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Abaddon's Gate is a science fiction novel by James S. A. Corey (pen name of Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck). It is about a conflict in the Solar System that involves the polities of Earth, Mars, the Asteroid Belt and the outer planets, and a mysterious self-replicating alien technology of immense power. It is the third title of The Expanse series and is preceded by Leviathan Wakes and Caliban's War. The series is continued in Cibola Burn. The book was released on 4 June 2013,[1] as well released as an audiobook by Audible, narrated by Jefferson Mays.[2] Abaddon's Gate was adapted into episodes 7 to 13 of the third season of the television series The Expanse in 2018, with its title taken for the final episode of that season. It was the last book in the series to be adapted before the show's move from Syfy to Amazon Prime. Plot summary Six months have passed since the Protomolecule created a structure on Venus and launched off the planet. The alien machinery stops two AU beyond the orbit of Uranus and proceeds to transform into a circular structure that is termed "The Ring." The UN, Mars and the OPA send ships to monitor it. When a young belter attempts to "slingshot" his ship through The Ring on a dare and doesn't emerge out the other side, it is realized that the structure is a wormhole. The UN, Mars, and the OPA scramble to send military fleets out to The Ring in a show of power. The OPA sends the generation ship Nauvoo, now repurposed as the military vessel Behemoth, under the command of Captain Klaes Ashford, with security officer Carlos "Bull" de Baca. The UN also sends a group of religious leaders, artists, and poets on their fleet for public relations purposes. Included in this group is Methodist minister Anna Volovodov, and celebrity pastor Father Cortez. On Ceres, Holden, Alex, Amos and Naomi are taking a vacation, having made good money using the Rocinante as freelance courier and escort ship. UN Public Broadcasting contacts Holden, wanting to make a documentary about Holden and the Ring. Holden initially refuses, even though a vision of Miller, which has appeared to Holden occasionally since the Protomolecule crashed on Venus, has been urging him repeatedly to go to the Ring. However, the Martians file a lawsuit to take back the Rocinante, and Holden makes a deal with UN Public Broadcasting to do the documentary in exchange for them paying off the Martians. Meanwhile Clarissa Mao, sister of Julie Mao, plots revenge against Holden, whom she believes caused the downfall of her father Jules-Pierre Mao, who was responsible for the research into the Protomolecule. She gets a job under an assumed identity (Melba Koh) as an engineer on the Cerisier, a UN exploratory ship heading for the Ring. When the Cerisier gets close to the Rocinante, Clarissa sends a signal to the ship, which activates software secretly placed there by a member of the documentary crew whom she bribed. The software takes control of the Rocinante, disables the communication system and controls the weapons, while a bomb simultaneously detonates on one of the other ships heading for The Ring. A faked video message of Holden claiming responsibility for the attack is broadcast. The joint military fleets, in retaliation to what they perceive as an unprovoked attack, start firing on the Rocinante. Holden, with no other options, flies the Rocinante into the ring to escape. All three major powers send ships into The Ring after the Rocinante, including the OPA flagship Behemoth, with Bull on board, and the ship carrying the religious leaders including Anna and Father Cortez. The Ring leads to a hub in a massive but dormant wormhole network, with thousands of dormant rings orbiting a spherical object termed Ring Station. Any object within this space traveling faster than 600 m/s is captured by an inertia field and pulled into an orbit circling the station. As a result of this speed limit, the Rocinante crew names the area "The Slow Zone." Once inside the zone, the Rocinante crew repairs the communication system in order to contact the other ships and convince them of Holden's innocence. Amos discovers the planted software. He forces a confession out of the documentary crew member who planted it, who doesn't know Clarissa's name, but draws her face. Holden, thinking it's Julie Mao, assumes that this is another one of the Protomolecule's ploys to manipulate him. Holden decides to go to Ring Station, figuring this is what the Protomolecule wants him to do. The UN, Martian, and OPA fleets enter the Slow Zone. The Martians launch a skiff in pursuit of Holden, but he reaches the Station before them. The vision of Miller appears and guides Holden deeper and deeper into the Station. He explains that the Protomolecule projects the vision directly into Holden's brain, using it to communicate with him. Both the Protomolecule and the Station were separate tools constructed by an alien race billions of years prior, and both maintain some degree of decision-making autonomy. The Protomolecule, lacking control over the Station, needed Holden to be physically present to open the wormhole network and begin searching for its creators. The Martians catch up to Holden and attack him, but constructions in the Station attack them back. After launching a grenade, one of the Martian marines is ripped apart while the others retreat. The vision of Miller explains that the speed limit in the Slow Zone is merely a form of threat deterrence, and that as a result of the Martian's actions, the Station now considers objects moving at the speed of a grenade a threat and will lower the maximum speed accordingly. Holden and Miller advance through the Station until they encounter a large alien structure. Miller urges Holden to touch it. Upon contact Holden experiences visions of the civilization that built the Protomolecule. They had an empire spanning the galaxy, but were attacked by an unknown entity. Trying to stop the spread of the attack, the Protomolecule's creators used the Station to destroy thousands of star systems, causing them to go supernova. Miller explains he can reopen the network of wormholes in the Slow Zone, but before he can explain how, the Martian marines reappear and arrest Holden. In his cell on a Martian ship, the vision of Miller advises Holden to get all the ships to turn off their reactors. This will show the Station that they are not a threat and convince it to release them from the Slow Zone. Meanwhile, because of the sudden change in the speed limit, all the ships in the Slow Zone are captured by the inertia field and abruptly and drastically slowed, causing the people inside to experience lethal deceleration. Casualties are extremely high and most of the survivors are heavily wounded. Because no ship can now move faster than a grenade, returning to The Ring would take years, leaving the survivors essentially trapped in the Slow Zone. On the Behemoth, Bull clashes with Captain Ashford about allowing the ship to be used as a refuge. Bull and XO Michio Pa stage a mutiny against Ashford, imprisoning him and taking control of the ship. They arrange to have survivors transported to the Behemoth, where they can be most effectively treated. On the UN fleet, Clarissa, still seeking revenge against Holden, attempts to board the Rocinante and kill the crew. Anna, who had spotted Clarissa earlier and who after some time worked out who she really was, follows Clarissa to the Rocinante.Aboard the Rocinante, Naomi discovers Clarissa and the two fight as Clarissa attempts to destroy the ship. Clarissa nearly kills Naomi, but Anna arrives just in time to stop her. The Rocinante's crew is transferred to the Behemoth to receive treatment. Clarissa is imprisoned, and crushed by her failure to harm Holden and experiencing intense guilt about the deaths she has caused, confesses to everything. Knowing Holden is innocent, the Martians release him from custody and he returns to the Behemoth. Ashford, imprisoned, conspires with Father Cortez to use the Behemoth's powerful communication laser to destroy The Ring, thinking they will save humanity from the "evils" brought by the alien technology. They stage a revolt and take control of the ship back. When Holden hears of the plan, he realizes that if the Station considers humans a serious threat, it could cause the Sun to go supernova as it had done to the other stars he had seen in its vision. Assuming that attempting to destroy the gate could risk the fate of the entire solar system, he gathers a crew of allies including Anna and Bull. A brutal battle ensues as both sides attempt to prevent the other's plan, which Ashford's side is on the brink of winning. In a final desperate attempt, Anna convinces Clarissa to shut down the control system of the Behemoth. Ashford is overpowered, and his plan to destroy The Ring is thwarted. After all of the trapped ships shut down their reactors as instructed, the vision of Miller appears to Holden and informs him that the Protomolecule has convinced the Station that the ships are not a threat. As a result, the Slow Zone's speed limit is lifted, allowing the trapped ships to escape. Furthermore, the Station reopens more than a thousand of the dormant wormholes surrounding the Slow Zone, each leading to a different planetary system. Miller says the Protomolecule will never stop searching for its creators, even if they are long gone. As its instrument, the Protomolecule will keep using Holden for this search. Anna convinces Holden to bring Clarissa to Luna to stand trial. In return, she will use her influence to prevent Mars from taking the Rocinante. The OPA leaves the Behemoth (renamed Medina Station) in the Slow Zone as a waystation for ships traveling to the wormholes. Humanity begins to probe the gates that will lead them to the stars. Characters James Holden, captain of the Rocinante, former UN Navy (UNN) officer; from Earth (an Earther). His associates on the Rocinante are pilot Alex Kamal, engineer Naomi Nagata and mechanic Amos Burton. Joe Millers consciousness continues on in disembodied form, now part of the vast protomolecule matrix and used for his investigative capabilities. Talking to and trying to work with James Holden, he has limited insight into the actions taken by the gate, but knows there is a vast tapestry of opportunity and danger associated with it and those who built it, because someone destroyed them. Clarissa Mao, younger sister of Juliette "Julie" Andromeda Mao and daughter of Jules-Pierre Mao, who was president of the multi-planet corporation "Mao-Kwikowski Mercantile" also known as "Mao-Kwik". Jules-Pierre was part of various conspiring organisations, all of whom wanted to use the protomolecule for profit. Carlos "Bull" de Baca is a former warfighter and friend to Fred Johnson. He's given the job of third in command of the Behemoth, formerly known as the Generation Ship Nauvoo, which the OPA salvaged and repurposed as a warship. Klaes Ashford, captain on the Behemoth. Michio Pa, XO on the Behemoth, "promoted" to captain after the coup. Annushka "Anna" Volovodov is a Methodist pastor from Europa who joined the expedition as part of a UN delegation of religious figures and artists selected to witness the start of a new epoch of human history. Her ship joins others following Rocinante into the gate, and she tries to pull fragile strings of common interest together against the gales of politics, self-interest, and madness driving others in the expedition. Monica Stuart works for UN Public Broadcasting. She and her cameraman Cohen go aboard the Rocinante to make a documentary about Holden and the Ring. Reception Abaddon's Gate won the 2014 Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel.[3] Publishers Weekly gave Abaddon's Gate a starred review saying that "series fans will find this installment the best yet".[4] Notes and References The solar system civilization made-up of the Earthers, the Martians, and the Belters has just defeated the threats of engineered proto-molecule monsters attacking Ganymede in the Asteroid Belt and putting the three societies on the brink of galactic war. As hinted in the previous book, however, the struggles and sacrifices to overcome the challenges are only the beginning of a larger imminent danger. Here's a deeper look at the best seller: Abaddon's Gate. Events in Abaddon's Gate take place a year after the ending of Caliban's War. The Asteroid Belt is in a perilous food shortage situation because Ganymede can only yield a quarter of its normal production, and Venus is now a dead planet. Despite the troubles, the Rocinante has been doing pretty well with a profitable cargo ship business. Captain Holden deliberately takes a job as far away as possible from The Ring but it doesn't work out as expected and he must go back to the centre of the problem again; and this, too, does not go quite as planned. To get a glimpse of the story, it is best to look into the characters and their motivations. Chapters in the book rotate through the perspectives of four main characters: James Holden: initially reluctant to even get close to The Ring, the captain eventually accepts the request from Monica Stuart (UN Public Broadcasting) to take her team of journalists into the portal. And Detective Miller is back, in some sort of apparition that only Captain Holden can see and hear. Each time Miller comes to Holden's senses, the latter questions his own sanity. Miller only reveals himself when Holden is alone. If someone else from the actual reality enters the room, the apparition disappears. Miller claims to be the only one who can access control of The Ring's defense system, but he needs Holden's help to do that. Clarissa "Claire" Mao: using a fake identity as Melba Koh to make her way into The Ring aboard a civilian ship Cerisier, Claire is determined to kill Holden for taking down her father Julie-Pierre Mao. Disguising herself as a technician and coming to the scene with an elaborate plan to discredit Captain Holden, her characters will come as close to full circle as they can get by the end of the book. Carlos c de Baca (Bull): a former UN Marine who has now joined the OPA, Bull holds the position of XO on the generation ship Behemoth. Because of his history as Earther, he never sees eye-to-eye with Captain Ashford. Annushka "Anna" Volovodov: a pastor from Europa chosen by the UN to join a civilian expedition aboard the UNN Thomas Prince into The Ring. Her religious belief will intertwine with Claire's fate once her sinister plan unfolds. Meanwhile, at the Ring Station, where nothing travels at a maximum speed of 600m/s (meters per second) in the center of The Ring, Holden and Miller deactivate the defense system and open all the gates. Nothing hostile comes out (for now), but Miller tells Holden that it is not yet completely safe. Claire is not immediately arrested for her crimes because Holden refuses to take her to Luna for a fair trial. Instead, she is now repairing the damages that Rocinante has to sustain due to her actions. We think the aptly titled Abaddon's Gate opens the door to a much larger universe in The Expanse series. Now that The Ring becomes practically a free quick portal to everywhere beyond the solar system, the story is no longer confined in the Milky Way galaxy and its political conflicts. Abaddon's Gate might even work well as a stand-alone novel thanks to an assortment of fresh characters and an already familiar base storyline. Apart from Holden, Miller, and the crew, all characters in Abaddon's Gate were never mentioned in the previous books. Readers have an easy chance to catch up with the story and learn some new interpersonal conflicts. Have you read Abaddon's Gate? How do you think it compares to Leviathan Wakes and Caliban's War? We'd love to hear from you. Other things you might want to know: Abaddon's Gate won a Locus Award in the Best Sci-Fi Novel category in 2014. An unabridged audiobook of Abaddon's Gate was released at the same time as the original version. It is about 19 hours long and narrated by Jefferson Mays. Gods of Risk (2012) by James A. Corey The Vital Abyss (October 2015) by James A. Corey Check out other articles by month: These notes were contributed by members of the GradeSaver community. We are thankful for their contributions and encourage you to make your own. Written by Bui Huyen, Varusha Murthen, Niveditha Palani and other people who wish to remain anonymous The Myth Behind the GateThe title Abaddon's Gate is inspired by biblical and Hebrew traditions. Abaddon represents destruction, a fallen angel, or an abyss. In the novel, this mythological imagery mirrors the Ring, a massive alien artifact beyond Uranus, which serves as a gateway to an unknown, potentially perilous expanse. This framing highlights both the danger and wonder of encountering technology far beyond human comprehension, setting the tone for a story where curiosity, ambition, and caution collide. Humanity at the ThresholdIn this third installment of The Expanse series by James S.A. Corey, humanity has spread across the solar system—Earth, Mars, the Asteroid Belt, and the outer planets. The discovery of the Ring, created by the protomolecule, ignites political, military, and ethical turmoil. The Ring acts as a portal to the Slow Zone, an infinite region containing thousands of wormhole gateways to distant star systems. Its activation forces factions and individuals to confront both their ambitions and their limitations. As Holden reflects, "The unknown isn't always something to fear—it can also be an opportunity," capturing humanity's simultaneous awe and trepidation. Crossing the ThresholdThe narrative follows multiple perspectives, immersing readers in the stakes and moral dilemmas of interstellar discovery. James Holden, captain of the Rocinante, becomes entangled in protecting a scientific expedition to the Ring. Clarissa Mao, driven by revenge, infiltrates the mission with intentions to sabotage Holden, while Anna Volovodov, a Methodist pastor, wrestles with moral questions and the pursuit of unity amidst chaos. Carlos "Bull" de Baca manages the human conflicts aboard the Behemoth, and disembodied consciousness Joe Miller offers insights from within the protomolecule matrix. The interplay of these viewpoints allows readers to explore not only what happens, but why the characters make the choices they do and how consequences ripple across the solar system. Conflicts Among the StarsThe Ring's discovery escalates preexisting tensions between Earth, Mars, and the Outer Planets Alliance (OPA). Each faction seeks control over this revolutionary technology, reflecting broader themes of power, responsibility, and the struggle for unity. Individual motivations intersect with collective stakes: personal vendettas, political maneuvering, and ethical imperatives all drive the plot forward. When Klaes Ashford attempts to destroy the Ring out of fear, Holden and his allies must navigate a web of competing priorities to prevent catastrophic outcomes. Choices in the Slow ZoneThe Slow Zone imposes a 600 m/s speed limit on ships, creating intense survival challenges. Within this space, characters confront ethical dilemmas that probe the limits of human judgment. The protomolecule, as both a scientific marvel and a potential weapon, amplifies these questions. Choices made here are not just tactical—they are moral. Holden's and Clarissa Mao's decisions, alongside Anna Volovodov's guidance, demonstrate the tension between ambition, fear, and the ethical use of unprecedented technology. Exploration and Human AmbitionThe novel examines humanity's drive to explore, juxtaposed with the consequences of overreach. The Ring's gateways promise access to thousands of star systems, representing immense opportunity, yet they also raise questions about readiness, responsibility, and humility. The story illustrates that advancement without foresight can be perilous, reflecting the enduring tension between curiosity and caution. As one line observes, "If humanity were capable of being satisfied, then they'll still be living in trees and eating bugs out of one another's fur… That human audacity had put her there," emphasizing the courage and dissatisfaction that fuel human progress. Redemption and TransformationCharacter arcs emphasize growth and moral reckoning. Clarissa Mao transitions from vengeance-driven antagonist to a figure seeking redemption, while Holden and Anna grapple with the consequences of their choices. These arcs underscore themes of forgiveness, responsibility, and personal evolution amidst larger existential challenges. Legacy and Cultural ImpactAbaddon's Gate received the Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel and significantly influenced the television adaptation of The Expanse. By combining action, political intrigue, and philosophical inquiry, the novel deepens the series' exploration of humanity's place in a vast, unknown universe. Its narrative invites readers to reflect on moral responsibility, the ethics of technology, and the courage required to confront the unknown. You can help us out by revising, improving and updating this section. Update this section After you claim a section you'll have 24 hours to send in a draft. An editor will review the submission and either publish your submission or provide feedback. The third Expanse book, Abaddon's Gate, picks up about three years later after Caliban's War. We ended the 2nd book with two stingers. The impossibly huge ship takes off from Venus and Detective Miller shows up in a rush of blue fireflies. The TLDR summary on Book 3: That alien ship reached its destination. It flew out to Uranus and transformed into a gigantic Ring in space. The scale is given as one thousand kilometers wide. For Americans I played a bit around on google maps and it's about the distance between Memphis and Milwaukee. No one knows what the fuck this thing is. Ships are flying out to figure out what the fuck this thing is. There's an alien structure in space surrounded by Earth and Mars military ships trying to figure what the fuck this thing is. The story is these three factions heading out to The Ring, fucking around, and then finding a way out of the situation alive. We get the big picture exposition through our prologue character, Maneo. He is a Slingshot Racer. The book explains what Slingshotting is. Basically, your goal is to use the gravity of planets and moons to build velocity instead of an engine, follow a course, and don't die. People gamble on the outcome. In a classic Chekov's gun, when you have a giant ring in space surrounded by guns and a dumb kid with a spaceship you know what's going to happen next. The kid is going to try to take his ship through the ring. And in true Song of Ice & Fire prologue character fashion, he dies in the attempt. When Maneo goes into the ring two things happen. First, he dies when his ship undergoes a massive deceleration. More on this later. The second thing sets the stage for this book. Maneo doesn't come out the other side. Where did he go and what else is out there? It's The Question every character in this book wants to answer. One person not curious what's out there is our returning POV main character, James Holden. The crew of the Rocinante has had a good run since they stopped working for governments at the end of the 2nd book. Their bank accounts are flush. Holden frames it as having more money than they know what to do with. But all is not well. Holden is still seeing Detective Joe Miller when he's alone. In the last book Holden was trying to find his way out of his liminal state. Here Holden knows what he's supposed to do. But he's desperate to refuse the call to adventure. He knows the bill is coming due. And that's really his arc here. Figuring out what the cost is and how to pay for it. The show doesn't bring back Miller until the end of the first episode set in the "Abaddon's Gate" era. I can't imagine book Holden living with this monkey on his back for three years. That cost is best epitomized by one of our new POVs. We are introduced to a young woman named Melba Koh. Melba is our first antagonist POV. She has a plan to get revenge on James Holden. She doesn't explain it in her introductory chapter. But we do realize that Melba is not her real name. Her real name is Clarissa Mao. She's Jules-Pierre Mao's daughter and Julie's sister. We're introduced to her in Baltimore where she is picking up fake IDs. But the people providing them want more money and are prepared to do violence to get it. These are tough mobsters and she's a skinny rich girl. In an establishing character moment, Clarissa Mao kills the gangsters with her bare hands. Because Clarissa has modifications in the Khan Noonien Singh/Steve Rogers sense. The book explains explicitly what these mods are and how they work while the show is a bit too cryptic for my taste. There will be more info on this later but essentially Clarissa has glands surgically implanted that can supercharge her physically for a few critical moments. In addition to being a cool piece of science fiction I think what these mods say about her character is that she has passed a point of no return. Later in the story she will pass this point literally. But as a person, in her soul, she has committed. Her body cannot be changed back. Her deeds cannot be undone. One other character note. The books give us the Middle Names for the Mao sisters. Juliette Andromeda Mao. Andromeda being the princess set out to bait a sea monster, a Leviathan if you will. At least until the heroes save her. Contrast with Clarissa Melpomene Mao. Melpomene is the muse of tragedy who sings songs for the dead. Her actions in this book are initially revenge for herself, her father, her family. In every way but literal, they're dead. She's speaking for the dead, our next POV is focused on the living. Carlos c de Baca is known as Bull to his friends. Those friends primarily being his former comrades in arms when he was a UN Marine. Bull was formerly under the command of Marine Colonel Fred Johnson. Also just like Fred, he was slowly drinking himself to death on Ceres before he was recruited into the OPA. So Bull is basically an avatar for Fred Johnson in this story because Fred's a quest giving NPC, he can't go on adventures himself. Bull's role on the OPA ship is that he was initially going to command that ship, effectively leading the OPA faction going with the Earth and Mars factions out to The Ring. But instead he is placed as 3rd in Command, Chief of Security, beneath Captain Ashford and XO Michio Pa. His role in the story is to give us a POV on the Behemoth, the OPA ship and our main setting for the second half of the book. Bull also provides insights into the politics and the people. Bull is not as deep a character as Clarissa or our last POV. His orders from Fred are "Make It Work." And so he goes forth, trying to choose the most pragmatic options as they present themselves. Sometimes those moves are subtle, sometimes they are not. At his core, Bull is a soldier. Our last POV is perhaps the opposite of Bull and Clarissa. Her chapters are titled Anna but her full name and title is the Reverend Doctor Annushka Volovodov. This is pronounced Ahn-ah in the Muscovite style. Anna is our Miller/Avasarala character which is to say she has a superhuman level of empathy, insight, and social intelligence for the people around her. Her opening chapter is, as most first chapters are, an Establishing Character Moment. In Anna's case, her establishing character moment takes place at her home on Europa where she's a Methodist minister. One member of her congregation is committing domestic violence against his wife. And Anna's tried the counseling carrot, now it's time for the stick. She provokes the wife beater into laying hands on her, enough to make an assault charge stick, then puts his ass down with a taser. Anna considers herself a pacifist and doesn't even approve of swearing. But, as Anna says, sometimes swearing is justified. That's Anna's character in a nutshell. She is really walking the walk, living her faith, but St. Anna has an edge and sometimes she's morally obligated to set aside pacifism. And God help the motherfucker who goes over the line far enough to make Anna take action because The Almighty usually takes Anna's side. So our stage is set. To recap, In the first book, some kind of alien…thing transforms the asteroid Eros and all its people into a ship that crashes into Venus. In the second book, something is being built on Venus and takes flight, another ship. Now, our third book, that ship flies out to the edge of the Solar System. Its location is pegged at as far out as Uranus but on the opposite side of the solar system from the planet. The ship unfolds into this giant ring in space. The three factions of humanity, Earth, Mars, and The Belt, head out there to find out what this thing is. The Belt goes out there because Earth and Mars are going. If they want to be equal players they have to go too. But The Belt and the OPA doesn't have a fleet. What they do have is The Nauvoo, the largest ship humanity has ever built. Recall that The Nauvoo was initially designed to be a generation ship, taking a colony of Mormons across space for centuries to another solar system. In the first book it was launched at Eros as a battering ram. Then in the second book there is one line of dialogue that Fred Johnson launched a mission to recover the ship. Now the ship has been renamed The Behemoth, fitted with guns, and given a giant shark paint job like a Bullet Bill from hell. Bull and Fred Johnson meet in Bull's first chapter to discuss the mission, two Earth Marines who sided with the OPA. Something rubs me the wrong way about Fred and Bull talking shit about Belters. Two elite outsiders privately denigrating the people who will benefit from the progressive cause they've rededicated their lives to. Bull was originally going to command the Behemoth. But as everyone could tell, the politics of that suck. The first Belter Warship commanded by a non-Belter? This brings us to the secondary character that Bull serves as a camera on in this story. Ashford. I'll just say it now, the TV show completely changes Ashford into a different character even giving him a first name, Klaes. For now I'm just talking book Ashford. The Behemoth ship is described as a salvaged ship never meant to be a warship. It is completely unsuited to what it's being used for but it has a great paintjob. The Behemoth is Ashford. Ashford is a politician. He's not a soldier, he's not a terrorist. Ashford's worst fear is that he's going to be embarrassed and as someone who has never done this kind of high stakes political military science captaining before there is a very high probability he will be. It's really not clear why this previously unmentioned motherfucker is in charge of the OPA faction for this book. We are just told "it's politics." The OPA has gone legit and making the bosses happy is something one must sometimes do when you go legit. But the lack of explanation is unusual in the Expanse Series. We never find out who in the OPA was so pro-Ashford they were able to force Fred Johnson to put him in command. Ashford is here to be an obstructive bureaucrat because if everyone worked together efficiently there would be no story. Bull is charged with this quest by Fred Johnson, "please try to make everyone work together efficiently" with Ashford as the prime obstacle to that goal. To quote Bull summarizing the situation, "We're heading out to throw gang signs at Earth and Mars while the Ring does a bunch of scary alien mystery stuff. We've got a crew that's never worked together, a ship that's half salvage, and not enough time to shake it all down. Sure it's a problem, but it's not one we can fix, so we'll do it anyway. Worst can happen is we'll all die." It's not the strongest writing in the series and you can see the authors' thumbs on the scale in this decision. The half-hearted defense I can make to appointing a politician like Ashford to captain the OPA ship is that this is a political mission. The OPA doesn't need a violent extremist, they need a glad handing politician. The Earth fleet even includes a contingent of artists, poets, philosophers, and religious leaders. Anna is one of those religious leaders. Although she wouldn't consider herself a leader. Really Anna's there more because where she lives on the moon of Europa made it convenient for her to join the fleet and they didn't have any Methodist representation. Initially Anna doesn't want to go. She applied for this thing years ago and now that humanity is actually going to the Ring she'd rather stay. In contrast to the TV show, it's helpful to remember that in the book we're about three years after the last book. It took all that time for The Ring to form after it launched off Venus and humanity to decide to do something about it. Anna's wife encourages her to go to The Ring which reminds me of Ned and Catelyn. Anna's wife Nono tells her, and the audience, that Anna is an amazing public speaker. She and their daughter Namono will wait for Anna to come back to their families in Uganda and Russia. This group of artists and scholars on the Earth ship is referred to as "The Dog & Pony Show." To me these civilians are like if the Ridley Scott Alien Prequel movie, Prometheus, took place in an election year. What will humanity find at the Ring? What should they do about it? No one have the slightest damn clue. But this could very well be first contact. And Earth's Secretary General wants to make sure that Earth, and the millions of voters who watch Earth's biggest evangelist preacher online, know that he's doing everything he can at this time. The text makes a point to mention that the fleets of Earth and Mars are heavily depleted after the battles of the first two books. This is meant to be a scientific and political mission, all factions of humanity united in the face of First Contact. What that means in practical terms though is that the Earth Navy can't handle everything on their own. To that end, independent contractors! Clarissa Mao is aboard one of these civilian contractor ships disguised as a repair tech managing three other techs. An eagle eyed viewer might notice that the techs she manages, Stanni, Bob, and Ren, are a reference to the Baratheon brothers from ASOI&F. Who doesn't love the occasional easter egg? The three of them know that their boss, disguised as Melba, is not qualified for her job. But she knows enough to follow through on her plan. Clarissa's second chapter gives us her whole plan. Clarissa plants a bomb on an Earth ship, the Seung Un. She has a fake video of Holden saying there's a bomb on every UN ship and claiming the ring for the OPA. She's working with the sound guy on the documentary crew on the Rocinante. She's spent a fortune on fake ids, getting this job, the bomb, the video, her implants. We the audience know the plan and we know why. There is no mystery, there is just the Hitchcockian suspense of "There's a bomb under someone's table and Holden is going to be blamed for it." After planting the bomb, Clarissa wants to celebrate. For her celebration, Clarissa wants to be honest with someone, so she tells Ren that she's not qualified for her job. This is kind of a buffer conversation but it's also foreshadowing. Ren points out the fucking elephant in the room, that this fleet is flying out towards an Alien Ring that killed a million people on Eros and everyone is scared shitless. I kind of wish the book dwelt on that fear a bit more. I haven't mentioned the crew of the Rocinante in a while. Which is fitting because they don't want to be at the Ring. We join them in the most expensive private area of Ceres' most expensive hotel. Two metaphors strike right away. Holden remembering one of his mothers (Holden has eight parents, a product of Earth's massive overpopulation) suffering from migraines and to him it looked like possession, like she was haunted. He also looks down at the massive pile of casino chips in front of them and thinks "If we quit now, we'll be ahead." They're not subtle metaphors. After enjoying a few shots of Lagavulin 16 year ($1200 a bottle in Ceres a thousand or so years from now, $91+Tax at the place down the street from me in 2023) Holden heads to the bathroom and sees Detective Miller from the 1st book. Recall this was the stinger at the end of the second book. It was a shocking moment. Now we get what happens three years later. Holden keeps seeing Miller only when he is alone. Miller's words make no sense but they sound ominous. These words make more sense on re-read but they're not that important. Miller's nature is also a mystery. He casts a reflection. When he touches Holden, there is weight and sensation. He is actually there, not a hologram in the sense that we humans of 2023 understand the word. As this has been going on for years, Naomi knows about it. She does her best to ask Holden relevant questions then pivots to distracting him with affection and an offer to go play poker. This is a callback to the beginning of the chapter. Holden keeps trying to say that the house always wins and if they quit now they'd be ahead. Naomi tells him they're not there to win, they're there to play. Sounds about right for every damn fool headed out to The Ring. Chapter 5, Bull's second chapter, introduces us to other important characters in the OPA faction for this book. Other damn fools headed out to The Ring. We can start with Michio Pa. Michio Pa is second in command aboard the Behemoth. In the show, her character was fused with Fred Johnson's chief of security, Camina Drummer, to make a character that is stronger than both. Chapter 5 also introduces us to Serge as Bull's second in command in security. This is also our reintroduction to the Behemoth, formerly the Nauvoo. To recap, the Nauvoo was intended to be a Mormon generation ship. It would spend centuries in space flying to another solar system. This means that the majority of the ship is designed to spin and generate gravity so that they could grow crops. This makes it a really shitty warship but fuck it they're using it as one. Lastly, Samara Rosenberg, Sam to everyone else. The Chief Engineer, our Montgomery Scott, Geordi La Forge, Miles O'Brien. I can't help but think this character was a little inspired by Kaylee from Firefly. She's joyful, extremely competent, and the main characters all like her. These four characters, Bull, Pa, Sam, and yes the Behemoth, intersect as they try to deal with technical problems aboard the ship. The text cuts through the techno babble and gives us plain language. Firing the guns will destroy the ship if they're not fixed. Pa says its not a priority in the budget. Sam doesn't really care beyond stating the facts, "This thing doesn't work, it will take 18 days to fix if everyone's sober and working hard." Bull is left with the politics. Michio Pa and Ashford will fix it if Sam asks, but that undercuts Bull and he doesn't want to set that precedent. What to do? Bull reflects that his Actual Job as Security Chief is to be den mother to the thousands on board and keep trivial stuff away from the Captain and XO. Using that limited power he reclassifies Sam's job as including tech support and the ship's guns as a pretty fucking technical piece of equipment in dire need of some goddamn support. Then he follows that punch with the haymaker: What did Sam mean when she said "If everyone was sober?" Sam reminds him that she needs to keep an eye on the politics too and that neither of them can afford to alienate the crew. Bull tells her she needs to pick a side. From Bull's perspective, it's not his side, it's the ship's side. So she gives him the name of a dealer. We jump from that perspective of Making It Work, the trip The Ring, to Chapter 6 where Holden is trying to do literally everything to not go to The Ring. The news has just leaked that Maneo tried to fly through The Ring and he didn't come through the other side. Holden and Naomi realize Miller's last appearance and The Thing That Happened he spoke of referred to Maneo. Holden's response to this, and the approach of the Earth/Mars/Belt fleet headed to The Ring anticipating First Contact is to accept a job to fly to Uranus. Recall that The Ring is on the literal opposite side of the solar system from Uranus. Naomi objects to this on the grounds that a shell corporation hiring an advanced warship like the Rocinante with virtually no cargo space to transport "Some Crates" out to a science base sounds like the shadiest possible illegal deal she's ever heard of. Holden doesn't care, Holden wants to be as far away from the Ring as possible. He is refusing The Call To Adventure. And The Plot can't have that. This chapter is a farce. Holden's panic at being contacted by an alien entity that killed millions and built The Ring out of their bodies and Venus is understandable. But it's really played for comedy. They accept this obviously criminal job. It's funny that they're going literally to the other side of the solar system. Then they wait an hour for their client. Then the client calls and says they're cancelling the contract. Trouble is headed their way. Holden says there's trouble. Amos says he'll be right back. Holden tells Alex to prep the ship for departure. Alex says they can leave in ten minutes. Naomi wants to know where Amos is going with a shotgun. Amos has a shotgun in his right hand, assault rifle in his left. Again, farce. The Plot demands Holden go to The Ring. And so the crew of the Rocinante gets sued. Mars initiates legal action demanding the ship back. There's a kind of caged animal feeling. Holden doesn't know what's going to happen and has no impact on the decision. This being set adrift lasts two pages. Then, a miracle. A documentary crew led by journalist Monica Stuart approaches Holden with an offer he can't refuse. They can get the Rocinante out of impound. But. They want to go to The Ring. Holden smells a rat in this serendipity. Being him, he suspects that Miller, the protomolecule, whatever force controlling them has caused all this. This has the feel of players rejecting your TTRPG hook and railroading them back to The Plot. The demand of The Plot must be answered. Holden welcomes them on board. Holden is not wrong in that this is part of Clarissa Mao's plan. How exactly is not clear. But her vast fortune paid for IDs and her job, it also somehow paved the way for Monica Stuart's crew to be on the Rocinante and perhaps even started the ball rolling on the lawsuit brought by Mars. Those details we don't really need and not in an Ashford/Littlefinger "why are we hanging out with this asshole?" sort of way. We the readers believe in the awesome power of Wealth to lead things to this point. If Jules-Pierre Mao could initiate the events of the first two books his daughter can jolly well kickstart the third. The Mars/Earth/OPA Fleet and now the Rocinante head out to The Ring. Anna is with the UN fleet and treated like a dignitary. She's given a tour of the "cool" parts of the ship aka The Parts That Make It Good At Killing which she doesn't give a fuck about. Her cabin is described as "luxurious for a spaceship, normal for a Belter, and a coffin for an Earther." We also meet some of the side characters from the UN fleet, namely other religious leaders from Earth. The highlights for later in the book are Father Michel of Rome (on the short list for cardinal!), Hector Cortez, a mega-church preacher whose weekly sermons go out to 100 million people, and perhaps most important, Tilly Fagan. Tilly's an extremely wealthy person whose husband gives gobs of money to the UN Secretary-General's election campaign. The point of introducing these people is obviously to plant seeds for later but in the moment it's to show a contrast. These people are players. They're playing The Game. Anna on the other hand, Methodist of Moscow and Europa, is here to do God's work as she sees it. And frankly it's pretty fucking important work. This could be First Contact. We are very literally boldly going where no human has gone before. What does it mean? What does it say about God? Can faith provide something to the people doing this mission? These questions are interrupted by the reinforcement of reality. Some guy starts shouting that Afghanistan should be free and lights himself on fire. Well he tries to. But this is a spaceship in the future. Dude is immediately tagged by fire suppression systems and hauled away. This is one of many examples reinforcing the most prominent main theme of the expanse novels. At the end of the day, people are gonna be people. Whether they have alien portals to hell or swords and sandals we never really change. In keeping with that theme, Chapter 9 finds us back with Bull. In the last chapter, Sam gave Bull the name of a drug dealer. Now, Bull sits with this information. He watches this man. Bull humanizes him. Then Bull summarily executes him. It isn't sudden like a bullet to the head. Bull takes 30 minutes to reach an airlock on the gigantic ship and makes sure people see him hauling this guy away on a cart. Bull thinks back to a pig being carried for slaughter when he was a child. Bull throws the dealer into the airlock, kills him by spacing him, then announces to the crowd that he's going to space the drugs he's confiscated in 16 hours. Any drugs people throw in there are no questions asked. After that, the next person to show up to work high…well Bull isn't specific about their fate. Needless to say, Ashford and Pa are pissed. We hard cut from the execution to Bull standing before Ashford and Pa on the bridge, staring up at white Jesus and images of plenty in the Mormon decorations. Clearly a judgement. Ashford tells Bull he's relieved of duty and will stand trial for murder. Bull argues back that it's the OPA way to space someone who is endangering the ship and this guy was doing it by selling the drugs to let people show up to work high. There's a real problematic element here. Bull the outsider from Earth, explaining Belter culture to Belter superior officers as a reason for why he committed pre-meditated murder against a drug dealer. Ashford immediately folds. He goes from "Bull, you're gonna be charged with murder" to "Bull, please do not murder anyone else without my consent." For the sake of the audience, it's noted that Bull senses the man's weakness. Later, Michio Pa privately dresses Bull down for appealing to Belter culture. She says that killing is not "admirable." In his own head, Bull agrees with Pa but feels like this won't be the last murder he'll need to commit. This whole scene is whitewashed in the TV series. There it takes place between Captain Drummer and her XO, TV Ashford. Drummer is prepared to space the dealer and anyone else caught dealing. TV Ashford, quietly, argues with her in front of the crew preventing her from doing these things. Maybe necessity but sowing the seeds for future conflict. Bull, Clarissa, Anna, and even Holden now that he's hosting a documentary crew, are all keenly aware of appearances and how they look. But they're all playing up being what they actually are. Bull is a soldier whose lived in the Belt for decades. Clarissa isn't qualified to be a technician but she has the will & capacity to learn the trade. Anna is a pastor comfortable giving people spiritual guidance. Holden is a space captain paladin main character. They are being their characters but at the same time acutely aware that they want to be perceived as their characters. Probably because they don't want to be perceived as terrified humans going into an objectively terrifying unknown. Speaking of being perceived by others,

man. This is all character building showing Bull reacting, holding up, and thriving under heavy pressure and fatigue. Then there's an announcement from Ashford. The Behemoth is heading through The Ring in pursuit of Holden. The words are full of bluster and ceremony. Sam immediately asks Bull if Ashford is drunk. Bull thinks it's worse, Ashford is embarrassed by the Behemoth failing at a critical moment and now he's trying to save face. Bull tries to talk Ashford out of it offscreen but fails. Pa also tried to talk Ashford out of it offscreen. Now we find Bull and Pa talking together in the aftermath. Bull floats the idea of a mutiny past Pa. She doesn't go for it and still hasn't forgiven Bull for his actions so far so they have no trust. It's weird reading interactions between Bull and Pa when these two characters were combined to make Drummer for the show. Then TV Drummer was placed in charge for there to be a conflict with TV Ashford. Meanwhile on the UN fleet, Anna holds services. Instead of her usual twenty families trickling in she has eleven soldiers aged 18-25 who show up on time. Anna doesn't talk about David versus Goliath or sacrifices that we ask of soldiers. She senses that people are scared and want to talk and want community. She preaches about God watching out for us. Anna also tolerates very little shit. She rebukes a marine for using the terms Duster and Skinny, the racial slurs for Martian and Belter. She tells them, "you realize those terms are to dehumanize people so it's easier to kill them, right?" The military wants and needs soldiers to dehumanize The Enemy. Pastor Anna doesn't let people off that easy. After services she meets up with Hank Cortez. The mega-preacher wants to go into The Ring. The belters are going, Earth should go too and bring their religious leaders with them. Anna agrees and will come with them. Melba aka Clarissa is also going through The Ring with the Earth ship. She's terrified of people knowing she killed Ren and has to move the body. Again, the text doesn't let her off the hook by being extremely graphic about this. Clarissa sobs through this, she realizes later. She's dissociating with the knowledge that Holden survived when she thought he'd be dead by now. She wants to go through The Ring in pursuit. Again, point of no return. One seed is planted for later though. In the commissary, Clarissa recognizes Tilly Fagan. Tilly knew Clarissa, she knew the family. We the audience know this is another bomb placed in Clarissa's story waiting to detonate. After checking in with all our other narrators, chapter 20 brings us back to Holden and the crew of the Rocinante. Here, Holden coins the name that I'll use from now on to refer to the space inside The Ring, The Slow Zone. Naomi prefers Alex's name, Dandelion Sky, which was the original name for this book and is the name for season 3 episode 10. This name doesn't make a lot of sense in the TV show because it specifically refers to the next revelation inside the Ring. Holden and crew immediately figure out that there are 1373 Rings, here they also start referring to The Rings, plural, as Gates. What comes next is pure exposition to set up the second half of this book. Inside The Ring is The Slow Zone with it's 600 meter per second speed limit. The Slow Zone is one million kilometers across, a bit smaller than The Sun. There are 1373 Gates and it's a logical guess that these Gates each lead to…somewhere. The text also mentions that it's nearly impossible to send communications through the gate. And inside the slow zone, at the dead center of everything, there is a planet/space station of some kind. Holden gives the audience this exposition through giving an interview to Monica Stuart. Mainly as something to do while they're trying to fix the Rocinante's communications. Holden reflects that they are in pretty deep shit if there's an engineering problem even Naomi can't solve. The plot catches them when Amos bursts into the bridge with a shout of "motherfucker!" Amos has found a doohickey planted in the ship that is the source of all their ills. The only explanation for this is that someone on the documentary crew did it. I think the reader is justified in engaging in some Fridge Logic at this point and asking, "wait how the fuck DID they outsmart Naomi?" Look do you want to hear the story or not? Yeah, this feels like the author's thumb on the scale. Cohen the sound guy immediately confesses under threat of death. He confirms that "someone" got Monica this documentary job but he doesn't know who she was. Unfortunately for Clarissa Mao, the blind Cohen is also a visual effects creator and can easily recreate her face. The Rocinante crew recognizes the face of Julie Mao, not suspecting it's actually her younger sister. With this info, the crew now suspects another ghost similar to Holden's visions of Miller. I will note for the record here that Naomi does not object to the proposed violence against the documentary crew while breaking up with Holden over similar violence in the previous book. Holden decides he has to martyr himself again. If the Miller ghost and Julie ghost have driven him to this moment and the little blue space station moon is the only thing in the slow zone well he better go there. Feels like he's jumping to a conclusion the plot needs him to? Naomi points out that Holden always does this, leaning on the fourth wall while justifying to the audience that this bizarre leap is entirely in character. Everyone on the Behemoth is going through their emotions. Crime reports are dropping to zero, communications traffic back to the belt is six times normal. Bull is acting as Ship's Dad, demanding everyone strap into their crash couches. It's eerie but the Behemoth crosses the Ring into the slow zone without incident. There's a strong feel of "nothing is the scariest" or "fear of the unknown". As ships enter the slow zone, the Rocinante is able to talk to the other ships. Naomi is on comms telling everything it was all a setup and they have the evidence. Everyone's still pretty fucking pissed. Then Naomi drops the bomb, Holden is in an EVA suit flying to the little space station at the center of everything. She's even forced to say Holden thinks he was called there. Everyone loses their shit. Bull meets with Ashford after Naomi's announcement. Ashford confirms that the UN and Mars are both sending troops after Holden and demands the OPA do the same. Bull gives him a hard reality check that they can't. As a Marine himself Bull is entirely in his area of expertise when he tells Ashford that the Behemoth has no troops that can stand against UN or Martian marines in power armor. He refuses to sugarcoat this for Ashford. If Ashford sends people against power armored marines those people are going to die and everyone on the bridge (then everyone else) will know he was told what would happen. If those people die, he's doing it just to save face. Bull goes over the absurdity of the situation recapping for the audience how it looks to an outsider. The Rocinante is saying that Juliette Mao's ghost orchestrated all of this which is equally as implausible as an Alien superweapon being found in Saturn's orbit. which made a magic gateway. Bull doesn't buy it. The old marine and current chief of security smells a rat but isn't sure where. So our most pragmatic POV decides to deal with the problems he can. Bull gets in touch with Naomi and offers to take custody of Monica Stuart and the documentary crew. He and Naomi can start taking variables off the table and acting like grownups to solve problems. Naomi agrees. Chapter 22 finds us back with Holden, flying through the void to the little blue moon/space station at the dead center of the Slow Zone. At first he's awed. Then he's bored. Like so much else in the book, the TV series compresses hours and days into seconds. This journey passes by in a few minutes in the series when here the book points out it takes hours to make the crossing. He has a lot of time to think. Holden thinks about the Protomolecule that made all this possible. The thing was launched at Earth and captured by Saturn 2 billion years ago. Then Protogen/Mao-Kwikowski finds it and starts experimenting. But it's purpose all along was to make this gate to the Slow Zone. Holden uses an analogy of monkeys with a microwave to humanity with the protomolecule. If you push a button the microwave makes a light, so it's a light. Different button it burns you so it's a weapon. Open and close the door it's a safe. And no one ever figures out the original intent, "heat a frozen burrito." This feels like a very 21st century analogy. Naomi tells Holden what Ashford already told Bull and The Audience, that Marines are chasing him. Because of the speed limit, no one can just go faster and catch him. Holden is going to keep the headstart he has. For those doing math, with the speed limit of 600 meters per second and the slow zone one million kilometers in diameter it would take approximately 19.25 days for a ship to cross the diameter of the slow zone. Meaning a ship at the maximum speed should take approximately 9.5 days to reach the station at dead center. Eventually the Marines are about 5 minutes behind Holden. I don't think they actually spend the right amount of time on this but whatever, that's nitpicking. The Marines are traveling fast enough to preserve the drama. Naomi wonders if Bobbie is among the Martian marines. The TV Show does include Bobbie in a nice piece of conservation of detail but Book Holden is not so lucky. He wonders is he's at the center of all this just to be told "You're the perfect wormhole fuel!" and then killed. Eventually, Holden makes it to the little blue ball. He prepares to land on the thing feet first, like falling onto a planet. Instead an entryway opens on the surface and "swallowed him up" which is a lovingly horrible turn of phrase for a guy who thinks he's about to die doing the stupidest thing of his life. Inside he lands on the sloped wall and finds Miller waiting. Holden says Miller is making more sense than usual but on re-read Miller is way weirder than I remember. The TV Show simplifies this but there are a number of rooms Holden passes through with bizarre constructs. The marines catch Holden here and their guns don't work with the speed limit. One of the bizarre constructs starts to move. A Marine fires a grenade at it, injuring the thing. This is where shit gets real. Twelve of the constructs activate and rip the offending Marine apart. They do the same thing with the injured construct. And for their last trick they repair the damage to the station caused by the grenade like it never happened. They turned the Marine into spackle the same way the protomolecule turned Eros into the material to make The Ring. But there's a bigger problem with the Marine firing a grenade. Miller explains it to Holden and the Audience in ominous tones. See, Miller explains, the Speed Limit outside is a security measure. But the grenade just taught the little blue space station, which controls everything here, that slow things can be a threat too. So now everything traveling at 600 meters a second just decelerated again. It's not revenge, it's not personal, and it's not gentle. Miller tells Holden that a lot of people just died. This is A Big Moment in the book. The problem that we will now contend with in the chapters going forward. I don't want to undersell it; the speed limit changing in the slow zone is a Big Fucking Deal on a scale with Big Moments in earlier books like the Donnager blowing up or rogue UN navy forces trying to kill Avasarala. Now we deal with the aftermath. Clarissa gets the first chapter. She's dodged a bullet with the Rocinante telling everyone that Julie Mao's ghost is behind everything. Her cover as Melba Koh is still intact. Her next move is to go for pure violence and get to the Rocinante to kill some people. We start the chapter with her planning then the speed limit changes. She wakes up to alarms and the smell of blood. We the audience are alerted that something violent happened because Clarissa's hand terminal hit something hard enough to break. Bodies float everywhere in the hallway outside her room. The UN ship Clarissa is on, The Thomas Prince, is described as "a scene from hell." She casually tells us something that the show presented to its audience as an Oh Shit revelation, that in zero gravity blood pools, inflammation is bad, lungs fill with fluid more easily. Clarissa begins dealing with damage control. She lifts an ID card from a dead officer while securing him to a wall with adhesive foam. Then she realizes that with this card and the chaos she will never have a better chance and her chapter ends with Clarissa bolting for the Rocinante. We then cut to Anna, also on The Thomas Prince for more aftermath. She was reading on her own hand terminal, strapped into a crash couch, when the speed limit change came. More on this later but basically anyone who wasn't strapped into a crash couch (1/2 to 2/3rds of all people on all ships in the slow zone) is dead or has a life threatening injury. The hand terminal left a series of bruises and the impact dislocated her arms. Outside in the hall Anna finds the same apocalyptic imagery that Clarissa did. Tilly Fagan finds Anna. When Anna complains about the terrible pain she's in, Tilly jabs her with three syringes full of military grade amphetamines and painkillers. Uh oh. Anna's chapter kind of becomes a dark comedy at this point. It's estimated later that among the ships, the third of people sleeping in their crash couches lived, the other two thirds are dead or injured. The count on the Behemoth, our biggest ship, is given at two hundred dead, four hundred wounded, and that's a better ratio than most other ships. But our point of view is this extremely drugged out Anna. She marvels at how smart Tilly is for reading directions on a package of drugs. Tilly thinks she may have given Anna too many drugs. Then the next penny drops. Anna and Tilly see the broadcast put out by the Rocinante which includes the 3D image of the woman who paid off Cohen. Tilly immediately IDs Clarissa Mao, who she calls Clare. Anna remembers the dangerous woman from the cafeteria. And then Drugged Out Anna puts two and two together, suspecting that Clarissa is the one who blew up the Seung Un, not James Holden. A nearby UN security officer checks the facial recognition and sure enough, Clarissa Mao is in a hangar bay. Then we get a gem of an exchange that dispelled any doubts for me this chapter is intended to be comedic. Tilly Fagan stares at the officer in disbelief asking why they didn't check when the Rocinante put out a broadcast saying "THIS WOMAN PLANTED THE BOMB. IT WAS NOT JAMES HOLDEN." To which the UN security guy responds, "Ma'am, we don't ask 'how high' when James fucking Holden says jump." I cracked up at that one. The exchange falls silent when they realize that the woman in the hangar bay is opening the airlock. This is one problem added to the queue among many and the officer has to get back to work. Anna is insisting they deal with Clarissa right now when Tilly pulls her aside with another gem, "What are you gonna do hit her with your Bible?" Then Anna pulls out the taser she stole from the security officer. Again, black comedy. Anna, stoned out of her mind, with a stolen taser, heads off to find an EVA pack to chase after Clarissa Mao. I think this chain of events makes more sense than the TV show where the end result of Anna chasing Clarissa Mao into space with a taser still happens but there's no reason for it, Show Anna didn't live on Europa for years and has no reason to know what an EVA pack is and she's not on drugs. Comedy aside, these two chapters really hit home on the horror of what happened in the slow zone. They are very graphic and you really get the weight of the tragedy. The comedy in Anna's chapter has a wonderful gallows vibe that I think anyone's who's survived something horrible or even watched movies about something like World War One will recognize. Chapter 25 snaps us back to Holden on the little blue space station moon. This is probably the most important chapter in the book if not the series. If there's one thing I'd compare this chapter to it'd be Dany in the House of the Undying in Clash of Kings. Holden is terrified that Naomi is dead. Miller is urging him to press on. I think it's an open question and worth stopping to consider for a paragraph as to what do we mean by "Miller" in this context? Miller is dead. The "system" or computer whatever we understand the protomolecule to be is using a projection of Miller to accomplish its own objectives. It is perhaps just this calculated manipulation. But there's I think a good case to be made that there is influence perhaps that belongs to the human detective from Ceres. I think that case gets stronger in Book 4. But the reason given here is that the reason all this shit is happening specifically to Holden is that Miller kind of liked him, thought Holden was decent. The Miller Projection Ghost gives us something approximating exposition here. The little blue station and the Slow Zone are on a kind of security lockdown. Hence the speed limit. The Miller projection and even Holden to some extent are not the species that built it, they lack control. They lack the ability to interface with "The System" here. But. In the same way that the system can punch a few trillion synapses in Holden's brain to make him visualize Miller and interact with The Miller Projection, they can perhaps interact with the system if not control it. And so Miller makes the ask. The Miller Projection wants Holden to touch the big glowing column in the room. An actual living being touching the pillar will give the Miller Projection some more access to whatever system controls this place. That's pretty much it. That's a little weird isn't it? There's no "Answer Me These Riddles Three" or Swordfish or choose Red, Blue, or Green light. Touch The Thing. I think there is an amount of leaning on the 4th Wall "don't worry about it" to this chapter as far as what's happening and why. The story really really needs Holden to Touch The Thing. I think he kinda goes along with it a little too easily but whatever, do you want the next six Expanse books or not? By Touching The Thing we enter into the House of the Undying Acid Trip for a few paragraphs. Holden sees some shit. Compared to House of the Undying I think the Expanse version of prophetic acid trip is both less specific and not written for calculated obscurity. Immediately after Holden Touches The Thing and Has A Vision the projection of Miller explains what he saw. Miller gives us an infodump here. It's a bit hamfisted but straightforward information about The Builders always feels fun and interesting. There are very few kernels of this exposition throughout the Expanse series. Here's the Snark Knight Ghost distillation of the Miller Ghost distillation as far as what the fuck the paragraphs after Holden Touches The Thing mean. I dunno how useful it is to recap as a this is a reread essay for people who've already read the book and I'm shouting into the void. So The Builder species. They intentionally threw The Protomolecule at Earth. The intention was to build The Ring to lead to The Slow Zone where there are 1373 other Rings. But, those Builders weren't waiting on the other side of the Ring. The slow zone has been in lockdown for two billion years. And Miller reasons that if none of the Gate Builders have reached out in two billion years they're probably all dead. So what happened to them? The Miller Projection doesn't know. But. And this is the important part for The Expanse series going forward. Miller can tell that Something violent happened to The Builders. The Builders are described here as a galaxy spanning hive consciousness. They could do things with the laws of physics that look like magic. And Something wiped them the fuck out. Miller's records show that this little blue space station that has unimaginable power and the ability to destroy stars. The Builders used it to destroy solar systems to try and quarantine whatever happened to them but they failed. The use of the word Quarantine is curious. You don't Quarantine a civil war. Maybe you use it for something like The Zerg or Alien Xenomorphs. But if it was two civilizations, The Bajorans and Cardassians, the Builders and The Ones Who Killed The Builders, you wouldn't use the word Quarantine. I'm leaning on spoilers for future books but the use of that word, Quarantine, hints that whatever the Gate Builders were fighting wasn't another species with a government and an economy and spaceships and guns. Holden's vision after touching the thing really dialed in on seeing the little blue station blow up stars. He wants to know what this all means for Humans. Can the little blue station in the Slow Zone blow up our Sun and thus Earth? The Miller Projection assures him it can blow up Earth. Fortunately, there's a way to prevent that! Great! What is it? Then the Martians show up to arrest Holden causing Miller to vanish. MOTHERFUCKER. End Scene. Like I said and again at the risk of spoiling later books, we don't get a whole lot of info on the before times and The Ring Builders in The Expanse. I wish we got more but this shouldn't be too surprising considering the theme the book hammers home over and over again that people are gonna be people. Humans are going to fight over the same primate bullshit whether they live in a single tree or spread across a galaxy. They might get access to alien technology or nuclear weapons or fire but no matter how much the capability changes the problems remain downright domestic. And then the next theme of that book is that while humans may have the ability to solve these problems through science and technology, humanity will never, on its own, maintain a critical mass of pragmatic grownups to solve these problems. Speaking of pragmatic grownups, Chapter 26 brings us back to Bull aka Carlos Baca aka Chief of Security and third in the chain of command aboard OPA ship The Behemoth. This is our first Bull chapter since Chapter 21 before the speed limit change. There's a reason for that. Unlike our other narrators Bull was seriously injured. He comes to consciousness slowly in a medical bed surrounded by doctors and the dying. He calls Sam Rosenberg, Chief Engineer, for a status report. She's on her way. At this point two parallel stories begin. Around his hospital bed a doctor tries to explain to Bull that he's been paralyzed. Bull doesn't pay attention to that, instead he's trying to be a pragmatic grownup in his internal monologue. If Ashford lived and Pa's dead that's not good. The survivors will need to pull together. The Doctor is getting agitated. Maybe Monica Stuart's team can put out broadcasts like Holden. Sam shows up, leg in a splint but otherwise okay. Bull wants the report. Sam wants him to listen to the goddamn doctor trying to talk to him. Bull comes to a moment of choice here. The doctor is advising putting him in a medical coma to give him the best possible chance of regrowing his nerves and bones and regaining some level of function and feeling below his chest. If he says yes, everything goes away and it's someone else's problem. Bull thanks everyone and decides to go against medical advice and get back to work to the best of his ability until the ship and crew are out of danger. The doctors will do their best to keep him functioning. For now. Sam gives Bull the damage report. Three Martian ships aren't responding. The Behemoth is rocked but being a ship designed to fly to another solar system for a century it was built to take a few hits. The Earth ships are bad but not as bad. The bigger problems beyond the death toll and medical emergencies are communications and logistics. Remember at the start of the book, communications can't get through The Ring. The ships are also now under the tractor beam effect of the speed limit. And if they did put out a smaller ship to fly back through the ring the scale of the space is enormous. Recall that under the previous speed limit it would've taken over nineteen days. Now with a speed roughly 1/10th of what it was it will take months to get outside the ring just to call for help and months more for enough help to come for the people that entered the ring out by Uranus's orbit. Bull has a moment of foresight here that is to his credit as a character. Holden asked Miller if the station was still capable of blowing up the solar system and got a yes. Bull reaches the same conclusion. If the Slow Zone can do this when it feels threatened and make things even slower, the chances are it has more tricks to pull. Bull gets in contact with Michio Pa and Captain Ashford who both survived. Bull wants everyone on the same page before someone pisses off the station more. While Ashford is micromanaging the crisis out of existence, whatever that means, Pa is the one coordinating with other ships. Pa loses it a bit here, complaining about "another self-righteous male telling her how high the stakes are and she better not fuck up." Bull, displaying basic empathy and seeing her stress, apologizes. In Bull's defense, he was putting it in basic terms for the audience not for Michio Pa. Bull thinks for a bit and then comes to two conclusions. First, everyone should be on the Behemoth. Keeps everyone from doing something stupid. Second, part of what makes the slow zone catastrophe so deadly is that there's no gravity. Solution? Spin the drum on the Behemoth and make some gravity. For those who might not recall, the Nauvoo/the Behemoth was designed to spin and create gravity so crops could be grown over the centuries the ship was expected to be in space. In the show, Ashford, played by David Strathairn got to say this line and he fucking nailed it. It's a triumphant fuck yeah moment. Here it ends the chapter and rightfully so. Chapters 27 and 28 are a nice two POV action sequence that reminds me a lot of Bobbie taking over Jules-Pierre Mao's space yacht. I maintain that chapter with Bobbie is the best action scene in the entire series. This one is quite good. We start with Clarissa. She grabs an EVA mech suit and takes off into space to reach the Rocinante. She's planning to kill Holden while wondering if he's already dead. Clarissa is trying to ignore a small part of her mind saying this a bad idea she doesn't need to do. She knows the ship's blueprints by heart and knows her mech suit can get through the airlock. Again, scale. The journey takes hours. But like Holden's flight to the blue space station we just hard cut to the destination after reflecting that it will take a really long time. CW: SA Imagery. TLDR, Clarissa breaks into the Rocinante. Clarissa entering the Roci is deliberately framed in this sexual imagery as a violation. She does not go into the ship. She invades. She cuts her way in. She breaches. She unzipped the outer and inner layer. The text is literally "Gently, she slipped the mech's hand into the hole, braced, and peeled pack the cargo door, long strips of steel blooming like an iris blossom." Yeesh. End CW Now that the authors have made us uncomfortable tagging along with Clarissa, we get to the more overt violence. She heads for the ship's reactor where she can easily blow up the ship. But Clarissa finds Naomi there. There's a beat and then the fight is on. I must start a new paragraph to assure you that this fight scene is way way better in the book than the TV show version. We get shit talk from both sides as Naomi with hand tools fights a woman in a power mech that can cut through a ship's hull. This is essentially Ripley in a power suit versus A Human. Except this time The Human with no power suit is the pissed off mama bear. Just as Clarissa's entrance into the Rocinante was written as SA, Naomi's defense of the ship is framed as a mother defending her child. Naomi fights like an Engineer in a way that would make Miles O'Brien proud. Despite Clarissa's mech severely messing up her shoulder she manages to dump the core out of the reactor to prevent sabotage. But Naomi loses. Clarissa has her. With her last ounce of strength Naomi gives her the finger. With one more twitch the mech will crush Naomi's throat. WHAT'S THIS!? IT'S ANNA VOLOVODOV WITH A FUCKING TASER FROM BEHIND!!! I swear the last three chapters have absolute banger cliffhanger endings. Anna and Naomi begin their friendship by Anna administering first aid to Naomi. Coagulant spray, painkillers. Anna thinks to herself that her asking forgiveness instead of permission is a pathological trait in her. We also get a gem of belter culture insight. The belter mindset boils down to "what you don't know kills you." Only earthers would jump out airlocks into a weird alien zone in stolen EVA packs. Anna catches the last moments of the fight when she fires her taser, hitting the mech instead of Clarissa by mistake. This destroys the taser and momentarily disables the mech. It occurs Anna as she asks childlike questions that she still might be high. This is round 2 of the fight. Naomi is seriously hurt but she takes Anna seriously when Anna says that she can't kill Clarissa. Naomi also mentions that Amos and Alex are alive but unconscious and helpless. They put some doors between Clarissa and themselves on the way to Naomi grabbing a gun but the Engineer tells the Preacher the salvage mech rig will have no trouble cutting through the ship to get to them. Sure enough Clarissa is after them shortly when Naomi passes out. Then yet another miracle, the mechanical voice of the mech announcing "Backup Power Depleted." Why does the mech make a verbal announcement for something typically used in vacuum? Ah fuck it. Now the audience knows. A locked door remains between Clarissa and vengeance. She tries to threaten Anna, Anna tries to reason with her. Then Clarissa activates her mods and starts to punch through the metal fucking door. This is dope. But the boost only lasts a few seconds, not long enough for Clarissa to make it all the way through. Once again we see the drawback of Clarissa's mods; she gets a few seconds of superhuman power and then she's knocked out for about 5 minutes. Anna's the last one standing on a ship of unconscious people. With Holden in Martian custody and Clarissa in Anna's custody, Bull is our logical narrator to check back with. On the Behemoth, work continues to get The Drum ready to literally roll. Bull is getting philosophical in his medical bed approaching something of a mental breakthrough to something Anna already figured out, that in their hour of need people want community, congregation, to just be together. The Behemoth is the roof big enough to shelter all of them. To that end, Monica Stuart is now also broadcasting Radio Free Slow Zone to propagandize the efforts at keeping everyone alive. Staying busy and staying alive is really all they can do right now. Again we have some foreshadowing and tending the garden GRRM style as Monica interviews the mega-preacher Hector Cortez. Bull notes his dead eyes and doesn't think more about it but we in the audience have now been informed. Serge and Sam call with updates. Holden's capture by the Martians is now public knowledge. Ashford has found out about Bull's proposal to spin the drum and the work done so far and is throwing a fit. It's telling that work started on this plan without Ashford being included up to this point. Bull decides to call the Rocinante which has been silent since the speed limit change, just after Naomi decided to hand over the documentary crew. He gets Anna. A very polite woman who says "Hello, can you help us? The crew is unconscious and I think I have the person who blew up the Seung Un taped to a chair." After what I'm sure was a delightful call offscreen, Bull calls the Martian commander. Mars is holding firm. They're not turning over Holden but they are sending some people to the Behemoth. Ashford is waiting to talk to Bull, again, curious that he's waiting on the 3rd in Command rather than handling it himself. Recall a few Bull chapters ago which highlighted that Michio Pa was doing the heavy lifting while Ashford was focusing on the trivia of disaster response. Captain Ashford walks into the sick bay. Bull thinks he looks angry and on the brink of rage. Bull recalls he's seen Ashford angry at looking scared or embarrassed but not like this. He thinks about grief and broken men, and I mean that in the Septon Meribald sense. Pa and Serge follow him. Ashford starts going through a list of the shit happening on the ship. Preparations to spin the drum and humanitarian outreach. Everything Ashford wants to confirm is happening, Bull and Pa have already agreed to do but privately. Bull decides not to mention this and to Ashford it seems like this is all the work of his chief of security, not his Executive Officer. Ashford swings the axe. He declares that Carlos Baca has exceeded his authority, all his orders will be revoked, and Bull is to be put into a medical coma. "Like fuck you are." Bull responds. Now the fight is on (again). At every moment, every interaction, Bull has thought "Make it work" as his mantra. Fred's orders to him before leaving Tycho Station on the Behemoth. And at this moment, we have gone over the high side. "Make it work" now means Bull needs to go through Ashford instead of around him. Bull tells Ashford that he and Pa have their jobs because they're political appointees and they need to follow now. Bull and Ashford start shouting at each other, the paragraphs alternating clips of their dialogue as the testosterone spills onto the deck. This ends with Ashford attacking Bull and being pulled off as a doctor, with the infinite calm and desert wit of a battlefield surgeon, asks if everyone can please not assault the patient with the crushed spinal cord because it makes the doctor uncomfortable. Finally we come to the nut cutting moment. Ashford orders the doctor to put Bull into a medical coma. Bull orders Serge to take Ashford into custody so Pa can take over. There's a beat. No one moves. Then Pa splits the tie. She tells Serge to do what Bull said. It's mutiny. Or chain of command, depending on where you stand. Security hauls Ashford away. Pa is left with Bull, confirming now that Ashford is drinking too much and not thinking straight. Bull flies a kite if the man should Have An Accident but Pa smiles and says she's not that far gone. She mourns her career in the OPA. Bull asks her if she came out here to do the right thing or win medals. Michio Pa, now acting captain and future Book 5 & 6 POV character, says she wanted to do both. Bull replies that there's nothing wrong with optimism so long as it doesn't set policy. After the grief they get back to business. The last page of this chapter is really more for the audience going over the stakes. The goal is to get everyone in the slow zone on the behemoth for their safety and so no one pisses off the space station any more. All weapons will be confiscated, only OPA people armed. Bull tells her she did the right thing. Pa frames it in different terms, that she backed his play. She doesn't think they're friends but they want to be allies. The young politician someone in the OPA put forward as XO and the old pragmatic soldier Fred Johnson picked so there would be a grownup. Chapter 30 gets us back to Holden. He's being hauled back by Mars being treated "professionally but not gently." Like Ren under Clarissa's bed or dead bodies floating around the Thomas Prince, he's stuck to someone's back in foam restraints. Holden runs out of air but "only for a few minutes" in the words of the marine carrying him. It's unclear how long it takes but eventually he's brought before the captain, the same one Bull speaks to. It's also unclear if this conversation takes place before or after Bull speaks to the captain. Holden, being Holden, spills everything. Projections of Miller and apparently Julie Mao drove Holden through the ring to the space station. Touching the magic column and seeing that the station has the power to destroy stars. The insect like robot that killed a marine who threw a grenade and taught the station that slow things are threats too. The captain accepts this in stony silence and sends Holden back to his cell. Once alone in a cell, Miller shows up. The projection immediately gets back to the discussion they were cut off from in the last chapter. Miller tells Holden what they need to do: Shut down the reactors on all the ships. If they can do that and the power generated by the ships goes below a certain threshold, Miller can get the security under control enough to disable it if that's what Holden wants. Holden has a few concerns. Firstly, he realizes that the cell he's in isn't actually large enough for two people to stand in and that drives him a little crazy. Secondly, what did the Miller projection mean by if? The Miller projection is offering a kind of Red Pill or Blue Pill. If Miller keeps the security in place, maybe some of the people in the Slow Zone will live the months it'll take to escape. Everyone can go home. Humanity can remain on placid islands of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity and tell themselves it was not meant that we should voyage far. But. When Miller lifted the security enough to let Holden into the space station, he also had to let the Martian Marines in that chased and captured Holden. Unlocked is unlocked as the Projection says. The slow zone will operate the same way. If Miller lifts the speed limit he also opens the gates, all of them, all at once, forever. And while Miller wants to know what happened, the projection states the biggest risk. Each gate goes to a solar system with a star. The Gate Builders are dead. They weren't waiting on the other side of the ring to greet humanity. But whoever killed them could still be out there. What if some other species has a 2 billion year evolutionary and technological headstart on Humanity and is waiting for a gate to open. On re-read, I'd forgotten that this was presented as a real choice. The TV show kind of presented it as a fait accompli that of course the gates are going to open. While Holden's adventure is a little ambiguous how long or when relative to the last few chapters, Clarissa's next chapter grounds us. She's on the Behemoth. The ship doesn't have a jail, the Mormons figured they'd talk out any problems. So instead she's been put into a wide animal stall, a veterinarian wing for large livestock aboard. Ashford is also in the improvised brig, jabbering, laughing, and bouncing off the walls. Clarissa is suicidal, floating in her cell, when the literal gravity of the situation dawns on her. The drum goes into effect creating gravity. Among so much science fiction, one thing that sets the Expanse apart from other work is that it doesn't compromise on the rules of gravity. Even harder science fiction like Sunshine or Silent Running include artificial gravity. The Expanse really tries to stick to physics for The Rules of gravity both what happens without it and how we might generate it. In the background, Clarissa doesn't pay attention to people meeting privately with Ashford promising their loyalty. Instead, she focuses on herself. Her breathing, the feeling of her body and bones as gravity returns. She gets her own visitor, a security officer with Bull on a hand terminal. Bull tries to interrogate Clarissa. Her name with the UN is Melba Koh but a bunch of people including the Rocinante and some Russian priest say she's Clarissa Mao and she's a terrorist. Clarissa thinks about singing with her family and doesn't respond. Bull also provides some context for the audience about the biological mods and extra glands Clarissa has. We've seen their effect and drawback. Bull, a UN Marine who then worked with Fred Johnson in the OPA aka Space Hezbollah calls them a "Modified Endocrine Bundle." He frames the mods as something "terrorists use when they need to do something showy and hard to detect." He also says the mods "turn your nervous system to soup in a few years." Clarissa says nothing. This reminds me of Bull wanting to talk about the ship while his doctors talk about his spine. Bull tells Clarissa and the audience that cooperating with him now is the only way he can keep her from catching a UN bullet. Clarissa continues thinking to herself. Bull says he thinks she's an amateur who made amateur mistakes. Clarissa says nothing. Bull says fuck it they'll try something else. Across the hall, Ashford calls out to Clarissa. He tries to recruit her to retake the ship. Clarissa says nothing to that either. She keeps thinking about her father and if only she had killed everyone and gotten away with it he could be proud. Then Tilly Fagan shows up. She touches Claire softly and tells her they found Ren. This breaks Claire. It was building the whole chapter and now the dam gives way. She screams and cries and laughs and breaks while her Aunt Tilly just holds her and strokes her hair. And when she finally stops Tilly asks her questions. But they're confirmations not questions. Clarissa put a bomb on the Seung Un. Clarissa responds like a small child, "He hurt Daddy." Tilly responds to this, "Your father is a first class shit." I think it's this chapter more than anything else you finally get a sense of the number Jules-Pierre Mao did on his daughters. The security guards behind her need to go confirm the confession to Bull and the captains presumably waiting on answers. Tilly refuses to leave Claire alone even though she's a dangerous terrorist who can kill people with her bare hands. Not gonna lie, this section makes me tear up. This whole reunion between Tilly and Clarissa where she just needs to let all of her pain out in wracking sobs is just really emotional stuff. It ends just as perfectly. Clarissa tells Tilly that she's a bad person and she deserves to die. This next line is just perfect, "Tilly didn't disagree, but she didn't stop cradling her either." Finally, Tilly says "There's someone I'd like you to talk to." We know who this is. It takes a couple days to get Clarissa, Amos, Alex, Naomi, and finally Anna off the Rocinante. When she gets to the Behemoth, Mega-Preacher Hector Cortez is waiting for her. The celebrity pastor seems to have aged a decade according to Anna the Empath. She says he seems like a different man than the one who called the three great factions of humanity to go through the Ring. Father Hank speaks of the influence of the devil in the slow zone. That the faith leaders gave bad advice and have committed the sin of pride. Anna doesn't see it that way. She makes the case that they didn't come here for glory, they came to give people community and to hold people together in a time of great stress. She also doesn't see "space station alien technology" as evil. I think Anna's correct in talking about her own motives and actions for coming out here and if Cortez thinks he was wrong well that should probably be between him and his God. But Cortez's talk of hubris and the devil are once again gardening, tending to a growing seed, like occasional mentions of Euron Greyjoy in ASOI&F before he actually shows up on page. As a new resident to the Behemoth, Anna is swept up by the grandeur of the place. She walks across the steel plains that would've held soil and crops and reflects on the similarities and differences between her own Methodist faith and the Church of Latter-day Saints. She wanders through the tents now taking route and finds Chris, the young Methodist who sought her out and attended services on the Thomas Prince. He's lost a leg and an arm in the slow zone catastrophe but aside from more profanity he's upbeat. I like the back and forth he and Anna have, optimism compared to the pessimism she shared with Hector Cortez. This is heartwarming. Something about the conversation makes Anna think, if the defenses in the slow zone could've just as easily killed them as declawed them, maybe there's value in learning more and evil is the wrong word for them. The intent matters. And with that, Tilly finds Anna. She hugs her, gushes over the Behemoth being "the place to be" like it's a new restaurant, and finally asks her to help Clarissa. She thinks no and says of course. Bull's situation has also changed in the medical bay. With the addition of gravity, now his doctors want him upright to prevent pneumonia. It won't be good for his spine but as the doctors say, he can live without legs, he can't live without lungs. With each chapter we see that Bull is dying by inches but there's nothing to be done with it. Both he and his doctors are hurting themselves trying to keep more people alive. He talks to the Martians. They have Holden but they're in a bad place. Hector Cortez comes to see him, Bull refuses. I wonder what that was about, obviously not foreshadowing. Sam comes by. While the Chief Engineer doesn't have time for hospital visits she still makes time to give Bull a present, a set of mechanical legs. Again, this shit is heartwarming. Bull visits people and there's a kind of heavy handed passage that Bull can't tell who's Earth, Mars, or OPA in the medical bay. Bull's newfound mobility also allows him to be a camera on Sam finding Naomi and the Rocinante Crew. One brief aside, I love that Bull can't tell if Alex is from Mars or West Texas (Bull himself is from New Mexico). Bull pivots from this to wondering what to do about the Martians. They are holding on to the bitter end and won't relent. At some point a stressed out Mars soldier is going to kill Holden or the UN is going to attack with hand to hand weapons. Something needs to happen. Recall that the speed of light isn't affected by the Slow Zone. Bull asks Sam what it would take to turn the ship's powerful communications laser into a weapon. If the Behemoth has the only working gun in the slow zone maybe it'll make the surrender taste sweeter. Sam is…reluctant. She doesn't want to know what the Space Station will do if they make light into a weapon. Bull asks if she would do it if Captain Pa asked. Sam is upset by this, saying it's not because Pa is a belter, it's because she's the captain and Sam trusts her. On re-read this moment jumps out when you know that Sam and Michio are in a relationship. To Sam's credit, the last time Bull got Sam to work on weapons, Pa arrested Sam. So Bull makes it work and asks Pa. Up until this point, Clarissa's chapters have been titled "Melba", her cover name. Chapter 34 however is titled "Clarissa." Anna comes to Clarissa's cell. The guards refuse at first however Anna insists they have privacy even at risk to her own safety. The guard listens to Ashford when he speaks. And so Anna and Clarissa sit on the floor of an unused meat locker. They chat. Anna talks to this murderer, offers her counsel, and ultimately feels empathy for her. Anna asks Clarissa what she wants to say. Clarissa confesses. The emotion of the Tilly scene is gone. But it comes back when Anna asks Clarissa if she wants redemption. Clarissa says she doesn't believe in God. Anna offers again. Does Clarissa want forgiveness? Clarissa gets hostile at this point. In a just world in her mind there can't be forgiveness for her. I'm picturing a Mean Girls style meme here of Anna saying, "so you agree there is forgiveness because this isn't a just world?" Anna goes to speak with Bull and the POV switches to her. She sees an artist speaking with Monica Stuart on the Radio Free Slow Zone broadcast. She thinks back to something Chris the young Methodist asked her, about mixed church services. She thought he meant interfaith but he meant Earthers, Martians, and Belters. Anna is a little baffled at believing God cares about the gravity one grew up

open. No one else is poised on the other side of them. There are no invading armies or satellites that have been waiting for the two billion years the gates have been closed. There are no Vulcans or other species waiting on the other side of the gates going “holy shit we didn’t know these things still worked!” The grandeur of it sweeps Holden away for a paragraph. The Nauvoo was built to spend centuries taking humanity to another solar system. Now these alien gates will take humanity to hundreds and hundreds of solar systems. Holden has no reason to expect empty habitable worlds at this time but yeah we’re taking that as a given for the moment. A new golden age for humanity. There’s some mild Lovecraftian weirdness though. The simulation is of another world and on it, Holden sees a frog with a mouth full of sharp teeth. The ground seems to bleed a honey-like substance when Holden scuffs it with his foot. The Protomolecule Ghost also gives Holden a warning in its particular Miller like presentation, that there are dangers for humanity to blunder into. Dangers we will uncover in the series going forward. The Miller Projection Ghost created by the 2 Billion Year Old Technology calls Ashford a cocksucker which I think is the first and only gay bash in an otherwise extremely progressive series despite a dearth of Trans and Non-Binary characters. The vision ends with Miller continuing to talk. He’s not really giving a warning or exposition but his words carry both. The Protomolecule Miller Ghost is best understood to the characters in universe as a program designed to investigate. The program can’t stop running just because it has enough intelligence to realize no one is around to hear the results. The Miller Program’s first job was to get the gates open. Now it’s back to that investigation. Miller needs to stay in the story a bit longer. There was a war. The Magratheans lost in spite of all their power. Where the fuck are the winners? Then Holden snaps back to reality although still in the zero gravity of the bridge. The shooting has stopped. Ashford’s condition is ambiguous for the moment. Cortez is putting a bandage on Clarissa’s gunshot wound. Holden wants to get on his ship and, in the words of James T. Kirk, get the hell out of here. There’s a Gollum moment where Holden reflects that he’s glad they didn’t kill Clarissa now that she just saved all humanity. Chapter 53 is from Clarissa’s point of view. She’s waking up in fits and starts in a medical bed. Anna is trying to persuade Holden of something. We get the situation pretty fast. The slow zone is being evacuated. Anna wants Clarissa Mao on the Rocinante because they’re the only independent ship. They’re the only ship that’ll get her to the trial she deserves even though yeah she’s definitely guilty. I’m reminded of the You’re Wrong About podcast discussing the trial of the DC Snipers, making the argument that yeah, they were definitely guilty, but their trials were just facetious. We make an exception for the civil rights of the clearly guilty. Again, Anna is offering the consistent Lawful Good argument. The Rocinante crew is not too impressed, stressing the logistics and legality of hauling a dangerous prisoner wanted by Earth and the OPA on a ship wanted by Mars. Anna has a card to play though and immediately calls in her favor with Tilly Fagan. Anna wants Tilly to buy the Rocinante from Mars so they can clear up all their legal problems. Holden and Clarissa shake hands. While the captains, including the disappeared during the fighting Michio Pa, eulogize the dead, the Rocinante quietly slips away. Clarissa has a gadget designed to sedate her if she uses her combat glands. Ashford is mentioned as being locked away and sedated, never to be mentioned in the series again. Clarissa goes through a mixture of emotions and story housekeeping with each member of the crew. Clarissa and Alex watch the now briefly unified OPA, Earth, and Mars all together making their statements for the public. We get a throwaway line that The Martian contingent of the fleet is going to be running the surveys through all the gates. Alex, with his piloting bird’s eye view looks over the unity and comments that this is now. After this comes the greed of dividing up the 1300 worlds worth of spoils aka The Expanse Book 4: Cibola Burn. Clarissa overhears Holden getting a message from Fred Johnson wanting to work together more. The Behemoth is staying in the slow zone. This gives Fred Johnson and the OPA the first and for now only gas station in the universe’s most important choke point. Clarissa and Naomi listen to Holden’s grim voice pronouncing that the Rocinante is out of coffee. This leads into a discussion of which foods produce the worst farts. Naomi looks aside and comments that she appreciates having another woman on the ship. Clarissa weeps at being included on a joke. We end Abaddon’s Gate with Clarissa and Amos. As the ship’s mechanic, his position is the closest to the one she had undercover on the journey out to the Ring. To Amos’s character, yes, a day or two ago he would kill Clarissa with zero remorse. Then Anna told him to forgive her and he did. Immediately and completely. But more than anything, working with Amos gives Clarissa the chance to put back together the Rocinante after she broke it. She has five weeks until they get back to Earth. And finally her last words, “Feels good to fix something.” Our epilogue goes to Anna. She’s on a UN ship headed back to Earth recording a message for her wife. She thinks about the grief yet to come for those who lost family members in the Slow Zone. She thinks about her daughter living in one of these new solar systems instead of the overcrowded Earth. Mega-Preacher Hector Cortez finds her after the message goes out. He tells her and the readers that the UN Secretary General lost re-election and a candidate of Chrisjen Avasarala’s choosing won. The book ends with Cortez and Anna looking out at the stars. Cortez is afraid. In his faith God promised humans the Earth, not the stars. Anna believes in a God that’s bigger than this and she wants that universe for her daughter. Cortez’s words echo Miller’s from earlier. This is an opportunity but also a potential danger. Which is a perfect setup for where the 4th book goes. The first two books are very similar. They’re space opera, they’re science-punk, they’re a scrappy crew and their cool ship swept up into a grand story of aliens, governments, terrorists, and mega-corps. I love how the Expanse advances its myth arc so well and completely with each book. The protomolecule and Eros gives way to Venus and the hybrids which give way to The Ring and the Slow Zone. Abaddon’s Gate changes things up with something almost like a halfway plot switch. Humanity comes to the Ring, expecting and dreading that they’ll bear witness to first contact and then they get trapped in this dangerous place. All three books have had the same sort of threat. Humans do something they shouldn’t have and the alien technology turns their intentions to something dangerous. Protogen killed Eros to study it, knowing that the protomolecule used a biomass to do…something. Then Eros became a weapon aimed at Earth until Miller talked it into changing course. Mao-Kwik tried to make human alien weapons, but they were too smart to control and would’ve killed billions on Mars. Until Fred Johnson used the missiles he captured from Earth stop them and earn the OPA a seat at the political table. Abaddon’s Gate lacks a sort of knowable goal but one grenade has the effect of causing an Alien security system to kill hundreds. Again it’s a pattern of human curiosity and violence getting us into trouble, our love and our empathy, our willingness to listen, to extend one another some goddamn grace getting us out of trouble. This time it comes from Clarissa’s timely blowing of the ship’s fuses to turn off the power. This book is a bit harder to get through than the last two. Miller and Avasarala were both pithy narrators that really elevated everything around them. This one also suffers a bit from the drama and challenge in the back half coming mostly from Ashford’s mental breakdown which is just less compelling than evil mega-corps and corrupt naval officers. And I was sad to see Sam go; I didn’t much care for that. I think these books do all suffer a bit from some obvious thumb on the scales in terms of “this villain’s plan was never going to work and should never have gotten as far as it did.” Starting interstellar wars to get away with some shit is about as plausible as “Mentally unstable captain orders death laser constructed.” I do think Abaddon’s Gate matches Caliban’s War in terms of a cliffhanger ending. Caliban ends with the gigantic ship taking off from Venus and then the stinger of Miller’s ghost returning. It’s a one-two punch that shocks you. The ending here is a bit more understated, a bit more on the cosmic horror than the sickening drop of Book 2. 1373 gates are open and we have no clue what’s on the other side of them other than knowing that someone who killed the gate builders is lurking around somewhere. It brings to mind Hitchcock’s definition of suspense, the bomb under the table. Clarissa planted a bomb on the Seung Un, we were waiting on it to go off, we knew all the details. We end this book with 1373 tables and no clue where the bombs are but Cortez and to a greater extent Miller assure us that there’s at least one out there. Future Book Spoiler Odds and Ends. ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING. Clarissa acquires her fake IDs in Baltimore and we are also told that Amos is from Baltimore. There is no details here that boxes the authors into a particular detail for Amos’s backstory but I think this was gardening for the character of Erich. Erich is introduced in the main series in Book 5, but his first published appearance is in the Amos backstory novella The Churn, which was published before Book 4. Erich’s deal is that he’s a master programmer and fake IDs are his thing. Never confirmed but highly likely that Clarissa’s IDs were created by Erich. Just as an aside, it’s kinda funny to think that this book is the last time the Nauvoo moves in the series. It begins as the Nauvoo, then it’s renamed The Behemoth here, and going forward it will be known as Medina Station. Speaking of gardening for future books, one thing that is definitely not gardened for future books here is the traffic limit on The Gates. We find out at the end of book 5, and this becomes really really fucking important, that there is limit to how many ships can safely pass through the Gates at a time. I’ll save the analysis for those future books but that limit is just not a thing in this book and I wonder if it was not contemplated yet or just, “we can’t let that variable affect the drama right now.” One thought that follows the previous one. Given how the traffic limit on the gates is eventually used deliberately, it’s kind of funny they don’t try to pull the same trick with the Tempest in Persepolis Rising. But if they did that there’s no book 7, 8, or 9. Getting back to thoughts specific to Abaddon’s Gate, when Anna first meets the whole Rocinante crew and asks them to forgive Clarissa, Naomi is the first one to agree. I wonder if the Authors backstory for Naomi is confirmed in their heads at this point. Specifically that Naomi, like Clarissa, participated in blowing up a ship. I mentioned in the essay how it’s a good character moment to show how Amos goes from wanting to kill Clarissa to complete forgiveness instantly. Again I wonder if the authors had the full arc of that relationship in mind yet, where after the 30 year time skip Amos and Clarissa have the closest relationship of any two people on the crew outside of Holden and Naomi. It is a little awe-inspiring on reread to go back to the little blue space station in the slow zone and remember that this is where it all ends up. I assure you on re-read I now comb those sections for scraps and hints the same way one might The House of the Undying chapter. In Chapter 40, Sam calls Naomi by the nickname, “Knuckles.” Holden wonders when and why that started. I don’t think we ever get a why but in Book 5 when Naomi meets back up with fellow violent extremists from the OPA, they also call her Knuckles. The implication is that Sam knows this secret about Naomi’s past but with her death in this book we never get more info than that. Speaking of our precious fridged Chief Engineer, there is a continuity error, Sam is referred to both as Samantha and as Samara. It doesn’t matter. One plot thing that Sam’s death does allow for is later on in Book 5, there is a new Chief Engineer, Sakai. With our precious Sam out of the way it provides the option for Sakai to turn heel and betray Fred Johnson, an option Sam would’ve never taken. The last thing to mention is the officially seriously last final published work in the Expanse series, post Leviathan Falls, the novella Sins of Our Fathers. We meet back up with Anna’s daughter Namono. She refers to her deceased mother as St. Anna. You get a sense of some bitterness there when she says it was hard to live up to the example of someone so moral, someone who tended to know what the right thing to do was and how to do it. Abaddon’s Gate ends with Anna hoping that her daughter might one day live among the stars and chart her own destiny. Namono gets that opportunity but we never find out if it works out for her. She’s on a planet at the end of everything when the Gates shutdown. We have no idea if the people there manage to survive. Anna gets her prayer answered but the ending is more bitter than sweet since we just don’t know. It’s a Watchmen ending, nothing ever ends.