

DESSERT IN AN *Alternate Universe*



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Dessert in an Alternate Universe is a coda to *Coffeeshop in an Alternate Universe* and contains major spoilers to the novel.



“So explain why we need this wiffy thing again?”

“Wi-Fi.” Brenda grins at me, her amusement sparkling in her eyes. “Only the most important thing for any small business owner to have. You definitely need your own connection at the shop. Oooh, and a cute name and password!”

I watch her light up as she talks, her hands fluttering as she talks about modems and routers and connections and why it’s important for the name and password to have some sort of theme. I’m processing about every other sentence, because it’s summer and I don’t technically have anywhere to be, not even the coffeeshop. There’s no school. There’s no *prophecy*. No danger, and only a few glorious weeks of absolutely *nothing* before Brenda and I go on our interdimensional-cross-country backpacking trip.

I’m beyond excited. I haven’t felt this relaxed in years. I can’t wait to hit the road with Brenda, see everything our worlds have to offer, eat food in weird places and see random giant things and do

all the touristy things and do all the small-town things and do, well, everything. To go where the wind takes us. To point a finger on a map and make spontaneous decisions.

To kiss Brenda in every state.

I lean forward to kiss her now, and her sentence gets lost with a pleased gasp of surprise. Her lips soften against mine, sweet and warm. Perfect. We can forget about trying to update my dad's coffeeshop with the wiffy thing for now and just enjoy each other's company.

Too soon, Brenda pulls back. She bops me on the nose with her little journal thing, and has the audacity to laugh at me.

I love it.

I take the journal and adopt a no-nonsense Brenda tone as I read yet another, one of her lists aloud.

HOW TO MAKE SAMMY'S MORE INTERDIMENSIONALLY FRIENDLY (AND DOUBLE YOUR PROFIT!)

1. Add electric plugs at more tables to make a cozy working space
 - A. Grounded outlets? Check with electrician
 - B. Ideal 110/120 volts and 15 amps for phones, laptops etc

C. Alternatively research spells to use mana to charge powerbanks for electric devices?

1. Figure out the logistics of getting Wi-Fi (see page 32)
2. Install Wi-Fi

I flip forward a few pages past some doodles and this week's schedule — "Bren, we're on *vacation*, why is there a schedule for this week?"

"I love schedules. Plus, it helps me keep track of what we might want to do and what is available. And you really enjoyed that queer farmer's market I found!"

True. And laying in the grass afterwards with Brenda handing me fresh peaches to eat wasn't bad either.

Page thirty-two —and again I'm marveling that Brenda hand-writes the page numbers in her journal ("So I can find relevant pages easily to reference") — is an untidy scrawl of words in balloons, arrows, and scratch outs. Everything from "Pay Mr. Freezy's more to have them install an extender" and "where exactly is the connection thinner here without a portal" and "can we open up a very small portal not for people but for Wi-Fi" and "would we have to get permission for that" and "maybe we should just do it" and "what

about installing an anchored portal between Sammy's and another coffeeshop with Wi-Fi" and "Open another Sammy's on the other side?"

And it goes on. There's a few more pages of musing on how to create a tutorial for other businesses and homes that want to install Wi-Fi, and then possibly what looks like an entire research project to see how the signal interferes with mana and active spells.

I put the journal down, my state of relaxation startling to dwindle away. "Brenda, this is starting to look more and more like work."

"But I thought you said your dad wanted to help figure out this stuff!" She pouts, which is unfair, because she knows I cannot resist the pouting. I try anyway.

"Yes. My dad." I gesture at the counter, where Dad is taking what seems to be a very long order from a wide-eyed middle aged lady who is avidly watching Jordan levitate a sack of coffee beans to the machines. He chats with the customer as he stacks baos into a box and rings her up. "Who owns the shop. Who gave me the entire summer off, to hang out with you and do *fun stuff*."

Brenda's eyes gleam. "I thought you said programming spells was fun. And isn't it a cool challenge? How do we make Wi-Fi signals and mana compatible? And why can we get the Mr. Freezy's signal in

my world over here? Is it because you are technically neighbors, or because there was a portal here once? Are there lingering connections between former portals? The question of the century, now that our universes are aligned. As people travel regularly, we're going to want the amenities of each world! The person who figures this out will be celebrated *forever*."

The idea of creating a revolutionary spell is tempting, in a I-want-to-do-something-challenging way. But that's not the vibe right now. I'm not in the mood to think. I want to kiss my girlfriend and lazily sort-of-plan (mostly daydream) where we're going to first on our trip.

Brenda sighs. "Okay, how else can I show you *Halfway Hollow*? You really loved season one. I can't wait to show you the twist in—"

"We were watching it just fine on your laptop!" I gesture at Brenda's open screen, and at the arched symbol. "And we have the wiffy from Mr. Freezy's."

"And so does everyone else here. And so does everyone at Mr. Freezy's, and Barb has not been happy with the strain on her bandwidth."

As soon as we figured out that the signal strength of the dessert shop next to the coffeeshop in Brenda's world is accessible from my

dad's coffeeshop, and Dad ingeniously added a sign with the name and password — our business has tripled. Dad even installed a whole otherspace and anchored it to expand the cafe seating area.

Barb, for all her complaining about the slowness of the signal — really loves Dad's dan tat's. We've given her a box a week so far, and I think it's a good system.

"Yeah, but Mr. Freezy's is not really a hangout spot the way Sammy's is," I say. "People get their ice cream and dessert, enjoy their dates or treat and then skedaddle on home. No one is writing a novel there, no one is studying, no one is really using that wiffy."

"Wi-Fi."

"Wiffy."

"Wi-Fi," Brenda says, eyebrows furrowed, her cheeks getting a little bit pink. She's about to launch into a whole explanation about the history of the wiffy or whatever, and I'm here for it.

I lean back and grin. This is summer. This is what it's all about.

BREND A



A Nguyễn family classic each summer is the big party we throw for Ông Ngoại's birthday. It's all in, we have relatives driving in from Orange County, Má and my aunties start cooking at least three days in advance, there's lots of last minute running to the grocery store for more ingredients, and driving back and forth with trays of hot steaming chả giò from Auntie Lydia's garage and doing anything and everything that is required to make this party spectacular. It's always chaos and I love it so, so much.

I keep checking my phone to see if Barb from Mr. Freezy's has finalized the preparations. It took awhile to convince Kat to actually work on the spell, but once we got started and her hyperfocus locked in she was really into it. It helped that I teased that we couldn't download season two of *Halfway*

Hollow because I didn't have the new remastered version, and the special effects were way better.

A week later, we're just about ready. We just needed Barb to finish clearing the space we needed at Mr. Freezy's.

Ana settles on my shoulder, nuzzling into my neck. I scratch her little head, but I know the attention will be fleeting as soon as Má brings out the food.

My cousins are animatedly talking to Kat about fashion in her world, and even Stacey is pretending not to care but oh she cares so much about fashion, it's funny. The latest trend of wearing clothes from the other world has really taken off, and Stacey's TikTok apparently has blown up with her unique cross-cultural takes. Stacey has gotten into DIYing a lot, and it's been cute to see her find her passion. And annoying. I've found several of my clothes cut up and remade without asking, but Stacey claimed I'd given those to her, and that shirt was hers all along, but she did give that one top back to me. Now it's got a cute little re-tied flair that I have to admit, is very cute.

"And since travel is so restricted, and there's a limit on carry-ons and of course our stupid government has just

decided to start this customs thing! So it's so hard to get the clothes I want to alter and talk about," Stacey rambles.

"Oh, I have a bunch of stuff I don't wear anymore," Kat says. "I'll just bring them over next time. And customs won't bother me. I'm the Chosen One."

I snort from the other side of the room, but I'm happy to see Kat joking about it. After everything we've been through, she deserves to make fun of herself.

Stacey's eyes go wide. "Really? I can just have them?"

Kat shrugs. "Of course. I'm not using them, and I have way too many clothes."

"Okay but even if I'm not wearing them and I want to like, fix them up a little or restructure and resell, that's okay?"

"That sounds amazing! Go for it." Kat laughs, a bright, happy sound that feels so right here, in my family home.

Stacy beams and pulls Kat in close for a hug, while Jimmy taps Kat on the elbow. "Okay, so about my Charizard..."

Kat catches my eye and winks at me. A soft, pleased happiness settles into me. She'd been nervous, at first— she's had dinner with my family a couple of times, but this is Ông Ngoại's birthday, the family event of the year, celebrating my

grandfather and *everyone* is here. The Nguyễns, the Trans, the Truongs, every almost immediate relative and family friend is in our house, having tea in Styrofoam cups, watching *Paris by Night* or helping Má in the kitchen. The backyard is filled with plastic chairs and card tables, and several card games have started while Ông Ngoại sits in the center of it all, content. He leans back on his plastic chair like it's a throne, laughing at something Uncle Kieu says as he sweeps pennies into his stash. He pushes a few coins over to Kat's dad, sitting next to him, and I watch him fluster and attempt to give them back, much to the group's laughter.

They start another round, flipping cards over and cursing with much aplomb, which is the only way to play Big Two, of course.

I think was worried the Woos were both really intimidated at first— my family is *huge*— but I think about how long it's been just the two of them, in that big lonely house, and it feels great. Not that they don't have their own extended family — I think everyone on Main Street pretty much considers Sammy family, he's such a big part of the community. And Jordan and their wife Rachel and their son

Tim are here too, and there's already a giant group game of Minecraft started in the living room with a bunch of cousins. Every time they are surprise attacked Tim wolfs out, much to everyone's delight.

Má sets down a huge platter of tenderly braised beef and pork on the kitchen table, where it joins the bowls of banana flowers, and platters heaped with fresh herbs— basil and bean sprouts, mint and jalapeños. There are freshly made meatballs, a plate of jiggly huyết, piles of crisp lettuce with droplets of water still clinging to them, and a huge tray of chả giò. Uncle Thu immediately rushes to the table and starts making himself a bowl, only to get swatted on the elbow by Auntie DeeDee.

"Guests first!" she says, handing an empty bowl to Kat. "Have you had bún bò huế? Here, I'll help you make a bowl, and the soup is in the kitchen..."

Ana jumps off my shoulder, tail twitching, as she delicately steps around the food and selects a meatball, daintily taking it in her mouth before finding a corner to enjoy it. I shake my head, watching her devour it and then wind around my mom's ankles. Má chuckles and plucks a tender piece of meat

right out of the pot and feeds it to her. Má, who always said no to pets when Stacey and I pleaded for one growing up, Má, who found all dogs and cats annoying, now is a pet-parent to an ancient dragon.

I get a text notification from Barb and get excited. Yes! My plan is totally going to work. We're all ready.

I grab my laptop and backpack from my room. I'd already packed it full of all the supplies we'll need. Some of them are a bit weird, like the huge intact pineapple, but I have never doubted Kat's spellcrafting skills. Technically the pineapple is my contribution, but I thought Kat would find it funny.



I find Kat in the backyard slurping down her bowl. She tilts the bowl to her mouth to catch the rest of her soup, eyes wide as her dad plops down his hand — a royal flush — with a triumphant grin.

Sam Woo grins, holding his single remaining card aloft, ready to win the game.

Ông Ngoại shuffles some cards around in his hand and drops down a two of spades, followed by all four sevens.

Uncle David and Uncle Ricky elbow each other, cursing and laughing.

Kat looks up from her bowl. "Wait—doesn't a royal flush beat a four of a kind?"

Her dad shakes his head. "Don't think about poker."

"I'm so confused," Kat says.

Uncle Ricky claps an arm around Sam's shoulders. "Don't worry, I tried to teach him the simple version first, then the Nguyễn house rules. In our house – when you have four of a kind, doesn't matter what number – the single card is the leader."

"Hai," Ông Ngoại says, tapping the two of spades.

"Ah, Big Two," Sam says.

Kat wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "I get it now. This is when *you* curse!"

Her dad sighs and shakes his head in defeat. "I thought I understood this game, but I really, really don't."

“Don’t worry,” I say, giving him a consoling smile. “I’ll practice with you, and soon you’ll be sweeping the table in no time.”

“I’d like that,” he says. “I can’t wait.”

I make a mental note to add *play big two with Kat’s dad* to my summer plans, and then nudge Kat.

“Hey, I got great news— we’re all set on project Wi-Fi. Let’s go!”

“But I haven’t had *chả giò* yet!” Kat protests.

“They will still be here when we get back,” I say, taking her bowl.

I guide her back into the house, through the kitchen where I drop the bowl. “Má, I’m taking the car!”

“Where you going?” she asks, not looking away from where she’s frying more *chả giò*. Kat eyes them hungrily.

“Mr. Freezy’s. School project. Extra credit.”

Má eyes me. “It’s summer vacation.”

“Okay, no one is giving me extra credit! I just wanted to do it!” I announce with a flourish.

My mom laughs and she waves us off.

“Thank you so much for the great food, I can’t wait—” Kat says, and I pull her out of the kitchen before we get stuck in ten more conversations.

Ana watches us, eyes narrowing in consideration. She glances back at my mom, headbutts her leg affectionately, and then follows us out the door and into the car.

Kat buckles her seatbelt, stroking Ana’s scales as she curls up in Kat’s lap. “That’s weird, did you ask Ana to come?”

I shake my head. “No, but she’s always welcome!” I say, scritching her under her chin.

Ana trills happily.

“How’s Fancy doing, by the way?”

“Having a blast at art camp with Erica. Apparently Fancy’s Instagram has gotten over 200k followers already, and the camp made her a mascot.”

We arrive at Mr. Freezy’s and after finishing a double scoop of salted caramel (I knew Kat wouldn’t be able to focus until we had dessert, so that was #1 on my list upon arriving at the store) — Barb lets us into the back.

“Thanks for letting us do this,” Kat says to her.

Barb nods. "Tell your dad thanks for the pastries," she says. "Gotta say getting back high-speed back will be nice, even if it's just for Joe streaming *Halfway Hollow* while he works."

"Hey!" Joe says, looking up from his laptop on the counter as from where he's filling the display tub of chocolate chip with a freshly churned batch.

Barb's cleaned out one a corner of her storage area. The ventilation grate attached to the building's centralized air system, but for our purposes, the most important feature is — that this corner is the strongest connection point between our worlds. We've tested it various ways, with Kat in her world confirming receiving emails in her world while I stand here, to me casting simple spells on this side to prove that the mana flow is stronger in this spot. The prevailing theory is that it's a remnant from when our worlds aligned from when Kat and I first met— but that's for scholars to unpack and debate about later. Right now, it's time to make a new portal – just a small teensy tiny one.

Ana settles on the floor, curling up as she watches us, her eyes shimmering with... approval, I think.

I open up the vent and lay out the spell diagram, Kat placing each focus object on its spot. It took awhile to convince her to actually write the spell— and I helped! And she admitted it was fun, figuring out how to anchor the small mini-portal.

“Why the pineapple?” Kat pulls it out of my backpack, eyeing it suspiciously.

“You said a source to define the sugar energy! I figured you’re always going to have it in storage, and you can just restock it when you need to recharge—”

She laughs. “Never mind, it’s a great idea.”

With all the prep, I expected it to take longer. But and before I know it, Kat and I are holding hands and inciting reciting the words to start the connection spell. I feel the mana surge through me, warm and friendly and inviting—excited, even.

The spell is complicated enough for it to take awhile for the mana to feel its way through the programming, the ins and outs of what we’re asking of our universes — a bridge, an open, stable portal, just big enough for a signal to get

through. The inherent *why* echoes back at me, a wide open question.

Because we need to be able to communicate.

Because we were once one world.

Because I love her.

The last thought isn't just my own, I feel Kat's voice too, echoing inside me, her love surging warmth and affection across our shared mindspace in the spell.

Kat smiles at me, her hands in mine, and I feel whole, resolute.

The spell runs its course, and then I realize— there's not going to be enough power. I didn't realize how much energy it would take for this small portal, and I can feel Kat's disappointment and frustration through the connection. We'll have to stop and try again, start from scratch. Maybe ask for more help anchoring the spell.

Kat's mind flashes to an image of the Ritual, and how it used to be— poor souls sacrificing themselves— and I push the thought away. *Nothing like that. We'll make sure we do it right.*

Kat's relief is palpable, as is her love and appreciation and wonder.

Then I see it— purple iridescent scales and a *presence*. It's easy to forget since Ana is so small. But she's unmistakably the most powerful and ancient being anyone is going to meet in their lifetime. She just likes hoarding nail polish.

Ana delicately pushes the pineapple off the diagram and settles there in place. I can feel the spell adjust as her mind joins ours— the expanse of a whole other soul, endless with possibility.

I feel her smile.

This will do, little one. We've got a long way to go to restoring balance, but this is a start.

The spell takes. I exhale, and feel the energy exhaustion hit me, like I've just run a marathon. I take a moment to catch my breath, holding onto Kat as she does the same.

We grin at each other as our hearts race.

Ana sniffs imperiously, and then leaps onto the counter and starts licking ice cream out of Joe's spoon. Joe, to his credit, just holds the spoon out further so Ana can get better

access, as he continues avidly watching the season nine finale.

“That’s it,” Kat says, taking a deep breath. “So that’s it?” Kat asks.

Through the open vent, I can feel a subtle difference in the air, the taste of ozone and slight tinge of smoke, and a hint of sweet vanilla, followed by the sound of faint laughter and cups clinking and coffee being poured.

Kat chuckles. “I told Dad he made way too many of those vanilla bean tarts, but I’m glad he did. Look. It smells great.” She smiles proudly at me. “We did it!” She bends down and gestures inside the vent.

I hug her excitedly, fighting back a yawn and the urge to close my eyes. I’d forgotten how hard these big spells are.

“Almost there,” I say.

I set down the router and power supply and get everything plugged in. “Okay, setting it up. What do you want to call it? Did you like any of those names?”

“Uh...”

I pull out my bullet journal. “Here’s the list again, even though you said you looked at it already,” I tease.

"Yeah, but you looked so great that day I completely forgot," Kat says. "Okay, what about katbrenda?"

"Brendakat," I reply, before shaking my head and laughing. "Too obvious. Cliche, maybe. Okay what about — "

Kat grins and takes my phone. "I got this."

I look at what she's typed in. "Really? I swear, it's called —"

"And that's the password!"

"Okay, fine."

I stare at the new setup *itscalledwiffy* and its respective password, *iswearitswifi*.

"Could have done it the other way around," I snort.

"Ah, but then you'd have to admit I'm right." Kat's smile is incandescent. The fond annoyance I have turns to full blown contentment and appreciation. I'm so lucky I found her. I can't wait to be annoyed like this every day.

Kat's already packing up our stuff. "Hey, you up for second dessert?"



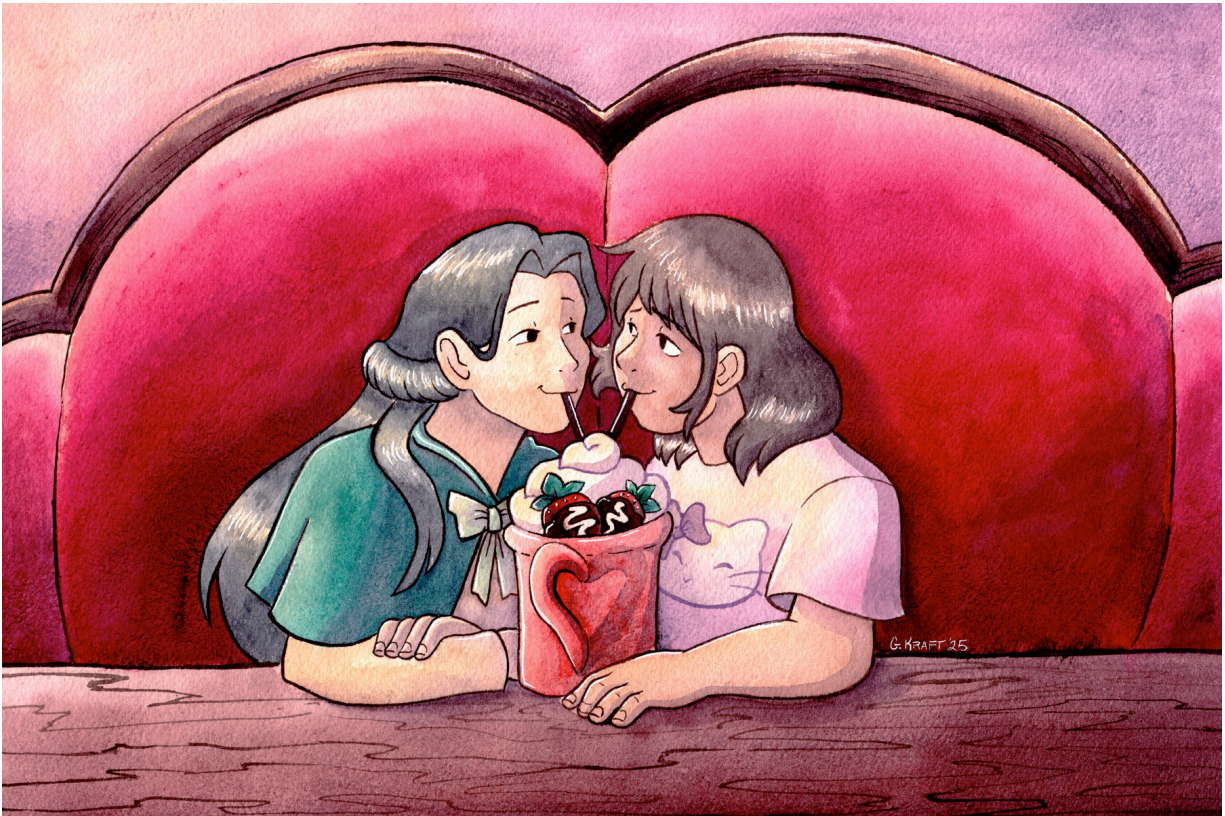


Illustration by Grace Kraft
<https://www.gracekraft.com>

Image description: Kat and Brenda share an elaborate hot chocolate drink topped with whipped cream and chocolate covered strawberries. Kat has long dark hair and is wearing a green capelet over a white long-sleeved shirt. Brenda has short hair and is wearing a Hello Kitty t-shirt. Both girls are gazing fondly at one another, and Brenda's hand rests on Kat's arm.



Illustration by Lisa Villella

<http://www.lisa-villella.com>

Image description: Brenda and Kat are curled up asleep, resting against Fancy, a large Himalayan cat the size of a small bus. Ana, a cat-sized purple dragon, peeks out from behind Fancy. Brenda is wearing a graphic T-shirt with a D20 design, jeans and Converse, and Kat is wearing an olive colored cheongsam, a modern green skirt and clunky heels. Both girls are smiling and look relaxed as they rest.



C.B. Lee is the New York Times Bestselling author of *Coffeeshop in an Alternate Universe*, *A Clash of Steel: A Treasure Island Remix*, the *Sidekick Squad* series and more. They write sapphic and queer fiction for middle grade and young adult readers, and enjoy writing cozy and joyful genre fiction. Lee's work has been featured in NPR, Teen Vogue, Wired Magazine, Hypable, Tor's Best of Fantasy and Sci Fi and the American Library Association's Rainbow List.

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Coffeeshop in an Alternate Universe



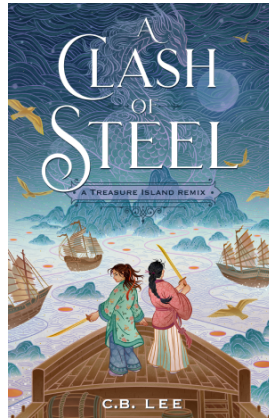
When Brenda's internet goes out right before an important scholarship deadline, she stumbles right into Kat's family's coffeeshop. Brenda is swept away by cool, confident Kat, who actually cares about Brenda's 19-step plan to save the world through science. Meanwhile, Kat can't stop thinking about Brenda, who is smart, passionate, and doesn't seem to care that Kat is the prophesized Chosen One.

The only problem? Kat and Brenda are from different universes. Like need-to-find-a-portal-to-go-on-a-second-date different universes.

As their universes collide and things spiral out of control, can a girl who is determined to save the world find love with a girl determined to outrun her destiny?

[Learn more](#)

A Clash of Steel



Two intrepid girls hunt for a legendary treasure on the deadly high seas in this YA remix of the classic adventure novel *Treasure Island*.

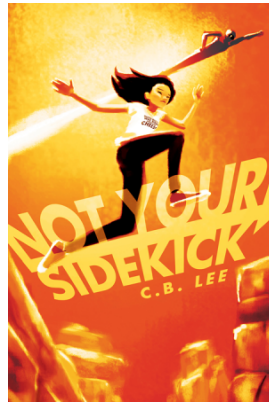
1826. The sun is setting on the golden age of piracy, and the legendary Dragon Fleet, the scourge of the South China Sea, is no more. Its ruthless leader, a woman known only as the Head of the Dragon, is now only a story, like the ones Xiang has grown up with all her life. She desperately wants to prove her worth, especially to her mother, a shrewd business woman who never seems to have enough time for Xiang. Her father is also only a story, dead at sea before Xiang was born. Her only memento of him is a pendant she always wears, a simple but plain piece of gold jewelry.

But the pendant's true nature is revealed when a mysterious girl named Anh steals it, only to return it to Xiang in exchange for her help in decoding the tiny map scroll hidden inside. The revelation that Xiang's father sailed with the Dragon Fleet and tucked away this secret changes everything. Rumor has it that the legendary Head of the Dragon had one last treasure—the plunder of a thousand ports — that for decades has only been a myth, a fool's journey.

Xiang is convinced this map could lead to the fabled treasure. Captivated with the thrill of adventure, she joins Anh and her motley crew off in pursuit of the island. But the girls soon find that the sea—and especially those who sail it—are far more dangerous than the legends led them to believe.

[Learn more](#)

Not Your Sidekick



Welcome to Andover, where superpowers are common, but internships are complicated. Just ask high school nobody, Jessica Tran. Despite her heroic lineage, Jess Tran is resigned to a life without superpowers and is merely looking to beef up her college applications when she stumbles upon the perfect (paid!) internship—only it turns out to be for the town’s most heinous supervillain. On the upside, she gets to work with her longtime secret crush, Abby, whom Jess thinks may have a secret of her own. Then there’s the budding attraction to her fellow intern, the mysterious “M,” who never seems to be in the same place as Abby. But what starts as a fun way to spite her superhero parents takes a sudden and dangerous turn when she uncovers a plot larger than heroes and villains altogether.

[Learn more](#)