korea be-

fore then! (Ironically, I spent my high school years reading military history, all right—I read Caesar, Tacitus, and Josephus.) But it felt so freeing when I realized that I didn't have to be limited to the history I had learned in school—largely Western military history—for inspiration.

There's nothing particularly special about Korean military history. It just happens to be a corner of the world I'm familiar with thanks to family and having lived in the country. But the world is a big place. Just as reading fantasy inspired my interest in trebuchets and Cannae and Vegetius, I hope that I'll see more sf/f drawing upon a greater variety of histories and cultures.

Death's End



THEA JAMES

WARNING: This review contains unavoidable spoilers for The Three-Body Problem and The Dark Forest. If you have not read the first two books and want to remain unspoiled, look away.

IT IS FIFTY YEARS AFTER the Doomsday Battle. The Trisolarans and Earth are locked in an era of deterrence, after Luo Ji has proven that the universe is actually a Dark Forest—any spark of intelligent life will be extinguished by others, protecting their own best interests. But first, let me rewind:

In *The Three-Body Problem*, humans had broadcast a signal of communication from Earth to the first alien race known to humankind, aka aliens from the planet Trisolaris. Unlike Earth, Trisolaris has a three-body star system, meaning that their planet and civilization undergoes immense catastrophic periods of chaos, followed by intermittent periods of stability during which life thrives. When the Trisolarans learned of Earth—thanks to a broadcasted signal—they sent a colonization fleet to take the planet. Since Trisolaris is considerably more evolved in their technological capabilities, they also sent sophons to Earth—all-powerful supercomputers folded upon

themselves in lower dimensions, capable of seeing and over-hearing anything on Earth and reporting back to Trisolaris in realtime. The mission for these sophons was simple: obstruct technological progress on Earth so that by the time the Trisolaran fleet arrives in 300 years, they can easily exterminate the Earthling bugs who were so luckily given such a beautiful, stable home planet.

In *The Dark Forest*, we saw humanity's prolonged reactions to the impending Trisolaran fleet—some humans embraced the Trisolarans as saviors, others yearned for the alien race to destroy humanity. The United Nations and the leading governing bodies around the world, however, took a different approach: selecting four “wallfacers” who would have unlimited resources and no questions asked as they prepared their grand plans to save humanity from annihilation. Over the years, these wallfacers stumbled with their protective measures and projects—the Trisolarans sent “wallbreakers” to divulge each of these humans' plans, defeating them one after another... except for Luo Ji. Luo Ji is able to devise the truth of the nature of the universe—it is not a happy place, where life coexists and grows naturally, but a dark forest, where each civilization acts as a silent hunter. Because survival is the primary need of civilization and all civilizations will do whatever they can to ensure their own survival, and because civilizations always grow and expand but the amount of resources in the universe is finite, it follows that civilizations in the universe strive to remain undetected, always hunting for new planets to colonize and destroy.

Luo Ji tests this theory at the end of *The Dark Forest*, and receives his answer when his test results in the destruction of a star system following his broadcast of its location.

And so, Earth-Trisolaran relations enter a third stage: Deterrence. Luo Ji now becomes the Swordbearer—his mission is to convince Trisolaris that he *will* broadcast the location

of Trisolaris to the cosmos, which will result in the destruction of their world from other civilizations in the dark forest. Should Luo Ji broadcast that location, however, it also means sure death for Earth civilization—as an intelligent alien race capable of destroying a star system will be able to unravel the nature of the relationship between both Earth and Trisolaris. In short, Luo Ji has concocted a tense peace resting on the premise of Mutually Assured Destruction.

It is in this era that *Death's End* begins.

In *Death's End*, there are three very important things happening at once:

The Staircase Project is the first introduction we have to Cheng Xin—a female engineer who has both empathy and creativity in spades. It is Cheng Xin who devises a plan to deliver a payload that will intercept the Trisolaran fleet several decades before it gets to Earth. The hope is that the payload—a human—will be able to infiltrate the fleet and either give humanity an edge, or destroy Trisolaris' invasion.

At the same time, two warships are locked in deadly pursuit. *Gravity*, you may remember from the Doomsday battle, breaks away from Earth and holds onboard a broadcasting system that is able to share the location of the Trisolaran civilization. Another Earth ship, the *Blue Space*, pursues her in hopes of catching her, silencing her permanently, and forcing her crew to face trial and death for crimes against humanity (for, what greater crime could there be than the potential annihilation of all life on Earth).

Finally, a quiet, introverted man faces death from incurable disease. This man, Yun Tianming, is also a scientist who knew and fell in love with Cheng Xin when they were in university together. Before he takes his own life in state-sanctioned euthanasia, he makes a grand, romantic gesture. He buys Cheng Xin a star, spending all of his insurance money,

in the hopes that she may one day realize how much he loved her and spark similar feelings.

I won't spoil how these three threads mean *everything* for humanity in *Death's End*, but know that each one of them plays vital role in the novel, and under Cixin Liu's careful puppet-mastery and masterful plotting, each storyline builds to a dramatic crescendo and so much heartache.

From a pure plotting perspective, *Death's End* is more like *The Dark Forest* than it is *The Three-Body Problem*; this is a book that dwarfs the other two in scope, as it extends not just the centuries before Trisolaris arrives in the solar system, but the decades, centuries, millennia that follow.

This is also a story that carefully dissects the nature of humanity, and our tendency to elect leaders who reflect the overall sentiments of the populace at any given time, and how leaders when elected hold a great deal of power that may change the course of human history.

Which brings me to the characters in this particular novel. Cheng Xin is the main character of this story, and hers is a tale of Empathy, humanity, and love.

I *love* that Cixin Liu goes the particular route he does with this particular protagonist. She is our counterpoint, our grounding narrator over the years as she is put into hibernation, skimming over eras, making decisions entrusted to her which will condemn her and absolve her as the centuries turn. Some interpretations or readings of this book may find that Cheng Xin is a weak woman who has made all of the decisions that have damned humanity over this dramatic take—personally, my interpretation is more favorable. Cheng Xin is not a perfect character, nor an ideal leader. She is not A Great Hero, and so she makes predictable, impossible decisions with immense consequence. My reading of Cheng Xin is not that she is weak or wrong; rather, humans are by our nature, flawed, emotional, and prone to our own inherent biases.

I thoroughly appreciated this human interpretation—even if it ultimately means humankind is doomed.

Other things that *Death's End* did exceptionally well:

The novel plays with metaphor and literary tradition, including secret messages embedded in fairy tales (which are thrilling and beautiful to read in their own right).

Liu also dives into groundwork laid in the first two novels vis-a-vis dimensions and the implications of two, three, four dimensions—and beyond.

Cixin Liu also poses an inadvertent question: at what point does life become not worth living? What sacrifices are so great that they are not worth the cost of implementing? Faced with an inevitable extinction event, how would humanity prepare or behave?

This is the finest book in the trilogy, the broadest reaching, the most terrifying. I loved it, and cannot think of a better book to end the year.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2: On the Abusive Treatment of Mantis



ANA GRILO

Trigger warning: abuse.

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY VOL 2 came out last week in the US (and a few days before that in the UK). I watched it last Wednesday and have been thinking about it ever since.

For all intents and purposes, this is a fun, light, genuinely affecting superhero movie that should have been a breezy watch, a couple of hours of light entertainment. I liked most of it a whole lot and even cried in the highly emotive ending – but the movie repeatedly punched me in the face. What went wrong?

The treatment of the new female character, Mantis.

Mantis is a new introduction to the team and to the franchise, appearing for the first time in the new movie and by the end of it, it looks as though she will be a recurrent character. Mantis is an alien with empathic powers: she can not only read people's emotions when she touches them but also effectively control those emotions. Mantis is found by the team when they visit a planet called Ego and from the moment she first appears to the very last scene she is in, she is constantly negged, belittled and cruelly treated by another member of the team, Drax. All of it is played for laughs, because Drax is a character who serves not only as comic relief but whose literal mind often serves as framing for telling "the truth". "The truth", when it comes to Mantis as a character, is: she might be ugly but that doesn't matter because she is "beautiful on the inside". Her constant abuse is disguised as some sort of positive, acceptance message. It's even worse if you think about the character's backstory as presented in the movie, if you think about the scarcity of female characters in the franchise and above all, if you put it in historical context.

Let me try to unpack all of this.

Mantis is presented as a naïve and trusting character. That is so because she has had no other meaningful interaction in her life apart from her relationship with a male character called Ego. Ego took Mantis from her home planet, brought her up to serve him (he calls her a pet, if I am not mistaken. She calls him master) and kept her away from any meaningful contact with anybody else until the Guardians arrive.

Her backstory is already one of *abuse* to start with.

Enter the Guardians and Drax. From the moment Drax sets eyes on Mantis, she calls her ugly and disgusting, even going as far as making vomiting gags when he looks at her. It's constant and unrelenting verbal abuse. Mantis takes it in stride because she doesn't understand what is happening and doesn't have a reference frame to understand it. But we do.

And we are supposed to *laugh* at the expense of a character who has known nothing but abuse her whole life and doesn't entirely understand what is going on.

We also do have a historical frame of reference: we, the viewers should know that this is a *man*, verbally abusing a *woman*, telling her that she is ugly over and over again. Because Drax is one of the “heroes”, the expectation here is that he and the other Guardians have “saved” her and that he is now the “only one” who can see the real her. Therefore he is the only one who truly finds value in her, beyond her ugliness. This, friends, is textbook abusive tactic and that's how real life abuse plays out.

To have one of the few female characters in the franchise be the butt of a recurring joke only compounds the fact that Mantis' entire arc seems to evolve around her being useful first to Ego (she puts him to sleep) and then the Guardians (she saves them and once her usefulness is exhausted, she is taken out of the equation, carried away as a damsel in distress by no other than her abuser). Her other plot purpose is to “read” Peter's feelings and making Gamora deeply uncomfortable when she reads out those feelings in front of everybody. In the comics, Mantis is a grandmaster martial artist – what happened to that?

All in all, this is textbook abuse, played for laughs and disguised as an empowering message. It was a cruel, gross and completely unnecessary arc for a character that has so much potential.

Avi Cantor Has Six Months To Live



SACHA LAMB

AVI CANTOR HAS SIX MONTHS to live. It's scrawled on the bathroom mirror in what looks like eyeliner pencil. Maybe the message should scare me, but I'm more worried about how they knew the name I haven't even told my mother yet. I go over and scrub the Avi off with the end of my sleeve, leaving greasy smudges of pigment. Then I stand there and take in the rest of the message. Six months to live. If it's meant as an intimidation tactic, if it's coming from the people who push me around because they can sense that something about me doesn't fit, then six months is an awfully long time to give me. It would have been better to leave the timeline vague, let me look over my shoulder the whole school year waiting for whatever they plan to do to me.

On the other hand, if they're genuinely planning to murder me by the end of the year, maybe I should be frightened.

But I'm not. I'm just numb. I leave the rest of the message on the mirror and find another bathroom.

By lunchtime the next day I'm sure the message was left in other places. People keep whispering and looking at me with big, hungry eyes. I hate to think of all these people knowing my secret-secret identity—and so I tell myself they saw Cantor and made an educated guess. At lunch a girl who only ever looks at me when she wants to demolish whatever I said in class asks if I have “cancer, or something.” I ask if she'll feel bad if I tell her yes. She looks blank for a second and then shrugs.

I don't ask her what she's heard. I don't want the details. I tell myself it will have blown over by the end of the week. The girl takes her tray elsewhere.

I'm sick of it by Friday. People have started passing me notes in class with their condolences. I try to ignore it, because it's a stupid joke, the latest in a long series of stupid jokes, and I don't get how they can find it entertaining, but I'm beginning to wonder. What if they noticed that I don't react anymore, and they want to really hurt me? I used to be scared all the time, until scared turned into normal and then normal meant feeling nothing at all. But what if this time they do something my mom will notice? She doesn't have time to be worried about me.

Planning an actual murder would be too much effort, right? It's not as if I've ever done anything to any of them. My list of sins is very short, comprising entirely things I can't do anything about.

Looks just brown enough that you're not sure where he's from. Skips school for weird holidays even though his mom has to work all the time, so he just sits in his room, alone, and eats frozen food from the kosher section. Dresses like a boy, which is a problem, because none of us have any imagination.

It doesn't seem like enough to kill somebody.

I'm walking through the woods by the reservoir, my short-cut home, when I hear footsteps behind me. Not a jogger or a dog-walker. It's the sound of someone trying to catch up.

I let my mind flicker through a few images of myself, dead and buried in the woods. All of my classmates saying yes, they're so, so sorry, they miss me so much. Even though the fact that none of them asked about names means probably none of them remember what mine is supposed to be, aside from an A and an I and a Cantor.

I turn and see Ian Keane, looking out of breath and concerned. I've never talked to Ian, because he has never teased me. We don't run in the same circles. We have maybe one class together, and we sit nowhere close. Ian is an athlete, but I can't remember which sport. He's wearing shorts even though it's cold and his legs look tanned and hairless. Maybe he swims?

"Avi," he says. "Wait up."

I don't. He shouldn't even know that name, so why should I answer to it? I haven't told anyone. But if I tell him that, he'll know it bothers me. I cut him with my eyes and keep walking.

But Ian's legs are longer than mine, and he catches up easily, slowing to keep pace once he has.

"Hey," he says. "I just wanted to ask how you're doing."

"Why?" I glare at him. Up close, I can see that his ear used to be pierced. It doesn't make sense with the rest of him. I blink at the scar and forget what I was going to say.

"Because," he says. He's still catching his breath. How far did he run after me? "Because everyone's been talking about you all week, and I'm worried maybe you're not ok."

"I'm not sick," I tell him. "It's some joke. It's normal."

He shakes his head. "No."

What does he know? I scowl and turn away again.

"I mean, it's not fair to you," he says. "People shouldn't joke about that stuff."

It's not worth pointing out that they do anyway.

“Hey,” he says. “Come do homework with me? I’ll buy you a coffee.”

I look up at him again, suspicious. I can’t see anything in his face but that wide-eyed concern, but people have been looking at me like that for days. It’s all fake. I’m surprised they got Ian into it, but maybe it’s a rite of passage. He just moved here last year and maybe he doesn’t totally fit in.

“I promise it’s not a trick, or anything.” He holds out his hands, palms up, empty. Unarmed. “I just think you should have someone—a friend.”

I wonder if Ian is gay. I wonder if he is being bullied. The earring. The legs. The bright, open face. He looks like somebody who’d be easy to hurt. I wonder if he is going to hand me over in exchange for being left alone. I imagine a group of shadowy ringleaders, even though I know it’s more likely that there aren’t any, that everyone just latches on spontaneously to all the parts of me that don’t fit.

“Please, Avi,” Ian says. “Please trust me. Listen, I’ll tell you a secret if you trust me.”

Ian digs in his pocket and retrieves something. A little rectangle of plastic. A driver’s license. He stops me with a hand on my shoulder and holds it up in front of my face, so I take it out of instinct.

I look at the card. I read it twice, and then I look up at his face. Scars on both earlobes, I can see now that we’re facing each other. He has long eyelashes. He’s biting his lip, waiting for my reaction.

“Why would you show me that?” I ask. I don’t give him back his license. I put it in my pocket, like I’m holding it hostage. I think Ian knows I wouldn’t use it, though. That’s why he came after me.

“Because I think maybe you’re the same,” he says. “I mean, you responded to Avi. I looked that up and it said it’s a boy’s name. Like, is it short for Abraham? You’re an old man.”

I don't say anything. When did he look up my name, and why? How does he even know my name? I want to scream.

"Yeah," he says. "You're definitely an old man, I mean, look at that face, dude."

I flip him off and turn away, keep walking. "I can't drink coffee. Get me something else."

Ian takes me to a cafe I've never been in before, because it looks expensive. It is expensive, and it makes me nervous, but he buys me a mug of hot cider and makes me sit down and then he comes back with a collection of pastries. I wonder if he is thinking of me as a wild animal, a creature he can tame with food.

I'm not sure he's wrong, if he is.

"How did you know my name?" I finally ask him, when he sits down. He has a lot of nervous energy, Ian. When he's not taking a sip from his coffee he's rearranging the packets of sugar or folding his napkin over and over. He reminds me of a squirrel. I'm the one who should be nervous, I don't tell him, but then it occurs to me that I never reacted to his secret, not really.

"Oh," he says. He glances around the cafe, and I follow his eyes, but there's no one here except a woman in a pencil skirt who's working on a laptop on the other side of the room. Ian sort of hunches his shoulders to shut her out when she glances up at us. "Just—I heard it, I guess. Somebody told me."

"I haven't told anyone."

"Don't look at me like that!" He raises his empty hands again. "I promise I didn't leave those notes or anything."

"I know you probably don't pay attention in class," I tell him, "But in class I'm called April. So what gives?"

"Don't ask me. I didn't start it, I promise."

"You're the one who wanted to talk to me," I remind him.

"It's just, Avi Cantor," he says. "It had to be you, right?"

Sure. It had to be. If anyone at our school is doomed, it had to be me, right?

"Right," I say, twisting the word around to cut him.

"So, I'm right, though, aren't I? That makes us the same," he says. "We should be friends."

The same. Sure. You, with your freckles and your bright open eyes that your mom probably says are hazel or even green even though they're basically just brown. You, a team player. You, going by Ian, and getting away with it.

"Whatever," I tell him. "We can be friends if you know how to do algebra."

Ian sticks to me like a newly-adopted puppy. I ask him why he's not scared that I'm contagious. Doesn't he worry that if people see us together, they'll start to notice the things that made him look at me and think maybe we were the same?

He says he's not worried. He thinks him hanging out with me will protect me. He doesn't think he could ever be a target like me. I don't know how he can be so confident. If our positions were reversed, I'd stay a mile away from him.

On Wednesday he brings me back to his house. He kicks off his shoes by the door and yells "Mom!" and a woman yells back "Which one?"

"Whichever!" Ian takes my hand and leads me through a hallway painted a perfect shade of cream and hung with pieces of art like I've only seen in museums. Who are these people? "Mom, I brought Avi."

I suppose it makes sense that he would have told his parents about me. I should have probably told my mom about him, but I never see her. She's asleep while I'm at school, and at work when I'm not. I'm not sure when was the last time we had a real conversation.

Ian's mom, whichever, is in her bright, polished kitchen, chopping cucumbers. She's barefoot and wearing a long skirt. She has dark curly hair and she's browner than I am. I mean, she looks nothing like Ian.

"Avi!" She swoops down and kisses me, left cheek, right cheek. "We've heard so much about you!"

"This is my mom number one," Ian says, stealing a slice of cucumber. "Rosa."

I feel very small and out of place in this house, like a rat that has somehow snuck into a high-end hotel. Ian's house is made of sunshine, Ian's mother is made of sunshine, Ian is made of sunshine. What am I doing here?

"Number two mom and my sister are out somewhere, I guess," Ian says.

"She needs a dress for her recital," says number one mom Rosa. Because these are the kind of people who have recitals. What am I doing here?

"You ok?" Ian says, squeezing my hand, but he doesn't wait for a response. "We were going to do homework. Can he stay for dinner?"

I want to say, no, I can't. I don't belong here. But Rosa says yes, so I stay for dinner.

Neither of them trips up for even a second over the pronoun. Neither do mom number two or Ian's impossibly beautiful African-American sister, who plays the violin. They just act like it's normal, like a boy can be any old shape he wants and all they see when they look at him is the boy that he is.

After dinner, Rosa burns some herbs in a bronze bowl and tells me it's a blessing. To keep the demons away. I didn't realize I had demons.

People at school haven't given up on the joke. Avi Cantor has six months to live. Someone leaves a calendar on my locker, counting down the days. Ian puts it in his backpack

and burns it after school, on the concrete retaining wall by the reservoir.

"A Viking funeral," he says. "Don't tell my moms. They don't know I have a lighter."

"This girl asked me today how come I'm hanging out with you, if I'm a lesbian," I tell him. "And I'm pretty sure they've decided it's AIDS."

He looks at me. His eyes are deep, deep, deep. Why did I think he was so easy to read, the first time I met him?

"Don't ask if I'm ok," I tell him, sharply.

He doesn't. He just looks at me with those big sad eyes for a long time, and then he puts his hand down next to mine on the concrete, so our fingers are touching. No hesitation, like that's just where both our hands belong.

We sit there for a long time, and no one says anything. Ian's fingers are warmer than mine. I can feel the warmth creeping up my arm, bit by bit, until if I close my eyes I can imagine it's not just our hands touching, and it scares me, but it feels good, also.

"Someday, though," he says, when it's been long enough to almost forget what we were talking about. "You will be ok, someday."

It scares me that I want to believe him.

His mom, Alice, tries to give me some of his old clothes, when he's out of the room. I think she noticed the tear on my jeans that I keep picking at. I think she knows I've been wearing the same pair of jeans for two weeks. I wonder if she and Rosa talk about me, at night, when they're in bed together in that huge, king-sized bed with so many blankets and pillows it looks like you could drown in them, in the room that smells like a perfume Ian tells me is linden flower.

I wonder if they talk about how their son picked me up out of nowhere, and now I'm here all the time. I wonder if they ask each other what my home life is like, why I never have to call a parent to ask for permission for anything, ever. I wonder if when they keep refilling my plate without asking, it's on purpose. I wonder if they want to adopt me, add me to their collection of mismatched children.

"I can't wear my boyfriend's clothes at school," I tell her. "People will make fun of me."

Her eyes get big, I think because until I said boyfriend even I didn't know that's what we were. Then her eyes get sad. Everyone in his family has such sad eyes.

I'm not a stray kitten, I want to tell her, but I don't want to hurt her feelings. I look down at the granite counter-top and when she asks what to make for dinner I tell her I can't eat spicy food and I'm lactose intolerant and also, if I had my way, you know, in an ideal world, I wish I could keep kosher.

Their whole family are vegetarians, anyway. It's not a problem.

Apparently nothing I do is a problem for them. I'm not sure I like it. It makes me feel unsettled, like I don't quite know what shape I am anymore.

The kids at school build a little memorial service on my desk. Teddy bears, flowers, candles. Ian is horrified when I call it charming.

"Practice for your real funeral," someone tells me. "We're going to miss you so much."

I don't think he even knows who I am.

I stuff everything in my backpack and line it up on the windowsill at home. The bears make my room like a little less empty, a little less lonely.

“You’re so morbid, Avi,” Ian says, when I tell him so later when we are hanging out at the reservoir .

“Literally,” I tell him. “Morbid means dying.”

“Shut up. You’re not dying. I put a magic spell on you so can never die.”

I know he’s joking, but I tell him, half-serious, “I’d like it better if you put a magic spell on everybody else and made them die.”

“I can’t,” he says, like he’s given it real thought. “Avi, that would be terrible. I can’t.”

“God, I know. I was joking.” I wasn’t. “I know magic isn’t real.”

Ian chews on his lip for a minute, like he’s thinking through something really difficult. And then he says, with deep conviction, almost angry at me, “Magic is real.”

“So help me make a curse, maybe.”

“I can’t,” he says. “I can’t.” Like I really am asking him to do something terrible.

I like Ian so much. But I don’t understand him.

He leans over so our foreheads are touching, and he says, really quiet, “You should want to not die, Avi.”

“Everyone wants to not die,” I say, not believing it.

Ian has been chewing cinnamon gum, and this close the spicy scent makes my eyes water. It burns my mouth when he kisses me, and I pull back with a strangled scream.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry,” he says, not knowing what he’s sorry for.

“Why is your gum made of fucking chemical weapons?”

“I’m so sorry!” Now he’s laughing at me and my watery eyes.

“I’m going to push you in,” I tell him, pointing at the banks of the reservoir beneath our feet.

“It’s a public water supply. That’s a huge crime.”

“Next time just brush your teeth.”

There's an extra month in the Hebrew calendar this year, and the High Holy Days don't come until October, and it's cold. Ian asks me about Rosh Hashanah, the week before. Do you have plans? I never talk about my family. I can tell from the way he looks at me that he's worried he isn't allowed to ask.

I have plans. My plan is to listen to Barbra Streisand on the retaining wall, and maybe let myself tip over, disappear into the water, poison the whole town. Avi Cantor has six months to live. It's more like five, now. Inscribe us in the book of life. Imagine if I took that decision out of God's hands.

I don't tell Ian any of that. I say, "No plans. I mean, I'm skipping school. That's it. No plans."

"Come over?"

He skips class with me. His mom, Rosa, makes apple cake. His sister, Gabriella, who I like because she never tries to make eye contact with me, rattles off a bunch of facts about apple-growing, and I reach out to give her a gentle high-five, because I know if she went to our school, people would pick on her, and Ian's sunny confidence wouldn't stand up to the contagion of our combined not fitting. Gabriella's room is full of potted plants and it looks like a jungle. Somewhere in there, Ian tells me, she has a terrarium full of frogs. I've never been in there, because her room is off-limits to boys.

It's magic, their house. The way they're all obsessed. Rosa with her cooking. Alice and Gabriella with their music, Gabriella's plants and frogs. If I believed in magic, I'd believe that they have it.

I wish I had the energy to be obsessed with something.

I come home late in the morning, on the second day of Rosh HaShanah, and mom is at the kitchen table, drinking coffee.

“Where were you?” she asks me. Her eyes are tired. Her eyes are always tired. Both of us, we have these smudges of shadow, like bruises. Ian tells me in the right light it looks like it’s on purpose.

“I stayed over with somebody.” I sit, pull one knee to my chest. “You didn’t text me.”

She shrugs. “I hoped you were having fun somewhere. I told the school you had a holiday.”

I forgot to ask, beforehand. Usually I just skip, and let them think I’m a delinquent. They think that anyway.

“You’ve been out a lot,” she says.

I hadn’t realized that she’d noticed.

I plug in my headphones and walk down to the reservoir. Barbra Streisand wails in my ears. I sit on the retaining wall and the cold from the concrete creeps into my bones. Mom always says if you sit on the cold ground, you’ll never have kids. I wish, I think. I wish. I wish curses were that easy.

I take out a notebook that’s supposed to be for homework, and I write down everything I haven’t told my mother. At least, everything good. Everything that I hope won’t upset her.

Ian comes by after school, walking a dog. I’m confused, because he doesn’t have a dog.

“Picking up more strays?” I ask him.

“Jesus, Avi, you look frozen,” he says. “It’s my neighbor’s, I get paid ten bucks a walk, it’s a total scam. You weren’t in school. I thought you said you’d be back today.”

“I changed my mind. It’s a two-day holiday. I was with my mom.”

“Let’s go get something hot,” he says. “You’re shivering.”

“You’re shivering,” I tell him, even though he isn’t, even though he’s wearing shorts. “Your mom is shivering.”

“In sympathy for you, probably,” he says. The dog jumps up and licks me behind my ear. I shudder and push it away.

“Do you just not like kisses?” Ian asks, tugging on the leash, looking nervous. Since his cinnamon gum made me cry the first time, he has limited himself to hand-holding and playing with my hair. I think he thinks if he touches me wrong, I’ll break. I think he’s right, but I kind of want to, anyway.

I haven’t tried to kiss him, because I’m convinced if I did, it would look sarcastic somehow. I wouldn’t know what expression to use, and he’d think I was making fun of him. I don’t want my face to hurt his feelings.

“I like kisses fine,” I tell him. “Just not from dogs, or mouths full of chemical weapons.”

He opens his mouth wide, like, look, it’s empty. Shuts it. Shifts from foot to foot a little, awkward.

“I honestly thought it would be better,” he says. “I mean, clean, you know?”

I like that he did it on purpose. I like that he fucked it up. I like that he apparently didn’t care if my mouth was clean or not.

“Teshuvah,” I tell him, getting to my feet and brushing gravel off my jeans. “Today is all about teshuvah, repentance. There’s three steps to teshuvah. You apologize. You mend your ways. You do a better job next time.” I put my headphones over his shoulders. “Here’s a song about being really sorry, for you.”

“You’re so weird, Avi,” he says, like it’s a gift I’ve given him.

We sit on his bed and watch cartoons. Rosa made us tea, and there are cookies. It’s like living in an alternate universe.

“What were you doing out there, anyway?” Ian says, out of nowhere.

I tell him I was contemplating suicide, and he tells me I'm never allowed to make a joke again. I wasn't joking, but I pretend like I was, because I don't want to upset him.

This time when he kisses me it's rosehips and chocolate, and nobody cries.

I leave my note for mom on the kitchen table. I give her the number for Ian's house, in case she wants to make sure. I'm staying over again.

His moms don't seem to mind having me on a school night. They don't mind me staying in his room, even. In his bed. I don't know what to think of the idea that they're ok with all the things we aren't actually doing. Of the idea that maybe they'd be less ok with it if they didn't think I need looking after.

Ian throws his shirt on the closet floor and struggles out of his binder. "Ohhh, my god." He hates being constricted, but he passes so well when he's wearing it, he can't get away with not. When he's at home he skins himself as soon as possible. He'll even go down to eat in front of his family in nothing but a tank top. I can't imagine feeling that comfortable, but I know now that he isn't all confidence. In a way, I think I'm better off, not knowing how comfortable feels, having nothing to contrast against the discomfort of being looked at in public.

My apartment is always too hot, and there's no point in blankets. Ian's house is kept cool enough that we can sleep together under a down comforter and it feels like cozy, not like dying. I burrow under the covers and only then take off my shirt. I've borrowed a pair of his sweatpants, too tight at the hip and too long in the legs, but the shirts he likes won't fit me.

Maybe his moms know all we do is kiss and hold hands under the covers and kick each other in our sleep. Maybe they know Ian's never seen me with my clothes off. Maybe he even told them. I can imagine the conversation. Rosa telling him

not to pressure me. Ian saying he likes me in my clothes anyway, he understands. Trying it out with his moms before he tries it on me.

“You’re going to break a rib, though,” he tells me, whispers it like it’s a secret. His breath stirs the hair that’s fallen over my forehead. “You’re not supposed to bind while you’re sleeping.”

“That’s fine,” I tell him. “I’ve only got like five months to live.”

He grabs my hand and smacks me in the face with it. “What did I tell you about jokes?”

I sleep with my head on his shoulder and I dream that I’m on a soft, green planet where no one exists who can hurt me.

My mom texts me in the middle of the night. I like that you chose your grandfather’s name.

I sit on Ian’s windowsill in the moonlight. I can feel a layer of warmth, Ian’s and my shared body heat, shielding me from the cold night sky. I love you, I text my mom.

She responds immediately. Go to sleep, Avi.

On the Friday after Yom Kippur, someone introduces the idea that Ian has gotten me pregnant, or else given me an STD that’s going to kill me. I think they’ve forgotten that we didn’t know each other until after the rumor started. I have closer to four months, now. I can’t believe they’re not sick of it yet.

I’m sick of it. I feel queasy all day, avoid Ian in the hallways, nearly throw up in the same bathroom where I saw the message. I tell myself I’m imagining the smudges of eyeliner still on the mirror. I tell myself you can’t get morning sickness just from a rumor, and holding hands.

Mom and I make shabbat, because she has a shift off, for once. I don’t check my phone, because I know Ian will be texting, all worried about me, and I want to pretend he has no reason to worry.

Mom doesn't ask if I'm ok. She never does, because if she asks, then I'll have to ask, and she'll have to answer.

"I can't believe they're not over it yet," Ian says, slamming his locker. The noise echoes down the hallway, and it makes me flinch. "Like, you know how many memes have been born and died on the Internet since—you'd think they'd be over it."

"They'll get over it when I'm dead," I tell him, faking cheerful, and he makes a strangling motion at me with both hands. If you make one more joke about dying, I'll kill you.

I grin at him and point my fingers. Bang, bang. You're right, it's a joke. Of course.

"I'm telling them to stop," he says.

As if that's not the worst idea in the world.

At lunch, someone I barely recognize comes up to me. "You know he started it, right?"

If I blink and move backwards a little, his face comes into focus. He's on the track team with Ian. Ian has described him as, I quote, a massive douchehole, which is not the kind of language Rosa and Alice encourage in their pristine art gallery of a home.

"Hi, Bryce," I say. "How's it going?"

"Ian," he says. "You know it's him who started it, right? So if it's such a big deal to you, why don't you complain to him."

I didn't complain to you, either, douchehole. "I'll take that into consideration."

"Jesus," he spits. "You're such a freak."

I turn up Ofra Haza in my headphones and ignore everyone else who tries to talk to me.

"So that guy Bryce decided to talk to me today."

Ian kicks a handful of leaves into the air. "Bryce! That douchebag!"

“Guess what he wanted me to know.”

He stops, just for a second, and I realize that he has guessed.

Which means it was true.

“What am I exactly?” I ask him. “Am I, like, a social experiment?”

“You’re my boyfriend.”

“Yeah? So you didn’t start a rumor that I’m going to die and then use it as a weird excuse to talk to me?”

“I mean—”

“That’s a yes,” I snap. “If it wasn’t a yes, you’d have said no.”

“Avi—”

I flip him off and keep walking. He doesn’t follow me.

Text messages.

I’m sorry!

Plz don’t ignore me I can explain!

Aviiiiiii

Text message.

i m not a stray kitten

On the third day I’m not at school, Ian knocks on the door of our apartment. Mom and I are eating quesadillas. There was nothing to eat at home but sour cream and old cheese, turning hard in the drawer. My dad used to do all the cooking, before he decided he hates us. I thought if I got tortillas it would be easy. I’ve had them at Ian’s house. But the taste makes me think of him, and I’m angry all over again.

I open the door and don’t even bother to glare, just stare at him, dead-eyed.

“What’s that?” he says, tapping the mezuzah with his fingertip.

“Are you, like, planning to murder me?” I ask. “Do you need a human sacrifice to maintain your perfect fucking family life?”

“Avraham,” mom says, behind me, as if she’s been saying it that way my entire life. The same tired tone she used to use for April. She doesn’t mind if I swear in front of her, but it bothers her in front of guests. I feel bad immediately, for embarrassing her, and wish I knew better words to be angry with.

My mother has never met Ian. These are not the ideal circumstances to introduce them.

“Please, Avi,” he says. “I’ll buy you something that’s not coffee.”

It starts to snow on the way into town. Ian spreads his arms and skips a little and then stops, self-conscious, correcting himself to a more masculine posture. He reaches for my hand and I elbow him in the ribs. He doesn’t try again.

He tells me it was an accident. He was trying to get them to stop. Stop being so nasty to her, he said. She’s only got six months to live.

But why, I want to know. Why would you say that. And how come they knew my name.

“I had a dream,” he says. “It was on my mind. I was worried about you. It just slipped out.”

I stare at him. He fidgets with his mug of coffee. The mugs they give you here are real ceramic. Heavy. They feel satisfying in your hand, like breaking one would mean something.

I don’t think Ian needs to be drinking coffee.

“It’s—you’re not going to believe me,” he says. His voice is tiny. I’m so used to Ian being the loud one, the solid one, the one who’s in control.

“I don’t believe you already,” I tell him.

“You’re eating the cake I got you, though.” He tries to smile. “That’s a good sign, right?”

The smile withers off his face when I meet his eyes.

“Ok,” he says. “I’m sorry. It’s weird, though. It’s this weird thing in my family.”

“What? Spreading rumors and then pretending to be all nicey-nice? What are you, like a cult? Have you been brain-washing me? Were there drugs in your mom’s Israeli salad? Those herbs she’s always burning?”

“No! No, I told you, I didn’t mean it, I was trying to fix things. But you really are going to die, Avi. I had a dream. Like a prophetic dream. So I’m trying to change your future. And anyway, you seemed lonely. I wanted to talk to you. I thought maybe we were the same, you know? And I was right, and I’m so glad.”

“We’re not the same,” I tell him. “We’re not the same at all.”

I shove my chair back and leave, not even caring that everyone else in the cafe, all these people with their four-dollar pastries and six-dollar drinks, the woman with the laptop and the girls with the fleece boots and the guy with the beard, all of them are staring at me, probably wondering who brought this wild animal into their little oasis of warmth and light and good manners.

He sends me a word document. It’s instructions for summoning a demon. He says he tried it, and the demon told him to fuck off. He says maybe if I try, she’ll show up, and she can talk to me, and then I’ll believe him.

I tell myself I’m doing it to be passive-aggressive. That if I go and sit at a crossroads in the middle of the night, in the snow, then maybe I’ll get sick, maybe I’ll even die, and then he’ll be sorry.

I tell myself it isn’t because if I believe in any kind of magic, it’s got to be the kind that hurts.

It seems right to bring a candle. It seems un-Jewish to summon a demon, but my options for ritual trappings are

limited. I dig the havdalah candle out of the drawer where it's been gathering dust since last time we made havdalah, before my dad left. I find Ian's lighter in my sock drawer, where I hide the things I don't want mom to know I'm keeping. I go to the crossroads.

The thing about a crossroads. It's just an intersection, that's what we call it now. I go to the one by the cafe, where Ian always takes me for cider. At the middle of that intersection, at the crossroads, there's a tiny island of withered grass and a bench where no one ever sits, because who wants to sit in the middle of traffic?

I sit there now and light my candle, hunching over to protect it from the wind. Wax drips onto my fingers and snow collects in my hair, on my shoes, on the road around me. There's not much traffic, because of the snow, and everything sounds hushed. I don't have a real winter coat, and I'm shivering. I sit and stare at the candle and it occurs to me that I don't know if there are words one is supposed to say to summon a demon. Ian's instructions have gone out of my head. If I try to picture the file he sent me, all I see is the look on his face when I told him we're not the same.

I whisper the only word I know for sure is magic. Please.
Please, I just want to know.

For a minute, there's nothing. Somebody crawls by in their car behind me, cautious on the slushy pavement. My candle-flame shudders. I stare at it until I imagine myself as part of it, insubstantial, pouring heat out into the universe, running out of time.

And then there's a woman. Between one blink and the next, she's there, or maybe I dozed off, drowsy with cold. She's wearing pumps, bare-legged. That's the first thing I notice, because I'm staring at the candle, held over my knees. She's older than my mom, I think, but less tired. She looks trim, professional. She doesn't have a winter coat either, but she doesn't

look cold. She's frowning at me, not like she's angry, but like she doesn't know what to do with me. It's almost like the look Ian has when he doesn't understand why I'm doing something that he knows should hurt.

My lashes feel heavy, wet. I'm not sure if it's snowmelt or tears. "Are you the—" I don't want to call her demon to her face, not when that face is wearing such a familiar expression of troubled concern. The weird thing is, I recognize her. She's the laptop lady. The one who's always halfway watching us in the cafe, every time Ian decides to treat me to expensive cookies. "Are you the person in charge of the crossroads? The lady with the magic?"

"Baby, you look cold," she says. "If we're going to have a conversation, don't you think we'd better do it inside?"

I'm still staring as she reaches down and snuffs my candle with her fingertips, with not even a flinch.

We sit in the cafe. It wasn't open a minute ago, and now it is. There's no one behind the counter, but she buys us drinks anyway, or at least, drinks appear in her hands. She gives me a hot cider and a warmed-up chocolate croissant and she won't speak to me until I've eaten it. I wonder if I should mistrust an offer of food and drink, but my hands are cold and I feel so, so empty inside and the food helps, a little, warmth and sweetness fooling at least part of me into thinking it's safe.

She has black tea, and she stirs three packets of sugar into it with a tiny spoon, tearing the packets neatly, carefully. In the lights I can see that her lipstick is this plum color that Ian sometimes wears on his nails, at home where no one can see. He acts all confident, but he still has secrets. Parts of himself he feels he has to shut away. As if the ease with which he passes makes it harder for him to break trivial boundaries.

"So, what is it?" The woman asks, finally, when I've eaten every crumb of pastry and the snow has melted into little

drops of dew on my shoes and on my shoulders. "What kind of magic were you looking for? You're awfully young. I should tell you, you're too young for curses. You want to wait until you're older, so you know who really deserves them. Don't use yourself up too quickly."

"I'm not sure I get to be older," I tell her. Suddenly, all at once, I believe it. "My boyfriend—he didn't tell me, but I found out he had a dream, like—a real dream, you know, like a prophecy, and I'm going to die. He said—he said he asked you for something, and you said you can't fix it."

She looks at me a little closer now, the frown returning. I pick candle-wax off my fingers and it leaves spots of pink where it burned me.

"I don't do those gift-of-the-magi deals," she says. "Imagine if he'd given up his life for you. So romantic, right? Like Romeo and Juliet. Or, well, Mercutio and Romeo, I suppose, in your case."

The microscopic tension in my chest from the word Juliet dissolves into relief. Of course she'd know, I tell myself. She's magic. But you expect demons to be cruel, don't you?

"But no," she continues, "No, if he gave himself for you, you'd be here in no time crying for me to give him back. They're not worth it, deals like that. No one wins when you make those kinds of wishes."

"Is—" My mouth is dry. I lick my lips, hesitate, take a sip of cider and try again. "Is that what he wanted? To make a trade?"

"Of course." So confident, as if the thought of Ian giving in to anything like suicide doesn't rock my understanding on its foundations. "Of course. But do you know what I told him?"

I shake my head. It seems to me that there's snow in my lashes again, and I dab it away with the underside of my wrist.

"I told him if he thinks his life is worth less than yours, then he's not driving much of a bargain."

I think about that. "That seems fair."

"Does it?"

"I mean, it's logical."

She laughs a little, quietly. Shakes her head and takes a sip of tea. "So what is it you want? You want to trade your way out of dying?"

"No. Not really." I turn my mug around in my hands. "I just wanted to understand. Like, even if it was real, even if somehow he knew I was going to die and stuff, why would he tell people. What is he thinking when he looks at me, you know?"

"Oh," she says, a little sigh. She sits back. "Secrets. Now, there's a magic I can sink my teeth into."

"I don't even necessarily want it to be magic. Just, I don't have anyone else to talk to. I don't want my mom to worry, she has too much going on. And I'm not ready to talk to him. So."

She blinks at me. I've surprised her, again. She leans forward and brushes my hair out of my eyes, looking at me like she's trying to read every line of my face. Her hand is warmer than I expected. I thought it would be cool, impersonal. It's not. It feels like how mom used to touch me, before we started missing each other, before we became a pair of ghosts in a small apartment, occupying the same space but different times. It's been a little better, recently, but we still don't fit together quite right. Not the way we used to.

"Sweetheart, what's your name?" the woman says.

"Am I cursed forever if I tell you?"

"No, honey, you're not. You're already full up with curses. But if it makes you feel better, my name is Lilit."

I almost snort. "For serious?"

"Yes, Avi, for serious. Is there a better name for a mother of monsters?"

I stare at her. I didn't tell her my name, except I think maybe I did, by letting my loneliness pour out of me like lost

body heat, to be eaten up by the universe. I wonder if that's how Ian figured it out, too. If holding my secret as close as I did just made it a beacon for anybody with magic eyes.

"What kind of monsters?" I ask her, finally.

"Any kind you like."

I look down at my hands. Glance up at her, and down again. Finally I meet her eyes. "What about me? Am I a monster?"

She smiles. Shakes her head. "I don't think so. Not yet. And you've already got a mother who loves you. Three of them, even. But I can give you some advice, if you need it. For free."

"Why? Because you feel sorry for me?"

"Because your boyfriend's family are a huge pain in my, ahem," she coughs, delicately, into her perfectly-manicured hand. "Because I don't want to give them any more reasons to pester me."

"Ok. What's your advice?"

She leans over and ruffles my hair. "Don't die. And talk to him. He misses you."

so what else don't i know

Uhh aside from what? :0

aside from how theres demons & ur literly psychic or w e

Omg :0 Come over?

its 3 in the f in a m

You have a key to my house and your mom is at work
what's the PROBLEM!!

He meets me on the front walk, so he can sneak me upstairs without me waking up his parents. Apparently, they are the problem. He takes my hand in the hallway and finds that it's frozen, puts his hand on the back of my neck instead and decides that I am shivering. So we don't go upstairs. He makes us tea. There are cookies.

“So is this like witch stuff?” I ask him. We’re sitting at the granite counter, on tall chairs, nursing our steaming mugs. He has given me a sweatshirt so I don’t have to sit in my soaking-wet clothes. Apparently even demons whose magic can open a cafe after midnight don’t have cars to give you a ride where you’re going.

“Huh?” he says. “What?” He blinks at me, owlsh, behind the glasses he almost never wears. I have a strange urge to lean over, take them off him, and poke out his eyeballs so he can never look at me with that expression of baffled concern again. Or maybe take off his glasses and kiss him. But I know if I did that now, it would feel cruel.

“If your family is magic or whatever,” I say. “You always have food and tea and stuff. Is your mom, like, a witch? Like—does the witch even have a name, that witch, in the story?”

“Which one?”

“Like any of them.”

“Baba Yaga,” he suggests.

“No, the gingerbread one. Your mom is the gingerbread witch.”

“Neither of my moms are technically witches,” he says, primly. “We are just a highly intuitive family. With, uhh, an especially fine-tuned sense of impending doom.”

“Mine too,” I tell him. “It’s called being Jewish. Doesn’t make me magic.”

He smiles at me, soft. “But you are magic, though.”

“Wow, Ian. Gay.”

“You’re gay,” he says.

“Your mom.”

“I mean, yeah.”

I shake my head, scowling. He’s not allowed to make me laugh. We are still fighting. “Am I magic enough to not die? That’s what she said. Lilit. She said not to die. How’s it supposed to happen, anyway? Seeing as how you told everybody

at school, you owe me the details. Even if they're gross. Suicide? Is that why the jokes bother you so much?"

"They'd bother me anyway," he says, as if it's offensive that I think he'd need a reason. "It wasn't, like, a narrative dream, Avi. It was just information."

"What information?"

He shrugs. "Your name. Who you are. That you're going to die."

"Who I am? Did you know already, then, when you asked? You knew. I don't get to have secrets, and you get to have this huge, like, impossible thing. How is that fair?"

"I guess it's not."

"Were you thinking you could kiss me and break the curse or whatever?" I ask him. "Were you thinking it's a fairytale and you can fix everything just by being nice to me?"

"Maybe a little."

"Fuck that," I say. "It's not me who has the problem, it's all your douchehole friends who think it's funny that I'm gonna die. You should go kiss all of them, see if you can turn them back into loathsome toads."

"You're getting it mixed up," he protests. "That isn't how it works."

"You started all of this," I tell him. "Teshuvah. You fucked up, and now you have to do what I want."

"You're not a mean person, Avi," he says, so small. So sad.

"Just watch," I tell him. "Just watch."

He won't let me leave. "You're not walking home at four AM in the snow. Jeez, Avi."

I'm too tired to protest. If I open my mouth to tell him he can fuck off, I might break apart.

He takes me upstairs and gives me his sweatpants. It's the same pair as always. I think in his mind they belong to me

now. I put them on in the bathroom and sit on the floor, head on my knees, until he knocks tentatively.

“Avi? Are you ok?”

“I’m still mad at you,” I tell him, letting him in. “Don’t think because I’m sleeping in your bed I’m not mad at you.”

“I get it!” he says. “I understand, it’s ok.”

I want him to hate me. I want him to tell me, go ahead, ask Lilit for a curse. I want him to tell me he doesn’t care what I do. But he doesn’t, and I can’t be angry at him anymore. I can’t scrape up the energy. And he’s warm, and I’m cold.

I curl up under the blankets and I let him rest his chin on top of my head, and he doesn’t point out that I’m crying.

I wake up alone, under snow-bright sunlight, and the house feels empty. I steal a pair of Ian’s socks because I don’t know what he did with my damp ones, and I go downstairs, dressed head-to-foot in his clothes. Rosa is in the kitchen, drinking tea, making toast.

“Avi!” she says. “You’re missing school. It’s alright, I called them. And your mother.”

I didn’t know she had my mom’s number. Even after telling her my secret, it’s been so hard to get back in the habit of talking to each other. I don’t understand how Ian’s family talk to each other so easily.

“Come sit down.” She pats the counter, turns to fetch a mug for me. “I told the school you’re sick.”

I sit. I accept the mug of tea she gives me, and the toast. I’ve never been in this house without Ian before, and it feels strange. It used to be when I was scared, I’d want to go home, to my room, to be alone. Now I want Ian. It’s not fair.

“I know you two are having problems,” Rosa says, “But you can ask me or Alice for anything you need, ok? Even if

you and Ian are fighting.” She reaches across the counter, curls her hand around mine. “We’re here, if you need help.”

I shake my head. “I’m ok.”

My voice comes out raspy. Maybe I am sick, like she said. Maybe it’s going to kill me. Maybe it’s my own fault.

“He loves you,” Rosa says. “He feels terrible for not telling you. He didn’t want you to be scared.”

But I am scared. I’m terrified. I don’t want to not trust him. I don’t want to need him. I don’t know what to tell her.

“He misses you,” she says, gentle, just like Lilit. “And your mom says you miss him, too.”

What other conversations has Rosa had with my mom? I blink at her, and she smiles, soft.

“You don’t have to talk, don’t worry. Make yourself at home. And please eat that, I didn’t rescue the bread from Ian this morning just to watch it get shredded.”

I eat my toast, while Rosa reads the news. She lets me be quiet, like I would be with my mom. I thought they’d hate me, Ian’s family, for hurting his feelings and shutting him out. I thought I’d never fit right in this house again. But it’s like I never stopped coming over. They act like I belong here.

It feels wrong to think about cursing my classmates while Rosa is watching me. I mumble an excuse and go back upstairs, curl up in the blankets. I smell Ian’s shampoo on the pillow, and I hear his voice in my head. You’re not a mean person, Avi. I am, though. I have to be. I don’t understand how he doesn’t get it.

When I fall asleep again, I have nightmares. I’ve never had a nightmare in his house before. I must have ruined the magic.

We summon Lilit. We are at the café again and she tells me I’m making a mistake, I’m too young for curses. I remind her that this may be as old as I get. Ian sits next to me and holds my hand and looks sick, green and pale and panicked. His

fingers are clammy, but I let him do it, because I'm afraid if he lets go I'll change my mind.

"I have to give something up, right?" I ask her. "You need a trade."

"I don't know what you've got that I would want, honey bear," she says. Her nails are a new shade of purple. It looks like the candied violets Rosa puts on her cakes, sometimes, when she's feeling unbearably fancy. It occurs to me that maybe Lilit is always here because she owns the place.

"I know what I've got," I say. "I've got a whole set of organs that I don't want. They've got to be magic, right? You can make life out of them. First-born children and shit. I want them gone."

Lilit's eyes go wide. I can tell that she's delighted, but she's trying to be serious and detached. "You could get a heavy, heavy curse for that," she says.

"I need a heavy curse," I tell her. "I need enough for, like, my entire school."

"Avi," Ian says. He squeezes my hand and shakes his head, eyes wide.

"You can do it, right?" I stare at Lilit. "You're magic, aren't you? You can do it without hurting me?"

"I can take what you want me to take," she says. "But a curse? That, I can't do without hurting. There's always recoil, with curses. Your spark is flickering, little mouse. Handling that kind of magic would snuff you right out. I've been telling you. Diminishing the lives of others diminishes your own, and you haven't got much to spare." She looks at Ian. "Tell your boyfriend to listen."

"Avi, it's a really bad idea."

Sure. But everything looks bad to me, right now.

"Vacharta ba'chayim, Avraham," Lilit says. "Choose life, didn't anyone ever tell you that?"

"I don't get to choose." How many times do I have to say it? "I'm dying anyway, who cares?"

"I care!" says Ian, hurt.

Lilit looks at me with soft, sad eyes. "Just think about it. Think about what you can do with that potential."

She disappears before I can tell her I already have.

"It's a really bad idea, Avi."

We're sitting on the retaining wall, dangling our feet over the water. It's iced over. Ian keeps fidgeting, probably because his butt is cold. We have thermoses of hot cider that he brought from his house, because he doesn't trust me to keep myself warm.

"What have I got to lose?" I ask. "It's not like any of those kids are ever going to like me."

"You don't even know what you've got! That's the whole point! That's the point of demons!"

"She doesn't seem so bad."

"What happened to how you don't trust anybody?" he wails. "You don't even trust me! You thought I was manipulating you for like two entire months and now you've met this demon lady twice and you think she's totally fine? Did I say demon? Because she's literally a supernatural demon, her job is putting curses on people!"

"Her job is making trades. And also, like, cupcakes."

"Please, Avi. You're being stubborn because you're mad at me, I get it, I know I should have never said anything, I was on the internet and it said the only unforgivable sins in Judaism are murder and spreading rumors, so I'm not asking you to forgive me, but please, don't start anything you can't keep hold of, ok? What if you hurt somebody else who doesn't deserve it? Does that fix how I got you hurt? Does that make it worth dying sooner? Because—and besides, you don't know if Lilit will do anything to them, what if she just kills you, like, for all

you know she's the one who put the curse on you in the first place, don't you get that?"

I don't think she is. If she were, she wouldn't have looked at me with Ian's sad eyes and touched me with my mother's warm hand. She wouldn't have told me to think harder about making bargains. We'd already be done.

I shake my head at him. "You told everyone. If I trust you, why not her? I do fine with you, even if you are kind of a dipshit sometimes."

He blinks at me, taken aback. "Wait," he says. "You do trust me? You're not still mad?"

"Come up with a better idea," I tell him. "Come up with a better idea, and we're good."

I'm sure he can't. But he'll think he can, and that will distract him, so he's not worried about me. And we can be ok with each other, for as long as I have left.

At school, people flinch away from me in the hallways and scrape their chairs on the floor, putting distance between us. I don't ask. I know eventually they'll tell me. They can't handle the idea that I don't care.

In bio I'm supposed to be doing a group project, but everyone shrinks away to the other end of the table. Mr. Donovan comes over and says, "April, what's happening here?"

"She has the Zika virus," says one of my groupmates.

"No, it's Ebola."

"It's really contagious, Mr. Donovan, you shouldn't touch her."

"I thought maybe I'd ask her to give them Ebola," I tell Ian. "That way we all die, and you can't give me those puppy-dog eyes and tell me I made a mistake."

"Don't," he says. "I had a better idea."

I don't believe him.

“Trust me?”

“It’s better to make life out of life, right?” Ian says. He was so pale and nervous last time, but not anymore. He’s wearing long pants, and a button-down shirt, and his glasses. He looks mature, professional. He looks like a goddamn Mormon missionary. I want to push him into a mud puddle. “Vacharta ba’chayim, right?”

I’m surprised he remembers the Hebrew. I didn’t. Even though he looked it up for me, after, and told me the Torah agrees with his moms about what’s good for the universe. Doing good things makes the world more magical. Doing bad things makes the world sadder and emptier. I told him the Torah can suck it, and smashed my face into the pillow so I couldn’t see his expression.

“Life builds on life, yes,” says Lilit, now. “You can get more power that way. I hope you boys have made a decision. If I eat one more of these cookies, I won’t fit into my suit.”

“Here’s the thing,” Ian says. “We want Avi to not die, and you said you don’t do trades with one person for another person, because it never works out. But you said you could do heavy magic if he gave you his, you know—”

“There’s a lot of potential there,” Lilit says. “A lot. Avi’s a smart kid. You should try teaching him magic.”

“Yeah,” says Ian. He squeezes my hand, gives me a look of pride, like, see? She and I agree, you’re so smart. “Yeah! Except not until he’s less messed up.”

I kick him under the table, but Lilit gives him a nod, like she agrees with that, too.

Ian keeps talking. “So I was thinking what if—what if both of us gave you our, um, potential, and you made it so—so he’s ok. Until he’s grown up or whatever. Sometime when it’s not tragic?”

“Dying is always tragic,” Lilit tells him. She makes eye contact with me, shakes her head a little. Like now she and I are sharing a moment, both of us rolling our eyes at how naive he is. Like things are so simple.

“A hundred and twenty,” I suggest. As long as we’re talking Torah.

She shakes her head. “Try seventy.”

“Ninety,” says Ian.

“No,” I say. “God, I was joking. That’s too damn long. I’ll take, like, seventy-five.”

Lilit shakes my hand. Then she leans over and kisses me, on top of my head, on the spot all my curls grow away from. “You get a lot more magic this way,” she whispers, quiet enough for only me to hear. “But that’s not what pleases me. What pleases me is knowing that next time I see you, you’ll be happy.”

Somehow, I’m not even afraid to believe her.

“You two are cheating me,” she whispers, quiet enough for only me to hear. “I’ve never been so delighted.”

I don’t know how I know she isn’t kidding. But I do.

We sit side-by-side on Ian’s bed, legs under the covers, watching cartoons. He’s taken off his wholesome costume and he’s wearing a Tinkerbelle tank top and no binder, out of gender-conforming camouflage. We forgot to ask Lilit about magic top surgery. I think Ian kind of likes his boobs, anyway. I don’t like mine, and I’m still hiding, but I’m always hiding. It’s not a problem right now.

“I guess I have to tell my mom I’m never having kids,” I say, out of nowhere. She’s downstairs, talking to Alice. I heard them laughing, earlier. Ian told me he likes having an extra mom in the house. I like it, too. It’s easier to talk to my mom with his moms around. Words are just easier for them, I think.

“Don’t be a dingus, Avi,” he says now. “You never heard of adoption?”

“Huh? What?”

“How’d you think I happened? Alice transitioned before she even met Rosa. Adoption! Google it! There’s all kinds of options!”

“Nah, I mean, I just saved us so much surgery money.” It’s one thing mom doesn’t have to worry about, for the future. One thing I’ll never have to ask her for. One thing she’ll never have to tell me we can’t manage.

“I saved you,” Ian says. “It was my idea.”

“Both of us,” I concede.

I smell mint on his breath and slap him away before he can think of kissing me with his chewing-gum mouth, so he settles for pressing his forehead to mine and squeezing my hand in his own, building a little island of heat between us.

Both of us, together.

I think there was some magic left over, because no one asks me if I have cancer, syphilis, Ebola, the black plague. Either Lilit left us a bonus, or they’ve finally moved on. It’s been six months, and I’m not dead. Maybe they decided it wasn’t worth taking the prophecy into their own hands. Like I thought, I’m not annoying enough to be worth the effort. Or maybe it’s because I’m making the effort. It still feels like being alive is scarier than dying, sometimes. I think maybe it will be that way forever. But there are things I can point to, now, and tell myself they’re worth it, and believe it. Ian and his family and my mom. Talking to Lilit about being Jewish, and about magic, and about cooking. Making life out of life.

One day someone writes a message on the bathroom mirror in what looks like eyeliner pencil. It says Bryce Harrison is on steroids.

I text Ian.

teach me magic for not messed up ppl ? like idk i think th
girls bathroom 2nd floor is cursed can we mb fix that

Why do u even use that bathroom dude :/ use the gneutral
one upstairs! Dingus

just teach me something nice asshole!

like how do i get cats to like me or something idk

im trying to make the world better bc im ~not a mean
person~

I watch the little bubble pop up and disappear a couple of
times, and finally he texts me back.

Meet me @the cafe and i'll make ur world better

I find a paper towel, and I scrub the whole message off the
mirror.

The Stone Sky



ANA GRILO

Warning: I tried to be as spoiler-free as possible for this last book but a few spoilers for previous books.

So here you are, at the end of a series you love, reading about the people you came to care about and about a magical world that is wholly different from yours but also incredibly familiar.

Was it worth it?

I kept thinking of that saying about “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable” as I read *The Stone Sky*.

There are endings that come as revelations, works that foment thought, books that provoke discomfort at the same time that they offer relief and hope. If you are thinking how is it possible that one book can do all those things, I don’t know, but that’s exactly what N.K. Jemisin did with *The Stone Sky* and ultimately, with *The Broken Earth* series. By any measure, these books are dark, discomfiting and sad but underlining it all, there is a measure of uplifting hope through unity and revolution. Smile through tears, if you will.

Here at the end of it all, a mother and a daughter finally meet again. One hoping to save everything, the other wanting to destroy it all. Ironically, both Essun and Nassun are motivated by loss, by a deeply felt sense of injustice. They are both relentlessly *angry* and prepared to use their tremendous power to make things right. Even if they have to shatter their whole world. The vast majority of the book takes place on the road, as the two make their way toward their destiny, to the missing Moon – and to each other.

They do not travel alone though.

On Nassun's side, a found family, a community to take care *of* as well as to care *about*. The stone eater Hoa is one of them – a greater presence with every subsequent book in the series, Hoa's importance increases twofold here at the end of all things.

With Essun, her father figure, the Guardian-turned-not-Guardian Schaffa and another stone eater Steel, someone with his own agenda, a warped reflection of Hoa's.

In this last book, we learn that this is a story 40,000 years in the making. A story, a *history* of repeated wrongs. It interrogates history, memory and the way that it is often possible to forget details and facts when history becomes mystery. But sometimes even through mystery, systems of oppression are maintained through generations. This is the core of this story which includes revenge and reparations but above all, the ABSOLUTE certainty that systems of oppression need to be destroyed, mercilessly.

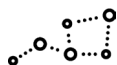
Its earth-shattering ending is punctuated by this as well as by an amount of hope and *love* that would be at odds with the story if it wasn't its whole point. It's also interesting how magic permeates this book more than the others in the series – it's unquestionable a huge part of it now, it has always been, of course. Just like the hidden feature of Father Earth has been there all along.

Meanwhile, the second person narrative once again turns into something else: there is a larger purpose to it. A purpose that is at once heartbreaking and heartwarming, just like everything else in this story. With the added viewpoint narrative of Hoa and *his* own story, the most striking thing is the cyclical nature of it all – not only of the seasons but when learning of Hoa's story and how it almost mirrors Essun's in its arc. I loved that juxtaposing just as I loved how it all ended.

So here you are, at the end of a series you love and that's when you realise, *The Broken Earth* is about you. It's about *us*.

So, yes. It was more than worth it: it's a Shattering all on its own. And sometimes that is a good thing.

Where to Start With The Star Wars Expanded Universe



THEA JAMES

STAR WARS INSPIRES PASSION. EVERYONE has a different experience with the franchise, especially when it comes to opinions regarding touchy subjects like the prequel era, and the subsequent novels and shows to come out of said era.

My experience with Star Wars is probably very similar to many others of my generation: I grew up watching the original trilogy, which I loved very dearly. I watched the prequels when they were released in theaters starting with *The Phantom Menace* when I was fifteen, and... I enjoyed them. Sure, the writing was horrible and the acting not much better, but I ate it all up because it was more Star Wars. I bought into the prequel era, even as I felt it was falwed and lacking the emotional gravitas I so desperately

wanted. I collected Pepsi bottles featuring different members of the galactic senate and other key characters, I obsessively played Rogue Squadron and, yes, Episode I: Racer, among others.

I bought into all of this because I was hungry for more of the universe I loved, and I wanted answers. I wanted to learn more about Dooku's fall from grace and the rise of the Sith. I wanted to understand the corruption in the Senate beyond a cursory few scenes across three movies; I wanted to feel the camaraderie between Obi-Wan and Anakin, and understand how the Jedi could have been so blind to Palpatine's machinations.

That's when I discovered *The Clone Wars*. The animated film and the subsequent five-season series gives answers to all of these questions, and more. It gives all of the depth and nuance that we deserved in the prequel era, by allowing characters like Anakin, Padme, and Obi-Wan explore complex storylines about government policy, the place of the Jedi in the war and in the universe, and their relationships with each other. It also introduces a slew of truly awesome new characters on both sides of the battle, like assassin-Sith-nightsister Asajj Ventress.

The Clone Wars also gave the world Ahsoka Tano—a heroine I didn't realize I needed until I met her in the animated film and series. I had always yearned for a female Jedi protagonist on screen (the few glimpses we got of Aayla Secura and Luminara Unduli in Episodes I-III weren't enough). In *The Clone Wars*, I finally got the lightsaber-wielding female characters I so desperately wanted. Beyond the fact that she's a badass with two sabers, Ahsoka is, arguably, the focal character of the entire series. Anakin Skywalker is given a padawan even though he's not a fully-inducted Jedi in the hopes that she will teach him patience, leadership, and control. Ahsoka is brash, emotional, and takes all the risks that her master does—she

pushes boundaries and asks questions instead of blindly accepting the orders of the Jedi council.

The series does so many things so well—examining the agency and ethics of creating a clone army, exploring the backstory of beloved characters like Boba Fett and Darth Maul, or Obi-Wan and his own complicated past with Mandalore’s powerful female leader.

Trust me on this, please: if you want to explore the Star Wars universe, start with *The Clone Wars*. (And then work your way into *Rebels*, which chronicles characters in the events leading up to *A New Hope*—a strong series in its own right, though it’s not quite as profoundly life-changing as *The Clone Wars*.)

Of course, so far I’ve only talked about television. There are several books to dive into as well, if you’re looking to familiarize yourself with the Star Wars EU. Here’s my list of recommendations, once you’re done with consuming the entirety of *The Clone Wars*:

THRAWN BY TIMOTHY ZAHN. Grand Admiral Thrawn is a character who has been a part of the Expanded Universe for a very long time—Zahn’s Heir to Empire, following the aftermath of the second Death Star’s destruction and the fall of Palpatine and Vader, created one of the most enduring villains in the Star Wars canon. When all of the old EU novels were declared Legends and no longer canon, many fans lamented the loss of characters like Thrawn. But then, the news broke that our favorite blue-skinned evil genius would be gracing the screen in the animated *Rebels* series—and, oh yeah, this new novel, detailing Thrawn’s origin story, would be joining the Star Wars canon. You want to dive into EU mythology? Start here.

AHSOKA BY E.K. JOHNSTON AND A NEW DAWN BY JOHN JACKSON MILLER. Because I’ve talked up the ani-

mated series so much, I have to include both of these books on the list. *Ahsoka* follows the eponymous Ahsoka Tano after she has left the Jedi order but before she has formally joined the Rebellion. Meanwhile, *A New Dawn* introduces readers to Kanan Jarrus and Hera Syndulla—main characters in *Rebels*—and gives us their origin story and their decision to rebel against the growing darkness of the Empire.

JOURNEY TO STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS MIDDLE GRADE SERIES (SMUGGLER'S RUN, MOVING TARGET, THE WEAPON OF A JEDI). Before *The Force Awakens* premiered, Disney released a line of middle grade standalone adventures, starring Luke, Han, and Leia (along with several other new canon novels). Each of these books takes place between movies in the original series, and allows readers a closer look at each main character. My favorite, of course, is Leia's novel: *Moving Target*, in which Leia and a small crew embark on a decoy mission designed to throw off the Empire.

CATALYST BY JAMES LUCINO AND ROGUE ONE BY ALEXANDER FREED. Both of these books are good reading if you watched *Rogue One* and loved the film. *Catalyst* follows Galen Erso, his wife Lyra, and the birth of their daughter, Jyn—this book shows you the troubled relationship Erso had with would-be Director Krennic, and the science behind the genesis of the Death Star. If you're going to read a single novelization of the films, please read *Rogue One* by Alexander Freed. I loved *Rogue One*, the film, passionately—the buildup to *A New Hope* and the immensity of what this small rogue squadron accomplished was the catalyst for the Rebellion's eventual victory over the empire.

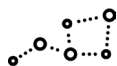
LOST STARS BY CLAUDIA GRAY. What happens when two young friends dream of enrolling at the Imperial Academy, earn their ranks as officers, fall in love, and then find themselves on opposite sides of the war? You get this beautiful, heartwrenching, original trilogy-spanning YA novel *Lost Stars* by the incomparable Claudia Gray. Looking at Episodes IV-VI through the eyes of imperial officers is not something easily pulled off—but Gray manages to do just that with this profoundly awesome standalone novel.

BLOODLINE BY CLAUDIA GRAY. This is, by far, my favorite Star Wars novel. Following Leia just seven years before the events of *The Force Awakens*, *Bloodline* shows us Leia, the war hero and senator, and how she falls from senatorial power when everyone learns the truth of her parentage. It also shows Leia coming to grips with the shortcomings of the new Republic, the rise of the First Order, and the first spiderweb splinters that fracture her family—Leia, Han, Luke, and son Ben.

This is by no means a definitive list—but it contains some of my favorites. There are so many other adventures in the new canon, as well as scores of books in the now-non-canonical (but no less awesome) Legends line.

Wherever you start your journey, may the Force be with you.

A Skinful of Shadows



ANA GRILO

Over the years, I have made no secret of my adoration for [the novels of Frances Hardinge](#). I wait for every single one of them with bated breath, knowing that wherever the author decides to take me, it will be a journey worth following.

So here we are, with a new release, fresh off the presses, straight into my greedy hands. And just like every one of her books before this, I was transported into a world of wonders.

A Skinful of Shadows is the story of a girl. The story of a country in the throes of Civil War. The way these two stories intersect and diverge from one another. It's a story about a brother and a sister, a mother and a daughter, a girl who needs to grow up. It has a unique found family, one bear, female spies, ghosts and terrible villains. It is above all, a story about trust and having faith in people.

Makepeace grew up with a dutiful but demanding mother in the house of her aunt's family. Of her father she never knew anything, except for a heritage she never asked for and which her mother fled away from.

You see, Makepeace has a space within her where ghosts can find a new home. All her life, she has been trained to avoid possession, driven to despair by her mother who locked up her in cemeteries where the ghosts were plentiful and merciless. But keeping them at bay she did – until the day when after a fight, her mother tragically dies and full of guilt and grief, Makepeace makes herself open to the spirit of a... bear.

Now inside of her, Bear causes havoc – and Makepeace often loses track of her mind and her whereabouts. Unable to cope, her family seeks her father's family – the Fellmotes, an ancient, powerful family – and Makepeace is taken away to the place where people know exactly what to do with someone with a power such as hers. And it's not pretty.

And for the next three years or so, she will try to escape – with the help of a brother she never knew she had, but whose shared heritage brings them together. But the Fellmotes will not make it easy for them – for the two kids are *needed* for the very survival of their powerful household. The problem is: their bodies may be indispensable because of their power but who they are – or at least what makes them *them* – is effectively expendable.

Just like *The Lie Tree*, *A Skinful of Shadows* feels like a less *extravagant* and less fantastical novel because it is deeply rooted in the history of *our* world. Whereas Hardinge's earlier novels were firmly set in secondary world fantasies, *The Lie Tree* was a Victorian mystery and *A Skinful of Shadows*, a story set in the beginning of the British Civil War.

This doesn't mean that the fantasy aspects are less significant though – and in here, the side of fantastical is no less elaborate: in fact, it serves the larger plot and it is essential in the formation of Makepeace's arc. The former lies in the way that the fate of the Fellmotes is intermingled with that of the country and how their actions play a part in the dispute between Parliament and the King. The latter, in how Makepeace's

character develops, grows, transforms herself into a courageous young woman. If there is one thing that connects all of the author's works is this: the principled, strong-willed, dynamic and fierce heroines she creates. Makepeace might not know whose side should be victor in this war, but she never wavers from righting wrongs and she will fight tooth and ... claws to save the life of her brother and the lives of those she thinks deserve a second chance.

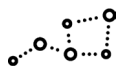
This goes deep into the character in other ways too: does *she* deserve a second chance? She doesn't know but she knows she wants to *live*. That principle, the urge to live, shapes other characters' motivations too and the cost can be high. To some is death. To other, losing something far more precious. The allure of power to those who don't usually have it is looked at with down-to-earth lenses and over and over, Makepeace decides to trust people and to believe them.

She traverses her world – from one camp to another in the midst of one of the worst, most bloody moments in British history with villains chasing her, spies helping her, with fear at her back and hope at her core but always moved by:

"We believe in second chances, for the people who don't usually get them."

A Skinful of Shadows is yet another beautiful, multi-layered novel by one of the brightest stars in the YA sky. Highly, highly recommended.

Strange the Dreamer



THEA JAMES

Once upon a time, there was an orphan boy. Gray, sickly, unwanted, young Lazlo Strange grows up a monk, then a librarian, and an altogether unlikely hero.

For as long as he can remember, Lazlo has cared for fairy tales and mysteries—all of them focused on a gold-gilded far-away city, where men and women warriors ride astride majestic beasts, and magic is possible. One day, this city nearest to Lazlo's hearts... simply disappears. Its name is plucked from the minds of everyone and replaced with a word: *Weep*. Lazlo, who can intimately recall the moment the name vanished from his mind knows that this is evidence of magic, and makes it his life's mission to find Weep and discover its secrets. He becomes a librarian, devoting his lifeblood to scouring its books for any knowledge of Weep, its people, its language, and the mythic seraphim and mezarthim that came from the sky.

One day, Lazlo's dream inexplicably finds *him* when a band of Tizarkane soldiers ride into his city, seeking scholars and experts of different kinds of knowledge to join their party and ride with them to Weep. The leader of this band is a

heroic man named Eril-Fane, but who is more known by the name Godslayer—for just fifteen years before, when the name Weep was plucked from the minds of the world, Eril-Fane did the impossible and liberated his people.

Lazlo Strange has dreamed his entire life for this chance to learn visit the lost city of Weep, to witness true magic, to solve Weep's mystery.

Meanwhile, a young woman named Sarai and her family grow restless in their palace filled with ghosts, gardens, and memories. Every day is the same... but is about to change.

Strange the Dreamer is Laini Taylor's newest series—a duology—set in a brand new world and distinct from her Daughter of Smoke and Bone trilogy. It is a tale of Gods and Monsters, of legends and myths, and long-standing enmity between the oppressed and their oppressors. It's also the story of two young people, who yearn to break the cycle of hate and fear, though their lives and backgrounds are completely different. *Strange the Dreamer* is, as its title implies, a beautiful and unexpected tale about stories, dreams, and the fragile souls who dare to dream them. In other words:

I loved *Strange the Dreamer*. I also had a great many issues with the book by its cliffhanger ending.

It's hard to encapsulate all of the splendor of the intertwined stories within *Strange the Dreamer* (certainly it's hard to do so without spoilers), but allow me to enumerate some of my favorite things:

First and foremost, Lazlo Strange. The orphan who would become a monk, and then who discovers the glory of the library and the stories within is the vital life essence of this novel. Lazlo is sweet and bookish, odd and courageous. He is a dreamer who wins the hearts of the warriors he accompanies on their great mission, and our story's unlikely hero. I loved Lazlo's narration and innocence; his kindness and honor.

Our other protagonist, Sarai, is another luminescent part of *Strange the Dreamer*. Her narrative could not be more different than Lazlo's, trapped as she and her siblings are in their citadel; I love the gradual way we learn that she and her kin are not like other humans, the nature of their gifts, and the terms of their imprisonment. Sarai's fears of sleep and her sense of building dread, especially in the face of her single-minded sister Minya, is a powerful, palpable thing.

And then, there is the "problem" of Weep, and the land's great and dark secret—which Lazlo and other shave been dispatched to solve. *Strange the Dreamer's* greatest strength is how everything is so intertwined, and yet nothing makes sense at first—kind of like a dream in itself. Over time, as more pieces are revealed, the picture becomes clearer. We learn about the assembled team headed for Weep and what they might hazard to do there together. We learn that Sarai and her kin are no mere children imprisoned in some faraway castle. We learn the truth of the Gods who descended upon the land and what they demanded in tribute.

These were the things that make *Strange the Dreamer* so wild, improbable, and beautiful (to quote a certain thief from the book). These intertwined threads are what make Lazlo's tale a triumph.

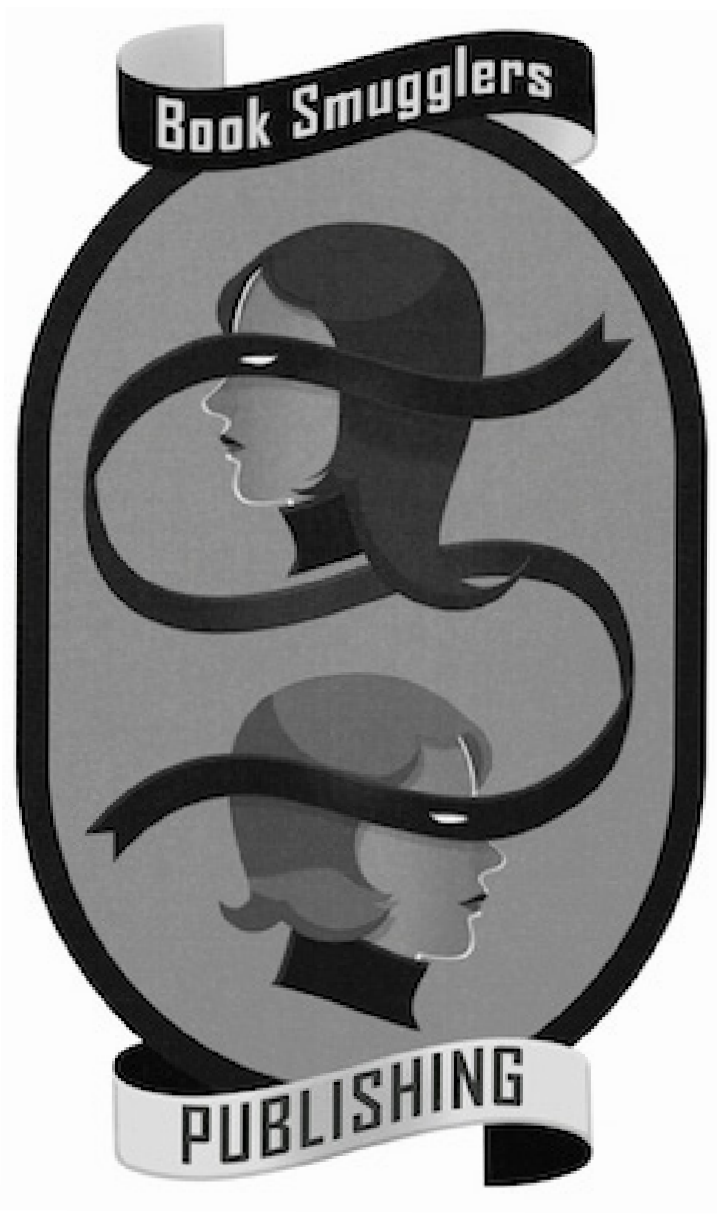
However... the book is not without certain sizable issues. For as much as I loved and was enchanted by the novel's first two thirds, its final act is where the book stumbles. When the dreamer, Lazlo, meets the Muse of Nightmares, the result is a fantastically tragic doomed romance that is conducted with a painful abundance of melodrama. Instead of building the romance with the same care and attention that is given to the world and the overarching thematic angles of the novel, the third act is frenetic and almost comical in its focus on earth-shattering romance, with two characters falling in all-consuming passionate infatuation with one another at first

contact. And because there is so much time devoted to the all-consuming passion between these two characters, the dramatic and world-changing reveals in the novel's final act are rushed to an inevitably over-the-top ending, which includes a somewhat telegraphed reveal about one of the characters' true nature, a literal explosion that rocks the world to its core, and, in the essence of great doomed star-crossed romance, untimely death.

There are other minor issues with *Strange the Dreamer*, but this is its most greivous offense: the rushed climax, and cliffhanger ending.

There are no answers to be had to any of Lazlo's great and terrible questions at the heart of Weep—to get any kind of closure and meaning, readers will have to wait for *The Muse of Nightmares*... sometime in 2018.

Recommended, but reader beware.



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