Where There's Life, There's Hope

by ModernWizard

Summary

Alison Cheney’s been traveling with her robot and the Doctor for ten months. Despite a
difficult start with two mind-fucks, she feels more confident than ever. She attributes a lot of that to the rule-bound relationship that she has negotiated with her robot, known to her as the Magister and to the Doctor as the Master. He’s teaching her how to be the master of her fate and the captain of her soul. She’s feeling pretty good…

--Until she starts having nightmares in which she dies and then her robot saves her life by robotifying her. But it’s not a good robotification; she’s miserable, objectified, and out of control. Her fear seeps out of her nights and ruins her days.

With the Magister and the Doctor’s assistance, Alison determines that she’s receiving distress signals from Bill Potts, a Black British woman like herself, who lives in an alternative universe. In this alternaverse, the Doctor is on their twelfth life, and Bill is their former companion. Trapped at the fast end of a space ship, Bill now works with the mysterious Razor to save herself and a city full of people from two of the cosmos’ deadliest foes: the Cybermen…and the Doctor. And Bill needs Alison’s help.

Notes

Collaboration with @natalunasans because we live-blogged both parts of the DW S10 finale together. We then spent many hours detailing ways in which we would have improved the story. We ran a lot of our character interpretations, world-building, and plot points past each other. We ended up with settings that, though not forming a single shared world, are still very similar. She didn't write any of the following stuff, but she did help me with planning. She also gave her seal of approval ["!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"] to the excerpts I showed her. Thanks, Nata!
Prologue [Bill]

Chapter Summary

Formerly the Doctor's companion, Bill now works with Razor to rescue Cyber people and restore their free will. Tonight she escorts a de-Cybered person from her and Razor's flat to a safe house. Chronic pain, shitty weather, and Bill's disillusioned thoughts about the Doctor make the trek difficult.

We're here, Razor, Bill thinks to him. Finally! She and Sinclair step out of the pissing drizzle of a Dystopiaville [Razor’s name for it] night, shivering despite their three jumpers apiece. Bill pops the umbrella closed so that she and Sinclair can try to keep dry under the really small awning. She knocks on the front door of the slumping brownstone, four syncopated beats that are the secret sign of RR: Razor’s Revolution.

The sneak from Bill and Razor’s flat in the basement of the Floor 1056 General Hospital to one of the many safe houses scattered around the city always puts her on edge, but this one really took it out of her. She only had to escort Sinclair, the latest ex-Cyber person restored to free will by Razor’s so-called detox, two kilometers to the Sewage Street safe house. As usual, Razor watched the Night Patrol on his hacked security camera feeds and let them know when the coast was clear. Once the guards left the hospital district, Razor gave Bill and Sinclair the signal to move.

Even though she hasn’t been able to go faster than a walk since her partial robotification, Bill has helped at least fifty repersoned Cyborganics – the deconverted Cyber people’s chosen term for themselves – from the hospital to safety. She knows all of Dystopiaville’s darkest corners, most secret alleys, and pubs where the owners will just give you a nod and pretend they never saw you. Plus Razor’s ability to watch the security cameras and then give her telepathic updates means that she can change routes on the fly. She and her escapees have never met up with the Night Patrol. In other words, Bill assumed that this was going to be a standard [if slow] mission.

But it wasn’t. Bill and Sinclair exited the rich hospital district, where all the Cyber conversion staff lived in sleek skyscrapers with purified air, and hit the slums. Bill untensed a little, the organic ends of her spine [as opposed to the stiff middle Cyber part] relaxing. The slums that made up most of the city might be a barely policed mess with raw sewage in the streets. Unlike the hospital district, though, the slums had more to them than just horrible shit. The members of Razor’s secret resistance lived there, working to reperson people, throw a spanner in the whole operation, and, ultimately, to bring down and replace the corrupt system that made this all possible. Bill always felt a little safer, knowing that there were people like her nearby.

Being in friendlier territory didn’t make things much better, though. For one thing, rain started to fall just a block outside the hospital district. Actually, rain never fell in Dystopiaville so much as it
hovered in clammy sheets. Raindrops bound themselves to the dust, exhaust, smog, and other shit in the air created by Dystopiaville’s large-scale Cyber conversion project. The rain just hung around like fog, and you inhaled pollution with every breath, tasting petrol, grease, and something that reminded Bill disturbingly of charred hamburger. Because Bill’s Cyber mods included robotic lungs with less capacity than her old ones, she began to cough, even though she put on her face mask. Her and Sinclair’s pace slowed even more.

As if the rain weren’t bad enough, there was the pain too. Cyborganics always had to deal with varying amounts of chronic pain; Bill and the others called it a *good day* if you could do some stuff despite the pain, a *bad day* if the pain was too much. She herself was having a good day, with no more than the usual dull aches in her chest and legs that she got whenever she did…well…pretty much anything.

Sinclair, on the other hand, nearly fell over like five times. Once Bill was terrified that she might have to carry him…or drag him…or something. But she kept encouraging him: *One step at a time.* *Don’t think about the next block, just one foot in front of the other.* *One step at a time.* *One step closer to safety,* *one step closer to freedom.* *You can do it; I’m here with you.* *Just one step at a time.* She said *One step at a time* again and again till it sounded like abstract syllables. She worried that she sounded like she was whinging or nagging, but Sinclair didn’t seem to think so. Every time she said it, he flicked his eyes at her and widened them slightly. Then he took as deep a breath as he could and walked another pace. At long last, they made it.

“Fuck,” curses Sinclair, propping himself against the door frame. He’s a scrawny kid, maybe fifteen, with brown tan, freckled skin. For a moment, he presses his hand to his forehead.

*I was beginning to think you’d never make it, my dear.* Razor’s mental voice, dry, humorous, and precise, comes into Bill’s skull. He uses a horribly fake semi-Russian accent in public, along with some sort of perception filter shimmer that makes him look like a balding sleazeball with bad teeth. With the few people he trusts, though, like Bill, he sounds like himself, posh, with some Manchester/Leedsish sound inside it.

*Alerting Ms. Kim,* Razor advises Bill. After a moment, he adds, *Be patient, my dear. Unwieldy chair, inaccessible door.*

“Hang on,” Bill whispers to Sinclair as another shiver goes through her. Her own legs ache, and the artificial portion of her spine now decides that it’s a good idea to shoot pain up and down into the organic parts. “Umph,” she mutters, trying to massage the middle of her back. To Sinclair, she says, “Prunella’s on her way.”

As she and Sinclair wait, Bill wonders what Prunella is like. As the second in command of Razor’s Revolution, she oversees the logistics of it all, while also managing the Sewage Street safe house.
Prunella and Razor communicate almost exclusively by telepathy, like Bill uses occasionally with him. Even though Razor’s the only person that Bill knows who can send his thoughts to other people, his ability to read people’s minds means that he can pick their responses from their heads and thus carry on a private, untraceable conversation. Though she has been living and working with Razor for almost a year now, Bill has yet to see or hear the mysterious Prunella.

After several minutes, there’s a click on the other side of the door. It swings inward a small amount and stops. “Where there’s life…” says a husky whisper, probably Prunella.

Bill finishes the code: “…There’s hope.” The Doctor likes to say, Where there’s tears, there’s hope, but that’s not true down here. Even Cyber people who have been deprived of the ability to cry may be restored to humanity. They’ll never be the people that they used to be, but Razor’s detox clears the Cyber brainwashing and the emotional inhibitions from their minds. And then, like Bill and Sinclair and Prunella, they’ll be part flesh, part machine, but they’ll have free will. They’ll be people again. The Doctor was wrong, for even artificial people without tears have hope. As long as they’re alive, it’s always possible that they can change.

The door moves another few centimeters, halting again. Someone breathes heavily, as if coughing, but without force, and Bill realizes that Prunella is opening the door for them. “Hey,” she whispers into the darkness, “you need a little help?” Prunella does not answer. Bill, who has learned never to do things for Razor unless he specifically asks, decides to play it safe and let Prunella work the door on her own.

Perhaps a minute and a half later, Prunella has the entrance completely open. She wheels into the light. She’s a Korean woman [or she would be if she were back on Earth] in her mid-thirties with lightly tanned skin that has pale pink undertones. She has her head shaved except for a black spiky strip down the center. She smiles, her grin filling up her mouth in fits and starts; a ring in her lower lip flashes, as well as a tongue stud. She waves a hand with skull rings on every finger, moving her arm in small, definite pieces of an arc, as if her motion is controlled by gears. Obviously she was repersoned much later in the Cyber process, as she moves with some of the mechanical slowness of fully converted people.

Bill now understands what Razor meant by Unwieldy chair, inaccessible door. The massive door, a solid slab of wood, would be hard for anyone to move, whether they were standing or sitting. Prunella’s disadvantages are magnified by her heavy manual wheelchair. It looks to be a solid steel frame with a leather sling seat, barely built for comfort, and it clearly takes much of Prunella’s arm strength to maneuver. The hospital hoards all the highest tech for itself, and Bill and Razor barely have enough time to rescue people, much less mobility aids. Thus the Cyborganics that they help must make do with outmoded city tech.

“Welcome to…the Sewage Street…safe house,” Prunella says to them in the scratchy, halting speech of someone whose voice has been replaced by the Cyber monotone. “Please don’t be…
alarmed at…my voice. I am not…a robot. I just…play one…on TV.”

Bill assumes that Prunella has made the same joke to every escapee. Gallows humor, even if it’s
tired, is one of the only ways you cope when you’re a partially robotified person living in
Dystopiaville. Nevertheless, she and Sinclair laugh, as does Prunella, and the tension is broken.

“Awesome.” Still against the door jamb, Sinclair gives two thumbs up. “Now I’ve got some actual
career prosp – fuck!” He clutches his thigh.

“Inside! Sit…down!” Prunella urges the two.

Bill and Sinclair slip in to the safe house. Bill shuts the door behind her. Razor was right; that thing
is heavy. “I am…really happy to…meet you…Bill,” Prunella says as she wheels down a hall.
“Razor is always…telling me about you. She is…very clever for…a human. She is…tough. I trust
her…implicitly. I’d give her a…place on my…staff alongside you…when I stage…my coup…but
she told me she…doesn’t like…politics. I think you…are like the…heart of…the resistance.”

“Well, hey.” Bill, shucking her soggiest jumper, shrugs. “It already stole my heart, so like why
not?”

“Hah. Hah. Hah. I am…very excited…to meet you. You’d think…that the upgrade…would have
given me…some exclamation points…but I guess…the tech…isn’t there…yet. Just…imagine
them.”

Prunella introduces Bill and Sinclair to her wife, Senga. She used to be an anesthesia tech at the
hospital, but quit when she realized that the Cyberized people were always suffering, no matter
what she did. Senga offers them some hand towels. Bill and Sinclair thank her and mop off the
dampest parts of themselves.

Then Prunella guides her guests to a living room papered with posters of tattoo designs: dragons
coiling around roses, angels wielding gory knives, demons crying bloody tears. Prunella explains
that she used to work at a tattoo and piercing parlor, but now she can’t hold steady enough to use a
tattoo gun. On good days, though, she still enjoys designing flash. Bill and Sinclair nod. Being
Cyborg means you never know if it’s going to be a good day or a bad one in terms of pain, and
you’ve got to make do with what you get.
Prunella, who clearly still has her digestive and excretory system, gives tea to Sinclair, who clearly still has his. Bill, who lost hers along with her heart, her lungs, her liver, and a big chunk of her spine when she had a hole blown in her, inhales the odor. Tears come to her eyes. The drink smells like a damp forest floor combined with an old wet sock. As Razor says, _They take generations to perfect Cyber tech, but can’t be arsed to develop a decent cuppa? Humans are so uncivilized._

“Sorry,” Prunella apologizes. “The tea is…so bad it…makes me want…to cry too.”

“No.” Bill dries her eyes on one of her many jumpers. “Just smog in my eyes.” She can deal okay with most of her Cyber parts. But now, a year later, she still misses eating – hell, even shitting. It’s the harshest reminder that she’s not normal anymore. Eating is a human thing to do. Without it, she really feels like a machine.

Prunella introduces Sinclair to the whole concept of the safe house. After escape from the hospital, Razor’s repersoning surgeries, and a detox in Razor and Bill’s flat long enough for the Cyber programming to clear from his body, Sinclair now moves to the next step. He’ll stay in the safe house for maybe a month, just getting used to things. Meanwhile, Prunella and Senga will introduce him to other Cyborganics, who will connect him to the Network, which, unlike the Cyber brainwashing network, is actually helpful. The Network, a secret citywide group, contains Cyborganics, unconverted people, and former hospital staff like Senga. Newly freed Cyborganics hook up with one or more unconverted people, who provide safe living quarters. They also take on mentors from the more experienced Cyborganic members of the Network, who teach them practical skills for keeping safe and living with the changes caused by partial conversion. Finally, the newly freed Cyborganics work with Senga to find former hospital staff who can address the unusual needs of partially robotified people.

Once Sinclair settles into Cyborganic society, says Prunella, there’s RR to consider: Razor’s Revolution. It’s not like you have to join the resistance just because he helped to free you. He knows about chronic pain and physical limits because he has those himself. He understands that, for some people, it’s hard enough work just to live through the day. They don’t have enough energy left to overthrow a dictatorship, and that’s okay. He’s always recruiting, though, from Cyborganics, unconverted people, former medical staff – anyone who will listen.

Bill has to admit that Razor’s got a good spiel. He won her over within weeks, as soon as she detoxed and finally learned what was what. It’s not like she needed much convincing, though, to resist a government that spent all its money on Cyber conversion, leaving everyone but the medical elite to live in rotting slums from which they were stolen at random to be broken down into soldier bots. _This place stinks…literally,_ he said. _I’m going to be a much better dictator. When I take control, I’m shutting down that facility, repersoning all the remaining Cyber people, and killing anyone who tries to use that tech again. Then I’m reprioritizing the budget for more important things, like effective pain management programs, clean air, more ramps for fucking wheelchairs, and a decent tube of eyeliner that doesn’t crumble when I look at it cross-eyed._
Bill makes sure that Sinclair knows RR’s code phrase and secret knock. She thanks Prunella and Senga, who swap her damp jumpers for dry ones and give her a new face mask. She asks Razor telepathically if it’s safe to leave, and he says it is. She hooks the elastic bands of the mask around her ears, turns up the cowl neck of the topmost jumper, opens the umbrella, and sneaks out into the smothering smog.

*On my way, Razor,* she says to him.

*Toasting your socks, my dear,* he replies. There’s nothing worse for Bill at the end of a mission than slogging home on a rainy night in slippery, icy socks. If her feet are cold, then everything’s cold, and then she shivers, and then everything hurts more. Watching her massage her feet a few times after missions, Razor silently greeted her one night with a pair of wool socks that he’d been warming on the radiator. At this point she knew him well enough not to say thank you [he’d only glare], so she just told him that he should try browning some bread next time.

Head tucked beneath the umbrella, Bill feels a smile stretching at the edges of her mouth, and she wonders why. With everything that’s happened to her, with everything that’s currently happening, why should she be happy?

The shit all began, though she didn’t know it then, about two years ago when she met the Doctor on the St. Luke’s University campus. She’d always been on the outside looking in – a Black girl raised by a white foster mum, a twenty-six-year-old canteen worker watching her agemates take uni classes, a lesbian that for some reason people read as straight – so she figured she might as well do it for the Doctor’s lectures. They taught either physics or poetry or both, and their lectures made the universe sound as cool and exciting as it was in one of the cheap pulp sci-fi paperbacks that she had inherited from her mum. When they saw that she was smart and said they’d tutor her privately, of course she accepted. And when those lessons turned into adventures through space and time with a Time Lord on one hand and a robot, Nardole, on the other, hell yeah, she went along for the ride.

At first Bill loved it. The Doctor opened her eyes and her mind to a universe full of aliens, civilizations, wars, plots, and stories that she had only ever read about. She felt like someone in a Jules Verne novel, diving to the depths of the ocean or going into the center of the Earth. She felt like the first astronaut to land on the moon. Everyone knew it was up there, but only a few people had been there. Only a few people knew how much fun it was to jump around in lower gravity. Only a few people knew how scary it was to realize that there wasn’t any atmosphere to protect you from the empty void of space. Most people didn’t know how awesome and terrifying and magical the universe was, but Bill did, thanks to the Doctor. She felt smart, like she was better than everyone else, and she felt like she’d finally found a place where she belonged. For once in her life, she was one of those lucky people on the inside, looking out at all the clueless losers.

Over time, though, she started to have her doubts. The Doctor kept information from her and
treated her like a kid. On Gliese 581 D, when the two of them were dealing with the murderous Vardies and Emojibots, they asked her to give them directions to the main power center of a building. She found out later that they already knew the way and were just keeping her out of trouble with the assignment. She didn’t feel like a fellow adventurer then, not even a companion. She felt like a kid being babysat.

Then Bill discovered that the Doctor had been keeping their frenemy Missy, also known as the Master, locked in a vault for decades. When she asked why, they gave her a vague answer that really told her nothing and implied that she was silly even to ask. She didn’t feel like a brilliant student who deserved private tutoring with a genius alien then; she felt like a bug before a human swatted it away for buzzing too loud.

After that, it just got worse. The alien Monks took over the world; the Doctor went blind, and she had sacrificed to get the Doctor’s sight back. But then the Doctor seemed to ally themselves with the Monks. They tortured her mentally, telling her that the Monks were good. Broken-hearted over the Doctor’s apparent turn to evil, she shot the Doctor because she didn’t want all their power to be used for the Monks’ horrible ends. The Doctor pretended to start to regenerate, then stopped. It was all just a test, they said, to make sure that she was loyal to the anti-Monk resistance. Then they and Nardole laughed at her while she stared at them in shock and tears.

Bill shivers especially hard. The rain has solidified into a fog. There’s no point using an umbrella in this stuff; it just leaks in from all directions. Walking through it is like being licked by a big, slimy tongue. Usually her face mask filters out the worst of it, but the mask is sodden now, and she can taste the oily pollution as she breathes in. As usual, the rain makes her breathing worse, so she stops into an alley. She sits on a crate to recover her strength, and, as usual, the drop in air pressure brings the dull pain back to her legs. And she’s only gone four blocks. “Ergh,” she says, closing the umbrella and leaning on it like it’s a cane.

After that thing with the Monks, that was when it clicked, and Bill realized what was wrong. She felt like she was in a game, not one of those cool ones where everyone built train tracks or stopped epidemics or went on quests, and you didn’t really care about winning, so much as you cared about doing clever stuff and seeing how far you can get into the game world. She wasn’t in the kind of games she loved, where people were, you know, having fun, learning stuff, and being silly. She was in the mean kind of game where everyone competed against everyone else and did nasty stuff, just so they could win.

Not only was it the shitty kind of game, but she wasn’t even a player in it. She was sneered at and left out of the loop and lied to and fucked with. The Doctor didn’t think of her as their fellow player, their companion, their equal, their friend, or anything at all. They had never thought that she was special, smart, curious, and cool enough to time travel with. They just had seen a lonely, isolated person and decided that she’d be easy enough to sucker into becoming – what was it Missy had said? – the disposable exposition. The Doctor thought of her like a little plastic token you move around the game board. Who cares if you step on it or lose it in the chair cushions? They’re cheap; they don’t mean anything, and they’re really easy to replace. Just get another.
just in case Bill needed any more proof that the Doctor was using her as their toy, this
dystopiaville shit went down. Bill said she was scared of Missy and that she really wanted the
Doctor to keep her safe. The Doctor ignored her fear and took her to this Mondasian colony ship,
where she lives now, to accompany Nardole on a test run with Missy to see if she had really turned
good. Just as they discovered that time dilation was allowing whole cities to develop over
generations at one end of the ship, while mere minutes passed on their end, the Doctor was
surprised by people with guns. They came up a lift and demanded the human.

Hoping to protect people who weren’t really her friends at this point, Bill said she was the one they
wanted. She then promptly had a hole blown right through her middle. You lied, Bill thought to the
Doctor, but she couldn’t speak because she had no more lungs. You didn’t listen. You didn’t keep
me safe. You don’t care at all.

and after all that, before she died, they had the conceited gall to tell her, wait for me.

Bill presses on toward home, but still... even just remembering that makes her feel like she did at
the moment she died: gutted, voiceless, frozen, just... like... empty because of the betrayal. She
sniffles and then cries. Her sinuses clog.

She stops in another alley, crouching behind a trash skip. There’s a huge wad of mucus in her head
that she’d love to get out, but then she’d have to take her mask off, which you really don’t want to
do when the air is this disgusting. She breathes in little gasps, wishing she could blow her nose.

Anyway, she came back to life at the other end of the ship, this end, where time was going much
faster. In a day at the slow end of the ship, where the Doctor had landed, generations had passed at
the fast end of the ship. Dystopiaville had sprung up on Floor 1056, ruled by the secretive dictator
known as Surgeon/General Irons.

Dystopiaville grew rapidly in population, so Irons sent teams of colonists to stake claims on higher
floors. Though they had less numbers and less developed tech, people on the higher floors fought
the Dystopiaville citizens off. Instead of doing something smart like, say, developing birth control
and condoms or trying to talk to the upper floors about sharing space, Irons thought up Operation
Exodus. They claimed that it was a plan to evacuate Dystopiaville and resettle in better land, but it
was really a declaration of war. Irons wanted to turn the Dystopiaville denizens into disposable
soldiers who would overwhelm the upper floors by sheer numbers. Dystopiaville became a Cyber
production factory, designed to convert free human beings into mindlessly obedient soldiers.

Bill soon realized that wasn’t like the Floor 1056 General Hospital gave her new internal organs
because they cared about her. Though he looked questionable with his greasy hair and silly accent,
Razor took her under his wing and told her the truth. The surgeons wanted to stick something in her that would inhibit her emotions. They wanted to rewire her brain and hook it up to a Cyber network so they could order her and other Cyber people around. They just wanted more cannon fodder in their pointless war. As for Razor, though, he was sick of the torture. He was working from the inside, he said, to take down Irons and their war machine. As soon as Bill heard that, she quit watching the Doctor raise their eyebrow for a week on the security cams. There was stuff to be done.

Bill goes for days at a time without waiting for the Doctor. As soon as Razor learned that Bill was a companion...no, a pawn of the Doctor’s, he grew very interested. So I see that you’ve discovered the truth about the Doctor, he said. They will claim to care about you, to be your friend, to defend you to the end of time, and they will make you want to sacrifice for them again and again. But, when you do, they will only laugh and watch you fall. She doesn’t know much about his past, except for that he was tortured into fighting a war against his will. Then he and the Doctor did something together that left him feeling as played as Bill was.

After that, though, Razor started helping her. Now she spends lots of her non-mission time sending out distress calls on some fancy device that Razor made out of his alien tech from whatever planet he’s from. Maybe someone who actually cares will respond and help her out of this black hole.

Bill does much more than just talk, though. She, like Prunella, like Senga, and like a growing number of people in Dystopiavilla, works with Razor for RR. She takes mop duty so she can scout out new places by which to evacuate escapees from the hospital. She assures people that being mostly mechanical doesn’t mean that you’re mostly dead; it just means that you’re mostly different, and you have to get used to it. She visits people who have moved out of the safe houses to see how they’re doing now that they’re back in the slums. She’s accomplishing important work.

But then the Doctor’s face appears before her like some pop-up scam advert that won’t go away, no matter how much you click on it. Wait for me. She doesn’t have time for the Doctor and their endless string of broken promises anymore. Razor has mind-control powers. Maybe he can remove this annoying Doctor virus...

Back in the present, mostly recovered from the memory of having a hole shot in her, Bill snorts enough mucus back down into her sinuses so that she doesn’t feel like it’s going to leak out her nose. She takes a few steps, but her organic spinal sections twinge so hard that she goes breathless. Not only that, but her shins feel like wood, like she has no more nerves in them. This weather is making a mess of her. It takes too much muscle coordination to crouch by the skip, like she was doing, so she just sits on the muddy pavement. Now her arse is wet.

You’d think she’d be in the depths of despair. She’s abandoned by her supposed friend, partially robotified, newly disabled, and, on top of that, cold and damp and tired. But she still feels that smile rise to her face again.
Despite everything, she feels something that she hasn’t since she started getting played by the Doctor. She feels proud. She does good work, saving lives, resisting a totalitarian regime. People appreciate her for who she is. Hell, she’s famous for being the heart of the resistance, even if she doesn’t have a heart. She has people she can actually count on and people who count on her. More than that, people like her and appreciate her and thank her for what she does. She’s nice to them, and they’re nice to her, and they really mean it.

Sure, this is Dystopiaville, and, sure, Irons and their minions are awful, but there are people here who are honest. There are people here who are kind. There are people here who understand. Yeah, compassion – despite all their talk about doing right and doing good and being merciful, the Doctor doesn’t have something that Dystopiaville does, and that something is compassion.

My dear Miss Potts! Razor’s voice crackles through Bill’s skull like a radio volume suddenly cranked up. Enough with the soggy sentimentalism. Where are you? Why aren’t you back yet?

In that alley off of Northeast Ave. It started to rain, and my legs and lungs just went. Yeahhhhhh… no. I think… Can you bring me the chair? Bill asks. Razor can walk, but prefers to cruise around in the power wheelchair that he, in his words, reappropriated from hospital storage. It looks like one of those plastic webbed office chairs stuck on top of one of those really modern, aerodynamic lawn mowers. Its seat, padded with memory foam, goes up and down. It also tilts. It’s got three speeds, headlights, taillights, a klaxon, and probably the ability to connect to scramble all Cyber network transmissions within a ten-block radius. It’s cooler [and probably more expensive] than most cars Bill has encountered, and it helps Razor conserve his limited energy. He has, however, let her borrow it for missions when either she or an escapee really need it.

Northeast…? He trails off in exasperation. I’ll be there in a minute.

Literally within sixty seconds, from the other side of the skip comes the four-beat RR knock. “Hello…my dear.” Razor, wincing noticeably, comes around to Bill’s side and looks down at her. His grey slicker blends with the gooey fog and shadows most of his face. “You’re looking…quite pathetic.”

This is the real bloke with the real voice. He’s kind of peach-colored in terms of complexion, and he’d probably have some tan along with that if he ever got out in the day. He’s finely built, not really muscular, a little on the short side, with a goatee and spiky hair that was probably blond when he was younger. His face, with the long cheeks, the narrow eyes, and the low fine brows, looks all innocent and closed at rest. But then, when he gets that smile and his mouth goes wide and his eyes start gleaming, it’s like a bomb goes off, and you just stand there, waiting to see what will happen next. Fortunately he’s not bombing right now, but actually frowning, one hand holding his side. So it’s a bad day for him too then. The weather probably doesn’t help him either.
“Back at you,” Bill says without meanness. He always sneers like that; it’s his version of Wow, you look like shit. Need some help? As he reaches his hand down to her, she takes it and asks, “How’d you get here so fast? Where’s the chair?”

“I followed…on foot. I had a feeling you’d…succumb…to pain.” Having helped her, he braces himself against the skip and straightens a small amount.

“Well, you’re not looking so great yourself. I thought you were gonna help me home. Are we sleeping in the skip or something?”

“No…you’re…going to help me.”

“Well, hello, in a little pain here myself? –Actually…a lot. I’m in a lot of pain.”

“If my psychic powers worked on me, I would dismiss my own pain long enough to help you, but I can only manipulate other people. Therefore I’m going to postpone your pain long enough for you to help me home. After that, you’ll have it back, but you’ll also have the next few days to rest.”

Bill sighs through her mask. “It’s gonna be a really bad day tomorrow then.”

“It’s always a bad day after a mission,” Razor points out. “I have bad days after missions, and I don’t even leave the flat.”

“Well…” Bill yawns. “If you can do your psychic trick and take away the pain so I can have a good night’s sleep, you’ve got a deal.”

“I’m touching you,” he warns her, as he always does before the psychic tricks. He says that he used to be able to do long-range mental manipulation. Now, with his depleted energy, his range is much reduced. Physical contact makes it that much easier for him.

“Right. Have at it.” Bill nods once.
Razor cups his hands around her temples, pressing the center of her forehead against his. Even though Bill holds an umbrella over her head, she still shakes as drops of smog drip from his slicker hood onto her skin. His voice lowers, like he’s reciting poetry or chanting a spell: “You are currently in pain, but, when I am done, you will feel pain no longer. Nor will you feel stiff, frail, or weak. You will help me home and go to bed, still without pain or stiffness or frailty. You will sleep well, without discomfort of any kind, and wake up restored. When you wake, you will feel the pain that you should be feeling, along with the stiffness and the aches. It will be a bad day, and you will rest, and maybe, pain willing, it will be a good day the next.” His voice goes down further, into a harsh whisper: “I am the evil overlord, and you will obey me.”

“Oh yeah,” says Bill with a sarcastic little smile. A few weeks ago, she figured out who Razor was from all his ostentatious hints about being a villainous control freak. He’s not human, obviously, with his psychic powers. He’s an alien. He’s a Time Lord, just like the Doctor and Missy. Like the Doctor, he has a weird title/name: the Master.

In fact, Razor and Missy are counterparts, two versions of the Doctor’s inevitable partner. Every universe has its Doctor, and every Doctor has their Master, Missy told Bill once. When the Doctor and the Master are friends, enemies, frenemies, exes, or something else depends on the universe. Missy came to this universe because her Doctor was dead. Razor, who now despised his Doctor, gladly let her have them.

Anyway, the Master, as their name suggests, tends to be a huge control freak. They also tend to antagonize the Doctor, subjugating people, starting wars, releasing monsters, and destroying things to either piss off the Doctor, get their attention, or both. They’re known to use their favorite mind-control spell — *I am the Master, and you will obey me* — in pursuit of power.

As soon as Bill figured out who Razor really was, she informed him that she was neither calling him that nor obeying him. He didn’t mind. He has only said that spell — *I am the Master, and you will obey me* — to her once, and he wasn’t even using his psychic powers. He was trying to cheer her up after she had just rejected the first person who came to rescue her, Clara. He told her to have confidence; someone better would come along. He believed it so fiercely that she did too. Those are the only circumstances besides pain management in which she’s obeying him.

Already Bill’s various throbs, lances, and other types of hurt are disappearing. It’s not like Cyber conversion, which, as Prunella and others have told her, just makes you push through the pain, even though you feel like shit. This is like when the naproxen sodium finally kicks in, and that awful hurt in your body just fades to a weird, sort of itchy feeling, then disappears entirely. “Ahhh, nice,” Bill says with a sigh. “Arm around my shoulder?” she asks Razor, holding out her left arm toward him.

“Thank you, my dear.” He puts his arm around her shoulders and vice versa. And they plod on home, back to the flat, back to the resistance, back to the rescues, back to the distress signals – back
to the hope.
The Doctor and the Magister trade barbs at the breakfast table. Conversation turns serious when Alison tells them about a vivid dream in which she died. The Time Dorks reassure her.

Alison staggers toward Anima’s [the Doctor’s TARDIS’] kitchen after another wretched night. She usually spends more time with her robot, who is also the Doctor’s inevitable spouse, hanging out on the robot’s TARDIS, Scintilla. The Doctor and their robot have separate houses now, which greatly improves their relationship. Now they each have a place to escape from annoying the shit out of each other.

However, Alison and her robot have been temporarily shooed from Scintilla. Her robot’s TARDIS is on vacation with her own partner Reeve, the TARDIS who belongs to the robot’s friend [?!] the Stylist. Therefore Alison and her robot are back in Anima.

It’s just like old times, when Alison and the two Time Dorks [they are way too nerdy to be Lords] first met. She even has her old room with her old bed. Unfortunately, none of that familiarity has helped her sleep for the past three nights.

She stops on the kitchen lintel, rubbing her eyes. The Doctor tips back in their kitchen chair made from a living reddish tree. They wear reading glasses atop their pale pink and balding head. They’ve thrown a caftan robe over their threadbare cotton nightdress. The rich periwinkle robe darkens their pale blue eyes and drapes like tulip petals around their lean, raw-boned body. Knowing the Doctor, it’s quite possible that they are in fact wearing a flower.

The Doctor, one leg bouncing, waves their spoon as they conclude a joke. “And then… Wait for it; you’ll love this. The actress turns to the bishop…” Uncontrollable snickers. “No. Wait. Sorry. Ahem. The actress turns to the bishop and says…says… I’m not human, and I don’t care!” They lean back in their chair, chortling. Somehow they knock their knees on the underside of the table. Cutlery clatters to the black and white floor tiles. “I can’t even… It’s just too…” They bend over the table and pound it with the flat of their hand. “Isn’t that hilarious?”

Alison’s robot sits on the other side of the table from his spouse, arms folded. She calls him the Magister [Latin for teacher], while the Doctor calls him the Master [English for someone who owns other people, which is why he’s not that to Alison]. Either one of those names goes perfectly with his dour, commanding appearance. He dresses in stark shades: today a shirt the color of dried blood with silver skulls for buttons and cufflinks, a black-red waistcoat whose pattern seems less floral and more gory, and narrow pants of carnival stripes, white and black. With his black leather gloves, he seems to lack only a top hat, and then he would be the ringmaster of a sinister circus, which is probably the exact look he’s going for. The creased forehead, the low and straight brows,
the down-pointing nose, and the drooping mustache give his sepia-toned face a tendency toward grimness, even at rest.

Because all of the Magister’s features follow gravity, they’re that much more striking whenever they move, as they do now. He smiles with his mouth, and the rest of his face perks up as well: one of those flexible eyebrows, the heavily lidded eyes, even the ends of his mustache. He addresses the Doctor: “Actually, I can’t decide which is more entertaining: the fact that you laugh at your own jokes, even on the forty-fifth retelling, or the fact that, when you do, you snort orange juice out your nose. Wipe that up.” Producing a handkerchief from one of his pockets, he tosses it at the Doctor.

The Doctor blots their place mat, then blows their nose. “Yeah, but what about the joke? Isn’t that the most brilliant thing ever?”

“It’s inane drivel. And it doesn’t improve when you tell it to me over breakfast every morning for seventeen years.”

“No, but that’s the best part of it!” The Doctor gestures grandly with their hands, spreading them out. The handkerchief is knocked to the floor and forgotten. “Don’t you see? It’s a silly thing to begin with, but then, if you hear it again and again for seventeen years, it becomes utter nonsense and therefore utterly hilarious every single time!”

Alison smiles slightly, even though she’s exhausted. The Doctor tells this joke habitually. It’s a mediocre anecdote, but their enthusiastic delivery, combined with the sheer fun they’re having, proves irresistible. Not only that, but she always enjoys looking in on her robot and the Doctor. The two of them play off each other with the rhythm of a career comedy duo, and it makes her happy to see them so happy.

The Magister likes moving his eyebrows independently. The left one now descends so that the right may hit its peak. “Ah, so you propose a high camp anti-aesthetic: the so bad it’s good principle.”

“Exactly! It’s so unfunny that it actually loops back around into being funny. It’s like Moebius strip comedy.” They drain their juice glass. “It’s actually like the way you use sarcasm a lot, come to think of it.”

“Do go on. I’m enthralled.”

The Doctor either ignores and/or does not detect their spouse’s tone. “Well, usually sarcasm is when you say what you don’t want, but you tend to get so sarcastic that your sarcasm does a Moebius strip flip and ends up being the truth.”

“I do?” The Magister sounds truly puzzled.

“You do. Oh, perfect example!” More hand waving. Another spoon visits the silverware already on the floor. “Remember when you and me and Alison were doing all that negotiation of her companion contract? She was like, Hey, Lucifer, you gonna be morally bound by this contract or what? And you were all, Tie me up. I can’t wait. I mean – it was so totally obvious that your sarcasm cancelled itself out there that even I could pick up on it!”

It was during the negotiation of her companion contract that Alison kind of got her robot. She met the Doctor and the Magister while she was mentally violated by lava snake aliens, the Shalka, from
which she and the Doctor then saved the world. When all that was done, she accepted the Magister’s invitation to bounce around time and space with him and his Doctor. She would only do so, though, she said, as long as the three of them agreed to treat each other with respect, honesty, and kindness. They all agreed to a morally binding contract, and they all followed it.

But setting limits and having her new alien companions take them seriously could not erase the fact of Alison’s previous mental invasion by extraterrestrials. She was enraged, in pain, and desperate to seize control of her life again. So she appealed to the robot, whose sharp, wordy, analytical mind got along better with hers than the Doctor’s more musical, synaesthetic, impulsive one. In the words of her favorite poem, Invictus by William Ernest Henley, she asked him to teach her how to be the master of her fate and the captain of her soul. He, who had never been approached fearlessly by a human before, found her request fascinatingly novel, so he agreed.

Since both Alison and her robot were kinky control freaks, they drew on the practices of BDSM negotiation. They structured a rule-bound relationship in which they both got what they want. She didn’t find evil middle-aged alien robots a turn-on, and he was a sex-repulsed ace anyway, so there was nothing erotic about it. She wanted someone to respect her as a Black British woman who was fed up with racism, sexism, and all other forms of dehumanization she had to deal with every day. He wanted someone to respect him as a robot who was sick of being ignored, contemned, and/or objectified because of his mechanical status. She wanted as well someone to protect her, while he wanted someone to mentor. They agreed to their terms; they gave each other their titles, and that’s how this -- whatever this was -- started.

Anyway, while the Doctor thinks that the Magister’s Tie me up comment to Alison meant exactly that, the Magister disputes this claim. “While I do grant you that I may, on occasion, ironize myself all the way out of irony, as it were,” he says, “I hardly consider that particular statement a prime example. Recall if you will – “

“The lady doth protest too much, methinks!” the Doctor quotes in a teasing singsong.

Eyeball rolling. “First of all, you misconstrue that quotation as referring to an excessive proclamation of innocence that signifies guilt. It actually means – “

“Ahhhhh, shut up, you rude mechanical.” The Doctor brushes the Magister aside with a sweeping gesture of a drapey blue sleeve. They catch sight of Alison and flash a grin: “Hey, Alison, did you know that the Master sometimes sounds like he means the opposite of what he actually says, but he actually really does mean what he sounds like he means?’”

Alison claps a hand to her forehead. “That’s…just… No. I may be Alison Wonderland, but I only believe six impossible things before breakfast after I’ve had my tea.”

“Ah, mea Domina carissima!” The Magister smiles at her. My dearest Domina. It’s Latin for something in the realm of queen or ruler, with a little bit of dominatrix thrown in by inevitable etymological association. “I’ll put the kettle on again.” He goes to the stove, taking the teapot with him. “Someone drained it, even though they knew you were coming.”

“You put the water in my special pot with the forget-me-nots!” says the Doctor. “How was I supposed to know it wasn’t all mine?”

“My dear Doctor,” says the Magister, back to them, “since my Domina has been living with either
myself or both of us for the past ten months, I should hope by now that the fact that she too takes tea with her breakfast would have sunken into your exceptionally fact-impervious brain.”

“I am not impervious to facts. They just have to go through a very careful vetting process before they get in. Lots of them become bored and wander off after a day or two in queue.”

Alison drops herself in her tree chair. “Frrrrgggh…it’s too early in the morning for sparkling repartee. Save it till at least after eight.”

“Are you having trouble sleeping again?” Hunching toward her, the Doctor pulls their reading glasses down from their forehead and puts them on the bridge of their narrow nose. “You have circles under your eyes like…well, like me! I’ve got all sorts of herbs in my jungle that could help. Just say the word. If you’re anxious and your thoughts are racing, there’s moonwort. If you sleep, but you’re still not rested, there’s farifloralis. If it’s dreams – “

Alison puts her elbows on the table and the heels of her hands in her eye sockets, thus propping up her sagging head and blocking out vision. “Yeah, it is dreams – bad dreams, nightmares. They’re even worse than the ones that I get occasionally about the Shalka or that Finisterran vampire thing. With those, even though I’m mind-fucked, I’m still alive at the end…obviously, or I wouldn’t be here.

“In this dream, though… In this dream, I die. I have a hole burnt straight through me, bigger than a serving platter. It goes right through my ribs, right through my lungs, right through my heart and my liver and my spine and out the other side.

“And somehow,” she goes on, in a dull, inevitable whisper, “though I’ve just had my entire core ripped out of me, I’m still aware; I still know what’s going on. I want to move, but I have no spinal cord. I want to scream, but I have no lungs. I want to live, but I have no innards. I want to do something, but I’ve lost all my power. I can’t even be the captain of my soul because I think that got blown out of me along with everything else.”

Tears run down her cheeks. When she first met the Doctor and the Magister about three years ago, she hadn’t cried for at least twenty-two of her twenty-five years. After a while, her tears eventually unthawed, and now they leak at every opportunity. The Magister assures her that it’s actually a good change, but what would he know? When the Doctor converted him from a biological Time Dork to a mechanical one, he lost the capacity to breathe, eat, drink, excrete, sleep, dream, and cry. He probably doesn’t remember how messy and ugly the whole sobbing process is.

“Everyone just stares at me, and I stare back at them.” Alison sniffs. “Then I realize that they don’t really see me any more. I’m still conscious somehow, but I’m not alive; I have no control, no voice, no motion, not even any thoughts really. I’m actually, really, truly going to pieces. I’m just…an object, and it’s worse than being dead because I’m not even a person at that point. I can’t be the master of my fate because there’s literally nothing inside me. I’m not there anymore. I’m not…real…at all.” Her voice fades out, but the dream remains vivid.

“Ah, Domina…” says the Magister in a low and sympathetic voice. “Shall I hold you fast?”

Taking her hands from her face, Alison cranes her neck back at him, nodding. Then she stands and turns toward him. He wraps one arm all the way around her torso, then the other, like he’s a letter folding around her, so both of them can fit in an envelope of security. He draws her so close against his front so that, as she likes, even her breath is somewhat constricted.
Now holding Alison’s core against his with his right arm, the Magister spreads his fingers across the whole right side of her face. He pushes her to bend her neck toward his chest. She does, pressing her ear against him. She hears the double beats coming from the noisemakers he has instead of hearts.

He holds her still, fast, with him. He grounds her, keeping her here and now so that she can’t drift back into that dream. He protects her, making a fortification of his body within which she may be held at peace. Now that she knows that he’s got her, she sighs, closes her eyes again, and lets him support her.

“Oh. Oh wow, that’s horrible!” the Doctor blurts. “No wonder you look so tired and scared. That’s just as horrible as some of the stuff that’s actually happened to you, if not worse. I know you usually like the Mas – the Magister to hold you fast when you’re upset, but is there anything I can do to help? I’m really not good for the holding fast, unless I’m holding onto the Master, so I can just go away if you…”

Alison’s forehead throbs a bit. “Eurgh, my head,” she mutters into her robot’s waistcoat.

“Actually, I do believe you could be of some use,” her robot says. “The kettle’s ready, and my lovely Domina here has a headache. Could you bring her a mug of…what is that brew?”

Five minutes later, Alison’s robot is no longer holding her, but that’s because you can’t really drink while in the midst of a hug. Sitting on her tree seat, Alison sips an inky purple mixture: Pundaras Dusk, the Doctor’s herbal blend against stress headaches. It has the sweetness of chamomile, but with a dash of pepperiness. “Thanks, Doctor,” she says, looking at them hovering near her. “Even the smell just makes it better.”

“Oh, er, you’re welcome. I can, uh, go away now…” The Doctor tries to slip for the door.

“You old fool! Get back here!” The Magister snaps his fingers, then crooks his finger. “My Domina did not dismiss you. Nor did I.”

“Um, sorry, Master.” Looking more embarrassed than apologetic, the Doctor flushes, but still hesitates.

“Are you being rude to your Doctor, robot of mine?” Alison sets down her mug and does what she hopes is an intimidating eyebrow maneuver at him.

The Magister bounces his eyebrows at her, first one, then the other, just because he can. “Are you telling me how to treat my inevitable spouse, Domina carissima?”

The Doctor rolls their eyes. “Oh great, a control freak versus control freak cage match. I’ve got to get back to my extremely important and highly scientific experiments.” For the past week or so, Anima has been in orbit around Otalux Four Eleven, a black hole in the Perlecebrae, a constellation in the Greater Magellanic Cloud galaxy. The Doctor has been studying the effects of the black hole on various materials. Some of their research seems to be actual research, while some of it also appears to be the cosmic equivalent of flushing things down a toilet just to see what will happen.

“Please don’t go away, Doctor.” Alison reaches out one arm across the table. “I know you’re not my Magister, but you’re my friend too. I’d just like to sit here at the breakfast table, being a person and being alive, with my two friends, who are also people and who are also alive.”

“Okay, I can do that, both the being a person and the living.” The Doctor takes their seat again, their grin growing wider.
“And we all have our insides on the inside,” Alison continues, more to reassure herself than anything, “and no one has a huge hole punched right straight through them, and it wasn’t real.”

“No,” says the Magister, shaking his head. “It wasn’t real.”

“It was just a really bad dream,” Alison concludes, nodding. “A really bad dream.”
The Magister Ambushes Alison

Chapter Summary

The Magister ambushes Alison to test her mental shielding abilities. They have a Dramatic Confrontation [TM].

Alison swings into the Doctor’s library the next day. It’s a rotunda with dramatically vaulted ceilings and, like the moon, it has a dark side and a light side. She travels through the dark side, with black granite walls, monumental ebony bookcases, and wrought iron tables, to reach the light side. Here the black granite gives way to a half-dome and wall of glass. The midnight blue carpet ends, replaced by one the yellow of early dawn. There are no bookcases here, only slim and blond tables and chairs, many occupied by mounds of sleepy TARDIS cats.

As usual, the Magister sits in his red leather throne by the window, reading something, probably about stop-motion animation, given his recent interests. Cats on the broad armrests flank him like purring accent pillows.

Alison bounces over to him. “Hey, magical, mischievous Magister of mine, so that dream, the one where I died, took a weird turn last night, and I can’t – “

“Shut up, Alison,” the Magister snaps, head still down. “I’m trying to read here.”

Slapped with the shock of being addressed by her robot with her first name, Alison stands there for a moment. “Wait…what? Ohhhhh, I s – “ Then she realizes what he’s doing.

“Seriously…shush. Obey me!” He snaps his fingers and points in her direction, still without raising his head. The armchair cats raise their heads and meow, telling him to shut up.

Alison’s realization is a little late, though, because she’s just lost her ability to speak. The Magister has taken advantage of her shock to slip his mind-fucking psychic compulsion into her. He tells her what to do, and, as much as she wants to do otherwise, she can’t. Her lips are shut; she can’t open her mouth.

After being mentally violated twice in as many months at the beginning of her travels with the Doctor and her robot, Alison had had enough. She asked her robot, the Master of Mind-Fuckery himself, to teach her some mental magic of her own. They accompanied each other on consensual tours of each other’s minds, just to become acquainted with what was a novel workplace for Alison. After that, she learned techniques for both grounding herself during flashbacks and also shielding herself from mental invasion. She can maintain almost complete protection around her mind with some background concentration.

Nevertheless, at her request, her robot ambushes her occasionally with the full strength of his mind-fuckery. To test the strength of her defenses, he fights dirty, using startlement, insult, and
other manipulative techniques to make her receptive to his powers. Again, she asked him to, knowing that, someday, she’d be up against such an unscrupulous opponent in the real world.

“Ah, much better.” The Magister rewards her with a satisfied smirk for submitting to his power. Then he returns to his book, flicking his hand as if at dust in the air. “Now go away. Turn around; walk out the door; shut it behind you, and go back to whatever you were doing before you thought it would be a good idea to interrupt me.”

Alison wheels about and walks toward the library door despite herself. She has no control over her voice or her movement, but she still has her thoughts. She recites the first line of her Invicta, which is what she calls Invictus, since she’s a woman. Despite its problems, that poem still guides her thoughts. Out of the night… Out of the night that covers me… She repeats it in her head until she can feel the words lying heavily on her tongue. Taking back her voice from him, she continues reciting aloud: “--Black as the pit from pole to pole, / I thank whatever gods may be -- “

“Shut your mouth; cease talking; you have nothing -- “

She stops walking, now controlling herself again, right near the corner of a light yellow table. She turns around, crossing her arms and glaring at him, though he’s not meeting her eyes. “--For my unconquerable soul. / In the fell clutch of circumstance, / I have not winced nor cried aloud -- “

“--To say. Speaking of not crying aloud, you should try it sometime.” He swivels his head and finally looks at her for longer than a second. His eyebrows go squinched and low, the sparks in his eyes a dangerous fiery yellow: “Obey me.”

“Under the bludgeonings of chance, / My head is bloody, but... umm…” Dammit – why does he have to be so good at distracting people by glaring at them? She loses the thread of the poem. “Shit!”

“Oh, are you having trouble remembering your favorite piece of literature?” the Magister simpers with false pity. He closes the book, though still marking his place with a finger. “Why? It’s such atrociously metered verse that I thought for sure that it would lodge in your memory forever… unless, of course, I told you to forget it. Obey me.”

Alison’s control sags. She’s still fending him off, but she only delays the effect of his mind-fucking, rather than resisting it altogether. She obeys his earlier edict – try not crying aloud – and loses her voice to him once more.

Nevertheless, she may have shut up, but she hasn’t forgotten the words fully. If she can just bring them to mind and get them out of her mouth… My head… she thinks. My head is…

“—Scrambled?” The Magister reads her thoughts. In any other circumstances, he’d need her explicit permission, but this is what fighting dirty is. “You know – everything would be much easier if you just let that mediocre text slip from your mind.” His voice takes on a smooth, liquid tone. “Why do you use it anyway?”

Because – Alison begins to answer him mentally. Wait…why is she doing this? She’s letting herself be diverted. She clenches her fists. Fuck his distractions! She thumps the golden table top for emphasis. Her surge of rage lets her take her voice back from him and heightens her volume, advancing on him: “Last verse: It matters not how strait -- “

The Magister stands. He comes toward her with a swift, deliberate tread, his eyes fixed on hers. His
head’s cocked, half of a sneer rippling his upper right lip, his right eye squinted nearly all the way closed. They both know he’s imitating Panjandrum, the bad guy from their favorite show, the sci-fi serial *Defenders of Earth*. He doesn’t look like the character, but he has the mien and the moves. “Do you truly believe that a scrap of rhyme can serve as your spell for safety or your enchantment for control? Be still! Say nothing. *Obey me.*”

Of course, now that she’s thinking about Panjandrum, she’s thinking about… Alison realizes that he’s gaining power over her again, so she repeats the line again, just to buy a little time: “—*How strait the gate*...”

“A paltry piece of poetry will never grant you the power you seek.” The Magister strides toward her as if he might walk right through her, but Alison holds her ground. He stops just a few handspans from her. Though he threatens her with his aggressive nearness, he drops the scorn from his voice. He now speaks softly, almost sweetly: “Haven’t you figured out by now that the concept of self-mastery is but an illusion that your species invented so you could distract yourselves from the abysmal futility of your wretched, evanescent lives?”

“Shit shit shit, what’s next?” Alison closes her eyes. She wraps her hands around the slender back bar of a chair just to anchor herself.

“Nothing follows,” he whispers tenderly. “This is the end. Your lines are done, your curtain called. The rest is silence. *Obey me.*”

“Um...um...um.... Ah hah!” Popping her eyes open, Alison finds the words and flings them at him in a yell: “*It matters not how strait the gate, / How charged with punishments the scroll: / I am the master of my fate! / I am the captain of my fucking soul! So tace!*” That’s their safeword – Latin for *hush* – which, when spoken, calls an immediate end to whatever conversation they’re having or game they’re playing.

The Magister retreats several steps. His face all alight with glee, he looks at her for a moment before doing a deep, swoopy bow out of a fairy tale: “Taceo.” I *am still*. That’s the other part of the exchange that marks a definitive end to mental magic practice. “Very good!” he exclaims. “My worthy opponent.”

Alison hugs him around the waist. “My best enemy.” Both he and the Doctor used to call each other things like that before they got together officially. “Nice scenery chewing, by the way. The stalking and the glaring and the annoying monologue were all supervillainy classics. And the Panjandrum imitation in the middle there just made it all the more meta-villainous.”

“Well, of course. I have mastered many things, including meta-villainy.” The Magister resumes his place in his red leather chair. Seeing his lap now free of books, the two armrest cats immediately hop onto his thighs. Purring, one with a little more snortiness than the other, they knead his pants and head-butt him. He pets one with either hand, and purring increases in volume. “I’d have you sit with me,” he says, “but I’m afraid your place has been usurped.”

Alison does like to ensconce herself sometimes in his lap, for maximum hold-fast effect, but mostly when she’s especially tired and/or upset. “I’m all right,” she says, taking a much simpler seat opposite him. “Besides, the dream wasn’t as much of a nightmare last night, though it was still
bad.”

“Yes.” Lifting his chin in acknowledgment of what Alison was telling him before he interrupted, the Magister points at her with the sharp end of his blackish brown goatee. “Do tell me about your dream.”
Alison's dream has a sequel in which she joins the anti-robotification resistance. She tells the Magister, who figures out the dream's source.

Alison pulls a blond chair over to him and sits, instantly gaining a lap cat of her own. Last night’s dream, she says to her robot, picked up where the one of her dying left off. It was like a recording that resumed after being paused while she was awake. Alison has had all sorts of dreams, including lucid ones that she can control because she knows that she’s dreaming. She’s never had a dream, though, that has behaved like a serialized TV show.

Even though the dream itself seemed kinda weird, like it was coming in from some outside broadcast, it certainly played on her worst fears. By making her die, it struck at her fear of powerlessness and lack of control. Then, in the next episode, it hit her hatred of hospitals. She regained consciousness in one of them, vast, shadowy, and blue-lit. Ever since her gram died in one, she has always thought of them as factories for the conversion of well people into the sick and the dead. And her dream hospital, staffed by surgeons and nurses who smiled too much, filled with patients who barely smiled at all, epitomized her fear.

Maybe she shouldn’t have been afraid, though. The horrible gaping hole that had killed her had been filled with mechanical replacement parts. She had a new rib cage, new lungs, new heart, new liver, even a new section of backbone. She found breathing with her new lungs difficult, and pain about her core waxed and waned. But she was alive, even if partially robotified.

Speaking of robots, her robot was there too. He rescued her from the hospital and protected her, as he always did. He cared about her, of course, and he cared for her. She grew healthier and stronger. She was almost always in pain, though, so he did what he could to alleviate it. They snarked and laughed and told each other stories, becoming closer. All the while they were plotting about how to make the world a better place.

Though Alison had her life and her robot, she remained miserable. For one thing, it was her robot, and yet it wasn’t. He looked completely different: younger, smaller, slightly hunched from his own chronic pain. He had a fuller head of short, blondish hair, with more hazel in his brown eyes instead of golden sparks. He also used a sleek power wheelchair that he drove almost like a weapon, spinning around with silent speed to startle people, accelerating far past walking speed to pursue anyone he didn’t like.

This version of Alison’s robot wasn’t even a robot, but completely biological. Even his personality differed: much less restrained in viciousness, much more casual in speech. Despite all the differences, there was still an essential similarity. But it wasn’t enough to make her as happy with him as she would have been with her true robot.

Alison was also unhappy because everyone else was unhappy too. They lived on a spaceship in a city made of corrosion and smog. Even the straggly flowers, pushing up through the cracks in the pavement, appeared to be rusting. The air tasted like rotten meat soaked in petrol, and you gagged on it if you didn’t use a face mask. All the colors had bled from the place, except for a dirty blackish brown.
Everyone lived in a dying city, and they themselves were dying. The hospital stole people off the streets. They took only the poor ones from the vast slums, though, not the rich medical staff from the hospital district or the government lackeys from the city center. The people were kidnapped and their bodies altered with mechanical components against their wills.

The stolen people weren’t partially robotified, as Alison had been, to save their lives. Instead, the hospital’s goal seemed to be one of perpetual torture. Their modifications caused the stolen people constant pain, but, instead of helping them deal with it, the hospital staff just made them shut up about it. They stuck some emotional inhibitor apparatus in everyone’s heads to prevent their involuntary responses such as wincing, gasping, and crying, along with tonal inflection. The stolen people were left with flat, electronic voices and little outward sign of their chronic suffering.

Furthermore, the stolen people were all hooked up to some network. [Alison wasn’t, though, as her robot who wasn’t really her robot had rescued her before that happened.] Part remote control, part brainwashing radio station, the network transmitted messages from the city’s autocrat directly into their brains. Like her robot’s mind-fucks, it forced the stolen people to obey commands against their will. They were to become soldiers; they were to fight for their leader in some conflict that she never quite comprehended, and they were ultimately to die.

But Alison and her non-bot had a plan. She didn’t know where he had come from, and he seemed not to remember. He had entered the city as a wanderer, determined to extract from it power and prestige. But he found only dehumanization factories. He discovered people making objects out of other people, just as other people had tried to make an object of him.

Alison’s non-bot wasn’t human himself; in fact, he thought humans rather insignificant, but he couldn’t countenance their objectification. He knew himself what objectification felt like on account of being disabled. It wasn’t his questionable grip on sanity that was his disability; in fact, he considered it an advantage in his line of work. Rather, his disabilities derived from the chronic pain, reduced stamina and mental focus, and panic attacks associated with a resurrection of dubious quality. Alison’s non-bot took the city autocrat’s torture of the stolen people as a personal attack, against which he had to retaliate.

Alison and her non-bot, operating out of their flat in a basement near the hospital, started the resistance. Her non-bot drew his first followers from the families of stolen people, as well as former hospital staff who, horrified by the nastiness going on inside, left. At first, the resistance patrolled, watching for hospital workers out to steal more people for objectification. They concentrated on the two neighborhoods where they had the greatest numbers. They couldn’t save everyone, but they were soon averting over half of the kidnapping attempts in those two districts.

Meanwhile, Alison did her own work on the inside when she had the energy. Her stamina varied, along with the pain, which was sometimes around her filled-in hole, sometimes in her legs. [She couldn’t go faster than a slow walk now.] On the good days, she felt almost like her old pre-robotic self again. On the bad days, she could barely shamble around the flat, and her non-bot experimented with analgesic cocktails. Some of them worked better than others, but none of them erased the pain.

When she was not in too much pain, Alison promoted the resistance within the hospital walls. She, like many other partially robotified people, occupied a low-status position. As a part-time sanitation worker, she spent much unsupervised time mopping, so she had many opportunities to recruit when her stamina permitted. She found resistance allies among her coworkers -- orderlies, laundry staff, cooks, and others -- who were equally overlooked.

Hospital superiors did not pay much attention to Alison and her allies. But Alison and her allies
paid attention to everything. They noted which emergency exits were usually propped open, which ground-floor windows lacked screens and bars, which service lifts were neglected by the security guards. Alison collected their information and passed it to her non-bot, who plotted escape routes. Soon they were evacuating three to five partially robotified people weekly -- patients and/or staff -- to save them from further robotification and torture.

The resistance truly established when Alison’s non-bot figured out how to unobjectify -- or, as he put it, *reperson* -- people. A scientist with much experience in human subjects, he eventually identified procedures to restore the stolen people’s free will. One was a deactivation of the emotional inhibitor implant. The other was a disruption and removal of the compelled obedience technology.

After Alison’s non-bot performed these surgeries in his and Alison’s flat, the repersoned people then spent a week with them, adjusting to life with autonomy and emotional expressiveness. They then moved to a safe house, where they linked up with supportive resistance members, who helped them back into the slums. Once at home, even if hidden for their safety, repersoned people almost always became devoted disciples of the resistance. They recruited and helped enthusiastically as their varying abilities allowed.

These repersoning techniques did not give people back their original, wholly biological selves and abilities. All repersoned people were cyborgs to some degree, and they would always be so. They all experienced some level of chronic pain and physical limitation. But, like Alison and her non-bot, they were alive, with their dignity and power again in their own hands. The resistance increased in danger and complexity, but also in numbers and hope.

“When a minute, my dear.” The Magister holds up his right palm, interrupting Alison. The righthand cat puts paws around the Magister’s wrist and tries to drag him back down. “--Get your claws out of my sleeve!” he orders the cat, who refuses. Then he gives up and resumes petting the cat, who flattens out on his leg again, vibrating happily. He looks back at Alison. “Have you any knowledge of Cyber technology?”

“Would that be like how people get into cyberspace: computers, mobile devices, Wi-Fi, routers, all that?”

“No, it’s a technology developed by the people of Mondas,” he says, “who are very like humans. They turned to partial robotification originally as a way to improve their quality of life, strength, and longevity. The resulting constant pain didn’t really achieve their goals, though, so they added emotional inhibition devices, figuring that the pain didn’t exist if the Cyber people didn’t complain. Then they added that mind control tech to create obedient soldiers. Tell me…” He leans forward and looks at her keenly. “Did you see any almost fully robotified people? If so, describe them for me, if you would.”

“Oh God, do I have to?” Alison slides down in her chair. Her lap cat makes an irritated noise and hops to the floor, padding away.

“Domina, please.” He reaches out to her with both hands, palms down, prompting protests from the suddenly neglected cats in his lap. Cocking his head at her, he lowers his voice: “I have an intuition about what’s going on, but your detailed description will confirm it for me.”

Alison stands, slipping her bare hands in the Magister’s gloved ones. “I saw some people who were way more robotified than me, yeah,” she says dully. “They wore all silver, like old-fashioned one-piece long johns, and they had bags over their heads. They looked like hostages or people going to a firing squad, and they were both in a sense.”
Her robot squeezes her hands, rubbing his thumbs across the back of her hands. “I know you don’t want to remember, but you are helping me greatly. One more question: Did the people have any obviously mechanical parts or traits?”

“Yeah. Some of them had clear plastic boxes sticking out of their chests, like old-fashioned computer monitors, only transparent. And some of them had really clunky headphones on, with spotlights on top of their heads. They didn’t talk too much, but, when they did, it was this...grating computerized whisper...with odd pauses where...you wouldn’t expect...any.”

“Ah!” the Magister says, standing quickly and shedding cats. “Then it is as I thought. Thank you for telling me; I know that it was hard.”

“They had no faces, Magister!” Alison clings to his hands. “They had no faces. And it wasn’t like our unpainted dolls, you know, where we can see the rise of the brows and the eye sockets and the shape of the mouth. We can see the people and their personalities even though they’re not finished. But not these people. It was like their faces were filled in with cement to erase all the features. And they were smothering in there; they were suffocating. And they couldn’t cry! They couldn’t cry....” Doing what the people in her dream couldn’t, Alison throws her arms around her robot and sobs into his jacket.

“Oh, my dear...” He holds her and swivels a bit at the waist, rocking her though standing.

“I don’t mean... I don’t mean,” Alison says with a sniff and a hiccup, “that not being able to cry is horrible. You can’t cry, and I’m pretty sure that you’d rather be able to, but that doesn’t make you horrific.”

“I know.”

“But these people used to be able to cry, and their tears were taken from them. They should have been able to cry; they should have been able to breathe, but the people who filled in their faces didn’t want them to, and so they were dying. It wasn’t robotification to help people live; it was robotification to make them die.”

“Sh sh sh, my good Domina, sh sh sh.” He says her name over and over, touching her face, while she cries on him.

She eventually stops making humiliating noises and dribbling humiliating fluids. “Oh no! I completely cried through your gloves. And I got a gallon of mucus on your jacket.”

“I think I can manage.” The Magister smiles gently. “If you don’t mind, I am going to take my gloves off, just to ensure that the circuitry doesn’t short.”

“You’re the one who minds, not me.” Alison gives him a little smile back.

He strips off his black leather gloves to reveal skinless hands with the beautiful exposed machinery of his mechanical body. The Doctor made him so fast and with such anticipation that they never got around to finishing that one last detail. And he accepts it, substituting another animal’s skin for his own, for it’s a constant reminder of how much the Doctor longed to hold him fast. He flexes his fingers in and out of fists. “Good. Everything appears to be in working order.”

“Can we go back to the hugging part?” Alison requests. They do. “So, uh, what was your intuition? And did I confirm it?”

“Indeed you did,” the Magister replies. “You’re not having a dream when you see these events in your mind’s eye. You’re receiving a message.”
Alison tries to back up from her robot, but he won’t let her leave his arms. It’s probably just as well, since the whole library floor starts to heave and roll. “You mean I’m being mind-fucked again? For the third time? Because twice wasn’t enough? What’s that old saying? *Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Thrice is enemy action.* It’s true. This is the proof. The universe just has it in for me. Get it out of my head; get it out! You have my permission. Please, please, please, I’m begging you. Use your powers, and make it go away. Make it go away now!”
Bill and Razor Send a Message

Chapter Summary

Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor listen to the message from Alison's dream. It's Bill's distress call, with a postscript infomercial from Razor.

The Magister sets to work. He sits cross-legged, sideways on a library couch. Alison lies on her back, her head inclined on a pillow within his reach. Now with new gloves on, he partially spreads his hands and places on either of her temples, fingertips only. He asks if this reminds her too much of how the Shalka held her down and rammed a bug through her forehead; she says no. He warns her that he can remove the message, but she will, however, retain her memories of having viewed it, memories that could be troubling. She understands and asks him to be as gentle as possible. He promises that he will.

And he is. Alison feels the Magister speaking telepathically to her, distracting her with some mash-up of several of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. She does not, however, sense him doing whatever he needs to do to remove yet another bug from her brain. She only realizes that he has completed when he exclaims, “Please don’t go to sleep in that position! You’ll get a cramp in your neck, I’m sure.”

Alison sees that it’s about time for her midday nap anyway. After being violated by the Finisterran vampire thing, she was dropped to the floor of the cave where it was fucking with her. She got a traumatic brain injury and some persistent side effects. She can’t really concentrate on customizing her fashion dolls for very long, so she mostly just photographs them now. She also has headaches and vertigo, which, along with a sudden drop in energy, occur most often during or after periods of strong emotion.

The most frustrating side effect is her need to recharge after being awake for four to six hours. Unlike some of her less predictable symptoms, though, her recharges have the courtesy to recur regularly around noon in the form of two- to four-hour naps. After a quick lunch, Alison crawls into bed, a feline guardian curled up on each corner.

Alison awakes in early afternoon. Anima notifies her that the Magister and the Doctor would like to see her in the control room. Usually the first room that you encounter when you walk through Anima’s main door, it’s a circular, shadow-ridden place, dominated by the hexagonal console in the center. The time rotor pumps in the middle of the room, up and down, glowing white with a tinge of pale purple. Rounded screens straight out of the 1950s and circular typewriter-like keys make up the bulk of the vaguely retro equipment. There are also various levers, wheels, faucets, and dials, both across the center console and at a counter around the edge of the room.

In keeping with the Doctor’s light/dark tastes, the room has trim, spiral staircases, and catwalks of wrought iron, interrupted by pure white spotlights shining down on nothing in particular. This room, especially when contrasted with its pale, well-lit counterpart in Scintilla, is designed more for atmosphere than function. Okay, fine. The Doctor’s aesthetic -- half Goth, half Romantic, half melodrama [three halves because they’re over the top, of course] -- looks great. But it’s hell on Alison’s legs. “Ow!” She walks into a wheeled office chair and sends it careering away.

Fortunately Anima turns up the light enough for Alison to see the two Dorks sitting at a monitor on
the perimeter. She sits down and asks for an explanation. The Magister says that he has
downloaded the extracted message from his processors to Anima’s, and he asks Alison to watch it
first. Only when he assures her that it has nothing in it like her dreams does she sit down and listen.

A person seemingly about Alison’s own age appears on the screen, speaking with a voice that
reminds Alison of the Doctor’s. It’s mostly light and interrogative, but it can hit some deep notes
when it wants to. Unlike the Doctor’s, though, there appears to be some South London ring to it. A
fellow Briton?

“Hi. My name is Bill Potts, Wilhelmina Frances Potts.” They wave a little, with such a true,
flashing smile that Alison returns it. [Unable to figure out the person’s pronouns, Alison sticks with
the ones that she uses for the Doctor.] “I’m from Brixton, in England, on planet Earth, in a solar
system called...um...Solar System, I guess, in the Milky Way. I’m stuck here because I came here
on a ship with some friends, but it crashed, and they...died.” The smile dissolves from their face.
“Please help me. I just want to go home. Thank you very much.”

After that follows a postscript. Now speaking is the biological person who’s Alison’s robot but not
quite. He sits at the same table in his power chair as sleek as a motorcycle. In one hand, he holds a
mug. With the knuckles of his other, he raps out four beats over and over: *tummetry tum, tummetry
tum…* His accent starts out somewhere in Siberia, moves west, then south, then back east, getting
lost in some unidentifiable region of southeastern Europe.

“Hello! I am Razor. Welcome to Dystopiaville: ultimate holiday destination. You come to visit,
yes? Not only to rescue lovely and deserving assistant Miss Potts, but to enjoy best of what
totalitarian regime has to offer.

“For example, tea! You like licking dead mouse? This tea for you. Excellent for building up gag
reflex. Is all I drink.” He pauses, then adds, “Is all that is available.

“And weather – we are having amazing weather here on Floor 1056. Amazingly rainy, amazingly
foggy, and amazingly smoggy. Is like Leeds, but in black hole. Well…is sunnier than Leeds.

“We know you will enjoy. In fact, we program you to enjoy....or at least to shut up about
unhappiness. Lose free will! Become object! Is great time! You will have fun.

“--Unless, of course, you’re a Doctor.” The parodic accent drops in favor of a semi-posh voice with
some North Country around the vowels. His eyes narrow, and he looks as fierce and deadly as the
Magister trying to ambush Alison with a mind-fuck. “In that case, you’d better pray to Rassilon and
everything you hold dear that you’re a better one than Miss Potts and I ever had....”

Alison tunes him out. She’s thinking about Miss Potts -- Bill! -- whose skin is halfway between
dark brown and golden brown, all shown up with some orange lights that makes her seem even
more warm and welcoming. A band holds back her chin-length natural hair so that Alison can
appreciate her all the more. She has a bold, oval face with wide cheekbones. Her generous mouth
smirks so regularly that it has sketched little brackets by either end of her lips, despite her youth.
Long, thick eyebrows, though neater and more tapering than the Magister’s, could rival Alison’s
robot’s for sheer wiggleness. Does Bill like women? Would Bill care that Alison can’t flirt worth
shit?

With a little sigh, Alison pledges that she will do everything in her power to bring Bill home.
Maybe then the lostness and the sadness would evaporate from her rough, sweet voice. Then she
would smile so widely that her smirk brackets would appear. Her eyes would go into crescents, and
her eyebrows would jump around. And she would be even more wonderful than she currently is.
Alison turns to the Magister and the Doctor with questions. First of all, where is this stupendous Bill Potts, and when can she and Alison meet? The Doctor says that the signature on the message originates it in the Mondasian colony ship Newland, slowly being sucked into Otalux Four Eleven, a black hole in the Perlecebrae constellation. Alison points out that there is no Newland around Otalux, only Anima. The Doctor clarifies: Newland exists in an alternative universe, similar but obviously not identical, connected to theirs by Otalux like some intercosmic umbilical cord.

The postscript, the Magister interjects, illustrates perfectly some of the alternatives at play in Bill’s universe. Razor is an alternative version of himself. In other words, Razor is the Master over in that universe, which also boasts a Doctor with whom he is not at all friendly. Though Razor named Bill his assistant, the Magister isn’t sure how to define the relationship between the two. He knows only that Bill and Razor are united against the Doctor as their common foe.

Switching back to the far more interesting topic of Bill, Alison points out that Bill’s distress signal contains none of the terrifying images or information that have haunted Alison’s nights. The Doctor explains by likening Bill’s communique to an E-mail message. Her short message and Razor’s infomercial formed the text of the message. Despite its seeming blandness, however, Bill’s plea held a massive amount of suppressed thoughts and feelings. These could be compared to large picture files embedded in the message at the end. Because she was empathically disposed toward Bill, Alison zeroed in on Bill’s emotionally laden, unspoken experiences. She was so engaged with the experiential meaning of the message that she neglected the comparatively bland text.

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Alison’s face becomes hot. How could she let her feelings overwhelm her critical attention to words? She thinks that she’s foolish, but her robot and the Doctor correct her. Bill’s message was quite faint after coming through the black hole. In fact, it only affected the Doctor as fleeting dreams of Cyber people. They, having dealt with Cyber people before, thought nothing of it. By contrast, Alison identified strongly with Bill. Another Black British woman who flew away with Time Dorks because she wanted adventure, but ended up penetrated, objectified, newly disabled, and in league with a villain just to take control of her reeling life -- how could Alison fail to feel for her? Her compassion for Bill enhanced the emotional freight of the message enough that it affected her through vivid dreams. Alison experienced such deep distress over her dreams that she told the Magister and the Doctor. Her empathy for Bill prompted the Dorks to examine her dream and determine that it was actually a message.

“In other words,” says the Magister, pressing a palm gently against the center of Alison’s chest, “your hearts heard hers when ours did not.” Her robot regularly refers to her as if she, like a Time Dork, has two hearts instead of one. She doesn’t bother to correct him, since, in that slip of the tongue, he reveals that he thinks of her as an honorary Dork: his equal. “As I keep telling you, you have the Master’s mind and the Doctor’s hearts, and of both attributes you should be justly proud.”

“Um, thank you.” Alison ducks her head. She still has a hard time accepting compliments, especially from him. Honest, straightforward, and linguistically precise to a pedantic degree, he says to her exactly what he means. His compliment does not exaggerate; he thinks that she’s as smart as him and as kind as the Doctor. It’s kind of intimidating to have someone think so much of you. Time to change the subject. “Hey, Doctor,” she says, turning to them. “Can we go through the black hole and rescue Bill?”

In response, Anima blares an orchestral version of the William Tell Overture finale across her speakers.

The Doctor chuckles. “The ol’ girl’s been waiting to fly through a black hole ever since we had a
close brush with the Shalka wormhole! I just need a little while to plot the route, and then we can be off!”
Alison and Bill Meet

Chapter Summary

Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor make a Dramatic Entrance [TM] into Bill and Razor's flat. Bill and the Doctor connect instantly. Razor is dubious.

Anima carries Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor out of their universe, through Otalux Four Eleven, and into Bill's universe smoothly and accurately. The Doctor deviates from their schedule for several hours to throw Anima a private psychic party in thanks and congratulations. As the Doctor emerges from mental communion with their ship and pilots toward Bill’s coordinates, Anima continues playing the William Tell Overture finale in unobtrusive triumph.

Anima materializes in a twilight Dystopiaville alley, made by a haggard brick building on the left and a corrugated steel warehouse on the right. The end is blocked by a huge pile of pallets, metal drums, pipes, wires, and wooden spools. There’s an overstaked skip on the warehouse side of the alley, bin bags splitting open like rotten grapes, and it probably stinks like puke. [Fortunately TARDIS monitors do not transmit smell.] The eerie lemon yellow light from the street lamp barely penetrates back here, and an ambient mist makes the whole scene seem unfocused. Nevertheless, the Doctor hides Anima behind a listing stack of crates so that she’s invisible from the street.

The entrance to Bill and Razor’s flat, set in the rear corner of the brick building, looks like a dull grey service door. Though wider than standard [for Razor’s chair], it still has no handles. Alison decides that it must, like her robot, have remote control options.

Of course, Alison wants to bounce in immediately and say to Bill We’re taking you home! , but the Magister needs to ensure the safety of his Doctor and his Domina. He doesn’t breathe, so the rotten air in Dystopiaville would only befoul his clothes. But his Doctor and his Domina have biological respiratory systems, and that of his Doctor is already compromised by stress- and exertion-induced asthma. He tests the air quality, prescribing gas masks for both of his people, as well as supplemental oxygen for the Doctor to use inside. He also recommends an overlayer if they, like him, don’t want to get their outfits too dirty.

Everyone suits up for their brief shift from Anima to Bill and the Master’s flat. The Doctor wraps themselves in a tatty Inverness that is either the color of moss or made out of moss. The covered tank of oxygen on their back makes their trench coat bulge out. The gas mask that they draw over their head has an integrated hood, circular eye lenses, and a large central filter. Used to wartime gas masks in olive drab, Alison grins when she sees that the Doctor’s hood is glittery turquoise plastic, the filter shiny silver.

The Magister procures a voluminous set of blackish purple robes fit for the Grim Reaper. He puts on his own gas mask. In the style of the Doctor’s, it’s all dull black. When he flips up his deep cowl hood, the rest of his face goes into shadow. All Alison sees is the cylindrical snout of his mask, which, she assumes, he has donned to shield the precious facial hair from noxious fumes.

Borrowing one of her robot’s many fwoopy cloaks, this one with constellations on it, Alison puts it on, along with gloves. A paper face mask follows, then her gas mask. Anima 3D printed it for her, so it has a bee-yellow hood and a sunflower screened on the front end of the filter. Since she has
been airing it out in the Doctor’s jungle in preparation, the interior smells of flowers’ live perfume, rather than plastic chemicals. With their hoods, goggles, gas mask beaks, and capes, Alison thinks that she and the Time Dorks must look like post-apocalyptic plague doctors. She hopes that they don’t scare Bill.

They all put on rubber boots and step outside Anima’s front door. Alison alights directly into a lumpy puddle that makes a disturbingly squishy plop. Following the Magister and the Doctor past the bursting skip, Alison has never been so glad to be closely smothered in her own personal yuck-free zone. Sheets of smoky mist obscure her already lessened vision, and she’s also happy that it’s night so that she can’t see what she just stepped in.

The Magister knocks on Bill and Razor’s door with the four beats that she recognizes from her dream. Come to think of it, she hears that sound whenever the Magister holds her fast; it’s the double pulses of a Time Dork’s hearts. The door opens a crack. “Where there’s life…” says a low voice, undistinguishable as either Bill’s or Razor’s.

Alison comes forward, having already peeled her gas mask up to expose her mouth. This is why she has the paper mask on: because she has to speak the second half of the code. “Where there’s life,” she says, “there’s – “ Even through her paper mask, the Dystopiaville miasma tastes oily and sandy. Without the full protection of her hooded gas mask, she gags on a lightly filtered mouthful of air and hacks.

The Magister catches her as she doubles over, and, by the time she’s upright again, he has pulled her hood down to protect her entire face. “Deep breaths, in and out,” he instructs her, his own hood retracted just enough for speech. “—Hope. Where there’s life,” he says to the person on the other side of the door, “there’s hope.”

The door slides into the wall like the door on a lift, remotely controlled, just as Alison thought. Bill and Razor’s flat occupies the unfinished basement of this brick building. Alison can touch the exposed beams of the ceiling if she stands on tiptoe. Despite being a single room, the flat has been subdivided into a living and kitchen area, some bedrooms, and a large lab space with operating table and lights. There’s a plastic portable latrine and shower stall separated off by sheets, but most interior walls are made of corrugated steel sheets, pallets, and other leftovers from the warehouse next door.

In the dimness of raw bulbs, Alison can tell how deflated everything is. The rug scraps on the floor wear through in spots to a floor whose chill Alison feels even through her boots. The dusty sheets between rooms sag on dirty, bowing ropes. The furniture dribbles upholstery foam through abraded corners. Even the glow of various laptops and monitors in the lab room only reaches the brightness of a sick firefly. They’re trying to stave off entropy here, but the burdens of living in a dead brown place weigh on everything and everyone.

Speaking of everyone, there’s Bill! Dressed in a loose grey cable-knit sweater and maroon leggings laddered at one knee, she stands to Razor’s right. Though not as tall at the Doctor, she yet reminds Alison of them because her entire self curves forward slightly toward the world. She’s a personified question mark, approaching everything inquisitively. “Wow, cool masks,” she says, walking toward them. “I haven’t seen colors that bright in a while. Like for Halloween, yeah?” Her eyebrows, as if shot free, fly up to the peak of her wide forehead.

“Wonderful,” says Razor with the Magister’s familiar sarcasm. Though firmly supported by gel cushions on seat, back, and inner sides, he deliberately shifts his torso toward the left. He leans his chin on his right fist, affecting cool nonchalance. He keeps his right arm loosely on the arm rest, at the end of which is the chair’s joystick box. Also attached in the same area is a tablet on a flexible
gooseneck support, but he has that pushed down and away for now. “Stay back, my dear.” He turns to Bill. “It’s a plague of doctors.”

“Well, that’s not precisely true.” The Magister rolls his mask away enough to free his goatee, which he rearranges to appropriate pointiness. He purposely leaves the rest of his face covered and his hood up, though, clearly plotting a dramatic reveal. “This is my Doctor,” he says, gesturing to them.

The Doctor, hair pointing in twelve different directions now that their mask is off, fiddles with their supplemental oxygen tubes. “Wait. Let me just get these up my nose.” They clip the tubes to their septum, then tuck each one behind an ear. “Hello, I’m the Doctor! I just flew in from another universe, and, boy, are my arms tired!”

“Doctor…” Alison can see Bill realizing that this Doctor obviously doesn’t resemble the one that she has met. Little vertical crinkles form just above and between her eyebrows as she thinks.

“This is my Domina,” continues the Magister.

Alison takes off her outer mask, but decides to leave her paper one on. It’s a good choice too, as the stench of Dystopiaville dishevelment hits her nose: like old books and old rust, masked by a pungency of vinegar used as a cleaning agent. “Hi Bill! I’m Alison – Alison Cheney. I got your message in a dream actually. Are you, um, okay?” Alison moves closer, mounting up on her toes in excitement. “I know all about what happened to your heart and the revolution and the Cyber people. There were a lot of unintended emotional attachments, I guess, to your basic text, so I picked up on all your confusion and despair when you were shot, then your hope and pain when you started working with Razor down here.

“I just want to let you know that, um, I know what it’s like,” Alison goes on. “In other words, you’re not the only one who went out to have some fun and adventures, but then was violated and wounded, and then had all sorts of physical disabilities as a result. I’m here because I know what it’s like to be alienated amongst aliens. I’m going to do everything in my power to get you home, and so are these two Time Dorks.”


“And I,” says the Magister, “am the Master.” He removes his gas mask, tosses off his hood, and flips one side of his cape over his shoulder in a single movement that’s so hammy, cheesy, and utterly bananas that Alison physically restrains herself from applause. “And you, my dear Miss Potts,” he says, with a slight bow toward Bill, “will – “

“No!” Razor’s chair moves so fast that he seems to have teleported instantly within arm’s reach of the Magister. He holds something in his extended right hand that looks vaguely like a sonic screwdriver, but probably does worse things. He looks like he wants to ram it up the Magister’s nose and fire. “You will not make her obey you. She…” He pauses. “She’s with me,” he finishes, glaring at the Magister.

Favoring him with a split-second glance of acknowledgment, the Magister concludes his sentence to Bill, “–Will not have to address me by my name. Professor Thascalos will do. Max Thascalos. Just don’t call me Prof.”

“Magister!” Alison exclaims in happy surprise, squeezing his hand. Refusing to call him by his actual name when they met, she ran through a list of every fictional wizard and/or shithead she could think of. When they made their agreement, she settled on Magister, which was what she used
to call her Latin teachers. Anyway, she’s pleased that he offered Bill an alternative without prompting.

“Thascalos is Greek for master,” Razor tells Bill, “because that’s just how smart I used to be with my aliases.”

“So Razor? That’s master in whatever pseudo-Russian language you pretend is your first, yeah?” Oh yes, Bill indeed does have a wide grin, complete with smirk brackets.

Alison realizes that she didn’t get a sense from her dreams that Bill knew Razor’s true identity. Thus he must have done his own melodramatic I am the Master proclamation after Bill sent her distress call. Even knowing who he really is, she continues to stay with him, even kidding with him companionably. She doesn’t know whether Razor is better than, worse than, or equal to the Magister in honor and trustworthiness. But she does know that the Doctor over here must be truly horrible to impel Bill to give up hope in them and transfer all confidence to, first, a supervillain, and, second, messages to the outside universe that may or may not be answered.

“Is good name!” Razor protests, his accent picking up where it left off in southwestern Europe and moving into Turkey. “Is very sharp, very shiny! Is…time to shave,” he realizes, stroking his chin, dropping the accent in distraction. “Ugh.”

“Right then,” says the Doctor, coughing slightly on the stale indoor air. “So, like I said, me and my Master and Alison are from another universe, and we just popped ‘round through Otalux Four Eleven. That’s how your message got to us actually, Bill. We were hanging around our end of it ’cause I was flushing stuff down it, you know, for science, and your message signal dropped through your end of the black hole and came out ours.

“It’s a lovely trip really, Otalux, that is.” The Doctor’s eyes focus far away, and the inevitable tangent begins: ‘The ol’ girl just loves her some black holes, so all I really have to do is set the coordinates, sit back, and enjoy the ride. The event horizon starts off with a sort of pitchy flavor, like treacle.” They lick their lips thoughtfully, moving from foot to foot minutely, but not yet jumping. “The closer you get to the singularity, though, it refines, tasting more and more like maple syrup.

“Then you hit the singularity, and bam!” The Doctor jumps voluntarily, and everyone else startles involuntarily. “You feel like you’re in the middle of a flower made of light,” they continue, now fairly jigging, describing the glory with soaring arm motions, “and all its leaves are rustling inside you. Somehow everything’s raining and flowing, and you feel yourself growing inward, condensing, becoming more and more the quintessence of yourself, and – “ At this point, they’re squatting, curled up in a ball, voice slightly muffled as a result. They pause, then look up. “It’s really quite refreshing, better than a day in the Epiphany Room. Puts things into perspective, gives you a better sense of your identity, that sort of thing. I recommend it.”

“Well,” says Razor, “you are definitely the Doctor because that is exactly the sort of poetic poppycock that Doctors always come out with.”

“Naturally.” Unfolding, the Doctor bobs their head. “My entire life is poetic poppycock. And plants. But mostly poetic poppycock.”

“You make it sound so lovely,” Bill says, her big eyes even wider. “You make it sound like you’re in the middle of a book coming true, one of those ones where the people blast off into space and just get so overwhelmed by all the sky that they don’t know what to do, only even better. You make it sound like you become the stars, but they go inside you without running a hole through you. They just…grow inside you, like there were there all along, and it’s not painful, and it’s not
scary. It's just…g-g-good and…b-beautiful and…”

“Oh Bill!” The Doctor wrings their hands. “Did I make you sad? I didn’t mean to; I swear I didn’t. I just get so excited when I talk about things that I think are wonderful that, um, I just…”

“I know… That’s why…” Bill wipes her eyes carefully, so as not to smudge her eyeliner, but it smudges anyway. “You… You love everything. You love your companion; you love the…um… Professor Thascalos; you love your TARDIS, poetry, plants, throwing things into black holes just for the hell of it. You even love black holes, yeah? Wish you could have been my Doctor…”

“Awwwww, Bill…” says Alison, but hesitates to give her the hug that she wants to.

“My dear Miss Potts…” says the Magister. Alison reaches out and squeezes his hand; he squeezes hers back, just to have someone to commiserate with.

“Blow your nose.” Razor pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and flicks it toward Bill without eye contact.

“But I could,” says the Doctor. They step tentatively toward Bill, reminding Alison of a long-legged heron. “I mean – I’m my Master’s Doctor, but it’s not like the only relationship I can have in the universe is the one with my inevitable spouse. I like to get to know people; I like people; I like to have friends!” Another step. “You’d just have to understand, though, that I’m not always very good with words and feelings, especially when I’m trying to put words to my feelings or to other people’s.” Now standing beside Bill [under Razor’s vigilant eye], they bend their neck to her. “Are you cold?” they ask as Bill huddles her arms to her chest, occasionally ducking down to wipe her eyes.

“Doctor,” says the Magister quietly, “Miss Potts is as my Domina when she is most distressed. She shivers and curls up because she grieves her loneliness and her loss.”

“Oh…but…then…” The Doctor glances a few times between the Magister and Bill. “Then you should hold her fast, right? That’s what she needs?”

“Don’t,” snaps Razor to the Magister, “touch Miss Potts.”

The Doctor’s gaze takes a few circuits from the Magister to Alison to Razor to Bill, as if they’re dizzy with confusion. “Bill? I just have to warn you that I’m not really good at it, like I might accidentally elbow you, but, erm… Should I be holding you fast now? What I mean to say is… Do you want me to hug you?”

Bill, snorting into Razor’s handkerchief, nods. And then the Doctor, the Doctor who never hugs anyone except the Magister, the Doctor who jabbed Alison with all their ribs the one time that she tried holding them fast, the Doctor who sometimes seems to have trouble arranging their body position – the Doctor lets Bill lean against their narrow chest and puts their arms around her as if they always had a place waiting for her there.
Alison and Bill Become Acquainted

Chapter Summary

The Magister and Razor sling insults. Alison and Bill meet Ranju, a Cyborganic kid. Alison gives Bill a present that makes her cry. Gaydar is pinged, awkward flirting attempted.

Everyone settles into some rather frayed couches and chairs the color of outdated condiments. Razor says he’d offer them some tea, but then they’d think he was trying to kill them. The Magister gives him decent tea and eyeliner, both from his personal stash. Razor retreats to his lab with both and, after chemical analysis, determines that his counterpart is not trying to poison him. The Magister’s tea is prepared and consumed by all except for the Magister and Bill, who have no digestive/excretory systems. No one dies.

Razor has no trouble believing that the communications equipment he rigged for Bill generated a message to Time Dorks from another universe. He, however, has a huge problem with the relationship of the Dorks who answered the call. The Magister explains that the Doctor made him into a robot after he died. The Doctor adds that the Magister heroically sacrificed himself to save Gallifrey and end the Time War, and the Magister makes a face like he’s been sliced in the guts with a craft knife. Razor assumes that his counterpart only stays around the Doctor because he’s been programmed to. The Magister says that he trained himself out of that programming a while ago. Now he keeps separate house [well, TARDIS, actually] from the Doctor and spends time with his inevitable spouse of his own volition.

Razor sprays a mouthful of tea. “Wait. You’re saying that, in an alternative universe, I’m a fucking love doll that’s married to the person who pumps me up?”

The Magister lowers his eyelids just enough to seem deeply bored. The edge of one eyebrow flickers, as if his ennui is so great that he can’t be arsed to push it any higher. “You appear to have caught the human obsession with relating everything in the universe to gender and/or erotic activities. An acute case too, I’m afraid. You really should consult a Doctor.” The Doctor laughs. Razor looks like he might spew again out of nausea.

Alison and Bill exchange glances. Bill asks her if she wants a tour. Alison recognizes the offer as an excuse to evade a Time Dork pissing contest, so she says yes.

The two of them peek into the other rooms of the flat. Alison glimpsed them all from the front door, and they look just the same up close as from a distance. Dust has fused indelibly with all
materials, from the lino countertops to the ceiling fans’ blades to the shower stall door. Everything appears as if in photos burned by time: all colors cooked away except for a dross of sickly browns. Musty particles, as of crumbling books, tickle Alison’s sinuses; she sneezes into her paper mask.

The flat has a third bedroom, tucked away behind Bill’s, and there Bill introduces Alison to Ranju. She’s a tall, prepubescent kid, maybe twelve, with a short torso, long limbs, and shorn black hair, just now growing in. Evacuated by Bill and repersoned by Razor late in the Cyber process, she has been living with them for longer than usual – three weeks instead of one – as she acclimatizes to independence. For her, this means doing all the puzzles that she couldn’t in hospital. Because she wears a silver Cyber suit that leaves only her round, red-brown face visible, she reminds Alison of the Magister.

Ranju holds a clipboard in her lap, writing on it as slowly as if engraving. Bill introduces Alison and Ranju. Ranju’s face suddenly flares into a full involuntary smile. “Do you have…word searches?” she asks in an electronically processed voice. Her features then revert to the smoothness of someone with partial facial paralysis. Her robotification obviously affects her ability to make expressions. “Or…mazes? Rebuses? Any…kind of…puzzles?”

“I made you like fifteen word searches the other day!” Bill points out. “You did them all already, didn’t you?”

Ranju smiles and nods, turning back to her crossword. “I need a…word. Murders. Five…letters.”

“Irons,” says Bill with a wry curl of her mouth.

“Hah. Hah. That’s…what it…should be.”

“Slays?” guesses Alison.

“Yes. Slays. As…in Ranju slays…Irons. Five…letters apiece.” Ranju nods, and it takes Alison a moment to realize that each word of her sentence does in fact have five letters. “Thanks.”

On the way to Bill’s room, Bill explains that Irons, the Surgeon/General of Dystopiaville, rules the city as a dictator. No one, not even their cronies, knows much about them or where they came from. They seem to have been here since the city’s foundation, using its residents in gruesome experiments that resulted in the Cyber conversion process. Every generation or so, someone tries an assassination attempt, but they always fail. Rumor has it that you could chop Irons in two, but
they’d just laugh. It’s not even like they’re a robot; it’s like whatever keeps them alive isn’t even in their body.

In a corner of the converted basement, Bill’s room is smaller and sparer than most hotel quarters. There’s a twin bed with a holey wool blanket and a flat pillow, an end table with lamp, a bookshelf of carpentry scraps, and a small wardrobe of limp clothes hanging from an overhead pipe. One entire wall is covered with color postcard-size pictures of rolling green pastures: _The Truth About Floor 1058 Solar Farms_! A water stain has caused some of the hills to smudge into those on cards below them.

At eye level across from Bill’s bed, so she can see it every morning when she wakes up, is a plastic rainbow, that stylized arc with a puffy cloud at either end. Every single one of its colors shines as if just printed. Written on the orange stripe is _Earth: It may be fucking shite, but at least there are rainbows_. “Yeah.” Bill rolls her eyes. “That’s Razor trying to cheer me up. You know there’s a problem with your Doctor when the guy who calls himself _an evil genius_ starts looking sort of okay by comparison.”

Taking in the greenery and the rainbow, Alison says, “Oh okay, so maybe you will like what I brought you.” She reaches under her cape.

“Tea and eyeliner?” Bill makes a wide grin.

“No.” Alison produces a handful of miniature sunflowers, slightly squashed around the edges by their travels under her cape. Their ends are securely sealed in a flexible plastic vase of water and nutrients. “When I saw Dystopiaville in my dreams, what struck me was the lack of trees and flowers and green. So the Doctor let me cut these from their jungle. That’s what they call their greenhouse complex with all their gardens. Of course, if I had known you liked rainbows, I could have brought over all different colors.”

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you so much…” Clutching the sunflowers in both hands as if they’re a lifeline, Bill starts crying again. “I never thought I’d see… I just miss Earth so much. I miss flowers and trees and green. I miss air that I can breathe without gagging and that doesn’t make my hair look like I’ve been electrocuted. I miss sunshine and rainbows and days with no clouds and actual blue sky. I miss libraries and books and fashion magazines. I miss the new styles and the latest colors and the hottest designers. And people – I miss people. I miss the girls out in the summer, in their shorts and camis and bikinis and sundresses. Their hair is waving in the breeze, and they’re smiling, and their skin is like shining in the sun.”

Alison’s gaydar starts trumpeting like Anima after just going through a black hole. “I’m an Earth people!” she says to Bill. “I just don’t really like shorts. Or camis. Or sundresses. Uh, yeah. But girls in summer are nice, though. Or, you know, whatever season.”
Bill sniffs a few times. “So… wait. So the girl who shows up to rescue me just happens to be another lesbian with a bouquet of flowers in her hand and a sunflower on her gas mask? How romantic!” She’s got a rainbow smile; it’s glowing through her tears. “Wow [sniff]! Wow [sniff]! Two in a row.”

When Alison makes confused eyebrows, Bill says that another woman answered her distress signals before Alison did. Her name was Clara Oswald, and she was just Bill’s age; she had even died under the Doctor’s watch too. But she was a white girl, favored so much by the Doctor that they gave her a TARDIS and made her their successor. The Doctor had loved her so much that she had trouble believing that they mistreated Bill. Wanting someone who treated her with respect and accepted her as she was, Bill let Clara go.

“It was you, Alison,” says Bill, her rainbow smile glimmering brighter. “I was looking for a girl like you.”

Alison grins back. “Um, sorry to be pedantic, but I like woman. I feel like girls are like under twenty-one or something. And I like people of any gender, so I say queer. I’m an amateur etymologist, but I’m in a dead heat for the title of Control Freak of the Universe, so I like things to be precise.”

Bill giggles. “No, that’s Razor, at least over here. Who’s your competition over there?”

“My… The… Um… All right, well, he said you could call him Professor Thascalos. I call him the Magister.”

“So he’s like your universe’s version of Razor, only he’s a robot and married to your Doctor and good…ish?”

“Well, let’s just say that they were both horrible little shits when they weren’t together, but, as soon as they got together, they started bringing out the best in each other.”

“And what’s he to you? Mine likes to think he’s somewhere between boss and teacher, with a bit of the crabby old guy who yells at the damn kids to get off his lawn, but actually secretly doesn’t really mind it.”
“He’s my…” — _My robot, my Magister, the one who makes me his good Domina._ That’s what Alison wants to say, but who knows if Bill understands kink, much less kink-based negotiation with a Time Dork? “I trust him with my life and vice versa,” she says at last, carefully avoiding labels. “And I trust him with my mind and vice versa. He’s the only person in the universe that I would ever let inside my head.”

“Not even the…your Doctor?”

“No. See – the Magister and I understand how each other thinks in a way that the Doctor doesn’t.”

“No kidding! Both of you told me exactly what I could and couldn’t call you. You’re very into what you are to other people, yeah?”

“Yeah. Names as relational identities.”

“So why won’t you tell me what you are to him?”

Okay, so not much gets past those big observant brown eyes. Bill reminds Alison of her robot that way. But for her robot, observations are about power; he knows something you don’t, and he’s going to show you exactly what that is. For Bill, questions are less of a challenge and more of a way to learn things. She doesn’t want to prove power over Alison; she just wants to know about her. “Um…” says Alison, “because I’m afraid that you’ll misunderstand me. It’s like…like…partners, but not the way that he and the Doctor are partners. We’re like partners of the mind.”

“Equal partners? –’Cause mine still thinks I’m his assistant. Pffft!” Bill revolves her eyes in their sockets.

“Oh yeah, we’re definitely equals. When he was explaining how I picked up all the emotions in your message, but not the text, he said something like _Your hearts heard hers._ He does that all the time, not even consciously. He refers to me like I’m a Time Dork with two hearts.”

“Aww. That’s kind of sweet. He really likes you! Why couldn’t I get one like that?” Bill’s shoulders slump; her question-mark frame droops.

“I don’t know if this helps, but I’m pretty sure you just got a Doctor a few minutes ago, the Doctor from my universe, I mean. They really do love everything and everyone, and they really do care
very deeply about everything, but you literally got closer to them in like five minutes than I have in the entire time I’ve known them. Seriously…they avoid touching people unless they’re really comfortable with them, and even then it doesn’t always go smoothly. But you… They just took you right in.”

“Really? You really think so?” Now those big brown eyes are shining like their owner has just heard a miracle.

Why is she so surprised? Alison wonders. Who could resist smiling at her, getting close to her, and taking her in? Who would ever dream of breaking such an eager, curious, trusting heart? Bill deserves people she can trust and people she can hold fast to. Everyone should love Bill because Bill is wonderful.
Alison and Bill Talk Sci-Fi

Chapter Summary

Alison and Bill talk about a Jame Tiptree, Jr. short story. Bill gives a little background on her life before getting a hole busted through her. And something horrible happens, but no one will tell Alison what.

Bill asks her if she likes to read. Alison rhapsodizes a bit about fantasy, especially if there’s magic, and fairy tales. Bill asks about sci-fi, her favorite kind of fiction. Alison says she’s really not into it. “I don’t care about how people learned how to actually warp space with the Alcubierre drive and wrinkle it up so they could hop from point to point,” she says. “I want to hear about the drama that’s, you know, created by that technology. As for the tech itself, just slap a piece of jargon on it, and I’ll be happy: *quarkulating reverse gyronymicon* or something.”

“Yeah, right? Just give something a big important title, and people will swallow anything that comes after. *Well, yes, the problem seems to be a fluctuation in the quantum chronometrical field.* Of course, if a show starts to use that too much, you’re like, *You’re just trying to cover plot holes.*”

Bill cups her hands as if shouting at the TV. “Why don’t you buy some intergalactic spackle?”

Alison snickers. *The Defenders of Earth* writers actually used the quantum chronometrical field as their go-to scientific filler often enough for Defenders to create T-shirts, posters, and, in these days, memes bearing the phrase. Does *Defenders* exist in both her and Bill’s universes? Do they like the same show? Is it even the same show? “Oh, you mean like sci-fi TV?”

Bill shakes her head. “Not TV, no. I mean, I like one show, but I’m really more into books. My mum – one of the few things I have left from her is her book collection. I thought that, if I read her books enough, maybe I could find out what kind of person she was. So I read them and read them and read them, all these little pulpy paperbacks with cheap paper, yellow edges, horrid Times New Roman, smelling like a dusty attic. Jules Verne, Ursula LeGuin, Mary Shelley, Octavia Butler, Marion Zimmer Bradley, James Tiptree, Jr., Tananarive Due.

“And I never really found out anything concrete,” Bill goes on, “but I figured that she was really into women, Black women. I don’t know about sexually, but I mean she really concentrated on us, what we experienced in society, what our stories were, what our future could be. I figured that she must have wanted to change the world, to make it better, you know?” She clenches a fist at her chest almost unconsciously, as if coalescing her own strength. “I hope she got to,” she says in a low voice.

“Well, she helped to make you, and you’re an awesome, kind, sweet person,” says Alison, “so we at least know of one way she made things better.” She doesn’t add that Bill also has amazing eyebrows and smirk brackets.

The amazing eyebrows mount as Bill’s smirk brackets appear. “Thank you. You’re so nice! What’d you have to go and live in another universe for?”

Alison, detecting both sincere compliments and sincere regret in her comment, can’t think of an appropriately humorous response. “Um,” she says. “Thanks.”
Avoiding each other’s eyes, both of them silently agree to back away from that subject. “So have you read James Tiptree?” Bill asks, pulling something from a shelf made of boards and breeze blocks. Alison isn’t sure, so Bill elaborates. Tiptree was a U.S. sci-fi author, actually named Alice Sheldon, most active as a short story writer during the 1970s and 1980s. As a disabled person, Bill now feels weird reading the works of someone who murdered her sick, blind husband and then killed herself. But she grew up on Tiptree, and the stories still mean a lot to her.

Bill explains: “She’s very into sex – hetero sex, but still – and feminism in a really interesting way, but also about this like...huge sort of horror. It’s not like monster horror, but more like Oh shit, I just went out into space and realized how enormous everything is, so where does my little ol’ free will fit in to a place like this?”

“Sort of like the horror of existentialism running up against nihilism,” Alison guesses.

“Um,” says Bill, curling an eyebrow at the polysyllables. “Maybe?”

Alison wants to kick herself. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to show off or anything. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. Sometimes I forget that not everyone grew up reading the dictionary. Existentialism is pretty much Each person is important because their choices define who they are, and nihilism... Oh, this is really cool, ’cause nihil is Latin for nothing, so you can kind of see how nihilism is like literally nothingism, right? It’s like Fuck this shit; it’s all pointless.” She throws her hands in the air.

“Fuck-this-shit-ism!” Bill says with a giggle.

Alison drops her hands to her lap. “Sorry again. I wasn’t trying to teach you or imply that you didn’t know anything. I just like words and their histories, and I get really enthusiastic about them. Violently enthusiastic. Ignominiously even.” Ignominious is another cool word, since it comes from a Latin adjective meaning nameless, implying that to be shamed is to be unnamed or misnamed, but she decides to keep that to herself.

“Like the Doctor does about black holes.” Bill nods eagerly. “—Or anything really. Doctor’s excited about everything, yeah? It’s cute. It’s not really teaching like lecturing, though. It’s like learning through having fun. I mean, you’re having so much fun.”

Did she just imply that I was cute? Alison asks herself. Is Bill Potts flirting with me? And what if, somehow, despite my chronic lack of clues in this arena, I’m flirting with her? Is that okay? I wish I had a manual for these things. “Um,” she replies. “Thanks.”

“So,” says Bill, “since you gave me something, here’s something for you.” She holds out a pamphlet made from sheets of A4, folded in half and worn soft with great use. “I’ve read it a lot since I got it, and I think, from what you’ve said, you’ll get something out of it too. It’s got some free will versus fuck-this-shit-ism in it, so it’s not the happy ending you said you liked, but it’s still worth reading.” She places the pamphlet in Alison’s hands and looks at her for a few seconds expectantly, her eyes wide and all dark with dilated pupils.

Alison thinks of how the Doctor sometimes runs out of words and quotes Dickinson, Shakespeare, and other poetic poppycock to communicate. She feels like something similar is happening here. Bill is giving her a story by Tiptree, but she’s also giving her a story about Bill Potts. The story may also be about Alison Cheney too. She reads the title page:

And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side

James Tiptree, Jr.
“Let me guess. Razor gave this to you,” Alison says. Bill says that yes, he somehow procured the text, typed it up, and made the pamphlet for her. “But this is important!” Alison cries. “This is like one of your links to your mum and your home. I can’t take this.” Bill insists, claiming that she’s pretty much memorized it already. Alison suggests that Bill give her a summary; then she can have Anima call up the text so that Alison can read it, while Bill keeps her own copy. Bill puts her eyebrows down a bit, obviously wanting to match Alison’s significant gift with one of her own, but she concedes.

_and I Awoke_ takes place on Big Junction, Bill says, a space station where cargo ships come and go from across the universe, along with a variety of extraterrestrial species. It’s a conversation between two humans. One looks at the aliens through the eyes of a crush. He thinks they’re all beautiful and wonderful; he can’t wait to meet them. The other one has a much different perspective. “To put it bluntly,” says Bill, “he’s fucked a few aliens, and frankly he’s unimpressed with the whole arrangement.”

Bill adds that she’s not giving the story to Alison because she thinks Alison has fucked aliens, especially not Time Dorks. Both of them rapidly agree that human/Time Dork sex is not for them, being, as they are, interested in human-type people who are around their age and level of power. The less they think about it, the better.

“See – the story talks about sex, but it’s really a power thing, yeah?” says Bill. “And not a good power thing, like sharing or agreeing what you’re going to get out of it or anything.” She shuttles her hand between their two hearts a few times, as if weaving a line of communication. “—But a bad power thing, like leaching or draining.” She pulls her hands down quickly, closing them into fists, like water slipping down a drain. “The aliens are all so amazing to the humans, but the aliens don’t really care about them. They just see them as toys, something they can have fun with for a little while and then move on.

“So yeah, it’s basically sci-fi Dracula. The aliens only want us for entertainment or food or whatever, but we don’t care. We have so many stars in our eyes that we follow them everywhere because we think we’re so lucky just to be their toilet roll. We let our hearts be sucked out of us, because we’re so charmed. From what you said earlier, I thought that…well, that you’d know too,” she finishes softly, meeting Alison’s eyes.

Alison nods, scooting closer to Bill on her bed. “Yeah, yeah. My story’s not exactly like yours because neither the Doctor nor the Magister betrayed me, but I have been mind-raped…twice.” She tells about the first time with the Shalka on Earth, then about the second time on Finisterra with the psychic vampire thing. Her broken heart, she says, didn’t come from a specific person’s betrayal, but from the realization that the rest of the universe was just like Earth. It was full of things that considered her less than a person, nothing more than an object, and they would do everything they could to take away her humanity.

Along with a broken heart came her broken brain; that is, the two mind-fucks gave her brain damage and various problems. She lists them for Bill: inability to concentrate hard for very long, need to sleep for four hours in the middle of every day, headaches, vertigo, and going really limp after feeling strong emotion. Her broken heart is healing a bit, but that brain damage she’s learning to live with because she’s damned if she’s going to let any psychic powers like her Time Dorks’ try to fix things. Surgical and/or technological help would probably be okay, but nothing else goes in her head unless she says it does.

“Wow.” Bill looks into her lap, then at Alison. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry. I don’t mean like I feel
“Sorry for you in a snobby way. I feel so bad that such horrible shit happened to you. People are mean and nasty sometimes, and so is the universe.”

“Yeah,” says Alison. “I know. But thank you. It’s nice to meet you, not just because you’re another Black British woman, but because you know what it’s like traveling with Time Dorks.”

“Yeah. Knowing you’re not alone…” Bill ends the sentence with a smile.

Alison realizes then why Bill told her about And I Awoke. The story says, This is what happened to me, and here’s how I understand what happened to you. The story says, You heard my heart in your dream, and I heard your heart in your words. Bill’s heart is right up there in the list of the awesomest things about her, along with her big eyes and her curious question-mark way of standing.

“Hey, Bill, can I ask you something?” Alison ventures. “Can you tell me a little bit about how you got from Earth to Newland? You crashed, and your friends died, right? I completely understand if you don’t want to talk about it because it’s too painful, but I just thought I’d ask.”

“Well, yeah, it is painful.” Bill nods. “And it’s always going to hurt, but I’ve had a year to deal with it, so it’s not like it’s the day right after I was shot. And it’s not like the Doctor and the other people I came here with are dead. They’re still alive, but they don’t give a shit about me, so the friends that I thought I had – they died along with me when I had my heart ripped out.”

About two years ago, Bill says, she worked in the St. Luke’s University in Bristol, where she felt herself fading away. She lived rent-free with her foster mom Moira, which was nice, but she also had to endure comments about what sort of proper young man she could bring home, which wasn’t. Kids in her age waited in her canteen line and talked about their books, their projects, and classes, but didn’t see her because they thought she was a menial drone. The GLBTQ Employees Union didn’t appeal because it was basically posh white men and women, and the GLBTQ Student Alliance would probably recognize her as a non-student and kick her out. She spent lots of time in her head, chatting about life to an imaginary version of her mum, or in her sci-fi, trying to read herself out of this world and into one where she mattered.

But then she even started to bore her own self, so she began to audit the Doctor’s classes. Without a name or even a particular specialty, the Doctor lectured on whatever struck their fancy. They connected unrelated ideas into shimmering webs of concepts, pirouetting with glee at their own brilliance. “It was like your Doctor,” Bill says, “with the same energy, the same passion, even the same sort of dancing when they got really happy. And there was love too for all these ideas and concepts, so I thought they loved everything and everyone in the universe too.

"It took me a while to figure out the difference, though," Bill continues. "Your Doctor may not be able to tell why I’m shivering, but they care about what’s going on inside me. They don’t even really know me, and they care. The Doctor here, though, likes things and ideas, but they don’t care about other people besides themselves. They pretend to, but they don’t really, not at all.”

The Doctor pretended to notice her, pretended to think that she was good for private tutoring, then upgraded her to adventure fodder. “Saying upgrading on purpose,” Bill clarifies, “’cause that’s what supporters of Irons call it when someone is Cyber converted. Like it’s a good thing to take away people’s free will and march them around in your own brainless war games! –Or your own selfish adventures, in the Doctor over here’s case.”

The Doctor’s indifference to Bill culminated in her most recent adventure. The Doctor dragged her here against her will to be bait in a trap for Missy, yet another version of the Master, who claimed that she was now good. Then they let her get turned into a human doughnut and made a sad face
when she was taken away. Only Bill understood knew the real reason for their tears: they had just lost an audience member, and it hurt them right in the ego.

Thanks to time dilation, a few minutes have gone by up there, at the other end of the ship, for the Doctor. However, it’s been nearly a year down here for Bill. She’s still hurt and angry, of course. But she’s had some time to grieve, and she has been doing something much better and more helpful than being the Doctor’s pawn. She tells herself that she’s carrying on her mum’s legacy of wanting to change the world. Sometimes it makes her feel better, and sometimes it makes her just miss home even more.

Alison listens, shoulders stiff, hands knotted about one another, unable to move for horror. “Aw, Bill…” she says. “To be betrayed by someone that you trusted to hold you fast – that’s the worst thing in the world…in the universe.”

“Hold me fast? Is that a technical term in your universe? When I was crying, the Doctor said that the Prof – whoops, the Professor – should do that to me.”

“No, it’s just something me and my robot started using, and then the Doctor picked it up too. In The Ballad of Tam Lin, Tam Lin tells Janet, Hold me fast, and fear me not, and that’s how she overcomes the fairies’ spell on him: by holding onto him. So holding fast is when you’re there for someone or they’re there for you, no matter how scared either of you are, no matter how powerless either of you feel. And you wanted the Doctor over here to do that, but… Well, they proved that they’re not worthy of you at all.”

“Well, that sure makes it sound better than me being foolish for trusting them, but still… If not even the brilliant psychic magical alien can really see me, then…well… Who can?”

Me, says Alison inside her head. My robot. The Doctor from my universe. Anyone who bothers to drop their preconceptions and take a moment to appreciate your sheer brilliance. She’s about to speak, but…

“Fuck!” Bill stiffens like a siren has just gone off, then jumps to her feet. She would be running out of her room, but, as it is, she just manages a determined walk. She turns around. “Come on! We’ve gotta go!”

Pocketing the Tiptree, Alison rushes to Bill’s side. “What’s going on?”

“You didn’t hear that? Razor just said – “

“I was listening to you, not whatever they were saying out there.”

“No, telepathically. He gave the signal…in our heads.” Bill touches the side of her skull just above her ear.

“Not my head. I shield against that shit.”

“Bill. Alison.” Ranju’s voice comes through the sheet separating her room from Bill’s. “Can you push…me?”

“Alison, can you?” Bill asks as the two of them enter Ranju’s room. “My chest is…giving me some trouble.”

“Sure, no problem. Don’t worry, Ranju,” says Alison, stationing herself behind Ranju’s chair. “But where? What the fuck is going on?”
“Alison! Bill! Ranju!” The Doctor tries to enter, but blunders into a sheet, pulling it from its line. With a few sneezes, they try again, the sheet now covering one shoulder like a badly folded toga. “Oh good, all three of you are here. The Master’s gone to get Anima.” They cough harshly, nearly to the point of gagging, then resume. “He’s going to rematerialize her in the kitchen, and we’ll all go into orbit around Newland. I’d say less than five minutes to grab anything you can’t live without.”

“But why?” Alison cries. “What did Razor say? Will someone please just tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“Ms. Kim, his logistics chief, sent him an emergency mental message. The Night Patrol caught a recently repersoned Cyborganic and interrogated them. The Sewage Street safe house may be compromised, so all safe houses are moving to their contingency locations. And the Night Patrol’s definitely on their way here, so everyone here is moving onto Anima.”
Everyone Evacuates

Chapter Summary

Everyone evacuates Bill and Razor’s flat. This takes way longer than it should, as all the control freaks try to take charge.

Alison, Bill, the Doctor, Ranju, and Razor gather around the edges of the shabby living space. The Magister materializes Anima in the center. The front door pops open, now wider than usual, and a ramp extends to bridge the short distance between the floor and Anima’s lintel. The Magister sticks his head out. “Everyone on, please!”

The Doctor, who has been conferring in a low voice with Razor in between coughing fits, glances up. “But there’s a drive he needs: repersoning surgery records or something. I can [cough] help…”

“You can help by getting in Anima and not dying of respiratory failure.” The Magister gives the Doctor such a glare that they bolt into Anima, presumably for their inhaler or more extreme measures.

Alison sends Bill before her, then pushes Ranju’s chair up the ramp and inside as quickly and carefully as she can. “Wow.” Ranju cranes her neck at the controls, catwalks, and spotlight. “Bigger inside.”

“So…what?” Razor is shouting to the Magister. “You expect me to just teleport a fifteen-kilo CPU from my lab into your ship?”

The Magister hops out from Anima. “In.” He jerks his head at the open door. “I’ll get it.”

Razor doesn’t move. “You don’t know where it is.”

“I will if you tell me, you fool. You can die. I can’t. In, please!”

Alison, Bill, and Ranju cluster by the time rotor. Something on a monitor catches Bill’s eye. “I think…” She squints. “Yeah, this is one of our security feeds: aerial view of our building. Prof!” she yells to the Magister. Her finger marks a small phalanx of white-clad figures marching along the front of the warehouse. “Night Patrol’s next door. Here in like two minutes!”

“Unplugging the drive!” he calls from across the flat.

Razor zooms into the control room and up to the central console. Bracing his feet on the floor between the edge of his seat and the beginning of the foot plate, he clamps one hand on either arm rest and pushes himself to a standing position. He seizes the railing around the time rotor first with his right hand, then with his left. He darts a quick look at Bill, telling her something telepathically.

Bill gives a small nod of understanding, then bends to Ranju. “You and me are going to sit down over here,” she says as they move to a counter against the wall, “and stay out of everyone’s way, ‘cause my chest – ow!” She plops into a chair by the door and massages the area around her mechanical parts.

“Pentas,” says Ranju. “By…right wheel.”
“Are you ignoring me, little Dominatrix?” Behind Alison, Razor snaps his fingers at her like the Magister does at the Doctor.

Whipping around, Alison snaps and points at him with both hands. “Hey! Arsehole! My name is Alison.”

“Talking to you telepathically,” Razor mutters, stretching across the console to flip levers.

“I have mental shields. Try it out loud.”

“Shut up. Ready for…take-off.” Standing and reaching introduces painful pauses in Razor’s speech. “Rear propulsors on: red switch by left elbow.”

Alison throws the switch. “Rear propulsors on.”

Razor pushes more buttons. “Landing gear: pink buttons…above rhinestone dials. –Oh,” he says, splayed out on the console and breathing heavily, “and my name is…the Master.” Despite his awkward posture, he still gives her a superior smirk.

That was clearly an As long as you’re not using my name, I’m not using yours challenge. "And if you think I’m calling you that, you know fuck-all about humans,” returns Alison.

There’s a dull thunk against the flat’s metal door. Stuff rattles. Grabbing Anima’s door frame with one hand, Bill calls into the apartment. “Prof, Prof, c’mon, Prof! Night Patrol at the door!”

The Doctor appears from Anima’s interior, divested of oxygen tubes and breathing much more regularly. “Is she good to go?” Razor thinks something to him. “Jolly good. Where’s my Master?”

The Night Patrol hits the metal door again. It bows inward, about to give. With another strike, the door falls, and a bunch of Cyber people hurry in, some with a battering ram. Unlike the ones Alison knows from her dream, these people wear plate armor that gives their heavy tread a metallic ring. Some take firing stances and train weapons on Anima. “Step out of the blue box,” they say to those inside.

The Magister finally exits Razor’s lab, hauling two armfuls of equipment with dangling cords. “Stop. Computer down. Hands up.” Other Night Patrol members aim at him.

The Magister follows only their first order. “Drop your weapons,” he says, as if mentioning that tea is ready. “Turn around. Leave.” The Night Patrol freezes instead, wavering. “Get out of here! Leave! Obey me!” Some of them start lowering their weapons slowly, but they don’t go.

“Can’t do it…alone, dolt!” Razor could probably think to the Magister, but he obviously prefers yelling at him. “Need my help…to…overcome Cyber network…Count to three…”

“On the count of three then,” the Magister agrees with a nod. “One, two, three.”

“Drop your weapons. Turn around. Get as far from this alley as you can. Obey me!” In unison, the two Masters of Mind-Fuckery combine their psychic strength and send it toward the Night Patrol. At long last, the Cyber people set down their weapons and file out the door. The Magister leaps into Anima and shuts the door telekinetically.

“And we’re off! Yippee!” exclaims the Doctor. Bellyflopping across the central console, they release a lever, and Anima begins to dematerialize.

Razor addresses the Magister: “Did you…?”
Just as Anima launches from the flat, a huge explosion wallops her and all the passengers. The humans curse. Alison, her eyes shut, wraps her fingers tightly around a bar and wonders if Time Dorks ever swear. She does hear something, but it sounds like the Doctor. How can they be singing for joy at a time like this?

The ship bounces and sloshes for probably half a minute, though it feels like half an hour, accompanied by an exultant tune from the Doctor. Eventually the trajectory slows to an easy drift. “Everyone all right?” calls the Doctor. “Wow, that was a trip! Like a merry-go-round in a centrifuge! Wheeeeee!”

“Dizzy,” says Ranju.

“Ooooh, me too,” groans Bill.

Alison opens her eyes and stares at a fixed point on the floor before responding. “I’m…okay.” She pries herself loose from the central console and stretches up to her full height. She finds Bill and Ranju across the room, the first with her arm around the second. “Are you two okay?”


“You goof.” Bill pats her on the shoulder. “Ranju and I don’t have stomachs,” she says to Alison, “so, even if we get dizzy, at least we can’t throw up.”

“Lucky,” Alison, whose esophagus is still quivering, mutters.

“Master? Uh, Masters? Where are you?” the Doctor calls, searching the control room’s shadows. Anima adjusts the usually dim illumination to the standard brightness in, say, the library; everyone squints.

“Just hanging out [cough] on top of ol’ Metal Arse here,” answers Razor with a wheeze. “He’d make a decent mattress, but he keeps trying to crush my rib cage.” Turning in the direction of the voice, Alison sees the Magister on his back, one arm wrapped about Razor, who’s kind of on top of him.

“Oh dear. Did you fall?” The Doctor peers about the console.

“No,” says Razor, deadpan. “It was a vicious gravity attack.” He swings off the Magister, then jabs him with an elbow. “Give me your arm, you lummox.”

Without a word, the Magister stands, then bends forward, offering both hands to Razor. He, down on one knee, pushes up off the Magister’s hands so that he can stand. Now that Razor’s upright, the Magister lets go of his left hand and moves to Razor’s side, matching his slow steps back to his chair. Razor catches the console railing in his left hand, and the Magister lets go of his right, but still watches attentively as Razor positions himself in his chair.

“In answer to your earlier question,” the Magister says eventually to Razor, “I did in fact find the self-destruct switch in your lab, just where I expected to be, and I deployed it, hence the blast.”

Razor adjusts a minute amount this way, a minute amount that way, finally seating himself comfortably. He closes his eyes for longer than a blink. Suddenly some of the reds drop out from his complexion, rendering him greyishly pale. The cumulative effects of standing at the controls, yelling at the Magister, mind-fucking the Night Patrol, and then crashing over on top of the Magister descend upon him at once. Alison, who can almost hear the pain hit him, winces in empathy.
Razor swings his tablet up from the side of his chair and arranges the gooseneck arm so that it holds the tablet at a slight angle, almost on top of the edge of his right arm rest. Thus he can reach the screen with little movement of his right hand. He taps the screen a few times, and the tablet speaks for him in a remarkably accurate rendition of his own voice: “My dear Miss Potts, is there pentacholamine in my left pocket?”

Bill checks a pouch hanging from the left arm rest of his chair. “Sorry. No.”

Blowing out through his teeth and rolling his eyes, Razor bangs the screen extra hard a few times. Somehow he elicits a tone of growling frustration from the device: “Anti-Agony Jeremiad Number Twelve goes here. Anti-Agony Jeremiad Number Twelve goes here. Anti-Agony Jeremiad Number Twelve goes here!”

“Um. Um. Um. Mister…Razor sir. I have…two…pentas.” Ranju speaks up from her place by the wall. “Alison. Please give.” She catches Alison’s eye and extends her arm.

“Miss Wijewardena.” Razor inclines his head at her as Alison deposits the pills in his outstretched palm. “Thank you.” He eyes Alison with a calculating expression, obviously plotting some sort of devious shit, but faces the Magister, who’s at his right, instead. “Get me a glass of water,” he commands, not even bothering with the pretense of courtesy.

Alison wants to smack Razor upside the head for ordering her robot around, but her robot doesn’t seem to be perturbed by Razor’s tone as much as his condition. Cocking his head, her robot regards Razor with some concern. “Do you need anything beside?” he asks. Jamming her fists in her pockets, Alison resolves to keep her hands to herself.

“No at the moment,” says Razor sweetly. “Run along now.” The Magister gives him the requested drink, and he tosses back the pills with a swallow. “Ah! Has Earth developed pentas in my absence? This shit is the best; it metabolizes in like ten minutes.” He rests the empty cup on his arm rest; the Magister takes it from him. “You’re quite the obedient little machine, aren’t you?”

Back when Alison gave her contract terms to her robot and the Doctor, her robot responded with a few of his own. Just like her, he wanted to be respected as a person, but his requirements, of course, accommodated his mechanical nature. He said that she could call him a robot, even the Doctor’s robot, but never computer, toy, servant, or machine. Alison, to Razor’s left, opens her mouth to berate him.

“Tace,” says her robot, more mouthing the word than speaking it.

Alison snaps her head up. He’s just going to let Razor get away with that?

Her robot has no need to read her thoughts, as her indignant expression is enough. He nods almost imperceptibly.

But… The objection is on the tip of her tongue.

Her robot shakes his head at her. Alison subsides. Knowing Razor, she’ll probably have plenty of other occasions to yell at him. She grits her teeth.

“Hey, Master!” says the Doctor, now that Anima is in smooth orbit around Newland. Both the Magister and Razor turn toward the Doctor. “Uh…no…Razor Master. Do you have any idea of who the Night Patrol got?”

“Ms. Lee thinks it was Sinclair…um…”
“Sinclair? Sinclair Mallory?” Bill jumps to her feet, then flinches. “Ouch!” She rubs the front of her thigh. “I just evacuated him like last week. Oh, the poor kid! He’ll be at the North District Detention Center. That’s where they do all their advanced persuasive techniques,” she says in a low sarcastic voice as she sits back down.

“Hey, Master – my Master – did you get the maps?” asks the Doctor.

“What? Huh?” say Alison, Bill, Ranju, and Razor, all of whom are obviously missing something.

“I could only download old insurance schematics from the central servers,” the Magister says. “Anything else would have alerted the digital surveillance. The schematics look largely accurate to the modern lay-out, however. I’ve already uploaded them into Anima, so, if we have the street address, we can plot an accurate route.”

“To where?” Razor interjects.

Bill claps her hand to her forehead. “What’s the name of that cross street?”

“You have the address, Miss Potts?” The Magister hastens to her side. “Excellent!”

“Um. Um. Mister Prof.” Ranju fidgets in her oversize chair, her body language speaking with an urgency that her voice does not provide.

“Yes?” The Magister squats, meeting her eye to eye.

“Mister…Master sir. Um. Um. Um. I’m…um…sorry. Your name…”

“Think nothing of it. Yes?”

Ranju straightens her back. “Address: Zero Irons Place…first floor. Cross street: Tenth. May be…Regent Place…on old map.”

“Thank you, my dear; you are most helpful,” says the Magister, at which Ranju flashes him a big smile.

“Irons Place or Regent Place. Got it.” The Doctor, punching keys, appears to be using the TARDIS equivalent of GPS. [Or is it CSPS – Colony Ship Positioning System?]

“Why the fuck are we going there?” Razor interrupts.

“For Sinclair, of course,” says the Doctor simply.

Razor’s entire face compresses inward, eyes and nostrils narrowing, mouth thinning. Tendons stand out in his neck. He freezes, as if unsure whether to speak or type his fury.

Much to Alison’s satisfaction, the Magister whirls on Razor and snaps, pointing at him. “Be still. If you tell me to let the child die, I’m evicting you from Anima, commandeering your resistance, and informing everyone of the reason I have taken over. My Doctor, my Domina, my dear Miss Potts, and I will make sure that every one of your loyal, obedient, adoring followers understands how much of a traitor you are to your own cause. Once that happens, I doubt that you’ll be very happy when they’re finished with you. In fact, you’ll probably be dead. Would you like to disempower yourself and speed your imminent demise? No? I thought not. Then we go to the detention center.”
Bill tells Alison the worst part of Razor's Resistance. Razor tries to hurt Alison's robot, but she and the Doctor stop him.

The tired humans leave Sinclair's rescue to the Time Dorks. Bill’s rubbing her eyes and yawning, so Alison says that she will share her queen bed for the sake of expediency. Ranju wants to know if she’ll have to sleep all by herself, but Bill says that of course she too can sleep in Alison’s room. Anima procures a trundle bed for Ranju, and Bill helps her into it. Two black TARDIS cats, one on either side of her pillow, appear to keep vigil. Delighted with *the furry-tailed rats*, Ranju strokes them and quickly earns their undying loyalty.

Alison and Bill retire to Alison’s bed. Four cats curl up nose to tail in a line between Alison and Bill. The cats’ small hot bodies radiate both warmth and purrs, but Alison’s mind continues to run as if the Night Patrol is still after it. She slows her breath way down and tries to pace her thoughts along with it, but they whirl away from her.

“‘The hardest part...’” Bill says.

“Hmmm, wha’?” Alison responds.

“You know what the hardest part of the revolution is?”

The knowledge that you might be seized and tortured at any moment? Partnership with an unpredictable, dangerous, and cruel person? Alison has plenty of ideas, but still she says, “No, what is it?”

Bill’s voice drops to a nearly inaudible level. “The caring, the helping, the giving, the doing things for other people. There’s always someone to escort, always someone to detox, always someone to move to the safe house.” Turning toward Alison, she comes even closer, whispering into her ear, cupping her hand around her mouth so that the words don’t escape. Two cats meow indignantly about being encroached upon and reluctantly relocate further down the mattress. “It’s been especially hard these last few weeks with Ranju. I love the kid; she’s bright, funny, and pretty cheerful for someone who’s like three quarters robotified. But I’ve never helped anyone who’s been that far robotified before, and it’s always something.”
“Yeah. It’s hard when people need your help, especially when you could use someone to help you too.” After Gram broke her hip, Alison’s mum took responsibility for all of her care. She ignored Alison’s dad’s offer to hire carers, as well as the possibility that she could again throw her back out. [Her mum has had a bad back since she cleaned house for people in her teens and twenties.] Of course she dislocated something in her spine and sought outside help only when forced. Alison knows firsthand how people like Bill, who are generous and accommodating, can easily feel obligated to help, even though they themselves are suffering.

Bill rolls away from Alison, lets out a loud sigh, then continues, gazing at the ceiling. “The worst is when Razor and me both have bad days. Then something that we can’t ignore comes up. People knock on our door all the time, and what are we going to do – turn them away? I always thought it was the best way to be good: being nice to people, helping them. Then my foster mum would want to keep me; then people would want to be friends with me, but…they just won’t go away, and they just won’t stop needing.”

“Ohhhhhhh. Ohhhhh noooo. Oh. Oh. Oh. Ohhh….” All of a sudden, Ranju groans. “I hear them. I hear…them in my…head again.” The black cats rear their heads, looking about for their ward’s enemies.

“Shit! Ranju, are you okay?” Alison launches upright. So do two cats on the bed, in case they can assist.

“She’s crying,” says Bill very quietly. “That’s what sobs sound like when you have a Cyber voice. Poor kid.” She shakes her head. “I don’t think she’s really been able to sleep since I rescued her.” She raises her voice so that Ranju, who’s across the room, can hear: “I’ll be right there, Ranju!” To Alison, she murmurs, “Do you have any eye drops, artificial tears, anything like that? She gets gunk in her eyes when she’s sad, but she doesn’t have tears anymore to wash it away.”

Alison sprints to the medicine cabinet of her suite and returns with a squirt bottle. Thanking her, Bill slowly swings her legs over the side of Alison’s bed. Alison can tell by the jerkiness of her motion that the pain in her legs continues to plague her. “Do you need help?” Alison ventures.

“I need a good night’s sleep is what I need. Just one night with no one needing anything or crying or…”

“Oh, I know! I’ll get my robot; maybe he can help Ranju. I know he likes her, and he knows what it’s like not to be able to cry anymore.”
“Your…robot?”

“The Magister. Max *Don’t Call Me Prof* Thascalos.”

“Alison. Do you…have eye…drops?” Ranju calls.

“But she trusts me,” says Bill simply. “And she needs me.” With that, she leaves the bed.

Somehow Alison sleeps for a while, and then a sound scares her nearly into levitating. It’s not Bill or Ranju; the two of them slump in the trundle bed, Bill half sitting against the wall, Ranju curled up like a cat in her lap. It’s not Anima, for this sound isn’t a flurry of musical instruments, but a voice. It’s a wordless cry: sharp with a melody of fright, resonant with a beat of fury, trembling with a vibrato of anguish, yet striking again and again a defiant, defensive rhythm. It’s the Doctor singing, and something is dreadfully wrong.

“Anima!” cries Alison. “Where are they?”

On a monitor, Anima shows her a small oval audience chamber with an elliptical oak table, white plaster walls, and green draperies enough for at least ten stage curtains. Alison’s robot lies face down before Razor, who seems about to run him over. The Doctor, fists clenched, neck tilted back, is screaming, and then the lights go out.

Getting a torch from her desk in one hand and the master Master controller in the other, Alison notices that Bill and Ranju haven’t stirred. How can they sleep through such a racket? Lucky them. She runs.

Clicking on her torch, Alison bursts into the audience chamber. It smells a bit crackly in here, as if something just got zapped. She nearly trips the Doctor, who’s now kneeling and weeping beside her robot. Her robot lies between Razor and the door, as if Razor was trying to go somewhere. Alison stabs her torch light into Razor’s eyes. “You! What did you do to my robot?”

“Nothing, unfortunately. I didn’t get a chance.” Though squinting with eyes closed, Razor affects a cool demeanor.

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry; I’m so sorry…” the Doctor cries, hiccupping.

“Then what did you do to the Doctor? Why are they sobbing like that?”

“Because they’re all about the melodrama, in case you haven’t noticed. The computer just needs a hard reset or some shit like that, but they don’t have their remote control with them. Apparently
they can’t be arsed to go and fucking get it because they’d rather wail and carry on. Do smack them for me, will you? I can’t reach.”

“Right then. Well, good thing I’m here.” Alison keys in the sequence on the master Master controller for a complete and proper shutdown of her robot. When that finishes, she does a hard reset and reboots him. Touching the Doctor on their shoulder, she says in their ear, “Hey, Doctor. I just rebooted my robot, so he should be —“

“—That unnecessary caterwauling; I’m certainly in no danger.” Finishing the sentence he started before he was interrupted, Alison’s robot comes back, along with the audience chamber’s lights. His features flicker – eyebrows perking, eyes shuttling from side to side slightly, corners of his mouth cocking into a smile – as if he’s testing their function. Now fully alert, he focuses on his inevitable spouse and sits up. “Doctor! I have sustained no damage. —Though my jacket, I see, suffers from a copious application of your nasal mucus.”

“I didn’t mean to ruin your jacket.” The Doctor throws their arms around him. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to make you shut off like that. I didn’t mean to make you fall on your face. I didn’t mean to hurt you at all. I never want to hurt you. I just wanted to…to…to…defend you and… and… and…”

“Of course you did, you foolish old quack,” says Alison’s robot, “even though I had no need of your protection.” He strokes the Doctor’s hair and runs his finger around the sleep/wake button that he installed at the nape of their neck some time ago. At his touch, the Doctor’s sobs abate into intermittent hiccoughs.

“Oh shut up,” Razor says to the Doctor. Propping his chin in his hand, he lids his eyes like he might go to sleep. “You made the robot; you programmed it to love you. I’m fairly certain it’ll forgive you.”

“No.” Alison stands and speaks with an icy hush to Razor. “You shut up. First of all, no one’s talking to you. Second of all, you’re the cause of this problem, and no one cares what you think. Third of all, if you really can’t stand the objectification of people, much less yourself, then use the right pronouns when you talk about my universe’s version of you.”

“Mea Domina carissima!” her robot cries. “Excuse me, Doctor,” he says, gently detaching the [somewhat calmer] Doctor from his chest so that he can pay a little attention to Alison. One of her robot’s hands goes up to rest against her cheek; he looks up at Razor: “The Master was just about to --“

Alison holds his face in her hand as if he’s her cup of tea who will keep her safe and warm. “Are you okay? Did the hard reset work? Did you break anything?”

“Yes, yes, and no.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“He tried, but the Doctor sang and stopped him.”

Alison glares at Razor. “You! Why? Why did you try to hurt my robot?”

“He wished to execute the child that we rescued from the Night Patrol,” explains Alison’s robot. “The Doctor and I prevented him.”

“No,” says Razor with a scoff. He glares at Alison’s robot, shielding his eyes with his hand. “The Doctor screeched and shorted out all the electronics in the room: my laser screwdriver, my chair,
“I only meant to keep you from hurting my Master,” says the Doctor to Razor. Wiping their eyes with the back of their sleeve, they leave a long smear of sparkly black eyeshadow across their cheek and their shirt cuff. “I didn’t mean to deprive you of mobility. I’m sorry.

“But...I have something to say to you,” the Doctor goes on. “There’s a city of people here that you want to help, Master,” they say, now to Razor, “and we want to help them as well.” Though raggedy and rumpled, their eyes still glimmering with tears, the Doctor speaks in a light, steady voice. “If we are to work together, though, we must be kind.

“If we’re to succeed in keeping Dystopiaville safe and whole and happy, then we have to keep ourselves that way too,” they say, their voice becoming firmer. They stand straighter so that they look less like a wilted flower and more like a strong, flexible tree. “We have to be gentle with one another. We have to be respectful about other people’s thoughts and feelings. We have to keep our tempers; we have to think through things before acting. If we are going to do good, then we have to be good.”

“Mmmm...you have a point,” Razor concedes.

“And you must be kind to my people: my TARDIS, my companion Alison, and my Master,” says the Doctor softly with a nod of confirmation. “I am my Master’s dearest possession, and I will make sure that you treat him well.”

Razor clearly relishes the fact that Alison’s robot is still on the floor and thus may be gazed upon with eyebrows of contempt. “Really, Mechanical Me? The Doctor’s your dearest possession? Seems like it’s the other way ‘round. How many people own you now, Master?”

“Well, you certainly don’t.” Alison stands. “And you don’t have permission from him, me, or the Doctor to objectify him or hurt him. So you’ll never do it again.”

“If he gets in my way again...”

“—Then you address him like a polite, respectful, nice person without trying to run him over.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then we drop you back in the midst of your bombed-out flat and let you entertain your own damn self.”

“Are you...threatening me, little Dominatrix?” The right side of Razor’s lip curls up; the left eyebrow curls down.

Razor is trying to deride Alison in the way that you undercut a woman who asks you to do something by making whip cracking noises and muttering, Yes mistress, no mistress, whatever you say, mistress. But the mere fact that he uses a variant of her robot’s title for her indicates some acknowledgment of the power she wields in that role. She doesn’t want him to call her Domina, a name that he is unworthy of using. If he wants to compliment her unwittingly by calling her Dominatrix, though, why not?

Alison’s robot speaks before she can, however. He comes to his feet and, standing behind her, puts
one hand on either of her shoulders. “She tells the truth, Master. All actions have consequences. If you wish continued assistance from any or all of us, consider this: She is my Domina, and you will obey her.”

Having never heard his favorite spell turned back on himself, Razor fails to summon up a proper response. He just stares.

“So, erm, I could probably reboot your chair really easily,” the Doctor interjects. “But first, you’d have to give me your permission. And second, you’d have to promise not to attack anyone after I fixed it.”

“Just do it already.”

“If you promise to keep your cool and not harm anyone.”

“I promise. Do it,” says Razor again, and Alison’s robot hugs her as the Doctor goes to work.
Razor seeks updates from Dystopiaville's safe houses about their status post-raid; the Tinder Town safe house reports in. Alison yells at Razor because she thinks he's going to mind-fuck Bill. The Doctor and Bill become closer.

Anima’s orbit around Newland temporarily isolates everyone from the tumult of Dystopiaville, its dictatorship, its Cyber factories, and its revolution. Without apparently a moment to rest, Razor sets up a radio communications hub aboard Anima. He informs the rest of the resistance that he and Miss Potts, though displaced, survive. Indeed, they thrive; they have gained powerful allies, and they are planning the next stages of the fight.

Razor sends his encrypted broadcast to the four safe houses of Dystopiaville, each designated by the derogatory nickname of the neighborhood in which they are located: Butcher’s Block, the Dominoes, Sewage Street, and Tinder Town. As far as Alison can tell, the heads of each safe house form the second major tier of RR leaders, often working directly with members to coordinate rescues, orchestrate anti-Night Patrol watches, collect supplies, et cetera. Razor concludes his message by asking the heads of the safe houses to report in as soon as possible for a status update and further instructions.

Yasmeen Mazandarani, current head and former second in command of the Tinder Town safe house, reports in. Tinder Town, a district of crammed wooden houses, suffers frequent fires that spread quickly. One such blaze occurred on the night Bill and Razor’s flat was raided; the primary Tinder Town house caught fire. It burned to the ground, as did buildings on either side. Three people died in the safe house: Nilufar, Andrew, and Karim. The first was Yasmeen’s young cousin, who worked as a courier for RR. The second were Cyborganics just days away from returning to the open city. Yasmeen survived, as did two just detoxed Cyborganics, Soojin and Elsa.

No one knows if the fire was related to the raid on Bill and Razor’s flat -- and thus probably set by the Night Patrol -- or if it was the usual accident coinciding with the raid. Whether the Night Patrol was responsible or not, they certainly took advantage of the ensuing chaos to seize Miles Carson, head of the safe house. He admitted nothing under advanced persuasive techniques, so the Night Patrol amputated pieces of him and sent out warning videos that such was the fate for traitors. He never told them anything, so the Night Patrol decapitated him, gouged out his eyes, cut out his tongue, and left his head on the doorstep of the primary Tinder Town safe house.
The primary safe house was empty, however. All survivors had removed to the fallback, a secondary shelter for just such emergencies. Since their arrival at the fallback, Yasmeen has been broadcasting encrypted radio messages of hope and revolution. These only reach as far as their district’s borders, but those in Tinder Town are definitely listening. Miles’ spouses come to Yasmeen on behalf of fifty others who are ready to enlist and fight. Nilufar’s friends donate clothes, toys, and books to the resistance so that Cyborganic kids could use them. Andrew’s parents cook meals for Yasmeen, Soojin, and Elsa. Night Patrol officers are beaten in effigy, as burning would be too dangerous. Graffiti appears: You can’t cut out the tongue of the truth! JUSTICE FOR MILES! Remember Nilufar. Tinder Town now has four new couriers, two interim seconds for the safe house, and more new supporters than can be counted.

Tinder Town is out for blood, boss, says Yasmeen. You know as well as I do that RR members have died before in the line of duty, but never like this. The NP attacked unprovoked and killed four innocent people. And yeah, I’m counting Nilufar, Karim, and Andrew because, even if we don’t know if the NP started the fire, they sure used it as a weapon.

They probably thought we’d be intimidated by all the bits of Miles they showed us, but they were wrong. Almost everyone in Tinder Town knew Nilufar, Miles, Andrew, or Karim, or their families. Now that Irons killed four of their own, Tinder Town is furious. I’m not exaggerating when I say that all two thousand people in this neighborhood are now part of the resistance. More than that, we want revolution. We’re ready for war.

I’ve been ready for months, Mx. Mazandarani, says Razor, smiling like he’s running over his enemies and listening to their bones snap beneath the mass of his chair. He gives Yasmeen his sympathy over the deaths that they have suffered. He acknowledges that they feel horrible. They will find solace, though, if they turn their rage and grief into power. From there they may transmute their power into vengeance, and then they will win satisfaction.
Alison, who witnesses these exchanges for her own edification along with the Magister, the Doctor, and Bill [if she's not resting], casts a horrified look at her robot. She hasn’t seen this side of him before. Sure, he has told her in vivid detail of the countless ways in which he manipulated, humiliated, injured, and killed people. She has even sampled memories from him in which she tasted the glory of his games of pain with the Doctor. But none of that is quite as immediate as hearing an alternative universe’s version of him practically lick his lips over such a savory, sadistic prospect. Never has she been so glad to live in a universe where her version of her robot satisfies his cruelty with the Doctor, who does the same with him.

When Alison recovers from that shock, Razor appears unassuming once more. He turns his attention to the safe house on Sewage Street, named for the stuff that surfaces when the ancient system leaks sporadically. Neither Prunella Kim nor her spouse Senga McDonall have reported in. Ms. Kim, who alerted Razor to the raid, is not just the head of that house, but also of logistics. As far as Alison can tell, she’s like the vice president of RR. Ms. McDonall also has an important role as the liaison who matches Cyborganics with sympathetic medical providers out in the community. As far as Razor knows, Ms. Kim and Ms. McDonall weren’t hosting anyone when the raid on his house occurred, so only the two of them are lost. Without those two, though, much of RR’s work comes to a halt.

Razor uses Anima’s processing power to hack into surveillance cameras near the Sewage Street safe house and its fallback. The primary Sewage Street house is completely bombed out, just smoking rubble, but the fallback is still there. He programs various alerts to sound in case of activity and then waits. He hopes that the cameras will capture images that will tell him where Ms. Kim and Ms. McDonall have gone.

While Razor spends hours at the communications console, others on the ship attempt to recuperate. They use the brief hiatus to rest and tend to their pain. With Alison’s crew distrusting Razor, Razor distrusting everyone, and the Cyborganic kids Ranju and Sinclair generally overwhelmed, Alison and Bill feel caught in the middle, unable to do everything that they are obligated to.

For Bill, the hiatus coincides with a state of physical prostration and wretchedness that she has rarely experienced before. Alison, who basically flops over and recharges for four hours after passionate feelings, thinks that Bill is experiencing the same sort of drain on a larger scale. The
shock of meeting would-be rescuers from another universe and then having her flat invaded and exploded has enervated her.

Furthermore, the night that Bill spent comforting Ranju has only increased her depletion. Over Bill’s objections – But what if she needs me? – the Doctor and the Magister move Ranju to her own room nearby. She now sleeps just across the hall from Sinclair, who has not opened his door since his rescue from the North District Detention Center.

As for Bill, she stays in Alison’s room. I just want to quit running around and just stay in some place for once! she says, on the verge of tears. Alison, a heavy sleeper with a huge crush on her bedmate, convinces Bill that she will gladly share her room with her as long as she wants to sleep there. Of course Alison feels a little glow of flattery inside at Bill’s desire to stay put. She wants to rest someplace familiar where she feels safe, which means that Alison is already familiar and safe to her! I will keep you safe, Bill, Alison thinks. Don’t worry about anything.

Of course, Alison’s promise proves empty the very next day after the evacuation when she enters her room to find Razor lecturing Bill. Out of his chair, he sits at the foot of Alison’s bed. Bill, propped up on pillows, drinks water, coughing a little bit and wincing. “Sometimes I think you’re uncommonly bright, my dear Miss Potts,” he cries, “and then other times I wonder if you even have two brain cells to rub together. What were you doing, wandering the halls? I told you to stay in bed!”

“Well, I thought I’d see how Ranju was doing…”

“Eh, don’t worry about that little nerd. The robot gave her a laptop full of puzzle software, and she’s been head-first in it for the past four hours.”

“And then Sinclair – he won’t come out of his room!”

“That’s because he knows no one wants to see his treacherous fucking face.”

“Hey now…” Bill chides in a low voice.

“What? It’s true. I took that kid out of the hospital myself. I saw that he had a way with words and said I’d see if he’d be useful in propaganda. I told the little shit that I thought he had potential, and what does he do? The Night Patrol barely sneezes in his direction, and he caves and sets fire to my lab!”
“It was a little more than a sneeze; they tortured him.”

“I don’t care. Know what I care about? You disobeyed me.” Razor points his finger very close to Bill’s nose. She sips water without a change in her expression. “You couldn’t sit still and recover like you were supposed to. No one needs you sticking your nose in the kids’ rooms, and now you’ve just overexerted yourself.” He sighs the sigh of the long-suffering. “Why must you be so incredibly…sentimental? It’s because of your irresponsible recklessness that I am constrained to resort to such measures, you know.”

Alison steps in. “Don’t you dare intimidate Bill!” Glancing around, she sees Razor’s chair by her closet, which means that he drove in here, picked himself up out of his chair, and moved himself to Alison’s bed specifically to persecute Bill. “What the fuck are you doing in my room anyway? If you’re not out of here in five minutes, I’m having my robot throw you out.”

Bill says that Razor just came in to see how she was doing. Alison points out that Razor’s idea of seeing how Bill was doing involves more harassment than solicitude. Just what was he threatening her about anyway? With a great exhalation that communicates volumes of noble endurance, Razor says that, as much as he doesn’t want to, he is forced by the extremity of Miss Potts’ physical distresst to use his psychic powers for her relief. “You’re gonna mind-fuck her?” Alison cries. “Out! Now!”

Several minutes of shouting ensue before, first, Razor realizes what a mind-fuck is and, second, Alison realizes that he has no intention of doing it to Bill. Furthermore, Razor regularly uses his psychic trick, as Bill terms it, to alleviate her physical distress. He can’t make her forget her chronic pain, as he would exhaust himself in sustaining her persistent memory loss. However, he does sometimes postpone especially bad pain, usually so that she can sleep well and deal with it the next day. Bill asks him not to do the postponement, since it would just be compounding future misery. “Don’t worry; it’s not postponement, but experimental transitive phenomenological neuropathy,” says Razor.

“Some experimental thing with psychic powers and pain? I’m worrying precisely because you said, *Don’t worry.*” Alison leans against the wall, crossing her arms, supervising in case of disaster.

Bill inclines herself forward, bowing her head. Razor presses the center of his forehead against Bill’s, one hand clamped around either of her temples. It’s a less delicate, more forceful variation of the stance that Alison’s robot took when he was removing Bill’s message from her brain. Is something similar about to happen here?
Razor casts his spell in a voice slightly lighter and higher than Alison’s robot’s. He favors shorter sentences and a confrontational delivery over reassurance. Nevertheless, the poetic lilts and repetitions are ones that Alison knows intimately. “You have done too much in recent days; you have strained yourself past your limits, and now you are in pain,” he says to Bill, whose eyes flutter closed. “You need to rest; you need to sleep; you need to restore yourself, and yet your pain will not permit you. You are caught in a cycle of bad days.

“So give me your pain, not your psychic pain, not your emotional pain, but your physical pain. Give me what disorders your thoughts, what crushes your breath, what binds your movement, what weighs down your limbs. Give me what wakes you when you are asleep. Give me what would stop your heart from beating. Give me what would stop you from doing what you want.

“Give me your pain until you can think again, until you can breathe freely, move smoothly, and sleep through the night. Let me bear it; let me drug it; let me still it; let me conquer it; let me crush it. And then, when it has returned to its usual magnitude, take it back from me. You will have slept; you will have had respite; you will have had good days enough to give you power again. You will have your pain, and you will have your power. Obey me.”

“Oh!” cries Bill, sitting straight up, one hand over her heart. “My chest! I feel… It worked!” A smile dawns on her face. “Razor! Thank you!”

“Ah!” It’s more of a quickly released breath than a word, and, with that, Razor doubles over and pitches to the side on Alison’s bed.

He did it. He really did it; he transferred Bill’s pain to him. Alison stares at him for a few seconds, then retrieves his chair as quickly as she can. Its highly responsive controls have her weaving in arcs before she realizes that slight nudges to the joystick work best. Bringing the chair close to her bed, she hops out. Bill, holding Razor’s elbow, helps him in.

Bill confirms that she’s not free of pain, but just down to her usual, much more bearable amount. Razor extracts from her a promise to stay in bed for the next few days. He tells her to do so with a gravity more grim than his earlier frustration. Bill, obviously swallowing complaints, says she will. Alison makes a mental note to ask the Doctor to give Bill [and Ranju while they’re at it] a power chair like Razor’s. Then she can move around without too much loss of stamina.

“Now then, my little Dominatrix,” Razor says, somehow able to make the voice from the tablet sound as haughty and flippant as he would in speech, “your apology, please.”
Alison glares at him. “I’m sorry that I assumed that you were going to hurt Bill.”

Razor considers, then says, “Acceptable. But crank up the abjection next time.”

Though she really wants to tell him to fuck himself backward with a rusty pitchfork, Alison just turns on her heel and leaves.

Razor isn’t the only one caring for Bill. The Doctor devotes themselves to her wellbeing. They procure a power chair for her, and the two collaborate on a retro-futuristic theme. The body, silver with glitter embedded, features curving sides with chrome fins. Two chrome tailpipes project by the rear wheels. The hubcaps of the main central wheels reflect the visible spectrum, spinning out rainbows when in motion. The artculated seat, made of adjustable segments of pale grey foam, looks like a captain’s chair from a *Defenders* spaceship. With the ability to adjust its seat’s height, tilt, and horizontal rotation, as well as zippy controls, silent operation, pointless [but cool] blasting off sound effects, and a horn that sounds like burbly lasers, the chair has more options than certain cars.

Bill, crying happily, embraces the Doctor in thanks. Even though they elbow her in the stomach when returning the hug, Alison smiles to see how well the two fit together. She smiles even more when Razor permits wheel-based roaming about Anima, as long as Bill doesn’t overdo it.

Besides a power chair, the Doctor apparently wants to give Bill their entire jungle. First they bring Bill sunflowers to replace Alison’s gift. Then come butterflies on whose iridescent wings are black figures that look either like the number 8 or the letter B. The two of them watch the insects unroll their tongues and drink sugar water.

The Doctor also shows Bill a nest with stillborn chicks in their eggs, pellets coughed up by raptors that gulp their prey whole, slugs that leave glowing brown slime, and other phenomena that Alison would rather avoid. Bill thinks everything is *beautiful* and *brilliant*, even though she’s laughing with disgust over slug juice on her hand.

However, when a giant purple beetle becomes stuck in the bathtub one morning, Alison rescues it and tells the Doctor that they should take Bill to their jungle and not vice versa. Soon Bill spends hours there, and there are no more six-legged guests using the en suite.

Out of curiosity, Alison ventures into the Doctor’s jungle one mid-afternoon to see what they and Bill are doing. She finds them in a boreal forest greenhouse that, with paths of crushed and raked gravel, easily accommodates Bill’s chair. It’s warm here with a comfortable glow and a slight early fall crispness to the air. The Doctor and Bill have made a sort of shallow den in the violet-strewn
grass in a circle of lissome paper birches. The two sit on a blanket, anchored by a slanting stack of board games at one corner, a bone china tea set at another, Bill’s space-age chair at a third. Odd rocks, peculiar leaves, and bug corpses await examination in the fourth corner of the blanket, but the Doctor and Bill are busy.

The Doctor has both hands pressed right against Bill’s mechanical heart, and they are singing her. Alison has seen the Doctor sing the Magister, using their magical voice and their love to recalibrate his mechanics, making him well and whole. However, she didn’t know that they could do it on anyone else. They certainly never did it on her.

And yet the Doctor sings Bill, as if each of their notes are birds, calling out to one another, fluttering around each other, taking to the sky together. They follow a staccato, repeating theme, like sharp bright laughter at a joke told again and again. Every note opens into another, like a fractal of flowers, like one question that prompts a cascade of others. The song sounds like Bill and the Doctor because it is Bill and the Doctor: tricking out her chair, smelling flowers, playing board games, poking dead things with sticks, playing, exploring, learning, and then grinning and singing for the sheer joy of it all.

Here’s the Doctor that Bill should have had all along. Here’s the one she deserves. Here’s the overapologetic mess who doesn’t always realize the detrimental side effects to their actions. Here’s the one who unknowingly hurts people, but who always apologizes and learns from their mistakes. Here too is the kind one with a perpetual sense of wonder who wants everyone to be happy. Here’s the person who truly does love and find beauty in everything, from a genocidal supervillain to a decomposing bug.

Here’s someone who loves everything, but also loves Bill specifically with a fervent, eager adoration. They’ll be gentle when she needs comforting, strong when she needs protecting, and constant when she needs a friend. The Doctor is now Bill’s companion, and Bill is literally in good hands.
The Butcher's Block safe house reports in. The Doctor proves themselves useful in the resistance effort. Alison, her Time Dorks, and Bill advise Razor on the strategic value of compassion.

Two days post-raid, Britomart Smythe connects with Razor. She heads the safe house in Butcher’s Block, a neighborhood on the edge of the Cyber production factories, so named for the body parts that occasionally show up in the streets. She immediately gives Razor her deepest condolences. He must be grieving hard after the loss of his dear friend, his partner, and the most ardent supporter of the cause.

Britomart recognizes that such a subject is painful to discuss so soon after the passing, but has he given any consideration to a replacement? She recommends her son, whose hard work and dedication to RR make him the de facto head of communications and propaganda in the district. Of course, while he is smart and loyal, he will never duplicate the inimitable warmth and compassion of Bill, heart of the resistance, but…

Razor, finally realizing that Britomart thinks that Miss Potts is dead, interrupts. Everyone escaped the raid without casualties, including Miss Potts, who is very much alive. Razor asks Britomart where she heard of Miss Potts’ demise. She cites no specific source, instead saying that the rumor is on everyone’s lips that Bill was Cyberized, tortured, and then executed. Since the North District Detention Center, where Sinclair was held, is near Butcher’s Block, Razor surmises that such faulty information may have leaked from there. Apparently his broadcast assuring everyone of his and Miss Potts’ survival has not been heard by all.

He turns the conversation back to the subject of the Butcher’s Block resistance members. Everyone is safe in the fallback, Britomart tells him, and the primary location remains unmolested. Razor and Britomart both hope that this means that only the flat and the Sewage Street location were at risk. Nevertheless, Sinclair’s family lives in Butcher’s Block, so Britomart and allies now guard them in the fallback: his grandmother, his mother, his father, and two sisters. The Night Patrol began following Sinclair’s boyfriend Ali yesterday, so he and his immediate family, the Alsaeedis, currently hide in the fallback as well.

Britomart says that, with the move to the fallback and the accommodation of two families, there has been no time for her to check in with Razor or to broadcast any reassurance from her hub. Razor tells her not to worry. He is very pleased with the efforts in Butcher’s Block to maintain safety and stability. He thanks her many times for taking in Sinclair’s family and his boyfriend’s. He closes by saying that he will send her some audio files for broadcast shortly.

Razor asks Bill’s help. He wants her to record a message that may be used in Butcher’s Block broadcasts or anywhere else to satisfy people that she’s not dead. It will suffice until they can return to Dystopiaville and persuade people in person. Bill says:

Hi, everyone! I’m Bill Potts; I’m the heart of the resistance, and I’m totally not dead, at least not as
of the last time I checked. So that’s great, yeah? And, since I’m not dead, I’m alive, which means that, where there’s life, there’s hope.

Thank you, each and every one of you, for doing what you do. You keep me and Razor going; you keep RR alive. I might be the heart of the resistance, but you all are totally the blood. You’re circulating the message and the power; you’re giving the city hope. So keep on keeping on and...um...thank you.

Anxious that Razor will not consider her effort *smart and sophisticated enough* for radio, Bill takes Alison with her when she gives him her message. Alison accompanies Bill, hoping for a chance to kick Razor’s arse into next Tuesday. He, however, deems the message *a canny use of the informal register to establish authenticity and intimacy.* Very good, Miss Potts. You sound like yourself vocally, of course, but you also sound like yourself in terms of personality. Excellent!

Bill thinks of another way to rouse the resistance. She used to make copies of the science-fiction stories that Razor typed from memory and distribute them about Dystopiaville. The stories, many of which were about the overthrow of dystopias, pissed Irons off incredibly. They even devoted radio broadcasts specifically to the denunciation of the illicit distribution of science fiction. Anyway, there’s only one story left now: *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side.* It’s not necessarily uplifting, but Bill and Alison have Anima make thousands of copies. These are scattered about Dystopiaville to remind the denizens that they too can imagine alternatives to Irons.

Still neither Prunella nor Senga report in from the Sewage Street location. The security cameras that Razor monitors show no activity around the primary and fallback houses. Razor now enlists the aid of Tinder Town’s new couriers, Amaranth, Corvine, Ishi, and Jamal. He dispatches Amaranth and Ishi to the primary safe house, Corvine and Jamal to the fallback. He orders them to scout around, going inside if they think it’s safe. He also gives them names of nearby RR supporters who might have information. He wants the most inconsequential observations from their house tours and even the vaguest rumors from their informants: anything that will lead him to Ms. Kim and Ms. McDonall.

Meanwhile, Alison hopes that her order for Razor to quit talking will conspire, along with the amount of pain that he has assumed from Bill, to actually quit him from being such an arsehole to her Time Dorks. It does not. His snide comments, espoused by tablet, persist, especially about the Doctor.

Two days after evacuation, Bill leaves the lunch table early to follow Razor’s command and take a nap. [She doesn’t eat, but, like the Magister, likes to socialize during meals.] With Ranju still poring over the Magister’s puzzle software and Sinclair still blockaded behind his door, Alison is the lone human among three Time Dorks. As she periodically does, she makes herself as unobtrusive as possible in the hope that she will overhear something interesting.

The Magister and Razor discuss the next steps for RR. They both agree that the destruction of Bill and Razor’s flat acts as the perfect catalyst for transforming resistance into outright revolution: stopping the Cyber project and taking down Irons once and for all. They disagree, however, on how this should be done, so they devolve to insulting each other’s intelligence.

The Doctor, literally tuning out, stares at a fixed point somewhere above Razor’s head and hums. Their song sounds like the satisfying interlock of gears, hooking together, then spinning faster and faster, until finally a great machine is running. The short, repetitive phrases irritate Alison to no end, but she likes its sprightly tone. It sounds like the wheels in their head are turning.

Razor, despite his stated disgust for *vegetarian shit,* follows the dietary restrictions in force on Anima and now crashes his spoon on the table. It’s not because of the food; he has just consumed
about a kilo of balsamic orzo salad with cashews and peapods, followed by half a dozen coconut carrot muffins. Instead, he’s annoyed at the Doctor. “Does this one contribute anything helpful?” he demands. “Or do they just blank out and hum inanely?”

Alison refrains from stabbing Razor with her fork as the Magister crosses his arms and speaks with a half smile: “They do quite a bit, actually, both humming and contributing productively. In fact, the staring and humming is actually the helpful part.”

“Sure. It’s helping me go even madder than I already am.”

“Wait for it…” The Magister holds up his hand.

Alison waits about a half a minute, but nothing happens. Razor rolls his neck and says out loud, “Thhhhhpppfft.”

Just then, the Doctor opens their mouth. “Right then, while you Masters were piddling around, I just got the best idea. If I concentrate, I can harmonize with the various radio signals in use around Newland, and one of those is the Cyber network frequency. It’s magnificent work for a mind control machine, very elegant and efficient. It’s based on a simple two-part signal that’s like…oh… a single tree. The Cyber receivers beam the signal into your brain,” they say, pointing their finger into their ear, “and then replicate it.” They wiggle all ten fingers upwards, as if to show hordes of plants sprouting.

“You end up with a whole forest inside your head,” the Doctor says, waving their arms in circles around them, “as well as the illusion of being trapped in another dimension.” Now they’re miming being stuck behind an invisible pane of glass. “Now you’re disoriented, detached from reality, and desperate for something that will make order out of all this chaos: Irons’ orders. That’s where the second part of the signal comes in, encouraging you to accept the broadcasts as the truth and form of your new life. It’s really a sort of fiendishly inventive poetry. From such an unassuming electronic seed grows a forest of trees of mirror trees that seems to go on forever and…”

“Spare me,” interrupts Razor. “Do you have an idea or yet another tangent?”

“Well,” says the Doctor, “now that I’ve found out how to harmonize with the Cyber broadcasts, I know how to dissonize them. –That’s a new word, by the way, because I said so. It means to make dissonant… obviously. Get me to the Cyber broadcast hub, and I’ll disrupt the signal at its source and free all the remaining Cyber people from the brainwashing. There’s one part of your revolution sorted.”

“How are you going to do that? By humming?” Even Razor’s recording sounds incredulous.

“I’m actually thinking a little Gilbert and Sullivan. Wonderful chaps, those. Quite amusing. Well, except for The Mikado. You can tell me all you want that it’s a satire on English aristocracy, but it’s still a load of Orientalist tripe.” The Doctor finds their pitch, then starts in on a parody of I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General: “I am the very model of a modern sonic engineer… / Maybe you should listen up before you snort and make a sneer…”

Razor looks ready to bang his forehead on the table. “What did I do to deserve this?”

“You underestimated my Doctor,” says the Magister, not bothering to disguise the fullness of a smug smile.

After that, Razor’s snark about the Doctor dies down, but he still seethes about Sinclair, who he refers to as that traitorous fuck. Alison doesn’t blame Sinclair for barricading himself in his room.
Not only is it safer in there, but it’s certainly a hell of a lot quieter.

Alison, her robot, Bill, and the Doctor finally convene with Razor in the glass, daytime half of the library. Sinclair is probably hiding in his room, they say, because he fears Razor’s retribution. However, Razor can’t kill Sinclair, as he is under the protection of Alison and her Time Dorks. He needs to accept that so that Sinclair can leave his bedroom. Razor, of course, doesn’t want to.

“Besides,” says Bill, after the argument has gone around in circles for a while, “where there’s life, there’s hope. If we want RR to succeed, we have to remember that.”

Razor, like the Magister, paces when plotting, and the broad aisles between the scattered tables and chairs provide plenty of room. He performs sweeping laps in his chair, punctuated at each end with precise hairpin turns. In the middle of a circuit, he whips toward Bill and drives till his foot plate nearly touches her legs. He types with vicious stabbing motions. “Don’t insult me, Miss Potts. I decided on that fucking phrase. You don’t need to remind me.”

Bill and Alison are sitting at a yellow, clear-stained table along with the Magister and the Doctor. Alison and her robot are on one side, a pale tree lamp lit and leafing out over them, Bill and the Doctor on the other.

“Yeah, I do need to remind you,” says Bill in a conversational tone. Either she’s a master of suppressing annoyance, or she really does have an unflappable disposition. “RR is about giving life back to people, yeah? So you can’t kill one of the resistance. If you do that, you kill hope and ruin everything that you’ve worked so hard for. You really want to do that?”

“Stop trying to appeal to compassion I don’t have.”

“She’s appealing to your sense of strategy, Master,” puts in the Magister. Alison notes with satisfaction that her robot, at least, consistently treats Razor with much more respect than Razor treats him. “Killing a traitor, though understandable, would be a grave tactical error at this point. You’d lose your followers’ trust and thus that large-scale consensual obedience that you’ve prepared so carefully. You’d be depriving yourself of your chief source of power.”

“Yes, yes! That’s exactly why you should show mercy.” The Doctor leans across the table to Razor.

Razor glowers at the Doctor as if they have just cursed. “I am not the Doctor. Nor do I ever want to be.”

“I didn’t say you should be me. I didn’t even say you should act like me. I just said you should show mercy, if only for practicality’s sake.” The Doctor shrugs. “If you do that, you’ll solidify your reputation. You’ll show yourself different than the heartless, hopeless Irons. You’ll be merciful, hopefully, and, most importantly, morally superior. That righteousness will go far. You might even get a substantial membership increase out of it.”

The appeal to Razor’s pragmatism, rather than his nonexistent clemency, decides him against killing Sinclair. That, however, is not enough to motivate Sinclair to open his door and join the rest of the passengers. Everyone employs various plots to bring him out. Ranju, now cruising around in a power chair like Bill’s and Razor’s, yells to the door that she needs help with crosswords and anagrams. The Doctor leaves flowers and hovers anxiously. The Magister, who apparently saved Sinclair from his detention cell personally, mentions to him once that he’d like to know how Sinclair is dealing with recent events; other than that, though, he leaves Sinclair alone. Razor remarks that the kid’s going to starve to death soon if he doesn’t come out, or at least he does until Bill says rather calmly that it’s inappropriate, which scares him off. With Anima’s help, Alison
pushes flat food under the door: crackers, cheese slices, fruit leather, slender apple slices, peanut butter sandwiches. Bill adds a copy of the Tiptree short story, just in case he needs some entertainment.

Bill takes Sinclair’s self-imposed isolation personally. At least thrice a day, she stops in front of his room. Sometimes she says that she knows how hard it must be for him; he’s scared and tired and in pain. Sometimes she reminds him that he’s not the only one who’s feeling that way; maybe it would help if he came out and talked to sympathetic listeners. Sometimes she says that she, Ranju, and Razor really miss him; they wish that he would reappear so that they can see him again. Other times it’s just a naked plea for him to open the door because she’s getting more and more worried about him. Every time, though, she closes with some version of the following: And I’m always here if you want to talk, just like I was always there for you when you were with us in the flat. You can always come to me. You know that, yeah?

There’s no answer.
Alison Uses Her Invicta

Chapter Summary

Alison uses her Invicta twice: one to shield Ranju from Cyber broadcasts, once to repel Razor.

Sinclair might be silent and in uncertain condition, but the other kid on the ship, Ranju, flourishes. She reads *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side* and then pesters Anima for more stories like it. She becomes fast friends with Alison’s robot after he gives her the tablet with puzzle software. Now equipped with her chair from the Doctor and her tablet from the Magister, who she calls *Mister Master*, Ranju zips around Anima, telling everyone [including the Doctor and the Magister] how great Alison’s Time Dorks are.

Unfortunately Ranju’s lively spirits dwindle as night comes. The third night in orbit, Ranju cries, as she always does, but Bill, sleeping, does not hear her. Since Alison has donated her bottle of artificial tears, Ranju can clean her own eyes when she is upset. However, the mechanical monotone of her sobs just sounds so lonely and desolate that Alison creeps from her room into Ranju’s.

There are three TARDIS cats, two black on Ranju’s left, one white on her right, that refuse to let Alison sit next to Ranju on her bed. Instead, Alison hops up on the mattress and sits across from her. Rubbing their faces and skulls all over Ranju’s Cyber suit, the cats burble like a small furry thunderstorm, though precipitating loose cat hair instead of rain. Ranju tilts her head to the side and squirts saline solution into her eyes. One of the black cats decides that the clear acrylic box sticking out of Ranju’s chest also needs some love and so proceeds to nudge it at all corners. Alison reflects that, if they all gathered in the same room and purred on a Cyber person who was still hooked up to the network, the TARDIS cats could probably break the connection as effectively as the Doctor’s proposed musical offensive.

Alison asks what’s upsetting Ranju. Ranju answers that she’s homesick. She thought that, once Bill and Razor took her from the hospital, that she would be back in her own house within a week. Now it’s been almost four weeks, and she misses her mum and her pet rats. She likes the large ones with the pointy ears and fuzzy tails, she says, stroking the white cat, but she wants to play with Squeak and Cheep.

Not only that, but, despite the repersoning, detox, and the vigilant attention of TARDIS cats, Ranju still hears the Cyber network signals in her head. “Broadcasts come…at night: *Obey. You’ll have… Irons in your veins…your mind… your heart. Then you’ll…be strong,*” Ranju says. She carefully wipes her eyes around the rims so as not to absorb all the freshly applied tears with her handkerchief. “Don’t…want Irons in…my mind. I want me…in my mind. Just me. Just…me.”

Alison asks Ranju if she’d like to try a way to keep her mind safe from the broadcasts: mental shielding. It requires a certain amount of energy and stamina, plus perseverance, so it’s not simple or easy, but it can be done. Basically you fill your conscious mind with some thought; for example, poems, passages, and spells work best for Alison. Then you either repeat the thought so much or focus on it so exclusively that it creates a barrier between you and the invasion. If you do it effectively, mental shielding can keep out intruders that are trying to come in and kick out intruders.
that are already inside. Ready to try anything at this point, Ranju asks for lessons right away.

Alison decides to start with her *Invicta*. It’s perfect for her when she has to fend off mental attacks, so Ranju should have no trouble with it. She writes the first verse out for Ranju:

*Out of the night that covers me,*

*Black as the pit from pole to pole,*

*I think whatever gods may be*

*For my unconquerable soul.*

Ranju has nothing but trouble with the poem. She thinks that the image of a pit for despair is fundamentally silly. Everyone knows that despair isn’t night, but a polluted fog that chokes your breath. It’s not a pit either, but a black hole that pulls your entire city toward decay and death, no matter what you do. Furthermore, gods don’t exist; neither do souls. Ranju says that she can’t memorize a poem like this because she’ll be too annoyed by how wrong it is.

With a chuckle at her own foolishness, Alison realizes that of course not everyone’s mind thinks in incantations and words like hers. She asks Ranju what sort of things interest her so much that she loses herself in them. Puzzles, says Ranju, hard puzzles. When Alison suggests that they could try anagrams as mental shields, Ranju starts wiggling excitedly. Mister Master, she says, gave her an anagram generator on his tablet!

Using the Magister’s tablet, Alison and Ranju start with *Mister Razor slays Irons*. The two experiment with the software and its inclusion/exclusion criteria. Alison notes a few words that might be useful: *master, ersatz, slimy, zooms, amazes, resist*. After excluding a bunch of irrelevant words [*raisin, martyr, loins, zesty, sinistral, et cetera*], she guffaws. “Here’s one. It’s perfect! *Sleazy mirror roasts sin.*”

“But RR...for everyone...not just men. Let’s use...*Razor* in anagram...though.” Ranju adds *Razor* as a necessary criterion. “*Razor storms. Razor’s storm? Razor’s storm...slays...in ire.*”

“Somehow I don’t think he’ll like that one. But hey, if we’re going the unflattering route, how
“Sly Razor good.” Ranju specifies that phrase for the inclusion pool. “Maybe Sly Razor is… Oooooooh. Insult: Sly Razor...is sorriest...man. Hah. Hah.”

Alison thinks that the analysis of Razor’s character is pretty accurate, though he’s not a man, but she keeps that thought to herself. “Hmmmm...can we get master or masters in there somehow?”


“That’s awesome! You even got master in there.”

Ranju nods. “Master of...fate. Captain...of soul.” She taps her chest electronics, clearly referring to herself. “Um. No. Master of anagrams. Captain...of puzzles.”

“You sure are! Hey, is the Cyber network still bothering you?”

“What is Cyber...network?” Ranju widens her eyes, feigning ignorance. “No. All good. Anagrams make...mental shields. Alison: master...of mind. Master...mind. Master...mind.” She grins, sit-bouncing again, making exclamation points with her body language. “Thanks. Thanks. Thanks. I can go...to safe house now. And then back to...my mum. And Squeak. And Cheep. Yay. Yay. Yay.”

Bidding Ranju good night and stumbling back down the hall toward her bedroom, Alison yawns. Her broken brain hasn’t really bothered her these past few days; though she always needs her unavoidable naps, she hasn’t experienced any short attention span, post-emotional flop, dizziness, or notable headaches. But staying past her bedtime with Ranju has just jeopardized all that. She’s going to need extra sleep tonight if she –

Something stirs in her head. It’s a startling, unexpected shiver within, the recognition of something unwelcome. It feels like that Finisterran vampire thing, putting its fingerprints all over the books in her mental library, wanting to pull them all off the shelf and stick its nose in, then rip out their pages. Someone is trying to read her mind.

Turning around, Alison sees Razor standing behind her. She drives him back with a variation on
the final stanza of her *Invicta*: “It matters not how strait the gate; / I will be good; I will be kind.…”

She stalks toward him the same way that he stalks toward everyone else. For every step she takes forward, he takes one backward, his forays into her head weakening. “It matters not how strait the gate; / I will be good; I will be kind,” Alison says again. “I am the master of my fate, / So get the fuck out of my mind!” She bores her eyes into his, blasting him with the full strength of her power. And she repels him.

Razor stands still, mostly because Alison has him cornered against a wall. “I didn’t know you would object,” he says. “Most people don’t.”

Alison, nearly standing on his toes, arches her neck and glares as hard as she can. She badly wants to yell at him, but she’d probably just end up calling him a *fucking fuck of a fuck*, thus losing her coherence and her control. No, far better to go with a straightforward assertion of supremacy. “Do you know who the ultimate authority on this ship is? Me. Not you. You’re a guest here, so you don’t set the rules. Instead, you follow them…or you would if you were sensible. But you’ve just been breaking and violating them one after the other. So give me one serious, compelling reason why I should let you stay.”

“Because of Miss Potts,” says Razor instantly, as if prepared for this question. “You value her regard for you too highly to let me go. You see – if you were to evict me, you would evict her friend, her protector, her loyal companion after her Doctor’s betrayal. Not only that, but you would evict someone disabled by chronic pain and thus dependent on others for help. And you know that Miss Potts considers it one of the worst cruelties to reject someone in need of assistance. How did your robot put it? Oh yes, evicting me would be a grave tactical error at this point in your overall strategy to secure Miss Potts’ affections.” Confident that he has successfully manipulated her emotions, he folds his arms.

“You underestimate me and Bill then.” Alison speaks with a brusque snap. “We stick together, even if we’re from different universes, because we’ve dealt with some similar racist, sexist, homophobic shit, and we’re equals. I’m close to her in a way you’ll never be, even if you’ve known her longer. Therefore, if you hurt me, I know without question that she would defend me against you. She would understand if I kicked you out right now. So no, I shouldn’t let you stay because of Bill.” She checks to see how Razor is taking this. His eyes slowly widen as he realizes that he’s truly not in control of this situation.

“There is only one condition under which I will let you stay,” Alison goes on, taking advantage of her proximity to level a finger at him about a centimeter from his nose. “Before you do anything with anyone who’s currently on this ship, ask yourself if your actions promote their safety, wholeness, and happiness. If they do, then do it. If they don’t, then don’t fucking do it. If you’re unsure, fucking ask a question. Will you abide by that condition?” Now that she has given him the harangue that he has deserved since the moment she first laid eyes on him [and probably before],
she falls silent to see how smart he’s going to be.

Razor musters his haughtiest attitude. “Stand down, little Dominatrix.”

“Answer my question, you big bully.”

He holds silent for a moment. Finally he concedes. “Very well. It appears that I must, so I shall.”

“The Doctor and my robot will be making sure that you do.”

“Your robot.” Repeating the phrase, Razor squinches up his face in revulsion. “Why do you call him that? He’s a person, an autonomous individual. He’s the Master, for fuck’s sake! He’s not yours.”

“I know he’s a person. And I call him that because he, as an autonomous individual, consented to be mine.”

Razor sniffs, shaking his head. “Yours? No. The Doctor’s? Maybe, temporarily, under certain circumstances, but yours? Impossible. The Doctor must have programmed him somehow… Or you must have done something to him… Or something inside him must have broken for the Master, of all people, to agree to be someone’s possession.”

“Well, of course I did something, and so did he. We negotiated our conditions and made an agreement. We have names that we use, rules that we follow, limits that we respect. So now I have a robot, my Magister, which means teacher, and you can fuck off about it meaning master. And he has a Domina.”

“You’re saying that like it’s some...Earthling...kinky thing, but with a...a...a human and a Time Lord. That’s revolting.”

“And exactly why is it revolting?”

“For one thing, you’re fucking.”
“We are not. Now you’re being revolting. It’s something we do because it’s the only thing that even comes close to evening out the power differential.”

“That’s why it’s disgusting. We’re not equal. You’re degrading him.”

“Okay, look. I explained. You don’t get it. I don’t have time to educate clueless white people anymore. If you’ve got other questions, take ‘em to my robot. Goodbye.” Alison leaves him standing there.
Alison and Bill Hold Each Other Fast

Chapter Summary

Razor submits to/threatens Alison. Alison informs the Magister, Bill, and the Doctor of Razor's actions. The Magister provides some insight on Razor's character. Alison and Bill hold each other fast.

The next day starts on a discouraging note. Alison remains anxious from her confrontation with Razor hours earlier, while he, in his own anxiety, has temporarily forgotten that she exists. She’s happy for his disregard, but not for the cause. Late the previous night, the four Tinder Town couriers, Amaranth, Corvine, Ishi, and Jamal, reported back from their investigations at the primary and fallback Sewage Street safe houses. Both houses [well, ruins, in the primary house’s case] were empty, with no clues as to Prunella and Senga’s whereabouts or condition. The couriers interviewed Sewage Street neighbors too, but they gave no helpful information either. Breakfast passes with Razor and Bill whispering anxiously about where Prunella and Senga might be. Alison and the Doctor watch Bill with some distress, and the Magister watches both of them.

After breakfast, just as she’s about to call the Magister, Bill, and the Doctor together to tell them what Razor did the previous night, Alison is approached by the culprit himself. They stand outside the kitchen, in which her robot is washing the breakfast dishes.

“I have been given to understand,” says Razor, with a sidelong look at her robot [who, dish towel in hand, gives him a sidelong glance right back], “that you rule the universe that you are from and that, because it is from your universe, this ship is also under your command. Therefore I will follow your laws while I am here.” She’s not sure if he’s mocking her with his rule the universe comment, but his tone seems even and relatively sincere.

Alison’s robot must have kicked his arse while she was sleeping. “Good. I’m holding you to that.”

Razor sniffs, as if his admission left noxious fumes in the air. Still and silent for a moment, he then swiftly turns toward her in a smooth arc of the chair. “My dear Miss Potts came to me,” he says, changing the subject abruptly, “with her heart blown out of her. It was beyond broken; it was atomized. She even wondered what the point was of trying anymore, since even the supposedly kindest, smartest, and most powerful person in the universe didn’t care about her. Do you know how disgusting it is to watch someone like Miss Potts believe herself unworthy merely because the person that she loved made her feel so? I was vicariously ashamed.

“Love is the most insidious of masters. It takes over the brain like a parasite, divorcing one’s
perceptions from reality. It makes decent people believe that they are horrible and vice versa. And yet still you humans willingly submit to it because the temptation of satisfaction is too great.

“And now, even after all that she suffered with the Doctor, Miss Potts is thoroughly infatuated with you. She respects you, admires you, likes you, and wants to fuck you. And you feel the same way about her. For some reason, you will eventually choose to love each other. But take care, little Dominatrix, because Miss Potts is never one who should debase herself with such doubt as she had when she came to me.” Coming toward her, he glares up at her as if he holds her personally responsible for any self-doubt that Bill has from this moment forth. “Fail her, and you are as bad as the Doctor.”

“Uh,” Alison answers. She’s glad that, despite being a general arsehole, he does at least care about Bill in a way that the Doctor over here never did. At the same time, though, his inability to express everything except in terms of disgust, humiliation, and failure indicates that he’s deeply miserable. For fuck’s sake, can’t he stop threatening her?

“Master,” says the Magister, turning away from the sink and now backing up Alison literally and figuratively, “my Domina believes that Miss Potts deserves the happiness, wholeness, and safety so much that she came from another universe to help her. Our goals align with yours: to see Miss Potts free from the Doctor and to see Dystopavielle free from Irons.”

“Um, yeah,” says Alison. “And now, if you’ll excuse us, we need to have a private conversation.”

“Very good,” says Razor, turning punctiliously and zipping away.

Alison calls her robot, Bill, and Bill’s Doctor together. She wedges herself next to her robot as close as she can without being in his lap, and he puts his arm around her. Razor, she reports, tried to read her mind last night. She told him to fuck off and treat everyone aboard with respect and kindness, or else he was being banished.

The four sit in the night side of the library at the end of a corridor of books. The ebony bookcases, carved with trees, loom over them, three meters high, as if they have gone through a secret passage to arrive at this secret oasis. Two flower lamps droop above them, dispelling both soft light and a fragrance slightly like sandalwood. It’s safe here and quiet, and her robot won’t let any alternative versions of him bother her. Neither will Bill and the Doctor, who are exchanging grim frowns opposite Alison and her robot.

“He’s not doing that again,” says Alison’s robot when Alison finishes her story.

“No way,” agrees Bill. “I’m gonna kick his arse if he does…or maybe run over it. Depends if I’m having a good day or a bad day.”

“Good,” Alison says, snuggling against her robot. “Did you tell him off too?”

“Of course! I wouldn’t be a very good robot, now would I, if I didn’t do that?” He snuggles her
back, tightening his arms around her.

“We both did,” says the Doctor with a little smile. “Your robot discussed the importance of obeying his Domina. I said that it was bad manners to misbehave when you’re a guest in someone’s home, especially when those hosts are going to help you with your revolution, because then they might think you’re revolting and, you know, revolt against you instead.”

“The Doctor actually said that,” puts in Alison’s robot. “There were a gratuitous plethora of puns on revolting.” Speaking over the Doctor’s insistence that puns are never gratuitous, he continues: “He -- the Master -- approached me last night. Have you no dignity? You’re the Master...or you should be. How can you let her just strip you of your name, your pride, everything that you are, and turn you into a toy...and not just a toy, but one that belongs to her, a human?”

“Huh, that’s weird,” says Alison. “He implied that he knew what kink was, so I thought he’d understand when I explained, even if he didn’t like it.”

“Yeah, well, he does that,” says Bill with a sigh. “Back before it was too much effort to have a social life, he was kind of vetting all my prospects because… Hey, I’m the assistant to the leader of RR; I have to make sure that my girlfriends are trustworthy, yeah? Anyway, he was like, Oh, not that one, she’s kinky. I was about to tell him that it depended on what she was into, but I stopped once I saw the look on his face. He knows what it is, but I don’t think he gets it.”

Alison’s robot agrees. Razor obviously knows what kink is, but his personal experiences distort his view of Alison’s relationship with her robot. Razor has been deranged, in his words, since childhood. His major life experiences correspond with those of Alison’s robot until his universe’s Time War, when he was weaponized against his will by the High Council. He fled to the end of the universe and disguised himself as a human to hide from them. The Tenth Doctor inadvertently restored his true identity to him, so he traveled to Earth, made PM, and was assassinated by his wife Lulu Lucy. He resurrected faultily, tried to wipe out humanity, assassinated Rassilon instead, and from there somehow ended up on Newland without his TARDIS.

Razor now accepts his disabilities, but he must have hated himself at first. Time Dorks, Alison’s robot says, prize their reputation as the most perfect society in the cosmos, so they reject the notion that their world has imperfect – that is to say, disabled – people. Almost all disabled people regenerate out of their disabilities, so the few who do not are seen as traitors to the perfection of Time Dork culture. Disabled people are urged to kill themselves or, at the very least, to pretend that they don’t exist.

As a disabled Time Dork, Razor contends with self-hatred and the hatred of a society bent on removing his personhood, autonomy, and dignity. Because of his history, Razor assumes oppressive objectification in all relationships of possession, domination, and submission. He cannot conceive of such a relationship as consensual, beneficial, and enjoyable.

“Ohhhhh.” Alison nods with understanding. “I see what you mean. It’s like, because I’ve had my mind invaded twice, I automatically assume that anyone going into anyone else’s mind is mind-fucking. I actually yelled at Razor about that the other day. He was going to use his psychic powers to take Bill’s excess pain and transfer it to himself. And he did, by the way! He really did. He actually did a nice thing! It was amazing. But I didn’t understand at first, so I thought he was going to fuck with her. So what you’re saying is that he was watching out for you in his own twisted way.”
“He’d better watch out for me,” mutters Bill, sounding her wheelchair’s blast-off noises in an ominous manner. “Messing around with my girl – with you like that when you told him multiple times that you don’t do psychic tricks! Alison…” Driving closer, she ducks the low-hanging bloom of a flower lamp and puts her left hand over Alison’s right. “I know what it’s like to feel scared around Time Lords, so seriously – if you want me to tell him to go away, let me know, and I’ll do it. I won’t be offended. I just…I want you to be safe, yeah?” Big dark eyes open anxiously wide; lovely thick eyebrows swoop down in concern.

Alison smiles so hard that tears squeeze out her eyes. “Yeah,” she whispers. “I mean…I’m not crying ‘cause I’m scared; I’m just crying ‘cause you want me to…to be…”

“Handkerchief.” Her robot proffers one. “Your Magister is not the only person who wishes to hold you fast,” he says in Alison’s ear. “Do be my good Domina, and let Miss Potts do so as well. Your hearts are safe with hers.” He caresses her cheek, incidentally brushing aside some of her tears.

Eventually the Time Dorks depart, and Bill watches them go. “Not really your partner of the mind then, the Prof?” she says, turning back to Alison. “Obviously you think alike, but you’re playing with one another, aren’t you?” Her emphasis on that word indicates that she knows exactly what kind of games. She gives a little smile and a nod, as if this is absolutely right.

“Um, yeah.” Alison, still nestled amongst the cushions of a dark, fertile brown sofa, chews on her lower lip. She wedges her hands between her thighs so that she won’t wring them. “Do you see why I said partner, though? First of all, I had no idea if you would even approve of kinky stuff. Second of all, people tend to think that kink entails sex, which he and I absolutely do not have. Third of all, he’s…an ex-evil alien superpowered robot.”

“Yeah,” says Bill, “but the Prof is different from the one over here. Razor got objectified against his will for the Time War and then when people told him to die because he was disabled. So, as a result, he thinks all power plays are evil and wrong, except when he’s doing them. He can’t understand why anyone else besides him would do it.”

“Of course he has an exception for himself,” mutters Alison, voice heavy with disgust.

“But the Prof is different. He got objectified when the Doctor made him a robot, but then he realized that his old power plays were wrong because they were taking advantage of people. So he started doing better ones that both people consented to. That means that he learned something that the one over here hasn’t. He’s more considerate, and he actually realizes that you have to be more careful with humans than with Time Dorks. So hey…if you’ve got to go with a Time Dork for a play partner, go for the one that knows about limits and consent and respect and all that.”

“So…you understand?” Alison ventures. She unclamps her hands from between her legs.

Bill nods, blinking rapidly. “Well…yeah. Because…I…saw how he looked at you, knowing absolutely everything about you, and was still like, Yes, yes, I don’t care if she’s a human; I don’t care if she’s a different color; I don’t care if she’s hundreds of years younger than me. She’s good just as she is, and she’s worth holding fast.

“I understand,” she says with a long exhalation, “because…because…because I want that. Not like a play partner, although that would be nice, and not even like a Time Dork, but someone who says, This is Bill, and she’s Black, and she doesn’t have a mum, and she’s a lesbian, and she didn’t go to uni, and she’s not all book smart, and she’s lonely and shy and scared most of the time. But none of that is bad, yeah? She’s good just as she is, and I want to hold her fast. I’m jealous, I guess, and sad that you had to go out of your own damn solar system to find someone who would do that. That’s not really great odds for me, is it?” The inner edges of her eyebrows flicker up and down as
she tries not to cry.

With a gulp, Alison stands up and moves to the side of Bill’s chair. She leans over and puts her arms sideways around Bill. “This is Bill,” she whispers, “whose heart called me here from another universe with her goodness and her desire and her pain. This is Bill, who has the strength, the courage, and the mechanical guts to survive perforation. This is Bill, and she stands like a question mark, asking the universe to explain itself. This is Bill with her big brown eyes, always looking for wonder, and her smirk-bracketed mouth, smiling and sighing. This is Bill, who’s scared, in pain, feeling homesick and abandoned. She’s good just as she is. In fact, she’s amazing just as she is. I really, really, really like her, and I really want to hold her fast, and I hope she wants to hold me fast too.” She starts crying, warm, fast tears, like all the happiness is too much for her body to contain.

“Yes, yes, of course I want to hold you fast!” Bill wraps her arms up and around Alison’s left arm, which is against her chest. Bending her neck, she curls herself around Alison’s arm. Her tears too fall thickly and quickly, heating Alison’s sleeve where they drop. “Dammit,” she says in between sniffles. “Where’s an evil alien robot with a handkerchief when you need him?”

“Mea Domina! Miss Potts! Luncht – oh! Are you…all right?”

Alison and Bill, catching each other’s eyes, begin to laugh and cry at the same time, leading to all sorts of interesting sound effects. “No [snork]! Wait! Prof!” gasps Bill. “We were just – “

“Ah,” says Alison’s robot, his voice enriching and becoming as warm as their tears. “—Holding each other fast?”

“Handkerchief [snnerrrrk]?” Alison says with a silly hiccup.

“In your left front pants pocket,” he says, tucking it there. “Now, my dear Miss Potts…” Though she can’t see him, Alison imagines him turning to Bill. “You do know the secret about my lovely Domina, don’t you?”

“Um, she’s awesome?” guesses Bill.

“No,” he says, lowering his voice to a confidential tone, “it is this. Now that you have given your consent, she will hold you fast for as long as you wish to be so held. She will hold you when you feel unworthy of being held. She will hold you when you believe that you have no need of being held. She will hold you when you do not realize that you should be held. She has wonderfully true and loyal hearts, and so, I believe, do you, my dear Miss Potts. Yours match well with hers. How delightful!” There’s the sound of his gloved palms joining in a satisfied clap. “I apologize. I’m leaving now – truly I am.” Alison’s robot departs, leaving her and Bill to giggle uncontrollably in between blowing their noses.
Sinclair Tells His Story

Chapter Summary

The Sewage Street safe house reports in with momentous good news. Sinclair comes out of hiding and tells about his torture by the Night Patrol and his rescue by the Magister.

Bill wakes Alison from her midday nap with jubilant horn honks. While Alison was asleep, Prunella and Senga, the heads of the Sewage Street safe house, called. They’re concealing themselves in Dead Beggars’ Alley, in a hideout that they kept secret even from Razor till now.

Prunella and Senga escaped the safe house with nothing but essential records. They called on RR agents at Floor 1056 General Hospital, who smuggled them into a laxly monitored ward of recently Cyberized people. The patients lay in medically induced comas as the Cyber network reprogrammed their brains.

The couple saved three of the patients at highest risk for post-surgical complications. With the help of the pro-RR charge nurse, they disengaged them from the Cyber network, woke them from their artificial comas, and had them reported as three deaths due to failure to upgrade.

Barely brainwashed by the Cyber network, the three patients had repressed emotions, but no need for extensive detox. If kept hidden, they could wait for eventual reversal of their emotional suppression. The hospital’s RR agents agreed to use their own social circles to find the three patients shelter.

Leaving the hospital after two nights, Prunella and Senga passed their house. There was only ashes...and a Night Patrol officer. Charlie Foxtrot [a name based on the person’s only identification: serial code CF901] had been injured in the blast with which the other officers had destroyed the house; their legs were crushed by fallen beams, their right hand ripped off below the elbow. They had been abandoned as lost by their comrades.

But Senga, a former anesthesia tech who knew much about Cyber anatomy, saw that Charlie was still alive, albeit in a survival state. Severing all transmissions to and from the Cyber network to conserve power, Charlie concentrated life support systems around their vitals. Prunella and Senga hoped that Charlie, now in Dead Beggars’ Alley with them, might receive immediate medical attention, ideally from someone who was a genius in both robotics and surgery.
The Doctor yelled, *Oooh, oooh, me! Pick me!* They sprang to their feet with such alacrity that they knocked Razor’s microphone off the table and plopped into the Magister’s lap. Razor must have been in a good mood because he just cracked up and didn’t make a single snide comment.

“So yeah!” Concluding her summary, Bill does a double horn beep of happiness. “A lot happened while you were napping. We’re back in the city now, but don’t look out the windows ‘cause we’re hiding in the hospital in a ward they don’t use very much. Even though it’s still daytime, your robot insisted on going out. He’s dropping Ranju off at her mum’s, then looping around to bring Charlie back here. Amazingly brave or amazingly foolish? Still can’t decide.”

“Both,” says Alison without a moment’s hesitation. “He’s also amazingly smart, amazingly strong, and amazingly psychic. I’ve seen him mind-fuck six hundred and seventy-two aliens into committing suicide without even making eye contact. He can defend himself.”

“He better have had a really good reason!” Bill’s jaw is hanging open.

“Well, they had the Doctor hostage, and their idea of negotiation was compromising on which end of them to eat first. He didn’t think that was such a great idea. Anyway, if anyone gets in his way, he just…gets them out of his way.” Reviewing everyone’s status, Alison says, “What about the kid whose family went into protective custody at a safe house?”

“Um, yeah. The coward extraordinaire? That would be me.” A lean kid, with skin on the browner side of tan, crouches against the frame of Alison’s bedroom door.

“Sinclair!” Bill reaches out toward him.

“Hey, nice wheels.” He moves slowly into her arms and hugs her. “Thanks for the story — the one about the cold hill’s side.” Alison realizes that he’s referring to the Tiptree that Bill slid under his door. “It was, um, a good reminder that you can’t hide forever, even if aliens have fucked you over. Can I, um, talk to you?”

“Ah, good!” Razor’s voice rings down the hall. “Still alive!”

“Uhhhh, excuse me?” says Alison. “How did you -- ?”

“My dear Miss Potts thought his name very loudly,” says Razor, pulling up near Alison.
“Fuck.” Upon seeing Razor, Sinclair mouths the word rather than says it. His fingers dig into Bill’s arms as he goes grey and still and sweaty.

“Razor, do you think you could maybe leave us alone for this, please?” Alison says to him in a low voice out of the side of her mouth. “He’s obviously scared shitless of you.”

“No. Um, no.” Prying himself loose from Bill, Sinclair stands as straight as his pain will allow him. “I’m scared shitless of everything now. But, um, it’s something I need to say to you too,” he mutters in the direction of Razor’s foot plate. “And...well...the worst you can do is kill me, but even that won’t, um, be as bad as what I’ve gone through because...well...I’ll be dead.”

Silence falls. Sinclair won’t lift his head. Alison and Bill glare at Razor, daring him to come out with his usual mean, spiteful remarks. But Razor says nothing. He only eyes Sinclair, tilting his head to one side a little bit, then to the other. Bent forward in his chair, his eyes narrowed, he looks like a scientist examining a specimen through a microscope, but also like someone trying to understand faintly heard sounds. Alison suddenly realizes that he’s probably reading Sinclair’s mind as well as his body language.

“I see now how they hurt you,” Razor says, his voice low. His tone is suppressed, but he sounds like he’s biting into each word and ripping it off the bone. “They said that no one cared about you, that no one would save you, that no one would miss you when you were gone. They told you that your life was worthless, that you should die, that the world would be better off without you. They told you that you weren’t a person; they told you that you were a thing. And that...that...that is the worst lie that one person can tell another because, when someone’s vulnerable, it’s so very easy for them to believe.”

Not until he reaches the last sentence does Alison realize that this is Razor’s version of empathy. He speaks viciously not because he is angry at Sinclair, but because he is angry on Sinclair’s behalf. In those moments of scrutiny a few minutes before, Razor discovered that Sinclair had been depersoned with the same sort of psychological torture that Razor himself underwent. That discovery canceled out any desire to murder Sinclair for his ostensible treachery because he saw that Sinclair was like himself, and he could not murder anyone in the same condition.

“Yes, Mister Razor sir; I’m sorry, Mister Razor sir.” Sinclair hangs his head. “I...I...I understand why you have to...have to...have to kill -- “

“Sinclair, no!” Bill touches his forearm gently. “You’re safe here. No one’s going to hurt you anymore...ever.” She throws a significant look, practically a glare, at Razor.
Razor rests himself back against the gel seat supports; he sighs. “Mister Mallory, Miss Potts is right. You’re safe here; no one’s going to kill you, least of all me. If I did that, I’d make an object out of you, and then they’d win. No.” He shakes his head. “I can’t do that.”

Another tense silence occurs. Alison and Bill share a nod: “Tea!” Everyone repairs to the kitchen table and finds the Doctor, who, thrilled to see Sinclair, has already put the kettle on. Sinclair thanks Alison for his under-door diet of the past few days and looks for heartier sustenance than tea. The Doctor offers leftovers, but any hot food will have to wait for the arrival of their inevitable spouse. The Doctor has been forbidden to use all cooking machines, even the microwave, since the Cling Film Catastrophe of 2007.

Announcing the Magister’s return, the Doctor disappears to stabilize their new patient. The Magister sits down at the kitchen table, and Sinclair visibly relaxes and supposes that it would be okay to talk now. Alison, fidgeting with eagerness and sit-bouncing in her chair, asks if Sinclair can begin his story with an account of his rescue, about which the Magister mentioned nothing.

“Well, you know, it was a rainy night,” Sinclair begins. “Sure, it’s always a rainy night, but this was a clammy rain. It gets under your skin, makes you shiver, makes you feel like you’ll never be warm again. I’ve told them everything, so I’m just in a cell -- I have been for like a day -- waiting for the end. They said that they’d be merciful by killing me and making it quick, but now they’re thinking that it would be a waste of good meat when they could just re-robotify me. I’m just limp, empty, too far gone to move, to sleep, or to even be scared anymore.

“Then there’s this creaking, snapping noise. I look up; this...um...this person is like pulling the bars apart from my window, actually wrenching them out of the concrete walls. He like jumps in, only it looks kind of like he’s flying because he has all sorts of black and purple flapping layers and stuff. Normally I’m cool with gas masks, but he has has a really high-tech one, all black and shiny, and I’m thinking that it might be one of Irons’ personal guards come to beat the shit out of me. But then he takes off his mask, and I have no idea who he is, but the way he smiles just makes me trust him instantly. He’s like, _Where there’s life, Mister Mallory, there’s hope. I’m very pleased that you’re still alive, for your friend, the lovely Miss Potts, sent me to save you. I’m the Master, and you’re going to come with me._”

Sinclair hurry through the rest of the rescue, which apparently involved shots fired and the Magister stopping the bullets in midair telekinetically, then returns to what he really wants to say. His dramatic retelling of a superheroic rescue breaks down into a stammering admission of guilt. He stayed in his room all this time, he says, because, every time Bill came by, saying that she'd be there for him, he just froze and sank deeper into shame. He couldn’t bear the thought of facing her. If she knew what he’d done to her, she’d hate him forever.

There’s a pause as Sinclair gathers his composure. They tortured him at the North District Detention Center, he says in a low, broken voice, by telling him that they had Bill in custody too.
He said he wouldn’t reveal anything, but they let him hear screams and sobs that they said were hers. If he said what he knew about the flat’s location and that of the safe house where he stayed, they said, her pain would end. Did he really want to be responsible for breaking the heart of the resistance?

Slightly greenish about the face at this point, mumbling into his hands, Sinclair presses on. He couldn’t let Bill die; she was the one who had saved his life. So he told. Then he realized that, while he might have saved Bill, his confession risked the resistance’s entire operation. He felt extra horrible now, but still he focused on Bill. Where was she? Was she safe? Had he at least spared her life? He lay in isolation for maybe a day or two, wondering.

When they came to transfer him to the cell from which the Magister took him, he asked them about Bill. Oh, she’s out of her misery, they said. Would you like to see her? They turned on a monitor to show him a fully converted Cyber person, with the bag over the head and the empty eye holes and everything. Well, they said, she might not actually be out of her misery, but at least she won’t be screaming and crying anymore.

Of course, when the Magister swooped in to save Sinclair, he filled him in on everything, including the fact that the torture had been a mind-fuck. Bill really, truly was safe and unconverted. In fact, the Magister and his people had come all the way from another universe to make sure that she was safe and to help the revolution succeed. Still, Sinclair feels like he betrayed his friend. He failed her. His heart wasn’t as strong as hers.

Sinclair cries, holding Bill’s hand. Bill cries, her Doctor with their hand almost gingerly on her shoulder. There are tears in the Doctor’s eyes as well. Alison, in need of reassurance just watching, sits by the Magister, who puts his arm around her. Razor looks like all the tears in the room are contaminating his skin and he needs to peel it off and run away. Alison wonders if she used to look like that before she rediscovered how to cry.

“Well, in good news,” Razor says after a short time, seeming ready to stab out his ear drums if he hears another sob, “your family is safe, Mister Mallory. They’re at the Butcher’s Block fallback, along with Ali and his parents too, just in case.” He adds that the whole Butcher’s Block safe house was spared any raid and that the Sewage Street location was destroyed, but Ms. Kim and Ms. McDonall are fine, so he needn’t worry about that. Editing the news from Tinder Town, he says that four people, including the former head of the safe house, died in a fire, but the entire neighborhood has pledged itself to RR. “In other words,” he says, “this resistance is about to become a revolutionary war.”

“Oh...fuck…” Sinclair glances up. “Mister Razor sir, I’m so sorry…”

“No,” says Razor, “don’t apologize. I can’t wait for the fun to begin!”
Charlie Comes Back to Herself

Chapter Summary

Alison has some minimally civil conversations with Razor. The Doctor repersons a fucking Night Patrol officer!

Alison, drained merely by the witness of Sinclair’s painful testimony, sleeps for an hour afterward. She wakes to find her Time Dorks hard at work on Charlie, replacing their amputated limbs with ones originally designed for the Magister. Meanwhile, Bill diverts Sinclair with a variation on checkers. Bill has added to the mix occasional trivia questions and a dodecahedral die. The black squares are black holes, Bill informs Alison, while the red squares are lava. The black checkers can survive black holes, but not lava, vice versa for the red. She and Sinclair are trying to evacuate all the checkers off the board without losing any.

Alison watches with a smile as a red checker dies in a black hole and Bill makes its friends put up a trivia card shrine. In thirty seconds, Bill grants more dignity and personhood to a plastic game piece than her universe’s Doctor ever granted Bill, an actual person, in a year of acquaintance. Sure, Alison’s robot thinks that Alison has the Master’s mind and the Doctor’s hearts, but she hopes that he recognizes that Bill’s heart is more like the Doctor’s than hers will ever be.

Moving to the library, Alison views Razor pacing with long laps of his chair and talking to nobody at all. He counts off items on his fingers. “First, it raises morale, theirs and mine. Also gives me a chance to run my mouth and let the batshit out to play for a few hours. Second, it marks formal transition from resistance to revolution. Third,” he says, executing a pinpoint switchback, “it consolidates new support, especially from Tinder Town. Fourth, it scares Irons shitless. Proves we’ve got the numbers to take them down and the tech to kill their Cyber operation. Possible speakers: me of course, Miss Potts, Mister Mallory, maybe the former NP if conscious.”

“Um, are you okay?” Alison calls.

“Speech to text!” he yells back.

“What? Are you okay?”

Razor zooms in her direction so fast that Alison leaps backward, even though he stops about a half a meter from her. “Contrary to popular belief, little Dominatrix, my crazies do not show up in the form of talking to myself. I’m just a narcissistic psychopath with delusions of grandeur who
happens to be using the speech-to-text capabilities of my tablet.” He twists the gooseneck stand of
his tablet toward her, and she sees that it has captured both of them shouting at each other. Alison’s
about to apologize, but he waves her off. “Are you here to help me and Ms. Kim play war games?”

Just then a high-pitched beeping sounds somewhere in the left side pocket of Razor’s chair. “Ah,
that would be the Gregorys!” His rather slithery smirk turns into one of happy surprise. Glancing
up at Alison, he adds for her benefit, “Heads of the safe house in the Dominoes, last to report in.
Interested? Your robot’s still operating with the Doctor on the Cyber person, but Miss Potts says
she’d like to hear, so you wouldn’t be alone with me.”

Alison, who is irrepressibly curious, assents. She and Razor withdraw to the communications
center in the corner of his bedroom. Razor makes small talk with the Gregorys until Bill zips in.
With a split-second glance of affirmation at Alison, she parks her chair between Razor’s and
Alison’s. As Alison and Bill hold hands, Razor asks the Gregorys for an official report.

Audrey and Scott Gregory are speaking from the Dominoes, a corner of the East District populated
with narrowly spaced tenement towers. Periodically, one of the cheaply constructed, slab-like
buildings crumple, damaging at least the next three in the row. But none of the Dominoes have
collapsed in the recent raid. Audrey, Scott, and five Cyborgans all decamped to the fallback
without incident.

Razor is about to rejoice until Scott mentions his latest activities. He knows, he says, that Razor
has had difficulty learning about NP raids in advance. Therefore, he and Audrey have solved this
problem. Over the last four weeks, they have detained three Night Patrol officers in their basement,
trying to obtain information about future raids. He acknowledges that physical pain hasn’t proved
effective, since Cyber people are programmed to withstand it. Waterboarding doesn’t work either,
but he feels confident that he and Audrey will find some effective technique of extracting
intelligence. He hopes that the ingenuity and initiative that he and Audrey have shown might prove
them worthy of more trusted positions in the --

Saying he’ll get back to the Gregorys, Razor ends the call. With a tap of his joystick, he turns to
Alison and Bill. “Was that just a figment of my demented, deranged imagination,” he inquires, “or
was Mister Gregory bragging about torturing and murdering Cyber people?”

“Torture,” say Alison and Bill grimly.

Razor’s entire demeanor changes. His finely incised facial features, the tilt of his neck, the set of
his shoulders, and indeed his entire body compact into a new hardness. It’s as if being nice was
pulling him apart, but now he solidifies into his true self. “Right then,” he says with a nod.
“They’re dead!”
“But you can’t -- “ Alison and Bill start.

Razor snaps his fingers, then spins around to point at them, in a gesture so like the Magister’s that Alison falls quiet. “You think I’m about to kill them, and you presume to tell me how to run my resistance,” he says. “Don’t!” Though hard and quick, his voice lacks the vicious edge that it did when he realized how Sinclair had been harmed. He cocks his head at Alison. “You may run your universe, little Dominatrix, but your dominion ends at the borders of this ship. You have no power over me in my realm.” He switches his attention to Bill. “Nor do you, my dear Miss Potts. You, as the heart of the resistance, do invaluable work, but I am the leader, not you. If you want to listen, be still and obey me.

“Besides,” he goes on, “they’ll only be dead to RR, not actually dead, which I’m sure will placate both of your tender little hearts. I’m expelling them, giving supervision of the safe house to another team, and moving the Cyborganics that they’re hosting elsewhere. You see?” Smug smile. “I’m not a fool. I’ve learned the strategic value of compassion.”

“Right,” says Bill with a nod.

“Understood,” says Alison, who is also pleased to note that he has also learned the strategic value of occasionally not acting like a shit.

At that moment the Doctor sticks their head in. They wear dirt-smudged clothes, plastic clogs on their feet, three pairs of goggles on their head, and a ventilator around their neck. Their canvas apron, covered in blue daisies, features many grease stains and a bunch of sonic screwdriver-like things in the breast pocket. “Hey hey hey!” They jig from foot to foot, various electronics clinking in their pockets. “I’m about to get Charlie out of their coma. Anyone wanna say hi?”

Verifying that the Magister will come out of the lab to keep an eye on Razor, Alison and Bill agree that saying hi to Charlie sounds much more interesting. They leave with the Doctor, who updates them on Charlie. Today the Doctor tested on Charlie their plan to dissonize with the Cyber network and break connections between it and Cyber people. The dissonance worked so well that, blazing with success, the Doctor sang on. They sang Charlie free of all mind-altering effects, both emotional and brainwashing, then suffered an asthma attack and stopped to use their inhaler.

Nudging open the grey metal lab door, the Doctor triggers the pale LED overhead lights and gallops down an aisle toward the back of their lab. Alison stops Bill from entering, as she realizes that the floor might be unsafe for Bill’s chair. Greenish grass and strands of colored wire fill the space between black floor tiles, raising them into uneven hillocks. “Hey, why are you in my way?” Bill cranes her neck at the interior, glimpsing ranks of trunks along the walls, both silver humanoid and brown tree. “Oooh, a forest of robots in there!”
“The floor is a disaster waiting to happen,” Alison says, “and, as usual, the Doctor didn’t notice.” She drags some spare rugs into position over the uneven floor. “There. That might make things easier.”

Alison and Bill head to the operating theatre at the back of the lab. A circular bank of lights, turned off, hang overhead, as well as monitors tracking vital signs. On a hospital bed with the back slightly inclined rests Charlie. Their silver Cyber suit, which seems to function as skin, covers their torso and their original robotic arms. Their replacement limbs, silver intricacies of artificial skeleton, tendons, and muscles, look like the Magister’s hands when they’re ungloved. With their Cyber helmet off, they have a hairless skull of medium brown plastic with greyish undertones. Their actual face, a smooth, shield-like curve of plastic, has two eye sensors and a mouth speaker, but no recognizably human projections and indentations.

“No face?” gasps Alison, remembering the smothered, filled-in people of her dream.

“Yeah,” says the Doctor. “Charlie’s brain and spinal cord are original, along with some of their cranium, but everything else is robotic.”

“Oh…” Alison nods solemnly. Bill slips her hand into hers. “Yeah.”

“I hope they’re not in too much pain when they wake up,” says Bill with a wince. Alison squeezes her hand.

“I hope too,” says the Doctor. “I think I sang some of that away, but I’m not sure. Shall we see?”

Alison and Bill nod, and the Doctor, cradling Charlie’s head in their hands, sings again. They sing low and slow and sweet, a crooning melody as gentle as waves washed against the shore by a light breeze. A nightmare moves into the past, and the present rises, an unknown place filled with unknown people and an unknown future. But the unknown place is safe, and the unknown people want to help. You were in pieces; you were in pain, the song says. I have knit you together again. I have given you new limbs and new peace of mind. I hope that I have given you a new chance too. Please come back and tell me what you think.

The Doctor’s song sinks away. Everyone’s breath catches in their throats as Charlie’s eyes literally wink on, bright, pale green lights filling the black ovals of their lenses. Then they speak in a voice that’s computerized, but not halting like Ranju’s: “Fucking fuck of a fuck!” Nor is their voice uninflected, for that’s definitely an incredulous, terror-stricken tone.

“Hi!” says the Doctor with a wave. “I’m the Doctor, like not a doctor from the hospital, but just, you know, the Doctor. That’s my name. I gave you some new legs and an arm. I was the one singing to you; that’s how I cleared the Cyber network and emotional inhibitions from your brain.”

“Oh yeah,” adds Bill, wheeling a little closer, “and I’m Bill…”

“The fucking heart of the – “

“Yeah, the heart of Razor’s Resistance, but don’t worry!” Bill flaps her hands, palms down, as if smoothing out wrinkles. “You’re safe. We’re not going to torture you or interrogate you or hurt you in any way. Do you remember that you went on a raid to the Sewage Street safe house?”

“Un-fucking-fortunately.”

“You got partially, um, squashed and then abandoned by everyone else, yeah? You went into a survival shutdown coma, and two of the resistance members brought you here to save your life.”
“And I’m Alison,” Alison pipes up. “Are you, um, okay? Can we get you anything to make your more comfortable? Oh yeah, and we were calling you Charlie because of your CF901 serial code, so let us know what we should call you.”

“Fu-uck.” Drawing the word out into two syllables, Charlie makes it a definitive pronouncement of overwhelmed consternation. “Um. No. Please don’t call me fuck. I’m so far from being Sarah Fanshaw anymore, and I’d really like to stop being some fucking serial code, so let’s just go with Charlie.”

“And, um, what pronouns do you use?” Alison asks. “The Doctor uses they/Them, and Bill and I use she/her.”

“I…” Charlie sighs. “Well, it’s not like you can really fuckin’ tell, but feminine.”

“Fanshaw… Fanshaw…” Bill searches her memory. “The first Cyborganic that I saw Razor do the repersoning surgery on – his name was Junie Fanshaw. He said that one of his spouses had been kidnapped and converted like a year before, and he – “

Charlie sits straight up in the bed, then makes an exclamation of pain, and falls back. “Fuckin’ Junie? Fucking Junie! He’s alive? Is he okay? What about Gardenia?”

“Um, I think Razor just did a follow-up call with him a few days ago, and both of them are fine.”

“Oh fuck. Oh fuck.” Staring at the ceiling, Charlie would probably be panting if she had lungs. “Then I… And they… And we… But I’m a fucking traitor! And I have no fucking face!” She buries her head in her hands.

“Um, Charlie?” Hands clasped at about sternum level, the Doctor steps forward. “If you tell me what you want, I can make you a face. I’m not sure how well I could connect it to your existing nervous system, but you’d definitely have all your usual features. And you could open and close your eyes and your mouth at least.”

Lowering her hands, Charlie points her face at the Doctor in a look that’s definitely a glare, even if she has no eyes to narrow or eyebrows to lower. “Don’t fuck with me. This is Dystopiaville; our tech isn’t that good.”

“But I’m not from here,” says the Doctor. “I’m a genius alien from Gallifrey with so many doctorates I’ve lost count, including a few in microneurosurgery and biorobotics. And…oh look – here’s my walking visual aid. Hi, Master!” they say as the Magister walks in. “I was just trying to convince Charlie here that I could make her a reasonably expressive face. You mind taking off yours and maybe proving it to her?” Turning to Charlie, they explain, “That’s my inevitable spouse. He’s a robot. I made him.”

“Excuse me, but you’re a fucking what now?” Charlie says to the Magister.

“Hello, my dear, I’m the Master,” says the Magister, as Alison and Bill stifle a few snickers. Striding smoothly forward, he extends his hand as if he meets repersoned Night Patrol members regularly, and Charlie shakes his hand. “I am a robot, that is, fully artificial in my construction, built entirely by the Doctor.”

“Fuck no,” says Charlie. “You are not a…” The Magister takes off his face plate with a click of magnets releasing, showing the naked mechanics of his physiognomy. “—Fucking robot…?” Charlie finishes, trailing off in stupefaction.

“Okay,” says Bill. “Wow. Really a robot then.”
“Stop showing off, Mechanical Me.” Razor appears on the scene. “No one wants to see what you look like naked.”

“What is this, a fucking surprise party?” says Charlie. “Who’s this fucking weirdo?”

“Oh. Right,” says Razor. “Most of you Night Patrol have no idea what I really look like, do you? – Or sound like. But perhaps,” he says, picking up his accent where it last came to rest in Turkey and taking it on a loop through Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, “you remember ridiculous generic foreign accent? Usually comes with greasy hairs and complete lack of fashion sense, but probably is ringing the bells, no?”

“Fu-uck,” Charlie states again. “So the last time I checked, I was completely Cybered and basically dead. Now apparently RR saved my life, and I’m deconverted and mostly pain-free, thanks to a singing genius alien microsurgeon. And Bill the fucking heart of the resistance and Razor him-fucking-self are here to say hi. Oh yeah, and I’m getting a new fucking face. I think my fucking head’s going to explode.”

“I know!” Jumping several times, the Doctor claps their hands. “Isn’t this exciting? –Except for the head exploding part. Please don’t do that. That would be disgusting.”
Alison is unsure if she and Bill should be kissing. They discuss their favorite TV show, Defenders of Earth, and agree that Deedee is the best character. Her exit from the show, however, is the worst.

The day following Charlie’s triumphant resuscitation, the Doctor and the Magister sequester themselves with her as they talk over how best to construct her a face. Razor coordinates with Yasmeen Mazandarani to transfer the Cyborganics housed by the Gregorys to the Tinder Town fallback. Tinder Town also sends one set of their interim seconds, Vernon Pulse and spouses, to establish a new safe house and fallback in the Dominoes. Meanwhile Sinclair borrows a laptop from the Doctor and retreats to his bedroom to type out something that Alison really hopes is therapeutic.

In Alison and Bill’s room, the two of them lie on their bed on their backs, holding hands, reveling in the fact that, for the moment, they are involved in no drama whatsoever. Squeezing Bill’s hand occasionally, Alison stares at the ceiling, where the Doctor stuck glow-in-the-dark nebulae for her. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Bill’s head turn toward her minutely. Uh oh, Alison is being gazed at. What does Bill want her to do? “Should we be kissing?” Alison blurts out, eyes still on the nebulae.

“On a schedule, are you?” teases Bill.

“Well, I meant more like, Do you want to kiss? I just can’t flirt worth shit.” It was all so much easier with Alison’s last partner, the nice guy back in Lannet, Joe. He just decided to start kissing her. She went along with it because she was, at that particular moment, sick of analyzing the power dynamics of every single fucking interaction ever. But she soon found out that Joe was so nice and dull that he didn’t think about power dynamics at all, not even between a white guy and a Black woman, between a newly minted MD and a uni dropout, or between two people in bed. He was so boring that she had to leave him and the planet.

Now Alison, who’s finally admitted that she likes parsing the power differentials in every single interaction, is in another universe with someone that she wants to do right by. She really should be negotiating transactions of power, but… What if she does it wrong? What if she scares Bill away? What if she breaks her heart?

“Yeah, let’s kiss!” Rolling up on her side and reaching for Alison, Bill folds in two as she stretches
her arm out. “Oooh. I think my chest just went bweeble bweeble wzzzzzzzheeeeeeew.”

“What’s bweeble bweeble wzzzzzzzheeeeeeew?”

Gingerly Bill places herself on her back once more. “Etheric blaster noise. Sounds like a dying Hoover, yeah? I use it for when I get hit with sudden pain and it just takes everything out of me, you know?”

“ Etheric blasters don’t go bweeble bweeble wzzzzzzzheeeeeeew. They go bweeble bweeble zzzzzt. Unless…are etheric blasters actual weapons here? Or are you talking about the ray guns from the 1970s sci-fi schlock fest *Defenders of Earth*?”

Alison and Bill quickly establish that their mutual favorite TV show exists in both their universes. Both versions follow the same story, in which white British sixteen-year-old Hope Januarius, Defender in Training, learns how to save the world with the help of the current Defender, a white British man in his forties. Extraterrestrials and space/time travel appear occasionally. Most plots, however, involve foiling the machinations of Professor Panjandrum, whose overreliance on clockwork henchpeople regularly proves his downfall. Both versions even have an original run of six series in the 1970s and a reboot, which has been airing since 2011. The major difference between Alison and Bill’s versions of *Defenders* appears to be the sound effect for the series’ signature weapon. Even the fans have the same name in both universes: *Defenerds*.

Alison and Bill’s comparisons escalate into a heated debate about which is better, the original or the reboot. “Reboot,” declares Bill, nodding and putting her hands behind her head. “The effects are so much better. The original kept reusing the same monster suits.”

“Original,” Alison counters, now propped up on her side and gazing at Bill [which is much easier than being gazed at by Bill]. “It had a sense of fun then. Now it’s all angsty and murky. You can’t see what’s going on ‘cause no one turns on the fucking lights.”

“Yeah, but the reboot’s got this steampunk Goth style going on, lots of corsets and gears. Very your thing, isn’t it? –Well, the kinky bit at least.”

“I’m not denying that. But it started off as an escapist show about some girl making abysmal puns and kicking rubber monsters’ arses. It was silly, but it was clever and funny. Now everyone has a tragic backstory, which means daddy issues. Seriously, did Hope ever figure out who her father was?”

“Um, either the Defender or Panjandrum.”

“Gross! Especially since there was that whole bit in the original about Hope – “

“—Getting tempted to evil because she fancied Panjandrum, right. I feel like the writers are trying to creep us out sometimes.”

“So who was it: the good guy or the evil guy?”

“Well, she couldn’t figure out, even though she did a paternity test, because apparently the Defender and Panjandrum are…clones? Either that, or they’re the same person, just from parallel timelines, and Panjandrum used to be a Defender over there. Then he came over here and couldn’t get back, so he lost it and became evil…maybe?” Bill stretches her mouth and her eyebrows into confused faces. “Still a bit fuzzy on the details. Sorry. –Oh no, hope that doesn’t happen to your Doctor and the Prof! –The losing it because they’re meeting themselves, I mean.”

“I doubt that meeting themselves will have any deleterious effects on them whatsoever. They’re
already intensely weird and morally compromised. Besides, have you seen them? They’re having a blast.”

“They love each other,” says Bill, voice going to a lower meditative level. “But it’s more than that. Over here, the Master – Masters – and the Doctor don’t admit it. And they deny it so hard that people get killed as a result. But yours admit it. And it doesn’t change them or make them less of who they are. Well, it does change them. It makes them happier.”

“Well, they had to go through a significant amount of murder and denial before they got to that point.”

“But now your universe is safer because they’re on the same side.” Bill’s eyebrows curl inward as she frowns. “Don’t think I can stay in a universe where the two most powerful people hate each other, you know?” She looks at Alison.

“I don’t know what you have waiting for you back home, but you can come to ours if you want. I’m sure the Dorks could use their magic to help you get settled. We’ve got all the racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism that you know and love from this universe, so you’ll feel right at home!” Alison pries her face into a purposely unconvincing smile.

“Well, since I know people like you and the Doctor and, heck, even the Prof, I think that maybe I would.” A wide smile touches Bill’s generous flexible mouth, and Alison’s own grin becomes genuine in response.

After this sobering diversion, Alison and Bill renew their original versus reboot debate. Finally Alison pulls out her winning argument. The original has Deedee Schmidt, a working-class Black girl and Hope’s best friend. Deedee’s low-key practicality provides a great contrast to Hope and the Defender’s melodramatic idealism. As of series four, Deedee becomes a regular, although mostly as a victim for the white people to rescue. Nevertheless, Alison and Bill agree that Deedee is smarter, funnier, and hotter than anyone else on the show.

“The absolute best moment of Defenders, no question,” says Bill, “is when Hope comes out of her coma and sees Deedee and is all, Oh my God, how did you ever survive the fire? And Deedee just looks at her, as chill as you please, right? I just did stop; drop, and roll, like they tell you in nursery school. And then, of course, the two of them smile at each other, and the music gets super dramatic, and all the little lesbians all over the world are like, Kiss! Kiss!” Bill clenches her fists as she cheers. “–Um, could’a’ been just me, though.”

“You weren’t the only one.” Alison smirks.

“Okay, so all the little queer girls across the multiverse, yeah?”

“Definitely. Of course, all the little queer girls across the multiverse then had their hearts broken at the end of series five, so…” Alison punctuates the sentence with a drawn-out sigh.

“Never got that far in the original series. What happened? They broke up?”

“She died.” Alison folds her arms, her voice still flat with bitterness after all these years.

“Pffft, so?” Bill says with a laugh. “She did that in episode three of series two…and episode seven of series four. She’s like Panjandrum: never stays dead.”

“No, I mean for real. For good.”

“How?”
“You know how Panjandrum becomes increasingly robotic and unhinged over the fifth series? So he kidnaps Deedee for like the five hundredth time, but he…um…”

“He rapes her?” Bill pops up. “Ow!” She presses her chest. “He rapes Deedee? My Deedee? I thought…but… No! He wouldn’t! Wasn’t it pretty much canon that the kidnapping is his fucked-up way of like spending time with her? He never hurts her! He just likes snarking at her.”

“No! No!” Alison comes up and puts her hand on Bill’s forearm. “He doesn’t rape her. But all that character development about the two of them being kinda lonely and feeling ignored goes flying out the window. He goes all bug-eyed and vengeful, and he has the genius idea to turn Deedee into one of his robots.”

“That makes no sense!” Bill crosses her arms vehemently. “He says himself that his robots are always breaking down or trying to kill him. Why would he do that to her? Why would he break her?”

“Because the white girl needed someone to cry over so she could win a BAFTA, I assume,” says Alison with a grumble, tightening her arms against her breast again. “But wait! You haven’t heard the best part. It gets better! She dies in an alternative timeline. So, when everyone goes back to the real timeline, they don’t remember her. It’s like she never existed. She’s fucking erased. And she never appears again.”

“But…no! Just no!” Bill, her voice rising, trembles. “Why would you do that? Why would you betray someone like that?” She coughs a few times. “Ow…ow… That’s like…sabotaging your whole revolution.”

“I know. Right? But apparently they were operating under the delusion that she was just some expendable minor character.”

“She wasn’t!” Bill tosses her head emphatically, her loose hair flaring about her head. “She was the most important! She was the heart of the show!”

“That’s why I stopped watching.” Alison’s head feels heavy and full of tears; even after all this time, the sadness always returns with the same flattening strength.

“So…no…no funeral? No eulogy? No burial? No gravestone?” Enlarged by unshed tears, Bill’s eyes seem to take up all of her face.

“No, because she had never lived in the first place.” Why is Alison crying over a fictional character?

“No. No. No!” Bill’s tears fall. “That’s wrong. That’s mean, and that’s cheating, and that’s…bad writing! Ow! Lungs! Breathe…” she says aloud to herself, her voice wavering. “Breathe…” She lies back down on their bed. Alison and Bill hold each other fast.
Chapter Summary

Razor isn't shut up again, but in a slightly more salutary way. Sinclair leaves Anima. Alison and Bill snark about Atomic Age pulp fiction. Razor needs help sitting up, then prays to the fearsome Domina for assistance in starting a war in Anima. Bill proves that she's a [cough] Master baiter.

Later that morning, Razor asks Sinclair if the two can speak. Sinclair balks, saying that he will do so only if his superheroic rescuer, the Magister, is by his side. Alison and Bill, watching from their doorway, exchange thumbs up at Sinclair’s insistence. Razor says that he just wants to give Sinclair details about his reunion with his family, but Sinclair, blocking Razor’s entry into his room, stands firm. While Razor rolls his eyes, Alison calls the Magister, who’s somewhat bemused by Sinclair’s adulation, but perfectly understanding about Sinclair’s wish for him to be an intermediary. Sinclair, the Magister, and Razor go behind closed doors, and Alison and Bill cheer. The more people stand up to Razor, they figure, the better.

Sinclair leaves his room half an hour later with a few clothes slung over his back in a leather rucksack and a sheaf of A4 print-outs clutched to his chest. His expression wavers between elation and terror. He can’t wait to see his family and his boyfriend when he joins them at the Butcher’s Block fallback. Then he thinks about returning to his true home, a resistance-friendly section of Butcher’s Block, and he worries how he and his family will be received since he’s a coward and a traitor.

Razor interposes that he’s neither of those, but a survivor of Irons’ attempts to deperson him. In that sense, Sinclair is a perfect example of who this revolution is for. Alison and Bill exchange question-mark eyebrows at this, since it’s a complete reversal from his earlier view of Sinclair as a treacherous little shit. But apparently everyone’s appeal to his pragmatic sense of charity really did change his mind.

Alison wonders if she should be glad that Razor changed his mind or aghast that he even considered killing Sinclair in the first place. Bill says that fear is always the best policy with Razor. You can trust Alison’s robot because, even if he used to be like Razor, he’s consistently nice to people, whether they’re like him or not. Razor, though, is more like Bill’s universe’s Doctor; he has a very small circle of niceness, and Bill stays with him only because she happens to fall inside it. You can’t trust any of this universe’s Time Dorks to be consistently nice to everyone, says Bill, so you just learn to be afraid of all of them all the time.

Trying to forget about Deedee’s death and nasty Time Dorks, Alison and Bill sit side by side in the light side of the library. Bill resorts to her Doctor’s latest gift: Atomic Age pulp fiction magazines bursting with the formulaic but exuberant science fiction of the early to mid-twentieth century. Bill is actually reading the stories...or trying to. Whenever she comes to particularly infelicitous and/or thoughtlessly heterosexual bits, which is often, she reads them aloud.

Alison, meanwhile, admires the ads and covers. Done in vibrant jewel tones, the covers exhibit an endless parade of square-jawed men and pointy-chested women trembling before things with compound eyes and/or tentacles and/or ray guns and/or vise-like mechanical grips. “Right then,”
she says, setting aside the twentieth copy of *Stupendous Science-Fiction Stories* that she has examined in as many minutes. “If I’m going by the art here, I can’t tell who the 1950s thought was scarier: half naked white women with perfectly gelled hair or robots that looked like tin cans topped with colanders. Probably robots disguised as half naked white women with perfect hair.”

“Yeah,” says Bill. “I wouldn’t trust anyone whose hair looks like it could survive a direct nuclear blast. Hey...so I’m in the middle of this story, meaning that I haven’t read the end, and I’m wondering what you think. Here’s the scenario. It’s 1964, and the Cold War is on. You’re a retired genius astronaut from the U.S. There are no more male babies being born on Earth, and there’s a theory that aliens put something in the atmosphere that created the problem. Oh yeah, and there are also sentient supercomputers. Now...what do you do?”

“Call Charles Atlas!” Alison shows the backside of *Stupendous Science-Fiction Stories*: a full-page advert of the bodybuilder’s fitness routine. “It says here that he can make you a new man in just fifteen minutes a day. So we just find him, supply him with weaklings, and then watch him churn out men at the rate of ninety-six a day!” Alison reads the copy: “Give me a skinny, pepless, second-rate body, and I’ll cram it full of handsome, bulging muscle... Wow. That’s...very...gay. Okay, so most of these guys are going to be incredibly gay, but at least ratios will be back to usual.”

Bill laughs. “I’m going to take a wild guess and blame it on the computers. If history -- or at least *Defenders* -- tells us anything, it’s that they always become conscious and turn on their masters. – Or their Doctors,” Bill, who has obviously been spending a lot of time around her own pun-loving Doctor, adds with a giggle. “Knock out the evil machines, and everything will go back to normal.”

Razor comes up behind Bill. He usually rockets around, but drives at close to a crawl today, though still with the usual silent stealth approach. He sits stiffly, rather low in his chair, his left shoulder dropped and pressed against the seat support at his left side. The rigidity of his position makes him look like a book that has tipped over, only to be arrested by the side of a bookcase. He’s squinting as if staring into the sun, and Alison unintentionally mirrors that expression. He must be in so much pain. Confirming Alison’s supposition, Razor moves his right hand across his tablet with minute, obviously excruciating gestures. “My dear Miss Potts, how are your political views today?”

“Oh hey.” Bill turns around to look at him. “You know me – I’m just a boring ol’ centrist. How about you?”

“Left-leaning. I wonder if you might restore me to a centrist position.”

Bill’s frown takes an apologetic turn. “I would if I could, but sorry. My heart’s really not in it at the moment.” She winces slightly as she places her hand on her chest; her sentence seems to be code for *I’m having a bad day and can’t help.*

Razor pivots to Alison. “Would you?”

“Um, I’m not quite sure what you’re asking me to do.”

“I am in too much pain to reposition myself in my chair.”

“Oh, do you need help being sat up? My gram did sometimes after she, um, became really...frail.”

“I do. Please. I asked your robot and your Doctor, but they’re busy with Charlie. If you don’t want to help me, I will wait for one of them.”
“Why don’t you tell me what you need adjusted? Then I can tell you if I can do it.”

“First, I’m leaning to the left. To fix, place your shoulder against mine, and push me toward a more centrist perspective.”

“Hah! Okay, what else?”

“Second, I’m slouching. To fix, I tilt chair back to appropriate angle. You stand behind me. Reach around under my arms. Wrap your hands around my forearms. Lift from knees to pull me diagonally up and back at same time.”

“I was following you right up until the part about wrapping forearms. Here’s my proposal. I can at least straighten your shoulders, and I’ll do my best to stand and reach and wrap and lift and pull all at the same time. You, though, have to be patient, so no snapping or snarky comments if I ask questions or do something wrong.”

“Yes. Good. I appreciate you trying.”

Alison successfully moves Razor’s shoulders. But she requires five minutes, a few tries, and several surprisingly even-tempered corrections from him to attain the correct stance for helping him unslouch. “Remember – back straight!” he says. “You are the Dominatrix, yes? So pretend you wear the kinky clothes, laced up tight. No bend!”

“Do you seriously have that wandering accent of weirdness programmed into your tablet?”

“You are feeling the envy?” He flicks an eyebrow at her. His control is almost as good as her robot’s.

“No. No, I’m not.” Alison swallows snickers.

“Ready?” He goes back to his usual voice. “Seriously, though, I’ll yell. Ignore me. Ready -- steady -- go!”

Alison, assuming the correct stance, grabs onto Razor and pulls up and back simultaneously. With a sharp gasp, he gives a wordless roar of pain as she shifts him. She suppresses her instinct to drop him instantly and instead lowers his back slowly against the cushion. “Um, how’s that?” She comes around to the side, gritting her teeth in trepidation.

“Ahhh…” Speaking with his vocal cords again, Razor relaxes, as if he was holding himself together through sheer force of will, but now again has support to rely on. “Well...pain has downgraded from *My goatee is too heavy for my face* to the usual *Only seventy percent of my neurons are on fire, so...*” He gives her double thumbs up. “Thank you, my dear Dominatrix.”

Alison regards him. When he quits with the nastiness and the insults, she recognizes him a little more as an alternative form of her robot. He’s intense, passionate, brilliant, witty, and powerful. He combines an imperviously grandiose opinion of himself with wry self-deprecation in a way that’s irresistibly charming. The angular smirk, the jumping eyebrows, even the way that his eyes change color when he’s excited [though Razor’s darken rather than lighten] -- they’re all so similar. She can’t help but like those aspects.

At the same time, this is the person who tried to mind-fuck her and only stopped because she yelled at him. He’s miserable, and that misery just seeps from him and affects everyone else. Would he be happier if he extended his nascent and limited sense of empathy to all people, beyond those he personally identified with as disabled? She doubts it; he’d probably find compassion boring in comparison to the multifarious possibilities of cruelty. However, he probably would be happier if
he had someone in his life who, in the manner of the Magister’s Doctor, appreciated him and thus promoted his protectiveness, his loyalty, his wit, his playfulness, his charm, his melodramatic silliness, and his other better traits. Razor likes being a psychopath, so he really has no great motivation to conform to Alison’s definition of goodness. His nastiness might be slightly tempered if he had a social life, though.

Alison says none of this. “I see I’ve been promoted,” she notes drily.

“Hmm?”

“From little Dominatrix to dear Dominatrix."

“Oh. Yeah. Keep it up, and you might even become Master Dominatrix.”

“He’s lying,” Bill throws in. “He’s very territorial about that title.”

“Ooooh, does that mean you answer to Master Dominatrix?” Alison smirks at Razor.

“No, but he’s brilliant at baiting people,” says Bill, “so you can call him Master B -- “

“You!” Razor points at her. “Quiet! You’ve been hanging around the Doctor too much. Now everything’s a pun.”

“ Took the bait, didn’t ya?” says Bill, making a face at Razor. “I’m going to be a master baiter soon enough if I can bait the Master!”

“Is there a place we can talk,” Razor asks Alison, slipping a sidelong glare at Bill in between snickers, “where we won’t have to hear Miss Potts Master-baiting?”

Alison and Razor retreat to the section of the library furthest from Bill and her wordplay. Nearly cracking her head on a lily lamp, Alison pushes it out of the way and sits on the night side of the library. “Yeah, what’s up?”

Dropping his chin, closing his eyes, and clasping hands before him with fingers interlaced, Razor speaks with the stately inflection of a prayer. “O mighty one, fearsome power, and dearest Dominatrix, I genuflect here before thee as a supplicant because I, unworthy petitioner that I am, request thy blessing. I fervently implore thee to approve my undertaking so that it may succeed and bring glory unto thee, O Dominatrix, for it is only by thy grace and permission that anything in the universe flourishes.”

Alison eyes him and then remembers a conversation that she overheard between the Magister and the Robot just last week [though it seems like eons ago]. The Doctor was talking about the Magister’s tendency to be so sarcastic that the sarcasm canceled itself out, and they cited his statement to her -- *Tie me up; I can’t wait* -- as an example. Of course her robot insisted that those particular words should absolutely not be taken at face value because God forbid he ever admit anything like that straightforwardly. And then of course Alison ignored the sarcasm, and here they were. Apparently her robot’s not the only version of him who plays at concealing and revealing the truth with layers of bullshit. And Razor should know by now that he’s not the only one on this ship who can do a mean power play.

“And hast thou yet broken thy haughty spirit?” Alison asks in response. “--For I do not suffer to be adjured by people who think themselves more lordly than I.”

“I must tender thee the deepest of apologies them, O fearsome power. I have been unable to break myself of my pride. In sooth, I may only claim to have kicked it into submission for the time being.
However, I do hasten to assure thee that I recognize thy reign over thy universe, of which this ship is an extension. Being as I am within thy domain, I may do nothing that is not sanctified with thy grace. Therefore I seek thy favor."

“For what purpose seekest thou my favor then?”

“Verily, O magisterial Dominatrix and ruler of all, my design is but this.” Raising his eyes, Razor gives her a huge grin, somewhere between goofy and diabolical. Back in the modern day once more, he proclaims, “I’m going to start a war in the Epiphany Room!”

“Oh huh,” says Alison. “And how’s that going to go down?”

Razor lets her in on his plans. The raid on Bill’s and his flat, along with the related violence at other safe houses, has gotten him thinking. The covert action with which RR has occupied itself in the last year no longer suffices. Intercepting kidnappings and repersoning Cyborganics helps people, but addresses only the effects of Irons’ regime, not the cause itself. As Irons and the Night Patrol struck at the heart of the resistance, so the resistance must retaliate in kind. Self-defense must continue, but they must go on the offensive as well. The time has come for the resistance to convert to revolution and revolution to war.

Of course, a revolution needs a proper beginning, and that’s where the Epiphany Room comes in. Given the casualties, destruction, leadership changes, and misinformation present in RR, Razor needs to rally the troops, both literally and figuratively. A formal transition from resistance to revolution has several advantages, which Alison may have overheard him brainstorming the other day when he was using speech-to-text on his tablet. It brings the scattered masses together, raises morale, and inspires new recruits, particularly those from Tinder Town who signed on following the deaths of their own. It also lets Irons know exactly what they’re up against: a bunch of militant and enraged people who, sick of their oppression, are working with a megalomaniacal psychopath who has the demonstrated technology to reverse and end the whole Cyber conversion endeavor. Finally, it gives Razor a chance to let his bats out of the belfry for a while. He hasn’t done that since he got here almost eight years ago, and he suspects they might be dying of boredom.

Razor considers the Epiphany Room in Anima the perfect place for his rally. It’s a TARDIS room and thus reconfigurable, so it will definitely have the capacity for all the attendees. Furthermore, unlike the hostile architecture of Dystopiavilla, the Epiphany Room can also be modified to accommodate the many people using mobility aids and other assistive devices. Finally, it’s also the safest place in Newland, as Anima could conceivably go into orbit for the rally and evade detection by Irons and the Night Patrol.

“In any event,” says Razor, “the Doctor says it’s fine, just so long as no one does any actual fighting on the TARDIS. Mechanical Me is cool with it, as long as he doesn’t have to clean up anyone’s mess. And now...” He nods deeply at Alison. “I come to thee, O dearest Dominatrix mine. Wilt thou consent to my machinations?”

“Hmmmmm, I mislike giving a knave of thy infamy such license in my purview.”

“If it should appease thee, O dread power, I would concede to any restriction, condition, or prohibition thou mightest place upon me, if I might but have the Epiphany Room for my purposes.”

“What sayest thou? I prithee -- repeat such words for the people in the back!”

“Rehearsing Shakespeare or something?” Bill stops by.

“Nay,” says Alison, holding up her hand, “but mark this, Bill of my heart, for the occasion is
momentous indeed. ‘Tis the moment in which yon shaving tool doth submit to me.”

“Shaving tool!” Bill snorts. To Razor, she says, “Hey, I think she’s a Master baiter too!”

“Thou art a very carping interference, Lady Bill.” Razor crosses his arms, though he’s clearly trying to suppress laughter. “Hast thou an answer for me?” he asks Alison.

“If I may impose restrictions at any time henceforward, then I grant thy request. *Fiat mea voluntas.* My will be done. Alison nods. “Thou art dismissed. Hie thee hence.”

“Great. I’m out of here.” Razor exits at top speed.

Bill chases him, also at top speed. “Hey! I wasn’t done punning yet!”
With a date set for the War Rally, everyone swings into action. The Magister takes over security and venue prep. The Doctor helps out Charlie and codifies some of their deCybering processes with Bill's help. Alison, feeling unassigned, pointless, and powerless, cries. Unexpectedly, the Magister knows exactly what she's talking about. Mutual reassurance.

Having secured the Domina’s approval to use Anima’s Epiphany Room, Razor decides that he can pull off his war rally within four weeks. This puts the date of the event on the Demimensis of Eleofan, which coincides with the Mondasian commemoration of the new year. Previously an excuse to sing until you were hoarse and dance until you fell down, Demiel, as it is known colloquially, has become much more subdued under Irons’ law. You’re only supposed to sing the old songs with pro-Irons lyrics, and the Night Patrol makes sure that no one has more than their prescribed allotment of fun. Razor would like to bring back some of the day’s traditional anarchic spirit.

And so he enters a period of frenetic activity. Bill shivers when she sees it, as she first experienced this combination of wild ebullience and sharp focus within days after he took her from the hospital. Since she knew Razor as a nice, retiring guy with a dry sense of humor and an obviously fake accent, this sudden switch alarmed her because his whole self seemed to change. The anxious crouch evaporated from his posture, as well as the nervous smile. In its place was someone with expansive gestures and a strange, gleaming grin.

She said to herself that he had obviously clicked into manic mastermind mode. Could she trust him? He laughed – a sound that, now she thinks about it, was purposely planned to sound like stereotypical villainous gloating – and told her two things. First, she should really call it mad mastermind mode, since he wasn’t just manic on occasion, but rather insane. [It took her a moment to realize that he had read her mind.] Second, she could trust him absolutely; he wouldn’t hurt her. She was one of the ones that he liked.

She asked why he liked her, and he replied, It's because you're good. The way that he drew out that word slightly made it sound sneaky. Bill remembered the advice from Maya Angelou that she had gotten via her stepmum Moira: When someone tells you who they are, believe them. She hadn’t believed the Doctor, but she was definitely going to believe Razor. Right then, so he was a dangerous, unpredictable person who hated pretty much everyone and considered himself a genius. She’d do what she had to do in order to survive with him, but there was no question of trusting him absolutely.
Anyway, Razor’s *mad mastermind mode* fuels a burst of planning for the rally. Subcommittees assemble. Actually the Magister declares himself head of the first subcommittee. He, with input from the Doctor, is in charge of the venue: tech, accommodations especially for people with disabilities, food and bathrooms, and – of paramount concern to him – security. The Magister considers this duty a logical extension of his mandate to keep his inevitable spouse and their ship safe, whole, and happy. He’ll be working directly with RR’s most capable planners, Ms. Kim and Ms. McDonall. He will certainly apprise his counterpart of his work, but this leaves Razor free to concentrate on other matters.

Razor, who knows a partial takeover when he sees one, fights back, but the Magister quells him with two words: *Domina’s orders!* Razor, grinding his teeth, inquires of Alison why she gave *half of the rally* to her robot. Alison, ignorant at first, makes appropriately noncommittal noises until she determines what he means, at which point she upholds the Magister’s judgment.

She teases her robot later about his *arrogation of authority*, but he only does an eyebrow maneuver at her. *Do you want a thoughtless, untrustworthy automaton to whom you must give excruciatingly detailed orders for fear of being disobeyed?* he asks. *Or would you like a robot in whose loyalty you have such limitless confidence that you will allow him to exercise your will as he sees fit?* Alison, wiggling her eyebrows back at him, allows that the latter pleases her immensely.

The Magister convenes with the Doctor to design the best lay-out for the Epiphany Room for the estimated seven thousand people, tech, food, bathrooms, security, et cetera. He also meets by radio with Prunella and Senga. The three immediately draft security protocols; Prunella and Senga ask among their network for people to organize, recruit, and train the security team. Hamlet and Ophelia Carson take on this responsibility. They are the surviving spouses of Miles Carson, former head of the Tinder Town safe house was was tortured and then killed by the Night Patrol. They are also the ones who came with almost threescore people to the current head, Yasmeen Mazandarani, asking where they could *sign up to fight*. Less than a week after the venue subcommittee’s first meeting, the Carsons have seventy-five people reviewing the protocol and the floor plan, assuming charge of certain sectors, practicing with two-way radios, complaining about not being able to heave concealed weapons, and agitating for *uniforms, but cool ones, no silver foil Cyber shit*. The Magister passes along the message to Hamlet and Ophelia that he’ll whip something up.

Razor embarks on his own whirlwind of activity. He’s inclined to think that *War Rally* is a perfectly fine name for the event, and he likes *It’s revolting!* and variations thereof as a slogan. *REVOLT DEMIEL. Dystopiaville: it’s revolting! Cyber conversion REVOLTING. Razor revolts Irons.* Alison wonders if it wouldn’t be more effective for him to use the city’s real name. Razor gives her a withering glare: *Floor 1056: it’s revolting! isn’t as exciting. I’m trying to market a war here. This is all about branding.*

In developing the agenda for the rally, Razor asks Bill and Charlie, among others, to speak. He presumes that Bill isn’t interested in *hanging around for the fun part*, by which he means the actual battle. Thus he hopes that Bill will inspire the crowd one last time and then officially say her goodbyes. Bill, clapping her hands on the crown of her head, fidgets in her chair, plainly reluctant.
Alison whispers to her that she doesn’t have to do anything that she doesn’t want to. Bill whispers back that she doesn’t want to, but she owes it to all her RR friends. Glad that at least Bill feels no obligation to please Razor, Alison watches Bill agree to a short introductory speech at the rally. However, Alison notices that, after this concession, Bill suddenly finds other things to do whenever Razor enters the room.

As for Charlie, she reacts to the proposition of speaking with as much fear as Sinclair did of telling his story to Razor. She’s a Night Patrol officer, she says. Nobody likes NPs. They’re almost as reviled as Irons, perhaps even more, because they’re Dystopiaville denizens who have turned on their own. She’s not even sure she wants to face her spouses at this point. But Razor wants her to stand in front of thousands of irate revolutionaries out for blood?

Razor argues, as he did with Sinclair, that Charlie embodies the whole point of the revolution: selfhood, autonomy, and free will for Dystopiaville citizens, including all Cyber people. *Yeah, if they had free will, they’d pound me into a fuckin’ pulp on the stage,* Charlie says. Razor, adamant that this is a great idea, importunes Charlie again. Alison, who happens to be passing through, gives him a Domina glare. He withdraws, promising not to harass Charlie.

While Razor generates revolting phrases and a roster of speakers, publicity begins. Britomart Smythe, head of the Butcher’s Block safe house, runs the committee. She forms two teams: on-air and on-ground. The on-air team is made of Sinclair, who’s apparently a good writer, and Gardenia and Junie Fanshaw. The Fanshaws are Charlie’s spouses, unaware that RR has saved and repersoned the missing person in their marriage. Charlie, who’s still adjusting to autonomy, keeps herself secret from them, still unconvinced that they want to be married to a traitor. In the meantime, Sinclair, Gardenia, and Junie script and record announcements. These are then broadcast on the encrypted, short-range RR radio networks.

Britomart’s other team, the on-ground, is led by Becky Ann and Margery Pulse, who, along with their spouse Vernon, succeeded the Gregorys as heads of the Dominoes safe house. The on-ground people concern themselves with spreading the word by gossip and graffiti. The Pulses have many assistants in this endeavor, chief of which are Ranju, Amaranth, Corvine, Ishi, and Jamal. Naturally Ranju employs her puzzle skills to develop pithy anti-Irons statements. She insists on a geographically solvable anagram around Government Square, where her pet phrase goes through progressively less silly anagrams before resolving into *MISTER RAZOR SLAYS IRONS. (Demiel.)*

As for Amaranth, Corvine, Ishi, and Jamal, they are the young Tinder Town couriers who spied on Sewage Street when Razor was looking for Prunella and Senga; they all have the proven ability to move around Dystopiaville unseen. Therefore they gather people to whisper the news and/or draw the graffiti in neighborhoods across the city.

Not directly involved in planning the rally, the Doctor still has their own tasks. They make themselves available to Charlie for the inevitable refinements to the body parts that they have given her. Charlie turns out to need more practice than refinements. Her new robotic limbs were made for the Magister, who is a larger person, so she has some trouble moving because she expects smaller, lighter body parts that are more in proportion to the rest of her. Charlie starts out without a
mobility aid, but falls over. After the Magister catches her twice in fifteen minutes, the Doctor gives her a cane. That’s not enough, so they offer forearm crutches. Charlie ends up with a walker that has two front wheels; she eagerly anticipates the day that her face will be finished so that she can smile again.

As a Cyber person with nearly unlimited resources, Charlie walks Anima’s corridors at all hours, practicing her steps. Alison, who gets up to use the bathroom or sometimes have a snack in the night, sees that Charlie is never alone, though. Often the Magister is at her elbow, amusing her with tales of his own mishaps when he was adjusting to robotification. Just as regularly, Charlie is chaperoned by at least twenty-five TARDIS cats. They don’t follow her, but instead keep pace with her or go ahead of her, then turn back to make sure that she’s going the right way. Alison asks where the cats take Charlie. Charlie, who, like Ranju, thinks that the rats are adorable, says that they guide her to their favorite corners. There they each spend time her lap, in an apparently strict rotation, so that she can pet every single one in turn.

The Doctor works on behalf of more than Charlie. They devote hours to their recording studio [evidently hard by the Epiphany Room] as they improve their plan to dissonize the connection between Cyber people and the brainwashing network. They know that they do not have the capacity to completely reperson all Cyber people through song alone, as they did with Charlie. Nevertheless, they wish to do more than to merely dissonize the Cyber network connections. They want as well to reverse some of the alterations to people’s brains done by the transmissions. They also want to perform some rudimentary reversal of the emotional inhibition; when they dissonize the network, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people will instantly gain their freedom. Even when Razor teaches his surgical techniques to others, many of the Cyborganics will have to wait for the deconversion operations. The Doctor would like them to have as much of a Cyber-free life as possible while waiting.

On top of everything else, the Doctor also develops their scheme for refacing Cyber people like Charlie. They’re currently in the midst of creating Charlie’s new face and figuring out how to link it to her existing nervous system. At the same time, they want to codify a simplified version of the process, as well as a 3D printable design for a generic face, both of which can be shared with Dystopiaville surgeons. Thus their usual disorganization magnifies. They generate notes, which end up strewn everywhere. In the midst of talking about the dissonizing song, they get an idea for some aspect of refacing; when they struggle to catch the first idea, they lose both and stand stock-still in confusion. They stop in mid-sentence, clothes rumpled, reading glasses askew, intense concentration crinkling up their face.

Alison and Bill happen upon the Doctor in such an abstracted state. Bill asks what’s wrong; the Doctor requires about ten minutes to explain that they’ve forgotten important things. Alison starts bouncing and squirming after ten seconds of complete silence. But Bill, sitting next to the Doctor, just watches them with an equally silent, expectant serenity until they begin to speak.

When they’re done, Bill says that she’s very good at writing things down and organizing them; she could help the Doctor. The Doctor, lighting up, jumps around. This is a wonderful idea! But…
They frown. Bill would have to follow them around with a notebook or a recording device or something. Bill says that she likes following them around. The Doctor says that they want her next to them -- *you know, like friends, like partners* -- not behind them. Bill looks at them with such a smile that even her hair seems to radiate in happiness about her head. Okay, thinks Alison with a big grin of her own. Maybe she’s not going to be the only human in her universe with a Time Dork partner after all.

Everyone scatters on their own missions, leaving Alison unexpectedly unengaged. She doesn’t mind being alone; she has always thrived on solitude, especially if there are books around. She lives for a while in the Doctor’s library, reading all the fairy tale anthologies that she can find and -*luxury of luxuries!* -- napping whenever she feels like it. But even these pursuits leave her unsatisfied after a short time. She’s not working toward some goal; she’s not making productive contributions to anything, and she feels aimless.

About one week into everyone else’s rally planning and three weeks till Demiel, Alison wakes up one night and needs to cry about it. She doesn’t want to bother Bill, so she goes into one of her favorite nooks in Anima. Most staircases in the ship are bare wrought iron, but there is one made of wood. Built under the slant of it is a cubby not much bigger than a closet, only shorter. Padded with cushions and blankets, it has a set of shelves built into the walls for a few books and/or tea bags and/or cats. There’s even a bathroom stall adjacent, so you can fill your mug from the tap, make your tea on the hot plate in the nook, and stay in the fort for hours. It’s a perfect safe place to sob, so Alison goes there, tells the cats who want to guard her that she’d like some privacy, and cries.

“Miss Potts, is that you?” Razor asks.

Fine, Alison and Bill do cry similarly, and they probably sound even more alike when the noise is distorted behind a door, but seriously -- how obtuse is this person? Why won’t he leave her alone? “Fuck off,” she says between gritted teeth.

He doesn’t respond, and his chair is silent, so she can’t tell if he leaves. She decides to spend the night under the stairs, even if it does get kind of stuffy in here. She goes to the bathroom, washes her face, blows her nose, and gets water for tea. She can’t drink it because she’s crying into it.

Not five minutes after Razor’s intrusion, there’s a knock on the door. “Go away,” Alison says. “No one’s home.”

“Oh? Then my counterpart must have been deceived, for he told me -- “
“Robot of mine! You can come in!” Alison calls, stowing her undrunk tea on the shelf.

He does, ducking his head and sitting next to her. Two cats slip in along with him and park on Alison’s other side. “Now then,” he says, “please tell me what’s wrong.”

“I feel powerless, like I’m trapped in someone else’s fairy tale,” says Alison with several protracted sniffles. “I’m not the main character in my own story anymore. And I understand that this isn’t my war, and I don’t want it to be my war; I don’t even really want to help out with it, but still...I feel pointless.”

“Ah, I see.” He ponders for a few seconds, then speaks quietly: “You have been a commander and enforcer since our arrival in Dystopiaville, setting and guarding the boundaries of everyone on this ship. When the action centered here, you had plenty to do, but now the revolution shifts activity from your domain to Razor’s. I expect that you feel abandoned and neglected because no one seems to be paying attention to you.” She can’t really see him because she purposely has the lights off, but she can hear the gentleness in his voice. She can hear that he’s turned toward her, probably even watching her in the dark with the same attentiveness that he gives her in the light.

“Right, so you’re telling me that I’m a control freak who’s freaking out because I don’t have anyone to control anymore. Thank you. That’s very comforting.” Alison hangs her head.

He doesn’t bother to controvert her sarcastic interpretation of his sympathy. He only holds his peace for a few minutes. “I believe that I understand how you feel, mea Domina carissima, only from a different angle. Since we came here, I have been...subservient. I deliberately chose to act thus because I knew that I could best save my dear Miss Potts and help the people of Dystopiaville by being of service, rather than assuming control. Needless to say, it’s been a challenge.” There’s a slight drop in that word, as if it is burdened by bitten-down frustration. “And even though my counterpart finally behaves himself with as much respect and courtesy as we can reasonably expect, I still… Well, I dislike feeling as if I am but a means to an end.”

“Oh…” says Alison, echoing his tiredness. “Oh… Wait...where’s the light switch? I need some light.” He flips it telekinetically, and the cubby suddenly has enough light to read by without eye strain. “Ack! Too much!” Alison flings her hand over her eyes. “Maybe try the bathroom light, but leave the door ajar?” She opens her eyes a few seconds later to see a soft glow emanating from the bathroom door, which is about a quarter of the way open. “Much better.”

Alison sits with her back against the cubby wall opposite the door. On her right hand are two snoring cats and the bathroom. Her robot, who’s at her left, is partially visible in the dimness. He’s wearing a black dress shirt with jet buttons, a black-on-black waistcoat whose embroidered thorns may only be seen in the subtle way they catch the light, and narrow pants done in the same sharp and secret pattern. Of course, the black leather gloves and the angular shoes made of reptiles never
change. It finally registers to her that, after months of wearing things other than the black Nehru suit that she always kind of thought of as his robot uniform, he has reverted again to monochrome. Since he’s anything but a monochromatic person, she can tell that he’s doing this partially as a way to wedge himself back into a role where he no longer fits.

“I think you’ve forgotten who you are,” says Alison, her voice low. She puts her hand around his chin as he does to her. “Who told you to be subservient?” she says, cocking his head to one side and then the other. “Who required you to blend back in with the shadows like you used to? Who said you should remain silent whenever Razor sneered at you? Who made you think that his project was more important than your happiness? It sure wasn’t the Doctor, and it sure wasn’t me. It must have been you.

“But you’ve made yourself into someone that you’re not. You’re neither silent nor unobtrusive nor self-abnegating. You’re my playful, witty, wonderful robot with the golden sparks in your eyes and the fuckin’ ridiculous eyebrows.” She traces them, one with each pointer finger, and feels them jump up as he smiles. “I’m not telling you to be perky and happy all the time; I’m just telling you to quit squashing yourself like this. Who told you to be what he wants anyway? Was it him?”

“In so many words, yes.” His tone is still laughing, but self-deprecating.

“Hey, don’t look down.” She catches him by the chin again. “And since when do you belong to him?”

“I do not.” He’s grinning, not at her questions themselves, but at the absurdity of his that her questions reveal.

“Then tell me who you are, mi Magistre.”

“Yours, of course. Your imperfectly obedient robot. Your Magister in whom you have implicit faith.”

“Good.” Wrapping her arms around his middle, Alison hugs him fiercely. “Now remember that and act like it.”

“Well, yes,” he responds, the depths of his voice vibrating through her as she slouches comfortably next to him. “To do so, though, I must have my owner, my friend, my partner, my match. She’s been a very capable Dominatrix recently, but I think she has forgotten everything else that she is.”
“Yeah...I think so too,” Alison says in a small voice, drawing her knees up near her chest. “I think you need to remind her regularly, especially now.”

“Name a time then when we can meet and bring each other back to ourselves.” He slides his hand down the side of her face.

“How ‘bout...before I go to bed?” She yawns.

“You’re going to fall asleep in my lap, aren’t you?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Before you do, tell me who you are.”

“Sleepy. Sleepy...Domina.”

He touches her, one finger on her mouth. “Sleep then, my lovely, tired Domina.”
Bill Evades Razor

Chapter Summary

Bill has been avoiding Razor, but he's wise to her maneuvers. He asks her why, and she stands up to him with Alison's help. Also Razor is having a really bad day.

The day after Alison and the Magister remind each other who they are, she and Bill pass a wonderfully quiet morning on their bed, reading pulp fiction, petting cats, and occasionally holding hands. Just as Alison is about to go down for her midday nap, though, Bill pricks up her head and sighs. “Can’t avoid him forever, I suppose.”

“Who?”

“The guy who just popped into my head, asking me to please see him so we would talk.”

“You’ve been avoiding him?”

“Well, yeah. I thought it was kind of obvious, especially with the not being at the dinner table whenever he was, but I guess it took him till now to figure it out.”

Reviewing the interactions [or lack thereof] between Bill and Razor that she has seen in the past two weeks, Alison realizes that Bill has been staying away from him since she agreed to do opening remarks at the rally. Indeed, she has absented herself from the kitchen table more often than not, citing chest or leg pain. Helping the Doctor track their many projects also occupies much of her time, as does snuggling with Alison. However, Bill has also been outright lying to Razor, telling him that she’s in too much pain when she and Alison are just hanging around on their bed with nothing to do. Now that the pattern of evasion becomes clear to her, Alison becomes cold with alarm. “Bill! Did he...do something -- or try to do something -- to you?”

“What? No! No! He just…” Sighing, Bill rolls toward Alison on the bed. “Well, I’m still my dear Miss Potts to him. And I know I’m my dear Miss Potts to the Prof too, but he always kind of lights up when he says it, yeah? I feel like he really means it, both the my and the dear part, like I’m really his friend. And he just calls me Miss Potts because -- I don’t know -- he’s allergic to calling people by their first names,” she says with a snicker.
Bill presses on the crown of her head with both hands as she thinks. “But with Razor, it’s always Miss Potts, can you do this? or My dear Miss Potts, can you help me with that? It’s more like Hey! You! Assistant there! Like I’m only worth something if I can help him...which I’m sick of doing. I mean -- I like helping people, and I know he needs help, but I don’t have to be the one helping him all the time. I’m not letting him take me for granted the way that the Doctor over here did.” Her brows lower into a defensive position.

“Good!” Alison gives a *fiat mea voluntas* [my will be done] nod, as if that will set everything right. “Your tenure as faithful factotum is over. Cool Latin word, by the way: it comes from the imperative *fac totum*, or do everything, so it means someone who does all sorts of things.”

“I’m not done with factotumming,” says Bill. “I just went to *fac totum* for myself...and my Doctor.” Her voice strikes a defiant note. “And I suppose it’s time to go tell him. Come with?”

“Always!” says Alison, and they go to confront Razor.

They find him in his bed, lying on his back. He’s partially covered by a sheet, wearing yesterday’s shirt and pants, though with all buttons and zippers undone. Perspiration dampens his body, and there seems to be a shadow just under the surface of his skin. Brownish bristles of unshaven facial hair stick out along his jaw, messing up the even edges of his goatee. His tablet lies at his right hand; he types with as little movement as possible, not even turning to look at the screen. “Hi, I’m tranquilized. How are you?”

“Oh shit, are you okay?” Alison cries.

“Very bad day. Trying not to move. Water, please? Refill glass on night stand. Cold water.” Razor inclines his head very slightly toward the table.

Alison retrieves the glass and fills it with the chilliest water she can run. Returning, she holds it out to him. “He can’t really move,” Bill says. “It hurts too much. You’ll need to hold it by his mouth so he can use the straw.”

Having never helped anyone eat or drink before, Alison stands over Razor tentatively. Sitting him up was physically intimate, yes, but it was mostly a businesslike yank. Approaching him from the front, though, as he watches her and waits silently, she feels like she’s preparing to kiss someone she doesn’t want to. Finally she puts the straw close enough so that he can grab it with his lips.
Razor drains the glass, then says vocally, “Ah...good.” Blinking a few times and smiling slightly, he revives a little. “Thank you. --Miss Potts,” he says to Bill, his voice barely above a whisper, “you ignore me. Why?”

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t know you were having a really bad day,” Bill says, even though both of them know this isn’t about that.

“No, he helps me,” says Razor, obviously referring to the Magister. “Could use your help,” he continues to Bill, “with RR.”

“Yeah...well...that’s your war, not mine.” Bill, her voice soft and level, meets his eyes. “And like you said, I don’t want anything to do with the -- what did you call the fighting? The fun part? Yeah, not for me.”

“You and me, hearts and minds...of the revolution.” He points between the two of them with small indications of his chin.

Bill shakes her head. “No, it’s all been your revolution. I’m just your assistant.”

“I thought you were...my friend.” It’s hard to interpret his tone when his voice is so chipped with pain, but that’s not a regretful sigh at all. It’s more of a test to see how she’ll respond.

“No. The Doctor -- this Doctor -- is my friend. Alison is my -- “

“--Inevitable spouse,” Razor finishes drily.

“--Friend,” says Bill, talking over him. “The Prof is my friend. You... You just needed me for a while, and I needed you.”

“Make me sound like the Doctor...using you for an audience!”

“No, you used me for your assistant, and I needed someplace safe, so I stayed. Now...” Bill pauses, slipping her hand into Alison’s. “Now I have someplace safe and people who don’t need me for anything. They just want me to be...well, me.”
“Yeah,” says Alison, holding Bill’s hand tightly. “Bill of my heart…"

“Should’ve given you...dead bugs,” Razor mutters, referring to the Doctor’s gifts from their garden. “Charm didn’t work?” A wry smile folds up half of his mouth. “Didn’t work,” he answers himself. “You, Miss Potts, are good. Very...very good. Well done.”

“What does that even mean?” Bill grimaces. “Cause it certainly doesn’t mean nice.”

“I...admire you.” Razor coughs, flinching. “Water, please.” Alison, much less intimidated this time, supplies him with more. “Thank you.” He directs his words to Bill again: “You see what you want; you do...whatever it takes...to get it. Ambitious. Focused. Manipulative. Calculating. I like it.”

“No! What? No! I’m not... No!” Bill, her eyes widening, actually steps back.

“Hey…” Finally speaking up, Alison squeezes Bill’s hand. “I don’t know if this helps, but my robot said pretty much the same thing to me once. He said I was an **artifex**, which means **artist**, but also **clever, tricky person**. I thought it was an insult, but then I realized that he meant it more like I was practical enough to do what I had to do to survive, smart enough to make a deal with a villain that gave me an advantage. Maybe think of it that way.”

Bill’s wonderful eyebrows are practically doing loop-de-loops of dubiousness. “Like a compliment then?”

“Yes!” A true smile flashes across Razor’s face. “Anyone who sees through...the Doctor’s bullshit and mine...I admire.”

“**Best enemy. Worthy opponent,**” murmurs Alison, thinking of some of the Magister and the Doctor’s old terms for each other.

Speaking of the Magister, he comes in. “Ah,” he says to Razor. “Please excuse me. I thought you needed help with a shower. I didn’t realize you were in the midst of boring my Domina and my dear Miss Potts to death. If either of you would care for a more engaging pastime,” he addresses Alison and Bill, “I believe that the Doctor may be watching seeds germinate on the tundra section of their jungle.”
Razor gives him double middle fingers. “Ugh...who...programmed you?”

The Magister meets Alison’s eyes briefly. “Not you, Master,” he says, in a tone of voice that gives Alison no doubt that he remembers who owns him.
Bill Gets a Title/Name

Chapter Summary

The Magister is dressed very, uh, sharply, much to the Doctor's dismay and Alison's delight. Alison, the Magister, Bill, and the Doctor tease each other. Bill gets a title/name like "all the cool kids!" Charlie gives Razor some fucking shit because he desperately needs it.

Alison and Bill follow their noses to the kitchen the next morning. “What do you think is for breakfast?” Bill asks. “It sure smells good.” She sighs. “Aw, I wish I could eat.”

“Eggs of some kind?” guesses Alison. It’s a thick, rich smell, very yolky.

“Poached!” The Doctor flies in from behind them, motivated to sprinting speeds by the breakfast menu. Their hair has grown long enough for a [very small] ponytail, but not all the hairs catch in their queue; loose, fine locks hover around their crown, charged with static. This time their dressing gown is of red satiny fabric figured in black paisley, fraying at the turned-back black collar and cuffs. “They’re very much like marching bands, with a definite shade of intense sunsets. Delicious!” They draw out the word and spin around. “Oh yeah -- and Bill -- when this hullabaloo is all over, remind me about making you a stomach, okay? I’ve been developing an optional one for the Master off and on, but your interest should give me just the kick in the pants I need to perfect it! See you at the table!” The Doctor rounds the corner, their dressing gown shedding either glitter or minuscule flower petals.

Alison and Bill hear the Doctor run into some hallway piece of furniture, then apologize to it. The kitchen door slams open, and the Doctor cries, “Gooooooood moooorning, Mast -- ow! How am I supposed to jump into your arms when you’re wearing something like that? What’s with all the poky bits?”

“They’re the stainless steel equivalent of hackles; they discourage predators,” says the Magister’s voice.

“What the heck is your robot wearing?” Bill wonders with a giggle.

“I dunno,” returns Alison, “but it sounds entertaining. Let’s go see.”
“I don’t think the predator is up yet,” the Doctor says. “His door was closed when I passed it. Ooooh, scones with ginger thingies in them!”

“You think I’m trying to overawe my counterpart? I don’t need a gratuitous amount of spikes -- Doctor! Get away from the toaster! Those are for -- “ Whack!

Alison and Bill enter the kitchen. The Doctor, mouth full of a scone from the open toaster oven, is failing to give the Magister a wide-eyed and wounded look. Meanwhile, the Magister, arms folded, is holding a spatula and failing to keep his jumping eyebrows severely drawn. His outfit looks like the result of a motorcyclist crashing into a hardware store: a black leather base with multifarious metal decorations, including rather pointy spikes on the epaulets, which must have offended the Doctor.

“Oh, let me guess,” says Bill with a smirk. “Someone got whacked on the arse with a spatula, yeah?”

“Yes,” says the Magister, tossing the spatula in the sink and going back to a pot of water on the stove, “because someone started eating my Domina’s scones.”

“Drr vrr grr,” the Doctor says, chewing. Coming up behind their inevitable spouse, they wrap their arms around him, swallow, and say, “They’re very good, Master -- the scones, that is.”

“And you’re not,” says the Magister. “I’m going to overcook your egg as punishment.”

Dropping to their knees and flinging their arms in the air with a dramatic flap of sleeves, the Doctor lets out a resonant cry: “Noooooooo!” Without missing a beat, they say in their normal voice, “No, seriously, why all the leather? Is there a fetish club around here that I don’t know about?”

“Wait...is there?” Alison and Bill ask in unison, exchanging looks as they sit down at the breakfast table. “Can we go?”

“I regret to inform you all that the Doctor’s guess is incorrect,” says the Magister, sliding plates before Alison and the Doctor, then sitting down himself [clink clink]. “I got bored.”

Alison mashes the bulges of her two eggs, each on a piece of buttered toast. All the yellow leaks out, and she spreads it carefully with her fork to fully saturate each piece of bread. The Doctor
pushes the sauce, which ostensibly tastes like marching bands, toward her; she ladles some of it on her breakfast. With a pale yellow base and light green bits in it, it looks like melted cheddar with tomatillos. She eats some; it’s kind of like eggs with salsa and cheese, but the flavor is intermittently sharper and more acidic, with even a little granular sweetness at the base. “No,” she says, shifting her food into her cheek, “you got told.” She winks at her robot.

“You told him to do like a Professor Panjandrum cosplay? So this is the kinky stuff you two get up to late at night, huh?” Bill laughs.

“My dear,” interrupts the Magister with a note of mock sententiousness, “if I were doing a Panjandrum cosplay, I’d have a trench coat with chains all over it and no shoulder spikes.”

“Well, you’ve got the bandolier of winding keys for all the robots,” says Bill, gesturing across her chest, “and the amoral compass and everything else, not to mention a bunch of silly straps everywhere, so I’m going to say it’s Panjandrum -- reboot version, of course.” She whisks Alison’s plate away from her mat and nearly sticks her nose in the eggs. “Oooh, mmmmm.”

“I just told him he didn’t have to behave like anyone’s butler anymore,” Alison says. “He was the one who decided to take it in a kinky direction.”

“My dear Miss Potts, that’s not yours!” chides the Magister. “Why is everyone after my Domina’s breakfast?”

“Don’t threaten me with your hackles and your spatula,” says Bill, sticking out her tongue. “We have a deal. Alison gets all the tastes, and I get all the smells. Well, at least till the Doctor makes you and me stomachs.”

“The Doctor,” says the Magister, looking askance at his inevitable spouse, “has been mentioning the prospect of a digestive system on and off for five years without any results.”

“Well, you need to be persuasive about it,” says Bill. She raises her voice to a stage whisper: “The Doctor forgets things kind of easily.”

The Doctor nods vigorously. “Right you are, uh…” Pause. “Wait...who are you?”

“Hmmmm, maybe I should use my spatula to aid their recall,” muses the Magister.
“No!” Alison points her fork at him. “Bad robot! A spatula is not an interrogation tool!”

“Bad Domina!” He points at her [without a fork]. “Dinnerware is not for intimidation!”

“I think you should have a title,” says the Doctor, chewing meditatively. “I mean, all the cool kids do.”

“Who, me?” Bill looks up from Alison’s breakfast’s smells again.

“Yeah, it’s very disrespectful of the Master not to use it,” says the Doctor, deadpan, as if she already has one.

“I could be a proper noun just like the rest of the family, yeah?” Bill beams. “Maybe something about my heart…” She thinks of the possibilities.

“Your sense of wonder…” says the Doctor.

“Quaestrix?” offers Alison around a mouthful of poached eggs. “That means asker of questions.”


“Ooooh! Yeah, that’s me!” exclaims Bill. “I’m the Seeker! The Doctor, the Master, the Domina, and me: the Seeker!”

“Gooooooooo team!” says the Doctor, sounding like a cheerleader, and everyone laughs.

The Magister cocks his head. “My dear Seeker,” he says, “my counterpart is coming.” Bill, still grinning with Alison about her new moniker, doesn’t respond to it.

“Hey, Bill the Seeker!” the Doctor calls, cupping their hands around their mouth. “The Master says
the Master is coming.”

“Okay then.” Bill clicks on her wheelchair and fires her blaster sound effects. “That means the Seeker is going.”

“Oh! Yeah! Right!” The Doctor bounces up. “We got a good start on the list of supplies for post-surgical care, but I’d like to finalize that today. Now where did I -- ?”

“Subtropical wetland zone,” Bill answers, clearly anticipating the question.

Just as Bill wheels away from the table and glides toward the door, Razor swings around the corner, meeting her footplate to footplate. Upright, relaxed, clad in fresh unwrinkled clothes, and recently shaved, he appears in much less pain and much better spirits than he was when Alison previously visited him. “No need to flee the scene, Miss Potts,” he says. “I won’t trouble you with further requests for your time. Besides -- “

“Hey, Batshit Harry!” bellows a voice further down the hall.

“Batshit Harry?” the Magister repeats, chewing on the inside of one cheek. He crosses his arms in amusement, the winding keys on his bandolier jingling as he compresses them.

“Yeah,” says Bill, backing up to ease the impasse at the doorway. “He went by Harold Saxon when he was PM for about two seconds.”

“Two seconds?” Razor cries indignantly. “My reign was longer than two seconds!”

“Batshit Harry!” yells the voice, coming closer. There’s a slow shuffling sound, and Charlie stands in the doorway of Alison and Bill’s room, hunched slightly forward as she balances on a walker with two front wheels. She’s wearing something that looks like the Magister might have whipped it up: a gown of cranberry wool with faceted jet buttons down the entire front. The sleeves puff at the shoulders, then taper sharply, going down over her wrists to end in points, and the black lace of the high collar brushes the underside of her jaw. She still has her original flat, mask-like Cyber face, but that doesn’t prevent her from addressing Razor with jocular sarcasm: “If you want me to fuckin’ keep up with you, maybe you should go at a pace I can fuckin’ follow, huh?”

“Wait…” says Alison. “You’re following him around now, Charlie?”
Charlie leans her elbows on her walker handles. “No, I’m more like keeping my brain from oozing out my fucking ears from boredom. His mind runs too fast for his notes to catch up,” she says, with a tone that indicates that she would be rolling her eyes if she had the machinery, “so I thought I could earn my keep and prevent his brain from flying out his head, but it’s a lost cause. There’s nothing in his fuckin’ skull except, you know, bat shit.”

“Ah, my apologies, Ms. Foxtrot,” says Razor, as Bill zooms off, the Doctor just behind her. “As I was saying…” He launches into a complicated idea for a last surge of pre-rally publicity that involves hijacking the remaining ten functional LCD clocks in the city with revolting propaganda.

Alison figures that Charlie, who has no compunctions about giving Razor a derogatory nickname, can clearly fend for herself, so she clears her plate as Razor pulls in alongside her. “And I’m going to do...um...something,” she concludes.

“That’s a fucking ridiculous plan,” Charlie, usurping Alison’s vacated chair without missing a beat, tells Razor. “The communications hubs are so well-guarded that they’re rat-proof! It’s not at all worth it to send the Master up against all those NPs, even if he is an indestructible robot, just to hack into ten little ol’ clocks to make them say revolting shit. I know you’re all about the fucking derring-do, but this is like a derring- don’t.” She does another vocal eye roll, and her green eye lights flicker in an obviously contemptuous fashion. “Now, if we had someone who could like, fucking hijack the hub and reprogram the clocks with super freaky mind powers, I’d say go for it. Otherwise, try something a little less goofy next time.”

“I could connect to the hub remotely and do exactly what you suggest, my dear Ms. Foxtrot,” interjects the Magister, “and I concur with your assessment that it would be much less risky than doing so in person.” He pivots toward Alison. “Domina! Before you leave, do come here, please.” She stands before him. “And, whatever she does today,” he says, lowering his eyes to her, his voice as soft as a kiss, “will my Domina remember who she is, at least until tonight when I can tell her?”

“I’d hug you,” she says, “but I think I might get a puncture wound, so I’m just going to say yes.”
Alison Is Revolting Too

Chapter Summary

Charlie asks Alison about her relationship with her robot. Alison joins Bill in helping the Doctor with their pre-rally projects. She learns more about the Doctor and Bill and how awesome each of them are.

Alison, bored with her status as an extraneous individual, seeks ways to become as revolting as everyone else. First she checks in with Charlie. Though Charlie now works as Razor’s idea herder and Alison has no interest in helping Razor directly, she wonders if Charlie needs any help with her adjustment to repersoning.

Charlie is in her bedroom just down the hall from Alison and Bill’s. Important files heap up in listing stacks everywhere, many topped with TARDIS cats pretending to be paperweights. Several draft agendas for the rally are pinned on the wall. Very little about the room suggests the personality of its occupant, although there is a color plate or two from *Godey’s Lady’s Book* on the desk. Alison figures that Charlie, like the Magister, must like the dramatic shoulders and imposing bustles of Western European 1880s and 1890s fashion, as she’s got another high-necked, long-sleeve, full-length gown on today. Constructed of heavy burgundy velvet with black lace detailing, it trails and swirls impressively behind her, just like one of the Magister’s capes. It’s definitely from his sewing machine.

“Hey! Alison!” No longer in need of the rolling walker, Charlie leaps up from her seat without assistance. “Look at my new fucking face!” She has a rectangular face, skin of cool brown with grey shadows, a strongly lined jaw, and close-together eyes [still artificially neon green]. “Look – even got the cockeyed mouth and the mole!” The left side of her thin dark lips turns up, the right side down. A pale mole protrudes at the outer tip of her right eyebrow like a button.

“How’d they do that?” Clapping in fascination, Alison comes closer.

“The Master did it; he’s amazing! He read my memories of what I looked like, then pulled them out of my head and made a three-dimensional picture that the Doctor worked from. Ya know…” Charlie sits back down. “My fuckin’ eyebrows… My sister used to poke me, going, *Beeeeep! Beeeeeep! I’m turning your eyebrows off.*” She jabs at the prominence. “Of course then I’d have to punch her in the stomach, and then she’d kick me in the crotch, but anyway… But then, when the Doctor asks me what kind of face I want, those are the first fuckin’ things I think of. Well, along with blondish brownish hair that goes in seven hundred and seventy-seven different directions, but the Doctor’s still working on the curls, so that’ll be a while.” She slides her hand across her bald scalp. “But still…can’t wait to wash my fucking hair!”

“You look amazing!” Alison cries. “Your face – I love that your eyes are still glowing, and you look so proud and expressive. You remind me of my robot – I mean, in the best of all possible ways.”

“Aww, thank you. Anyway, I’m glad you’re here. Can I ask you about the Master?” Charlie tells some of the cats on her bed to move [which they do, despite protests], then hefts up a handful of her skirt, plops on her bed, and says to Alison, “What’s it like fucking him?”
“Well, you’re a biological person espoused to a robot, and I’m a robot espoused to biological people, and I’m scared shitless about seeing my spouses again. I’m a traitor! Even if I didn’t want to, I hurt people. I arrested my nieces for being out fifteen minutes after curfew! My own fucking wonderful little nieces...” Charlie closes her eyes, squinching them shut. “They saw me and my crew, and Reenie started screaming like a fucking baby. She’s ten. And Grey – she just... She just fucking shit herself out of terror. She’s twelve.”

“Oh, Charlie...” Quickly overcoming her shock, Alison sits next to her on the bed. The recently dismissed cats jump into her lap.

“I just fucking reduced them – “ Charlie can’t bear to finish. “And I couldn’t even tell them who I was because I was programmed not to. I suppose it’s good that I couldn’t because then I’d be a nightmare to them. As it is, I’m just a nightmare to myself.” Her cockeyed mouth goes symmetrical in grief, both corners pulling down deeply.

“I, um... Do you want a hug?” Alison scoots closer.

“Fuck yeah!” Charlie’s voice peaks, crackling with electronic static. Alison has a feeling that that would have been a sob. “But...I’m not like the Master. I don’t feel like a person. Ack!” she cries as Alison dives in and wraps her arms around Charlie’s middle. The cats exit her lap before she and Charlie touch.

“Yeah, you do,” says Alison. “You don’t feel like lots of completely biological people that I’m used to hugging, but you still feel like a person because you are one.” Charlie’s Cyber suit crinkles against Alison’s grasp, and she feels plates encasing Charlie’s abdomen, rather than a rib cage. But she still feels like a person who wants to be held fast, so that’s what Alison does.

Charlie puts her arms down, then embraces Alison gingerly. “Oh.” There’s another crack in her voice as she tightens her arms around Alison, and Alison wonders if the Doctor deliberately added that sound to signify strong emotion. “He said you might do this,” she says, now clinging to Alison, rocking her from side to side. “And I’m so glad you did!” One of the cats leans on Charlie’s left side, the other on her right, adding a small feline hug to Alison’s larger human one.

“He said I’d do what? Who’s he?”

“Your spouse! The Master! He said you held people fast like this and that’s how you make them happy. And he was right!”

After they hug for a while, Charlie brings up her original topic. She’s mortally afraid of reuniting with Junie and Gardenia for the emotional reasons she already mentioned. However, those are frankly too scary to contemplate for very long, so she preoccupies herself instead with what she calls hydraulic problems. That’s why she asks about the Magister. Does he have functioning sex organs? She needs to know if the Doctor can make robots that can fuck. The Doctor did not provide her with any functioning sex organs, so she is trying to figure out if they can give her some.

Alison clarifies that she is not at all married to her robot. Charlie is surprised, as she assumed that Alison was espoused to both the Magister and Bill. Alison also adds that he doesn’t fuck anyone, including his actual spouse the Doctor. Finally, she has no idea about his sex organs.

They take this question to the Magister, Alison accompanying Charlie for support. The Magister inquires what Charlie defines as a sex organ. If she’s looking for a fully functional set of body
parts with which to reproduce, he advises against that. The Doctor has never done such a thing, and
they would be instantly immersed in the thrill of a challenge, useless to concentrate on their many
projects related to the Dystopiaville revolution. If she seeks organs, orifices, and genitalia that
many of her species use for erotic activities, the Doctor could certainly supply these. However, she
must specify exactly what she wishes the Doctor to make for her, as the Doctor does not consider
these things, which is probably why she does not have the parts she wants in the first place.

“Fu-uck!” Charlie’s electric green eyes shine. “I can ask for whatever parts I want? Whoooo hooo
hoo! That means I could… Wow, I’d better go make a list.” She departs as briskly as she can.

“Damn, robot of mine,” says Alison with a laugh, “I think you just made Charlie’s week. Maybe
even her month.”

“Oh no,” he says with a smile, “for you were the one who held her fast. I hope that her spouses
welcome her back with equally open arms.”

Reminded of the Doctor’s war efforts, Alison next visits them and, of course, Bill. The last time
she looked in, the Doctor had several tasks on their list to accomplish before Razor’s Resistance
officially turned into a war. They wanted to optimize and codify the refacement that they
inaugurated with Charlie, while also designing a basic 3D printable face for others in Charlie’s
situation. They also wanted to refine their song of Cyber network disruption to include some basic
un-suppression of emotions. Surely Alison can contribute somehow, right?

Well, not so much. Bill and her Doctor have already been hard at work. With the assistance of
Bill’s sharp, never-miss-a-detail mind and her penchant for lists, diagrams, outlines, and other
ways of synthesizing information, the Doctor has already perfected their refacing operation.
Collating the Doctor’s explosion of notes, Bill drafted An Illustrated Manual to Refacement
Surgery. She then sent it to the target audience, RR agents who had defected from the hospital,
asking for comments on clarity and comprehensiveness.

In particular, she appealed to the first individual that Razor had repersoned: Doctor Kevin Yoon, a
surgeon formerly specializing in complex cases of Cyber conversion. Doctor Yoon provided so
many suggestions that they, Bill’s Doctor, and Bill met in person. They holed up in Bill’s Doctor’s
robotics lab for several hours. The three emerged with a vastly streamlined process and an
improved manual. After that, Bill reported with a laugh, her Doctor waltzed her around the kitchen,
singing, until they [the Doctor] barked their knee on a cabinet door and had to sit down.

The three have obviously been achieving miracles without her, so, after a breathless update from
Bill, Alison tries to withdraw. No! Alisonshine! We need you! Bill, who is apparently having a
really good day, jumps out of her chair, catches Alison’s hands, and tows her further into her
Doctor’s lab. These two are surgery nerds, she says, waving at her Doctor and Doctor Yoon, and
I’m an organizing nerd, but we’re doing instructions and explanations here, and we need a word
nerd, yeah? Here. She plops a laptop in front of Alison. It would be really great if you could read
the refacement manual. I write okay, but I don’t think my sentences are scientific enough
sometimes, you know? Also I’m pretty sure that you know how to use semicolons better than me.

Thus Alison assumes the position of chief word nerd. She polishes up the refacement manual,
which is amazingly innovative [thanks to the Doctor], logically structured [thanks to Bill], but
dense [thanks mostly to Doctor Yoon, who can operate, but not write]. She breaks up heavy blocks
of texts with bullet points, varies sentence composition, and adds introductory and summary
paragraphs everywhere possible.

When Bill is done recording her Doctor’s discussions with Doctor Yoon on designs for printable
faces, Alison and Bill take on that project as well. Bill outlines it. Then Alison writes it, and Bill
collects feedback from RR members in the medical profession. Alison and Bill edit, run the
document by Bill’s Doctor and Doctor Yoon, then finalize it. Compiled with the documentation on
refacement surgery, the tutorial on printable faces is distributed electronically so that RR surgeons
can ready themselves.

While all this is going on, it comes out that the repersoning surgery that Razor practices was
actually developed by Doctor Yoon. Since Razor is preoccupied with large-scale visions for the
rally and then the fun part after that, Alison, Bill, and the surgery nerds assume the documentation
of repersoning and detox. They obtain Razor’s permission to use his surgical records, which are on
the drives that the Magister had snatched from Razor’s lab under the very noses of the Night
Patrol, and set to work.

The surgery nerds cloister themselves for a lively discussion about overall concepts. Bill jumps in
with her laptop to take notes. Alison follows, but the conversation quickly passes her
understanding. She knows that the Doctor thinks and communicates synaesthetically, but she has
never before been privy to one of their creative sessions. All of their usual techniques intensify, the
sentence fragments becoming shorter, the poetic allusions more rapid, the melodic interruptions
longer, the arm flapping more vigorous, the full-body pantomime more frequent. It’s like watching
someone conduct, dance, speak in sign language, and do acrobatics simultaneously: transfixing,
beautiful, but ultimately overwhelming. There’s so much motion, such coruscation of wit, that it
unfortunately makes Alison’s broken brain rather nauseated.

In any event, the surgery nerds adjust the repersoning operations in ways that they estimate will
reduce the duration by one third and the post-operative detox to five days instead of eight. Alison
drafts Bill’s notes into a rough manual, which the Doctor and Doctor Yoon use to test their
innovations. For surgical candidates they seek out the three people that Prunella and Senga rescued
from Floor 1056 General Hospital’s brainwashing ward. Though they escaped brainwashing, these
Cyborgonics still have suppressed emotions, so they enthusiastically consent to re-emotionalization
procedures, however experimental. The re-emotionalizations succeed, leading to three ecstatic
Cyborgonics, four ecstatic documentation nerds, and a much more comprehensive manual. The
surgery nerds do not want to finalize such crucial information so quickly, but they do allow draft
manuals to be distributed among future specialists in repersoning surgery.

Finding the Doctor’s excitement a little much, Alison observes Bill instead. Already familiar with
the subject and with the Doctor’s mode of communication, Bill is undaunted by their idiom. Bill
has nowhere near the Magister’s expertise in translating the Doctor’s thoughts, but she listens and
watches with great focus. Her lovely big eyes open wide to catch all the sights; her lovely wide
mouth opens slightly as she smiles to catch all the excitement; even her loose, short hair seems to
perk up around her head, picking up signals from the Doctor’s brain.

If she sees the Doctor doing jazz hands and repeating the same few words, Bill says, It looks like
you’ve got a really cool idea. Is it about…? And then she names whatever topic they were just on.
It’s usually not; the Doctor has often skipped ahead to something else. Nevertheless, Bill’s
observations give them some language to work with, if only to explain that the were thinking about
something else.

As Alison watches, Bill and the Doctor develop a routine. Soon the Doctor quits repeating a
phrase, instead flapping their hands for a second or two, then saying, Bill – words, please! This is
Bill’s cue to remind the Doctor of the most recent subject, at which point the Doctor says, Ah hah,
the Seeker has sought it!, and Bill replies, And the Doctor has got it! Both of them look at each other and dissolve into giggles every time they complete their couplet. Then the Doctor figures out what words to apply to their thoughts, and work continues.

The Doctor, who seems to have difficulty with words in every other case, never runs out of words for Bill: compliments, thanks, questions. She’s clever; she’s brilliant [insert extended wordplay on her billiance here]; she’s amazingly patient; she understands how the Doctor thinks more than any other person they’ve come across. They thank her every single time she volunteers to take notes, every morning she comes in with a smile, every time she helps them find their words. She thinks this is fun? In fact, she thinks this is so fun that she pops up at night sometimes to sit in the jungle and work on her notes? But doesn’t that play havoc with her circadian rhythms? Didn’t she used to sleep more like eight hours, instead of six? She does understand, doesn’t she, that, unlike Razor Master, they don’t expect her help, and they certainly don’t want her to wear herself out?

Alison, overcome with affection at this sight, feels so springy that she bounces in her seat without really thinking about it. Just as Alison’s robot blooms whenever he sees her, so Bill’s Doctor blossoms too with the attention and care from someone like Bill who has the thoughtfulness, patience, and silliness to understand them. And, when they unfurl themselves, the Doctor is amazing. They’re energetic and brilliant, and they throw themselves wholly, bodily, into whatever they do, turning their life into a dance of creation. They’re weird and wild and wonderful, and they make the world equally wonderful merely by existing in it. They impart to the universe a limitless thrill of promise and possibility, as if everything and everyone can be as good and true and curious and kind as they are. Alison knows now exactly what the Magister sees in the Doctor because she herself sees it too.

As for Bill, she was wonderful and beautiful when Alison first laid eyes on her, but now she’s even more more so. For one of the first times in her life, she has someone who sees her in all her strength, all her frailty, all her glory, and accepts her. Not only do they accept her, but they positively adore her just as she is. They respond with gleeful surprise and even just a touch of confused awe that such a lovely, brilliant person would befriend them, work with them, and voluntarily hang out with them. And Bill flourishes with such love. She turns toward it and grows, her pupils dilated as big and dark as the black centers of sunflowers, smiling, beaming, glowing, radiating, loving. Alison watches Bill love the Doctor and likes Bill even more as a result.

Oh, Bill! She is stupendissima [Latin for most stupendous, or, as Alison thinks of it, coolest]. She sits in her retro rocket chair with the posture of a question mark, and her swoopy eyebrows punctuate all her inquiries. She laughs at jokes, even if she has heard them twenty times, and her nose, with its few freckles, crinkles up every time. Those lovely eyes, with the long dark lashes, watch everything so carefully and understand so much. Even her hair, bouncing in loose chin-length curls, listens to what you have to say. She’s like the Magister; her face is so expressive that it provides a window clear into her lovely, wonderful, thoughtful, sensitive mind.

But there’s one way in which she differs from Alison’s robot, and Alison witnesses this firsthand when she shows Bill the draft of the repersoning manual just before it goes out and says, Guess what I added? When Alison saw that Bill had put By the Doctor, MD, PhD, etc., and Kevin Yoon, MD on the refacement documentation, she decided to make the repersoning documentation’s byline more accurate. It now reads By the Doctor, MD, PhD, etc., and Kevin R. Yoon, MD, with
Alison Clarabella Cheney and Bill Jessamine Potts. Seeing this, Bill Jessamine Potts looks up at Alison Clarabella Cheney, her lips shaking between a grin and a sob. Then Bill Jessamine Potts pulls Alison Clarabella Cheney into her arms and holds her fast, crying all over her shirt.

Right then and there, Alison decides that, along with her heart and her eyebrows and her smirk brackets, Bill’s tears are one of the best things about her too. Like the Doctor, she’s transparent, and, like the Doctor, she cries easily and without shame. For some people, tears mean suffering, but for Bill they mean so much more than just pain: sentiment, openness, honesty, a heart easily stirred by wonder. Her tears are as clear as her straightforward candor, as bright as her brilliant, hopeful mind. Bill’s tears crystallize the beauty of her fierce and naked clarity so strongly that Alison feels like crying herself.

Alison realizes that she either loves Bill or is very, very close to doing so. This, however, is a patently absurd proposition. Alison has only known Bill for less that two months. It is factually and emotionally impossible to love someone after such a short period. Alison’s own personal experience suggests that it takes at least a year for infatuation to settle down into something more durable. She is interpreting her friendship for Bill as love because that’s how others are reading it: Charlie, who guessed that Alison and Bill were married, her robot, who’s delighted to see them holding one another fast, and Razor, who thinks they’re inevitable spouses. However, it is too premature and presumptuous to designate her attachment to Bill as love, so Alison tells those feelings to fuck right off.

Unfortunately, her thoughts only hear the fuck and, inspired by her discussion with Charlie, move into the realm of actual fucking. Maybe Bill could pin her down, lying upon her, strong enough, hard enough, heavy enough, so that she could finally feel secure, grounded, here. And she could hold Bill, all of her, gently enough to accommodate her pain, fiercely enough so that she wouldn’t be haunted by the memory of how the Doctor over here dropped her. And Alison would make Bill so happy that she would cry, and then Alison could wipe away Bill’s tears and lick them off her fingertips, and they would be just as sharp and sweet as the rest of her.
Razor Returns

Chapter Summary

Alison and Bill run out of energy simultaneously and retire from revolting to play another one of Bill’s games. Razor arrives on the scene, not doing well, and the Magister goes into his mind to help him.

A week before Demiel and the rally, Alison and Bill both run out of energy. Though she has, per Razor’s command, been using her chair regularly to conserve her stamina, Bill still exhausts herself. Her late-night lucubrations erode her usual perkiness, leaving her less of an eager question mark and more of a long pause of an em dash. As for Alison, she’s so glad to be revolting productively -- and in collaboration with Bill, no less! -- that she allows the general enthusiasm to sweep her into a late-night session or two. Slightly overtired, she feels the effects of everyone’s zeal all the more strongly, and they effectively down her.

On hiatus from revolting, Alison and Bill play games, mostly in their room. After the lava/black holes version of checkers, Bill becomes frustrated with her inability to play the labyrinth game; she can’t roll the ball bearing through the maze without it dropping into the holes. Therefore she invents a version where falling into a hole constitutes falling into another dimension. If you want to get out, you have to talk to characters represented by court cards that Bill pulls from a deck of regular playing cards.

Alison rolls her ball bearing about three centimeters before falling into the first hole. The fact that she’s sitting on her and Bill’s bed probably doesn’t help her at all. It’s time for a court card scenario. The Magister, crouching forward in a desk chair, watching with great interest, procures 3D printed game pieces for them. To Alison he gives one medallion, to Bill another. Both of them show faces crowned with yellow rays, but Alison’s is very definitely a sun, Bill’s a sunflower [just like the sunflowers that Alison got her from the Doctor’s jungle once].

“Oh -- oh -- oh my God!” cries Bill, clapping both hands over the top of her head. Alison boings when she’s thrilled, and Bill sticks her hands in her hair like she’s trying to keep all the excitement in her brain. “You made us! Look, Alison! The Prof made Alisonshine!” She sniffs; she smiles; she cries; she hops from the bed and throws her arms around the Magister. “That’s so sweet of you,” she says, most of her words lost in his clothes. “Your universe has the best everything: the best Alison, the best Doctor, the best you! Thank you so, so, so much!”

The Magister startles as Bill attaches herself to him. “Please! Let me go.” He explains that he wishes people to ask his permission before they touch him. Bill, of course, feels mortified. After several minutes of extensive negotiations, a hug is approved, at which point both of them put their arms around each other. Alison squeals with joy to herself to see them getting along.

When they end their hug, Alison’s friend returns to the bed, puts Alison’s token on the counterpane, and asks Alison’s robot to cast a handful of jacks around it for obstacles, which he does. Then Bill shuffles the court cards and has Alison choose. Alison pulls out the Joker of Bicycles. As voiced by Bill, the Joker makes suspiciously Doctor-like puns and gives Alison bad advice that runs her into a forest of jacks. The Magister says that Alison should use her vorpal pen, the magical tool of creation and destruction that he imagines her always carrying.
Having no luck with the Joker of Bicycles, Alison next pulls the Knave of Hearts. “Oooh, he looks mean,” reports Bill, “and he’s coming at you with his sword drawn.” Her eyebrows bouncing, she looks to Alison for her contribution to the collaborative story.

“Hack him up,” advises the Magister, perking up from his crouch at the prospect of violence. “Off with his head! and all that.”

“I tell him he’s nothing but a pack of cards,” says Alison.

“Bad idea,” comments the Magister. “Fictional characters tend not to like being reminded of their fictionality.”

“What he said.” Bill points at the Magister. Regarding the Knave of Hearts, she informs Alison, “He just threw a tart at you. Ugh, at least it wasn’t hot, but it was sticky.”

“I ducked,” Alison returns, sticking out her tongue.

“Oooh, it hit the Joker!” Wincing, Bill recoils as if she’s just seen someone dealt a fatal blow. “Now the Joker’s throwing banana cream pies.”

“And then the Master came in,” adds the Magister, “and told them to stop wasting perfectly good food -- “

“So the Joker and the Knave started throwing pies at him,” says a new voice, “until there was nothing left of the robot but a very smug pile of pie filling, and everyone lived happily ever after, and no one wasted food ever again.” It is, of course, Razor, hanging out in the doorway.

“Oi, Batshit Harry!” Bill waves. A big grin spreads across her face; she feels that this name suits him as much as Charlie does. The grin dissolves as soon as she pays a little attention. “Oh no, when was the last time you ate?”

“Ah! Master! You are alive,” says the Magister. “But dear me!” His brows take flight to the vicinity of his sharp widow’s peak. “You’re quite unwell.”

Razor salutes them with wide open arms. “Greetings, loyal minions and adoring fans!” The purposely vainglorious tone extinguishes for a momentary pause, after which he says with some wonder, “Wow, you look shitty today. What have I told you about the importance of sufficient sleep, my dear Miss Potts? Tsk!” He shakes his head. “Hey, Mechanical Me, give the Dominatrix a poke. I can’t tell if that’s her or a zombie. If she tries to bite your head off -- “ He pauses, then finishes, “Well, that wouldn’t actually prove anything or way or the other.”

No one has seen much of Razor in the past few weeks, so they all stare. It doesn’t really count if he rockets by at thirty-plus kilometers an hour, which according to Bill, is his chair’s top speed, and the only reason they know it’s him is that Charlie’s bellowing after him, Hey, Harry, get back here; this idea makes no fucking sense. Who thought up this shit, you or your bats? He doesn’t even appear in the kitchen for meals anymore, which makes Bill wonder if he’s eating at all. Several times she makes sandwiches and goes hunting for him, but he’s either moving too fast for her to track, or he’s dodging her.

Now that he has finally materialized, Razor looks the worst that Alison has ever seen him. Between his half-cocked position in his chair and the shadows beneath his cheekbones, his brittle frailty reminds Alison of her gram, perched precariously on the edge of life. His goatee has turned into a full beard, and his hair exceeds the disarray of the Doctor’s in the morning. His eyes burn dark with the by-now-familiar dictatorial glee, but without the usual self-consciousness. His grin is
a little too tight, his eyes a little too wide, his attention a little too...elsewhere. “Why are you staring at me?” he asks, his knuckles going *tummety-tum, tummety-tum* against his joybox. “I mean -- I know I’m devastatingly attractive, but -- “

“Are you like feverish?” Alison cries.

“Please excuse us for a second.” Shutting the door in Razor’s face, the Magister turns to Bill. “Have you seen the Master in such a state before?”

“No!” Bill, eyes wide, shakes her head. “He was bouncing off the walls after he got the idea for RR, but he calmed down after a few weeks. This is bad. In fact, this is worse, like extra manic. Can you...help him? He looks like he’s going to run himself into the ground if someone doesn’t stop him.”

“Do you remember if he did anything in his earlier state to calm himself?”

“Well, he was doing that knock over and over,” says Bill, “but I don’t know if that was like a stimming thing or more like, *Oh fuck, it’s in my head, and now it’s gotten control of my body too.* ”

Razor does *tummety-tum, tummety-tum* against Alison and Bill’s door. “I might be mad, but I still know when people are pitying me behind my back, and I fucking hate it!” Momentary pause. “Hey! Why can’t I hear you anymore? What did you do, Mechanical Me? Fucker!”

“Right then,” says the Magister in a low voice. “I have blocked him for but a moment. Let me tell you my plan. I will ask the Master to let me into his mind. If I can enter, I can recall him to himself. I can certainly do so in my private quarters if you have no wish to see -- “

“No, we’re helping,” say Alison and Bill in unison.

“Ah, my dear Domina.” One hand down the side of her cheek. “You have no need to do so, and yet I thank you. You as well, my lovely Seeker.”

“I’m going to get some leftovers,” announces Bill, setting herself in her retro rocket chair, “in case it ever gets through his thick skull that he needs to eat something.”

“I,” says Alison, pulling the master Master controller from her pocket, “am keeping guard right here.”

Alison, the Magister, and Bill share a glance and a determined nod; then the Magister opens the door. Razor backs up so that Bill can maneuver past him. Alison picks up the labyrinth and game pieces and withdraws to the desk, spinning around the office chair so that it faces the bed. As she settles, the Magister says, “Please come in.”

“Has this been authorized by the ruler of your universe?” Razor shifts his eyes in Alison’s direction.

“The Domina bids you enter, sir.” Alison lifts her chin.

“Many thanks, dread power.” He bows from his sitting position, but doesn’t make it very far. His breath hitched, and he sits back up quickly. Slouching toward the Magister, he switches to modern casual parlance. “Yeah, what do you want?”

The Magister crosses the room and stands in front of Razor, nearly touching his foot plate. “Master, I’d like to look inside your mind, if I may. Do I have your permission?”

He surges upright, clamps one hand to either side of the Magister’s head, then presses the center of his forehead to the Magister’s. For a moment, he stands like that, eyes shut, teeth gritted, as if trying to force an understanding into the Magister’s mind, but then he stumbles. The Magister catches him in a way that Alison has felt many times from the inside, as he has done it to her, but never seen from the outside. He bends, lifts, and swings Razor up, all in a single graceful motion. Now he has his counterpart cradled in his arms.

Razor, reorienting himself, opens his eyes. He glares at the Magister, obviously telepathically telling him to go fuck himself backward with a rusty pitchfork for putting Razor in such a position. The Magister lets him go, and they sit side by side on the bed for a minute.

And now Razor attacks the Magister. He must be transmuting his rage directly into power, for Alison has no other explanation for his ability to tackle the Magister, who flies backward, his skull making a horrible dense *thud* on the headboard. With a squeak of secondary suffering, Alison freezes and shuts her eyes.

Noises of an altercation seem to have ended, so Alison cautiously opens one eye, then the other. Razor straddles the Magister’s ribcage, bowed over him, forehead to forehead, Razor’s hands at the side of the Magister’s head and vice versa.

Something’s happening between the two of them – hopefully some psychic connection by which the Magister can help Razor – but of course Alison has no indication of what. She only sees the two of them. The Magister seems to have gone down within himself, beyond himself perhaps, to a plane where physical movement is irrelevant. All twitches and flexions that he usually has as part of his sophistication mimicry of biology – all of these have ceased. Even his great mobile face stills, the wrinkles uncontracting, his large nostrils relaxing, the corners of his mouth falling into their usual downturn. Solemn and zeroed in, he looks as if he has leapt and then abandoned himself to the air currents in full certainty of his landing point.

Blowing through his teeth, Razor shakes, his emaciated back hunching violently. First he pushes down hard, almost growling, as if he’s trying to fuse with his counterpart at the brow. The Magister neither yields nor moves, and eventually a sound emanates from Razor. Somewhere between a scream and a roar, it’s the sound that Alison made when the Doctor said that they could fix her brain after the Finisterran affair and she ran away from them, out of their hospital. It’s the sound of someone breaking.

Closing her eyes and clenching her fists, Alison cries, “*Tace! No! Don’t hurt him!*”

“Shut…up…!” Razor snaps at her. “Not…d -- ah!” He lets out another breaking noise, and Alison flees the scene.

She nearly trips over Bill, who has a tray of food in her lap. Orange sections go flying, along with a napkin and a cucumber and cheese sandwich. “What’s wrong? Is something bad happening?”

Alison squats to pick up the fallen food, then feels a little dizzy. She leans against the wall, sliding down until she’s sitting on the floor. “It was painful,” she says, breathing heavily, “and he screamed, so…I…” She lets out a few sobs, damping them with the napkin. Bill reaches down for her hand; Alison stands up, and the two hold each other.

A few minutes later, she hears the bedroom door open. “Great. Now look what you’ve done! You
made the ruler of the universe cry. Smooth move, Mechanical Me.” Razor comes closer and says to Alison, “Exalted one, dearest Dominatrix mine, I do beseech thee -- dry thy tears.”

Alison and Bill glance up. “You’re back!” they gasp in unison.

He’s still a mess: clothing askew, hair tousled, beard sticking out in all directions. A few leftover tears of his own hang on the bottoms of his reddened eyelids. But there he is, his eyes once again their usual shade of hazel, his smirk as easy and calculating as before. “Much good as it doth me to witness thy tender soul shedding tears for the sake of thy poor petitioner, sigh not so. For lo!” He flings his arms to either side. “Under the fair ministrations of thy robot, Batshit Harry is broken from distraction and restored to himself!” He relaxes. “And do let me offer thee the humblest of apologies as well, for swearing at thee and then scaring the shit out of thee. It would have helped,” he says, raising his voice in the direction of the Magister, who now exits the room, “if Mechanical Me had fuckin’ told me how much it was going to hurt!”

“I did,” says the Magister in a very dry voice, “multiple times. What I am about to do will cause you extreme pain. Do you still want me to do this? Every time, your response was, and I quote, Fuck you and your fucking consent bullshit. Just do it already and break me before I start really fighting you.” He reaches Alison and asks in a low voice, “But... mea Domina...are you all right?”

Everyone asks everyone else’s condition and confirms that they’re experiencing various levels of mental and/or physical prostration. Even the Magister pronounces himself in need of rest after such an endeavor. Bill says that, as for her, she needs some mindless entertainment, so she’s going to drop onto her bed and watch Defenders of Earth for a few days. Alison says she’ll join her. The Magister asks if he may partake as well. While there are still half of the security guards’ uniforms left to complete, he’ll start sewing his fingers together if he attempts another, so he’ll delegate the task to the Carsons. Alison and Bill approve his inclusion, as long as he realizes that they have conversations with the TV shows they watch. The Magister says that that’s the best way to watch.

“All right, have fun with the telly.” Razor clicks on his chair and pivots away. “I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Sandwich!” says Bill.

“Master!” snaps the Magister.

Alison jumps in front of him. “And dost thou forget thyself, sir?” she asks, crossing her arms, wishing that she had sparks in her eyes like her robot’s.

“Yea, verily, Dominatrix mine, but, with the aid of thy rude mechanical, I have rediscovered myself. And now I must away, for my list of undone things -- “

“Thou didst swear, sir, if I remember rightly, to obey any condition of mine in my domain. Now I have commands for thee. First, eat something. Second, clean up. Third, rest. Fourth, take care of thyself. And fifth, do not force me to insult thee by dictating in minutest detail what each task requireth. If thou want’st to lead a successful revolution, thou must achieve a certain strength of body and mind.”

Razor eyes her in silence for a few seconds; then she can just see his exhaustion hit him. He actually blinks a few times and nods his head forward, as if either sensing a burden come upon him or heading toward sleep. “Wow, I’m dizzy. I just need some water before I -- “

He swings back around toward Bill and the Magister with his usual high-speed, pinpoint turn, then stops. “Okay, a little too fast,” he remarks, hand to forehead. “Do you mind getting me some water,
Mechanical Me?” The Magister supplies him with about two liters’ worth of water glasses, all of which he downs quickly. Bill practically shoves the lunch plate in his lap. Eating half the sandwich in one go, he says, “Yeah, good idea, Dominatrix. I do need to rest. That doesn’t mean I’m watching your silly TV show, though.”
Everyone Watches Defenders of Earth

Chapter Summary

Everyone watches some cheesy sci-fi TV, Defenders of Earth, to get their minds off the upcoming revolution. Though they start off skewering trashy tropes, things unexpectedly turn more serious when the episode arrives in which Alison and Bill's favorite character, Deedee, dies.

Of course, Razor is in fact watching the silly TV show. In fact, everyone on the ship is: Alison, the Magister, Bill, the Doctor, Razor, and Charlie. The Magister has delegated the rest of security and venue planning to the Carsons. The Doctor instructs Doctor Yoon on some adjustments to their documentation. Razor talks to his tablet, making extensive notes on changes to lighting and blocking needed for the next dress rehearsal, but Alison sends him a reproof via eyebrow. He suddenly decides that it would be better if he took a mental and physical break from mania.

They all gather in a private cinema with perhaps thirty seats, including ten on a small rear balcony, tricked out, like much else in Anima, entirely in black and white. Walking down the gently inclined floor, Alison pets the black velvet wallpaper above the striped black and white wainscoting. She points out to Bill the ropey sconces wrapping around the wall lights like roots twisting around yellow beryls. The twining ironwork repeats in the frames and armrests for the reclining, collapsible seats, which are upholstered in white bubbles on a black field.

Before any ambulatory people sit down, however, the Doctor asks the wheelchair users where they’d like to go. Bill wonders where Alison is sitting because she wants to be next to her. Alison slips into a seat in the narrow center aisle. The Doctor folds up two chairs to Alison’s right, and Bill parks in the space. Automatically Alison and Bill reach for each other. As soon as their hands connect, they share a smile and a giggle. Commenting that Dystopiaville doesn’t really think of disabled people, much less offer them options, Razor checks the view from the balcony before gathering with everyone else near the center of the cinema.

For the benefit of Razor and Charlie, who aren’t familiar with Defenders of Earth, Bill reviews the premise. It’s a no-budget BBC science-fiction serial about Hope Januarius, a white British teenager, heir to the Defendership of Earth. She’s apprentice to the current Defender, Arthur Clarion, another white British person, but old enough to be her dad. During its first run in the 1970s, the show concentrated on intergalactic sci-fi. Threats to Earth originated on other planets populated by people in rubber monster suits. Their governments operated as blatant metaphors for aspects of current events, and it was up to Hope, the Defender, and occasionally Hope’s best friend Deedee to save the day.

Accompanied by the theremin-laden theme tune, the trio packed their etheric blasters and rocketed off into space. They hardly used the weapons, however, as the show derived many of its plots from silly misunderstandings or other comic conflicts that almost always resolved after some sensible diplomacy. With Earth safe for another week, the crew returned home, only to meet a cliffhanger that set up the next story.

Around the middle of the decade, though, the show changed. The focus shifted from amusing adventures in space to rather grim time-traveling adventures in time at home. Professor Mercurius
X. Panjandrum, a recurrent character in the first four series, became a regular and a constant antagonist. He gave Hope, the Defender, and Deedee plenty to do on their home planet. Either he tried to change history so that he was more powerful, successful, and well-liked, or he fomented chaos with his robots. Fortunately, his robots always exploded, discovered free will, or otherwise stymied him.

Hope, the Defender, and Deedee tried to use their diplomatic skills, but Panjandrum and his bots notoriously avoided reason. Etheric blasters were inevitably deployed, property destroyed, beloved characters injured or killed. People watched less for entertainment and more to make sure that their favorite characters were okay at the end.

But no one wants to watch dystopian sci-fi, least of all the current denizens of Dystopiaville. Thus the Doctor queues up the original series pilot and a random selection of episodes from the first four original series. The Magister informs everyone of the standard elements and Defenders stereotypes for which to keep an eye out. Soon everyone is harmonizing [to varying degrees of skill] with the signature melody and making etheric blaster sound effects for particularly corny lines.

--Except for Razor. He leans toward the screen, watching with silent, focused intensity. After a few minutes, he complains that he can’t hear the actors over the audience’s sound effects, so the Doctor puts on closed captioning. Running commentary continues, so Razor tells everyone to shut up. Alison counters that, if anyone needs to shut up, it’s him. He knew this was going to be an audience participation event, and, besides, he claimed he wasn’t even going to be present. Now that he is, he just needs to deal with the opinionated audiences. Though the Domina issues no commands, Razor, amazingly enough, quits talking.

The viewers grow more obstreperous as the episodes continue. Bill shares with everyone the concept of plot hole spackle. When something especially nonsensical occurs, someone calls, Fetch me the spackle; I’ve got a plot hole the size of a meteor/Saturn/a red dwarf/the Milky Way! When Panjandrum appears, people start counting the number of scenes until he lets out a resounding evil laugh or his robots break down, whichever comes first. Sometimes they even get up to four or five scenes. And, of course, people call advice at the characters – Yeah, run toward the scary noise inside the cemetery when you know you’ve left your torch and your blaster at home! That’s just brilliant! – but the characters ignore them. Alison considers it a personal victory when a one-off antagonist, slavering and cackling, appears, and Razor yells, Oh, for fuck’s sake. That’s not a mad scientist; that’s a narcissist with a saliva problem who happens to use a wheelchair! Get your facts straight!

And then come the Star Wars: A New Hope episodes. Inspired by the success of the Stateside film, the Defenders showrunners produced a two-part story in series four that blatantly lifted many elements from it. The episodes even begin with Star Wars’ iconic text crawl: yellow summary on a star field background. The words Not too far in the future, in a time and place not unlike ours… appear, and Alison, the Magister, Bill, and Razor send up a groan in quadruplicate. The Doctor, much less attentive to modern Earth movies, and Charlie, not being from Earth, require an explanation about why four of six audience members are shaking their heads. “Creative bankruptcy -- that’s why,” Razor informs them with a sage nod.

Just as Star Wars starts off with Darth Vader boarding a Rebel ship, so the Defenders episode begins with a villain’s dramatic entrance. A figure in black enters the frame, wheezing, with a swirl of smoke. “Yesss [hhhhhh]!” he says, sounding slightly like a Cyber person. “At last the princess [hhhhhh] shall be mine!”

“Next time, cut down on the dry ice and you won’t have so much trouble breathing! Better yet, use a bronchodilator,” calls the Doctor.
“Is that Panjandrum?” says Charlie. “I thought he was a sort of clockwork Cyborganic, not some person in black.”

“I want a cape like that,” says Alison.

“I have several like that,” says the Magister, “only better, and, if you truly want one, I can make you one.”

“You,” remarks Razor, “clearly missed your calling as the Dork Lord of Evilsville.”

“Well, this is sort of an alternative universe thing,” explains Alison to Charlie. “He’s usually an automaton person, but not in this story.”

“An alternative universe? What the fuck is that sort of shit?” Charlie asks.

“It’s a plot device,” says Bill, “invented by writers to confuse the heck out of viewers. Just go with it.”

“Are you all going to shut up,” asks Razor of the room in general, “or do I have to Force choke someone?”

The episode continues. It is, of course, Deedee whom Panjandrum kidnaps, as he does so many times in the regular universe episodes. The scene then switches to Hope in the Luke Skywalker role as an inexperienced, adventure-hungry orphan. She meets up with two of Panjandrum’s bots, analogous to R2-D2 and C-3PO. The Defender, serving as Obi-Wan Kenobi equivalent, trains her in combat and deception.

After Panjandrum’s Darth Vader-like entrance, the episode copies a few other early Star Wars scenes. Deedee resists Panjandrum’s psychological torture and tells him to fuck off, eliciting universal cheers and the hope that she continues to kick his arse. The R2-D2 and C-3PO analogues bicker with bad puns. Hope seeks out the supposedly retired Defender, who’s living in a cave. The two of them go to a red-light district bar where Defenders’ entire closet full of monster suits put in an appearance. During these scenes, audience participation runs rampant.

But everyone quiets down by the end of the first half of the two-parter. The over-the-top drama and robotic comic relief diminish when Hope receives her quest: to accompany the Defender on a rescue mission to save Deedee from Panjandrum. The focus then shifts back to Panjandrum and Deedee. She tries to break free [applause from the audience], but he catches her [booing and hissing].

Panjandrum mocks Deedee’s failed flight, but she remains calm. Folding her arms, she crosses her legs up on the interrogation desk. “Laugh all you want. Even if I can’t escape on my own, I will eventually. I have Hope, and that’s more than you’ll ever have.”

Bill nods happily. “They’re totally a couple. My little lesbians!”

“And there you’re wrong.” Panjandrum whirls on her with a swoosh of the cape. “I have no need of Hope, for I have power: power over you, power over them, power over death itself.”

“Death?” repeats Deedee. “You’ve never had power over death; you’ve only had power over machines -- and not much at that, seeing as how they’re always exploding on you.”

“Wrong again, child,” says Panjandrum with a laugh. He undoes his shirt to reveal a bunch of metal, wires, and blinking lights embedded in his chest. “How do you think I survived the fire? I control the workings of life itself, and now I am indestructible. So you see -- you may try to run;
you may try to hide; you may even try to die, but…” Pause. Close-up. Panjandrum’s actor demonstrates eyebrow control nearly as impressive as the Magister’s. “I’ll have you one way or another.”

“He’s never said that before,” notes Bill. “Yikes.” Her face crinkles.

“If he rapes her,” Charlie mutters, “I’m out of here.”

“Does anyone else feel that this just went from a comedy to a drama?” the Doctor asks, turning backward to consult the others.

There’s a close-up on Deedee. Her eyes widen; her mouth droops as she realizes that Panjandrum has not only achieved new abilities, but he has also become more unhinged than ever. The scene ends.

The Magister, who has been utterly silent, utterly still, for the past few minutes, rises. “Anima -- please -- stop the film.” His voice cuts through the air with that peculiar weaponized precision into which he falls when he’s trying to restrain himself.

Razor glares at the Magister. “The plot was just thickening!”

“I know,” says the Magister as the screen goes dark. “That’s why I stopped it.”

Suddenly Alison knows why he stopped it too. “Shit,” she says, feeling a sink of cold air fall into the pit of her stomach.

“Domina.” He slips into the seat next to her, and she seizes his hand, hanging onto it hard enough to crush it.

“Alisonshine! What’s wrong?” Reaching over Alison’s white-dotted armrest, Bill holds her other hand. “You’re all clammy.”

“I just remembered,” Alison says, as sharp icy tingles go through her. “I’ve never seen it because I couldn’t bear it, but I’ve read all about it, but I guess I just forgot about it till now.”

Bill pauses. “Wait…” she whispers. “Is this the one you were telling me about? The one where Panjandrum goes all robotic and deranged and kills Deedee?”


“No!” says Charlie. “She’s my favorite! --And she’s the only one of my color.”

“Oh. You’re right.” The Doctor, finger to chin, thinks for a moment. “Yes, this is the series five finale in which Deedee dies. I didn’t even think, but… Oh no, that really isn’t escapism at all, isn’t it? Oh dear. I’m so sorry. I’m so…”

“Remove it from the queue,” the Magister cuts in, directing the Doctor with a nod.

Bill sits up straight in her chair. “Wait! Doctor, don’t. I… I, um, wanna see.”

“Really?” the Doctor asks. “But that… I can’t let you… You shouldn’t… That’s horrible…especially since you’ve…well…you’ve already died yourself.”

Bill sighs. “I know...but that’s kind of the point, yeah? That up there on the screen is fictional death. I can walk away from it without any consequences except for crying. I don’t have to deal with all the real-life pain and suffering and betrayal and bullshit; I can just shut off the TV and
leave. Better than real life that way,” she concludes with a slanted, rueful smile.

“But...you’ll be sad.” The Doctor wrings their hands. “I don’t want to make you or Alison or Charlie -- or anyone -- sad! I don’t think I should play it.”

“I want to see it, though,” Bill says. “I need to see.”

Putting his hands on his hips, Razor sniffs with laughter. “Haven’t you figured out yet, my dear Doctor, that it’s impossible to countermand Miss Potts? Like the Dominatrix, she cares nothing for the prohibitions of Time Lords. She uses her own judgment and does what she will. In fact, once she moves in with your Dominatrix, the two of them will be co-ruling your universe, so you may as well get used to the new management starting now.”
Deedee Dies

Chapter Summary

Defenders of Earth, the show that everyone's watching to try to lighten themselves up, takes a disturbing turn when the villain Panjandrum captures and robotifies the protagonist Hope's best friend Deedee. Most of the audience, particularly Alison and Bill, freak out. Real fall-out from fictional events follows.

No one leaves or shuts off the TV, and Defenders resumes. Audience participation dwindles, at least of the snarky variety. A hush enwraps the theatre, grim and tense, expectant of a storm. Nevertheless, huzzahs occur when Hope and the Defender advance that much closer to Deedee or when Deedee fends off Panjandrum. After Deedee’s second unsuccessful escape attempt, Bill starts recounting to her the advantages of a quiet, adventure-free life in the country.

Alison, who’s here only out of loyalty to Bill, pays little attention to the plot points. Throughout her body permeates a buzzing anticipatory dread, as when she’s waiting for someone to yell at her. She knows that Deedee’s death is coming. With such a disaster looming on the horizon, she can’t concentrate on anything but the imminent doom. Bill, her nails digging into her armrests, is too preoccupied to hold Alison’s hand at the moment, but Alison keeps a sure grip on her robot.

The second episode never hits the death scene, however. Deedee tries a third time to escape, and Panjandrum decides that he could better keep her if she were programmable like one of his robots. He sneaks up on her and injects her with something. At this, Charlie shrieks, covering her ears and bending forward, curling into a little ball.

The scene cuts to an operating room. As the camera pans in a wide shot, Alison feels as if she’s sucked into the screen. She now floats, submerged, in dim aquatic light. Dingy equipment surrounds her, its cranes and arms reaching for her. She sees no walls; everything fades into shadows as dark as the blackness behind closed eyes, and it’s as if she’s suspended in a nightmare.

Panjandrum sets Deedee supine on the table, deftly, softly, one hand around the back of her head. And that gentleness is somehow infinitely worse than if he had just flung her there, cracking her skull. She’s so very still, not the way that her robot was when she found him in suspension, half unconscious, in the Doctor’s lab. When she found him then, he looked like he was between breaths, like he could wake at any moment, but now she is even stiller than he was then. Her sarcastic eyebrows don’t move; her wry mouth is lax; even her cornrows swing limply. It’s the stillness of being gone; she’s not there anymore.

She splays out on her back, and surgical instruments clink in a tray. Their ring sounds like the tinkling of icicles, as if everything is freezing into a blue horror. He rearranges her minutely, regarding the effect with satisfaction, as if she’s his doll. But no...even though she plays with her dolls and repositions them, even though she regards them sometimes with pride at her creation, it’s never with such smugness. She’s always a little in awe of them, of herself, of her ability to make such marvelous little people who seem ready to move and speak. But there’s no love, no wonder in his eyes, unless it’s wonder at his powers of objectification. To him, she’s less than a doll; dolls are beloved and person-shaped and animated by love, while she... She is but a contemned thing.

She leans over the side of her seat and gags again and again, but apparently there’s not enough to
throw up. She sneaks a glance at Bill, who, face drawn, eyes wide, remains transfixed by the onscreen torture, as if compelled to watch. Maybe Bill has the guts for it since her digestive/excretory system was removed and replaced with sterner mechanical stuff, but it’s too much for her.

Wrenching herself away from her robot’s grasp, she follows the track lighting down the black velvet aisle. She bursts out into a softly lit hallway, its walls full of narrow black and white stripes. Clutching her knees to her chest, she tries to stop shivering.

Almost immediately, her robot appears. He has completely abandoned the unobtrusive style under which he was earlier suppressing himself in favor of his more usual inclination. It’s not really a dress, as that to her implies flattery of the figure and fashion, but more like a cassock. He’s not religious at all, but something about the standard simplicity of the design -- high collar, tightly darted torso, narrow sleeves, and skirts to the floor -- and the preference for pure, plain colors reminds her of that clerical garb. This garment is a dark, almost black purple, as of the center of a candle flame, and the heavy skirts always swing around him as if he’s a clapper in a bell, commanding everyone’s attention. He joins her on the floor, the padded carpet yielding slightly as he sits.

“I…” she says. “It was… Please… Please… Hold me; keep me…” As much as she wants to reach for him, she bends her head to her hunched-up knees.

“Always.” By taking her in his arms, he shields her from the seeping shadows. By bringing her into his lap, he ensures that she will never be tacked out on an operating table. By keeping her so close that she can barely shake, he warms her so that she will never freeze. He places himself between her and despair.

She cries, with all the soggy, sloppy side effects that tears entail. She emits thoroughly undignified moans and groans. She rubs her eyes on her shirttails and fills up her robot’s handkerchief with mucus. And, through it all, he stays the tremors of her body with the warmth and solidity of his own core. He lets her be the messy organic creature that she is with a serene lack of judgment that she wishes that, just once, she could muster for herself.

When her tears subside, she finally comes back to herself. Sweaty and rumpled, she reminds herself that she’s not in a chilly nightmare. Instead, she’s safe and warm in the constriction of her robot’s arms. She’s not an inanimate thing; she’s not a fictional person under the power of someone who’s going to medically rape her. She’s knows who she is. She’d never end up as Panjandrum’s thing because she’s the Magister’s Domina -- not his possession, but his partner -- and she can depend on him to protect her. She’s Alison Clarabella Cheney, and she’s [in the process of becoming] the master of her soul. “Thanks,” she says to the Magister.

“You are most welcome, lovely Domina.”

“I didn’t think it would be that bad; I mean, even though I’ve never watched it, I’ve read about it so many times. But she… I saw her on the table, and it was so… It was me!”

“Mmmmm,” he says with a listening noise.

“You know…” Alison sighs. “I was so happy when Deedee first came on. And of course I was thrilled when she became a regular.” She leans against him. “She was one of the few representations of an awesome Black girl that I’d seen anywhere on TV. I wanted to be her when I was older. I was going to be a Black girl standing up for the best of humanity, defending the Earth against bullshit. Deedee gave me hope -- actual hope, not pointless punny Hope -- that I wasn’t alone.
“It was only later that I realized that the show didn’t give a fuck about Deedee!” She punches her fist into her palm, but that motion is a little too forceful for her head, which starts to feel wobbly. “She kept getting hurt and kidnapped, all so Hope would worry and the Defender would have someone to save.”

“They always do that,” mutters the Magister, shaking his head. “They always make the most interesting characters subservient to the needs of the story, just because of the color of their skin.” Although it’s slightly complicated by Time Dorks’ ability to regenerate, Gallifreyans have just as much prejudice against dark-skinned people as do Earthlings. The Magister, whose sepia skin is denoted by the Gallifreyan word for middling, is therefore talking about his own experience as much as Alison’s.

“She was just a plot device, a stick that the showrunners threw so the white girl would fetch it. And they didn’t care that the stick got broken in the end. Deedee was just an object to the story, but...to me,” says Alison, her voice shrinking into softness, “she was a person.”

“Yes,” he agrees, “and you were she, so you yourself felt cancelled, objectified, killed when she died too.” Despite her lingering perspiration, he holds her to him so that she’s all too aware not just of him against her, but her own living, sensitive mass. “But remember,” he says, “you are a person, even if you feel your personhood threatened, and I will always defend your integrity.”

“Keep me…” Alison says again, a slow, low murmur, rather than a gasp.

“Oh yes,” he says, a smile in his voice. “I’m keeping you.”

“Yes,” she says with a happy sigh. “I’m yours... right?”

“Obviously.” He chuckles.

“Good…” Alison sighs, settling. All of her life, her deepest, perhaps most basic, desire has been to be held fast, held tight, constrained, restrained. She wants to be pressed by someone, to someone, against someone. She has always wanted someone to say, Yes, you are mine, and she has always wanted to know, with a deep and intimate certainty, that she does indeed belong.

As deeply as Alison has yearned to be held by someone, to belong to someone, to be kept close, she rejects ownership. No one is ever going to possess her again, not since Generic White Boy 47 intimidated her into eight months of subservience at the end of her teens. When she finally got herself unseduced by evil, she renewed her commitment to power and self-determination. She was a Black British woman, and she was the one to master her fate and captain her soul. She is her own person now, not some arsehole white boy’s, not any male person’s of any race, not anyone else’s in her life, not even her robot’s.

Alison may not be owned by him, but she’s still the Magister’s Domina. That is her title/name, accurate, true, right, and comfortable. If he says, My dearest Domina, then some part of her resounds almost automatically, ringing as if struck, responding, Yes, of course, that’s me. But such a possessive has always distressed her because...well, it implies possession -- more specifically, that she is the possession that he owns. She has long struggled to reconcile the possessiveness she craves with her antipathy toward possession.

She ended up obviating this conflict when she got lost inside her robot’s mind recently. He started his lessons on mental defenses with a tour of his mind: an interior landscape, populated by the various selves that the Magister is and has been. To make a long story short, Alison ended up in a forgotten forest of his head. She worked with her nine-year-old self, Ali C., to rescue two of the Magister’s selves -- the Little Witch and the Cat -- from the Jabberwock. When they she brought
them all back to themselves, the Magister said, with something like wonder and pride in his voice, Oh! You are mine then. The emphasis fell on the verb. Truly mine. And the emphasis fell on the possessive. His eyes were shining -- amber scintillations in brown irises -- and she was smiling because he was confirming the truth.

Alison realized that, despite his history of possession and domination, despite her aversion to the same, he implied neither of those with his use of the possessive. The possessive denoted her as someone with whose life he had chosen to intertwine his own. Most pertinently, it described her as someone for whom he assumed care and vigilance, just as she did to him. Her status as the Magister’s Domina did not signify her inferiority to him, just as his status as her robot did not demean him before her. The possessive meant a possession of responsibility, not of a person, and the responsibility entailed no infantilization and diminishment. Their responsibility for each other, she has figured out, means that they are happier when they keep each other safe from the universe’s bullshit. So the Magister is hers and she’s the Magister’s, and they’re both satisfied.

After several contented minutes, Alison realizes that they’re the only two in the hallway.

“But...where’s everyone else? Is it still going?”

“No!” That’s Bill, still inside the theatre, her voice resounding with stunned disappointment.

“But... But... But...she and Hope were gonna get married and have two chocolate Labs and a cottage in Lancashire! --Or at least I wanted them to.” This last is appended in a small defeated tone.

Alison rushes back into the theatre, resuming her place by Bill’s side, nearly bowling over the Doctor, who’s hovering near Bill’s chair. “Hey, Bill of my heart,” she says, breathing fast. “I’m here; I’m here; I’m here.”

“No.” Bill shakes her head so violently that her hair un coils like springs. “I refuse to believe it. Deedee didn’t die.”

“Right,” pipes up Charlie. “There wasn’t even a body.” Slightly more coherent than when Alison departed the room, she kneels backward in her seat in the row in front of Alison and Bill so that she can face them.

“Exactly!” Bill points at Charlie. “There wasn’t a body, and, in sci-fi, if there’s no body, you’re not dead. In fact, if there’s no body, you have to come back to life. Panjandrum does it all the time; even Deedee herself does! The writers just invent some magical explanation and then bring back the character and hope that no one notices the bleeding obvious hole in the plot that’s been bleeding obviously filled with the old standby, bleeding obvious plot hole spackle. That’s how the stories go. She’s not dead. She’s just not. She can’t be!”

“Maybe her contract was running out,” Razor muses in the background. “Is that why she was dispatched so summarily? Or did she really get on the showrunners’ nerves?”

“Well, at that time, Lost in a Good Book was gaining popularity,” the Magister says, “and Lisa was a fan favorite. I heard some speculation that the BBC thought it was too risky to have two Black British girls on their flagship children’s shows, so they eliminated one of them.”

“--Because that’s a damn vicious way to go: not just killed, but forgotten by everyone, including her little girlfriend.” Razor shakes his head.

“Oi, what the fuck is this shit?” Charlie waves at the screen. Free from the Star Wars knock-off universe, Hope and the Defender hug, laugh, and carry on, unaware that the third member of their team has died, killed in an alternaverse by an extra evil version of their usual antagonist. “They’re
acting like none of this ever happened! They don’t even care that she’s dead!”

“Like it wasn’t Deedee who convinced Hope that she needed to train with the Defender to get her powers under control.” Tears trickle down Bill’s cheeks. “Like it wasn’t Deedee who saved the whole world in series two by smuggling the Crypto Code out of Panjandrum’s lab. Like it wasn’t Deedee who made the show worth watching at all. This is so… This is so… This is so…” She sobs in earnest, clinging to Alison’s hand as if she might squeeze it off by constriction.

“Bill…” Alison strokes Bill’s hand with her free one. “Oh Bill…Bill of my heart…”

Bending forward, the Doctor stands near Bill’s chair, impersonating the question mark that she herself has been too tired to form. “Oh dear. Oh my. I knew it would make you sad; I just knew it. And now I made you sad. I stopped it -- the show, that is -- but...oh dear. You’re still sad. Please don’t be sad! How can I make you happy? Please tell me! Are you okay with holding onto Alison, or would you like someone more to hold onto? What I mean is… Would you like me to hold you fast, Bill?”

“Oh… Doctor!” Those two words erupt from someplace deep inside Bill where the past two years of fear and rage have lived, somewhat soothed, but never healed. Those words are a sigh, an exclamation; they sound as sharp as a rejection, but, if one attends more closely, one hears in them a plea.

“Um…” Alison hears the Doctor stall. They are clearly catching only the resignation and pain in Bill’s utterance, but nothing else. “Was that a yes or a no?” The Doctor turns to the Magister for help; “Master?”

“It was a yes,” say the Magister and Razor together.

“But it was the yes of a person who’s been failed by her Doctor before,” Razor adds. “Do the same, and I’ll kill you.” The sheer nonchalance of his tone makes it all the more convincing and unnerving. “Miss Potts,” he says, his voice brisk, “tell me what you need.”

“No grave [snerk]! No headstone [snerk]! No eulogy!” Bill, punctuating each sentence with a huge sniffle, continues to shake her head. The Doctor, at her left, holds her in the spot within their arms that they have always reserved for her, while Alison guards Bill’s right.

“Mea Domina?” The Magister glances at Alison, seeing if she needs him; when he verifies that she’s all right, he turns to Charlie, telling her something in a low voice.

“I need a funeral for Deedee; that’s what I need,” Bill says under her breath. “I need Deedee not to be dead! I need to travel back in time and yell at them until they make Deedee live!”

“Right,” says Razor with an impatient huff. “Well, unfortunately, I’m without my TARDIS, so…”

“--And you’re not using Anima for that,” cuts in the Magister.

“Ugh.” Bill wipes her eyes. “This is why I used to write fan fiction, even though I can’t write. This is the sort of thing that’s just begging for a better ending, but all I would write would be, And then everyone lived for once, and they all had psychological problems because they had been through shit, but no one was betrayed or had their heart broken, and they were all generally happy. The end.”

“Now that,” says Razor, “sounds like escapist fare to me.”

“Ssshhhh!” The Doctor startles everyone with what, for them, is a sharp reprimand.
“Hm?” Razor, having never thought the Doctor capable of such vehemence, raises his eyebrows.

“You’re wrong, Master,” the Doctor says simply. They face Razor, the pallor of their blue eyes clear enough to see to the heart of everything. “Healing isn’t escapism. Neither is coping, nor mending, nor growing, nor changing, nor solving problems, nor finding satisfaction, nor achieving peace. All of those are part of life, and, where there’s life,” they say quietly, a little smile dawning on their face, “there’s hope.”
Chapter Summary

Last-minute preparations for the rally heat up, as does conflict within the resistance. Razor leaves the safety of the Doctor's TARDIS to deal with some shit.

Alison, Bill, and Charlie wish they could have at least a day or two just to mourn Deedee’s death, but they don’t have time. With four days till Demiel and Razor’s revolting rally, everyone enters a period of frantic final planning. Razor calls another dress rehearsal to perfect his new ideas of lighting and blocking. The Carsons finish the security uniforms and remind the recruits of their routes and duties. Anima expands her already capacious Epiphany Room just in case and adds a bank of accessible toilets near each door. Razor decides that, just to ensure everyone’s safety, he’d like Anima to pick up audience members at each of the safe houses. The actual rally will occur in orbit, out of Night Patrol range. He and the Doctor map a route, calculating the number of circuits they need to make to collect all people, as well as the appropriate times when they can pick up attendees without meeting the Night Patrol. Meanwhile, a last burst of publicity on warehouse walls and the shortwave radio network tells Dystopiaville citizens where to gather for an event that will change their lives.

Alison and friends develop their own contingency plans. Knowing that the rally will cause as much upheaval as the *Defenders* episodes they’ve just watched, Alison, Bill, and Charlie make a pact. All of them will stay onstage, side by side, for both Bill’s remarks and Charlie’s. [The latter has agreed to say a sentence or two, on the condition that she has some of the Magister’s security as bodyguards.] They’ll remain together.

After that, they will sit as a trio by the nearest exit with the shortest escape route. They don’t know how long they will stay once Razor starts ranting, but they decide that they only way they can deal with it is by the same means they used to make *Defenders* bearable: audience participation. They stock up on notebooks and pens so they can share a running commentary in manuscript form. Nevertheless, they agree that, when the rally becomes too revolting, all three of them will leave for someplace safer.

Of course, Alison, Bill, and Charlie have more than just each other watching out for them. Bill obtains the Doctor’s promise to sit with them. Furthermore, Alison strongly suspects that, if Bill leaves the Epiphany Room, the Doctor will follow her, just as Alison’s robot follows her, to make sure she’s okay. Alison smiles at this thought; after all she’s been through, Bill should definitely have a Time Dork, especially a Doctor, keeping her safe.

Meanwhile, the Magister wants to guard Alison during the rally, preferably by holding her fast. As much as she wants the same, both she and he acknowledge that, during the rally, his charge is
much greater than that of a single individual. He must secure the safety, wholeness, and happiness of everyone on the ship, Alison points out, and thus he is excused from being her robot. He says that he’s always inexcusably hers until she bids him leave; therefore, though he will have the safekeeping of thousands, he will come to her instantly if she wants him.

Alison, Bill, and Charlie turn their attention to Bill’s and Charlie’s speeches. Both have already drafted words, as Razor required them to, for the dress rehearsals, but they remain dissatisfied. Bill wonders what to say. She knows that Razor will make the revolution all about himself: his cunning, his righteousness, his hatred of Irons, his much better rule. But you know, Charlie, she says, spreading out her hands. He and I aren’t from your planet; we just kind of came in and took over. Maybe I shouldn’t even be doing this. Razor’s probably going to say something like, I saved you all! But that’s really condescending and imperialist, yeah?

But you’re not Batshit Harry, Charlie says. Sure, you’re not from here, but you’re a fucking Cyborganic now, and you know what it’s like to suffer the worst of Irons’ regime. That’s why you’re the fucking heart of the revolution; you’re one of us. Frankly you’re the reason why so many people are revolting. We’re not stupid; we know Batshit Harry’s in this for his own ends, and we’re going along with him because his resistance has gotten more shit done than the two we tried before.

But you -- you’re in it because you actually fucking give a fuck about freedom and compassion and dignity and equality, continues Charlie. So tell us the truth; tell us what this revolution’s about. Let us know that you’re truly on our side, fighting with us and for us, not just for yourself. Alison gives Charlie’s impromptu speech a standing ovation, while Bill, whose legs are in too much pain, toots her horn in harmonic appreciation.

Though she inspires both Alison and Bill with her straightforward, direct assertions, Charlie protests that she has no ideas for her own address. All she has is the shame of being forced to punish her own people and her nightmare that Gardenia and Junie won’t want to stay with a robot. Alison suggests that she could focus on those feelings, and Charlie asks why the fuck she’d want to show her vulnerability to people who hate NPs. Bill says that people hate NPs because they forget that the NPs are people. But Charlie might remind them that Cyborganics are just like non-Cyborganics. Even the people who have been drafted into Irons’ army still want to be free. Best you can do, Bill says, is to show them that, even though you have robot parts, you’re a person too, yeah? Dubious that this will have any effect whatso-fucking-ever, Charlie nevertheless draws up some paragraphs on the subject.

After this discussion, Alison realizes that none of them have seen Razor for the past day or so. They ask the Doctor where he might be. The Doctor, looking up from surgery notes of Doctor Yoon’s, isn’t much help. The Master? I thought the Master was minding him...literally. I’m pretty sure that mine is psychically connected to Razor Master just to keep him from doing anything...you know...particularly Masterful.
Alison, Bill, and Charlie rush to the Magister for details. He does indeed have surveillance on Razor, says the Magister. His counterpart has left Anima for the new Dominoes safe house to, as he put it, *quell dissension in the ranks*. Alison and Bill, both panicked and outraged, assume that Razor’s killing traitors, even after they told him not to. No, says the Magister with a shake of his head. *He’s refraining, even though he would much rather do so.*

Bill, who has no problem with Razor’s psychic communication in her head, calls out to him in thought: *Hey! Harry! We hear you’re trying really hard not to murder people. Congratulations! What exactly is going on in Dystopiaville?* Razor starts bombarding her mind with a swift, dense hail of updates, but Bill tells him to take it to the radio so Alison and Charlie can hear too.

Alison, Bill, and Charlie cluster around a shortwave radio in Alison and Bill’s room. Bill and Charlie give Alison the microphone, since Razor seems to communicate most honestly with her. “Razor, are you there?” she says into the intercom.

“Ah yes! Is Dominatrix!” And there he is, voice buzzing and snapping with vaguely pseudo-Russian consonants. “Many greetings, ruler of universe. Your servant reading you loud and clear.”

“What the fuck is it with him and that accent?” asks Charlie. “Is he pretending that he’s on some horrible TV show?” A suspicion flickers across her face; her electric eyes glow as she glares at the receiver. “Is he making fun of us?”

Bill shakes her head. “No… In all the time I’ve been working with him, he’s never made fun of Cyber people or anyone else in Dystopiaville. Well, once, he did say to me, *Cheer up; at least you are not having sock over head and tin foil pajamas,* but I think he was just trying to make me laugh. That silly accent, though… Only ever heard it when he’s being really sarcastic...or serious.”

Bill goes on. When she first fell in with Razor, she was so dazed and dismayed by her death that she cried almost constantly. She had sacrificed herself, and the Doctor had thought nothing of it. They had just let her die and given her a psychic bookmark, then reshelved her, like the second book in some space opera series that you never finish because it’s just so much work. She had middle book syndrome; she was boring, unexciting, just an obstacle between the Doctor and good stuff. As Bill was of the opinion that most trilogies could be edited down into two really good reads, so she thought that maybe the Doctor and Nardole would be better without her. Maybe she wasn’t good enough to save.

Razor found her sobbing over such thoughts. He had just finished the manic episode that propelled him to plan Razor’s Resistance, so she knew he was a miserable mastermind, untrustworthy down to his very voice. He had dropped the pseudo-Russian days since to speak to her in his usual semi-Northern accent. She thought he wouldn’t bother with the pretense anymore, since they both knew they were using one another in an alliance of expedience, but no. He swept the curtain door to her
bedroom aside, came up close to her in his sleek and silent chair, then began to speak to her.

*My dear Miss Potts, you are hating me.* His eyes darkened from hazel to brown, looking at her, into her, inside her. *I know this is true. You are thinking,* He is liar, trickster person, hypocrite, ego as big as Siberia. *Is true, all true, though ego actually the size of Soviet Union, not just Siberia. Now you think that maybe Doctor was not the worst person you have known. Maybe is me, yes?*

*Well, maybe Doctor and I are both equally bad: liar, hypocrite, egotist, and all. But the Doctor -- they see you lonely; they see you looking for a purpose; they make themselves that purpose for you. They are expecting your sacrifice, and they are training you to give it again, again, again, until you are out of lives. They want your life for theirs.* At this point, Bill realized that he was speaking as much about himself, whatever his mysterious history with the Doctor was, as he was about her.

*You like the science fiction, I know -- time travel, evil robots, people living forever. Perhaps you have heard about Koshchei the Undying?* This character from Slavic folklore, Razor told her, can never die because his soul is kept outside his body. It’s in a needle, in an egg, in a duck, in a hare, in a chest, under an oak, on an island, in the ocean. If you dig up the chest, then the hare runs away. If you kill the hare, then the duck flies out to escape. If you hold the egg, you have power over Koshchei; he physically weakens, and whatever harm comes to the egg also comes to him. Break the needle, and he dies.

You may think yourself as strong and as immortal as Koshchei, Razor tells her, but the Doctor will infiltrate your life. They’ll charm you into believing that they’ll do anything for you. You, enamored, let the Doctor onto your island, swearing eternal devotion. The Doctor needs an oak tree for their visionary, genius purposes, so you chop down the one whose roots hold your soul. Then they need a chest, which you gladly surrender, for you’re honored to play even a minor role in their grand designs.

Then the Doctor needs a hare, and you can’t deny them, but the hare dies in their custody. The duck, who’s clearly much smarter than you are, makes a bid for freedom. But you call it back because... What if the Doctor needs one?

By this time the Doctor has their hands on the egg. They toss it from hand to hand, laughing, as if they’ll never drop it. You know, though, that they killed the hare, so you beg them to handle you with care. But still they let it slip, and you break, and you die, and you’re never the same again.

*I am the batshitting narcissist, my dear Miss Potts, but I am not this Doctor.* Razor, whoever he was, wherever he was from, shook his head briskly. *I am honest hypocrite; I am not hero. Nor am I seeking your death. Heart of resistance must beat...or perhaps beep, since is robotic for you.* His pun achieved the desired effect for, as his mouth curved up halfway, Bill gamely tried for a smile too. *My dear Miss Potts must be strong for my plans, yes? Besides, death is no fun, no fun at all.*
have done a few times. Cannot recommend. So stay alive, Miss Potts, he concluded, patting her firmly on the shoulder, if only to spite this Doctor, who was not deserving of any of your sacrifices in the first place.

“Oh!” Alison jerks up straight. “Of course! It’s the ventriloquism of displaced candor!”

“Of course it is!” Bill smacks her forehead. “It’s so obvious! No, it’s not. What are you talking about?”

“Why does the Master call you his Domina?” asks Charlie with an eye roll. “You should be like the fucking Thesaurus.”

“He can’t bring himself to be sincere in his real voice, whatever the hell that is,” says Alison, “so instead he adopts weird accents. It’s the same reason he talks all archaically to me: Yea, verily, Dominatrix, I submit myself to thy will. He can’t admit that he actually really is doing exactly what I tell him to, so he disguises it and pretends it’s a joke.”

“Dear Dominatrix! You are the analyst of psychos too then, yes?” Razor’s voice breaks over the speaker suddenly, making everyone jump. “I am having the therapy here, or I am giving you update?”

“You’re way beyond therapy,” Charlie calls into the mike. “Let’s just go with an update.”

“Situation down here is bad, very bad,” Razor says, heaving a huge, weary sigh. He recounts all the disasters that have occurred since the Defenders viewing party a few days previous. Prunella Kim, his second in command and primary on-the-ground informant, said that someone had killed an NP and left the headless corpse in Dead Beggars’ Alley, hanging a new sign: Dead Traitors’ Alley. Elsa, one of two Cyborganics who had survived the fire at the first Tinder Town safe house, died from the fatal effects of smoke inhalation on her already compromised lungs. Alison, Bill, and Charlie of course exclaim with worry and alarm, while Razor breezes over these deaths, unconcerned because he doesn’t consider the casualties his people.

But then he received reports of the aforementioned dissension in the ranks, the effects of which he needed to face in person. Ms. Kim came down with the flu. She kept sending him telepathic debriefs, however, until Senga McDonall’s mental vituperation at the person who was interrupting her wife’s recovery made him back off.
Razor then sought information from Britomart Smythe, head of the Butcher’s Block safe house. He discovered her barely coherent with anxiety. She and her son had been threatened for sheltering Sinclair Mallory, whose confession under Night Patrol torture had sparked the raid on Razor’s flat and Sewage Street, and his family, as well as the Alsaeedis, his boyfriend’s family. *If you help the enemy, said a message on the Smythes’ door, then you’re one of them, and there’s no good Irons supporter but a dead one.*

In fact, Sinclair and his boyfriend Ali had been assaulted by some of the children they once played with. Ms. Smythe overheard him crying, *Why didn’t Mister Razor kill me in the first place?* Afraid that Sinclair might attempt suicide, Ms. Smythe begged Razor for guidance.

At that point, Razor decided that the only way to know what was happening was to see it with his own eyes. He left Anima for Butcher’s Block and conferred with Yasmeen Mazandarani, Tinder Town head. The last time he checked, Mx. Mazandarani housed both survivors from the Tinder Town primary safe house’s fire, as well as five people who had been in the Dominoes safe house before he took control of it from the Gregorys. Razor asked Mx. Mazandarani if they might be willing to send their safe house residents to Butcher’s Block in exchange for the Mallorys, who would be safer in a neighborhood where no one knew them. They agreed, so the Mallorys decamped to Tinder Town. Razor directed the Alsaeedis to the new safe house in the Dominoes, which was run by the Pulses. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction -- finally everyone was safe! -- before calling together the anti-Sinclair arseholes for little chat about who enemy actually was.

While Razor explained to several infuriated Butcher’s Block residents that they should launch their hostility toward Irons and not their own, he got a call from Mx. Mazandarani. Two of the Tinder Town courier/spies, Ishi and Jamal, reported that Audrey and Scott Gregory had been seen in the vicinity of the new Dominoes safe house. The Gregorys were the former safe house heads, but Razor had learned a few weeks ago that they had tortured Night Patrol members. Thus he had stripped the Gregorys of their posts and ejected them. The Pulses had taken the Gregorys’ place, and Razor assumed that he wouldn’t have to worry about the Gregorys again. But he’s at the Dominoes now, just in case --

*Ffffffffssssssshhhw crack crack crack!* A whistling sound, followed by several shot-like explosions, intercuts Razor’s report. “You must pardon me, Dominatrix dear,” Razor says sweetly. “I see I am needing to kill someone.” He ends the call.

“Oh shit!” Alison darts a glance at Bill. “The Night Patrol found the safe house?”

Bill shakes her head vehemently. “No, that didn’t sound like their guns.”

“That’s fireworks,” Charlie puts in, “but you’re not actually supposed to fucking blow shit up with
them. It’s just pretend!” She explains that one of the many raucous traditions associated with Demiel is the beaters. On the three nights before the new year, groups of teenagers go around to their friends’ houses. They stand on the front steps, banging on the doors and windows, yelling, Feed or fight! Feed or fight! / What’s it gonna be tonight? If you give the beaters sweets or alcohol, they go away, but, if you say fight, they sing dirty songs and set off firecrackers.

“Oh yeah,” says Alison, nodding, “like wassailing. It’s probably a remnant of some agricultural ritual, maybe for a good harvest or a good new year or something. But why would anyone do it at a safe house and risk calling the Night Patrol’s attention to it?”

“Dominatrix dear, you are listening?” As if in response to Alison’s question, Razor appears on the line again.

“If you actually killed anyone -- “ Alison begins.


Alison, Bill, and Charlie exchange looks among themselves and refuse to gratify him. “Okay.” Bill folds her arms, her tone as casual as if speaking about the weather. “So who did you flatten?”

“Audrey Gregory!” Razor says, as if revealing a long-awaited surprise gift.

“Fuck!” cries Charlie. “Fucking sabotage?”

Razor is Quelled

Chapter Summary

Alison, the Magister, Bill, and Charlie go back down into Dystopiaville to keep Razor from absolutely laying waste to some traitors to the cause.

Just as Razor signs off, the Magister knocks on Alison and Bill’s door. Receiving his Domina’s permission to enter, he does so. With his shiny black gas mask tucked in the crook of his arm and the loose ends of his purple layers fluttering in his stride, he looks like a wizard impatient to start spellcasting. Alison recognizes this attire from Sinclair’s description of what the Magister wore when he rescued Sinclair from his cell in the North District Detention Center. Before the Magister says a word, Alison guesses that he must be out to impress or intimidate. He’s going to help Batshit Harry deal with the Gregorys, isn’t he?

The Magister says that he is [though he doesn’t use Charlie’s name for Razor]. Audrey Gregory just attacked the Dominoes safe house, now run by Becky Ann, Margery, and Vernon Pulse. Using the tradition of the beaters as an excuse to get close, Ms. Gregory forced her way in. Those were not actually pre-Demiel fireworks that everyone heard. Instead they were shots from Ms. Gregory’s handgun. Screaming at the Alsaeedis that they were to blame for her and her husband’s humiliation, Ms. Gregory opened fire. She obviously mistook the Alsaeedis for Cyborganics under the Pulses’ protection. Everyone dove for either cover or weapons of their own.

Most of the Alsaeedis hid behind furniture, but not Ali. He had a sprained ankle from being assaulted in Butcher’s Block, and he was sick of being attacked. He tried to trip Ms. Gregory with one of his crutches. Distracted, she didn’t see Razor barreling toward her. He knocked her flat on her back, but she didn’t let go of her gun. Razor shot her feet out from under her [yes, apparently his chair was weaponized] and ran over her again, crushing her gun hand under his tires. The confrontation was over, with the would-be killer as the only casualty.

Fortunately, no one else noticed the attack in the general ruckus of other people slamming doors and lighting firecrackers. Razor seized the moment to deal with the aftermath quickly and privately. He extracted from Ms. Gregory information about her husband’s whereabouts, then sent people to seize him. Meanwhile, Margery and Vernon Pulse calmed their panicked guests. Becky Ann Pulse gave Ms. Gregory some basic first aid, then blockaded her in the basement. Finishing up his story, the Magister says that Mister Gregory will arrive at the Dominoes soon, and Razor has requested help in managing the fallout.

When Bill asks what specifically he’ll be doing, the Magister says that Razor seeks the help of his psychic powers to neutralize the Gregorys. He favors something more invasive than what you, my dear Seeker, says the Magister, call psychic tricks. He proposes a more thorough intervention:
mind-fuck. *Such is my Domina’s cruder -- and yet more accurate -- term.* Of course, the Magister concludes, he has no intention of giving his counterpart what he wants. Charlie approves, muttering that, if she heard that Razor had mind-fucked anyone, she’d have to yell at him till he reversed the procedure.

Bill beeps her horn indignantly. Is the Prof sneaking around, doing questionable stuff behind her Doctor’s back? Alison jumps in, saying that, ever since a particularly shameful incident on Terripluvium when she secretly disobeyed the Magister, she, he, and the Doctor now tell each other what they’re doing. So the Doctor knows what the Magister’s up to, and they permit it. Besides, the Magister adds, the Doctor would much rather delegate such dubious tasks to him so they can better maintain their delusion of perfect virtue.

But that’s not true, says Bill. She counters the Magister’s description of the Doctor as deluded, insisting instead that they want to be good. They do good as much as they can, but they also realize that sometimes the good thing isn’t that obvious. They’re not deluded at all about the mission here in Dystopiaville, for example. They know perfectly well that, between Batshit Harry and Irons, the first is the lesser of two evils. And yet they’ve decided to do the best they can with what they have. She finishes speaking and folds her arms, her eyes wide and locked on the Magister’s. Alison sees then that Bill is just as loyal to her Time Dork as she herself is to hers, but this is no uncritical devotion. Both of them see exactly who the Time Dorks are and like them anyway, but they still never quit expecting their Dorks to do better.

Alison observes something to this effect, and the Magister crouches before her, almost kneeling, to cup her chin in his hand. It’s for this reason -- her ability to see the best in people -- that he asks for her company, he says. Though it may not be apparent to those who can’t read the Magister’s counterpart’s mind, he craves the Magister’s approval. He knows, though, that he will win no attention from the Magister without the favor of the Magister’s Domina. Alison nods. So her robot wants her around so she can intimidate Batshit Harry into doing his dirty work as cleanly as possible?

Bill sits straighter in her chair, firing the rocket sound effects as she powers up her wheels. If that’s the case, then the Prof and Alisonshine need her help, she proclaims. She may not run the universe, but she knows that Razor doesn’t want to appear cruel to her. She has repeatedly taken advantage of his desire to seem good -- or at least better than her universe’s Doctor -- in her eyes. Whenever she heard disputes between him and RR agents back in the flat, she exited her room with a few supposedly innocent questions. Diverted from his rants, Razor controlled himself and spoke to her civilly. The Magister agrees that Bill’s ability to derail Razor could indeed be useful.

At that, Charlie invites herself along, as she’s got *fucking Batshit Harry management skills too.* She has license to call him out on his shit because he knows she’s right. Who knows when he’ll need to be yelled at? Besides, she’s sure as fuck not going to pass up the chance to boss around the most conceited control freak in Dystopiaville. The Magister allows that the rest of them probably share her motivation, and the team expands to four members.
They go down into Dystopiaville again. In deference to Alison and Bill’s lungs, the Magister alerts the Pulses that he’ll land Anima inside the safe house. Mister Pulse sends him to the basement, since there’s nothing down there but old furniture and now two prisoners, since the search team has just brought in Mister Gregory.

The Magister cracks open Anima’s front door onto a low room of darkened beams and a dirt floor. Used to the gentle, life-giving atmosphere inside the Doctor’s ship, Alison and Bill gag as Dystopiaville air wafts in. Their paper surgical masks filter some of the stench, but still the smell of petrol-roasted mice punches them in the nose. Even worse, the smell has a dank aftertaste, which, reflects Alison, is probably what you would get if you licked the moss off the brick basement wall.

Under the sallow incandescence of bare utility lights, Razor leans against a rusted pillar. Alison didn’t expect to see him upright, but maybe flattening Audrey Gregory took less out of him than she thought. He drums the RR knock on the side of his chin as he glances between the Gregorys. The two sit in chairs, each handcuffed to a pillar, though only Audrey’s uninjured wrist is secured. At Razor’s side, Ali, a wide, round teenager, balances on crutches, keeping his bandaged right foot slightly off the ground. “You’re gonna kill ‘em, right, Mister Razor sir?”

“But we were helping you!” Scott Gregory cries.

“Shut...up...!” Audrey snaps, gritting her teeth with both frustration and pain.

“Listen to your wife,” Razor advises Scott. “The more I hear you puling, the less inclined I am to let you live.”

“Kill ‘em!” Ali hops on his good foot. “Dissent is death and all!”

Razor rounds on Ali. “You’re going to quote Irons at me? I am the dissent. I am the resistance. Don’t tell me what to do.”

Alison figures that’s her cue. “And I’m the Domina,” she says, exiting Anima, “and you’re not killing anyone.”

The wandering accent returns as Razor recognizes her. “Dominatrix dear! This not your universe! I am Razor, and if you tell me what to do again, I cut you.”
“Cutting what?” Bill wheels into the TARDIS doorway. Her light voice suggests that she has overheard something about a ribbon-snipping ceremony. “Not actual people?” she asks, wrapping her hand around Alison’s.

“Lovely Miss Potts!” Razor’s eyebrows hit his hairline. Much to Alison’s gratification, she can see his startlement abort his bloodthirsty thoughts. “Is just figure of speech. --Hey, Mechanical Me!” Razor drops the accent to call to the Magister, who’s still in Anima’s control room. “When I said I wanted your help, I didn’t mean you should bring all your little groupies.” Narrowing his eyes at Alison, he says, “Heel, Dominatrix. You’re overstepping your bounds.”

“I am not,” Alison says, shifting her weight to her right leg and canting that hip out. Her voice remains even. “You need the Magister for whatever you do to the Gregorys. You won’t do anything without him. But he’s my robot, so he won’t do anything without my approval. So...obviously...whatever you do with the Gregorys needs my approval.” She gags on the putrid air and pretty much kills her ambience of cool superiority.

“Look, Razor...” says Bill, patting Alison on the back. “We’re all here for the same reason you are.” Her gentle tone makes Alison marvel yet again that she can maintain her composure around the likes of him. “We want the resistance to win; we want everyone to be free of Irons, but we need a good revolution with people who truly believe in it. --Not people who think it’s okay to kill people like me!” With a sharp glance at the Gregorys, she adds her laser blast sound effects as exclamation points. The Gregorys, expecting another missile-launching chair, panic, trying uselessly to dive out of the way.

Realizing that Bill doesn’t have any projectiles, the Gregorys quit struggling. “But you’re different,” says Scott to Bill. “You’re a person; you have a face; you’re not an NP -- “

“What the fuck about me then?” Charlie steps around Bill’s chair and stands less than a meter from the Gregorys. She falls involuntarily into the military geometry of the Night Patrol: legs together, feet planted, spine elongated, chin level. “I’m an NP...or I used to be till the Doctor repersoned me. Irons took away my free will, my feelings, everything except my brain and spinal cord. Irons,” she says in a quieter voice, unhooking her magnetic faceplate and revealing her mechanical anatomy, “even erased my fucking face.” She hangs before Scott, the innards of her head still and unblinking, until he shuts his eyes, turning his head to the side.

Charlie continues: “But you know what? I still have a self; I still have dignity; I still deserve to live as much as you. And you’re going to stand in front of me and tell me I’m not a person? Fuck you, you...you...chimney fucker!” She stalks away, setting her face back into position.
“Chimney fucker?” Alison whispers to Bill.

“Yeah,” Bill whispers back with a squeeze of Alison’s hand. “Imagine how gross you’d become if you screwed a Cyber factory smokestack. One of the worst things you can call someone around here.”

Just then Ali gasps, white showing all around his eyes, as he focuses on something beyond Alison. Alison turns around to see her robot making one of his signature Dramatic Entrances. As he leaves Anima for the dusty basement, his skirts twist and flow about him, giving him an uncanny, liquid grace. The blackish purples and charry greys of his robes diffuse into the darkness, so that he seems to be either made of it or drawing power from it. The hard shadows from the utility lights sharpen all the angles of his face and the depth of his eye sockets. He’s a Master of emanating power without exercising any.

“Right then,” the Magister says, his voice gliding into the momentary silence as if no one’s just been fighting. “As the Seeker was saying before she was interrupted by a very ignorant person, all of us, my dear Mister Razor, share your goals.” He bows. Alison wonders what his primary goal is: to placate Razor or to show off his trailing sleeves?

Rising, the Magister says, “Irons must be overthrown; the revolution must succeed. Therefore, insubordination must be discouraged, the instigators castigated and,” he says, lowering his voice as he approaches the Gregorys, “punished.” The word lands with enough force to make both Audrey and Scott quiver.

Despite telling Scott to shut up, Audrey feels compelled to open her mouth. “Why? We spent months helping all those poor little robot people. We should -- “

“Enough!” Razor snaps and points at Audrey. “The poor little robot person in charge of your revolution says, Enough!” The blood sunk from his face, he quivers too, from his nostrils to his hands, but in rage, not fear. Either he has some Cyber tech in him himself [not an implausible concept], or he identifies with the Cyber people because he too depends on mechanical devices in his daily life. Either way, Audrey just hit one of his buttons, and he looks like he wants to run over her until there’s nothing left of her but pulp.

“Ahem. Mister Razor…” Releasing Bill’s hand, Alison approaches him with an even step, as if he’s not trying to assassinate someone with eyeball power alone.

Taking a deep breath in through his nose, Razor closes his eyes, then opens them again. Still awfully washed out, he rotates toward her. “Yes, Dominatrix mine?” He yet speaks so harshly that
the words crackle in his mouth.

“I don’t need to tell you, but I will anyway,” Alison says, stepping closer, “that you’re not a poor little robot person at all. You’re a person with mechanical parts, just like Bill and Charlie and all the other Cyborganics are. It’s not pathetic to be mechanical. Yeah, you might have disabilities, but no one’s poor and little because of that. That’s what this whole revolution is about: personhood and dignity for everyone in Dystopiaville. Right?” She nods a little bit encouragingly -- anything to make him stop glaring at her like that.

Another careful breath, and then he says, “Yes,” with much less venom. “--Which is why people who don’t believe that cannot participate!” He focuses the last of his rage into a stabby look at the Gregorys.

“Exactly. Even if I may not allow the use of certain extreme measures, you have to deal severely with the Gregorys’ crimes. And all of us,” she says, resisting the urge to bow elaborately, “want to help you do that. So...shall we compromise? I’m confident that we can agree on an effective deterrent that meets both of our requirements.” Smiling broadly [because she knows she has won], she offers him her hand to shake.

Now that she’s close enough to touch Razor, Alison identifies a certain tightness in the wrinkles around his eyes. He’s in pain. She understands why he’s been propping himself against a pillar. The position affords him a nonchalance all the more effective for discussing nasty punishments. It also helps him maintain verticality when he’s having a bad day. “Yes! Excellent!” The accent reappears as he clasps her hand and pumps it. “You and me -- we are planning the punishment to fit the crime. Your robot and I -- we execute.” There’s a squeak from Scott, at which Razor swivels toward him with a forced grin. “Plan. Is plan we execute.”

He faces Alison, his eyes burning down into the concentrated hazel of excitement. He grins, his face half open and expectant, half closed and fiendish. “I see now why the Dominatrix keeps her robot on too-short leash,” he says, at a volume only she can hear. “She fears what she could be if she did all that she wanted with her power. I am master of my fate, she says, but I am wondering what else you want to be master of. Punishment? Pain? Power? People?” He reminds her of the Magister when she told him that she wanted to exterminate all the Shalka; he looked like he was waking up to find that one of his dreams had come true.

Razor expects Alison to flinch. He has, after all, identified an aspect of her that she tries not to think too much about: the part that hungers for revenge and retaliation. But she has spent enough time behind a pub counter to know that you don’t disarm smug blokes by showing them that they’ve got something on you. You disarm them by doing the unexpected: by matching them. “All of it!” she says. “I want all of it: pain, power, punishment, everything!”
Razor stills for a small fraction of a second, unnerved with her easy admission that she’s a sadistic little shit. “Ah, and so we are partners in the crime!” His full smile returns, along with consonants from several languages. Finally detaching from her hand, he claps her on the back. “Come. We begin.”
The Magister Asserts His Personhood

Chapter Summary

The Magister and Razor mind-fuck the traitorous Gregorys, then explain to the humans how they did it without completely steamrolling the Gregorys' minds. The topics of dignity and personhood recur, especially since Razor seems to be granting neither to the Magister.

Razor wants to discuss the Gregorys’ fate in front of them, just to terrify them even further, but Bill won’t let him. Don’t we have more important things to do? she asks, even though the plans for the rally are essentially finished. There’s last-minute stuff we have to get back to, yeah? Our big performance is coming up; it’s the climax of our book… Well, maybe more like the climax of our first book, since there’s still the revolution to go through in book two. Don’t we want to spend more time on giving a whole bunch of people life and hope than we do on taking it away from just two of them?

Cocking her head, her voice lilting upward as if her questions are actual, rather than rhetorical, Bill inspires a surge of affection from Alison. She uses mildness and indirection, thought-provoking questions pitched as innocence, to lead people to do the right thing. Tears come into Alison’s eyes [and not just because it’s so polluted here]. Bill has been abandoned, killed, resurrected, and robotified, but she’s still tough enough to cry over the death of fictional characters and to make a nasty version of Alison’s robot do what she wants. And this marvelous person, with her heart and her soul and her smirk and her eyebrows, likes Alison! It’s a miracle!

The Magister sends Ali away; then everyone withdraws into Anima to discuss the Gregorys’ fate. They convene in Anima’s control room, a shadowy circular cave of cathode ray tube monitors and typewriter keyboards, the faintly glowing time rotor standing like a pillar in the center. It’s always cool in this room, with a slight breeze stirring through. But the wind never sweeps away the shadows, which, despite the many glowing terminals, are so deep that the boundaries of shapes are swallowed at the room’s edges. Lines are indistinct here; there’s really no distinct definition, so it seems to Alison the perfect place to discuss morally dubious activities. The tip of her nose cooling down markedly, she sits in a wheeled chair and wraps her arms around herself.

Debate begins. Razor advocates mind control as an expedient means of dealing permanently with the Gregorys. Make them forget their entire involvement with RR, and they won’t be a problem anymore. The three humans, especially Charlie, vehemently oppose it as a basic violation of integrity.

The Magister doesn’t want to mind-fuck the Gregorys at all. Nevertheless, he sees no effective alternative. Merely telling them to stay out of RR obviously doesn’t work. Imprisonment uses safe house staff and space that should really go to support regime refugees. And no one wants the Gregorys’ intimate knowledge of the resistance to end up with the Night Patrol, thus to be used against the movement, so something must be done.

The best solution in the circumstances, says the Magister, involves a carefully targeted, restricted form of mind control. Total annihilation of all the Gregorys’ RR memories would cause extensive
brain damage. He and Razor, says the Magister, would do better to leave the Gregorys’ thoughts entirely intact. Instead, they will increase the Gregorys’ fear, making them scared enough that they’d never do anything against RR again. Yes, this is a mind-fuck, but, as an enhancement of emotions that the Gregorys already feel, it’s the least invasive option he can think of.

The humans reluctantly agree. Then, as the Time Dorks leave to perform their grim task, Alison, Bill, and Charlie turn their thoughts to Bill’s and Charlie’s rally speeches. They bring up the text on one of the control room displays, but the Doctor seems to have an aesthetic based on insufficient lighting, so they soon give up reading off the screen. With Alison’s editorial input, Bill has crafted words that she hopes will pay proper tribute to all the friends that she has made, while also saying goodbye and wishing them all the victory and power in their revolutionary war. Razor pronounced it excellent during the final rehearsal, but Bill suspects that’s just because he likes saying that word in his weird accent. She herself considers it unexceptional. Alison tries to tell Bill that she does so have a way with words, but Bill just tells her that she’s biased.

As for Charlie, she’s still not sure what to say. She wants to talk about her marriage, how Irons broke it up, along with her and her spouses’ fucking hearts. But what if Junie and Gardenia are listening? Actually, that could be good because then she could see them with the safety of a stage separating them from her, before she crossed paths with them. Then again, it might be bad if they’re listening because maybe they think she’s dead. Maybe it would be too much of a shock for them to know that she was alive again. Maybe she should just talk about how being Cybered and marched around against her fucking will fucked her up.

Alison wishes that she could tell Charlie in all certainty that June and Gardenia will be listening, loving, supportive, and accepting. But she does not have the time to say any of this, for just then the Magister and Razor re-enter, bringing in a swoosh of warm, but tainted, basement air. “That was…not bad, Mechanical Me, not bad at all,” Razor admits, leaning casually on an armrest. “For an incredibly boring, nonviolent pacifist who does nothing interesting whatsoever, you actually do pretty okay playing on people’s fears.”

The Magister nods as he sits in a wheeled chair. “And, for someone who uses his self-proclaimed batshit as an excuse to go to needless excess, you demonstrate an impressive control, both of your passions and your power, when you feel so inclined.”

“So the mind-fuck is done?” Alison perks up from her office chair.

“Why, Dominatrix, you insult me!” Razor glides to her. “I did nothing so primitive. Just as I have repersoned countless Cyborganics, so I applied the same finesse and delicacy to the Gregorys’ psychic procedure that was done to the Gregorys. Consider it…a surgery of the sentiments.”

“But…they’re okay? Scared off, but not hurt, yeah?” Bill, coughing on the Dystopiaville stench that the Magister and Razor brought in, emerges from the shadows.

“We have convinced them,” says the Magister, spinning toward Bill with the loose carelessness of full confidence, “that they have everything to fear from us. Thus the revolution now has nothing to fear from them.” He smiles, the tips of his mustache poking upward.
“They better still have free will,” says Charlie, crossing her arms, “and not be like Cyber-fucked into obeying, whether they want to or not.” Voice low, eyes squinted, she ducks out from under a spiral staircase, obviously taking none of the Magister’s joy in the recent events.

In a moment’s silence, the Magister blinks, remembering that not everyone thinks that mind-fucks are so awesome. He walks over to Charlie. “My dear Ms. Foxtrot, you have every reason to be concerned. Please rest assured that the Master and I did not compromise the Gregorys’ agency in any way.” He pitches his voice as low as hers, meeting her eyes, telling her in his body language that he too has an equal respect for the gravity of the situation.

“Besides,” the Magister goes on, “I cannot speak for the Master, but I, at least, have long since abandoned compelled obedience as a means to power. It evacuates the people upon whom I impose my will because they do not commit themselves to my desires, and it evacuates me because enforcing their compliance requires a constant use of my psychic resources. Nowadays I much prefer to work with the existing contents of people’s minds.” His voice climbs in pitch, and he smiles again, glancing at Alison.

“You’re smiling like you fucking like it.” Charlie hasn’t uncrossed her arms.

“Oh, I do! In happy cases, such as that of my lovely Domina,” her robot says, turning his entire attention on Alison, “I begin with her desire to please me and then reward the devotion of her power to my ends. I have no need of compelling her with my psychic skills because she willingly does whatever I tell her.” Just as brilliant shafts of light stretch down from unknown skylights here in the control room to cut through the deep shadows, so Alison feels as if a light extends from her robot to her. He might as well be shining a spotlight on her for the intensity with which he’s beaming at Alison, and she puts herself at his side and takes his hand so she can be closer to his glow.

“Thought it was the other way ‘round, though.” Bill’s eyebrow springs up. “--You doing whatever she asks.”

“Oh yes, it’s that way as well. The two practices are by no means mutually exclusive.” His body aligned with hers, warmth against warmth, Alison’s robot looks down and regards her steadily, eyes very soft and deep and sparked with gold. He has forgotten himself for a moment -- the Magister who performs mind-fucks at least -- and become someone who’s so amazed at his good fortune that he can find no words.

“Yeah,” says Charlie, “but that’s different, though, if you’re both doing something you want.”
“Fair point. Not all cases can be as nauseating -- I mean easy -- as that of the Dominatrix and her robot.” Razor picks up the story, pointer fingers upward as he enters lecturing mode. “If they’re miserable wretches like the Gregorys, you still use what’s already there in their minds. But, since they don’t really want to please you in the first place, you have to go with negative reinforcement. See -- they weren’t scared enough of the consequences of disobeying me, so I just readjusted their expectations.” Alison notices that, while the Magister credits his and Razor’s actions to both of them, Razor makes like he did the mind-fuck all by himself.

The Magister explains that he and his counterpart told the Gregorys that, first, they could read minds and, second, they would not hesitate to use these skills if the Gregorys acted against RR again. The Gregorys did not believe the Magister, until he informed them that Ms. Gregory did not want news of their banishment and her retaliation to get out. She feared most the demise of her reputation as a helper of the pathetic, barely human victims of Irons’ regime. As for Mister Gregory, he had always thought himself unjustly stymied in his quest for success, so he emulated people in power, hoping to achieve their level of command. He couldn’t bear to be ousted and humiliated by a broken, undeserving man like Razor. “We told them that we would make their worst fears come true if they betrayed us again,” summarizes the Magister, “and now the power of suggestion takes hold. They do not know how their fears might be realized, so, in anticipatory panic, they devise worse torments for themselves than we ever could. Truly people can be their own worst enemies.” He shakes his head.

“Well, what did I tell you?” Razor unfurls his hands as if displaying the self-evident truth. “You and I make a perfect team! And we’d be even better – unstoppable! – if you didn’t have so many ridiculous moral scruples.” From the way he tilts his head, Alison is pretty sure that he’s teasing the Magister.

“Don’t patronize me, Master,” says the Magister, his voice still as genial and smooth as it was a minute before. “If you hold me in such contempt, then do so openly, rather than disguising it in platitudes about equality.”

Just like his counterpart, Razor himself has an eloquent set of features that register every flicker of emotion as it crosses his brain. “But -- !” His eyes go narrow as he frowns in indignation. “You think -- ?” A few lines on his forehead curl into confused knots as he realizes that his sarcastic attempt as a compliment has been received as a slight. “Wait… what?” Now crinkling his nose in something close to a sneer, he just looks completely baffled.


“What talk?” Detaching from her robot, Alison leans over to ask Bill out of the side of her mouth.

“Yeah, what talk?” Charlie echoes.

“It’s like… Well, just like I got sick of Razor treating me like just one of his tools who would always do what he wanted, so I think the Prof’s had enough of being treated like Razor’s the amazing original and he’s the inferior copy.” There’s a short pause, and then Bill, crossing her arms almost defiantly, adds in a low voice, “—Especially since the Prof is kinder and gentler and more thoughtful and not inferior at all!”
Hearing that familiar incontrovertible fierceness in Bill’s voice, Alison realizes that, whether she fully recognizes it or not, Bill has chosen to join her and her Time Dorks. Alison remembers that, when the Doctor offered Bill her title/name, she exclaimed happily it was like she was now *one of the family*. Bill, who has felt homeless, alone, and unseen for so much of her life, wants a family, so she has made one with herself, Alison, the Doctor, and the Magister. Now that she has adopted them, she’s not letting them go. She’s going where they go and staying where they stay. And that, thinks Alison with a thrill, means that Bill really is leaving this universe and coming back home with them.

“Now then,” says the Magister to Razor, pacing as if warming up to pounce, “you truly don’t know why I think that you contemn me? Then answer me this. Who are you?”

Razor moves his shoulders in a quick shrug. “Is depending on what I want to accomplish. Who is audience?”

“It is I.” The Magister points to his hearts. “So then – who are you to me?”

“I am the Master.”

“Well and good. So what then am I to you, Master?” The Magister says Razor’s actual name with sharp emphasis, but without snideness.

“The Dominatrix’s robot, of course!” Razor, trying to squirm out of a direct answer, takes refuge in facetiousness.

“Bad move, Harry,” says Charlie so only Alison and Bill can hear, shaking her head.

“Then treat me as such! I am what I make of myself.” The Magister bends forward stiffly at the waist, almost like a bow, but so he can glare straight into Razor’s eyes instead. “While I may be your counterpart from another universe, I am neither your machine nor your self. I have a name, my dear,” he says, straightening and pacing again, “one with which you are quite familiar, for it is the same as yours. I have always called you by your name, but you have never once returned the favor.”

“The name game,” Alison says to herself. The Magister, who is just as punctilious and pedantic as she is, believes in naming everything correctly. The right name confers power, even possession, while the wrong name is a rejection and belittlement. Bill’s right; the Magister is sick and tired of being *Mechanical Me* to Razor, with all the unoriginality and subservience implied thereby. He’s been addressing Razor by his actual name all along, so he must have a decent respect – and maybe even some affection? – for his counterpart. All of that is about to disappear, however, unless Razor starts referring to the Magister appropriately.

“Use my name then,” concludes the Magister. With his folded arms and his placid, slightly raised eyebrows, he looks like he’s going to wait all night, if necessary, until Razor does. The humans settle in to wait along with him, since they really want Razor swatted down from his position of smug superiority.

Razor, his nostrils flaring in and out, says nothing. The Magister has a little pity on him and makes it easier. “Ah,” he says with a laugh, “so you’d rather disrespect the Domina’s robot and risk his owner’s wrath? How strange! I do admit that we Masters have our foolish moments, but never have we been so perversely self-destructive.”

“Niiiiiiice.” Charlie draws out the word appreciatively. “The Master’s got some excellent Batshit Harry management skills.”
“Hah!” whispers Bill to Alison. “It’s like they’re playing a card game. Razor’s like, *I have a Master, so I win*, but the Prof’s like, *Well, I’ve got one too*. And then there’s just a standoff until the Prof pulls a Domina out of his back pocket and Razor’s just like, *Shit.*”

“Miss Potts!” Razor raises his voice. Bill startles to attention, but then realizes the playfulness in his flicking eyebrows. “Has no one told you how rude it is to whisper throughout someone else’s performance?”

“And during the climax too. Really, my dear Seeker!” The Magister shakes his head a bit.

Charlie fakes a yawn. “What climax? This scene is taking for-fucking-ever.”

“Oh, the Master was just about to admit the error of his ways,” says the Magister. “—Weren’t you, my dear?”

“No, actually,” Razor counters, “the Master was just about to demonstrate how much of a little shit he is. Well? Go on! You’re doing great so far!”

“Cut! Cut!” Chopping her arms vertically through the air, Alison steps between the Time Dorks. “Seriously, though – you’ve done the surgically targeted mind-fuck? You’ve executed the plan without executing them?”

“Yes, Domina.” The Magister nods once.

“Yea, verily. In all things, thy will be done, O Dominatrix mine.”

“Stupendissimus,” Alison declares. “Good work, everyone. This act is over, and I’m going to bed.”
Alison and Bill Can't Sleep

Chapter Summary

Alison and Bill are too exhausted to comfort each other the night before the revolution, but too worried to sleep. They seek out their Time Dorks for hugs, only to find out that the Magister at least shares their anxieties.

“Can’t sleep,” Bill whispers to Alison as they lie side by side in their bed the night before Razor’s revolution officially begins.

“Me neither,” Alison whispers back. Both of them roll onto their backs, heaving sighs in unison. “I keep thinking that I should have done another copyediting pass on the face printing manual. I should have made Razor show me his speech, just so I could make sure it was truly revolutionary and not just, you know, revolting. I feel like there’s still something, some key detail, some key word, that I should have seen and caught and fixed. But I missed it, and now something horrible is going to happen because I didn’t attend to my responsibilities.”

“Yeah...responsibilities.” Bill lets out a long, tired breath. “Being the heart of the resistance is... hard. Only got one little ol’ mechanical ticker in my chest, but there’s a whole city of people out there who expect my heart to work for all of them too! And there’s always a Ranju, always a Sinclair, always a Charlie. There’s always someone who has it worse than me, always someone who needs my help, and, if I rest, then they cry, or they go hungry, or they suffer. Can’t let that happen. What if I’m not doing enough?”

The two turn toward each other, Alison now on her left side, Bill on her right, and try to hug. They put their free arms around each other, but Alison dislikes such a loose grasp. She’s neither held fast by Bill nor holding Bill fast; furthermore, she has no idea what to do with her squashed left arm. Should she keep it down by her side and continue lying on it? Should she bring it to her chest or perhaps stretch it over her head? Bill, obviously experiencing the same uncertainty, tries stretching her right arm up onto her pillow, accidentally whacking Alison on the cheek. So much for lulling each other to sleep in the safety of one another’s arms. There’s too much to obsess about already to be wondering how to hug.

Giving up, Alison and Bill flop back supine. “What are we doing in the first place?” Alison says to the darkness. “We’re helping Razor, of all people, overthrow an oppressive totalitarian regime. Why are we trusting him? What assurance do we have that he’s going to do anything good?”

“Because he’s like me,” says Bill.
“No, he’s not! You’re better than him!”

“Sometimes it doesn’t seem that way.” Bill’s voice is low and flat. She stops, swallowing a few times. “I’ve never hated anyone before, but...but...I found out that the Doctor did the same thing to him, fooled him and fucked with him and failed him. And I started hating the Doctor too just because they made me hate myself so much.”

“It’s not necessarily bad to hate someone,” says Alison softly, taking Bill’s hand. “You and me, we’re expected to be polite and reasonable with everyone who looks down on us because of our color and our gender. But niceness just gets us ignored; it lets the oppressive shits silence us and objectify us. Hatred, rage, hurt -- it’s a natural psychological reaction. And that anger gives you power. It reminds you that you’re a person too, with just as much dignity as anyone else. You just have to learn to use it so that you don’t burn yourself and everyone else in the process.”

There’s a silence, Bill’s hand lying loosely in Alison’s. “Now see...” Bill says. "Razor said kind of the same thing to me. Anger and hate can be good. They can make you strong if you can master them. But it makes more sense, the way you put it. You and me, we’ve grown up hearing that we should be nice and quiet. Him -- well, he knows what it’s like now, but, for most of his life, he’s been the one telling people to shut up. You understand in a way that he never can.” She grips Alison’s hand strongly. “You understand me.”

Bill goes on. Razor himself recommended vengeance as a way to free oneself from the Doctor’s power. And what better revenge could he have than to challenge the Doctor’s delusion that they were good and he evil? It wasn’t that hard either. He just had to do right by someone like Bill whom the Doctor had wronged and then actually give a shit about the citizens of Dystopiaville being weaponized against their will. Then he got the deeply personal satisfaction of knowing that he’d proved the Doctor wrong; he was in fact not completely hopeless. Yes, living well was indeed the best revenge.

Maybe she could do something similar, Bill thought. Maybe she could channel all her rage into helping people like her, people of the kind that the Doctor pretended to care about, but never actually did. “Talk about the power of love all you want,” says Bill with a rueful sound that would have been a laugh if there had been joy behind it, “but there’s nothing like the power of showing up someone who’s told you that you’re an utter piece of shit until you believe it.”

“But you’re wonderful, Bill.” Alison’s tears make her eyes feel hot. “You’re so good and sweet and smart and funny. You’re full of wonder and curiosity. You’re made of love, and your imagination...encompasses the stars. You’re so clear, so honest, so brilliant, that all of those qualities just shine out of you. You remind me of the Doctor, your Doctor, this Doctor, because you’re gentle, but...like...resolute at the same time. And anyone that you like, anyone that you love, should
realize what a privilege it is to have you like them. If they don’t, then they’re complete and utter dolts who don’t deserve you.”

“Um, thanks, but you’re really describing yourself, aren’t you?” says Bill. She pauses for a minute. “You’re brilliant and wonderful and full of passion, and you’re so good, so thoughtful, so sympathetic. You’re quick and clever; you understand people, and you analyze everything. But you’re different than me. You’re a fighter too, and you’re not afraid to burn down people who abuse their power. And you think I’m the one who’s wonderful? There’s a reason you’re Alisonshine, you know: Alison, full of sun….sunshine, the one who gave me sunflowers.” Her voice skips a little bit, and Alison knows that Bill is crying too.

“Awwwww, thank you,” Alison says. ...But if only you could see yourself from my perspective, she thinks to Bill. Maybe then you’d realize that everything I said was true. Maybe you’d love yourself as much as -- Catching herself, she remembers that she cannot love Bill at the moment. They’ve known each other only long enough to plan a revolting revolution, not long enough to love each other.

Ugh...that revolution. The war’s going to start tomorrow. She believes Bill when she says that Razor will do more good than he seems capable of, solely because the Doctor over here doesn’t believe that he can. Nevertheless, he’s also going to perform his manipulative, self-glorifying demagoguery so over the top that he’s probably going to launch into orbit. Some unexpected shit is going to happen. She can feel it.

She doesn’t feel headachy or dizzy with worry; she just senses tingles throughout her body. They’re the dull, soft ones that will soon turn into throbbing pain, just as this night will soon pass and become a revolting day. If only there was someone to hold her fast and press all the itchy tingles out of her… Wiping her eyes with the heel of her hands, she murmurs, “I need my robot.”

“What’s that?”

“Are you scared?”

“Yeah…”

“Me too. And you know what one of the best things is for feeling scared? --Time Dork hugs.”

Bill’s already climbing into her chair and turning it on. “Time to find our Time Dorks then.”
“Hee hee,” says Alison as the two of them exit their room. “You feel like you have one too?”

TARDIS cats detach from the shadows, weaving around Alison’s feet and Bill’s wheels, then trotting ahead into the darkness. Then they turn back and chirp, their tails curved with expectancy.

“Well yeah,” says Bill with a little giggle, “but kind of in the way you have a cat. You know -- they do their own thing most of the time, but they’re always there when you really need ‘em, and they really know how to snuggle. Speaking of cats…” She surveys the milling cats below her. “Are you showing us where the Doctor and the Prof are?” she asks them. “Or do you just want attention?”

“Both,” says Alison. “They’ll take us to the Time Dorks, but they expect payment in the form of pets.”

“You drive a hard bargain!” Bill says to the cats with a laugh. “Let’s go.”

The cats lead Alison and Bill to the library. It’s a binary two-story rotunda, one half, where you enter, devoted to night, the other half devoted to day. The night half contains high, dense hedges of dark shelves, replete with the fruit of books. There’s a blue-black rug of stars and galaxies and meteors, softening their steps underfoot. Overhead nod the living lamps of flowers that resemble bruised lilies, diffusing an odor of grainy sandalwood.

They travel through the night section of the library and enter the day. It’s a spacious area with light, airy blond furniture instead of books. The gleaming black stone of the night side yields to pure glass walls here; the entire day half is a window. Since Anima now orbits Newland, though, no sunshine comes in, only the naked darkness and stars of space. There are more living lamps here, but whole trees, their yellow buds as bright as Christmas bulbs. Beneath one tree light, the Doctor sits on a couch facing the window and the Magister, who strides in tight circuits with hands behind his back, chin bent forward and down.

“This is so frustrating,” says the Magister. Several cats wind around his legs, purring hopefully, but he pays them no attention. “I want to sleep; I need to sleep; I have tried every possible way I can think of to go to sleep. I’ve even used the time delay to power down completely, but, when I power back up again, I just start right where I left off. Even the hard reset doesn’t really reset anything. I remain just as preoccupied as I was before.” In fact, he and the Doctor are so preoccupied that they don’t notice Alison and Bill approaching.

“Oh…” The Doctor thinks for a while. Two cats loaf themselves up on the Doctor’s thighs, and the
Doctor pets them slowly and inattentively. “Why are you so worried, though, Master? What’s happening tomorrow is nothing compared to what we’ve pulled off before. Remember that time on Vispun?” Perking up, they wave their hands in the air. One of the cats bats at the translucent white sleeve of the Doctor’s nightgown, trying to bring their hand back, but the Doctor is busy gesturing. “We made a vaccine from the contents of my compost heap and your spice drawer and saved them all in a half a day.

“Or how about Amiin?” the Doctor goes on. The cats in their lap stalk the crochet lace unraveling from the Doctor’s sleeve cuffs. “I still have no idea how you tricked a bunch of Daleks into believing that you were Davros, then infiltrated the prison and got me out of there, all without leaving the ship. You’re a Master of large-scale, improbable schemes, especially with me by your side. Now that we’re together, I’m never afraid anymore ‘cause we can do anything!”

As the Doctor throws their arms wide, one of the cats leaps for the loose sleeve lace. But the cat misses, makes an abrupt thud against the trunk of a tree lamp, then saunters off like it meant to do that. Alison and Bill share a glance and a stifled laugh.

A swirl of sandalwood-like odor curls around them from the trees, beckoning them closer. Alison has always thought of it as a bright but soothing smell, like summer sun that warms you to sleep, and it brings comfort to her now. In the midst of a gentle fragrance, with her dear friend on her right hand, her partner in crime and his inevitable spouse just steps away, and silly and/or snuggly cats all around, Alison feels contentment surround her.

“Of course we can!” Now still, the Magister stands before the Doctor, arms folded, chin tilted back, head cocked. “I’m not doubting either of us, you old fool, especially not with our powers combined.” When Alison first met him, such a laugh in his voice and such an arrogant stance usually betokened derision for the Doctor’s buoyant optimism. Since Alison has known her robot, though, he has changed. Now, while he laughs at the Doctor’s enthusiasm, it’s with fondness, and he says you old fool to the Doctor in the same way that he says mea Domina carissima to Alison.

“And yet,” says the Magister, lowering both his chin and his voice seriously, “you know that we are not the only two to consider. Thousands of people will be entering my...your...our very house, where we shall have their safekeeping in our hands. And among those people are my people: the lovely Seeker, though she is more properly yours, and the Domina. My Domina.” He touches the center of his chest with his right fist.

“I would sequester them from the rally if I could, but there is no better place for them than here. Besides, my Domina would not permit herself or her Seeker to be removed. Anyway, they have important parts to play. Yet this will be a volatile event, run by a volatile person who, as I know all too well, will stoke and exploit that volatility. But I will see no one burnt tomorrow, least of all my Domina!” Because he speaks his desires as predictions, saying I will... instead of I want to..., the Magister sounds as if he has the power to command time itself to obey him. A thrilling shiver
comes up on Alison’s arms. One day she’ll have that much certainty...

“Oh no.” The Doctor shakes their head. “I agree with you. No one’s getting burnt tomorrow...or even slightly toasted around the edges. I know what the Master -- Razor Master -- is capable of; I know what we have to watch out for. I know we have to keep people safe, especially our people.” Shaking their head, the Doctor mutters under their breath, “And if there’s anyone who could use special guarding from Time Lord bullshit, it’s Bill. She...She’s just starting to bloom again. I want to make sure that she keeps flourishing, especially back in the sunshine of Earth, where she can put down roots and cultivate happiness....”

“Oh…!” Bill whispers with a squeak, pressing her fist to her mouth. “Oh, Doctor… Flowers… They love flowers.”

“They love you too,” Alison says, and Bill, her eyes never leaving the Doctor, nods slowly and tearfully, unsure what to do with this new and stupendous realization.

Leaning down and over Bill’s chair, Alison gathers Bill in her arms. Though they’re not holding each other fast, it’s better than their attempted hug in bed. And Bill loves the Doctor, she thinks. Of course she loves the Doctor. But what does she feel for me?
There Is a Moment of Peace

Chapter Summary

The Doctor tries to calm the Magister by singing him, but they’re too excited. Alison demonstrates how her robot purrs when you give him beard scratches and then goes flop when you rub his ears. Everyone snuggles for a temporary respite.

When Alison and Bill disengage, the Time Dorks have shifted position. Both are now on the couch, the Doctor down at one end, the Magister stretched out along the rest, his head in the Doctor’s lap. Alison herself likes lying just the same way in the Magister’s arms, and she does so as much as possible, but he, much more accustomed to holding than to being held, does not submit often to such a position. One cat balances on his shins, two on the armrest by his feet, and about six nest around the base of the nearest tree lamp.

There’s a silence. Then the Magister, his head in the Doctor’s lap, looks up at the Doctor, shading his eyes against the dim glare from the tree bulbs. “If I heard your voice -- “

“You want me to sing you? Oh! Oh! Oh!” The Doctor lets out sounds as if they’re on the verge of saying something, but they keep forgetting the words. “Oh wow…” Their eyes widen, and they regard the Magister with something close to awe. “Oh...wow. I mean...wow. Just...really...wow.”

“It’s not a novel request,” says the Magister, his voice as low and even as the Doctor’s is higher and jumpy. “You did sing me into being, did you not?”

“What?” Bill whispers to Alison. “The Doctor made the Prof out of a song?”

“Oh no,” Alison whispers back. “The Doctor constructed him out of metal and wood and computers and all. It’s just that they pulled all those pieces together and finished up all the loose ends and programmed him and activated him by singing. He’s literally tuned to the Doctor.”

“That’s so beautiful.” Bill starts to cry. As the tears trickle down her face, they catch some of the low light and flash before they disappear, like meteors shining soundlessly across the night. Tilting her head back and closing her eyes, Bill puts one hand flat on the crown of her head, then the other over that. “Then, when the Doctor sings, the Prof must feel as if he’s singing too. Everything in you hums with their song,” she goes on, “and they bring you into their world where everything’s alive, even your clothes, even your words, even the air around you. You just realize that everything is connected, even you and the Doctor. You’re in the Doctor’s hands, and they’re so delighted to be
holding you and showing you all these amazing things that they start dancing. Then you’re dancing with them, and it’s all...perfectly...right.” She ends with a sigh.

There’s a silence; then Bill sighs again. “I guess... I mean... That’s what it’s like for me at least...because I’m a robot too, yeah?” She pats her metal core where her heart, her lungs, and other viscera have been replaced by mechanical Cyber tech. “And you know...it hurts being a Cyborganic sometimes. Can’t breathe as well, can’t run anymore, always some pain to deal with. But, when the Doctor sings, my Cyber parts don’t feel so sharp; my lungs don’t feel so squished; my legs don’t feel so heavy. It’s like the Doctor convinces my biological parts that my robotic parts aren’t evil alien invaders, but just -- I dunno -- weird-looking helpers. It’s like...well...a tune-up, so I guess you could say that I’m tuned to the Doctor too.” Wiping her eyes, she gives Alison a big grin.

As much as she envies Bill [because she herself has never been sung by the Doctor], Alison really can’t maintain any hard feelings in the face of Bill’s smile. Bill trusts the Doctor as much as Alison trusts the Magister. Bill adores the Doctor, and the Doctor adores her in a way that they will never adore Alison. But that’s okay because Bill is happy, so Alison’s happy too. “Yeah...” she says, since she can’t think of anything else to say.

The Magister squints up at the Doctor, appearing puzzled. Hooking one hand around the Doctor’s collar, he pulls them down so that their face is mere centimeters from his. “Ah, you old fool, why are you crying?” he asks in dismay.

“Because I...” The Doctor gulps. “Because you really do mean it.” A sob escapes most of the way from their mouth, but they swallow it back. “You really are asking me to sing you, even after everything I’ve done. I always knew -- well, I always hoped -- that you’d come back to me, but I never -- “ Another sob.

“What are they talking about?” Bill asks in Alison’s ear. “Did the Doctor and the Prof split up?”

“Yeah,” says Alison. After two mind-fucks, once by the Shalka and once by a Finisterran vampire, she had to go home for a while. At the same time, her robot left the Doctor. Having been literally programmed by the Doctor to stay, he had never had a free, unconstrained choice in the matter. He had to separate from his inevitable spouse, if only so he could decide of his own volition to come back to them.

Alison left for her parents’ house, the Doctor for London, while the Magister taught classics as Professor Max Thascalos at a little place in the States called the University of Vermont. Soon finding her parents intolerable, Alison moved in with the Magister. Meanwhile, both Time Dorks discovered that they got along much better when living apart. They agreed to continue having separate houses, but regularly went on adventures with Alison and without coercion, and everyone
was much happier.

Alison and Bill sneak forward, stopping under a tree lamp that engulfs them in the sweetness of its scent, and turn their attention back to the Time Dorks. “Do...um...” The Doctor’s voice, indeed, their entire person, trembles hopefully. “Then...do, um, you trust me to do your will with my song, instead of mine?”

“I have come to the conclusion,” says the Magister, “that you are in fact worthy of my possession. So, yes,” he says, releasing his hold on the Doctor’s collar so that they can sit up once again, “I have full confidence in your submission to my commands. Do sing then, and try not to gasp and squirm too much.”

“Yes, Master,” murmurs the Doctor. They put their hands on him, right cupped over his brow, left cupped under his chin. They take in a deep breath, their entire body rising, then falling, and then they begin to sing.

It starts low and gentle, like the wind gliding across the lake. The heat of the day is burning out, the Doctor’s song says. Now it is as light as my hands upon your face. They touch the Magister, their fingers in his hair, the back of their palm sliding again and again along his beard and down his throat. The Magister subsides; he banks himself. Eyes closed, he lifts his chin toward the Doctor, offering himself, and the Doctor’s song breaks. “Oh!” They sigh as if they might cry again.

Recollecting themselves, the Doctor goes on. They summon up their song once more, but they’re too overwrought to fully concentrate. They sing of the hushing of the breeze [hic!], the sinking of the light, the rustling of the trees, the rising of the dark [sniff!]. The song gains power and depth, cooling the air with chill that makes you feel all the more cozy, perfect for sleeping with the one that you… In a valiant effort not to distract themselves, the Doctor chokes down a cough, but some air escapes out the other end. As they dissolve into laughter, Alison and Bill try without success to stifle their own giggles.

“Ahem!” the Magister says, hoisting an eyebrow. “Clearly your diaphragmatic cacophony is inevitable, but perhaps you could endeavor to sneeze along with the beat?”

At that, Alison, Bill, and the Doctor completely lose it. Just before the Doctor doubles over in peals of laughter, the Magister rolls and extricates himself from their grasp, coming upright. The cats previously stationed on his legs bound away to join their friends at the foot of a nearby tree lamp.

Several minutes later, everyone calms down. Alison and Bill come out from the shadows and explain that they’re too anxious to sleep. “Oh! I can sing you!” the Doctor says to Bill, hopping up
from the couch and hitting their shin on Bill’s footplate. “Oh. Sorry. --And I promise not to blow my nose in the middle!”

The Magister, adjusting his posture so that he sits even straighter, crosses his arms. “And why does your dear Seeker merit such respectful treatment that even I am not accorded?”

“Well, for one thing, she doesn’t do weird eyebrow maneuvers at me.” The Doctor, blinking and squinting, moves their own eyebrows like rather frenetic caterpillars.

“Really? You should pay more attention to her supraorbital physiognomy,” advises the Magister, taking a glance at Bill. “It’s quite elastic.”

“Oh, go get your ears rubbed.” The Doctor sticks out their tongue. To Bill, they say, “You should see what he does. It’s even funnier than me hiccuping and farting my way through an impromptu aria.”

Bill flicks on her chair, taps her joystick, backs up slightly, then does a smooth turn toward the Magister. “So what’s this funny thing you do, Prof?”

The Magister sighs through his nose with long-beleaguered dignity. “I’ll have you know that the feline is a creature of indubitable majesty and pride who does not exist for the amusement of others.”

Bill blinks a few times. “So...you’re...a cat?”

“Well, it’s more like cat-like,” Alison, who’s now sitting to the right of her robot, says. “He got trapped on a planet once where there was a virus that turned people into cats. It’s still in his system -- the virus, that is -- so he really likes it when I do this.” She sinks her nails into his flesh underneath his jaw and scritches hard. “--As long as it’s not against the grain.”

“Mmmm,” agrees the Magister. All the stiff indignation dissipates from his body, and he slouches against the back of the couch. “Never pet a cat in the direction contrary to that in which their fur grows.” As he speaks, a low, pulsing trill bubbles up beneath his words.

“The Prof purrs?” Bill stares as Alison scritches with more force, causing the Magister to purr more quickly and lightly, leaning his head against Alison’s shoulder. “Awwwww, he likes it! Eeeeeee, that’s so cute! Wait -- what happens if you rub his ears?” She stretches out her hand toward him.

The Magister snaps to attention. “Please,” he says to Bill, clearly but not harshly, “she has my
permission to do so, but you do not."

Bill retracts instantly, even backing up a little in her chair. “Oh shit! So sorry.”

The Doctor laughs. “Don’t take it personally, Bill. He’s not angry at you, just very particular. But he’s a *good* kitty, aren’t you?” The Magister responds with a deadpan glare so intense that it could probably corrode things. The Doctor just cackles. “Well, for a certain value of *good*, I suppose.”

Turning to Alison, the Magister relaxes into a smile. His purr comes back up behind his voice. “Well?” he says after a few seconds. “Domina?”

“Cats: picky *and* bossy!” Alison huffs, but she reaches up and rubs behind her robot’s ears. He butts his head against her face, her neck, her chin. His beard pokes her, but still she keeps petting him. He falls back into her lap as if boneless, his purr going up into the register of ecstatic snurgling. Sure, this isn’t a usual position for him, but she can get him there in about five seconds with the right maneuver.

“Awwww…” says Alison with a smile. There may be a virus inside him that gives him feline responses to certain situations, but he has always held conscious control over it. In fact, she didn’t even know this aspect of his until she ended up lost inside his mind with his forgotten childhood incarnation, the Little Witch, and his remarkably Cheshire-like inner Cat. Since that adventure, though, he has remembered both the Little Witch and the Cat, and sometimes he’ll even permit himself to be the latter. At times such as these, he seems truly happy, as happy as he is when he’s holding her fast, as happy as he is when the Doctor’s singing him, as happy as he is when he has the Doctor by the throat, drawing them down so he can look into their eyes.

“Wow.” Her oval, strongly featured face flickering with a smile that she can’t fully control, Bill says, “That is definitely the most majestic-looking Magister I have ever seen. He’s so majestic that I think he’s dribbling.”

“Dear Seeker,” says the Magister, addressing Bill from his supine position, “your inability to recognize my dignity does not preclude its existence. The majesty of a cat is a subtle, multifaceted entity. Its -- " He suddenly perceives that Alison has quit petting him. “I did not give you leave to stop!” Catching Alison’s wrists, he returns her hands to their previous position on his head. “Be my good Domina. Obey me.”

Bill, having recently learned that the obedience between Alison and the Magister goes both ways, just smirks as Alison starts scratching him again. “Um, is there room for one more on the couch?” She eyes the Doctor, then the Magister, then Alison, then the Doctor again.
“Sure, plenty!” The Doctor scoots toward Alison, squishing up against her and the Magister so that there’s an empty space to their left. Abruptly thinking that Bill probably wants to sit next to Alison, the Doctor shifts direction and now presses themselves against the left armrest. “Hey, Master,” they call to him, “you’re going to have to give up your spot. Bill wants Alison.”

“I’ve known that from the moment they first laid eyes on each other,” replies the Magister. “At this particular moment, however, I believe that the Seeker wants the Doctor.”

“The Seeker...wants the Doctor?” the Doctor repeats, as if they have no clue who these people are.

“Um, yeah.” Bill, compacting her hair on the top of her scalp, looks down into her lap. “If you don’t mind... You said you’d sing me, and that would be -- “

“We tried holding each other fast,” Alison speaks up, “but we were both too worried, so it didn’t help much.”

“Prescription for snuggles!” calls Bill. “To be administered by the Doctor, stat, as often as necessary, for as long they can stand it before they get tired -- “

“No no no no!” Shaking their head, the Doctor stretches out their arms. Bill rises carefully from her chair, and they take her into a hug. “These are over-the-counter snuggles, no prescription needed. And you can have them as often as you want them, for as long as you need them, because I’ll never get tired of snuggling you [sniff!], and...oh. Oh dear. I’m crying again,” they observe, dripping tears into Bill’s hair. “I’m sorry, Bill my dear. Really I am. I’m not sad -- at least I don’t think I am -- so I shouldn’t be crying. Why am I crying? I hope I’m not making you ups -- “

Unwinding gracefully from under Alison’s hands, the Magister now stands. He puts his hand over the Doctor’s mouth. “Shut up, you old fool,” he says, his words quiet and short.

“Prof!” reproves Bill.

“Mmph?” says the Doctor, lifting their chin up the the Magister.

“You’re crying with happiness,” explains the Magister to the Doctor, his voice as warm as the
scented air around them, “because you love everything and everyone in the whole universe, particularly those people sharing the couch with you. Now then...shut up and enjoy it.” He strides to Alison and picks her up off the couch.

“Squeeeeee!” cries Alison, suddenly up in the air. She can hear the thump and scuttle of several alarmed cats fleeing. Bill giggles.

“Shhhhhh!” says the Doctor, louder than Alison’s squeal. “We’re supposed to be shutting up and enjoying it.”

The Magister sits down next to the Doctor and Bill with Alison tucked firmly in his arms. “Ah yes... With my inevitable spouse blowing like an untuned recorder, my Domina piercing my eardrums, and her Seeker laughing at my auditory torture, I am truly the most fortunate of individuals.”

“Tace,” says Alison softly, leaning against her robot’s chest. “Tace, mi Magistre.”

Hearing in her voice that she’d like him to cut the sarcasm, he does. “Tace,” he says to her, “my good Domina. Be my good Domina.” He claps her head against his breast, one hand down against her cheek, the other arm binding her to him. The strength and pressure with which he holds her press all that queasy internal itching right out of her. He keeps her; he stills her; he keeps her still. He forces her to be still by keeping her so close that she cannot move. And so, finally, she is still. “Ah,” he says, hugging her more tightly for a moment, “good.”

Everyone eventually quits fidgeting. As Alison quiets her breathing, so does the Magister, and, after some rustling and murmured negotiation, Bill and her Doctor nestle more comfortably beside Alison and her robot, who sends his purrs directly from his core into hers. The bright tree lights pale down, and the darkness encloses the four of them in a sweet blanket of sandalwood. Yes, the war begins tomorrow, but, for now, there is peace.
Everyone Dresses Up

Chapter Summary

Alison, Bill, Charlie, and the Time Dorks dress up for the revolting rally. Bill's knowledge of fashion is revealed. Sartorial preferences are discussed. Gibes are traded. Alison, Bill, the Magister, and the Doctor are getting along very well. Razor is disgusted.

“Your turn, Alisonshine!” sings out Bill, punctuating the announcement with a few rocket sound effects from her chair. It’s the morning of the rally, and all of Anima’s current inhabitants, Alison, the Magister, Bill, the Doctor, Charlie, and Razor, gather in the Doctor’s dressing room. “I bet you can’t stump me...unless it’s an alien thing, of course, but most of the stuff in here is human.” Bill waves her arms at the clothing heaped on the floor and furniture, the hats and scarves draped on wall racks, and the clutter of handheld appliances and cosmetics across all flat surfaces. While the humans wait for the Time Dorks to finish getting ready, they amuse themselves by testing Bill’s encyclopedic knowledge of clothing and accessories.

Alison steps gingerly through a thicket of parasols and wriggles as her dress flutters against her legs. Upon hearing that the Doctor sometimes used petals, stems, and leaves as fashion, Razor insisted that she, Bill, and Charlie should dress in flowers. So now she wears a rose dress, long-sleeve and dark purple, veined with and illuminated at the edges by translucent red. It fits her closely about the arms and core, then falls past her knees to a zigzag hem made by the overlapping petals. She has to admit that it looks striking, especially when coordinated with some sweeps of dark red, sparkly eyeshadow. But the flowers’ soft, slightly adhesive quality makes her skin clench up when she thinks about it.

Fortunately, Alison also wears one of the Magister’s capes -- a lightweight one of pine green -- about which she had to glare at Razor until he quit objecting about its interference with his organic aesthetic. Smoothing a corner of her robot’s cape against her cheek, she fills her nerves with the dense roughness of its wool. It smells like him too: a touch of old, sweet pipe tobacco. She sits sideways in a white wicker chair, leaning one arm on its heart-shaped back, distracting herself with the feel of regular clothes. On the nearest vanity, Alison sees a container of orange glop labeled Rejuven8. “What the hell is this?” she asks Bill. The list of ingredients doesn’t provide any clues.

Weaving around piles of clothes, Bill moves her chair forward so she can take the container from Alison. Unlike Alison, she’s made for flowers. She wears a loose, boxy, cap-sleeved dress, constructed of vibrant yellow sunflower petals set so closely side by side that she seems to be wearing a pleated chiton. A band of dark green leaf cinches just under her breasts. Her hair, braided closely against her scalp, fluffs into a bun at the back of her crown, more sunflower petals arrayed around it like a corona. With a soft, brick-like tone on her lips and golden flecks covering from her eyelashes up to her long eyebrows, she shines even more than usual. Alison just wants to stare at her forever and drink in her light.
“Oh, that’s easy,” Bill says, not even looking at the label. “It’s for hiding bags under your eyes. They look sort of purple, at least on really pale skin like the Doctor’s. If you put something orange on them, it kind of cancels them out. Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks Alison. “It’s just basic color theory.”

“You know so much about clothes and makeup and stuff. I’m impressed!”

“Really?” Bill makes skeptical humps of her eyebrows. “But...I thought most girls did.”

“Uhhhh...no!” Charlie, one gloved hand holding a fistful of her dress, nearly trips over a shoe rack. Righting herself, she puts a strut in her step. She loves dressing up as much as the Magister does, and she’s thrilled that, somehow, he found time to design and make a gown for her. It’s got a high lacy neck, huge puffs at the shoulders, a tight, sloping bodice, and a narrow bell of a skirt, burdened at back with a significant bustle and train. She would look like an Edwardian fashion plate, from the soaring curly updo to the narrow pointy shoes, if her outfit weren’t made of dove grey lilies that warm her tannish complexion. “We make do with fuckin’ candle wax and charcoal around here, so I just didn’t even bother. And then, of course, I didn’t even have a face for a while, so this is just… Fuck! I could spend like a year in here, just trying shit on.” She tries to twirl in joy, but her train catches on a loose stack of trousers.

“No seriously, I’m getting like a remedial education here,” Alison says to Bill. “My mum and my gram tried to teach me this stuff. I remember becoming bored and just reading all the packages and trying to figure out what the chemicals were from the Greek and Latin roots.”

Bill giggles. “Awwww, of course you would, Alisonshine. But I think it’s fun. You can wear something like Charlie has on and feel old-fashioned and elegant. Or you can wear what you’ve got on, and then you’re like made of secrets and magic. It’s like… It’s like reading a book that’s so good that you feel like you become part of the story, except you can actually make yourself into something different!”

Alison’s grin stretches across her face. When Bill talks about clothes and costumes, her eyes start glimmering, like brown glass with light shining through. All the lines on her face fly into upward curves, and she reminds Alison of her robot when he’s rhapsodizing about one of his interests. “You should get together with the Magister,” Alison says. “He’ll talk clothes with you for hours and even design stuff for you.”

“Yeah,” says Bill, “but would he tell me what to wear on dates?”
“Harry did that?” Charlie glances toward the back of the room, where the Magister, the Doctor, and Razor cluster around yet another vanity. “What’s his fuckin’ problem? Don’t tell me he told you to be all modest and shit so you didn’t get raped.”

“Whoa, no!” Bill holds up her hands. “In fact, he did the exact opposite. One time this drunk girl followed me out from a club. She’d never seen anyone with natural hair because the pollution here just wrecks it. She was like, *It’s so pretty! I want to touch it!* I was trying to get away from her on my own, but then Razor’s in my head like, *Fuck it. People like that never listen.* He appears out of nowhere -- because he’s good at that -- and tells her he knows what she’s been doing with the heart of the resistance. I think he wanted to break her fingers, but I distracted him, so he just ended up making her wet herself.”

“Shit. Talk about overprotective. My mum was like that, always passing judgment on my clothes. It was a combination of micromanagement and thinking that I was an extension of her just because we shared the same genes.” Alison makes a face.

“Ugh!” Razor expels a huge sigh, and everyone turns to look at him. He does a quick half-circle away from a full-length mirror, right hand on his joystick, left hand holding up something as if it’s a mouse dropping. If Alison, Bill, and Charlie are the flowers, then he’s the thorn, his hair dark and spiked out. He wears a narrow, slimly tailored suit of warm, blackish brown, with a black shirt and textural, bark-like striations on both pants and waistcoat. A red ascot streams from his throat. His shiny shoes are brownish red leather, just like his fingerless gloves. He would look as perfectly sharp as an edged weapon except for his unfinished eye makeup. “Crumbly...gritty...a thoroughly excremental shade of brown. Worst eyeliner ever!” he proclaims, his bright red mouth cutting a disgusted angle within the confines of his goatee.

The Magister, seated on a plump pink fainting couch, bends over a mass of aquamarine sequins, then glances up when he hears his counterpart. “I gave you much better, didn’t I?” he asks. In the midst of sewing something, he holds a needle between left thumb and forefinger. Dressed in white jacket and tails, he looks like the inverse of his robot butler self.

He, Alison notices, has already finished his makeup. Unlike Razor, he favors no strikingly apparent color, only some carefully calculated blend of tints that dramatically sharpens his cheekbones, his nose, his jawline, and his chin. Alison assumes that he’s going for a scary mien in his role as head of security, but to her he seems even more himself with his expressive essentials highlighted. She doesn’t want to run away from him; she wants to hug him, but contents herself with a little happy dance in her chair.

“I used it up during dress rehearsals. --And you,” adds Razor, focusing on the Doctor, “don’t have anything suitably subtle.”
“Of course not!” The Doctor, whose vaguely Edwardian suit features a periwinkle paisley pattern on a white field, rolls their eyes. Unusually enough, their pale blue suede shoes have no scuff marks, their matching gloves no holes. In fact, their entire ensemble shows no stains or runs; their hair, heavily subdued by some sort of oil, all points in the same direction, and their earrings, huge silver shields hung with beads, match. Their inevitable spouse must have overseen their toilette carefully indeed.

“Makeup is paint for your face,” the Doctor informs Razor. “What’s the point of subtlety?” In illustration of this philosophy, they wear lipstick so blue that it’s almost black, as well as a heavy amount of deep grey eyeshadow. In theory, none of what they’re wearing really goes together, but the Doctor specializes in making the impossible possible.

The Magister says to Razor, “You used up six tubes?” Then he finishes sewing, cuts the thread, and hands the pile of sequins to the Doctor. “Your vest. I’ve stitched it closed, so you have no more buttons to lose.”

There’s a chime from his TARDIS Talk cell phone, models of which he has also given to his security squads. “Ah good!” says the Magister. “The last contingent from Dead Beggars’ Alley has been picked up and seated without incident.” He has been monitoring Anima as she circulates through Dystopiaville, collecting audience members from designated stops. Thanks to Razor’s detailed knowledge of Night Patrol circuits, the Magister’s careful scheduling, and Anima’s ability to expand, there are now thousands of people in the Epiphany Room, waiting to revolt.

As the Doctor pulls down their vest over their head, their hair moves out of place, several locks falling down to brush their temples. A cufflink pops off and hits the floor. The Magister, putting away his TARDIS Talk phone, shakes his head. He slicks the Doctor’s hair into position and takes their chin in hand. “I do believe my efforts are wasted on you, dearest possession of mine. You are the very personification of chaos.”

“They’re not wasted, Master,” says the Doctor, looking into his face with a big, dreamy grin. “They’re beautiful, and the creation of beauty is never a waste.”

“Oh course I used all six tubes.” Razor, appearing faintly ill at the display of affection, dabs the objectionable eyeliner from his face. “I was experimenting with the look.”

The Doctor smirks at Razor. “Wow, and I thought the Master was a perfectionist!”

“I am the Master!” Razor glares.
“Yes, thank you for reminding me,” says the Doctor. “Between all the control freakery and maximum drama, I completely forgot.” Alison, Bill, and Charlie, drawing closer, start snickering. Though the Doctor prefers puns and playful humor, their dry sarcasm can match the Magister’s on occasion.

Razor snorts. “At least I have more taste than to use glitter in my personal adornments.”

“And some of us have the truly visionary capacity to imagine a multiverse in which glitter is so much more than a mere aesthetic accessory! It’s a tangible manifestation of magic and wonder. Everything could use a little glitter.” The Doctor unfolds their arms over their head in an arc, and the sequins on their vest, as well as their matching cravat, shimmer like large pieces of glitter.

The humans laugh even louder. “It’s true!” Bill says to Alison and Charlie. “This eyeshadow was the Doctor’s idea.” She points at her golden lids. “Razor thought it was too much and artificial, but I think it brings everything together. Plus it’s sparkly!”

“Can’t argue with sparkles.” Charlie shrugs.

“Is Razor ever going to be done?” Alison wonders. “We were all done in like an hour, and he’s been at this for -- what? -- like four? Five? What the hell is it with Time Dorks and their makeup?”

“Got a theory about that actually!” Bill says. “You know how, in sci-fi, aliens tend to look human? That’s always annoyed me. Wouldn’t you think that aliens would look...well, alien? Like they’d be so weird that they’d be beyond our ken because we can’t think in enough dimensions to imagine them or something?”

“Unless, of course, there’s like fuckin’ coincidental evolution or some shit,” says Charlie, “to explain how humans develop like twice, once on Earth, once on Mondas.”

“Well, maybe Gallifreyans actually really are beyond our ken,” suggests Alison, “and they just pretend to look humanoid so they don’t blow our minds.” She thinks of how the Magister mimics a biological state until he feels like it, whereupon he removes his faceplate for shock value. Yeah, it’s definitely plausible that he and the other Time Dorks are strategically pretending to look like Homo sapiens.

“Not sure what Time Dorks really look like,” says Bill, “but that was all sort of a tangent. Here’s my theory. They’re like us, psychologically speaking, only more so. We take an hour to do our makeup; they need like five years! Time Dorks are like the human aliens of sci-fi stories, multiplied by a factor of...oh, scientifically speaking, I’d say...a billion and two.”

Razor utters a gasp just as loud and gusty as his earlier sigh. “What?” he cries in Bill’s direction.

“Think about it.” Bill spreads her arms out in a gesture reminiscent of the Doctor’s. “On Earth, we’ve got old white guys who colonized every single continent; on Gallifrey, they’ve got a bunch of suspiciously white, suspiciously Lord-type people who run around, sticking their noses in a whole timeline.”

“We do not!” says Razor.
Bill ignores him. “We ruin our entire planet with World Wars; they mess up the entire universe with Time Wars... They’re like us, only more so.”

“Hmmmm...” The Doctor strokes their chin. “That’s either a really big insult,” they say to Bill, “given your species’ destructive tendencies, or a really big compliment, given your species’ ingenuity and adaptability.” After a moment of reflection, they say, “I think it’s probably both -- and a brilliant analysis to boot.”

“Really? You think so?” Bill’s eyes shine as she turns toward the Doctor.

“My dear Seeker,” says the Magister, close to purring with happiness, “the Doctor thinks that you are brilliant because you are.”

“Maybe that’s why I’ve always been fascinated by humans.” The Doctor’s eyes spark with inspiration, then unfocus as they go off on a tangent of thought.

“Are you kidding me?” Razor stares at them.

“Exactly!” Alison hops in her seat, picking up Bill’s line of thought. “When I first started traveling with the Doctor, they told me that they and the Magister got sent on missions by the High Council of White Guys. I was like, So you’re like space versions of Sir Walter Raleigh, under charter by the crown.”

Razor appeals to the Magister. “Can’t you do something with your Dominatrix? Make her shut up or something?”

“No,” says the Magister. “I’ve told my inevitable spouse the very same thing. I have always found it unconscionable that they submit to the authoritarian directives of a remote entity that has little regard or care for the Doctor’s ultimate benefit or safety -- “

“--When they could instead be submitting to the directives of their spouse in the comfort of their very own home!” interrupts Alison with a laugh.

“Anyway, Master,” interrupts the Doctor, “Bill and Alison aren’t shutting up because I think they’re right. What Alison and my Master said got me thinking. And that’s why I’m not interfering on behalf of the Council anymore.”

“Yeah, now you’re just throwing things in black holes to satisfy your own curiosity,” says Charlie, who has heard the story of the Doctor’s experiments that brought them in the vicinity of Otalux Four Eleven in the first place.

The Doctor nods vigorously. “Right, now I interfere on behalf of my own insatiable inquisitiveness!” They beam, as if reporting a great accomplishment.
“And look where that’s gotten us,” murmurs the Magister.

“We’re rescuing one of the loveliest people in this universe,” returns the Doctor. “What’s wrong with that? Besides, I cut with the colonialists.”

“Well, felicitations to you, my dear Doctor,” Razor mutters. “I still find Miss Potts’ speculation that our species is human, only more so, repugnant and evolutionarily implausible. Now...might I trouble you for some decent eyeliner? I go on in twenty-five minutes, and I’m having a makeup emergency here.”
Charlie and Bill Rally Dystopiaville

Chapter Summary

Alison accompanies Charlie and Bill on the stage at Razor's revolting rally. Charlie speaks, and people aren't sure what to make of her. Bill speaks, and everyone loves her. Alison can't stand crowds.

“Fu-uck. That’s a lot of people,” whispers Charlie into the bank of microphones at the lectern in the Epiphany Room. Her words echo to all extents of the amphitheatre, and the larger versions of her on the huge monitor duck their head when she does. “Ya know – it’s one thing to go up against crowds when you’re programmed to do it, when you’ve got a weapon in your hand and Night Patrol armor on your face to scare the shit out of people. It’s another thing to do it practically fuckin’ naked, with nothing but your words to defend you.”

Alison and Bill sit behind her on the stage, holding hands. Alison figures that Charlie’s Cyber-enhanced sight must be better than plain old human eyeballs because, in the glare of all the spotlights, she sees very little of the crowd. In fact, she feels as if she, Bill, and Charlie hover in a room made of light, its limits ill-defined by the concentration of spotlights on the center stage. Surrounding the three of them is just darkness. There are people out there -- over seven thousand of them, according to mental messages that Bill has received from Razor. But they’re so quiet and Alison’s sight so dazzled that the vastness around them seems empty. She supposes that’s a good thing because crowds unnerve her.

Alison, Bill, and Charlie prepared their writing supplies so that they could do running commentary on Razor’s part of the rally, but Bill is already handing Alison a note. Receiving it as smoothly and unobtrusively as possible, Alison spreads it out in her lap to read without looking like she’s really reading: BS Harry just came into my head and told me to get C back on track.

Alison glances at Charlie, who, head still bowed, is trying to keep her cool. Fuck off, Harry! she writes back.

“Fuck it!” Charlie, her hands clenched on the edges of the lectern, pricks her head up with a decisive toss. “Let’s just get this out of the way. Yeah, I’m a Cyber person.”

Astonishment rustles through the crowd. “You don’t look like one!” someone calls.

“Well, um, it’s the new printable face tech that you’ve probably heard of. Didn’t you send the
news about that out to everyone, Bill and Alison?” Charlie turns to them; they nod. “Anyway, I’ve been repersoned and refaced. But...um...I wasn’t just one of those partially converted people in the hospital. I was fully converted. I was part of the Night Patrol. My name’s Charlie Foxtrot because I sure as fuck can’t go back to my old life and my old name.”

“The Night Patrol? Here?” Some attendees sound ready to run away.

Others are out for blood: “Traitor! Killer! Chimney fucker!”

*BSH wants C off the stage NOW for going off script*, Bill reports. *Told him to trust her.*

Alison glances at the four security officers, who, white-suited, stand behind her and Bill. As requested, they’re guarding Charlie. They’re also in telepathic communication with the Magister. But they’re also obviously getting psychic communiques from Razor, who’s probably telling them to evacuate Charlie.

The guard that Alison likes best, Lieutenant Travertine, takes a step toward Charlie. Before Alison, Bill, and Charlie went on stage, the Magister introduced them to their security detail: the Lieutenant and her troops. According to the Magister, the security guards self-organized along military lines, which, along with their insistence on *cool-looking uniforms*, makes Alison think that they’d really rather be waging direct war on Irons.

After saluting the three of them, Lieutenant Travertine turned to the Magister. *But Master...I know we answer to you, but what’s the proper response, Master, if we get orders from Razor that conflict with yours? Should we follow those? I’m assuming, Master, that you answer to him, but I just want to be certain of the proper chain of command, Master.* She saluted again. Lieutenant Travertine and her troops [soldiers? privates?] were obviously the best people for the job, according to the Magister’s judgment. Alison also realized, however, that the Lieutenant was just as obviously about twenty years old and absolutely thrilled to be playing army games.

*I’m working with him, not answering to him*, the Magister replied with some sharpness. *No, please, there’s no need to apologize and salute. In any event, if there are conflicts, let me know of the major ones. Minor ones, though, you can resolve with your own best judgment.* Lieutenant Travertine frowned; his instructions for independent thought didn’t fit into her hierarchical fantasies. The Magister sighed and indulged her. *Or look to the Domina if you’re unsure. That’s Alison Cheney to you.*

And that’s what Lieutenant Travertine is doing at this moment. Razor’s wish to remove Charlie from the podium conflicts with the lieutenant’s ultimate goal: to ensure that her charges make their
presentations safely and completely. Catching her eye, the lieutenant asks Alison for guidance.

*Leave her be, please,* Alison writes. *Trust her.* She shows the sign to the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Travertine salutes and retreats.

“Wait! Please! Listen!” Charlie holds up her hands to the crowd, surrendering. “Don’t run away! I did the dictator’s dirty work. I probably hurt and humiliated a bunch of people who are here today. I’m so, so, so fuckin’ sorry.” She drops her head again. “Even though I literally wasn’t in control of myself, it’s still all my fucking fault, and I don’t know how to make it up to you. I’m a robot and a traitor, and I can’t even fucking cry about it because then I’d probably fucking rust.” Her voice glitches and scratches. “You don’t need to call me a killer and a chimney fucker because I already know what I am.

“Irons took everything from me. My twin brother, who died in the womb because we weren’t rich enough to go to the hospital. My older sister, snatched off the street from her graduation party to become a robot soldier in Irons’ neverending war games. My chance at tech college because, with her gone, I had to stay home and take care of my sick dads. My husband -- the NPs got him when he and me and my wife were on our honeymoon. And my entire body got taken when I was robotified. There ain’t nothing fuckin’ left of me.” Even her voice shudders to a stop.

There’s complete silence for a moment, and then a piercing shriek resounds from somewhere in the audience. “Sarah! That’s Sarah! Junie, Junie, Junie, she’s alive!”

Charlie hunches over the microphones. “Um...Gardenia?”

“Sarah -- Charlie, Charlie, Charlie my love…” Gardenia dissolves into incoherent sobs.

Bill waves a sheet of paper at Charlie. *“Batshit Harry wants to...what?”* Charlie, squinting, tries to read in the glare. *“Batshit Harry wants to know...if you’d like your spouses to come up onstage,”* she reads into the microphone. Alison smirks, realizing that the entire audience just heard Razor called *Batshit Harry.* *“He says it would be a powerful moment. Yeah... But... I... Um...”* She’s clinging to the podium again. “But...my speech... I have to...”

Writing is taking too long. “Tell Razor to send security to take Gardenia and Junie backstage to meet with Charlie afterward,” Alison whispers to Bill. “And tell him to make sure to tell them that she’s mortally terrified they’ll reject her on account of being a chimney fucker. It’s not that she’s
been brainwashed out of loving them; it’s just that she’s scared.”

With two thumbs up, Bill follows Alison’s directions.

Alison steps up to the podium. “Charlie, you don’t have to do anything right now. Gardenia and Junie will be backstage when you’re ready to talk to them. Gardenia and Junie,” she says, looking out into the invisible audience, “some security will be there shortly to take you backstage. Thank you. Okay, back to you, Charlie.”

More silence. Charlie blinks into the banks of spotlights. “Yeah…they thought I was dead,” she says eventually. “My… My own fuckin’ spouses thought I was dead. --Because that’s what Irons does. They kill people; they steal from them. And I’m not the only one that they’ve stolen from, and neither are Junie and Gardenia. Irons has stolen from everyone in this city.

“And I kind of lied when I said there was nothing left of me,” says Charlie, voice strengthening and heightening in volume. “There is something left, and it’s my fucking rage!” She comes so close to the microphones that they squeal. “Irons has been turning us against each other, but it’s time to band together and aim that rage at its proper target: them. Feed or fight! Feed or fight! / What’s it gonna be tonight? This is our revolution, and I say it’s time we fight.”

As Charlie steps back from the microphones, the crowd reverberates with applause. “Feed or fight! Feed or fight!” Some people pick up the rhyme of the beaters as well.

Alison shivers, her heart picking up tempo along with the chant. It’s time for Bill to speak. “Ready?” she mouths to Bill.

“No,” says Bill, “but I have you, and it’s time.” She drives to the podium, then steps carefully from her chair. Alison puts her left hand in Bill’s right.

The cheers change tenor. A high pitch of joy, like Alison’s squee multiplied by the thousands, fills the amphitheatre. People scream Bill’s name like she’s a celebrity.

Now that her eyes have adjusted a bit to the lights in the Epiphany Room, Alison makes out the silhouettes of attendees jumping and waving their arms, like the Doctor when they become excited. She sees rows and rows of enthusiastic people about her, as far back and as high up as she can discern. “Fu-uck,” she echoes Charlie under her breath. “That is a lot of people.” She feels like she’s in a library at the base of a leaning bookshelf. She imagines it creaking under the weight of
too many books; it’s going to descend upon her, flattening her...

“Hi, everyone!” says Bill. Her forward lean and her friendly wave remind Alison of the Doctor.

“Hi, Bill!” Everyone greets her in return. Alison detaches from Bill to cover her ears, but the noise still presses in through her hands.

“I’m Bill Potts, and you all know I’m from Earth, yeah?”

“Yes! Yeah! Of course we do! But now you’re here, and we’re glad to have you!”

Bill pauses until the audience quiets down. “We don’t have Cyborganics or mind control broadcasts there,” she says. “The daily life of Dystopiaville, for almost everyone on Earth, me included, is what Earthlings read about in science fiction.”

Charlie gasps. Alison sneaks a peek sideways to see Charlie’s eyes shining at the possibility of a world where Cyber conversion doesn’t exist.

“Anyway,” Bill goes on, her voice confident and conversational, “I grew up reading science fiction, and I learned about wonder, wonder and hope and love. If your air and your mind are being poisoned by fear, you have to realize that you’re not the only one afraid. Everyone else is afraid too. Everyone else wants something better. I learned that you always have to keep looking through the smog, past the black holes, into the stars, for that bit of hope, that little bit of love, that next adventure that’s going to sustain you.

“So...yeah...that’s what I did.” Her voice lowers as she remembers. “Crashed here; my friends died, and I kind of took on this work to sustain myself. And it did, because what you’re doing here is right and true and necessary. I’ve done good here that I’ll never forget, and I’ve made friends that I’ll always remember. I’m so grateful for your kindness and generosity.” Interlacing her fingers, she presses them against her heart. Her lower lip twitches; she’s trying really hard not to cry. “Your passion and your dedication are just amazing. Thank you. It’s been an honor.”

Every single person who is able rises to their feet and claps hard. Every single person who is able yells, “We love you!” People who can neither applaud nor speak either sign or hold up placards. BILL -- she’s revolting! says one. My heart belongs to the revolution Bill Potts! proclaims another. Some are just flags with sunflowers on them. The ones referring specifically to Razor are, Alison notes, a distinct minority.
“They love you, Bill of my heart,” Alison whispers to her, squeezing her hand. “They might be going along with Batshit Harry because he can help them get rid of Irons, but you’re the one that they love.”

“I knooooow,” says Bill with a slightly embarrassed moan. “Isn’t that wild?”

The audience take several minutes to calm themselves. Alison wishes that she didn’t have eardrums because they’re still vibrating with the roar of the Dystopiaville citizens’ devotion. “But...the thing is...this isn’t my story,” Bill tells them eventually. “Yeah, I’m a Cyborganic, so of course I have a personal interest in seeing everyone free and happy and out from under Irons’ control. But I’m not from here, so it’s literally not my place to be the heart of your resistance.”

“Oh... But... You are!” Dismay rolls through the assemblage. The people can tell that some unhappy news is coming.

“Charlie was talking about rage and hope.” Bill’s eyes shine in the spotlights, like spotlights of their own. She’s about to cry. “The more that’s been taken from you, the angrier you’ve become and the more you’ve imagined how things could be different. Inside each and every one of you -- and inside all the people who feel the same -- there’s something that has survived everything Irons has done, some invincible kernel of rage and love. That’s the heart of the resistance. It was always you, all of you.

“I don’t want to co-opt your revolution or stand in your way, so that’s why this isn’t just a welcome speech. It’s also a goodbye speech. You all know that I’ve wanted to go home ever since I got here. And now I have the chance to.”

“Awwww…” A sigh goes through the audience. As much as there’s disappointment in it, it’s also warm; they’re happy for her.

“This is...Alison, Alison Cheney,” says Bill, sniffling and putting her arm around Alison. “She’s… She’s my…”

_Friend? Girlfriend? Inevitable spouse?_ Alison wonders what she’s going to say.

“She’s...Alison,” Bill, now crying, says simply, as if words can’t do justice to everything that Alison is. “She’s...my...Alison.”
“Squeeeeee!” Alison jumps like an audience member. She’s never been so happy to be someone’s Alison.

“She answered my distress call; she’s taking me home. I’m finally going to be safe...safe and whole and happy.” Bill turns away from the microphones, which yet pick up the sounds of her sniffling and wiping her eyes. “And... And so are you, all of you,” she says to the Dystopiaville citizens, “as long as...you hang onto...the wonder and the hope and the love. Goodb -- “ A sob leaps out of her, and she never finishes the word, plunking back down in her chair again to cry.
Alison runs away from the tumult of the rally, followed by Bill and Charlie. People start harassing Charlie. Bill tries to reason with them, but violence ensues.

Lieutenant Travertine and her guards escort Alison, Bill, and Charlie from the stage just as Razor wheels on. The crowd goes wild. Alison has seen that phrase so often that it’s a cliche, but now, suddenly, it strikes her with new meaning. Though she’s in the dark, behind the curtains, she knows with certainty that they’re going wild because she can hear it happening.

Yet again the audience’s voices shift tone. This isn’t the excited chant that Charlie and her rage elicited, nor the joyful dedication with which people called out to Bill, whom they loved. The people are screaming; the people are roaring; the people are scraping their throats raw. Their sound fills the air with all the suffocating headiness of a fire.

Alison remembers that, back when the Shalka kidnapped her, they took her down to their lava caverns below Lannet. They screamed so hard that she felt their sound knock against her like hammers and drive into her like nails. The scream of the Shalka destroyed things; it rearranged matter; it turned the world upside-down. And the sound that crashes upon her ears now is just the same. It’s a cry of grief and pain, which the Shalka never felt, but also a cry of violence and power.

And Razor, of course, wants this. A momentary hush occurs, and he speaks, his voice escalating on each word: “Friends...you -- are -- my -- revolution!” She glances at one of the techs’ monitors as she passes, and there he is, arms outstretched, uplifted. A camera zooms in on his face. His eyes closed, mouth spread as wide as possible in a grin, he appears to be full of an utterly peaceful joy.

Then he sits up straight, opens his eyes, closes down his smile slightly, and looks around. Alison, shuddering, physically backs away from the screen. The last time she saw that look, she and Sylvie were at PlayCon, a kinky convention, too overawed at the moment to do anything more than people watch. Unfortunately, they had quickly seen a quintessential specimen of *Dominator creepificatus*, Alison’s bullshit Latin term for the character type known in English as *the creepy dom*. *D. creepificatus* was a species of older dudes who specifically targeted very young women with very little kinky experience and demanded insta-submission. If a woman expressed misgivings, *D. creepificatus* steamrolled them by assuring her that this was how real kinky people operated.

Since Alison and Sylvie couldn’t have this specimen thrown out of the con just for existing, they
contented themselves by adding nature documentary narration to his activities. Then the creepy dom started chatting with a young woman who was passing by his bench. Alison and Sylvie quit narrating and watched more closely.

And they saw on that creepy dom’s face the exact same expression that she now sees on Razor’s. The placid set to the mouth, the content lowering of the lids, the anticipatory flare of the nostrils -- everything about it connoted the predatory smugness of someone who had achieved power over their target. As soon as Alison and Sylvie saw that smirk on D. creepificatus’ face, they swung into action, breaking up the conversation and giving the woman a chance to escape.

“Fuck…” says Alison. Everything hits her at once, and she shuts her eyes. The people are screaming again, and she can’t shake the image of Razor’s features as he realizes his power over them. She claps her hands to her ears, but now the sound seems to be coming from inside her skull as well. She imagined the crowd as an unsteady bookcase looming over her earlier, and now it’s falling upon her.

“Alison?” says Charlie.

“Alisonshine, what’s wrong?” asks Bill.

“Um…Domina?” Lieutenant Travertine, who is probably saluting her right now, ventures.

“This… Too much!” Alison bursts out. “I need quiet! I need silence! I need my robot!” She runs.

Alison doesn’t know where she’s running, but she doesn’t care. She only knows that she has to get away. Her head down, she launches herself down straightaways and around corners, trying to escape the noise.

She finally stops because there’s a stitch in her side. Panting, she looks around. She has entered a part of Anima that she has never seen before, a white hallway with black tile. A large sign in black, sans serif capitals, points the way to the toilets, in a room at the end of the hall. Maybe twenty people stand around the entrance to the toilets, and a queue stretches about five people out the door. The people converse, but that’s the only noise beyond Alison’s quick breathing. Ah…she has finally lost the rally.

Turning around, she glances back the way that she came and sees that she has also lost Lieutenant Travertine and her troops. --But she hasn’t lost Bill and Charlie. The two of them swoop around the
corner, Bill leaning on her joystick, as if more pressure will make it go faster. Charlie, who, as a Cyber person, cannot run, matches Bill’s pace by standing on the back on Bill’s chair and holding onto her handlebars. Bill stops neatly within centimeters of Alison, and Charlie hops off the back of the chair. “Alisonshine!” says Bill. “Tell me what’s wrong!”

“The sound...was like the scream of the Shalka.” Alison presses her head against Bill’s chest as the two hug. “And Razor...was like a vampire, and he was just feeding off their bloodlust. I hate crowds anyway, and that was just...”

“Bill! Bill, what are you and your Alison doing, hanging around with an NP?” someone says.

Alison and Bill pull apart. Some of the people who were out in front of the loos now circle them. “What? She’s my friend,” Bill says. “Leave Charlie alone.”

“Charlie Foxtrot!” says another person, sneering. “That’s just like a serial number prefix for a squad or a platoon or whatever of NPs.”

“Yeah, you don’t have a name,” says a third person, glaring at Charlie.

Alison folds her arms. She moves closer to Charlie, her skin prickling in waves along her forearms. She feels cold suddenly, despite the Magister’s cloak about her shoulders. Something bad is going to happen.

“Oh fuck you!” Charlie, now shoulder to shoulder with Alison, snaps to the person insulting her. “That is my fuckin’ name! I made it my name because I changed when I got converted. I’m not who I was. This is who I am.”

“A robot -- that’s what you are! Chimney-fucking robot!”

Alison really should be doing something about this. She’s defused rowdy pub patrons and bar brawls with deafening whistles and, in some cases, a well-placed glower. She’s defeated mind-raping Shalka and survived a psychic vampire. She has made the worst villain in her universe hers, and, while she hasn’t done anything similar with his counterpart over here, she’s at least made him behave himself. She’s the one who tells the truth. She’s the one who does the right thing. She’s the one who ostensibly rules her universe. She’s the Magister’s Domina, whose every word contains power. But now her thoughts are blank, and she has no words to speak.
“There’s nothing wrong with robots,” Bill says. Her voice, as always, is even and level; she’s trying to reason with them, but Alison knows it’s not going to work.

“Irons is a robot!”

“So? So am I, but that doesn’t make me a totalitarian dictator, does it? Being robotic isn’t inherently good or bad. It just is. It’s the choices you make after turning into a robot that determine whether you’re good or evil. And Charlie didn’t choose to do what she did,” says Bill, “just like none of the people you know who were taken and turned into NPs chose to become NPs, just like I didn’t choose to become a Cyborganic, just like none of us chose to have Irons in power. We all want them gone, yeah? And we all want to be free to make our own choices, to do whatever we want. And we’re not hurting you, and we just need to get back to, um, our dressing room, so please let us through.” Bill honks her horn, and people spring backward, probably thinking that her chair, like Razor’s, is weaponized.

“But she did hurt us.” A person grabs Charlie by the arm.

“Let me...Let me go.” Charlie tries to shake the person loose.

“She said so herself.” Someone else seizes Charlie’s other arm.

“Let me go.” Charlie’s voice goes low; her eyes are flickering like candles buffeted by the wind. “I’m stronger than you -- a lot stronger -- and I don’t want -- “

“--You don’t want to have to hurt us -- is that it?” The person who called Charlie a chimney fucker puts their arm around her neck from behind. “Too bad -- you already have. You’ve arrested our children, stolen our friends -- “

“I’m sorry! I never wanted to!” Charlie, blinking quickly, stays completely still and unresisting in the three people’s arms. “I never wanted to hurt people! I don’t want to hurt people!” Alison wonders exactly how much force she, as a fully converted Cyber person, is holding back.

A roar cuts off Alison’s thought: the bellow of mighty engines, as if a majestic spacecraft is descending. “Please!” cries Bill.

Alison registers that the sound comes from Bill -- or, rather, from her chair. Well, good on the
Doctor for tricking out Bill’s wheels with all those super sound effects, and good on Bill for figuring out how to use them strategically. She has adapted her chair’s sounds so seamlessly for use as her punctuation that Alison can’t imagine Bill without the accompaniment of her wheelchair for emphasis. Staring with the rest of the crowd, she waits to see what Bill will do next.

“This rally isn’t about ganging up on each other! It’s about banding together.” Bill interlocks her fingers in illustration. “Robots aren’t your enemies. Charlie’s not your enemy. I’m not your enemy. Irons is. It’s them we’re fighting, not each other.”

“Yeah, but Irons is the one making the robots.”

“Irons is the one turning people into chimney fuckers.”

“And robots are chimney fuckers.”

“Irons needs to die -- and their chimney fuckers too.”

“Really? Really?” Bill puts her hands to the sides of her hair, clamping her head in incredulity. “Do you realize what you’re saying? I’m a robot! I’m a chimney fucker.” Clenching her eyes shut, she yells, the first time Alison has ever heard her do so: “I’m a fucking chimney fucker too!”

Her shout has the same effect as her touchdown sound effects. Everyone stops and gapes. “Yeah,” says Bill, her voice resuming its usual softness, “if you think I’m the heart of your resistance, then the heart of your resistance is a mechanical one. I’m a robot. Irons took me. Irons tried to make me into an NP. I’m the type of person that you’re saying you want to kill. Do you want to kill me? Do you?” Her eyes are glinting again, but not with tears. She looks from person to person, silently challenging them. “Look into my eyes then, and tell me you want to kill me.”

Everyone’s still for a moment. Alison, her shoulders hunched up by her ears, holds her breath. Did it work? Were they listening? Did Bill talk some sense into them?

“Not you,” says the person with their arm around Charlie’s neck. “Not our Bill. You were never an NP. You never hurt anyone. You were never,” they say, constricting tighter, “a fuckin’ chimney-fucking traitor!”

They’re going to wrench Charlie’s neck, Alison thinks. They’re going to break her spinal cord, one
of the last biological pieces of her, and kill her.

“Let -- me -- go!” Finally Charlie moves. With the first word, she knocks her head backward into
the face of the person choking her, and they go down with a bloody nose. With the second word,
she shakes off the person on her left arm, who goes airborne into the wall, crashes, and slumps to
the floor. With the third word, she releases herself from the person on her right arm. She flings
them bodily into the crowd, and they knock down four other people in a row before landing. Those
who can immediately jump for Charlie, piling on top of her. Beside Bill, Alison shrinks down into
a little ball and wishes that it would all go away.
A Guard Intervenes

Chapter Summary

A guard singlehandedly ends the mini riot and alarms Alison, who loses her shit. She and Bill leave the rally, and her robot helps her get her shit back again.

“Be still! Thank you.”

Alison peeks out from her fetal position. There’s a seething heap of people in front of her [is Charlie underneath it all?], but some of their attention focuses behind Alison. She turns around bodily, while Bill twists around in her seat.

There’s a person walking toward them, smiling as if about to join their friends for drinks. For someone wearing a white security guard uniform, they look distinctly non-threatening. In fact, that’s the only distinct thing about them. Everything else about them is...nondescript. Even Alison, who prides herself on having words for everything, doesn’t know how to characterize this person, with their pleasant voice, their pleasant expression, their average height, and their average build.

“So this must be the assault in progress of which I heard report.” The person surveys the fighting people for a second, then disappears into the fray. They emerge soon after, shrugging off a few assailants, one arm around Charlie. “Ms. Foxtrot, are you all right?”

Charlie, a long tear down the front of her skirt, holds onto her squashed updo wig with one hand. “Um...did I kill anyone?”

“Yes!” snarls someone. “You’re an NP -- of course you did.”

The guard gives the snarling person the kind of look that Alison wishes she had been able to level at people. “Please… Please understand -- Ms. Foxtrot is not your enemy. Even if she has hurt and killed people, you have no right to do the same to her.”

“No right? Why not? Fuck you!”

Oh shit -- not more violence… Alison flinches and almost instinctively grabs Bill’s hand.
“Why not?” The guard’s unexceptional features register surprise at the question. “Shall we wax philosophical here? Very well then. Pain in kind for pain,” says the guard simply, “only begets more pain. It’s the very definition of a vicious circle, and it’s very easy to be caught in such a loop, thinking that there’s no beginning, no end, only endless suffering. The only way out lies in the recognition that the endless loop need not be so. We can choose to end the cycle.”

“What -- then we should lie back and take it?” the person that Charlie knocked in the nose, their shirt now spattered with blood, says. “Fuck Irons; fuck the NPs, and fuck you! We’re not taking it anymore.”

“I did not say that you should submit to tyranny,” says the guard. Their voice runs evenly, firmly, but almost soothingly. “I recommended only choosing to end the cycle of suffering. One does that in this particular case not by letting Irons do whatever they want, but by fighting them. And yes, I mean by revolution and war. Fight Irons; defeat Irons, and you will end the cycle by stanching the pain at its source. I know you want blood; I know you want pain; I know you want suffering, and I do not seek to deny you any of those. Seek none of it, though, from those who already hurt because of what Irons has done. Seek it instead from the creator of the pain. Seek it from Irons.”

The Dystopiaville denizens glare at the guard, who looks back at them with a neutral, at-rest expression. In spite of -- or because of -- its very blandness, the set of their face confers them an inarguable authority. They will yield neither their convictions nor Charlie, and they are here to keep the peace. Realizing this, the citizens at length stop glaring. Some of them even shuffle and have the decency to look chagrined at their group assault.

Having singlehandedly stopped a small riot, the guard now summons help. Security guards take those who are injured to first aid stations. Lieutenant Travertine and her troops show up, with an inordinate number of salutes and apologies. The guard tells them to take Charlie where she will. They turn to her for direction.

“I want to…” Charlie gulps and finally rises from the guard’s arm. “I want to change my clothes and my wig and then see my spouses, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lieutenant Travertine snaps to attention. “We can take you to your dressing room at once, ma’am.” Salute. “As for your spouses, the Master says they’re waiting for you in an antechamber, ma’am, not anywhere near the noise of the rally, so you can have a private meeting with them, ma’am.” Another salute.

“Fu- uck.” Charlie sighs. “I have no idea what the black hole I’m doing.”
“Yeah, you do.” Bill smiles at her. “You’re having a reunion with the rest of your family -- your family who loves you. Remember that Gardenia and Junie are probably pretty scared and worried too.”

“How do you know they love me?” mutters Charlie. “I don’t even love me.”

“Charlie,” says Alison, finding her voice at last, “Gardenia was calling out to you. She said, *Sarah! Charlie, Charlie, Charlie my love.* She called you once by your old name and thrice by your new name, and the last thing she called you was *my love.* I’m not saying it’s going to be easy or that you’re not going to be scared or angry with each other. I’m just saying that Gardenia at least misses you and loves you.”


Alison clears her throat. “Hey...um...excuse me,” she says to the guard. “Thank you. I just want to say...I think you saved our lives. You were very polite and calm and helpful, and I don’t know how you managed to talk down a ravening mob, but you did. I’m Alison Cheney, by the way. What’s your name? I know the person who’s heading up security, and I want to tell him how awesome you were.”

The guard glances about them and sees a bunch of people queuing for the toilets, which decides their answer for some reason. They smile, but it’s not an average smile anymore. It’s a blooming smile, an unfolding smile, the smile full of brilliance that her robot gives her whenever he sees her. “I know the head of security myself, and I know who you are, *mea Domina carissima.*”

“Huh?” Yanking her hand from the guard’s grasp, Alison stumbles backward.

“Yay! The Prof saves the day!” Bill conjures a triumphant fanfare from her chair.

“Hush, please,” the guard says.


“Sorry,” says the guard. “And I’d rather not have that be known, which is why I’m not removing the
The guard says her name like it’s him, and Bill is talking to him like it’s him. Nevertheless, it doesn’t look like him or sound like him, so she can’t be sure it’s him. “You’ll… You’ll have to do better than that,” she says, swallowing a few times. “If you are who you say you are, then tell me something that only he and I would know.”

“I am the Master of Violation, and you are the Warrior whom I saved from the dragons when they wove an illusion to make you think that you were without power.” That’s the first fairy tale he told her, right after she’d been mind-fucked by the Shalka. “And you’re the broken person, the Healing in Training, who led me out from the Labyrinth where I was imprisoned by the Ruler of Time.” And that’s the first fairy tale that she told him, when she found him turned off and hidden away in the Doctor’s lab after being mind-fucked by the Finisterran vampire. “You are the young woman who fractures fairy tales, and I am the wizard who tried to teach you strength.” And that’s how she summarized her experience when she went on the County Gallifrey message boards to talk to other former companions. “You are my Domina,” he says very softly, looking like he wants to touch her, though he doesn’t, “and I am your Magister.” And that’s her name, and that’s his.

After everything that has just happened, Alison should be happy that her robot’s here; after all, he’s her protector. But mostly she feels like she’s wavering in the wind, with no one there to hold her. He wasn’t there when she could sense Razor’s mind-fuck taking hold of seven thousand people; he wasn’t there when people wanted to rip out Charlie’s heart; he only showed up at the end when she had no power left. She knows that he was doing his job, keeping more people than just her safe, but still her heart feels endangered.

Alison feels dizziness hit her like a club to the back of the head. She falls into a sitting position and cries out everything that she’s been repressing since this morning. “You left us alone! You left me alone. We could have… I couldn’t… Charlie…” She shivers. “I was all alone! Don’t ever do that! Don’t ever leave me again!”

“Domina, Domina, Domina,” says the Magister with a sigh, squatting beside her. “Ms. Foxtrot tells me that you fled because the rally was too much. If you like, I can take you to your room -- “

“Oh, good idea,” interjects Bill. “Can I come too? That was way too much excitement for one day, and I need to rest.”

“Well, of course,” says Alison, pushing down a sob. “It’s your room too!”

“Ah, excellent,” says the Magister. “Then I will tell the Doctor to meet the three of us there.”
Alison, who has a headache coming on, solicits some painkillers from the Magister, who produces them from his pocket. Then they and Bill go to Alison and Bill’s room. The Doctor, pacing up and down the hall and mussing up their formerly perfectly oiled hair, starts running when they glimpse the Magister. They barrel full tilt into him, crying with relief, and cling to him hard, as if to reassure themselves that he’s actually safe and sound.

Then the Doctor realizes that they’re only hugging their inevitable spouse, so they scramble around, trying to hug Alison and Bill too. Bill says that the Doctor could have asked the Magister for psychic updates, right? The Magister points out that the Doctor could have easily used Anima’s monitors to see that everyone was fine. They’re both unsure why the Doctor is so upset.

The Doctor, now laughing in between tears, acknowledges that they took both Bill’s and the Magister’s suggestions. That didn’t allay any of their worries, though. Since when have their feelings ever been guided by sensible things like facts? Alison says that their feelings make perfect sense and they’re just a goof, to which the Doctor agrees.

The painkillers finally kick in as Alison flops back onto her bed, Bill beside her. Now in private, the Magister removes his perception filter. Alison’s not sure exactly how it happens, but somehow he transforms from a thoroughly average person to his usual extraordinary self. She does what she has wanted to do since she saw him this morning, with the makeup essentializing him into all his wonderful, expressive angles, and she throws her arms around him. “I’m sorry,” she mumbles to him. “I’m sorry for screaming at you about never leaving me again. I don’t actually want you to stay with me all the time. I know you have a job to do. I was just...scared.”

“I know,” he says. “I am glad that you understand that you are not the only one whom I safeguard. I will go back shortly, but the Doctor will be here, and I will always, always, always come when you call.”
Alison and Bill Prepare for a Funeral

Chapter Summary

Irons cracks down on Dystopiaville after the rally. Alison and Bill plan a funeral for Deedee.

The Irons regime discovers evidence of mass revolution during the revolting rally itself and dispatches the Night Patrol to arrest any groups of people out in public. This complicates the attendees’ return to their homes, as the Doctor simply can’t let people off at the designated depot areas where they came aboard.

Master of Security that he is, the Magister solves this problem by deploying the same perception filters that he distributed to his staff. While the security guards only used them for themselves alone, the Magister discovers that the filters’ fields may extend to encompass groups. A score of people may thus appear as two innocuous, unrelated pedestrians. Deploying perception filters to minimize any crowds that the Night Patrol might see, he and Razor follow the Night Patrol’s movements, timing dropoffs as best they can between sweeps. With perception filters as a safeguard, everyone returns to their homes without incident.

Naturally the fact that Razor and seven thousand other people elude the Night Patrol sends Irons and cronies into a fit of wrath. In retaliation, the regime cancels First Day. As much as the Demimensis of Eleofan and the week before encourages rowdy indulgence, so First Day [which is technically the second day of the new year] entails sober reflection. All public and private institutions close, allowing people to fast during the day, review the errors of the past year, and plan their atonement.

The fast breaks at sunset when people gather at the gravesites of their ancestors. There they build pyres of wrongs: candles, braziers, or even bonfires where they burn up papers on which they have written their errors. Then everyone eats copiously, especially of the ashcakes fried over coals. They tell stories of the dead, laugh, cry, and finally go home, having balanced the past with the present and the future.

This year, Irons forbids all First Day observances. Radio broadcasts, digital news chyrons, and pre-taped televised announcements reveal the new edicts. Governmental and municipal offices must function as usual, as well as the Cyber factories. It’s a mandatory school day for children of age, and all businesses are expected to keep their accustomed hours. Cemeteries and memorial parks are locked down, however, barred until further notice. The First Day curfew ends a half-hour past sunset [or whatever passes for sunset in a spaceship being slowly sucked into a black hole]. Anyone caught breaking these rules will be promptly imprisoned.
Alison, Bill, the Magister, the Doctor, Charlie, and Razor listen to the commandments twice over radio, then turn off the device. To put it in Earthling terms, Razor explains to Alison and Bill, *this would be like me when I was PM canceling Christmas. I couldn’t have planned this better myself. Now I can do almost anything and still come out better than that wicked monster who tried to stop the new year from coming. Cheers, Irons! You’ve had a good run, but now it’s time to forfeit your city and your life. Cue protest, mob violence, open revolt, and homicide in three...two...one...*

At that moment, a telepathic relay from Yasmeen Mazandarani arrives in his head. The four young courier/spies from Tinder Town, Amaranth, Corvine, Ishi, and Jamal, report an increase in activity about the Murder Factory. An abandoned plant that first constructed Cyber weaponry before operations consolidated near Butcher’s Block, the Murder Factory usually shelters the homeless survivors of Tinder Town’s latest building fire. Everyone just pretends it isn’t there. But now construction workers -- or at least people dressed like construction workers -- have arrived, bearing loads of siding, flooring, and wallpaper. The nine people currently squatting in the Murder Factory have no idea what it signifies.

But Mx. Mazandarani does. They know the militant spirit of their neighborhood, as well as the flammability of the supplies accumulating outside the Murder Factory. They suspect that their irate friends will defy Irons and the Night Patrol by turning the entire Murder Factory into a pyre of wrongs. Then the former factory will burn and almost certainly some surrounding tenements. But will their beloved Tinder Town rise up to fight or go down in flames? Mx. Mazandarani doesn’t know.

*That whole fucking firetrap will burn,* predicts Razor, *and your neighbors will die defending it. Well, at least the foolish ones will.* He and Mx. Mazandarani agree to evacuate as many Tinder Towners as possible out of the neighborhood. They identify a few brick or metal buildings on the western edge of Tinder Town that could convert to temporary shelters, and Mx. Mazandarani spreads the word to direct people there. There’s a lift within blocks of the northern edge of Tinder Town, and residents in that area will be encouraged to go down to Floor 1055 as refugees. *We’ll be there shortly to hustle people along,* Razor concludes. *I’m bringing the Master; he’s very good at motivating people to do what he wants.*

With the Magister and his counterpart off to Tinder Town, the Doctor ensconces themselves in Razor’s communications command center. They, Prunella, and Senga plan the Doctor’s sing-down of the Cyber network broadcast center. Doctor Yoon makes suggestions when Cyborganic health in particular is at stake.

Alison and Bill listen in for a while. Prunella and Senga focus on gaining the Doctor access to the heavily guarded broadcast center, while the Doctor worries about what will happen after all the Cyber people are suddenly freed from network control. Speaking from personal experience, Doctor Yoon foresees confusion, disorganization, and most of all fear. While fully converted Cyber people’s emotions are dampened, their feelings are also controlled for them by broadcasts that
force them to ignore their anxiety and misgivings. Thus, when the Doctor dissonizes the Cyber network, they will cause the Cyber people to experience a comparatively strong spike of panic. Unless people can somehow intercede and keep the newly free Cyber people peaceful, Doctor Yoon envisions mayhem and destruction as a result.

Prunella and Senga join the discussion. Both of them note that Cyber people are particularly vulnerable just after disconnection from the Cyber network. Prunella recalls the first fully converted Cyborganics who underwent detox at the Sewage Street safe house. They took every suggestion as an incontrovertible order and followed it instantly. When she and Senga realized this, they developed a training program by which newly repersoned people could relearn their right to refuse.

Anyway, the biddability of the disconnected Cyber people could be used to everyone’s advantage, Senga thinks. If RR agents were present to comfort disoriented Cyber people and redirect them away from violent action, both Cyber people and other citizens would be much safer. The conversation shifts to the places where RR people would most effectively be deployed to calm the greatest number of Cyber people. Doctor Yoon, the one most familiar of the four with the regime’s exploitation of Cyber people, makes suggestions.

Alison and Bill leave the conference. Alison is frantic. Her robot’s out in a war zone, doing crowd control with a narcissistic psychopath. He’s looking after the people of Dystopiaville, but who’s looking after him?

Meanwhile, Bill is frustrated. *Need to be useful! Need to help out!* she says over and over. Alison thinks she must be echoing someone long ago who told her the same so often that the words engraved themselves on her brain. Unfortunately Bill’s desire to contribute runs up against the fact that she lacks experience in the large-scale planning that the Doctor and others are currently engaged in.

Alison and Bill concur; they need to do something that will absorb their interest and keep them from worrying. They consider writing fanfic in which *Defenders of Earth* series five ends happily, with Deedee surviving unrobotified. At least in the fictional realm, Bill says, Deedee and Hope can grow old in their country cottage with their two black Labs.

Alison brainstorms. What if Deedee survived her robotification? What if, in a way that has no connection whatsoever to real life, she organized Panjandrum’s bots against him? What if, instead of becoming sentient evil murder machines, the bots flourished under Deedee’s leadership? They could develop morals and ethics, as well as a desire to do good and escape the oppression of Panjandrum’s senseless destruction. Could Panjandrum turn good as well? Alison doubts it. As much as she loves a good redemption arc, it’s really hard to do them well. Maybe Deedee and the bots should just kill him.
Though Bill nods along with Alison’s expanding ideas, she ultimately remains stuck on the events of the actual episode. She can’t forget the image of Deedee dying, medically raped, partially dissected, in pain, and alone, while Hope, having forgotten all about her, frolicked in the joy of having saved another world. But Deedee was worse than forgotten, worse than dead; it was as if she had never existed. For Bill that’s the ultimate objectification: the transformation of her favorite character into a non-entity, like she meant nothing at all to anyone.

To Bill, Deedee’s dead, and not even fanfic can undo that loss. If only people had remembered her, though… Sitting up straight in her chair and combining her rocket sound effects for a triumphant fanfare, Bill announces what she and Alison are going to do. They are going to give Deedee a funeral.

She even knows where they can hold it: in the Cemetery of the Lost, the crypt where the Doctor memorializes all the people that they couldn’t save. Alison, to whom this is a new room in the TARDIS, asks what the Cemetery’s like. It’s a grave place, says Bill, pun fully intended, so it will be perfect. I can even write the service. But…what about the body?

Alison has the answer. Ever since the Finisterran vampire dropped her on her head and damaged her brain, she hasn’t had the sustained concentration for detailed doll customization. However, she has some supplies here in Anima left over from the time when she lived and traveled with the Doctor. She can make a simple Deedee doll and something for her to wear, as well as a cardboard coffin. Her and Bill’s Deedee will have substance and solidity. Her and Bill’s Deedee will be remembered.

Now both equally inspired, Alison and Bill remove themselves as far from revolutionary activity as possible. They each do their best work in solitude, so they split up. Bill, who’s having a good day in terms of pain, leaves her chair and takes a laptop to find someplace in the Doctor’s jungle conducive to eulogy writing. Alison scrounges some paints, brushes, and other materials, then sits at her old desk in the room she now shares with Bill. Anima says that she will transmit messages between Alison and Bill if they need to talk.

In between naps and snacks, Alison transforms a fashion doll with yellow-brown plastic, straight hair, and a smirk into a representation of Deedee Schmidt. She strips off the cheap glittery dress and slaps a few layers of acrylic paint over those parts of the doll that will be visible from the open casket: head, breast, and right arm. Now the doll is the right color -- a smooth light brown, tending toward tan. Furthermore, Alison doesn’t have to deal with the bright, stylized makeup.

Alison seals the skin paint with a few coats of matte varnish, diluting it slightly so that it dries more quickly. She then adds Deedee’s distinctive black eyebrows and paints her eyes closed, with a fringe of thick brown lashes. She leaves Deedee’s lips uncolored, except for a darker line between
them. Some high-gloss varnish will take care of defining the shape of her mouth. Alison turns up the corners of the lines between the mouth, giving the doll a satisfied peace that the TV character rarely enjoys.

Alison goes to sleep for a while, then next considers Deedee’s hair. On the screen, Deedee has cornrows that sweep past her shoulders; the costume designers change the beads on them to emphasize her mood or her role in the story. Before her brain was broken, Alison would have had the stamina to create scores of miniature cornrows, but she has neither the energy nor the time for that now.

Instead Alison makes a dreadlock wig. She shears off all the doll’s original hair, then whip-stitches a quick wig cap out of some scrap cotton print. She has the perfect yarn for dreads: thick, dark brown, slubby strands. Warming up her glue gun, she adheres pinches of the yarn to the doll’s wig cap, starting at the nape and spiraling up toward the crown. She finishes by trimming the dreads evenly. She wraps the ends of some dreads in copper or silver wire as a nod to Deedee’s cyborg state. Anima then gets her attention with a symphonic arrangement of microwave beeps, so Alison figures she should eat something.

Alison has some food and another short nap. She then concentrates on Deedee’s last two details. The first is her robotic arm, so Alison snaps the doll’s left arm at the shoulder, then screws a new limb into the socket, made from bits and bobs from the Doctor’s robotics lab. The second is Deedee’s outfit, but, at this point, she feels a headache coming on. Furthermore, her fingers ache. She abandons the outfit when Anima lets her know that Bill wants to meet her in the control room.

Alison and Bill convene and show each other their work. “Did a lot more resting and crying than I’d hoped to,” says Bill, the skin below her eyes still a bit puffy, her eyes themselves seeming larger because of remaining tears. “I found some good Bible passages -- To everything there is a season, you know -- and then had to cry. Started writing the eulogy and then had to cry. Ya ever feel like having feelings is just too much work?“ Anyway,” says Bill, pulling the laptop out from her armpit, “I wrote a bit, but not as much as I wanted to. Not that good either. Certainly not as good as what I did for the rally. I think I used up all my metaphors and appropriate pauses and clever allusions. I’m just like, She’s dead, and that’s not fair.”

Alison sighs. “Well, look -- here’s what I’ve got: a doll that has no clothes, no coffin, and no real resemblance to Deedee. Her hair’s wrong; her lips are wrong; I only had time for -- “

“No, no, no!” Bill, shaking her head, cradles the doll as if it’s a prematurely born kitten. “She’s perfect; she’s amazing; she’s wonderful, better than any doll I’ve ever seen or any I ever played with as a kid. She doesn’t look exactly like Deedee, but she feels like Deedee. And you look at her,
and you know it’s her.” She touches the doll’s face reverently with her fingertip. “And I hate that they killed off the queer Black character, but you…” She presses her finger to Deedee’s mouth, describing its curve. “You made her happy, which is more than anyone else on the show ever did. Oh God, I’m crying again.” She sniffs. “You know my eulogy is just going to be like Whhaaaaaaaa!, yeah?”

“Who cares? We’re not out to inspire people or impress them. We’re just doing what that fucking show never did and properly saying goodbye to someone. I think Whhaaaaaaaa! is perfectly appropriate in that case. Can I read what you wrote?” Alison asks, holding out her hand. Bill wakes up the laptop and gives it to her:

“It’s not fair, but that’s the way it is.” My foster mum used to tell me that when I got upset, in that tone of voice that said that she knew more than me. It was like that was supposed to be an explanation for whatever nasty things people did. It was like, because it wasn’t fair, because that’s the way things were, complaining was silly. It was like she was Teaching Me An Important Lesson.

I never stopped crying, though, over stuff that she thought was silly. And now I’m crying over the death of a fictional character because it is unfair, and that is the way it is, but it doesn’t have to be that way! It’s a horrible example of racist, sexist, homophobic, classist bullshit, but we don’t have to perpetuate it. I can’t unkill her, but I can give her the end she deserves. That’s what we’re here for then. We’re paying our last respects to someone who was never respected.

“Bill of my heart, this is a great beginning!” Alison flashes her a smile. “For someone who says she ran out of rhetorical devices, this is awesome! There’s nothing wrong with talking about how angry and sad you are. In fact, I’m all for the anger and sadness. I know there’s this tendency to be all soothing and thoughtful and serious during funerals, but fuck that shit!” Setting down the laptop on the central console by the time rotor, Alison swipes sideways with her arm. “Death’s not fair; it’s arbitrary, and it makes people angry and sad. That’s natural. So fine -- let’s be angry and s -- “

Someone pounds on the exterior door just then. Anima opens for them, and a small, short-limbed person tumbles inside, cloaked and gas masked. A whirl of cinders accompany them. Alison and Bill stagger as a wave of stifling air hits them, along with the sharp odor of cooked hair.

Before Anima closes her front door, Alison glimpses the outside world. While she and Bill were lost in art, Anima touched down in Dystopiaville. Backlit with a bloody glow, buildings crumple into flames. People scream; the fire roars; the entire city seems to be crying out. She feels like she’s back under the cry of the Shalka, the aliens that she first encountered who turned everything into molten lava. Then Alison sees and hears no more of it because she’s folded in two, gagging on the Dystopiaville air.
The Pyre of Wrongs Ignites

Chapter Summary

Yasmeen Mazandarani brings a report from the massacre front lines, with information about what the Magister and Razor are doing.

“Yasmeen!” Bill cries.

Anima makes all her wrought iron glow with ambient lighting so that Alison, Bill, and Yasmeen can see what’s going on. The staircases spiraling into uncertain heights, the catwalks criss-crossing overhead, even the thorny scrolls on the railings, desks, and chairs -- all of this now emanates a cool whitish purple light similar to the time rotor’s. It’s a soft illumination, as from a lantern or the moon. Alison, mostly done with her coughing fit, undoubles herself. Clamping one hand around the central console railing, she squints at the new arrival.

So this is the Yasmeen Mazandarani that Razor depends upon almost as much as Prunella Kim. They’re the one who lives in a neighborhood, Tinder Town, that’s just spoiling for a fight, but, from what Alison has gathered, are fundamentally pacifist themselves. Despite the assassination of their second, Miles Carson, Yasmeen has led Tinder Town almost singlehandedly. And they’ve still done their utmost to keep Sinclair, his family, and his boyfriend’s family safe when they were threatened in their own neighborhoods. Indefatigably formidable, they have more stamina and experience than Alison will ever have.

With such an imposing image of Yasmeen in her mind, Alison is surprised by their actual appearance. It’s not so much that they have dwarfism, so they’re about a meter and a quarter tall, with a prominent forehead and a barrel-shaped core. It’s more that they’re young, not much older than Sinclair. Underneath their gas mask, their light tan face and far-set eyes have yet to lose all the roundness of youth.

Yasmeen rights themselves, shrugs off their mask, then starts coughing belatedly. Bill, crouching beside them, helps them divest of their contaminated outer clothes. Alison runs for the nearest loo, where she grabs some damp washclothes, a towel, and a glass of water. When she returns, Bill has her arm around Yasmeen, who is taking in oxygen from a mask that Anima has lowered from the ceiling.

After emptying a few glasses of water and wiping off their face and hands, Yasmeen finally speaks. “Many thanks, Bill.” They nod to her, and their voice is deep, flowing, warm. “--And Bill’s Alison.” They nod to her too, and Alison, reminded of the Magister, likes them immediately.
“Now…” they say, beckoning Alison and Bill closer, like it’s all three of them who are going to save the world, “I need your help. I’ve got a report from the front that I need to get out to everyone.”

“I’ll take notes.” Bill scoots over to the nearest desk, cracks the laptop open, and poises her fingers over the keys.

“And I’ll get the Doctor,” says Alison. “Anima, can you please tell them that Yasmeen Mazandarani is here? They’re gonna need their help.”

The Doctor flashes up on a central console monitor, ink-stained fingers running through rumpled hair. They’re writing with a leaky fountain pen on what might be a map of the city.

Anima rings a bell to make them look up.

They flap their pen hand, spattering ink on a T-shirt that says I'm not a mad scientist. I'm just a mildly irritated engineer. “Not now, ol’ girl,” they address Anima. “Important stuff to do here. Networks to implode, revolutions to foment, that sort of thing…” To themselves, they murmur, “So we’re definitely going to need agents at the hospital and the Dumping Group, but what about the detention centers? And what about the Cyber people on their Night Patrol rounds? Wouldn’t they need -- “

Anima lets loose a sustained vuvuzela noise for about half a minute.

The Doctor barely flinches. “Nonsense! I can go a day or two without food; it’s not absolutely necessary.”

“Doctor!” says Bill, and they instantly turn to her. “Please come to the control room! You’re needed. Yasmeen is here.”

“Oh! Of course, Bill my dear!” At the sound of their partner, the Doctor bounds to their feet. “I’ll be there in a -- “ Whatever amount of time they’re going to say, Anima evidently does not think it expedient enough. She rearranges her architecture to remove the Doctor from their planning location. She then delivers them into her control room via a twirly slide unrolled from her ceiling. The Doctor pops off the end of the slide and flops in a heap a short distance away. “--Second,” they finish, looking slightly loopy. “Mx. Mazandarani! Hi! What can I do for you?”
Wavering a bit and coughing again, Yasmeen delivers their report. “The greatest pyre of wrongs,” they say, rubbing their eyes, “has gone up in Tinder Town.” Just as they expected, residents were indeed amassing flammables at the Murder Factory for an illegal blaze. Yasmeen and others, with assistance from the Magister and Razor, worked to remove not just the nine Murder Factory residents, but as many Tinder Towners as possible, from harm’s way.

They had a hard go of it. Those that chose to evacuate wanted to leave Dystopiaville entirely. Those in the northern reaches of Tinder Town needed no psychic encouragement to board the lift for Floor 1055 to start a refugee camp. However, no one in the other sections of Tinder Town wanted to congregate in the designated shelters, even if they were more fireproof. Contingents in the eastern sector struck out instead to join the lift queue in the north. Razor wanted to drive them toward the shelters, but the Magister persuaded him to let them go.

The southern citizens maintained that they were nowhere near the Murder Factory and thus perfectly safe. Again Razor wanted to march them all off to safety. Again the Magister said that they should conserve their powers until absolutely necessary. Knowing that he was right, Razor subsided.

They had the most trouble in the west. Tinder Towners there accused Razor of favoring the northerners over them. Razor started cursing and muttering about clueless humans with self-destructive tendencies, which only agitated the crowds further. Fearing that a riot was imminent, Yasmeen told Razor and the Magister that they could use their powers now.

So they did. Our plan? said the Magister, and Razor nodded. The Magister laid his hands on Razor’s skull. He directed Razor to calm down and use the same charisma that he had wielded at the rally to convince the western Tinder Towners to leave. Yasmeen, who had expected a large-scale psychic manipulation, watched in stupefaction as the Magister persuaded Razor to persuade the westerners to evacuate. Quickly enough, Razor was persuaded, and then, with more effort, so were the westerners.

Then Yasmeen, the Magister, and Razor looped back toward the south, intending to exercise more persuasion. But, in the meantime, furious people had gathered around the Murder Factory. Of course, so had Night Patrol agents, ordering the civilians to disperse. The civilians responded by dispersing bricks, paving stones, and rocks at the NPs. The NPs began to disperse ammunition back at the civilians. Then someone torched the Murder Factory, and the carnage increased.

In their efforts to minimize casualties, says Yasmeen, the Magister and Razor devoted their powers to stopping the Night Patrol. Meanwhile, Yasmeen did the best they could to direct civilians to safety. Currently, the Magister and Razor have rendered about seventy NPs harmless by knocking them into the comatose self-preservation mode into which Charlie retreated when mortally wounded. These NPs need protection until the Doctor can disconnect them from the Cyber network. Meanwhile, there are dead and dying people everywhere; one third of Tinder Town is
afire; an evacuation shelter hard by the Murder Factory is about to collapse; and now the Magister and Razor -- Yasmeen never finishes the sentence. Abruptly consuming the last of their energy and breath, they pass out, eyes flickering before a complete closure.

“Yasmeen!” Bill cries again, tumbling to her knees beside them. “Ah...still breathing,” she concludes, going limp with relief.

The Doctor kneels and picks up Yasmeen. “Okay then. I’m going to take them to the Zero Room for humans.” They developed that medical facility some months ago and used it to help Alison recover from the Finisterran vampire. “I’ll also tell my Master and the other Master what’s going on. And I’ll rearrange Anima to encompass those Night Patrol members.”

“We’ll talk to Prunella,” says Bill, “and anyone else we can reach here in Tinder Town. We’ll give them an update; maybe they can help people get out of the collapsing shelter.”

“Wait...I have a robot!” Alison, balling up her fists, says. “What about him? Am I the only one who cares about my robot?”

The Doctor, who’s halfway out of the control room, turns back. “I just heard from the Master,” they say, obviously referring to their almost constant communication with their inevitable spouse through their telepathic connection. “He and the other Master are maybe a kilometer away, holding off a bunch of NPs from a mob of civilians. I’ve told him to summon Anima when they feel that they’ve done what they can.”

“That’s not really instilling me with confidence,” Alison calls, but the Doctor is already gone.
Alison and Bill Fight the Fire

Chapter Summary

Alison and Bill take over emergency dispatch services in Tinder Town during the chaos. They scramble to keep everyone updated and informed. The Magister comes in and drops off Razor, who's injured.

Alison and Bill move from the main console room to Razor’s bedroom, where he has also been operating his revolution communications center. Since they have access to all the RR shortwave radio frequencies here, Alison proposes sending out the news as a general bulletin. Bill objects, saying that giving news about the massacre to everyone might inspire mass panic. Instead, she suggests sending the message directly to anyone on the Tinder Town frequency who might be listening. For people outside of Tinder Town, they will transmit the news to the safe house heads in Butcher’s Block, the Dominoes, and Sewage Street, letting the leaders make the announcements as they see fit.

Alison condenses Bill’s almost verbatim notes into a report of the essentials: the pyre construction in the Murder Factory, evacuation to the lift in the north and the brick or metal shelters in the west, and the Murder Factory mob’s clash with the Night Patrol. She closes with the current disastrous state of central Tinder Town and the ongoing desperate efforts to minimize casualties and save people.

Inspired by Bill’s precisely quantified notes, she adds as many specifics as she can. The northern Tinder Town lift accommodates seventy-five to one hundred people at a time. The Magister, Yasmeen, and Razor addressed an estimated four hundred people in the north and personally witnessed two elevator loads of people transported to Floor 1055: a total of one hundred and seventy-nine verified saved.

Shelters were designated at Western Court, the old satellite detention center on Plague Street, and Old Crapper Lane. There were thirty-five people in the first shelter, two hundred and three in the second, and ninety-seven in the third when the Magister, Yasmeen, and Razor left the scenes.

As of an hour ago, the entire central district of Tinder Town is on fire, with at least two hundred and fifty people dead and seventy Night Patrol officers neutralized. The Doctor is now on the scene, operating their TARDIS as an ambulance to collect, treat, and stabilize the survivors they can find. Meanwhile, the Magister and Razor use their psychic powers to keep the peace between Tinder Towners and NPs.
Alison reads her report to each of the safe house heads and asks them to prepare supplies for refugees from Tinder Town. With Bill’s guidance, she also connects to the main hospital. She advises the RR agents on the other end of the line to prepare for the arrival of a bunch of comatose NPs.

Bill gives out the same news over the Tinder Town frequency, imploring anyone who can to respond and let her know their status. In the silence that follows, she and Alison hunch toward the transceivers, their backs stiff with anxiety. The dead air seems to roar around them as loud as the fire.

“Bill, Bill, is that you?” says a small, high voice, in between sniffles. “Oh, Bill, I’m so scared. Jamal and Corvine and me, we saw people dragging wood into the Murder Factory this morning, and Corvine said, Oh, chimney-fucking rat pups, that can’t be good. And I knew something bad was going to happen; I just knew it. Now the NPs are here, and the whole town’s burning up, and we went to a shelter, but my sister -- I think she got lost, and -- “

“Ishi!” Bill straightens and smiles upon hearing the voice of one of the Tinder Town courier/spies. “Ishi, it’s okay! It’s Bill. I’m here. I know you’re scared, but thank you...thank you so much for listening to me and calling me back.”

“I’m recording this,” Alison whispers aside to Bill, who nods. Alison pulls the laptop onto her thighs, opens a new document, adds a date and time stamp, and begins. She soon realizes that she can capture every word if she quits caring about spelling and punctuation.

“Well...um...but you asked me to…” Ishi trails off, unsure why Bill’s so enthusiastic.

“Yeah,” says Bill, “but I didn’t know if anyone would answer.”

“But...um...I thought you asked ‘cause you were worried, ‘cause you always worry about people and want them to be okay. And I know that Yasmeen always worries even more when they want answers, but don’t get them, so I thought that you probably should have some answers, even if the answer is that I’m scared, and I can’t find my sister, and I think the whole city’s burning up, Bill -- the whole city!”

Bill is nodding, even though Ishi can’t see her. “I know, Ishi; I know that’s what it feels like -- like the whole world’s falling down -- but that’s not the case. Me and Alison -- we’re here in the Doctor’s ship, and we’re doing what we can. The Doctor’s taking care of injured people. They’re brilliant, and they have a whole hospital in here, so they’ll save as many people as they can.”
“But lots of people are dead; that’s what you said. You said that the NPs were shooting people, and everything was burning! You can’t save people if they’re burning up or if they’re -- “

“Yeah.” Bill’s voice hushes, as if she’s trying to prevent an echo. “Yeah, I know. We can’t save everyone, Ishi, even if we want to. It’s a resistance, a revolution, a war; we’re going to lose people, even people we love. But people are going to survive too, and we have to remember that. We have to hang onto that. We have to help each other; we have to do what we can so that as many people can survive as possible, so that the revolution is worth fighting.

“That’s why I’m glad that you replied,” she goes on. “Alison and me need to know what’s happening where you are. We need to know what you’re doing and whether you need help. Then you’ll help us put together the story of the revolution, and we’ll figure out if we’re winning or losing and what we need to do to succeed.”

Soothing people’s terror with calm repetition, eliciting their information with an even, empathic temper, Bill collects responses from Ishi and two other Tinder Towners. She asks their location, the full names of any people with them, and what they have experienced since Irons’ ban on First Day festivities that morning. The three reports come from the periphery of the violence where there are few people dead, but many displaced, providing valuable intelligence about the extent of casualties and property damage. Bill makes sure to obtain specific details where possible, but also spends many minutes listening to narratives of choking smoke, startling gunshots, and terror that made people piss themselves. Nodding and sympathizing, she has the focus and gravity of a counselor, and Alison envies that.

Alison writes down everything, occasionally asking Bill if she can have her interlocutor repeat something. Soon she develops a hand signal that she can flash Bill, who acknowledges it with a nod and repeats her question. The two work in smooth unison as if they have regularly collaborated in crises before. We’re so good together! thinks Alison, but there’s no opportune moment in which to make this remark aloud.

There’s a break in the reports from Tinder Town precincts, so Alison passes along the updates to the other neighborhoods’ frequencies. Just as she finishes apprising Britomart Smythe in Butcher’s Block of the latest events, the Doctor appears on a screen before her: “Are either of you free to go to the control room? Anima’s just off to pick up the Masters, and I’m still working with some of the Cyber people on standby down here, but I’d like someone to be there to greet them.”

Alison springs up. “Me!” she says to the Doctor. “I can do it!”

Bill lets out a little sigh, probably relieved not to have to deal with Razor. “Okay. I’ll watch the
radio in case anyone else replies.”

Alison enters the control room, her yellow gas mask down over her face. This time, she’s prepared for a onslaught of pollution from outside. Soon after Alison sits down, her robot appears, naked of face and covered in soot. Razor, masked but equally smoke-stained, has his arm around her robot’s shoulders, and he’s hobbling. Alison runs to her robot and hugs him fiercely as he deposits Razor into a chair. He smells of charcoal and dead things, even through Alison’s air filter.

“Domina,” he says, disengaging from her gently, “I have to go.” As he releases her, she notices one of his sleeves half burned off, along with the skin of that forearm. Some charred bits of a black leather glove appear to be fused to his exposed synthetic bones and muscles. Alison recoils, wincing. Is he in pain?

“There are two hundred and eighty-three dead people out there,” he tells her, “and perhaps less than fifteen that we might save if I act quickly enough.” The fire has bitten out a chunk of his beard, and… Oh God, is his chin melting? She reaches out to hold him again, but he evades her lightly. “I will find them.” He nods toward Razor. “Take him to the Zero Room.”

Alison wrenches up her gas mask. “Mi Magistre...tace! Please...wait!”

Her robot looks at her with his eyebrows tilted up at the inner edges. “I pray you -- do not ask me to stay, not when there are people I can save.”

“But… But...you’re melting,” Alison stammers. “And out there… Well, it looks like the Shalka have taken over. I don’t want you to…” Tears stand in her eyes. “Hold me fast, just for a second, before you go?”

He does, then draws back. “Be my good Domina while I’m out, won’t you?” he says with a smile. “Of course you will.” With a last pressure from his hands, he’s gone.

In the brief span when Anima’s front door is open, Alison sees what’s left of Tinder Town. Everything’s alight with reddish orange, blackened about the edges. Anima stands in some sort of open square, and thick, darkened logs lie in a jumble everywhere, obscuring the pavement in most places. No, those are people, two hundred and eighty-three dead people. Dizziness smacks her, and she shuts her eyes.
Razor Reports In

Chapter Summary

Razor gives details about how he and the Magister tried to save people and prevent casualties at the front lines of the massacre. He's very distressed that the Magister is saving "his people."

When Alison recollects herself, Razor has peeled off his mask. He hacks intermittently, his right arm curled protectively up against his chest. The right side of his head streams orange-red blood. Worst of all, his right foot is skewed about twenty-five degrees off what it should be. What the fuck happened to him out there? Where’s his chair? She stares at him for a second too long. As soon as he meets her eyes, she runs to the loo for water, washclothes, and towels.

Trying to give Razor a little privacy, Alison sits a few meters away, looking away, while he drinks and washes up. After a few minutes, he waves at her, then snaps his fingers thrice in quick succession.

Alison realizes that he’s trying to get her attention. “Um, yeah?” She glances reluctantly at him.

Razor begins signing. He moves his hands rapidly, motions short and choppy, as if he’s manually destroying an invisible wall. She doesn’t need a translator to understand his outrage.

“I’m sorry!” Alison surrenders. “I don’t know sign language.” She wonders if Bill does. “Should I get Bill?”

He shakes his head and sighs, a sound intercut with a cough. He flutters his fingers as if typing.

“Oh, a laptop? But...um...the Zero Room -- “

He shakes his head harder. Obviously it’s more important at the moment for him to talk to her than to deal with his fucked-up foot. A quick scan of the control room reveals a dusty tablet computer, which she wipes off and hands to him. He works with it for a minute or two before typing: “No Zero Room. Time to rant.” The tablet speaks in a chain of strangely toneless words, not the sprightly, sarcastic replica of his own voice that she’s used to.
“Your foot, though?”


“Wait! Wait!” Alison waves her hands. “Ranting’s fine, but no yelling at me, okay? And no fulminating against humans for being self-destructive. Come to think of it, no insults of anyone at all whatsoever.”

Razor bobs his head impatiently. “Rant re: robot.”

“Okay, but, if you get too vituperative, I reserve the right to tell you to shut up.”

Razor laughs and coughs. “Of course, Dominatrix. Wait -- typing.” He leans over the tablet. Eventually his words come to her in clauses, broken by periods of silence during which he’s writing the next: “Three hundred dead. My people. My followers. I should have the power to kill them -- or save them -- keep them alive -- keep them people, not objects.

“But they were killed for me -- or saved for me. I did nothing. Ran out of power -- lost chair, lost voice, lost people. Three hundred people -- now just meat. Might have had a feast in past.” He tries to force a laugh, but it doesn’t come free, so he just gags.

“Oh great, now you eat people too? No wonder you were whining about the vegetarian menu around here.” Alison’s too tired to be truly disgusted.

“Used to. Real batshit back then. Now just friendly neighborhood psychopath.” The overly wide smile resembles a grimace of pain. “A waste,” he says again suddenly, the grimace falling from his face. “I promised them. They believed me. They became objects anyway.” Silence. He twists his mouth into frowns of rue and rage. “Waste of my power, waste of theirs. Waste of people! My people. They should be alive. They should be people. People, people, people -- not objects!”

“Um, yeah.” Alison sways a little with fatigue. “Death is always senseless, always a waste, and it’s especially so when you think you could have done things better. It could even be expected and inevitable, and it’s still senseless, and you still regret it.”
“I knew all of them,” says Razor. “They were mine. Eilish Gold -- helped Miles Carson with propaganda. The Duberrys lived in Murder Factory -- because their house had just burned down. Mx. Mazandarani’s entire family -- some of best agents I had -- all gone. Out there -- “ Razor points at the door. “My people are dying. My people are turning into objects. I said I would stop it. I didn’t.”

Alison just listens, trying not to pay too much attention to the pulse of a headache rising under her thoughts. Anyone who takes part in Razor’s Revolution is, to his mind, an extension of him, so of course he’s enraged by this personal assault. It’s a pointless waste of people that he could have used to achieve his ends. He’s frustrated, and he hates being frustrated.

At the same time, the idea of his people seems to include an obligation to protect them. And it’s not like he’s just guarding his valuable resources. He recognizes every single one of them as a person, an individual with a name and a history and a life full of promise. He vowed that he would help them keep their autonomy, their dignity, and their lives. Every dead person, though, represents a broken promise, a personal failure on his part to prevent someone’s objectification.

Alison remains uncertain about whether he feels sadness and sympathy for the dead people. She’s pretty sure that he regrets their deaths, though, wants them to still be alive, and wishes that he could have helped them. In trying to express sentiments [slightly] more altruistic than usual, however, he has reached the limit of his selfish vocabulary.

While Alison attempts to sound his mind, Razor tells her about what happened. Tinder Town residents massed by the hundreds to resist the Night Patrol, but the latter had guns. The Night Patrol began shooting systematically into the crowd. People panicked; a stampede started. Razor lost his chair, had most of his right ear blown off, got his foot stepped on, dislocated his shoulder, and inhaled a bunch of smoke. The robot, by contrast, lost a glove.

Tinder Towners were dying beneath the Night Patrol’s bullets. Night Patrol officers fell when Tinder Towners bludgeoned them to death. An apartment complex disintegrated under ammunition-related structural damage, squashing the people inside. And even more people lost their lives when they were trampled by their fellow citizens trying to flee.

In the midst of it all, Razor and the robot tried to save who they could. They joined psychic forces to transform the panicked crush into more of an urgent retreat. That feat required most of Razor’s remaining power, so it was the robot, still irritatingly chipper, who turned his attention to the Night Patrol. He commanded them to quit shooting and fall back.

Of course, says Razor, the robot really should have known from the raid on the flat that even a Master of Mind-Fucking can’t counteract Cyber programming alone. Razor lent the robot what little strength he had so that they turned back a few Cyber squads together. After that, the robot
ordered him to rest and tried to save the city by himself through sheer force of will. Obviously, the robot was a stubborn dolt.

Irons finally got wise to Razor and the robot’s psychic disruption of the Night Patrol. They surrounded Razor and the robot with more NPs than they could ever hope to mind-fuck. Back to back, hands in the air, Razor and the robot surveyed imminent demise. *I’ve got a gun,* said Razor, who had pulled one from a dead Cyber person. For once, though, he didn’t want to shoot, not that it would have helped them anyway.

*I’ve got a plan,* said the robot. *Down!* The Night Patrol began firing. The robot pushed Razor to the ground and covered him bodily.

Suddenly it was silent but for the roar of flames. Razor, squashed between a corpse and a robot, listened. Why weren’t the bullets hitting anything? Had he gone deaf? *Master?* he said.

*Can you walk?* asked the robot.

*Are you fucking kidding me?* said Razor.

So the robot scooped him up like a doll and, bent almost in two, ran. He pushed his way through the ranks of Cyber people as if they were blades of grass. Razor needed only a backward glance to account for both the weird silence and the robot’s posture. The robot had telekinetically stalled the Cyber ammunition in the air, ducked under the rounds, and escaped.

“Wow,” says Alison. She’s got a fucking superhero for a partner.

Razor shakes his head with a scowl. “He did everything -- lost nothing. He saves my people -- defeats my enemies -- treats me like his toy. But this is my city -- my revolution -- my people. Mx. Mazandarani’s whole family is dead -- for no reason. I am the Master -- I am not supposed to be powerless!” He signs something that Alison is quite sure is insulting, ending with a double middle-finger salute in the direction of Anima’s door, presumably for the absent Magister.

“I hate being powerless,” says Alison in a low voice.

“Me too.” Razor sighs. He sagged back against his seat, then looks around the control room. “Wheelchair?” Anima produces a manual one from somewhere in her depths. With a combined
hop and flop, Razor sits in it, then reaches out for the tablet, which Alison hands to him. “Zero Room, please. Push. Don’t drag. Master does not equal sack of potatoes!” Alison smirks a little bit. “Don’t worry,” Razor says as they leave the control room for the corridor. “Shutting up now. What’s been going on here?” He chuckles slightly. “Not a lot, right?”
Alison Gets Sick

Chapter Summary

One day of fighting makes Alison sick. As she tries to recover, the war rages around her. The Doctor heals the wounded; Razor sets up a new base of operations; Bill inspires patients. The Magister’s essential duties include purring on Alison.

Alison falls ill. She doesn’t have any particular sickness, just a general prostration. Just one day of fighting in a revolution overwhelms her physically and mentally. Her broken brain gives up and tells her that she’s done for a week. She spends the next several days in bed because, if she tries to stand up, her head pounds, and the whole world starts rocking. She has no energy for such exertion anyway; her muscles feel as functional as soggy paper, and even eating is hard work that requires a nap afterward. She sleeps and eats and sleeps again, watching everyone around her save the world.

The day after what is now called the First Day Massacre, Irons blames all deaths on Razor’s Revolution. The resistance controverted the regime, forcing Irons to deploy the Night Patrol for peacekeeping measures. They actually say peacekeeping, at which Alison screams and throws a pillow at the radio, then pays for her action with an hour-long headache. Thus, concludes Irons, revolutionaries may as well have lit all the fires and pulled the trigger, killing their own in an abominable display of murderous selfishness. Bill, who has temporarily moved to another bedroom to allow Alison adequate recuperation, nevertheless visits regularly and launches another pillow at the radio for Alison when she hears this.

Irons announces that the Tinder Towners brought death and destruction upon themselves by defying the regime. Let the piled corpses and the smoking rubble of that neighborhood be a lesson, they say, to all those who would defy them. Irons increases their surveillance of Dystopiaville. They will burn the whole city if they have to. Alison thinks that Razor is starting to look thoughtful, sensible, and mature in comparison to this person.

Even as the people of Dystopiaville try to bury or cremate and mourn their dead, strict curfews and prohibitions on public assembly resume. The Night Patrol circulates through the neighborhoods nonstop, day and night, harassing people for no reason. NPs drag people off to detention centers, interrogate them for a few hours, and then release them, thoroughly intimidated. They start raiding homes and businesses, whether the people have any rumored connection to the revolution or not. They assault the residents and customers in public, just so everyone can see what RR is making them do, then leave them injured in the street.

Bill observes that the Night Patrol has turned to scaring, rather than kidnapping and/or killing people. According to Razor, she says, this means that the Night Patrol’s numbers are down. The First Day Massacre took its toll on them, and they must not have the forces for their usual deadly
terrorism. Bill tells Alison that this development pleases Razor greatly for about five seconds, especially since most of the lost NPs aren’t dead, but comatose in the hospital. Then he thinks of how many people died, Tinder Towners and NPs, for such a result. He should have kept them alive, he says. After all, he promised them. There should have been another way in which he could protect more of his people.

Alison envies both Razor and Bill. Less than a day after Tinder Town goes up in flames, the two return to work. Despite aching legs, Bill feels better enough after a night’s sleep, and, despite his missing ear, broken foot, and strained shoulder, Razor spends only a half a day in the Zero Room for Time Dorks. Bill and Razor meet in the Epiphany Room, where rally attendees have left all sorts of tribute, from food to furniture to art, as a sign of their esteem for Razor. The two largest categories, Edible and Useful, comprise food and housewares respectively. What should RR do with such a daunting accumulation of stuff?

Razor immediately decides to make a bank of edibles and a bank of useful things from which Tinder Town survivors can take what they needed. Bill, who knows off the top of her head families that needed certain items, proposes matching donations with recipients wherever possible. She suggests even codifying the donation and swap in some sort of barter exchange. Razor pronounces Bill’s idea a good one for the future -- an excellent means to propagate goodwill and secure further submission. Alison hears all of this from Bill, who spends a day categorizing stuff with Razor and rolling her eyes whenever he starts getting high on the fumes of his own self-importance.

While Bill and Razor work in the Epiphany Room, the Doctor embodies their title/name and works with the wounded. There are scores of Night Patrol officers in the Zero Room for humans: those that Alison’s robot and Razor sent into protective comas so they could avoid killing them. First of all, the Doctor stabilizes these Cyborganics and delivers them to the main hospital. RR agents there assume care of the comatose Cyborganics, vowing to keep them safe until they can be rewoken and repersoned without danger.

With the comatose Cyborganics gone, Anima now houses just twelve people in the Zero Room for humans. They are those that the Magister said that he could save if he moved quickly enough. Because they are in perilous condition and because the main hospital is full anyway, these people stay in Anima under the Doctor’s supervision.

Though preoccupied with a dozen patients, the Doctor opens Anima’s doors for more. They land their ship at the site of the Murder Factory -- for dramatic irony, the Doctor explains -- and transforms the building into a field hospital. Especially in the day or two immediately after the massacre, Anima circulates through Tinder Town. She is transporting supplies and delivering people’s corpses to cremation and burial locations, but also looking for people who need medical attention. The Doctor takes in people who have inhaled smoke and burned their lungs, Night Patrol officers with brain damage from assault by non-Cyborganic Dystopiaville citizens, people whose limbs were broken or crushed in the stampede, and people with faces and fingers blown off from the Night Patrol’s bullets, caring for all of them impartially. Bill says that the Anima contains
thirty-two people by the end of the first post-massacre day.

As for the Magister, he sticks as close to Alison as a cat who’s glad to see you after your two-week holidays, although with less winding around her legs and more purring. He has swapped out his damaged faceplate for his spare, so he’s back to his usual features, though he ignores his burned, unskinned arm. He puts a new glove on, pulls down his sleeve, and says that he has deactivated his pain sensors there for the duration.

He stays near her. He brings her what she needs, food, water, a change of clothes, painkillers. He tries to leave her room when he sees her drifting toward sleep every hour or so. Alison asks why. He says that he doesn’t want to disturb her. Alison says that, while Bill’s irregular and human sounds of coming and going do disrupt her sleep [which is why Bill has temporarily moved quarters], her robot should know by now that she sleeps better when he’s either holding her fast or at least sitting nearby. He stations himself by her bed in a chair. She sleeps well.

On the second day after Alison fights, Alison is lying in her robot’s arms when Bill visits again. “Alisonshine!” She flies in at high speed in her chair, her smile as bright as a flower. “Looking better than yesterday!”

“I don’t feel better than yesterday,” Alison mutters.

“You’ll regain your strength, Domina, slowly but surely,” says the Magister, whose purr buzzes right through Alison’s body.

“Yeah you will!” Bill nods quickly. “Cats are very good for healing, especially when they go rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr and hold you fast.”

Bill wants to know what Alison has been up to. Alison regales her with the thrilling details of physical and mental exhaustion, interspersed with snacks and occasional treks to the loo. Yesterday’s big event was a shower that took sixty minutes, even with the Magister’s help during the non-naked parts, from taking her dirty trousers off to putting a new scarf around her hair. There are also lots of hugs from a robot whose constant purring makes her very sleepy.

“Maybe I should take over snuggling duty, yeah? --Just so you don’t sleep for like twenty hours straight.” Another big grin from Bill. She and the Magister slowly and delicately shift their positions so that she reclines with Alison on the bed and he sits in a chair by Bill’s empty wheelchair. “Oh Alisonshine!” says Bill with a sigh, as if it’s monumentally exciting to cuddle with someone who’s about a limp as a wet rag. “I was thinking about you all day. The stories people were telling me -- I was writing them down, but I knew that you would know how to make
Bill says that she has two jobs these days. One of them is helping the Doctor and the Magister. The Magister corrects her, saying that her job is more accurately characterized as *temporarily detaining the Doctor until they do things that they have neglected*. Bill admits that she has blockaded the Doctor’s bedroom door until they have agreed to take a nap and also trapped them into the kitchen until they’ve eaten. After several minutes of confused objection, the Doctor does what Bill requests, realizes how much better they feel, then bounces around, singing and thanking her for her help.

Bill’s other job involves daily visits to what she calls the *Anima Mobile Medical Clinic*. She goes to the Zero Room for humans every day, laptop wedged in the side of her chair. She asks who the patients are related to or worried about, then brings them reports of those people’s safety or death. She passes along Razor’s radio remarks because apparently he’s broadcasting inspirational things these days. She tells the story of five people found after four days under rubble. She gives updates on the number of volunteers, kilos of food, boxes of clothing, and other supplies coming into Tinder Town from elsewhere in the city. In other words, she emphasizes the survival, the aid, the defiance, the persistence, the good.

And Bill listens. It’s not just that people want reports of the outside world; they also want to tell someone what happened. Bill asks them if she can write down what they say, telling the patients what she told Ishi. *People’s stories are important*, she says, *because then we know how hard they worked, what they did, what they sacrificed. You’re part of the revolution, whether you hid in your basement or helped your neighbors get to a shelter or set a fire in the Murder Factory. You’re who we’re fighting for, and your stories tell the truth. The truth fights Irons’ lies. Your stories are a way to fight and a way to give hope.*

Bill inspires people to talk, and it’s these words that she wishes that she could give to Alison, for she knows that Alison would make them more beautiful and powerful than they already are. “We were recording history when we were working on the documentation and then at the command center,” Bill says, “but you… You could write it! You could find the story in it.”

“Yeah!” Alison sits up a bit in Bill’s lap. “I wouldn’t just be studying history; I’d be making it -- writing it! I’d be a historiographer!” She bounces once on her butt, and her head starts throbbing. “Ow!” She squints her eyes shut. “I hate this; I hate doing nothing. Maybe you could just leave me some of your notes, and I’ll look at them after I take a quick nap.”

“Okay, but do you think that’s a good --?” Bill starts.

“No,” says the Magister, softly but definitively. “Know your limits, Domina.”
“Fuck my limits!” says Alison, and the sharpness of her voice increases the pain in her head.

“Oh dear… Oh no… Oh Alisonshine, I’m so sorry I upset you. I didn’t mean to make you think of all the things you couldn’t do. Just thought it might cheer you up to hear that I was thinking about you, you know… Uh…maybe I should go…?” Bill’s sentences trip over themselves in her uncertainty.

“No angry at you,” Alison says under her breath. “Just at my fucking broken brain.”

Bill requires several more minutes of assurance from both Alison and the Magister that no one blames her for Alison’s sudden bad mood and headache. Nevertheless Alison feels Bill migrating toward the edge of the bed in almost imperceptible increments, trying to escape the unhappy feelings for which she still feels responsible. Taking pity on her, Alison says it’s okay for her to leave. Bill gives Alison a last gentle snuggle, then climbs back into her chair and departs.

Slumping against her pillows, Alison flings her arm over her eyes. “My fucking limits… My fucking brain… Ugh, I’m getting all worked up about being disabled again, and I don’t have the energy for it. I can feel myself wanting to yell at you for saying I shouldn’t be reading books, but yelling is too much work.” She sighs again. “Just…tell me what to do, robot of mine, and I’ll do it, okay?”

“Domina?” He doesn’t know what she means.

“Remember once back when we had just met? It was after the Finisterran vampire, and I told you that you had to stand up -- Gah, my head!” She presses the heel of her hand into her forehead.

“Ah! Ah, right.” Understanding at last, the Magister takes over the story for her. “You advised me to reject my Doctor’s use of me as a weapon and to tell them that I was a person whose rights could not be abrogated thus. And I told you that, as much as I wished to do so, I could not of my own volition, but I would be able to if you commanded me. You commanded me, and then it was no longer a question of my own internal reluctance, but of my obedience to my Domina. I may deny and thwart myself at every turn, but you know that I can deny you nothing. So, because you ordered me, I did something that I was afraid to do.”

“Right, so can you tell me to lie down and shut up and not read Bill’s interviews? Otherwise I’m going to have a fit of rage about my brain damage, and that’s not going to do anyone any good.”
“Hmmm…” The Magister falls silent for a minute. “You were rubbing your forehead,” he says at length. “Is that the source of your headache?” When Alison grunts affirmatively, he says, “Answer me in words.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, mi Magistre,” he prompts her.

The Magister has never asked her to repeat things exactly before, but he probably has a reason for it -- if only that he finds incoherent noises abhorrent to his eloquent mode of expression. “Yes indeed, mi Magistre, in answer to your question,” says Alison with a little smile, “it’s my forehead that hurts.”

“Would it alleviate your pain if I rubbed your forehead?”

Alison nods. “Yes, robot of mine.”

“Then may I do so, please?”

“I would be very happy if you did, robot of mine. Just don’t touch my scar, okay?” It’s where the Shalka went into her brain, and she even hates it when she touches her own self there.

“I will not, Domina carissima,” promises the Magister. “Thank you. Take your arm away from your face, please.” She does so. “Move down on your bed so that I can sit at the head.” She follows his requests until he has her lying stretched out before him. Kneeling over her, her presses down with his left thumb in the center of the forehead, making sure to avoid the scar by which the Shalka entered her skull. He moves his finger clockwise with steady pressure, as if she’s clay that he’s trying to warm before he works with it. “Now,” he says, “how do you feel?”

Alison loosens the muscles in her limbs, neck, and back, giving the support of her body over to the mattress and pillows beneath her. Opening her eyes, she looks up and sees the Magister smiling at her upside-down. The image makes her a little dizzy, so she closes her eyes. She feels loose and heavy, but not dense and soggy like she did right after fighting. She feels like she’s been laid out to dry, and she’s warming in the sun, toasting herself into a gentle calmness. His pressure on her forehead acts as a sort of tactile noise that drowns out the pain of her headache. “Hmmm…!” she answers, then realizes that that was not actually a word. “Very...relaxed... mi Magistre. Thank
“See?” She doesn’t need to see the Magister to know that he’s smiling. “You needed no command, only a distraction.”

“Purring robot…” comments Alison with a sigh, nestling deeper into her pillow.

“Sleeping Domina…” says the Magister, and she is.
Alison Doesn't Do Shit

Chapter Summary

Still recovering, Alison listens to one of Razor's radio addresses and discovers that he considers her one of "his people" [?!]. The Doctor bounces in with inspirational limericks and lots of love for Bill.

On the third day of Alison’s sitting around and not doing shit, she wonders how Razor is doing. She hasn’t seen him since she drove him into the wall on the way to the Zero Room and smashed his foot.

Bill gives her an update. Though hurt in multiple places, Razor can’t sit still. After sorting tribute with her, he left Anima in a temporary chair and a rather manic state. The Tinder Town safe house was destroyed, so he and Yasmeen set up headquarters at the old Plague Street Detention Center. It’s now a refugee shelter for approximately two hundred people, the perfect place for emergency aid.

According to Bill, Yasmeen takes the news of their family’s extinction with many tears, but without words. Razor suggests, insists, and then requires that Yasmeen to tend to their cremations, but Yasmeen walks away from him. The dead can wait, they say. I can’t afford to grieve right now. I deal in hope. They collaborate with what remains of the Tinder Town RR network to tend the wounded, shelter the homeless, feed the hungry. Even non-RR people from Tinder Town and adjacent neighborhoods help, with a secondary effort continuing to send refugees to Floor 1055 [since Irons hasn’t noticed the lift’s movement yet].

As for Razor, he’s physically incapacitated, but he does what he can with his words. He calls together helpers and has Yasmeen’s family members cremated, then memorialized with a plaque. He compiles a list of all the people he knows died, then interviews others until he has a comprehensive roster. He records who’s alive at Plague Street, then appeals to the other shelters and precincts for information about survivors and casualties. He calls down to Floor 1055 for an ever-increasing census of the refugee camp.

“He’s been spending hours on the shortwave,” says the Magister, delivering her lunch [poached egg on buttered toast] in bed, “reading off people’s names.”

“You popped the yolk!” Alison, who has a very particular way that she eats poached eggs, remarks. A closer look at the food reveals that he has burst the yolk and stirred the yellow contents in with the whites, coating all pieces of the bread equally with egg, to which a liberal coating of cracked
pepper has been applied. Everything is divided into small squares that appear to have been precision-cut with a craft knife. Alison forks some food into her mouth. “Awwwww, you did it right. Thank you! Mmmm, dis ish delishush!” The Magister twitches upon hearing her talk with her mouth full, so she swallows before asking, “Really? Razor’s really counting off the dead?”

“Anima,” calls the Magister, “can you please tune into the Tinder Town frequency?” She does, and Razor’s voice fills the room.

“Irons says you’re guilty, that we’re all guilty,” he tells his listeners. He possesses the same rolling intonation that the Magister does, the same perfectly calibrated balance of speech and pauses that he deployed at the relay. But there’s no exultation in his voice now. The power he speaks with is righteous fury, a barely contained rage. “Irons says we’re killing ourselves. Irons says that I killed all these people, that you killed all these people. Irons says that it’s your fault that all these people are dead. Irons says that your desire to be free killed them.

“No! I am innocent of these deaths; all of you are innocent; every single one of the Night Patrol is innocent. The NPs were only automated to carry out Irons’ orders. It’s Irons that’s guilty.” He pauses for a moment, then says again, “Irons is the guilty one, and Irons is the one who will pay.

“Irons says that we’re guilty because they want all of us hopeless. They think that they can burn the hope out of us; they think they can massacre it. But they forgot one thing, one thing that we all remember. Where there’s life, there’s hope.

“If you’re homeless, if you’re hurt, if your family and friends are dead, you might think that’s just an empty slogan. Maybe I’m lying. Maybe I don’t know what it means. Maybe I’m trying to make you believe something that isn’t true.

“There’s a reason I keep saying that, though. I felt that reason on First Day when I stood in a burning plaza with the smoldering bodies of three hundred of my people around me. I didn’t want to give up because all of you who are listening are still alive, and there’s work to be done. Just one life, one little bit of hope -- that’s enough reason to keep going. That’s enough reason to keep fighting.

“So come with me and and grieve; come with me and mourn; come with me and rebuild; come with me and fight; come with me and win; come with me and be free.” He issues the invitation like a spell, an inevitable spill of words that draws the listeners into the victorious future he portrays. “We’re doing it for ourselves, for hope, for the future, and we’re doing it for every single one of these people that Irons killed: Ashlin Abington, Corinna Abington, Aelfric Adams…”
“Huh…” Alison, lunch finished, stares at the ceiling for a few seconds. “He does care then.”

“Do you know, Domina,” says the Magister, withdrawing the tray from her lap, “that he thought you were dying after the massacre? I assured him that you were disabled and thus in need of recovery, but not in any mortal danger. He had some trouble believing that -- “

“What the hell is his problem? Did he want to see a medical history for proof of brain damage?”

“In the Master’s defense, he has never seen any of your symptoms before. You have shown him nothing for fear of appearing vulnerable and exploitable.”

“Okay, well, that’s fair.”

The Magister smiles. “After he lectured me for five minutes on the importance of watching over your dear Seeker, he then told me in no uncertain terms to -- and I quote -- *fix the Dominatrix. I am not going to have another one of my people die, especially if she belongs to you. This is supposed to be Where there’s life, there’s hope, not Where there’s death, there’s doom. I need her alive. I want her well. Make her good.*”

“Wait… Wait…” Alison presses her hand to her forehead. “You’re saying I’m included in his people now?”

“You, I, your dear Seeker, and even my Doctor, though they dislike him, are now, along with the entire population of Dystopiaville except for Irons, *his people.*”

“Wow, I think I just saw a pig fly by the window,” says Alison, and both of them laugh. The shaking of her core jostles her head. “Urgh.”

“Are you all right?” The Magister is instantly by her side.

“Well, my headache is finally gone,” says Alison, “but I’m still just…really weak, you know? Apparently laughing is too much for me right now. Goddammit!”

“Rest then,” he says and purrs at her until she does.
On the fourth day of Alison’s enforced inactivity, she still feels floppy, but rested enough to try a shower again. This time she’s in and out in less than thirty minutes, with no help from the Magister but his laying out of new clothes for her. Alison lies back on her bed, allowing herself a moment of satisfaction and pride. Maybe she really is getting better.

The Doctor taps on her slightly open bedroom door. She calls them in. The Doctor enters, looking like...well, like a doctor, dressed in scrubs [pink, purple, and blue tie-dye spirals] and slip-on magenta clogs, with a stethoscope around their neck. “Hooray, I’m so happy to see you!” They clap their hands. “How are you doing? Don’t worry; I won’t take your vitals. I was just in the Zero Room for humans doing rounds. Oh! Oh!” Their eyes light up to a brighter blue. “Wanna hear some poetry? You’ll like this! It’s about Bill.

“*There once was a girl named Bill*

*With a heart so strong no one could kill.*

*To the dictator,*

*She said, Goodbye. See you later.*

*Now Irons is dead, and we’re thrilled.*

The Doctor explains that, since the moment the flames were extinguished, revolutionary sayings and poems began springing up across Tinder Town and the rest of Dystopiaville. *Where there’s life, there’s hope* appears, shortened to *WTL* and scrawled over official Irons broadsheets. Ranju’s favorite anagram, *Sly Razor is Irons’ master*, shows up on occasion. So do pro-Bill limericks like the one above, even though Irons is not technically dead yet.

Preferring the limerick that they recited above all others, the Doctor has cut a stencil of it. They spray paint the poem wherever they travel: on the remaining Murder Factory exterior wall, upon Floor 1056 General Hospital’s loading dock, across the broken flagstones where Cyborganics were beaten to death. “It’s wonderful!” they cry. “Poetry’s just flowering everywhere, pushing like flowers through the cracks in the rubble, stronger than pesticide, stronger than homicide… *Hope springs eternal*, not just in the human breast, but from the very city itself, stirring, opening, blooming, and rising!” Clasping their hands to their chest, they spin around on one foot like a figure skater. A whiff of sweat and grime, condensed in the creases of the Doctor’s rumpled scrubs, hits Alison’s nose.

“Awww, Doctor…” Alison grins from ear to ear. As much as she has benefited from the placid purring of her robot, she has to admit that she has missed the Doctor’s wonder-filled ebullience. After Razor’s sorrow and anger, the Doctor’s confidence sweeps through her mind, cleansing it of doubt. As certain as they are of success, they have no foolish naivete about the situation, only an irrepressible sense of hope that, Alison is sure, they are imparting to their patients along with care.
for their physical injuries. “It’s good to see you. How are you? How’s everyone in the medical center? What’s going on in the city?”

Skipping over the first question, the Doctor debriefs Alison on the patients in Anima Mobile Medical Clinic. Someone’s collapsed lung has yet to reinflate, but the Doctor hopes that the Zero Room for humans will help them along. One of the Night Patrol members who was badly beaten now has their seizures controlled with medication. The person from whose eye shrapnel was extracted has lost most of their vision in that eye, but not the eyeball itself. The Doctor successfully amputated someone’s mangled hand this morning and may have to do the same with another person if their infected limb shows no improvement soon. Seven people have left Anima: three with their broken limbs reset and splinted and four with burns sufficiently dressed. In short, summarizes the Doctor, things are going swimmingly.

“And it’s all thanks to my dear Bill,” they finish with a sigh, their eyes momentarily far-off with affection. “You know how wonderful she is, don’t you? Of course you do; you’re in love with her. Well, so is everyone else. She comes into the Zero Room for humans, and everyone -- it doesn’t matter how much pain they’re in -- just...just...blooms! Everyone wants to hear the news from her; everyone wants to tell her their stories. She makes all the patients so happy. She makes me so happy.” As they sigh again, Alison knows exactly how the Doctor’s doing. With their healing arts in need and one of their partners by their side, they’re in both ecstasy and top form.

Outside Anima’s walls, the Doctor says, the people of Dystopiaville have turned against Irons. The Doctor sees concerted sabotage efforts at Floor 1056 General Hospital. They visit there regularly to check in on the comatose Cyborganics, advise the RR agents on staff about any challenging cases, remove discharged people to safe locations, and -- oh yeah -- put up RR limericks along the way. Anyway, most of the regular staff are revolutionaries, and they’re seriously revolting.

RR agents falsify charts and interfere with the actual installation and programming of people’s Cyber equipment. The most vulnerable candidates for Cyber conversion suddenly develop conditions [at least according to their charts] that render them unsuitable for Cyberization, whereupon they are diverted out of the hospital, through the Sewage Street safe house, to hide in the community. Surgical tech breaks down or goes missing, delaying operations long enough for more people to be rescued. Even at the final brainwashing stage, RR agents intercede, inspired by Prunella and Senga’s earlier actions in a coma ward. They unhook certain people from the Cyber network, write them off as conversion failures, and smuggle them to safe locations where they, emotionally repressed but un-networked, can stay until it’s safe for full repersoning.

In the midst of this recital, a balled-up pair of socks flies in from the hall, hitting the Doctor in the head. A clean scrub shirt with psychedelic swirls of yellow and red follows. The shirt lands on the Doctor’s shoulder as Bill enters the room. “Change your clothes!” she tells the Doctor.

“Hmmm, this is a nice shirt.” Plucking it from their shoulder, the Doctor inspects it as if it hasn’t
been hanging in their closet for [presumably] years.

“You should put it on,” says Bill with a smirk. “You stink.”

“I had a bath this morning, though.”

“Okay, well, your clothes stink. When was the last time you washed them? You know what -- never mind. Don’t answer that. Just put on some new ones, or I’ll keep throwing socks at you.” Bill gets up from her chair, picks up the socks, lobs them at the Doctor again, then sits back down in her chair.

“Eeek!” The Doctor covers their head with their arms. “Bill my dear,” they say between laughs, “you’re as bad as my Master -- no, worse! He doesn’t hurl things at me.”

“Worse?” Bill repeats with a snicker. “At least I’m not the one who drags you around by your shirt collar and pins you down!”

“Surely you’ve noticed by now,” puts in Alison, “that the Doctor considers that a feature, not a bug.”

“Oh ho?” Bill’s eyebrows swoop to the top of her forehead. “Well, consider sock bombs a new added feature. Change -- your -- clothes!” With each word, she throws something at the Doctor.

The Doctor falls in a splat to the bedroom floor, scrubs on their head. “Pax... Pax...” they gasp. “I yield.” Boinging to their feet, they bow to Alison. “And now, my dear, I must away, lest my dear Bill smother me in undergarments.” They leave with Bill, both of them giggling together.

The Magister enters shortly after with a bundle of clean sheets in his arms. “Oh, the old fool.” He shakes his head as Alison moves off the bed and lets him change the linens. “They are never content with enough misery; they must always find someone else to whom they can give their hearts.”

“What misery?” says Alison. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen the Doctor so happy.”
“I have,” says the Magister in a low voice, “before their beloved companion died.” When that person, whose name neither Time Dork will mention, perished, some essential part of the Doctor seemed to do so as well.

“Well, that’s not going to happen again,” Alison informs the Magister. “We’re all four of us going to watch out for each other, and no one’s dying of anything except old age, so you can quit worrying.”

“I can?”

“Yes, because I’m the Domina, and I rule the universe.”

“Ah, you must be feeling more yourself again.” The Magister cups her cheeks in both hands. “I see some of that old power scintillating in your eyes.”

“Yeah!” says Alison. “I’m almost certainly probably not half dead anymore.” She winks at him.
Nothing Is Happening

Chapter Summary

Bill resumes prep for Deedee's funeral with help from the Doctor and the Magister. Charlie introduces Alison to the rest of her family. Razor introduces Alison to an extremely weird form of tribute and the miraculous possibilities of repurposed Cyber tech.

On the fifth day of Alison’s recovery, a lull occurs in the Anima Mobile Medical Clinic. Five patients are discharged before Alison’s breakfast: one with a [finally] reinflated lung, one with a damaged eye, one with deep lacerations now healing nicely, and two with formerly infected burns now doing well. The Cyborganic with medically controlled seizures transfers to Floor 1056 General Hospital for long-term observation and treatment. The person with the amputated hand and the person at risk for hand amputation also move to the hospital. Doctor Yoon wants to discuss with them the possibilities of using Cyber tech enhancements or replacements.

With the decreased number of people in the Zero Room for humans, Bill and her Doctor have more free time. The Doctor heads off to the Floor 1056 General Hospital morgue to prepare dead people for burial. Bill expresses surprise that the Doctor knows about undertaking, but they only say, Oh, of course. It’s in one of your poems: I have been half in love with easeful Death. Keats. Ode to a Nightingale.

Remembering her and Alison’s own burial preparations for Deedee, Bill returns to this project. She tries to make a coffin for the doll out of several tissue boxes, hot glue, and paint, but succeeds only in producing a mess. She then appeals to the Magister, who uses the exact same supplies to create a miniature coffin with a mock oak finish, interior padding, and jewelry findings for handles along the sides. This used to be a tissue box! Bill, waving the coffin at Alison, can’t stop examining it. A tissue box! The Prof is a genius! Alison agrees.

But Deedee still has no clothes. Alison is about to ask the Magister to sew something, but Bill tells Alison not to worry; the Doctor has solved that problem during one of Alison’s naps. They will make a gown for the Deedee doll out of the purple petals of the papavilium, an almost translucent flower that smells like mustard seed. They’ll wait to do so, though, till the morning of the funeral [whenever it is] so that her dress stays fresh.

Speaking of the Doctor, Bill adds, they have given their permission for the funeral to take place in their Cemetery of the Lost. They’re down there as she speaks, actually, arranging a podium and chairs. They want to help in some way, but prefer to do so behind the scenes, as they know that they will be a sobbing wreck during the ceremony itself. Frustrated though she is at her inability to help, Alison feels nevertheless pleased that her friends have taken over. Maybe they can actually
hold the funeral one of these days, assuming she ever leaves the bed for good.

Feeling well enough to listen to the Magister read to her, Alison passes a peaceful day filled with naps and fairy tales. Then, on the sixth day, after lunch, Charlie visits. “Here! Meet the rest of my fuckin’ family! --This is Junie,” she says, elbowing a person with skin of darker sepia than the Magister’s.

“Excuse me -- I am Armando Tarragona, Junior!” he corrects. “--Or at least I was until I got married and was forced to change my name to Fanshaw. The indignity.” Cyborganic in a manner similar to Bill, Junie has a core of mechanical innards, but, unlike Bill, he has a blocky acrylic shell projecting from his chest that protects the electronics. He also has at least seven cowlicks in his short, thick, black hair and mischief in his green eyes.

“Indignity? Let me tell you about indignity!” says a person in the manual wheelchair that Junie is pushing. She’s scrawny and slight, with pale white skin, almost spherically pregnant with a baby that seems due any second. “I’m married to a pompous ass and someone whose every third word is a curse. I’ve got half a mind to run away and raise this offspring away from you two and your nasty influences.” She braces herself on the armrests, as if she’s about to rise, but then sinks back. “Ugh, running would require standing up. Never mind.”

“That’s Gardenia,” says Charlie, “and the newest Fanshaw, whenever they feel like gracing us with their presence.”

Gardenia pats her abdomen. “We just can’t wait till this little shit stops booting me in the liver, can we?”

“No!” say Charlie and Junie in emphatic unison. “We can’t!”

A definite flutter of motion appears through Gardenia’s flesh. “Thanks a lot!” she cries to her spouses. “You woke up the Bladder Stomper.” She groans. “Two more months. Just two more months.” Bending her head toward her belly, she adds, “And, if you’re not out by your due date, you’re being forcibly evicted.”

Charlie and family have been undercover, living in the Sewage Street safe house with the protection of Prunella, Senga, and a perception filter borrowed from the Doctor. They have stayed quiet, resting, since Charlie is still rattled from her post-rally assault. Furthermore, Junie, as a Cyborganic, has limited stamina anyway, and Gardenia has been expending most of her energy growing a small person inside her. There are lots of communal naps. Alison welcomes them to the club of the chronically underslept.
The Foxtrot-Fanshaws have ventured out on occasion, though. Britomart Smythe, who lives in Butcher’s Block next to the Cyber production factories, has organized educational meetings for factory line workers. She and her son demonstrate exactly how the equipment made by the workers enables Irons’ subjugation of Dystopiaville citizens. The Foxtrot-Fanshaws show up as an illustration of partial robotification [Junie], full Cyber conversion [Charlie], and, in Charlie’s words, general familial fuck-up. Junie punches her in the side for insinuating that the three of them are fucked up. Charlie points out that they’ve had to deal with a lot more grief and pain, thanks to Irons, than they would if no one had been Cyberized. Anyway, the exhausted Gardenia has attended two of these meetings, but then opted to stay home under Senga’s guard, leaving the public appearances to her spouses.

Irons, says Charlie, is trying desperately to increase the rate of Cyber conversion to replace those Night Patrol members lost in the First Day Massacre. Charlie hears, though, that the conversion operations at Floor 1056 General Hospital have been less effective than usual. Alison confirms that this is indeed the case. She fills in the Foxtrot-Fanshaws about the passive resistance efforts underway there, and the Foxtrot-Fanshaws cheer.

In return, Charlie and spouses give Alison news about sabotage on the other end of the Cyber production cycle at the foundries. Most of the factory line workers balance on the edge of poverty. Though they know that their work props up the dictatorship, most of them compartmentalize this knowledge and focus on supporting their families. Because they work for the regime, factory workers have been largely spared the Night Patrol’s terrorism and kidnappings. However, the Foxtrot-Fanshaws give the workers incontrovertible, real-life proof that their actions harm others.

Britomart Smythe, who arranges meetings between foundry workers and the Foxtrot-Fanshaws, not-so-secretly wishes that all the line workers would immediately quit upon realizing their part in the injustice. But the workers live in fear of a crackdown like that on Tinder Town, and they literally cannot afford to leave their stations. They resort to obstruction instead, overloading circuits, burning out electronics, loosening screws, jamming machines, and otherwise slowing the production of robot parts, despite Irons’ best efforts.

Irons is going down already, Alison thinks, and there hasn’t even really been a real battle. How long before they’re dead and gone? Could it be that soon? She hopes it is.

On the seventh day, Razor himself rockets in with a borrowed chair and tablet, a cast on his left foot, a slightly hectic gleam in the eye, a sheaf of papers, and that ridiculous accent. “Good, good, so your robot is keeping you well. I am hating when the people of mine die. Is very annoying. So,” he says, squaring the handful of papers neatly by tapping them on his armrest, “I hear you are boring. Okay! So I show you this. Maybe it gives you the laughs. Read; read.”
Alison considers. She still feels limp, but headache-free and intensely bored. “Ummm… I haven’t been doing much of anything recently, but I’ll try.” She starts reading. Despite herself, she continues and scans the rest of the pages within a few minutes. “Holy shit.” She sets down the story and looks at Razor. “Did I just… Did I just read what I think I read?”

“You are the smart Dominatrix; you figure it out.”

Alison shakes her head at the document. “Razor/Irons slash fiction -- who’d have thought? Where did you get this?”

“Is tribute! Was in Kill It With Fire pile, but I give to you before I burn.”

“What kind of tribute is hardcore porn?” Alison, chewing hard on her lower lip, is trying not to laugh.

Razor sits up very straight in his chair, as if her comment impugns him. “What kind of tribute? Is tribute to my universal potency! Obviously.” He flips through the pages. “Here I am, screwing Irons so hard that ship knocks out of black hole.” He pauses, then deadpans, “Physics not really author’s strong suit, no? Anyway, where is quote I was looking for? Ah hah! Says here… Master of Orgasms! I am -- “ He can barely complete the sentence on account of laughter. “I am vindicating!”

“Well, congratulations,” Alison tells him. “Now you’ve got a title worthy of a third-rate dom. Your work here is done.”

“Good.” Razor lets fall the fake accent. “It’s just offensive on so many levels, apart from the sheer failure of the physics. For one thing, the author assumes that Gallifreyan anatomy works just like Mondasian, which it doesn’t. For another thing, they also assume that I look good in green velvet. Green velvet!” He whacks the pages with the back of his hand. “No one looks good in green velvet… except for maybe your Doctor.”

“That’s… a piece of work, all right. Any idea who wrote it?” Alison asks.

“I could find out easily enough, but then I’d have to live with that knowledge.” He shudders.

“Ignorance is probably bliss in this case.”
There’s a short pause. The Magister comes in after having taken a nap of his own. He and his counterpart acknowledge each other with a momentary glance that transmits information and judgment too subtle for Alison to catch. As the Magister sits next to Alison on the bed and puts his arm around her, Razor changes the subject. “I didn’t know that you were like me, Dominatrix. You have limited strength, limited concentration, limited stamina, chronic pain, right? And you hate it.”

Alison grumbles. “Understatement. What’s your point?”

“Well, the Master says that you won’t let him use his psychic powers against your pain because that would be mind-fucking,” says Razor, “but you will use pharmaceutical solutions.”

“Yeah, drugs are great,” says Alison with a sigh, “but what I’d really like is a replacement for whatever broke in my head so I didn’t need so much fucking sleep all the time.”

“Right.” The Magister nods. “As you’ve told me, a technological implant would be best. So I was wondering what form one would take if I were to develop one.”

“And he was talking to me,” chimes in Razor, “either because I’m a genius in this field or because I’m the only person foolhardy enough to listen to him drone on and on. Anyway, he didn’t have any ideas -- because he’s not a genius in the field -- so I suggested the obvious: modified Cyber tech!”

“You,” Alison informs him, “aren’t doing brain surgery on me.”

“I never said I was.” Razor explains that he has experimented with the emotional inhibitor implants for years, altering them for voluntary pain control. He’s especially proud of the implant that reduces the recurrence of panic attacks. “I used to have them regularly, up to four a day. It really cramped my style, which is a key piece of the whole supervillain mystique. Just my luck that one of the first people I successfully detoxed and repersoned was Doctor Kevin Yoon, former head of surgery on Cyber Conversion Team Eight, which specialized in complex cases.”

“They converted one of their most gifted specialists? That seems counterproductive,” remarks Alison.

“Doctor Yoon was caught in an ethical lapse. Specifically, they lapsed and started having ethics,” Razor says drily. “Irons wanted to make an example of them. --Anyway, at the same time I brought
them back to themselves, I also developed a prototype of the anti-panic implant. So I had Doctor Yoon do the honors. Since they were significantly robotified, they didn’t have the fine motor skills to perform the surgery themselves. They oversaw a team of nursing students who did the actual work. Thanks to my little upgrade, I’m down to two panic attacks a week. I’m brilliant!”

“Self-experimentation involving untested technology installed by untrained people.” The Magister shakes his head. “It’s perfect example of the inimitable intellect, audacity, and questionable judgment for which we Masters are universally infamous.”

“Thank you.” Razor smirks. “Anyway, Dominatrix, I’ve shared my research and prototypes with the Master, so, if you ever trust my counterpart with your brain, you might be able to find some relief from your pain.” Something buzzes in the side pocket of his chair. “Ah, I’ve got to go track down your Doctor. We have a meeting on the sing-down of the Cyber broadcast. See you...probably at the funeral.”

“What funeral?” Alison looks at him blankly.

“The one you and Miss Potts have been working on for the past week or two. Weren’t you going to speak? I know she’d appreciate it. Bye! Watch out for third-rate porn.” Razor zips out.

“Third-rate porn?” The Magister raises his eyebrows.

“It was his weird way of trying to entertain me,” Alison explains. She thinks for a bit. “Am I just hallucinating, or was that whole discussion about brain implants also his weird way of trying to make me feel better?”

“He cares for you,” says the Magister, “though he’d never admit it, in much the same way that he cares for the Seeker. There is one difference, though. He has no fear of her, but you -- you he finds intimidating.”

“Yeah,” says Alison, “that’s me: intimidating as fuck...especially when I’ve been lying around for a week.”

“Well, if you would like a change from your habitual horizontal state… Will you walk with me?” He crooks his elbow and offers her his arm.
Alison smiles. “I believe I will.”
Deedee Is Remembered

Chapter Summary

Deedee is buried. Alison introduces the funeral; Bill runs it, and Razor says a few words.

Three days after Alison is well again, Anima plays a solemn, shivery chord of organ music. Alison and Bill take a double deep breath, exchange a look and a nod, then join hands. With the Deedee doll enrobed in a flower, laid in her open tissue box casket, and tucked under Alison’s free arm, Alison and Bill bear their favorite character into the Doctor’s Cemetery of the Lost.

First they pass through the wrought iron rosebushes. With stems of verdigris and flowers of black, the dense hedge spreads the eight-meter width of the pillared and deeply vaulted cellar. A chilly taste touches Alison’s lips, vaguely reminiscent of when she puts her finger in her mouth after accidentally slicing herself with a craft knife. This is the ferrous perfume of the rosebushes, and, just like the flowers and trees that serve as lamps in the Doctor’s library, they are alive. The iron flowers draw aside, showing a path between the thorns.

The organ music resounds, and Anima ignites torches for Alison and Bill to see their way. It’s a grave place, Bill had said of the cemetery, and it is. There are other people within the bushes -- life-size statues actually, either of black or white marble. Some, affixed to the woody stems, are transpierced by branches. Thorns coil around others, binding them in with the bushes. Still others lie on the ground, roses erupting from their arms, their legs, their bellies. She can tell by the plaintive tilt of their brows that some of them appear to have been crying, while others, lips parted, have been caught in mid-speech. Nevertheless, they have neither tension nor agony in their faces. Suspended, anchored, and otherwise encompassed, there is a smooth and slumbrous curve to their bodies. At last they are held. At last they are at peace. Maybe, finally, Deedee will be too, if only in Alison and Bill’s imaginations.

Alison and Bill bring Deedee into the cellar proper. Symmetrically arranged, it has three walls of a black, obsidian-like stone, salted occasionally with pale grey. The back wall contains round niches. In some there are urns of white marble that seem to hover, glowing, amidst the shadows. There are likenesses of people, either as small statues or images in clear cubes. There are jeweled boxes on curved legs, seamless tubes of pale blue light, and even some green glazed canopic jars out of ancient Egypt’s late Eighteenth Dynasty. This is the cemetery; this is a crypt.

Alison knows some of the people commemorated here. She recognizes an icon of the Magister when he was biological: a representation of the incarnation that inspired his current robotic form. Even a statue of the Shalka war leader stands in one of the alcoves. When she asked the Magister about these, he explained, The Doctor loves death, but hates to kill. In the Cemetery of the Lost,
they memorialize all those people for whose death they feel responsible, whether friend or foe.

Friends and foes [well, at least one foe] gather now for Deedee’s funeral. As Alison and Bill near the center of the room, the Doctor smothers a sob with a corner of their cloak. His head tilted, the Magister watches his inevitable spouse with a cringe of pain. Of all the faculties he lost when he was made mechanical, he misses the ability to weep the most.

In another set of paired chairs are Charlie and Razor. Charlie tried to explain to Gardenia and Junie why her attendance here was vital, failed, and in the end snuck out. Dressed in red, the traditional color of funerals, she’s both frowning with sadness and gaping at the intricacy of the Deedee doll and her coffin. As for Razor, he’s well enough to be walking today; in fact, he sits with a forward lunge, as if he might have to dash at any second. He keeps glancing at the Doctor as if he expects himself to break out in hives because of their tears. Alison, who’s unsure what his panic attacks look like, wonders if he’s having one. Whatever the case, he’s forcing himself to stay because he knows that it’s important to both Bill and Alison, which is...kind of amazing, really.

Anima’s music quavers toward silence as Alison and Bill pass two stone angels of black granite, slightly larger than life size. Wings and robes heedlessly splayed, they bow their heads, genuflecting toward a bier in the center of the room. It’s edged in bunches of the Doctor’s papavilium, the purple of which appears almost grey in such low light. Swallowing a few times, Alison tastes the strange rust from the rosebushes. As she takes her place by the bier, the mustard pungency of the papavilium hits her nose. She lifts her speech notes toward her face.

“Three hundred and seventy-one,” she says. “That’s the total number of people who died in the First Day Massacre. Three hundred and seventy-one people, three hundred and seventy-one names that Razor read out over shortwave. Three hundred and seventy-one people who used to be alive just like us and probably didn’t expect to die on the first day of the new year. Three hundred and seventy-one people full of lives and thoughts, likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares, all of which ended last week. Three hundred and seventy-one real people...and here we are, having a service for a fake one. Why?” she cries, and her voice bounces off the ceiling. “Why, when there’s so much real work to do, are we mourning the death of a story?”

Alison lets the echo dwindle away. “Well,” she says with a humorless laugh, “when I put it like that, I can’t answer the question. All I can say is that...Deedee Schmidt is real to me. I loved her because she was like me, another Black girl with some of the same thoughts and dreams. While she was alive, my hope was alive; I thought, Well, maybe I’ll grow up to become someone like her. When she died...well, then some of my hope died too. Stories can have just as much life and power as people, so we’re here to mark a fitting end to Deedee’s story. So...um...thank you for coming, and thank you for helping Bill and me close this chapter of Deedee’s life.”

The funeral goes on. Bill fumbles for her Bible and reads that bit from Ecclesiastes, embellishing with her own flourishes: “To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under
Heaven. A time to be born, a time to die... A time to plant and a time to uproot... A time to kill and a time to heal... A time to build up, a time to break down... A time to laugh, a time to weep... A time to cast away stones, then gather them again...

“There’s a time for everything,” she says, gulping and looking up. The words she speaks are now her own:

“A time for loss, a time for gain,
A time for rest and a time for pain.
A time to cry out, a time to be still.
A time to submit and yield up thy will.”

Bill looks down at the little Deedee doll. She’s silent except for protracted sniffling. “I don’t know exactly what that means,” she confesses, looking out at the small audience, “except...I wrote it, and it’s right. Maybe it’s that...it’s time to rest. It’s time to accept the pain and the loss. People are dead,” she says, and everyone knows that she means people from the massacre. “She’s dead.” Bill gestures with her chin at the coffin. “It’s inevitable, so...we have to submit to it, but we don’t have to be still. This is the time to yield, at least for the moment, but not silently. This is the time to cry...” She hiccups. “--Cry out.”

“Awww...” says Alison, putting her arm around Bill.

But Bill’s not crying yet. Tears fill up her eyes, but, just as Razor is determined to stay in his chair without fleeing, so Bill is determined to continue the service. She reads extracts from other books, but Alison barely hears them. With the bloody smell of the iron rosebushes around her and all the calm dead marble people hanging therein, she feels oppressed. It’s definitely time to cry out, but she knows that, if she starts, she’ll start wailing. She won’t be able to stop, and she’ll drown out Bill, and she can’t do that. This is Bill’s service. This is her time to cry out. This is for her.

With her arm about Bill’s warm and shuddering shoulder, Alison surveys the audience. She’s mildly surprised to see the Doctor erect and subdued except for the occasional spasm of a suppressed sob. It’s the Magister who leans against the Doctor, his hand upon their shoulder, cheek upon his hand. He’s baring his teeth as if he’s the one dying, millimeter by millimeter. Charlie’s eyebrows and mouth droop into a deeply creased frown. As for Razor, his eyes start from his head, his face carved into something like horror, as if he’s being forced to watch Bill’s demise from a powerless position.

This is Bill’s service, Alison thinks again. In fact, it’s her funeral. She said that her friends died
when she landed here because that was her way of saying that they were dead to her. But it was
never really her friends who died; it was Bill, literally and figuratively. Alison remembers that Bill
told her all the nights she spent crying and raging and grieving after she met Razor. And he helped
her, raging and grieving along with her, but she never said goodbye to herself: that entirely
biological, non-robotic, non-disabled person that she had been.

But now she is. Alison knows from personal experience that it’s not so easy to submit gracefully to
an acquired disability; therefore she knows that this funeral doesn’t mean Bill’s full acceptance of
her new Cyborganic self. It does mean, though, that she’s permitting herself to cry over what she’s
lost. She formally recognizes that she’s never going to be who she was again. Oh Bill… says
Alison to herself. Lovely, sweet, wonderful Bill of my heart…you’re amazing.

She realizes that Bill has quit speaking; now she’s crying, her shoulders jumping with quiet sobs. Is
it the end of the program? Alison doesn’t know. Alison’s robot, the Doctor, Charlie, and Razor are
still sitting there, fidgeting slightly, so they don’t know either. Uncertain, Alison hugs Bill. Bill
hugs her back.

“Dum spiro, spero,” says someone.

Alison’s eyes go instantly to her robot, but, even though it’s Latin, he’s not the one who has
spoken. In fact, he’s looking across the little aisle.

Following the line of the Magister’s gaze, Alison rests her sights on Razor. Unable to fully extend
his spine, he stands, balancing forward, his fingers pressing hard into the back of his chair.
Crooked and rigid, he says again, “Dum spiro, spero.” He’s staring fixedly at Bill, as if conjuring
her to respond. “Literally, that’s While I breathe, I hope.”

Something about that last word perks Bill up; raising her head with a curious tilt, she meets Razor’s
eyes. “Huh?” she says.

“Ah!” he says, his mouth going into a smile, now that he has her attention. “Does that sound
familiar, my dear Miss Potts, dear Dominatrix mine? Maybe you’ve also heard it as Where there’s
life, there’s hope.”

“Oh!” Now both sides of Charlie’s asymmetrical mouth flicker into a smile, and she clasps her
hands.
“And by hope,” says Razor, now relaxing a bit as his wryness warms up, “I don’t mean Hope Januarius. There was no way that girl deserved someone like Deedee Schmidt. I mean the hope of us still being alive -- the promise that we can endure, persist, resist, revolt, and win. Cry out; cry out! Now is the time to cry out, to feel the loss, to suffer pain. Cry out until you are done; cry out until you are still.

“Then rest and know that no one has to die in vain, not even fictional characters. Their deaths were senseless and awful, but remember that we can make significance of them. We have the strength of memory, strength from stories and people who ended before us. We’re alive, and we’re filled with hope. We’re alive, and we’re right.”
Alison and Bill are almost ready to go. Bill starts saying goodbye to people and planning how to tell off the Doctor from her universe. Neither Alison nor Bill want the Doctor to risk themselves by going back into Dystopiaville to sing down the main Cyber broadcast tower, so they work with them and the Magister to find a way to do it remotely.

It’s almost time to go. Alison, sick of Dystopiaville’s pollution and corruption, longs for the familiar pollution and corruption of her home planet in her home universe. She misses Scintilla, who must be back from her vacation with Reeve by now. She needs to hear the latest from the Stylist... and then talk to Galleia to see how the former Queen of Atlantis is faring as the Stylist’s latest apprentice in intergalactic hairstyling. And what’s up with Lee and his partner Stone -- and come to think of it, all her other ex-companion friends on the County Gallifrey message boards? She hasn’t posted there in months. It’s time to quit circling the drain of the universe and get back into the swing of things. She indulges a momentary thought of hanging out -- her, her robot, Bill, and the Doctor -- enjoying each other’s company without a revolutionary war hanging over them. Hopefully soon...

But Bill has made her home here in Dystopiaville for over a year now. She doesn’t want to stay for the revolution, but she does want to take her leave of the people with whom she has lived and worked for so long. She would rather not venture out of the Doctor’s TARDIS, but she calls people from Razor’s communications hub in Anima. Before her listeners become too effusive in their compliments, Bill thanks them for everything that they have done to make her feel welcome. Then she hangs up, sobs a bit with Alison handing her fresh tissues, and moves to the next call.

There are other people Bill wants to finish up with besides her friends. Razor, while never exactly a friend, has been her repersoning surgeon, flatmate, boss, fellow revolutionary, guardian, advisor, and self-appointed antithesis of this universe’s Doctor. And, while Bill would be fine with a short, heartfelt expression of thanks, Razor now apparently has lectures’ worth of advice to impart. Bill rolls her eyes, but suffers him to talk at her for up to ten minutes without a pause, before she suggests that there must be some war-related stuff he could be doing.

Bill also has unfinished business with three people at the slow end of Newland, the ones that she says died when she crashed here: this universe’s Doctor, Missy, and Nardole. Part of her wants to leave this universe without telling them. Let them think that she died for good. She doesn’t expect that they would be particularly distressed, despite the slight bruise to the Doctor’s ego that her loss would cause. It’s just that she would escape without having to deal with the Doctor’s abusive pomposity, Missy’s vicious snideness, and Nardole’s passive condoning of all their bullshit.
As much as Bill wants to flee without confrontation, there’s going to be one. It’s inevitable, she says. She’s spent an entire year preparing for a citywide revolution that has finally come to pass. *And now it’s time for the climax of my own personal novel!* she says.

*Yeah! A dramatic showdown that demonstrates your newfound maturity and insight and also proves to your antagonists the enormity of their error.* Alison flings her arms wide as if she sees the clause emblazoned overhead on a marquee.

Bill laughs. *That’ll never happen. As far as the Doctor’s concerned, they never make mistakes. There are only temporary setbacks until everyone realizes how right they were in the first place.* She pauses, her eyes going wide. *Oh shit. What am I going to say?*

While Bill and Alison worry about a speech, the Doctor, the Magister, and Razor worry about a song: the Doctor’s dissonizing Gilbert & Sullivan medley by which they will bring down the Cyber network. They face the conundrum of how to infiltrate the fortified broadcast center and gain access to the central transmission tower.

Two days after the funeral, Alison and Bill come across the Time Dorks in the Doctor’s library. They cluster under a tree lamp with lit buds in the window side of the rotunda. They are trying to figure out where to station the Doctor so that they are least likely to be shot at by the Night Patrol. Leaning over a schematic that Razor has pulled up on his tablet, they argue the merits of various approaches.

“All three Time Dorks raise their heads. “Bill my dear! And Alison!” The Doctor waves, then answer Bill’s question: “Well, it is easiest for me to harmonize with the frequency when I’m right next to the source -- “

“But we’ve got all sorts of futuristic TARDIS tech in here. Can’t you use some to do it remotely?”

Alison remembers Sinclair’s rescue from the North District Detention Center, right after the raid on Bill and Razor’s flat. Ranju gave the Magister the street address of the detention center. He then connected wirelessly to the Irons regime’s networks to find a map by which he could trace a route. “*Mi Magistre...*” she says thoughtfully, turning to him. “You can get on the Dystopiaville Internet, can’t you? What about their radio frequencies?”

“There is a way, but…” The Doctor chews on their lower lip. Slinking a glance toward the
Magister, they nearly close their eyes as they look down, as if guilt nearly seals their eyelids. “But...my Master...”

Razor rears back in his chair. “You doubt him?” he cries to the Doctor, offended on his counterpart’s behalf.

“Razor,” interjects Bill, her voice quiet and clear, “that’s not doubt. That’s shame.” She pitches her voice slightly louder at the Magister: “Prof, can you tell us more about why the Doctor’s worried?”

Everyone focuses on the Magister, hoping he’ll elaborate. “Well,” he says, “if we are to discuss at length, then I will sit.” He moves to the wingback chair that he favored when he lived here full-time. The old red leather cushions, pre-curved, wait to hold him, and he fits in perfectly. Elbows on the armrests, hands interlaced before him, he sits as if holding court. “I can connect with a variety of communications networks to trace, intercept, decode, alter, amplify, and direct all sorts of electronically transmitted information,” he announces.

“So you can help your Doctor hop on the Cyber network channel and dissonize the whole thing without even touching down?” Razor’s eyes go greener as he drives to the Magister’s side. “Excellent!”

“No, no, no, it’s not.” The Doctor, arms bent up tight against their chest, wrings their hands. “Not for him. I sang him into being. I don’t want to sing him apart...again...” Still under the tree lamp, they look down, as if they want to sink into the padded light yellow carpet at their feet.

“What do you mean?” Bill and Razor ask the Doctor together.

“The Doctor has used me as their gun on occasion,” says the Magister, referring to the Finisterran vampire affair, “but such nonconsensual weaponization has been forbidden.”

“No! No weaponization!” Razor hits his armrest with his palm. With white showing all around his irises, he’s less angry than he is terrified.

“You’ll understand,” the Magister continues, “why they have an aversion to anything similar.”

“But, uh, how is connecting to the Cyber network a weaponization?” asks Alison. None of the Time Dorks are listening, so she talks to Bill. “He’s connected to Dystopiaville networks before,
and it’s just like...being a router or something.”

The Time Dorks are still on the subject of nonconsensual weaponization. “I’m sorry about that, Master,” says the Doctor. It’s no longer an abject apology as it was when they first begged forgiveness. It’s a sigh over a mistake that they will never forget because it hurt someone that they loved so badly.

Razor registers the full import of the Magister’s history as the Doctor’s gun. “Your Doctor? Your Doctor was the one who made a gun of you?” His eyes bug. “And you’re still with them?” He faces the Doctor. “But you’re really sorry?” he asks them. “You are,” he realizes, seeing the Doctor hang their head.

“And you trust them to do better?” he asks of his counterpart. “Of course you do. We always believe in our Doctors, even if they’ve done nothing to deserve it.” With a sigh, Razor slouches in his chair, drumming his fingers on his armrest in the four-beat RR knock. “How is it,” he inquires of the Doctor, “that you do truly shitty things and still manage to be better than my Doctor?”

The Doctor arches one eyebrow and then the other, taking Razor’s rhetorical question literally. Finally they step out from under the tree lamp, and the shadows of the branches no longer cross their face like bars. “Well, first of all, I listen when someone tells me that I hurt them. Then I think hard so I can understand why my actions hurt them. I tell them I’m sorry because I am, and then I try my best to do things differently so that I don’t make the same mistake twice. From what Bill tells me, the version of me over here...um...doesn’t.”

“Ahem! I have a question!” Alison lifts her voice. “You’re talking like connecting to a network is the same as being a bomb, but it’s not. I mean...is it? Doctor, I’m pretty sure the Magister wants to help you do this remotely.” She checks with him, and he nods. “In that case, it would be a consensual weaponization. And you’d be targeting the Cyber network connections of unrepersoned Cyber people, not him. You’re singing them down, not him. So why are you saying that you don’t want to sing him down?”

The Doctor tugs on their fingers as they tangle them together, seemingly trying to pull them off and braid them. They concentrate on their hands and speak in a monotone. “Well, my Master... He’s...uniquely sensitive to my voice. Whenever I sing to alter non-biological matter, he...resounds; he changes, whether I’m singing to him or someone else. I’m going to be disrupting all those people’s connections to the Cyber broadcast. That’s a huge amount of non-biological material, and I don’t know -- I don’t want to risk -- “

“Doctor?” Bill moves cautiously to their side. “I dissonized a mind-control broadcast once. Remember how I told you? The Monks had everyone believing that they’d always been colonizing Earth, but my mum... I had memories of her -- well, more like thoughts of her, since I barely remember her -- and they were all Monk-free. Kept me going for six months while I was trying to
resist and find the, um, Doctor over there. Anyway, channeled all my Monkless thoughts into the central broadcasting Monk, and my mum was transmitted all over the world, reminding people of the way the world really was, breaking the spell.”

“Hmmm…” Their hands still, the Doctor considers Bill. “And what are you thinking, Bill my dear?”

Razor, not letting her answer, takes over. “And of course, my Doctor, my sorry excuse for a Doctor,” he snarls, “couldn’t just shut the fuck up and let my dear Miss Potts concentrate. She told me they were hopping all around, waving and swooping and speed-talking shit about her.”

“Yeah…” Bill wilts at the memory, curling down around herself.

“Oh Bill…” Alison places her hand on her shoulder.

“And don’t,” says Razor to the Magister, who has opened his mouth to object. “Don’t start lecturing me about how people process information in various ways. I know that, and I have no problem with people dancing out their thoughts *per se.*

“In fact…” As Razor trails off, a reminiscent smile appears on his face. He addresses the Doctor with his head cocked thoughtfully: “It took me a while, but I’ve realized who you remind me of: my tenth one. You remind me of my tenth one, with the messy hair and the shining eyes and the perpetual smirk. They were always talking, always jumping, always running, because they were always thinking. They made the entire universe dance.”

The Doctor looks at Razor for a second or two, their face slack and neutral. They’re in reflective mode now, particularly focused and pointed in thought, and they’re not impressed. “Well, then you must not have liked the tenth one, because I know you don’t like me. You think I’m an empty-headed twit with no attention span or common sense, and I think you have no patience for people who are different from you. I don’t like you. In fact, I really don’t like you. But that’s okay because I’m not doing this for you; I’m doing this for the good that will happen in spite of you.”

“The tenth…” Razor starts the sentence loudly, but ends. He says, much more quietly, “I never liked the tenth. They were… They were my best Doctor.” Whatever sentiments are seething in those sentences, naked, soft, and fierce, they’re more complex than liking.

But Razor and his ambivalence might as well not exist for this Doctor. “Bill, Bill, Bill my dear,”
they murmur, bending around her as if she’s a plant that they will shelter bodily from the wind. “Pay no attention to what that Master just said; he’s not mine anyway, so he’s very bad with feelings and talking about them. Besides, that Doctor’s gone; they’ll never hurt you again. I’ll make sure that you’re safe from them from now on.”

“Yeah...but...” Swallowing a few times, Bill straightens her back. “That Doctor was being mean, but their voice -- that was actually a key part of me saving the world, the part that I thought might be useful in this case. Almost got swept away by the sheer size and pace of the Monks’ broadcast, but the Doctor’s voice kept a hold of me. It was like an astronaut’s tether so you don’t go drifting off into outer space, you know?” Clearing her throat, she turns bodily toward the Magister. “So...Prof...what if you had someone to ground you, but nicely, so you wouldn’t be sung to pieces or whatever? Alison’s very good at that; she calls it holding fast.”

“She does.” He dips his chin in a single nod. “And it is most effective.”

“Yes! Yes!” Alison jumps with each affirmative. “I’ll hold you fast, robot of mine, and then you can help the Doctor by doing a remote transmission to the main Cyber broadcast tower. And you’ll be safe because I’ll keep you from falling apart by reminding you that you belong to me. Bill!” Alison hugs her. “You’re amazing! You’re wonderful! You’re brilliant! --And I’m going to keep on telling you that until I chase that other Doctor’s bullshit voice out of your head.”

“But...Master -- “ says the Doctor to their inevitable spouse.

“But...weaponization -- “ says Razor, looking at his counterpart.

“But...me!” Bill elicits a high-pitched blip blip from her chair that silences everyone. “I want to help too! I have to help. What can I do? What about me?” She looks from the Doctor to the Magister to Razor and back, as if afraid that she’ll be forgotten.

“First of all...Doctor -- Master.” The Magister lets his eyes rest on each in turn. “I enter this proposition of my own free will,” he says, voice steady and level. “I voluntarily choose to connect remotely to the Cyber broadcasts so that the Doctor can dissonize them without physical proximity to the main tower. I consent to be weaponized because, by doing so, I will preserve my Doctor from harm. I consent too because my Domina will hold me fast and mitigate my own risk. Object all you want, but your protests will not dissuade me. This is what we will do.

“And Seeker, my dear Seeker,” says the Magister, his entire face wrinkling up into a broad, gentle smile, “kindest holder of both my Doctor’s and my Domina’s hearts, brightest asker of questions, Wittiest maker of excruciating puns, heliantha clarissima...”
Alison realizes two things just then. First, the Magister, using a feminized form of *helianthus*, has just called Bill *the most brilliant sunflower*. Second, no matter how few months it’s been, he loves her. And it’s not just because of who Bill is to his Domina and his Doctor, but because of who she is herself. Bill had made herself a family out of Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor, and the Magister welcomes her in.

“You are just as important here as everyone else in this room,” he assures Bill. “We might talk over you inadvertently -- for which I apologize -- but we value your words, your thoughts, and your actions. You are always a part of our plans, our adventures, and our considerations. We will always recognize you, always consult you, always listen to you, and always find a way for you to help.”

“Keep me from getting lost in orbit!” bursts out the Doctor, clapping with the tips of their fingers and mounting on the tips of their toes.

“Oh!” Bill blooms into a smile of both relief and excitement. “Oh, I could ground you, right?” She turns her sunflower beams toward the Doctor.

“Maybe not by holding me fast,” says the Doctor, “because I don’t really do well with being pinned down, unless it’s by my Master, but I’m sure there’s some other way that you could keep me from going wheeeeeee... Oh! Oh!” Their tiptoeing turns into full-on bouncing. “If you see me getting too carried away -- and you know what that looks like -- just honk your horn at me! You’ve turned your chair into a communications device as well as a mode of transportation. It’s quite clever! That would be the perfect way for you to help! --Ah...erm...if you want to.” They pause, blinking quickly, for a few seconds. “Do you want to, Bill my dear?”

“Yeah! Of course! Yeah!” Bill’s now compressing her hair with happiness. “And it will be good because we’ll all be working together, so it’s not all on you -- “

“Goooooo team!” The Doctor echoes their cry after Bill had just gotten her title/name. “Hmmm... Wait. Do you think we need a team name?”

“I have perfect name,” Razor cuts in. “Is *Dork Family*. You like the polyamorous peoples that get along so well that everyone wants to strangle.”

“You’re just jealous.” Alison sticks out her tongue.
Razor tells Bill What Her Doctor Did

Chapter Summary

Razor tells Bill about how Alison's Doctor imprisoned Alison's robot. Bill is not thrilled by this revelation.

The day after the Dork family plans to do the sing-down remotely, Alison’s about to open the door to her and Bill’s room. Then she hears Bill talking to herself, taking both sides of the conversation. “Cheer up!” Bill urges herself. “Alison says the racism and xenophobia and homophobia and misogyny are just the same on her Earth.”

As soon as Alison wonders who Bill’s talking to, Bill’s next words explain: “Not helping, Mum.” Bill’s voice shrinks, and Alison envisions her hunching down: “Just wait till I get there. No more heart of the revolution, just a scared, clueless girl with robotic lungs, no stomach, and chronic pain. See how they like me then when I’m not so nice and heroic.”

For her mum’s response, Bill takes on a soothing tone. “Honey, honey, honey, rocket child, they’re gonna love you no matter where in space you are.”

Bill’s response, in her own voice, strengthens with some sarcasm. “You’re just saying that because you have to, yeah? Because I made you up to make me feel better?”

Bill, speaking for her mum, remains gentle. “No, I’m saying that because I believe it. You’ve got people who’ll love you no matter how heroic or in need of help you are.”

Bill cries out with all the pain of disbelief: “How do you know that? How can you be so sure?”

Bill’s mum answers: “Because I’m the part of you that hasn’t lost hope.”

Knocking on the door lightly with her knuckles, Alison pushes it open. Bill, curled up on their bed, facing away from the door, looks toward her suddenly. “I, um, heard that you were scared,” says Alison. “If it’s any consolation, I’m looking forward to getting back to Earth myself.” Sitting next to Bill, Alison bolsters herself on the pillows and stretches out her legs, crossing them at the ankle. “I’d just like to hang out and snuggle with you and be, um, friends without having to be freedom fighters too.”

Bill rolls gingerly onto her back. “Oooh, lungs…” She puts a hand to her chest; it’s obviously not a good day. “Yeah, hanging out and snuggling sounds good.” She smiles with a wince, taking Alison’s hand. “But...um...I’m not insane or anything,” she says quickly. “Talking like that - - it’s just like thinking out loud, imagining what I’d say, imagining what my mum would say. I’m not paranoid or hearing voices or anything. Okay?” She crinkles her brow at Alison.

“Well, obviously not.” Alison grins and squeezes Bill’s hand. “Don’t worry. I’ve talked to parts of myself before, and I’ve talked to lots of parts of the Magister, so...well...you’re in good company.” She shrugs. “Aaaaaaanyway…” Alison pulls out the word to change the subject. “Hi, Bill’s mum!” Facing Bill fully, she waves as if they’re just meeting. “Sorry to interrupt. I’m Alison, but you probably already knew that. Bill’s very lucky to have you, and she loves you a lot.”
Bill cocks her head at Alison. “You do know you’re talking to an imag -- “ She breaks off in peals of laughter. “She says she likes you! My imaginary mum likes real you!” With a huge smile, she adds, “Also her name’s Jessie. My middle name is her first name: Jessamine.”

“It’s a pleasure, Jessamine!” Alison bows from her seated position. “And might I say that you have a lovely and charming daughter? --But you probably already knew that too.”

Bill giggles. “She says, Well yeah! She takes after me.”

“Miss Potts, I am needing you.” With a perfunctory tap on the open door, Razor barrels in.

Bill sighs, not even looking at him. “We talked about this. You’re not my boss anymore. Not a soldier in your revolution, and it’s not a good time for a lecture.”

“All affectation drops from Razor's words. “After I found out that the Dominatrix’s Doctor weaponized the Dominatrix’s Master, I started wondering what else they did to him. The Master and I had quite an educational conversation last night, and guess what I learned?” he says with a sort of mocking smoothness to his tone. “The Dominatrix’s Doctor did to the Dominatrix’s Master what my Doctor did to Missy. In short, they vaulted me. Me!” He tugs on Bill’s hand, bringing her slightly toward him.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” cries Alison. “And don’t call my robot that! He’s not my fucking Master -- ever.”

Razor pauses, calming himself. “The Doctor in your universe, dear Dominatrix,” he says carefully, nodding his head on each word, “vaulted the Master in your universe, and that’s just like what the Doctor in this universe did to Missy.”

He explains. Missy, with whom Bill already has acquaintance, is the Master from another universe. Somehow she came to Bill’s universe and, almost inevitably, started hanging around the Doctor. Upon hearing that the Magister’s counterpart from yet another universe derives her name from a diminutive of Mistress, Alison says that won’t work. She’s not calling anyone Mistress, even in abbreviated form. Bill suggests Evil Mary Poppins, as that’s apparently who this version of the Magister looks like.
Alison, who thought that Evil Mary Poppins was a future version of Razor, makes the mistake of voicing this. Razor refutes her. Evil Mary Poppins, he says, objectified and dehumanized Bill just as badly as the Doctor did. “I am not that Master,” he says, pointing at himself. He taps his hearts on every I and every negative. “Bill is one of my people. When I have people, they’re always mine. I keep them, and I make sure that Missy’s kind of dehumanizing shit never happens to them. I have no idea who that Master is or where she came from, but I will never be her, and she has never been me.” He pushes down and away with his hand, as if subduing an unruly dog.

“Okay,” says Alison. “So we’re up to three universes now: mine, Bill’s, and Evil Mary Poppins’. But where does the pole vaulting come in? The Doctor in Bill’s universe jumped over Evil Mary Poppins?”

Bill finally clears it up. The Doctor over here put Evil Mary Poppins in a vault, like a bank vault, in a basement at St. Luke’s University for at least seventy years. “It was like Frankenstein or something,” Bill goes on, her voice slowing and becoming more thoughtful. “The Doctor said that they wanted friends, but they actually just wanted minions. So they collected real people and then experimented on them, trying to piece together mindless subjects. Then, when the people started thinking for themselves, the Doctor got angry and tried to punish them by sticking them in little boxes -- even Nardole, poor guy.” She sighs. “Started to realize then that maybe I was next...” Bill deflates back against the pillows.

"And that," says Razor in his usual voice, “is precisely what the Dominatrix’s Doctor did to the Dominatrix’s robot. They played Frankenstein, trying to turn him into their creature.”

Alison’s robot, he says to Bill, is a robot because his biological self died completely in the Time War, saving the Doctor, Gallifrey, and the entire universe. The Doctor wanted him back, but there was nothing left of him except the Doctor’s memories of him. Thus the Doctor used their recollections to make an artificial reproduction, true down to the most minuscule detail of character.

But, Razor says to Bill, while the Doctor didn’t delete anything from Alison’s robot, they added one thing: fear. The Doctor thought that he would leave them, that he wouldn’t stay of his own accord, so they programmed him to remain within the TARDIS at all times. “So...yeah,” Razor says. “The Dominatrix’s Doctor basically vaulted the Dominatrix’s version of me. They just kept him Anima instead of a cellar.”

“But...he’s out now, yeah? You told me something like that the Prof had to move out so that he could finally have the choice to come back.” Bill looks to Alison.

Alison nods. “We called the Doctor out on keeping him imprisoned, and they realized that they were killing someone that they loved. So they helped him reprogram himself and leave, both of which he did. Now they live apart, and I spend most of my time with my robot, of course, but
they’re back together -- obviously -- but without the compelled obedience.”

“The Doctor let him go.”

“The Doctor let him go,” Alison confirms.

“Does the Doctor usually do that -- locking up people they love and putting them in vaults?” Bill raises an eyebrow, then flattens both, scrunching them up.

Alison recognizes Bill’s intent. She’s trying to determine if the Doctor’s treatment of the Magister is anomalous or indicative of a persistent pattern. If it’s an anomaly, she may be able to retain her affection for the Doctor if she can find a way in which to make sense of their mistreatment of him. If it’s a chronic practice, though, she’s not going to love the Doctor anymore. “No no no.” Alison shakes her head hard. “Yeah, they’re clingy and control freaky, but not like generally possessive.”

“Ask the Master,” Razor speaks up. “I’m quite sure that he knows more about the Doctor than the Doctor does about themselves.”

“Yeah. Gonna need some more information here to come to a decision.” Bill sets her chin forward with determination as she swings her legs over the side of the bed.

“Bill, dearest person Bill, you have nice heart, very nice.” Razor, his hand on her arm, won’t let her pass. “One Doctor has already broken this heart. Is not good to let another Doctor break. Do not let this happen.” He shakes his finger at her. “I do not live in the universe of your inevitable spouse the Dominatrix. I am not being there to reperson you if you are breaking. So do not break! I am giving you order -- obey me! Is very bad idea to disobey person named after shaving tool.” He smiles; he wiggles his eyebrows, and they all know that there’s really no joke at all.
Bill Learns That Her Doctor Can Change

Chapter Summary

Bill interrogates Alison’s robot and learns about the Doctor’s relationships with past companions. Alison and the Magister discuss the Doctor’s current relationship with the Magister. Bill learns about companion contracts.

Bill goes on a fact-finding mission. With Alison’s help, she seeks more details with which she can make an accurate assessment of the Doctor’s character. She drafts a short questionnaire and interrogates the Magister about how the Doctor regarded and related to a representative selection of their companions before Alison. Did the Doctor respect their opinions and, in particular, their fears? Did the Doctor deliberately manipulate them so that they would stay with them longer or otherwise do what they wanted? Did the Doctor use their advanced age, knowledge, wisdom, and psychic power to gain advantage over them? In short, did the Doctor treat previous guests as objects, as with the Magister, or as friends, as with Alison?

Alison stays for the first five rounds of questioning, taking notes for Bill, while simultaneously satisfying her own curiosity. Then a two-hour midday nap strikes, after which she returns to the library to find the cross-examination still in progress. “Got any hypotheses you can extrapolate from your data?” Alison hops up onto the couch next to Bill.

“Well...um...the Doctor in your universe has been much nicer to all their companions than the Doctor over here ever was to me. And as for the Doctor and the Prof -- their relationship started becoming more equal when they got together, but it was still abusive because of the programming. But you and the Prof told off the Doctor, he said, and...they let him go. And they undid as much of their mistake as possible, and...and...they...never did it again?” Bill’s conclusion swoops upward into an incredulous question. “The Doctor...changed?”

The Magister has been pacing, hands behind back, as he answers Bill’s questions. He now switches around briskly, with a nod and a smile for punctuation. “As unbelievable as it may seem, this version of the Doctor is very good at that.”

“So’s this version of my robot!” Alison flashes him a smile of her own.

“Yeah, kinda gathered that,” says Bill with a grin.

“You,” says the Magister to Bill, “want to know if you can trust this Doctor to be as kind,
protective, gentle, and respectful to you in the future as they have been till now. I can tell you all
the anecdotes of past companions that I want, but I know that none will convince you as much as
one of my Domina’s own experiences.” He comes up behind Alison and puts his hands on her
shoulders, saying, “Tell her of the Doctor’s treatment of you after the Finisterran vampire.”

“Well,” says Alison, “it’s an explicit condition, a hard limit, in my companion contract that no one
goes into my head without my permission, not after all the times I’ve been mind-fucked. After the
Finisterran vampire, though, I had brain damage from the vampire dropping me.” The Doctor
assumed that Alison wouldn’t mind if they mended her injured brain without her permission.
Because Alison did mind, she ran into the Magister’s TARDIS and refused to come out.

“Finally they realized why they had been wrong to think that they could barge into my head, and
they apologized,” says Alison. “And they’ve never done anything like that again. So yeah, this
Doctor makes mistakes, but this Doctor also changes -- for the better.”

“This Doctor is not perfect, and this Doctor has done cruel things to me, but this Doctor reminds
me of you very favorably, my dear Seeker. Do you know why?” Coming around the front of the
couch, the Magister seats himself in a chair opposite Bill.

“Because of the not really believing in themselves, but still doing good stuff anyway?”

“It is because you are as kind as they aspire to be.”

Bill stares at the Magister. Her eyebrows and her lips twitch, as if trying to bear up under a load.
Then her features just kind of crumble, like paper dissolving into water. “Kindness…” she says
with a sob. “The Doctor -- that Doctor, not my Doctor -- made speeches about kindness. Once they
and Nardole and I… We were in a place like after the First Day Massacre. Almost everything was
destroyed; everyone was either dead or going to die. And still the Doctor wanted to risk everything
and fight and save people.

“And I...I made the mistake of saying that I was tired and scared and I wanted to go home. And my
Doctor -- your Doctor, the good Doctor -- would have said, Oh, does that mean you want me to
hold you fast? I can do that, but then you should take a nap so I can help these people. You all
would have understood.

“But that Doctor just launched into a speech, like Razor at the rally. I don’t do this because it’s
easy. I don’t do this because it’s fun. I do it because it’s kind. I can still make a difference to a few
people. I can help them; I can save them; I can bring them back to life and give them hope.
Tiredness doesn’t matter; fear doesn’t matter; selfishness doesn’t matter. You do it because it’s
“Yeah, well, that Doctor’s full of shit!” Alison bursts out. She puts her arms around Bill from the side. “You’re made of kindness -- and sunflowers -- and big smiles with perky eyebrows -- and tears -- and curiosity about everything -- and sarcasm and smarts and silly puns and some mechanical parts and lots of snuggles!”

“Looking back on it,” says Bill, “I see now that they talked about kindness to disguise the ego trip they got for being so fucking clever, but… Well, back then, I believed what they were saying. They made me think that they were kind, but not me.”

“Oh, heliantha clarissima …” The Magister bends toward her. He looks like he wants to hold her fast, but he doesn’t.

There’s a short silence in which Bill blinks and looks at him. “Are you purring?”

“It’s kind of involuntary at this point,” Alison puts in. “He does that when me and the Doctor are upset -- you know, like your cat that sits on top of you when you have a cold and vibrates until you feel better.”

A smile tries to appear on Bill’s face, but can’t stay for long. “Awww, Prof… I thought you’d be someone who made nasty jokes and manipulated people all the time -- you know, like the other Masters I’ve met,” she says, giggling, even with tears streaming over her cheeks. “But you… You’re like a cat, just with opposable thumbs and a sarcastic sense of humor, and you love people in a mostly non-fucked-up way, and now you… You’re just going rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr at me.”

“Indeed.” The Magister’s purr rumbles up under his words, almost overpowering them. “And just as a purr does not necessarily signify contentment, so I see that your tears do not necessarily mean distress. You are happy, and so you are crying.”

“You’re crying because you love everything in the universe, you old fool, so shut up and enjoy it.” Bill, smirking, roughly quotes what the Magister said when the four of them were on the couch the night before the rally, trying to calm themselves down.

“I would never address you thus!” He’s laughing a bit too.
“Contractually prohibited. Hard limit,” says Alison with a snicker.

“Really? There’s a contract?” Bill looks between Alison and her robot. “Okay, I can’t really tell here. Is this contract a joke? Or a private thing?”

“Do you want to see it?” the Magister asks.

“Whoa! No! Not if it’s private!”

“No no!” says Alison. “It’s kind of a relationship contract, insofar as it has a code of conduct in it, but it’s something that me and the Magister and the Doctor negotiated when I first came onboard.”

“More precisely, you informed us that, if we had any hope of keeping you as a guest, we were agreeing to a contract. Ah yes...those were they days,” says the Magister with airy false nostalgia. “--Back when you were calling me Voldemort, Moriarty, Christian, and every other fictional villain you could think of.”

“Christian?” Bill asks Alison.

“Fifty Shades of Grey.”

“Oh God, you have that shit in your universe too?” Bill makes a face. “Well, as long as the contract you’re talking about isn’t like the contract in that because that contract was abusively unreasonable, super controlling, and boring as hell to read.”

“Ew! No! It’s basically a document that says We, the undersigned, agree to be nice and respectful to each other, and here’s what that means to us.”

“Wow, Alisonshine! You just waltzed up to the two most powerful Time Dorks in the universe and said, All right, I want a contract. Here’s how it’s gonna be. Like it or leave it.”

“No, she said, Because you invited me aboard, I know that you want me here. Therefore you will do everything that you can to make me happy. It’s a morally binding contract because you’re going to be good in order to make me stay. My name is Alison Cheney, and you will obey me.”
“Ah hah hah, you did? You know where that’s from, right?”

“Well, yeah. That’s why I said it.”

“Right, so what did he say in response?”

“He said, *Tie me up; I can’t wait.*”

“Nooooo! Wait...really?”

The Magister ignores Bill. “And so, dear Seeker, if you wish further assurance of future respect, kindness, and good treatment, do negotiate a contract with my Domina, my Doctor, and me, either separately or jointly. We shall all three regard them as requirements of good behavior on which are predicated the continuation of our relations and adventures together.”

“Sounds like a good idea, but where do I figure out what to put in a contract like that? Don’t think you can download an example contract for hanging out with Time Dorks like you can example leases or wills or something!”

“You are fortunate then, for you have the universal expert in companion contracts available for your consultation.” The Magister extends his hand out to Alison. “One might even call her the master,” he says with a shit-eating grin, then adds in a stage whisper to Alison, “That wasn’t capitalized.”

“Obviously!” says Alison. To Bill, she says, “He hoards the capitalized ones for himself.”

“Wow,” says Bill. “You are all such complete and utter dorks.”

“It’s a contractual obligation,” says the Magister, whose deadpan expression lasts for just a nanosecond.
Just before singing down the Cyber network, everyone says goodbye. Harry has some instructions for Alison, who has instructions for him in turn.

The time has almost come to sever the Cyber network between Irons and all the controlled Cyber people. If all goes well, the repersoning of the Cyber people will begin and Irons’ regime will topple for good. Days of meticulous planning pay off soon. Revolutionaries stand by, waiting for Razor’s signal to move into position. The Dork family [plus Razor] will enter the Epiphany Room in scant hours. There they will oppose the oppression of Dystopiaville with nothing but the combined willpower of five people and a bunch of light comic librettos about a hundred and twenty-five years old.

It sounds ridiculous, even futile, when expressed thus, but Alison once helped the Doctor and her robot save her own world with a song. She has utterly unshakable faith in the combined powers of the Dork family, and she knows that Bill does too. Like Razor said at Deedee’s funeral, We’re right, and we’re going to win.

Before they deliver the final blow to Irons’ rule, though, everyone says goodbye. Some serious shit is probably going to go down right after the Cyber network does, and Alison, Bill, and the Doctor want to be well clear of it. As soon as the Doctor is done singing, they, Alison, and Bill will depart for the slower end of the ship so that Bill can have her inevitable triumphant confrontation with the wrong Doctor. Meanwhile, the Magister will stay in Dystopiaville with his counterpart to manage the aftermath, minimize casualties, and keep the peace as much as he can.

After Bill tells the wrong Doctor to go fuck themselves, she, Alison, and the actual Doctor will return to Dystopiaville, where about three or four months will have passed. The Magister estimates that, by then, he will have done enough toward stabilizing the post-Irons city. Then, at long last, the Dork family can reunite and finally go home.

Everyone takes their last leave of each other in the library. Razor spends five minutes in private conference with Bill, his voice too low for anyone to hear, but he spares the Doctor and Alison few words. Alison and Razor shift their eyes back and forth, while the Doctor just watches Razor with an almost cold focus. There’s either too much to say or not enough. Finally Razor sighs and says, “Thank you, both of you, for all of your help -- Doctor -- Dominatrix.”

The Doctor blinks once. “He’s my Master,” they say, their voice soft and clear, but not at all
diminished, “my inevitable spouse, my partner, my robot, the one who’s always been mine. Keep him safe,” they say, tears shining in their eyes. “Keep him whole; keep him happy.”

“I’ll do my best, assuming he’ll let me.”

The Magister snorts. “I trust you very little, Master.”

With a wry smile, the Doctor wipes tears from their eyes. “That’s why it’s a tall order,” they say to Razor.

Farewells to the Magister prove more lighthearted. The Doctor announces themselves well rid of an overwound bucket of bolts, while the Magister eagerly anticipates a few months’ respite from that flailing whirligig. With a roll of his eyes, Razor tells them to get a TARDIS. Alison and Bill giggle. They may not like him or trust him, but he’s rather funny when he’s not being so bitter and snide.

Rising from her chair, Bill takes both of the Magister’s hands, imploring him in a tear-broken murmur to do everything he can to keep everyone safe and whole and happy. Even... Her voice falters as she looks at Harry. Even him, though I don’t know what would make him happy. The Magister says that Bill’s tripartite commission is exactly why he’s staying. He has no intention of failing her or anyone else.

Finally Alison wraps her arms tightly around her robot’s waist. “I’m gonna miss you,” she says into his chest. “I don’t want to leave you here with him for a few months.”

“And why not?”

“It’s not safe. And besides, you’ll have no one to hold you fast when Harry annoys the shit out of you and you just want the company of someone nice and reasonable and respectful and snuggly.” She smooths her cheek against his outer robe: ombre linen starting in marigold at the shoulders and darkening to sunset red by the hem.

His chest flutters against her face while resounding with an almost buzz-like sound. He’s laughing and purring simultaneously. “That is true.” He hugs her, then sets her back from him, his hands on her shoulders. “Goodbye, Domina carissima. Be good.”
“Always.” She smiles, though the smile doesn’t want to turn up at the corners. “Take care, robot of mine.”

“Always,” he promises.

The Doctor, warming their voice with a few scales, glances over at them. “Ready to sing Irons to smithereens?”

“Wait...Alison!” calls Razor.

Alison freezes, which is probably the effect he was going for. But she won’t give him the satisfaction of a response. She keeps her back to him.

“Dear Dominatrix mine -- Ms. Cheney -- Alison!” As he runs through the monikers, Razor’s voice goes upward in pitch marginally. He’s becoming slightly desperate at the thought of her ignoring him.

With a sigh, she turns around. Having snuck up on her in his stealth chair, he sits much closer to her now than he did when she last saw him. Well, if he’s going to assume the casualness of her first name, she’s going to do the same with him. “Harry,” she says, glaring at him until he leaves her personal space.

Whoever the fuck he calls himself, he certainly didn’t expect her to call him the pseudonym under which he was PM. He blinks once in astonishment, then dips his head in an almost private nod, acknowledging that his ploy has worked. They are indeed on a level. “I’d like to speak to you before the sing-down.”

Alison flicks a look at Bill, who shrugs and turns out her hands. She has no idea what’s on his mind. Alison then glances at the Magister. “Why? What’s he talking about?”

The Magister stills, cocks his head for a small fraction of a second at Harry, then faces Alison. “The Master,” he says, his voice lightened with surprise, “wishes to tender you an apology for having attempted to r -- “

“Oi!” Harry cries, stabbing his finger in the air at the Magister. “Stay the fuck out of my head.”
With a gliding step backward, the Magister puts his palms up. “I have never entered your mind, my dear, but by your express permission. I have only read your body language and vocal inflections.” Seeing Harry’s face screwed up in confusion, he explains. “You spoke to the Domina with a calculated familiarity because you wanted her instant and full focus. The familiarity also suggests you wished to speak to her as an equal, about something significant and emotionally intimate. At the same time, you were leaning forward infinitesimally with your inner eyebrows up, so clearly you’re anxious about her reaction. Since you have no emotional intimacy with my Domina beyond what you tried to force on her, this force and your subsequent regret must be the subject you want to broach.”

Harry just stares at the Magister for a few seconds. “Shit.” He rubs his hands down his face.

“I know!” says the Doctor. “He’s basically like the Sherlock Holmes of Time Lords! Isn’t it cool?”

Harry shakes his head. “Not really. I’ve just spent an entire year living with someone who never missed anything.” With a half of a smirk, he shakes his head at Bill. “I thought I might be able to relax a bit, now that my dearest person is departing, but no. Apparently I have to face the Master of Psychological Induction before I can have a moment’s peace.” He holds out his hand to the Magister, then drops it into his lap, hanging his head, as if overloaded.

Alison and Bill turn to each other once again. “He didn’t deny it,” Bill points out.

Alison nods. She knows what Bill’s talking about. Sometimes she and the Doctor confront the Magister with observations that he’d rather not think about. He won’t directly controvert them in such cases. Instead, he’ll stay silent, as if refusing to grant their points any validity by discussing them. The silence, then, serves as a profound assent, an acquiescence. Thus, in this case, the Magister’s conclusions are accurate: Harry really, actually does want to apologize to her.

Is that even possible? It seems about as likely as her robot discovering a fondness for curses. However, Alison reflects, the Magister has indeed flung off his dour reserve to sling slang with vulgar abandon. [He was disguising himself as her agemate so that he could meet her parents without disgusting them because he appeared about thrice as old as her.] So perhaps Harry does have the unforeseen ability to repent. “Okay.” Alison lowers herself slowly onto a sofa across from him. “I’m listening…” The Magister sits to her left hand, Bill at her right, and the Doctor at the Magister’s left. “But make it quick; we’ve got a network to sing down.”

“Ah! Good.” Harry lowers his head to her. “Dominatrix mine, redoubtable adversary, exemplar of moral superiority, I abase myself before thy dread judgment. I am but a contemptible wretch, and I know I have no hope of mercy, for I have done thee grievous ill.” His voice moves quickly,
quietly, subdued. It’s a sonorous recitation, almost poetic. It sounds like something that he’s memorized and practiced.

“You -- !“ Alison starts. She’s about to tell him where he can stick his glib bullshit. She then realizes that, like the Magister, he chooses his words carefully for maximum effect. He does so because he wants to tell her exactly what he’s thinking.

And what he’s thinking is that he has hurt her badly, and he recognizes that. She’s also much better than he is, and he recognizes that. However, still thinks she’s going to smite him with retaliation for what he did to her. Realizing that she has lunged forward in anticipatory defense, Alison leans deliberately against the back of the couch. “Right,” she says. “Go on.”

“I’ve realized something.” Dropping out of the incantatory register, Harry resumes his usual voice and meets Alison’s eyes. His own eyes go darker than hazel, like forest shadows. “When I tried to read your mind, I did to you what the Council did to me when they forced me to be a gun in their pointless Time War. I did to you what the Doctor did to my dearest person Bill when they used her as a pawn in their games of self-aggrandizement. I sank to their level -- to the Doctor’s level!” Shuddering, he shakes his head a little bit. “I am sorry that I did, and I will never do such a thing again -- never.”

He’s quiet for so long that Alison wonders if he’s done. But then he smiles at her. It’s almost the way he smiles when he talks about my dearest person Bill, but there’s a sharper, slyer angle to his mouth. “You, my dear Alison -- you are a worthy foe. You antagonize me; you thwart me; you even hate me, but you acknowledge me for what I am. You have always treated me with respect, but I have not dealt with you in kind. From now on, though, I will.” He balances his right hand at the center of his chest, connecting only by the tips of his fingers, and bows. It’s an incline of the entire torso, only several centimeters, though, as his level of pain limits him. He’s obviously performing. Nevertheless, just because he’s hammy doesn’t mean he’s lying. It’s the ventriloquism of displaced candor -- or whatever clever phrase she came up with a few weeks ago: the truth masquerading as hyperbole.

Alison doesn’t want to thank him for his apology, especially since he might take it as an encouragement for his self-congratulatory smugness. Nor does she want to say that she accepts his words. “Right then,” she speaks up at last. “That was a pretty piece of poetry, Harry, but I don’t believe you. I’ve never trusted you, and I’m sure as shit not going to forgive you.”

“Excellent!” Harry clasps his hands. “Excellent! I’m not asking for any of those things. In fact, I’d be quite disappointed if you tried to give them to me. If you forgave such deep wrongs so easily, then you wouldn’t be the Dominatrix.”

“Okay,” says Alison, “just so we’re clear on that.” Pushing her palms off her thighs, she stands.
“Let’s head for the Epiphany Room now,” she says, looking around her, to herself and Harry, as much as to the Magister, Bill, and the Doctor.

Harry still blocks her progress with his chair. “But one more thing…” He grasps her forearm. His face settles into those old harsh lines that he’s been hiding for so long behind a semblance of geniality. “Alison!” he whispers fiercely. “Your inevitable spouse -- do right by her. Keep her safe. Watch out for the Doctor especially; make sure they treat her well. Know that you have in your hands one of the rarest human hearts I have ever seen. Sure, it’s on the sentimental and weepy side, but it’s tough. It has survived a lifetime of loneliness and years of Time Lord bullshit and even mechanization. And you…” Now he pulls her down toward him to say in her ear: “Be worthy of my dearest person, or I will make you regret it.”

“Let me go!” Alison releases Harry’s hold on her with a violent shake. “We’re in agreement on that subject; there’s no need to threaten me.” She recoils, then thinks of something. “But, while we’re giving each other orders, here’s one for you. I can’t control what you do in this universe. But if, by some remote chance, you ever find yourself in my universe, then treat everyone with the exact same respect and dignity that you’re promising me. Don’t think you can fuck shit up secretly because I will find out and I will kick your arse so hard that you won’t know which universe you’re in.”

Harry chuckles, backing away from her. “You are by far the best enemy I’ve had in a long time. You have the amazing gift of convincing people that their greatest honor and satisfaction may be found in submission to you. You compel people to do your will, but you never make objects of them, and thus they are wholly within your power. You are a master of voluntary obedience, and I salute you. I wish you could teach the Doctor over here a few things, but they tend not to listen to people like us on principle. I wish you all the luck in your quest to tell them to fuck off. Now...shall we tell Irons to do just the same?”
They Make a Surprisingly Good Team

Chapter Summary

The Dork family and Harry sing down the Cyber network in a remarkable display of cooperation.

In the Epiphany Room, the Doctor assumes the center of the round raised stage. Now that the rally is over, Anima has reverted this room to its usual size, but it’s still impressive: a two-story amphitheatre, all in white, with stadium-like seats that seem to climb the walls to the ceiling. Its bright starkness and lack of shadows give it a dizzying, dreamlike presence. The Doctor, though standing firmly on the stage with their usual forward tilt, appears to be suspended in smooth, white cloud.

Alison steadies her eyes on the Doctor, but, more than that, on her robot. Next to the Doctor, his left hand linked in the Doctor’s right, stands the Magister, a contrast to the Doctor in nearly all ways. The Doctor wears a loose long dress, either white or so well-washed that it’s pale, either lacy or worn full of holes, and the Magister’s grey-shaded robes frame his body in tight, almost architecturally intricate pleats. The Doctor leans forward into the future, and the Magister braces himself firmly in the present, his legs shoulder-width apart, his whole stance relaxed and ready. The contrast is only superficial, though, for they both have that same sharp brightness in their eyes, that same avidity in their angular features, the same excitement in their flying brows. When they look at each other and smile, Alison can tell that they’re not just thrilled to be saving the world yet again; they’re thrilled to be doing so together.

It’s more than just the two Time Dorks, though. Alison, with her left hand in the Magister’s right, bends at the waist and swivels to the left. She waves at Bill, who, at the other end of the line, holds the Doctor’s right hand in her left. Alison, with her arm around the Magister’s waist, is prepared to hold him fast, while Bill, free hand poised over her joybox, queues up an array of sound effects to recall the Doctor’s attention. While the Magister and the Doctor will most likely lose themselves to the sing-down, Alison and Bill will stay here and now, grounding them.

Sitting forward in her wheelchair like she’s about to start a race, Bill gives Alison a thumbs-up gesture. She follows it up with an air kiss so unexpected that Alison takes a step back. Bill just kissed her! She closes her eyes, certain that she can somehow feel the pressure of Bill’s mouth against hers, even across the distance.

There’s a tap on her forearm: tummety-tum, tummety-tum. She opens her eyes to see Harry. Alison much prefers the use of the RR knock to get her attention over his earlier ploy: snapping in her face. However, even though he has reduced his infuriating noises, Harry has yet to cut back on his infuriating gestures. “A loves B!” he signs, looking way too pleased with himself. Since he’s using
Gritting her teeth, Alison reminds herself that Razor serves two vital functions here. First, he’s telepathically monitoring the RR field agents on the ground in Dystopiaville. Second, he’s also watching the Dork family. If he witnesses either the Doctor or his counterpart in need of help, he’ll sign to the appropriate guardian. If he witnesses either human in distress, he will, Alison presumes, yell telepathically at the responsible Time Dork loud enough to blow their synapses until they do something. Anyway, it’s nice to know that she and Bill have some backup surveillance, but for fuck’s sake -- does he have to be such a smug bastard about it? “Harry loves Harry!” Alison signs back, following this remark with an erect middle finger.

Harry opens his mouth to laugh aloud, but catches a telepathic message. He listens for a few seconds. Then he gives Bill, the Magister, and the Doctor a mental signal to pay attention, following with a gesture for Alison: his finger to his lips, then in the air. All the revolutionaries down below are in position. It’s time.

The Doctor sweeps their eyes around the room, ending with a private glance for the Magister that excludes all others. “Master?” they say, their voice and their body shivering with anticipation.

“Doctor,” says the Magister. He nods as if accepting a dance, half of his mouth pushing upward into an expectant smile.

“It’s show time!” cries the Doctor, and they sing.

When the Doctor sang the Shalka’s hold loose from the Earth, they swung sound like a wrecking ball, glorying as they smashed the network of mental control, exulting in the destruction. But, even though this sing-down is dissonizing the Cyber network connection between people and the broadcast tower, it carries none of the concussive force that defeated the Shalka. The Doctor isn’t just breaking bonds here; they’re reconstructing freedom, over and over again, person by person, in a sprightly, delicate weave of sound and sense.

Alison has never really paid much attention to Gilbert & Sullivan before, but, as soon as the Doctor starts in, dancing along the lyrics, she realizes the aptness of their choice. The Doctor draws from comic operas, librettos that, propelled by zany misunderstandings, ultimately resolve in satisfying discoveries, unriddlings, and marriages. They sing all the voices and all the parts of each song, even the choruses, interlocking words and music into clever constructions. The polysyllabic wit drives Alison almost to vertigo.

Just when Alison feels muddled in the music, there comes a chorus; the Doctor slows a bit. There’s
enough repetition for the structure to settle down in her mind. She understands the jokes, though belatedly; she smiles at a neatly turned phrase; she appreciates the whole. Just as the librettos unravel the convoluted connections between characters and smooth them into happy bonds, so the Doctor untangles the Cyber people from Irons’ network. Carefully and joyously, they guide the Cyber people into greater liberty.

As for Alison’s robot, the Doctor’s music does indeed act on him. He’s in a state that she’s never seen before. There’s a concentrated stillness to him in the regal angle of his chin and the way his legs are braced. She is reminded of the supreme confidence with which he launched himself into Razor’s mind to bring him back from his distraction. But there’s that openness too that she sees whenever the Doctor sings him. His face relaxes; his lips part. He gives himself over to something wonderful.

To Alison, her robot’s both diving in and opening up at once -- and something more beside. He nods, then nods again, and then a third time before she realizes that he’s keeping time. No matter the tempo, as the Doctor’s medley skips from one song to another, he marks the beat, nodding and tapping his foot.

“Eeeeee!” Alison smiles so hard that a squee slips out between her teeth, and the Magister opens his eyes, looks at her for a second, then closes his eyes again. Yes, it’s true -- her robot’s dancing! Just as he must be resounding with the Doctor’s song, so she now resounds with her robot’s rhythm, as the motion of his body moves into hers. Bringing herself up to tiptoes, she squeezes his hand and squee again.

Harry’s touch startles her out of her glee. Alison meets his eyes, but he’s not worried at all. In fact, he’s grinning. “Bill!” he signs, nodding his head sideways, urging her to look down the line.

Bill’s sit-bouncing in her chair, making exclamation point after exclamation point with her whole body as she echoes the Doctor’s pace. Her hand clasped around the Doctor’s, she hangs onto them, checking their flight. The Doctor takes a breath, looks down at her, nods, and stays attached to the ground as they start the next measure.

Harry says to Bill, “Alison!” He directs Bill’s attention to her.

“Alison!” Bill mouths her name as if it’s too full of kisses for her lips to hold. Her eyes are the deepest, purest brown, full of an amazing soft darkness and tears. Her hair boings out all around her head in curls of excitement, and her smile’s as wide as her broad, strong face.

“Eeeeee!” replies Alison, who’s too dazed to say anything intelligible, like, for example, Bill’s
The sing-down goes on. Alison, Bill, and Harry pay close attention to the Magister and the Doctor. Quickly enough they learn the indications that either of their attention may be waning. For the Magister, it’s when his grip on Alison’s hand loosens a small fraction and his head tips back. For the Doctor, it’s kind of the opposite; they seize Bill’s and the Magister’s hands more tightly and swing their arms, as if gathering momentum. Whoever notices such a change, either Alison, Bill, or Harry, signs to either the Magister’s or the Doctor’s keeper, who then literally pulls them back to themselves.

After a yank or two on either Time Dork, all five people gain an idea of when someone’s slipping away. The Doctor and the Magister start reining in one another, either with a slight gesture or some psychic communication. Harry’s signs change from urgent alerts to calmer reminders. He nods or even just glances to the side, at which point Alison and Bill check in with their Time Dorks. The Time Dorks confirm that they are not, in fact, going into orbit, and Alison and Bill pass the information along to Harry with thumbs up.

Though almost wholly involved in the song and its connection to the Cyber network, the three Time Dorks observe Alison and Bill too. Occasionally the Doctor rubbernecks down the line, their song picking up when Alison and Bill are doing well. Even Harry anticipates when Bill needs to use the loo. Somehow he helps her leave and then return to the Doctor’s side without a break in the action.

And the Magister -- well, once he gazes at Alison and, with her hand still in his, slides the back of his hand down her cheek. Smiling back at him, Alison’s so happy that she runs out of squee. Everything hushes for a second, both the song all around her and all the words inside her. She feels full and quiet, safe and whole and, above all, happy.

Alison doesn’t know how long the Doctor sings because all the songs are running together. Tributaries combine into a stream of greater song that picks up speed. Lock after lock unbars, yielding to an ineluctable tidal surge of freedom. Bill’s right -- when the Doctor sings you, everything in the universe is ringing like a bell; everything in the universe is dancing.

The Doctor builds to an end, holds onto a note till it surges with a vibrato, then stops. There’s a silence as if everyone is slowly waking from a wonderful dream. The quiet absence of sound somehow possesses its own sound, as if the entire Epiphany Room sighs and slows and stops spinning. Ah, thinks Alison. Yes. This is good.

“Thank you!” cries the Doctor, though no one’s applauding. “I’ll be here for the next five sec -- ack!” An unceremonious hack follows.
“Inhaler?” says the Magister, holding out the Doctor’s bronchodilator.

The Doctor mimes drinking, and Bill pulls a water bottle from a holster on the side of her chair. “Here.”

As the Doctor gulps water, splutters, and receives whacks on the back from the Magister, Alison says to Bill, “Did we do it?”

Bill faces Harry. “Did we do it?”

Harry, head cocked, is staring off to the side, obviously listening to telepathic transmissions. Coming back to everyone in the Epiphany Room, he says, “Network’s down; connection’s cut. My people are intercepting the Cyber people before any violence occurs. Yeah,” he says once, then more loudly: “Yeah! We did it! Of course we did.”

“All of us,” says Alison with some marvel in her voice, “including you. We make a surprisingly good team. And that was in no way, shape, or form an invitation!” she tells Harry.

“Well, good.” Harry folds his arms as one eyebrow goes up. “--Because three of you dorks need to shove right off so the Master and I can take over this city.”
Alison, Bill, and the True Doctor Kick Butt

Chapter Summary

Alison, Bill, and the real Doctor confront the false Doctor, Evil Mary Poppins, and Nardole. Bill tells the false Doctor some important revelations. They don't listen.

Alison, Bill, and the Doctor do not follow Harry’s advice and fuck right off after the sing-down. Instead they all start sniffling, even Bill, about leaving the Magister behind and temporarily breaking up the Dork family. His reasonable reassurances have no effect.

At length the Magister gives the Doctor a snap of the fingers and an order to let him go, then tells Alison to leave. The Doctor pries themselves loose from the Magister. Alison nods to him and is still. Bill, deciding not to incur any commands, suppresses most of her snorts with a tissue. Harry exhorts them to remember life and hope and all that shit, then leaves precipitously with his cohort to seize control of Dystopiaville.

Pulling at long last away from the Dystopiaville end of the ship, the Doctor and Anima pilot up toward the slow end of Newland and the Doctor’s own counterpart in this universe. The real Doctor reports that the wrong Doctor appears to be haranguing Nardole and Evil Mary Poppins about the effects of black holes on time. Diagrams and expansive hand gestures are involved.

“Ahhhh, right.” Bill heaves a sigh. “Why would they bother looking after their dead so-called friend when they could take a chance to prove how brilliant they are?”

“That one moves like me,” says the real Doctor, watching their counterpart on one of Anima’s screens, “but what about their hearts? My Master says that mine are always on my sleeve or in my hands, but I don’t see this one’s anywhere.”

The last of the exhilaration from the sing-down sinks away from Alison. She’s left without a robot, yet still bound to help Bill face an empty version of the Doctor. “Can we sleep,” she says, “just for a little bit -- just for a few hours -- before we have to deal with this bullshit?”

So they go back down to the Dystopiaville sector of the ship to nap. Upon waking, they dress for the showdown with as much care as they did for the rally. Well, at least Alison and Bill do. The Doctor, realizing that their attire is rather transparent in places, just makes a single concession to presentability. Stealing one of the Magister’s aubergine shirts, they button it up over their dress. They decide that they look fine, despite their wrists poking well beyond the cuffs.
Bill wants herself as a sunflower and Alison as a rose, but there’s no time for the Doctor to make fashion of flowers. So Bill puts on a white cotton blouse with a drawstring neck and gathered cuffs and stretchy dark green denim trousers. With a wreath of living sunflowers surmounting her curls, she holds herself as straight and graceful as a stem. Meanwhile, Alison purposely goes all black, except for the little white skulls on the lining of the Magister’s velvet cape that she’s borrowing. Full of fury at anyone who would dare to hurt the Bill of her heart, she feels sharp, severe, and magisterial.

Thus equipped, the Dork family minus one returns to the slow end of *Newland.* “Ready to kick some Time Dork butt?” Bill asks Alison and the real Doctor.

Alison, pushing her arms straight out in front of her, cracks all her knuckles. “Yeah! And with Mary Poppins here, it’s like two for the price of one.”

“I’m not kicking any butt unless I have to,” says the real Doctor with a small frown. “I’m just here to make sure that everyone does the right thing.” Anima is hiding inside a lift, so they open her front door, as well as the lift door, onto the room where the wrong Doctor is holding forth.

Alison assesses the scene. The wrong Doctor scribbles on a transparent board, their marker squeaking horribly. Lean and slightly bowed in the legs, with a head full of wavy grey hair, they go on about temporal distortion, their handwriting jumping like their hands. Nardole, a tall, pink, hairless guy whose features seem all squished toward the center of his face, looks on with a bemused expression. Evil Mary Poppins, complete with the tailored jacket, long pleated skirt, diagonally cocked hat, and umbrella, attends to her compact.

“Oi! Time Dorks!” Alison projects her voice across the room, using the tone that she developed at the pub for stopping brawls with words alone.

“*Time Dorks?* That’s a new one.” Mary Poppins spins toward her with a flare of dark purple skirts almost as elegant as the Magister’s. The gaunt sharpness of her face and even the narrowness of her long lips recall those of Alison’s robot. Yet there’s something harsh and weary graven in the lines about her eyes and mouth. Not even her mocking smile and bright makeup can disguise an anxious widening of her eyes. Her dark brown waves of hair, though lacquered into an updo, betray matted ringlets and frazzly ends. Thinking of what Harry was like when overstimulated and unrested, Alison guesses that this counterpart of his has been losing herself, bit by bit, since being unvaulted.

Evil Mary Poppins jabs the wrong Doctor in the ribs with her umbrella. “Look who’s come back to us! It’s one of the expendables...with some little friends too. Now were you Comic Relief, dear, or Exposition?” she asks Bill. “I never could remember your name.”
“Bill Potts.” Though Bill trembles hard, her voice rings clearly in the sudden hush. “I’m Wilhelmina Jessamine Potts.”

“Hey! Bill! Welcome back!” Nardole’s face is all smiles. “I knew you weren’t dead! You’re too tough for that.”

With one hand on Bill’s shaking shoulder and the other enclosed in Bill’s equally shaky hand, Alison notices that Bill’s expression remains still and blank. She refuses to respond to Nardole, and then Alison remembers why. Though arguably the least objectionable of the false Doctor’s associates, Nardole colluded with them, tricking Bill into thinking that the Monks really had taken over the world, just so he could test Bill’s loyalty or some shit. Alison channels her vengeful impulses into a pointy look at Nardole. Yeah, no...mind-fuckers don’t even deserve the time of day.

“Bill! You’re alive!” The wrong Doctor leaps down from the podium where they’ve been diagramming. “You waited for me! Good girl!” They hurtle toward her with all the inevitability of a missile, and Bill freezes in terror.

“Don’t you dare!” Flipping half her cape off her shoulder, Alison frees her arm, thrusting it out as a horizontal bar between Bill and her assailant.

Suddenly the real Doctor, the true one, stands between Alison and Bill and the wrong one. Their reading glasses tilt on their nose; one of their shirt cuffs is literally hanging by a thread; their unhemmed dress flutters around their calves. Head stretched forward, hands curled up by their chest, they seem curious, even innocuous. But the single word they speak contains an incontrovertible authority: “No.”

“No?” Skidding to a halt, the false Doctor narrowly misses a collision with the true Doctor. “Who are you?”

The real Doctor stumbles back a few steps, then regains their balance. “I’m the Doctor, of course -- from the universe next door. But it doesn’t really matter who I am. What matters is that I keep people safe -- safe and whole and happy. And right now I’m keeping my dear Bill safe.” They speak warmly, and yet they command a power that will not be defied.

“Oh ho ho!” Mary Poppins hops up on a nearby table. Chin in hand, elbow on knee, she crosses her legs. “The dueling Doctors!” She catches Nardole’s eye. “We’re gonna need some popcorn for this one. Go see if there’s any in the TARDIS, will you?” Nardole just stares at her, too stupefied by the
“What is this about? What are you implying?” The wrong Doctor paces closer to the true one, their coat skirts switching like the tail of a balked cat.

Alison, who has been trying all this time to be reserved and stunningly indomitable like Bill and the real Doctor, can't stand it. She strides out in front of the right Doctor and puts her hands on her hips as she addresses the wrong one: “The implication is that you're an unsafe pretender. Maybe if you shut the fuck up and stopped your foolish questions for two seconds, then you’d figure out what was going on!”

Mary Poppins gives Alison a standing ovation. “Oooh, I like this one!” she remarks to no one in particular. “Feisty!” She waggles her eyebrows. “Dashing cape too, darling. I used to have one just like it.”

Alison folds her arms and levels a glare on her. “So are you going to sit down and shut up too?” she asks. “Or is the Doctor,” she goes on, seeing that the wrong one has plopped into a chair, “the only smart one of you lot?” Nardole obediently finds himself a chair. Mary Poppins makes a big production of arranging her hair and dress before lowering her arse into a seat at long last. “Good. Now pay attention and don’t interrupt because my girlf...my...because my...Bill has something to say. Bill?” Alison gives her the floor.

Bill explains the bare minimum to her former companions. After she died, the Cyber people took her down to Dystopiaville where she was given mechanical innards and a new life as a Cyber person herself. She joined the underground resistance against Dystopiaville’s dictator. As agreed, she leaves Harry out entirely, saying only that her resistance friends invented a way for her to send distress signals. She also omits the Magister, saying instead that the true Doctor and Alison heard her signal from another universe and came to rescue her.

“Goodbye...Doctor.” Though her voice cracks and tears stream down her cheeks, Bill eyes the false one without a cringe. “I’ve learned a lot from you, most of it stuff that I never wanted to know.”

This false Doctor has an impressive set of eyebrows, but they only seem to have one setting: squashed down and scrunched inward with indignation. Well, if that's all their eyebrows can accomplish, then maybe they aren’t so impressive after all. “How can you say that? I did so much for you! I got you out from behind that greasy chip fryer and into uni classes.” They wave their arms to the side, as if Bill’s entire life before them is irrelevant clutter. “I gave you what you always wanted: a chance to see the universe.”
“That’s only one of the things I’ve always wanted. I want people to recognize me, respect me, and love me as I am,” Bill says. “I want a family, a home, none of which I found with you. I want to be safe and whole and happy. I don’t want to be lonely anymore. And now…” Bill falters, so Alison and the real Doctor draw close, each taking one of her hands. “Now I’m not.”

“But...I told you to wait for me,” says the wrong Doctor. “I told you to wait for me!” They surge to their feet, approaching again.

Bill doesn’t flinch this time. “Yeah, I waited, but you never came. You know who came? People from another universe: my…um…my…Alison and my…my…my Doctor. My Doctor who came through a black hole to save my life. My Doctor who saw me crying the first time we met and wanted to make me happy by holding me fast. My Doctor who made me a wheelchair and showed me their jungle and sang my heart whole. My Doctor who’s not perfect, but who accepts me just as I am.” She shakes her head. “Not spending my life waiting anymore. Got a whole life to live, friends to live it with, and a whole new universe to explore!”

Pulling her hands from Alison and the true Doctor’s, Bill wipes her face. Even though her tears immediately renew, her big round brown eyes are shining. There’s a small smile on her lips, and Alison doesn’t need to be a mind-reader to know that Bill’s not afraid anymore. “Mission accomplished,” she says, turning away from the wrong Doctor.

“Butt kicked!” agrees Alison.

“Let’s go,” says the real Doctor, and the three of them head for the lift.

“Turn around,” cries the wrong Doctor.

The lift dings; the door opens, and the true Doctor presses a button on a key fob to materialize Anima in front of them.

“Turn around!” The wrong Doctor’s voice goes up a notch as Anima extends her front-door ramp for Bill to wheel aboard. “When I say Turn around, you turn around!”

“She’s not going to turn around,” Nardole points out as Alison follows Bill inside.

Evil Mary Poppins lets out the flaccid, two-note wheeze of the universe’s saddest trombone.
“Wow, Doc. You fucked up _bad._” Then Anima’s door shuts.

The old familiar shadows of the control room envelope Alison, Bill, and the Doctor in softness, coolness, and blessed silence. “Oh God…” Bill goes limp in her chair. “My poor heart.” She presses the electronics embedded in her chest. “Its little pistons were pumping as fast as they could. So panicked -- I thought it would give out any moment.”

“Oh, do you need me to sing it?” The Doctor cocks their head.

“No.” Bill shakes her head. “Just exaggerating. But… I mean… I’d like it if you did. Sure that would make it feel better.”

“It’d make me feel better,” says the Doctor, in between experimental humming, “and it’d make the rest of you feel better too.” They smile gently, already singing under their breath.

“I actually feel better already, now that that’s over with.” Bill blinks in the gloom, as if dazzled. “Can’t believe I did it.”

“But you did,” Alison says quietly, beaming at her. “You did do it. I knew you would. I’m so proud of you.”

Bill gets up from her chair and encloses all of Alison in a warm, slightly tearstained hug. “Thanks. Thanks for being there with me.”

“Yeah.” Tears sting in Alison’s eyes, but it’s a happy pain. “You and me -- we make a good team. We’re… We’re good together. Can I --?” _Can I kiss you?_ she thinks, but the sentence becomes stuck between her brain and her mouth.

The moment passes as Bill cranes her neck around Alison’s shoulder. “And thank you, Doctor,” she calls. “Uh… Doctor?” She realizes that the Doctor’s focus is elsewhere.

The Doctor stares upward into the control room shadows. They rotate their hands at their wrists, as if trying to help the wheels in their head turn. “Yes, thank you, Bill my dear,” they say, abstracted and perfunctory, as if their inevitable spouse has prodded them to politeness.
“Doctor!” With a chiding smile, Bill slips her arms about them from behind. “I was the one thanking you!”

“Oh! Erm, hello!” The Doctor adjusts their glasses with a finger and peers down at her. “Is this a sign that I should be holding you fast?” They encircle her with long, bony arms. “I’m glad that’s over. That room -- it was filled with blame and sorrow. I could taste it from the moment I came in: iron and tin, like running your tongue along the edge of an opened can. Did you cut yourself, Bill my dear? I hope you didn’t, but I don’t really know how to keep people safe from emotions that I can taste, but they can’t.”

“Don’t worry, Doctor. You helped me, and you really did keep me safe. That’s why I was saying thank you, you goof!” Bill says, then notices that the Doctor’s attention has shifted toward the ceiling again. “What are you thinking about?”

“Masterful.” The Doctor, lowering their chin, nods, making eye contact with Alison and Bill. “That one’s very...Masterful.” They tilt their head toward the door, obviously referring to the false one. “No!” They hold up their hands as if about to start a mime. “Wait! That’s not quite right. It’s more like...Valeyardish. Yes, Valeyardish.”

“What’s a Valeyard?” asks Bill.

“It’s what happens when you embody all my cruel impulses, bad habits, worst tendencies, disastrous mistakes, and failings into one entity: a truly unhappy person who exists only to spread their unhappiness to others.”

“Oh,” says Alison. “Damn…”

“Well, let’s avoid meeting yours then.” Bill, in her chair once again, crosses her arms. “I sure don’t fancy having to deal with another one.”

There’s a moment’s grave meditation. “But anyway…” The Doctor throws a few switches briskly. “C’mon, ol’ girl.” They pat Anima’s console. “Let’s see what my Master’s been up to, shall we?”

“Yay, my robot!” Alison hug herself with glee.

“I’ll have to ask him about that Valeyardish one,” the Doctor muses aloud, calibrating Anima so
that she re-enters Dystopiaville just one hundred and twenty days after their departure. With a sigh, they say in a softer, more fragmented voice, “Maybe he has some idea what could have made me so...so miserable.”
Alison Returns to Dystopiaville

Chapter Summary

Alison goes back to Dystopiaville four months later to retrieve her robot. She witnesses significant changes and chats with some old friends.

Bill perks up when the Doctor mentions retrieving the Magister, but the delayed aftereffects of her encounter with the wrong Doctor prevent her from going with Alison. Bill’s huddling in on herself by the time Anima touches down in the main lobby of the Dystopiaville Central Municipal Offices. She curls up on the bed she shares with Alison, trembling. The Doctor fits themselves around her from behind, putting both their arm and a blanket over her. As they promised earlier, they sing her, making a soft, safe place for Bill with their voice and their arms.

Verifying that Bill needs Doctor cuddles than Alison cuddles at this point, Alison puts on both her paper filter mask and the Magister’s green wool cape. Then she lets Bill and the Doctor know that she’s going to collect her robot.

Alison steps out into an atrium defined by smooth, rectilinear forms: a vast white tiled floor and narrow glass windows reaching up two stories. Pale light, misty but not smoggy, falls on people moving purposefully at various paces. The fully organic people walk swiftly, while partially robotified Cyborganics either wheel briskly or move at a slower, more measured speed. Fully robotified Cyborganics default to a heavy, almost marching cadence.

Everyone comes in through button-operated automatic doors, along with occasional whooshes of city air. After a few seconds of regular breathing, Alison removes her paper mask...and doesn’t gag. The air tastes of badly grilled barbecue with a hint of raw shit, but it’s much less horrible than four months ago.

Conversations ring through the air. Someone makes dinner plans with their brother and realizes that they don’t have to worry about evening curfew anymore. A couple contemplate erecting a shrine to Harry, bringer of both peace and digestible tea. Now that the pollution has died down, four friends agree on a group trip to the salon to get curls just like Bill’s.

Alison, rotating in a full circle, admires the scene and permits herself a little smile. In just one hundred and twenty days, Harry has taken over, stabilized Dystopiaville’s slow decay, and given people confidence. Of course, he’s an intergalactic supervillain, and this is an exhausted city circling a black hole, but there might actually be good things happening here.

Following the rest of the crowds, Alison heads to the back of the lobby. Stanchions mark off a line
before the security counter, which guards a bank of four lifts. The line moves expeditiously; in under two minutes, Alison stands at the counter in front of two fully converted Cyborganics. Like Charlie before the Doctor refaced her, both have flat, slightly curving plates for faces, with eye lights and mouth grilles.

One of them, wig loaded with ostentatiously fake pink ringlets, bends their head over a tape dispenser. “It’s nice being...detoxed. But I can’t...wait till I get my...face. Eight to twelve...months. Ugh.”

“I can’t wait...either, Nell,” says the other guard, who has both wrists lined with bangles. Their name tag says Thomasin Duvernay. “We are supposed to...be professional here. But your faces...keep cracking...me up.” Nell finally looks up. They have a frowny mouth taped to their face plate, and Thomsain bursts out laughing.

“No. Professionalism.” Nodding smartly, Nell removes their sad features and applies some happy eyebrows and a smiley mouth, all made of paper. “Welcome to...Dystopiaville Central Municipal...Offices. How can I...help you?” they address Alison. Both Nell and Thomasin wear embroidered patches on their Cyber suits that proclaim I knocked Irons OFF, and all I got was this lousy iron-ON.

Alison gives her name and her purpose: to see Max Thascalos. Thomasin examines her identification card and accepts it, even though it’s not even from this universe. Nell prints her an adhesive visitor badge and directs her to the twentieth floor. Slapping the badge to the breast of her cape, Alison enters the lift.

Hitting the button for the twentieth floor, Alison reads the many fliers, printed on pastel sheets of A4, covering the smudged metal walls. The Green-Up Group seeks suggestions for the location of their second community garden. There’s a vigil tomorrow for the victims of the First Day Massacre. United for Peace has an upcoming discussion: Domestic Terrorism: Sources, Signs, and Solutions. On her fellow riders, Alison glimpses a few more anti-Irons patches, as well as the tattooed corollary: I overthrew Irons, and all I got was this lousy tattoo. If sarcastic humor is thriving, things can’t be too bad here.

“Domina Cheney, right?” Turning around, Alison finds a person in their mid-thirties next to her, sitting in a sleek power chair. They have lightly tanned skin with pale pink undertones and full-sleeve tattoos on their muscular arms: snakes writhing through skulls and hearts dripping blood. Though Alison doesn’t usually identify people by gender these days, her mind informs her that the person is a Korean woman. Alison realizes that she’s picking up knowledge from Bill’s memories that were attached to her long-ago distress call.

“Ah, actually it’s Alison Cheney,” Alison corrects. She almost knows who this person is. Whatever
her name, she obviously works close enough with that Magister to be under the impression that *Domina* is Alison’s general-use name.

Speaking quickly with the aid of a tablet like Harry’s, the woman smiles. A ring in her lower lip and a stud in her tongue flash. “Hey there, Alison, ya crazy alternaverse kid! I’m Prunella Kim, *de facto* ruler of Dystopiaville...but don’t let Razor hear that, or he’ll abdicate quicker than a rat will run away with your lunch. You probably have no idea who in the black hole I am, but we kicked Irons’ arse together. I see that you, though, haven’t gotten the lousy tattoo yet.” She cocks her head, and her black mohawk wags a bit.

Allison giggles. Bill’s memories of Prunella inform her that Prunella used to run a body art and piercing parlor before she became RR’s head of logistics. “You designed all those tattoos and patches, didn’t you?” she asks. When Prunella nods, Alison goes on: “I’ve heard about you, mostly through Harry, but I’ve never met you. It’s an honor -- I mean it. Harry pretended like it was his resistance, but, from my point of view, you really did all the work: you and Senga and Yasmeen and the rest of the safe house heads.”

“Oh, of course.” Prunella nods. “I’ll tell you -- it’s nice to have a dictator for once who acknowledges who’s really in charge. --No, but seriously...the honor is all mine -- especially since you’re the one who swept Bill away and gave her a *happily ever after*. How’s our girl Bill anyway? Congrats on your espousal, by the way!”

Alison gives up correcting people on her nonexistent marriage to Bill. “Well, we went up to the slower end of the ship, where her friends had died. She was, uh, laying them to rest, so…”

Prunella sighs. “We’ve all been doing that down here every single day, so I know how she feels. --But hey!” She forces her tone into greater brightness. “Maybe some news will cheer her up. So you know how she thought up the requesting and trading system for all that shit people gave to Razor as tribute? Well, now all that stuff has a home: the Bill Potts Barter Center. And there’s a Revolutionary Heart Clinic -- get it? -- that focuses on Cyborganic cardiac care; it has a wing dedicated to her.”

“She’ll love to hear that!” Alison gasps in delight herself.

“And there’s a Wilhelmina J. Potts Speculative Fiction Collection at our main library now, with plans for a statue of her with a book in her hands and her eyes turned up to the stars. Well, our Bill always *was* out of this world.” Like the Doctor, Prunella laughs at her own jokes, and, like the Doctor, she easily evokes laughter from Alison too.
“That’s amazing!” Alison sighs. “People will always remember her and how awesome she was.”

“Oh yeah. And, if they forget, there are bunches of us that will remind them!” Prunella smacks her thigh for emphasis. “Anyway, guess who put up the speculative fiction? Razor himself! Apparently he’s got feelings besides annoyance and rage. Who knew?”

“Hey, how is he these days?”

Prunella rolls her eyes. “Fidgety. He keeps asking me and Yasmeen when we’re staging our coup,” she says, as the lift stops on the fifteenth floor. “We keep telling him he has to deal with the terrorists first.”

“Terrorists? What -- ?”

“Ah, this is my floor -- gotta wheel! Tell Bill that me and Senga send kisses! Bye!” Prunella rockets through the opening lift door, leaving Alison with unanswered questions for the last five floors.

Alison steps out onto the Magister’s floor. Underfoot lies a soft grey carpet, nearly worn through in places, its grey interlocking pattern subtle, but not overwhelming. The dusty, cream-colored walls feature shining cityscapes unlike the grimy ramshackle of Dystopiaville’s actual construction. Doors of golden-stained wood line the halls in either direction. There must be some sort of air filtration up here, as Alison’s breaths taste slightly of citrus furniture cleanser. It’s the quintessence of an inoffensive institutional interior. It reminds Alison of something she might see back home, a thought that’s oddly comforting.

A calendar hanging over trash, recycling, and compost bins attracts Alison’s attention. She reads. Razor’s Office Hours alternate weeks with Razor’s Regular Radio Rant, so at least Harry’s making a pretense of governing with, instead of lording it over, the citizens. Delegations from the Floor 1068 Solar Farms will be in town soon. The public commentary period for Basic Income Allotment opens next month. A vaguely streetcar-shaped graphic marks the date on which Route 03, Butcher’s Block to Hovel Row, begins service. And Max Thascalos has just finished training volunteers for the domestic violence hotline. “Oh, robot of mine,” Alison murmurs. “Of course you’re the one who protects everyone.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh. It’s Alison. Remember me?” This time when Alison hears her name, she recognizes the speaker on sight. Tall and long-limbed, with a warm red-brown face and two stubby black pigtails, it’s Ranju. She’s the Cyborganic kid who was detoxing in Bill and Razor’s flat when the raid occurred. “Ranju. Puzzle master...and municipal communications...consultant. You taught
me...shielding. But now...no more shielding. No more Irons. Free. Free. Really free.” She wiggles in her chair.

“Of course I remember you, Ranju!” Alison says with a squeal. “It’s so good to see you again. Can I hug you?” When Alison draws away, she notices that Ranju no longer uses the power chair that the Doctor designed for her. In its place she has a larger, dirtier vehicle. “I thought that Doctor made you a chair that fit much better. I hope it didn’t break down!”

“No. No. It’s all good.” Ranju waves her hands in a placating gesture. “I’m using this chair...just for a...little bit. People who...used to work in...Cyber factories... They’re using my chair...as a design model. They’ll make chairs like mine...to give out to...other people...like me.”

“Free cutting-edge mobility aids to disabled people?” Alison says under her breath. “That sounds dangerously helpful, Harry. Watch out -- people might start mistaking you for someone who gives a shit about compassion and justice and accessibility and all those horrible sentimental things.” Ranju gives her a weird look, so Alison says, “Never mind -- just talking to myself. So it sounds like you’re doing pretty good these days, huh? That’s great!”

“Well…” Ranju glances into her lap. “My grandma...my two uncles...they died on First Day. Just me and my mum...and my...rats...in the house now. And Amaranth and Corvine...in a...splatter bomb,” she adds, naming two of her agemates in the revolution who were runners and spies from Tinder Town.

“Oh God. Oh Ranju...that’s horrible. I’m so sorry that they died.” Alison squats to Ranju’s level. “It sounds like you were close to them -- all of them. You must be so sad.”

“Yeah.” Ranju’s voice is almost snuffed out. “So many...bottles of tears. So many...memorials and graves. So many...vigils. So much missing. So many people dead. Low casualties, Razor...says. Statistically, yeah. But still...every dead person... They’re a little bit...of dead hope.”

*Where there’s life, there’s hope,* Alison thinks. And where there’s death, there hope dies. “Oh Ranju. I know what you mean. I’m so sorry that you’re hurting so much. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Me neither.” Ranju, tilting her head to the side, drips artificial tears into one eye, then the other. She blinks furiously for a few seconds. “I had anagrams...for you, but I...I forgot them.”
“Don’t worry. It’s okay. It’s okay. I know you’re sad, and I know you’re feeling horrible, but I’m just glad that I got to see you again and to find out that...that you’re still keeping on.”

“Glad to...see you too. Good hugger.” Ranju stretches out her arms, so Alison hugs her again. After a few seconds of clinging, Ranju says, “You came here...for Mister Master...Max...didn’t you? Not me. He said you were...coming to take...him home soon.”

“Yeah! Yeah, I did. Do you know which one’s his office?”

Letting go of Alison, Ranju points. “Down there. Last door on...right, before stairwell. He misses you. My family, my family. All he talks about.”

As Alison rises on the balls of her feet, her heart gives a little jump of joy. “My family?”

“Yeah.” There’s a brittle smile on Ranju’s face, but it’s still a smile. “You told me...you’re not all married, but...I think...he thinks...you are.”

“My family...” says Alison again. Suddenly she’s about to cry herself, so she runs down the hall to find her robot.
Alison and the Magister Reunite

Chapter Summary

Alison reunites with her robot. She learns from him all about Newland cats, post-sing-down chaos, Harry's dissection of Irons, what happened to Charlie, and the recent terrorist attacks.

Alison stands in front of her robot’s office door. Max Thascalos, reads a printed sheet of A4. Transitional Public Safety Commissioner. Children’s Welfare Program Administrator. Chief Investigator, Familial Violence in Dystopiavilla Project. Advisor, Dystopiaville-Solar Farms Diplomatic Relations. Handwritten additions include Official City Grammarian, Director of the Twentieth Floor Lounge Hygiene Brigade, and Jack of All Trades, Master of None. Her robot, of course, has crossed out None and added, in his fine, precise penmanship, All Matter, Universally, followed by a happy cat face emoji.

“Oh, mi Magistre,” says Alison, laughing, a hand over her mouth. Clearly he has been doing good, making friends, and even enjoying himself. What about getting enough sleep, though? She probably has to reprimand him about that. She knocks.

“All set to run full speed into his arms, Alison stops suddenly when she catches sight of him. He’s rising from behind a scuffed-up steel desk to meet her, but he stands in careful increments, using a cane to brace himself. Some kind of a plate, browner than his golden sepia skin, covers the area from his left cheekbone up to his hairline. “Oh no -- robot of mine, what happened? Are you okay? Can I still... Can I still hold you fast?”

The Magister steps out from behind his desk. Something’s really wrong with his left side; his foot rubs harshly against the carpet as he limps toward her. “Always, mea Domina carissima.” Leaning against the corner of his desk, he props his cane next to him and extends both arms to her. “I may be injured, but you will not hurt me. Come -- hold me fast.” Alison puts both of her arms around him tightly, and he does the same to her. “My good Domina... My good Domina...” He’s kind of nudging her face with his.

“Squeeee -- that tickles!” Alison cries, but doesn’t struggle. She feels, rather than hears, the sound he makes, a deep low buzz. “You’re purring and head-butting me, aren’t you?”
“I haven’t done so for four months; I do believe I’m entitled.”

“Oh, poor unfortunate robot! However did you survive in such a desolate place without any other cats?”

“I brought a few TARDIS cats with me. They immediately ran off to found a colony in the Slumside junkyard. They’re always sending me urgent bulletins about how the kittens are doing, who caught the largest rat, and how many people patted them on the head. Their information is actually an effective way to gauge people’s overall morale, not to mention the effectiveness of the new sanitation measures. They’re Newland cats now!” The Magister’s purr goes up higher, with more of a trill, in satisfaction. “But...I need to return to my chair,” he says after a moment. He eases himself down into the wheeled office chair.

Alison, parking her arse on the creased cardboard blotter, notices that he’s cleared everything from the desk except for his handmade dolls. The one of him is standing with its arms around the little Doctor on one side and the little Alison on the other. She has seen those three before, but there’s another one now, holding the Alison doll’s other hand.

Made with what the Magister had available, the new doll is a simpler form of warm, middle brown wood, with hinged limbs and a shift the color of a sunflower. All detail has been lavished on that wide mouth, that round, strong chin, that stance like a question mark. It’s Bill, of course, and Alison has no doubt that he’s going to make a better likeness when he returns to his studio. Then all four of them will be a matched set. The Dork family, Alison thinks, remembering what Ranju told her. All he talks about.

Alison explains that she’s the sole member of the welcoming committee because the Doctor is consoling Bill after their difficult encounter with the wrong one. The Magister nods, saying that the Doctor tried to give him details telepathically. But all he got was a huge, enveloping surge of protective love for Bill my dear, grief at what she had suffered, and profound distress over the Doctor’s counterpart’s unhappiness.

Alison relates the story. She remarks how satisfying it was to tell the false Doctor to shut the fuck up, but she acknowledges that Bill was the true heroine of the hour. She was weeping; she was shivering; and Alison saw that she would bear the hurt and the anger from what the false Doctor did to her for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, she was calm. She held herself with the beautiful certainty of someone who was no longer intimidated. She told the false Doctor the truth about things less because she wanted them to hear and more because she was ready to speak. “I was so proud of her for doing such a difficult thing.” Alison finishes. “She was so majestic...and powerful...and lovely...and... She was the master of her fate and the captain of her soul!”

“Of course she was,” says the Magister. “I wish I could have seen, but I had to be here. You didn’t
“Yeah, what’s going on around here?” Alison puts out her hands and shrugs. “Everything looks amazing: freedom of movement, new infrastructure, pretty much everything being named after Bill. But then Prunella says that Harry’s got to deal with the terrorists, and Ranju’s devastated because Amaranth and Corvine died in a splatter bomb. And you’ve lost a piece of your face. What happened after we all sang down the Cyber network?”

“Chaos,” says the Magister succinctly.

He begins with the aftermath of the sing-down. As decided, groups of revolutionaries, including as many repersoned Cyborganics as possible, stationed themselves near the greatest concentrations of Cyber people. They infiltrated Floor 1056 General Hospital, as well as the smaller experimental surgery clinic. They also stood by the five district detention centers and the Dumping Ground Barracks, where off-duty NPs lived. Finally, several RR agents got as close to Irons’ command bunker as they dared. Thus, when the network went down, freeing the Cyber people from its command, RR agents were ready to help the confused Cyber people adjust to the abrupt resumption of free will.

RR agents experienced the best success at the hospital, the satellite clinic, the Dumping Ground Barracks, and the South District Detention Center. Because the Cyber people in the hospitals were partially converted, thus physically frailer, their disorientation threatened themselves instead of others. Some of them blundered about after network loss, bruising themselves, while others began seizing. Fortunately, RR agents used hospital tech and medications to treat the most injured Cyber people. Within hours, everyone was free and less terrified.

As for the Dumping Ground Barracks and the South District Detention Center, the majority of Cyber people there were in some sort of standby, power-saving mode when the network crashed. Because they weren’t instantly on the offensive, revolutionaries could address them more safely. Some Cyber people at the detention center did reflexively arm themselves, but RR agents quickly explained the situation. The only injuries occurred when a few Cyber people at the barracks tried to shake the agents’ hands in thanks, but inadvertently hurt them with their greater strength.

Over three quarters of the Cyber people disconnected from the network without incident, reports the Magister, but, as for the remainder… Well, there were problems. In the four other detention centers, Night Patrol officers opened fire on the revolutionaries before they had time to speak. Seven people died in the shooting. The East District Detention Center went up in flames along with two adjacent tenements, killing three dozen more people. Many other people were wounded, including Vernon Pulse, Dominoes safe house head, who had third-degree burns.

Losses were the worst in Irons’ bunker. After the sing-down, the bunker remained silent for fifteen
minutes, so RR agents waited. Then they crept in warily, only to discover corpses. Irons had surrounded themselves with at least a hundred Cyber people. Some acted as bodyguards, most as servants who stayed in suspended animation until Irons forced them to do something. A hundred and fourteen of them died, committing suicide. Irons too was dead, though of no cause that the revolutionaries could see.

In the entire bunker, the agents found only two survivors. They were teenagers, whose relative youth and recent Cyberization seemed to have immunized them against whatever afflicted their cohorts. RR agents hospitalized them, and one killed herself two days later. The sole survivor spends her days rocking back and forth on her bed, muttering things at a volume too low to distinguish words.

With Irons dead, the dictator’s supporters, mainly municipal lackeys, non-RR hospital staff, and rich people, scattered. Fearing that the poor majority of the city would rise up against them, they fled. Workers at the Cyber production factories left their posts. Dystopiaville teetered not only on the edge of a black hole, but on the brink of governmental and economic chaos.

Into the power vacuum wheeled Harry, who proclaimed that the time was right for a change from totalitarian dictatorship to beneficial autocracy. He promised to reorganize the government and restore the city. Since he himself was disabled, he was particularly interested in appropriate medical and social services for Cyborganics -- and anyone who needed it, really. He also promised health care, housing, and financial security for everyone, regardless of their physical and mental abilities. Reduction of soil, air, and water pollution also figured into his goals. He’d accomplish great things, he said, because the same passionate and capable people who followed him in the resistance and revolution would work with him to rebuild the city.

Many of Harry’s plans required both time and meticulous labor, but he did institute one change immediately: the tea. He replaced the foul drink of Dystopiaville with a brew based on the blend that the Magister himself had given him. He also repurposed a few former Cyber warehouses as tea plantations and made the results cheaply available to all.

After years of cowering from the Night Patrol and drinking swill, the Dystopiaville citizens reveled in safe public meetings and something tasty to sip. According to the Magister, Harry just thought that the tea would distract the masses from the time-consuming reconstruction. He didn’t expect the appearance of a cafe culture that actually boosted the local economy. However, he gladly accepted it, especially since many conversations in the cafes were about how amazing he was.

The first month post-revolution passed. Many former RR leaders took posts in the new government. The Magister, as his various titles indicated, did a little bit of everything, even acting as Harry’s bodyguard on occasion, all under the purview of making Dystopiaville a safer, healthier, and more peaceful town. Prunella Kim became chief of staff. Her wife Senga McDonall was secretary of the Cyborganic Health Care Task Force. Yasmeen Mazandarani, former head of the
Tinder Town safe house, advised the Dystopiaville Housing Authority. Hamlet and Ophelia Carson, who had directed security for the revolting rally, served on the Police Force Development Coalition. Britomart Smythe, erstwhile chief of rally publicity, now worked in municipal communications.

Overall, Dystopiaville was off to a promising start, especially since some former Irons factota and hospital staff took advantage of Harry’s clemency. Punishments for their roles in the previous regime were lessened if they helped the current dictatorship improve law enforcement [now called the Safety Patrol] and/or health care. With expertise from former Irons flunkeys as a foundation, both city sectors were on their way to serving all citizens impartially.

In between the many tasks involved in the running of a city, Harry researched a particularly vexing question. While Irons’ personal Cyber guards obviously died by their own hands, there was no biological, mechanical, or biomechanical reason for the dictator’s coincident demise. Who or what had deprived Harry of the joy of assassination?

A vicious dissection of Irons’ remains mollified Harry slightly and also gave him some answers. Irons, who was significantly robotified themselves, had been using the Cyber network as more than a communications channel. They had also been drawing off the mental and physical energy of every Cyber person plugged into the network. The strength that they leached from the people of Dystopiaville kept them alive, invulnerable, and in power long past their natural lifespan. However, when the Doctor sang down the Cyber network, they severed Irons from their human power source. Old age had caught up with them, and they died of long-postponed, but entirely natural, causes. Harry had to admit that it was a fitting end, but it wasn’t satisfying in the least.

The Magister has his own unanswered questions too, a fact that Alison discovers when she asks after Charlie, Junie, and Gardenia. She last saw Charlie, a solemn figure in red, at Deedee’s funeral, so she wonders how the Foxtrot-Fanshaws are doing now. The Magister has no information, for the three of them have apparently vanished. Prunella and Senga, at whose Sewage Street safe house the Foxtrot-Fanshaws had been staying, woke up just after the sing-down of the Cyber network to discover the family and their meager belongings gone. There were no signs of a struggle, but no indications of where they had gone either.

The Magister did what he could to find them, but what he discovered was not promising. Charlie’s surviving father had also disappeared, along with one of Charlie’s aunts and her three children. Junie and Gardenia’s relations are gone as well: Junie’s three parents, his step-sibling and their spouse, his ex-spouse and child from his previous marriage, even Gardenia’s grandmother and great-aunt. Charlie’s closest Cyborganic friends are nowhere to be seen either. The sheer scope of the disappearance worries the Magister. He suspects that they all may have suffered retaliation from people angry at Charlie, a former Night Patrol member, appearing prominently in the revolting rally.
He had little time to devote to Charlie’s disappearance, however, because then the terrorists started attacking. They favored remotely detonated bombs, which they left in public areas. Packed with nails, screws, bricks, metal scraps, and sharpened wires, the bombs sent shrapnel in all directions. People soon named them *splatter bombs* because they caused sprays of both debris and blood.

Three explosions rocked Dystopiaville in as many weeks. The first targeted the city’s auxiliary streetcar garage, hurting two janitors. Enough equipment was damaged to delay the public transit system’s inaugural runs by seven weeks. The second explosion occurred in a Butcher’s Block plaza, causing minor injuries to eight people and major destruction to a mural idealizing Razor. Harry insisted that this was proof of reactionaries out to destroy his work.

Most of Harry’s administration laughed him off, but not the Magister. He started his own investigation into the matter and increased Harry’s security detail. Just as the Magister was pulling together some rather suspicious circumstantial evidence, he and Harry attended yet another park dedication. This was for a garden in central Tinder Town commemorating the First Day Massacre.

Harry was about to speak to the crowds when the Magister noticed a splatter bomb rigged to the lectern. He uprooted the entire lectern and heaved the whole apparatus into a foundation hole for a homeless shelter. His left side took serious damage when the bomb went off.

With a sigh, the Magister dips his head for a narrative pause. “So yes, my dear,” he says to Alison, “you were right. I’ve lost my left eye, my little finger, and some flexion in both my elbow and my knee. I’m not in pain, and I know that others need body parts far more than I. Because I am still quite able, I have chosen to wait for my Doctor’s expert repairs.”

Nodding slowly, Alison folds her arms. “Yeah. Well, it sounds like anti-Razor militants to me. Any idea who it is?”

“Audrey and Scott Gregory, of course...or, more precisely, their minions.”

“Goddammit -- not them! Why can’t they just go the fuck away?”

“The Master and I may have incapacitated the Gregorys, but we did not prevent them from delegating their campaign of hatred and fear to other people. Two of the Liberators -- that’s what they call themselves -- surrendered earlier this week, though, and the Master has been busy using their information to plot a takedown.”
“Ugh.” Alison sticks out her tongue. “Do you think he’s going to kill the Gregorys because he didn’t get to kill Irons?”

“I don’t know.” The Magister stands with difficulty. “I am my Doctor’s keeper, not the Master’s. He may not do what I would do in the same circumstances, but I am confident that his actions will ultimately benefit both himself and the city.”

“--In his inimitably self-interested fashion, of course,” Alison adds. “--At least until he gets bored and hands it over to Prunella, Senga, and Yasmeen.”

The Magister laughs. “Everyone in the administration says that Ms. Kim will be in charge within the year, even she herself. She has visions of a democratically elected selectboard, I believe. I willingly leave governance to those who want it.

“As for myself, I have done my best to keep others safe and whole and happy, and now…” His voice lowers and softens; he begins purring again. “--I’d like to do the same for those who belong to me. Will you take my dolls, please? --Good Domina,” he says, as Alison does so, then puts her free arm around his waist. “I’ve summoned my Doctor; Anima will be here momentarily. Ahhhh, I cannot wait to go home.”
Chapter Summary

Away from Dystopiaville and Newland at last, Alison takes a nap, then wakes up. She and Bill prepare for re-entry to Earth. Then a Cyber person knocks on the door, and plans suddenly change...

After reuniting with her robot, Alison drops into bed. When she wakes up, Anima has left Newland and just cleared the border of Otalux Four Eleven, crossing back over into her home universe. Alison enters the control room to hear the Doctor and Anima congratulating each other on yet another impressive flight. “And the way you took that event horizon was just incredible!” the Doctor tells Anima, putting their arms out and banking in a steep curve, then gathering their arms close and spinning. “Well done!”

Anima responds with the thunderous strains of Wagner’s Walküre, to which the Doctor marches around the time rotor, laughing and conducting with both hands.

Meanwhile the Magister tells Bill the cure for some of her new-universe anxieties. “Right, so I’m writing you a prescription.” He letters something in his small, unornamented penmanship, tears the paper off the pad, and hands it to Bill.

“This is a URL.” Holding the paper under one of the room’s spotlights, Bill squints at it and looks puzzled.

“Well, of course.” The Magister reclines in his chair, rocking loosely and spreading out his hands with the complacent pleasure of someone who likes to pretend he knows everything. Only one of his eyebrows rises and only one of his eyes sparkles, since he’s still missing a quarter of his face. Though the Dystopiaville plate covers the hole in the front of his skull, he looks so happy to be back home that the damage seems inconsequential.

“The County Gallifrey message boards,” says the Magister, “are almost a panacea for those who have traveled with encountered the Doctor in one form or another. If you need someone who will listen to your tales of aliens without recommending you to an asylum, you will find plenty of listeners. If you wish to discuss the moral implications of the Doctor’s decision on Valo-esp, you can do so with the people there. If you need a local source of peloushir, you can probably find a supplier.”
“In other words,” says Alison, sitting beside Bill, “it’s a great place to talk to other people who have been through some of the same things. I found it really helpful when I went back to my parents’ house for a bit and had to readjust to the, uh, crashing mundanity of daily Earthling life.”

The Magister leans toward Bill, his voice hushing. “I know for a fact that there are people there skilled in dealing with all manner of personal situations, from traumatic experiences with Time Lords to a displacement from one universe to another. You would do well to consult -- “

“Oh, believe me -- I know. Probably need more therapy now than there are years of my life, so -- “ Bill sighs shakily. “--It’s good that I can find someone there. But...um...how do you know about this, Prof?”

“I moderate.” The Magister explains that the former mod, Eye of Harmony, was a petty despot. When Alison joined the boards, Eye of Harmony self-destructed and threatened to take down County Gallifrey with her. The Magister rescued the community because he thought it served a vital function.

Bill snorts. “Bit of a conflict of interest there, yeah?”

“I’m well aware of that.” The Magister says that he keeps trying to cede moderation to someone else, but no one volunteers. He supposes that he could just quit, but he has dedicated so much effort to supervising and maintaining the boards. “People thrive on that connection. It helps them; it makes them happy. I can’t deprive them of that.” He makes a gesture with open palms as if that’s simply how it is.

“Hang on, ol’ girl.” Listening to Anima, the Doctor cocks their head as if on an invisible phone. “I’ll check.” Putting their head back up to vertical, they crack their neck and call across the console room: “Master, was it you who invited twenty-seven people for tea? Or was it me, and I just forgot?”

“What twenty-seven people?” Alison faces the Doctor.

“Twenty-seven people where?” Bill adds.

“Anima says that there are twenty-seven people in the -- “ the Doctor begins.
Someone slams hard on the door. “Open… Open up,” they say in the distinctively pause-ridden speech of a Cyber person. “We are in...need of the Doctor. Surrender them at once.”

The Magister limps to the control room door. He flicks on the security monitor, then pushes the intercom button. “Who are you, and for what reason are you here?”

The Cyber person on the other side of the door has the same build as the Doctor: tall, narrow, and somewhat droopy. Having discarded their helmet, they expose their pinkish brown faceplate. A shawl of delicately beaded pink yarn rests on their shoulders, softening the bright silver of their Cyber suit. A matching skullcap sits on their head. “Irrelevant. We require urgent assistance. Hand over the Doctor, or we...will take them by force.”

The Doctor bounds across the room and elbows their inevitable spouse aside. “Hello there!” they sing into the speaker. “Are you a Cyborganic from Dystopiaville?” They wave.

There’s a momentary silence. “Um. Yes.” Alison assumes that the Cyber person has never received such an enthusiastic welcome before.

“Nice to meet you! I’m the Doctor. What’s your name?”

“Tango Delta 519. We require…”

“Right, right, urgent assistance. Hang on.” The Doctor fumbles with the door locks.

“Doctor! You don’t know what they want!” the Magister protests.

But the Doctor has already opened the control room wide to Tango. “Why don’t you come in and we can have a nice civil chat?”

“Um. Okay. Thank you.” Tango’s green eye lights move from one side to the other, as if they suspect that the room might be booby trapped.

“So…Tango Delta…how can we help you?” The Doctor plops in a chair with such momentum that it careens backward a meter, knocking the Magister’s knees. The Magister wavers for a second on his good leg, then moves in front of the Doctor protectively, narrowing his eyes at Tango.

“We need…a gynecologist…or an obstetrician.”

The Doctor blanches even more than usual and retracts a little behind the Magister. “That’s… That’s not my specialty at all. I focused on the other end of things, palliative care and mortuary sciences, which I really don’t think you want.”

“Who’s pregnant?” Bill interjects. “One of the twenty-seven mystery guests?”

“Gardenia Fanshaw,” replies Tango. “It’s premature labor. She’s in the zeppelin hangar.”

“Gardenia? Charlie!” Alison and Bill cry, for they recall that Gardenia is one of their missing friend’s spouses, along with Junie.

His friend’s name allays the Magister’s concerns. He takes a step to the side, abandoning his
defensive position. “Mx. Delta, I am neither a gynecologist nor an obstetrician, but I am a midwife. Might I be of some service?” He bows to Tango, and the two confer.

“Is Charlie here?” says Bill.

“She’s alive? She’s okay?” Alison remembers how Charlie’s eyes lit up when Bill said at the rally that forced robotification and mind control were science fiction on Earth. No wonder the Magister couldn’t find Charlie and her spouses anywhere in Dystopiaville. They’ve been stowing away in Anima.

“She is here, along with the rest of her family: worried for her spouse,” reports the Magister over his shoulder, “but otherwise fine.”

“Oh thank God.” Bill sits back and smiles. “And now I’m not the only one in this universe who’s lived in Dystopiaville.”

“Yeah!” says the Doctor. “Now there’s an instant twenty-eight-person support group!”

“Now then!” The Magister claps as if ending discussion. “Doctor – Domina – Seeker – I am off to aid Ms. Fanshaw, as well as her anxiety-ridden spouses and acquaintances. If you stay here, I understand that and I do not fault you, as labor and delivery do not interest everyone. If you go with me, I am sure that I can put you to good use. Please decide now if you will accompany me.”

“Oh, me, me!” The Doctor flaps both hands. “I can do lots of helpful things, just not…live…birth.” For a moment, they turn wan, profoundly disturbed by the very concept. “But I can hand you all the forceps and scalpels you want. Hmmm, now where did I put my surgical tools?”

Bill launches her rocket blast-off sound effects. “And I can help too, as long as I don’t have to stand up!”

“I can help three! Bill’s really good at caring and listening, and I’m really good at running my mouth and distracting people, so maybe we can calm them down.” Alison nods eagerly.

“Then come,” says the Magister. “Where there’s life, there’s hope.” And the Dork family goes forth to their next adventure.

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