

THE FALLEN STAR REVIEW by Florian / @germanjedi

The High Republic: The Fallen Star by Claudia Gray promises many endings and new beginnings for us as readers - and consequently, expectations were high. It is set to conclude the first phase of the project while also being the first title of the third wave of books. Those who have followed the marketing will also have come to expect the impending loss of Starlight Beacon as well as the end to several fan-favourite characters.

The novel does have many of the right ingredients - especially thanks to the thorough work done by Charles Soule in *Light of the Jedi* and Cavan Scott in *The Rising Storm*. While Bell Zettifar and Elzar Mann are struggling to recover from their personal losses, another fan favourite, Stellan Gios, has to take command of Starlight Beacon in the absence of Avar Kriss. In taking her mantle, the responsibility starts to wear him down, and he is not exactly on good terms with Avar either. At the same time, the devious Marchion Ro has deluded the Jedi into thinking the Nihil had been defeated and that the fugitive Louna Dee had been their leader, thereby staying off the Republic's radar once more. He uses this anonymity in order to get sleeper agents aboard Starlight, who immediately get to work sabotaging the station in order to bring about its end. And no, that's not a spoiler - from the cover to the first chapters, the book is never coy with the ultimate fate that will befall the station. This list of ingredients is completed by the addition of further fan favourites from Gray's *Into the Dark* as well as a pervasive feeling of doom and just a pinch of cosmic horror.

But if the ingredients are right, why is the finished meal not to my taste?

At the beginning, *The Fallen Star* still looks promising. Gray positions certain characters like the seasoned author she is and also discovers new character constellations that work perfectly, like teaming up Orla and Elzar. Marchion's sinister plans captivate the reader, too, as Thrawn has proven the value of a competent antagonist. Furthermore, the writer has elegantly captured the feeling of dread aboard the Starlight Beacon and how the Jedi feel when they're losing the connection to the Force. And then there is the reunion with the Vessel crew, most prominently the man, the myth, the legend himself: Geode. I wouldn't have been too mad if this book had turned into another road trip with that crew and its Jedi passengers, but alas, that trip soon ends at Starlight Beacon, too, where other Jedi are currently busy imprisoning some Nihil captives that YA readers might know.

However, this was also the point where the book started to lose me. While Gray has characterised Elzar and Stellan perfectly, she soon delivers a round of characterisations that made me feel disrespected as a reader. First of is Ghirra Starros, who has hitherto been presented as an intelligent, cunning politician, but whose motivation for her part in this book feels very forced and unworthy of her character. It does not end there, though. There is a whole series of Jedi who starts to make pretty dumb decisions that only serve to further the book's plot. I would have ascribed some of those decisions to the disturbed Force presence, but when one generally intelligent character after the other makes the same stupid decision with the same outcome, it starts to feel uncreative. Here, Gray repeats some of the mistakes of her mediocre High Republic debut *Into the Dark*, which also featured characters stuck on a creepy space station setting out on their own and finding horror. It feels as if Gray was trying to generate shock value by rapidly burning through some characters, but forgets that

Star Wars is not Game of Thrones and that such fates always have to serve the development of other characters within a story, and should not be an end in themselves.

Additionally, the small scale of the book does not do it any favours. After just a handful of chapters, all characters are trapped aboard the crashing Starlight Beacon, and soon enough a spatial separation takes half of the protagonists off the table, likely leaving them to Cavan Scott's Marvel series to deal with. This separation of media is hardly Claudia Gray's fault, but due to the absolute focus on the events aboard the Starlight we do not get the perspective of the wider galaxy, which had been present in both preceding novels. Aside from the trapped Jedi aboard the Beacon we only have a voyeuristic, but otherwise passive group of villains aboard the Gaze Electric. The short, cryptic paragraphs offering glimpses at what Avar Kriss might or might not be doing at the moment feel more frustrating than anything.

In the long run, this book lacks tension, since the station's fate is predetermined and inevitable, while the characters aboard make no noteworthy discoveries or significant developments. Traumatizing traumatised characters all over again does not resolve their trauma, nor does it advance their journey, and ultimately you spend much of the book waiting to see if the current point-of-view character's wiki listing would have to list a death date in the future. Since most of the Jedi are either busy with themselves or are trying to evacuate the station, the plot feels very diffuse. While there are antagonistic characters aboard the Starlight, they often just appear on the margins of the events and most Jedi are not even aware of their presence. It takes a cargo hold full of Rathtars to briefly focus the Jedi on a common goal, but alas, that episode also ends quickly.

Maybe it is just me, but I feel that the story in *The Fallen Star* is extremely shallow. The finale of the first phase does not reveal anything new about Marchion Ro, the Great Leveler, the past of certain Jedi or literally any other aspect of the galaxy in the High Republic. *The Fallen Star* is basically a "slow burn" (pun intended) without a satisfying resolution, even though on a plot level, I "agree" with everything that happens. Ultimately, the execution and presentation of those plot points falls short.

Instead of being a worthy sequel to *The Rising Storm*, *The Fallen Star*'s simple structure, its galactic blind spots and the lack of surprising twists make it feel like a pale epilogue of its predecessor. While some criticisms can be traced to the story architecture of the third wave, Gray definitely also hasn't used the ingredients available to her to the fullest effect. As far as positive takeaways go, there is the characterisation of Stellan Gios, whose chapters always had me hooked and that did not disappoint me throughout the book. Sadly, not even he can save the meal Gray has cooked up, and thus *The Fallen Star* ends up feeling very mediocre.

The Fallen Star is not a bad book, but also no masterpiece, and at this point in the story development of the High Republic, that can only be seen as a jarring disappointment. Who is the titular fallen star? For me right now, it might just be the author herself, but I'm hoping for her rehabilitation in Phase II.