--And Fear Me Not

by ModernWizard

Summary

Alison Cheney enjoys a life of adventure, loyalty, and snark with the members of her chosen Dork family: the Magister, Bill, and the Doctor. One of her partners, the Magister, loves her so much that he holds her fast and purrs. The other, Bill, loves her so much that she followed Alison home from the universe next door and writes space fairy tales to demonstrate her affection.

But there are a few problems. First, Alison is too scared to tell Bill that she loves her.
Second, the side effects from her traumatic brain injury bug the shit out of her. Third, for some reason, she keeps thinking about Harry, Bill’s universe’s equivalent of the Magister. He befriended and protected Bill back in her universe, but he antagonized the rest of the Dork fam, and Alison hates him.

Everything converges when the Magister does brain surgery on Alison, installing a modified Cyber chip to alleviate her TBI symptoms. It doesn’t work, instead plunging Alison into an acute depression. Anxious and preoccupied, the Dork fam fragments. How will Alison get through this? What does Bill know that Alison doesn’t? And what’s that suspicious noise coming from inside her closet?
Alison Meets Her Magister

Chapter Summary

Alison bounces around her bedroom, waiting for the Magister, so that they can go inside her mind together. He appears with a characteristic Dramatic Entrance [TM]. Repartee, snuggling, ham, cheese, bananas.

Alison sets her pick comb on her bedroom vanity and grins in the mirror. After forty-five minutes of meticulous fluffing, her wiry brown curls stand out from her head in a globular puff. The result does nothing to soften her long, acutely drawn face, but it does add a majestic five centimeters to her height. It’s her living corona of power. “Squeeeee!” she remarks to her reflection, hugging herself about the shoulders and bouncing on her rear end. Her hair is perfect, and the Magister, her robot, is coming in less than a half an hour.

She traces the legend that he etched in fine, flowing script about the bottom of the oval vanity mirror: *Hold me fast, and fear me not.* It’s a refrain from a fairy tale song, *The Ballad of Tam Lin.* In that story, Janet of Carterhaugh frees Tam Lin from fairy captivity by following his instructions. His commands to her include those lines, lines that also describe Alison and the Magister’s favorite activities: opening up to each other and holding each other fast, both of which they plan to do shortly. “Hey, Scintilla!” Alison calls, cocking her neck back. “He’s coming, right?”

“You asked me that two minutes ago, Miss Alison, and the answer is still yes.” A bouncy, lively voice rings out overhead: that of Scintilla, the Magister’s TARDIS. Like the Magister, Alison’s robot, Scintilla is a sentient machine. Her ship self, disguised as a house, provides shelter for Alison and the Magister, but she also regularly assumes a wireless humanoid form to better intervene in their lives. When she speaks from her ship self, like now, it sounds like the ceiling is talking. “The Master,” reports Scintilla, using the Magister’s real name, “is indeed getting ready. But,” she adds with a snort, “he just started his makeup. You might want to check back in five hours.”

“What a silly cat. Why does he paint his face if all you’re going to do is take a nap together?]” Imp, the Magister’s flying cat, alights on Alison’s vanity. She bumps the underside of Alison’s hand, petting herself there. She’s a tiny shorthair black house cat with yellow eyes and bat wings. Reanimated from dead animals and enhanced during the Magister’s Doctor Frankenstein phase, Imp is highly intelligent and, like everyone else around here, highly opinionated. She always knows exactly what non-feline people are saying. Furthermore, she always ensures that everyone else knows precisely what she means.

“We’re not taking a nap together. We’re going into my mind library to call a Council of the Alisons. He’s going to stick a Cyber chip in my head, so we’re making sure that all the Alisons know,” Alison explains.

“Whatever. You two are boring. I’m going to lie in a sunbeam.]” Receiving a last chin scritch from Alison, Imp flies out the bedroom door.

“How about now?” Alison asks Scintilla, spinning around on her vanity stool.

“Eyeliner. Charcoal purple. Do you want a running commentary? I thought you weren’t interested
in that stuff,” says Scintilla.

Alison is the odd one out in the Dork family in that regard. Along with the Magister, the Doctor, who’s the Magister’s inevitable spouse, and Bill, who’s Alison’s girlfriend inevitable spouse love other partner, all do amazing things with cosmetics. Alison, who would rather paint dolls than herself, uses only hand cream in the winter and sunscreen in the summer. Though she knows that the rest of the Dork fam would gladly initiate her into the mysteries of fancy skin products, she declines the opportunity.

Ignoring Scintilla, Alison rises from the vanity and crosses her bedroom, making sure that everything is ready for her and the Magister’s upcoming mental travel. If they want to sit in her reading corner, they have the chaise longue. Upholstered in vibrant sky blue, its dense foam cushions have cradled her during many a literary adventure or midday nap. Morning light comes in through the door-size windows to the left of the chair, striking a wall of inset bookcases on the right. The parawood takes on an almost orangey gleam, and the soft smell of worn, beloved pages fills the air.

Moving on the balls of her feet, Alison darts along the carpet of black and white checks. Now that she’s on the other side of the room from her vanity, its mirror flashes a reflection of her whole body. She’s tall, with warm brown skin. The reddish tones in her complexion brighten even more from her clothes: white peasant blouse, black flame-painted vest, and yellow leggings with silver stars. She likes to think that she looks magical and otherworldly, but she probably just looks like a member of the Dork fam.

Alison stops by her brass bed in the center of the room. Its four spiral posts support a canopy of burnt orange and purple organza. Though she has tidied the bedclothes, a heavy, summery smell of coconut oil lingers here. She and Bill had some amazing sex yesterday, with a liberal application of coconut oil to make things go smoothly. Yeah, the bed’s quite comfortable for a variety of activities, so she and the Magister could definitely sit there.

Would he want to, though? He’s a sex-repulsed ace; he doesn’t fuck anyone, even the Doctor. The kinky play between Alison and the Magister contains, in his words, no erotic activities whatsoever. He has both great experience and scholarly interest in BDSM, but would an obvious remnant of Alison’s practices with Bill disgust him? Lifting a sheet, she sniffs it, pauses, then sniffs again, thinking.

“As a matter of fact,” says a deep, rolling voice behind her, “I do like the scent. Coconut oil is quite versatile, either in my kitchen or in...well, whatever room I decide to deal with the Doctor. Either way, it bespeaks exciting things: experimentation! Adventure!”

Alison turns around to see the Magister. He resembles an Earthling man of perhaps sixty years, but he’s actually an alien from Gallifrey who has traveled in time for too many centuries to remember his age. Broad-shouldered and compact in build, he stands with a straight and supple spine, his hands interlaced behind his back. He wears robes whose skirts overlap like unfurling petals. His shoes are so pointy that you could murder people on them. His black hair, with white blazes at widow’s peak and ears, sweeps back from an impressively craggy face. He has applied his aforementioned makeup to make himself more himself. He highlights the cliffs of his cheeks, sharpens the prominence of his brows, and deepens the sockets around his eyes. His sepia brown skin seems to shine as his entire being smiles.

She rises to her tiptoes and bounces, hopping into his arms. “Squeeeeee! Of course! Of course you arrive early, spy on me unawares, talk to me like you know what I’m thinking, and make faces at me with those fuckin’ ridiculous eyebrows of yours.” She traces one of them, prominent and heavy.
It mounts even higher on his forehead, raising a tower of wrinkles above it. “You’re the Master of Ham and Cheese, and every entrance is calculated for maximum drama.”

“Oh, spare me your sarcastic commentary. You adore my eyebrows,” the Magister returns, “my entrances, my luncheon meats, and my dairy products.” He, one hundred and seventy-one centimeters tall, lifts his chin to look Alison, who’s about one hundred and seventy-five centimeters, in the eyes. Though she has always thought of herself as unusually tall, that doesn’t make him short. His self-possession renders him the perfect size.

“Yeah, well, you adore my snark, my bounce, and my squee,” Alison tells him. He pulls her against his chest, holding her there tightly, and she realizes that she is never self-conscious about her height with him. He is the perfect size for her, she for him. They fit together. They match.

“Speaking of excitement, when did we last enter your mind?” the Magister inquires, releasing her.

Alison sits on her bed again, then plops backward. The coconut smell strengthens as she lies back on the duvet and thinks. “Well, I called a Council of the Alisons when we came back from Dystopiaville to tell everyone about Bill. But that was maybe seven months ago, and you weren’t with me. I know you chat with all your selves all the time, but I mostly meet with mine on special occasions.”

Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor first crossed paths with Bill about ten months back. Alison and her Time Lords Dorks flew to Bill’s universe to rescue her from Dystopiaville, a totalitarian regime on a spaceship circling a black hole. Bill’s universe’s evil Twelfth Doctor had abandoned her there to die. But Harry, who, as the Magister’s counterpart, was the Master in Bill’s universe, resurrected her as a cyborg.

Bill and Harry led the resistance against the Dystopiaville dictator Irons, and Alison and her Time Dorks joined the fight. Alison and Bill quickly grew close, and the three-person Dork family gained a fourth member. Though Harry was a self-described batshit psychopath, he was less evil than Irons. So the Dork family worked with him and thousands of Dystopiaville revolutionaries to defeat Irons. After the autocrat’s overthrow, Harry assumed leadership of Dystopiaville, while Alison returned to her Earth with Bill and some other refugees.

The Magister paces before her bed, stride long, as he often does when thinking. With two fingers he outlines the edges of his pointy goatee. “I believe that the last time we went together was when I first taught you about mental shielding and mental travel, some two years ago.”

After she’d had her brain invaded by the Shalka and a psychic vampire, Alison asked the Magister to teach her mental self-defense. His introductory lessons involved touring his mind palace, populated by all his past regenerations. They also went into Alison’s mind library, where all her younger selves lived. They truly became acquainted with all of each other, and their closeness strengthened.

“Right. We looked around each other’s minds and met each other’s selves. That Little Witch is so adorable that it should be illegal.” Alison smirks. Her favorite self of the Magister’s, besides the current one, is the rowdy little girl he once was.

“I shall inform her that you think she should be outlawed; her rebellious nature shall be pleased. In any case — ah!” The Magister clasps his hands, but this time at his breast, as he favors her with a grin. “I have watched you change much since then.”

Sitting up, Alison squishes her mouth to the side and frowns. “Hopefully I’ve become the master of my fate and the captain of my soul.” She quotes William Ernest Henley’s Invictus, which her
dad taught her at age six. Its last two lines — *I am the master of my fate. / I am the captain of my soul* — have guided her in the twenty-two years since.

“Do you doubt that you have?” Stopping short, the Magister regards her, his fuckin’ ridiculous brows going down in consternation. “Self-mastery is a lifelong pursuit — *lives* long, in my case — and yet you have definitely made progress. I am very pleased.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel good.”

“Oh no! I am not.” The Magister shakes his head quickly. “I am done with lies these days, for I find that the truth has its own striking power that I may exploit for my own ends. And so I say precisely what I mean. Anything else would be...imprecise.”

And so, precisely speaking, Alison thinks, the Magister adores her. Usually she can deal with that, but, when he comes close to acknowledging it in words, she squirms. What’s so special about her? “Hmmm. Okay. Um, thank you.”

“You are most welcome. —Come then! Aren’t you as eager as I am to visit your mental library? I have witnessed the external effects of the changes that you have undergone recently. But I have not seen them from the inside out, and I am most curious. Shall we go, *mea Domina carissima?*” the Magister asks Alison.

As he takes both of her hands, a purr of excitement comes up under his voice. Gravity loses its hold on all his sharply carved features. His eyes widen, amber sparks lightening the dark brown irises. His long eyebrows dance with a life of their own, progressing higher on that broad, sweeping forehead. His mouth, almost frowning when at rest, stretches and curves, bringing the corners of his mustache up along with it. The point of his goatee shifts, homing in on her like a compass needle. Even his nose, the long, curving centerpiece of his face, flares in anticipation.

Alison smiles up at him. His self-given name is *the Master* [though Alison doesn’t use that name], and he is a robot created by his inevitable spouse the Doctor. He defines his existence by a struggle for control. And yet he has never been able to govern himself. His thoughts and feelings shimmer through his flesh, changing his expression and his posture moment by moment. And she loves that about him.

She loves too the name he has given her. He calls her *mea Domina carissima*, which is *my dearest sovereign* in Latin. And, since they’re both kinky practitioners of BDSM, there’s more than a hint of *dominatrix* in there as well. He chooses to yield to only two people in the universe: his partners, one of whom is the Doctor, the other of whom is Alison.

Alison herself plays games of power with just two people as well. One of them is Bill, the other of whom is the person now holding her hands. “Yeah, let’s, *mi Magistre,*” she says. She has named him, just as he has named her. *Mi Magistre* — that’s the vocative form: *my Magister.* *Magister* is somewhere between *teacher, ruler,* and *dom,* but also the name of her equal, her partner, her friend, someone she trusts with her life.
Alison and the Magister Prepare Their Katabasis

Chapter Summary

Being utter dorks, Alison and the Magister go through an elaborate performance before their mental travel, involving an impromptu etymology lesson, a digression into Greco-Roman mythology, and improvised enchantments. Also Latin -- lots and lots of Latin.

"Then I must sit down," says the Magister. "In your reading corner we may enjoy the sunlight." He crosses the sunny, high-ceilinged square of her room to recline in the chaise longue. He dislodges a sun-shaped throw pillow from under one thigh, then moves a puffy cloud-shaped one to better support his left side.

Watching him arrange himself, Alison remembers something. "Wait! You know how you always have the right outfit for the occasion? Well, I always have to have the right words." She goes to the center of the room, then pivots smoothly to face him. "Ahem."

"You have an incantation, I presume?" The Magister folds his legs up and brings his feet to the floor. He wears a variation on a cassock, long-sleeved and high-collared, severely boned about the bodice, with a golden base and purple pile. He sweeps a fistful of skirts out from under himself and redistributes them.

"Why are you laughing at me? You’re the one that looks like a wizard."

"And you, my dear, are the one that steals my clothes."

"Hmph. I don’t know what you’re talking about. This outfit is totally mine." Alison flips out the end of the broad pointy collar on her linen blouse. With a few tugs, she moves the black flame-painted vest so that its buttons are centered on her chest.

"That’s because I made you those — the shirt and doublet at least — so you would no longer abscond with mine. I doubt you would like a return to my earlier drabness," the Magister remarks. When Alison first met him about three years ago, he wore all black all the time. He looked like the Doctor’s butler or like Professor Panjandrum, antagonist of that 1970s sci-fi schlock Defenders of Earth. As he and Alison grew closer, though, he rediscovered his fashion sense.

"Yeah, no, don’t do that. I’d miss all your cool capes." Alison likes the black velvet one lined with little white skulls the best.

The Magister rises in one easy unfolding and approaches Alison. “So...the right words…” he says, reminding her of her original subject. “With what orotund grandiloquence will you preface our katabasis?” He once wore gloves, but he has discarded them to display the black infrastructure of his unskinned robotic hands. He spreads his hands out expectantly; his glass fingertips, which glow when he feels like it, shine magenta.

“Wow, you obviously ate a thesaurus for breakfast. Orotund grandiloquence I can follow, but what’s a katabasis? Something Greek, obviously.”
“Oh, I should have thought you would know such a delightful word, given your interests in fairy tales, psychology, symbolism, and such. Well…” The Magister’s voice alters subtly, deepening down to the incantatory pitch that he reserves for stories. He walks from one side of the room to the other again. “At its most literal, katabasis is the Ancient Greek word for the movement of an army from the interior to the coast. It is the opposite of anabasis, which is a progression from the shore inland. However, a closer examination of the term will reveal to us its metaphorical connotations. Now — follow me…” Turning toward Alison, the Magister takes a deep breath, about to start another paragraph.

“Follow you down to the water’s edge?” Alison suggests with a smile.

“Your intuition leaps ahead of me, my dear Domina.” He raises his chin in proud acknowledgment. “Indeed, a march from the interior to the sea generally means a decrease in altitude. One moves from the mountain peaks to the lower beaches.

“In the mountains,” the Magister says, “one stands in the clarity of sunshine; one beholds broad vistas.” He sets his feet solidly, one precisely within a white square on the carpet, the other precisely within a black. Bending back at the hips, he sweeps both arms wide over his head, describing an imaginary firmament. “One breathes pure air, sees much, and feels close to enlightenment, perhaps even to the gods.” His voice softens, suggesting awe.

He straightens, reeling himself back in. “By contrast, in the flats of the land, one senses gravity’s pull more strongly. One is closer to the secret bulk of the planet itself, whence all life springs and into which all people sink when they die. And so — “

“Ah hah, I get it!” Alison pops up and down a few times, swinging a few arcs around one of her bedposts. “The movement down becomes a movement inward, like into the earth, which, of course, is the location of the mythological underworld. Facilis descensus Averno and all.” Easy is the descent to Avernus — that’s from Virgil’s Aeneid, when the Cumaean Sibyl is preparing Aeneas for his excursion to the underworld. It’s also the legend on the Magister’s study door, an invitation to the thrills of forbidden knowledge.

With a grave smile under his mustache, the Magister lifts one palm to Alison and gives her an admonition like the teacher he is: “Sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, / Hoc opus, hic labor est.” However, to recall one’s footsteps and escape back into the upper air — well, that’s the hard work. That’s how the Sibyl concludes her warning.

“Right, right.” Alison nods avidly. “So katabasis is that standard trip to the underworld that Odysseus and Aeneas and Persephone and Inanna and so many other people take.”

“Yes! Yes!” The Magister drops his professorial mode. He smiles so fully that his eyes nearly close. He clenches his fists before him, and his fingertips spark yellow. He almost spins for glee, and his skirts turn into a brilliant bloom.

Alison grins. It’s hard not to love someone who experiences such rapture whenever she speaks. “And, because visiting the land of the dead tends to transform you as a person,” she goes on, “it’s easy to equate the descensus Averno with some sort of psychological journey. The inside of the earth becomes like the inside of the mind, where you plunge down in deep and come up changed.”

“Right you are.” The Magister masters his emotions...slightly. He stops dancing, but his eyebrows still jump and curl. “I do sometimes wonder why I should bother to teach you, since you comprehend my lessons before they leave my mouth.”

“Well, you like to hear yourself talk; that’s part of it. But so do I. You talk like you’re casting
spells, but spells that are so wonderful that you yourself are caught up in them. It’s amazing. No wonder you love teaching; you’ve got an audience whenever you hold a class.” Alison chuckles.

“I cannot deny that the role of professor flatters my ego.”

“Oooh!” Alison jumps again. “Speaking of which, I just got the best idea. Lucilla and Juliana should have a katabasis in between all their other adventures.” Since the Magister installed himself as Professor Max Thascalos in the Classics Department at the University of Vermont, Alison has been writing paragraphs for his Latin I and II students to translate. She found all the war vocabulary in her early Latin days incredibly dull, so she tries to rectify that for his students. Her paragraphs follow two feminae brunae, or brown-skinned women, Lucilla and Juliana, in their doomed resistance against Julius Caesar’s invasion of Gaul.

“Marvelous!” The Magister presses his palms together. “And I shall have the department hire you as a curriculum development assistant.”

Their old argument replays. Alison objects. She doesn’t want to work for a member of her chosen family. That would be a conflict of interest. The Magister insists that she should receive fair compensation for her work. He proposes that the department chair hire her to work for all of Classics. Then the chair could employ her, supervise her, and offer the chance for her to work with other professors as her energy and interests warranted.

Alison says that it sounds good, but she’ll have to think about it. “Anyway, that’s a huge tangent. I was going to cast a spell before we wandered off on an etymological katabasis. So. Ahem.” She plants her bare feet firmly on the deeply padded carpet, fidgets with her rather tight vest again, then takes a deep breath. “Here are my words for the occasion. I wrote them just now, after my daily three-hour nap, so I’m not sure if they’re any good, but here it goes: The Spell of Mental Travel.

“My Magister, my partner, my robot, my friend, I invite you inside my head.” She holds her arms out to him as if welcoming him for a hug, but raises her palms to the height of her shoulders in invocation. “Enter my mind library and address my selves. Explain to them the operation that you’re planning to alleviate my TBI symptoms. Give them guidance; give them comfort; give me hope.”

Alison pauses. The Magister, who has been nodding, marking the rhythm of her clauses, now stops. He observes her for a moment. Then he takes one step forward, lips parting, about to speak himself. But Alison’s not done. She walks toward him, reciting a modified final stanza from Invictus:

“Free me from my exhausted state.
Enchant me now — I shall be whole.
Make me the captain of my fate:
I am the master of my soul.”

Now she’s done. The Magister holds her eyes, then nods again, a bow of acquiescence. His attention flicks over to the bed, and Alison can tell that he’s thinking that they should be sitting down. Walking backward, he draws her along, guiding her there, extemporizing his own spell in response.

“Mea Domina, carissima mea, obsequentissima mea, atque amica mea, I accept your invitation.” My Domina, my dearest, my most obedient, and my friend. “I shall do as you say and accompany
you into your mental library,” the Magister promises.

He sits at the head of Alison’s bed, his back bolstered on the pillows. Alison follows, snuggling against his side. The sunset-colored organza falls about them, filtering the daylight, defining an intimate space for them of warmth and coconut smell. As the Magister speaks, Alison closes her eyes, relaxing.

“I shall speak to all of you so that you understand the reasons for the surgery, the anticipated effects, and the results,” he says. “If any of you are distressed, I will calm you. If any of you are doubtful, I will give you confidence. I will do the best for you, all of you, always and forever.”

Then he extemporizes his own spell, a variation on Tam Lin’s advice to Janet:

“Though what I do shall cause thee pain,

Trust me; do not curse the charm.

Hold me fast and fear me not,

And I’ll do thee no harm.”

And they descend within.
Once inside her mind, Alison and the Magister change forms. The Magister is distracted by his devastatingly attractive new shape. :p

Alison’s family used to go on adventures every summer. Alison’s mum worked as an academic administrator at Sheffield Hallam, while her dad struggled to establish his own computer repair business. As a result, they had summers off and an entire season for exploration. They spent every spring at the kitchen table, tracing routes on fold-out maps, bookmarking attractions online. When the summer came, they moved from campground to campground in their caravan, visiting local history museums, used bookshops, little-known ruins, and, mostly importantly for her dad, views.

Only when she went to uni did Alison realize that her family camped because that was all her parents could afford. Like poking through clearance shelves in the charity shops, going on caravan excursions didn’t mean that she was more adventurous than everyone else. It just meant that she was poorer.

When she figured this out, she admired her parents for making ninety-day camping trips exciting. At the same time, she still felt deprived of a trip to an amusement park, Adventure Wonderland in particular. There was an entire park in Dorset devoted to Alice in Wonderland, and, even knowing how much she adored those books, her parents couldn’t be arsed to save up? Unfair.

Anyway, the summer that Alison was fourteen, the family caravan died hours before she and her parents were to leave for their adventure. One of Mum’s friends from work offered them two weeks free at a rental cottage in Peak District to which she was too sick to go. Unsure how much of an adventure she could have within thirty kilometers of her house, Alison brought two satchels of her favorite books, just in case.

The cottage, a rambling stone heap, won her over. It was made of words, from Welcome in carved on the threshold to Watch your head painted on a particularly low beam. Yellowing recipe cards papered the inside of the knotty pine kitchen cabinets. Curling vintage circus posters, advertising beasts and marvels, filled the nursery walls. Slab-like art books in the bathroom had titles like Toilets of the Rich and Famous. Reproduction adverts for bustles and morning jackets lined the closet shelves in the master bedroom. And when Alison entered the living room, it contained so many crammed bookshelves that the walls were built of stories. It was perfect. She decided that she was going to live in a place like this when she grew up.

That was about a decade and a half ago, and her dream has come true. Alison and the Magister now stand in front of her mind library, her mental representation of her imagination, inspired by the Peak District cottage. Her mind library retains the essence of its source material. It has rather more stained glass, conical towers, and spiral staircases, however. Words carved of granite make up the foundation — MASTERY, CLARITY, JOY, CURIOSITY, PRECISION, SECURITY. The letters, thick, close, and squat, support the weight of Alison’s expectations. Books make the frame of the structure: gilded antique encyclopedias of brown leather for the inner and outer walls, open dictionaries for each gable, slender bright folio picture books for inner doors. The theme goes down to the toilet tissue, recycled from pages of the worst books she has ever read.
Alison touches the nearest book, its spine forming part of the lintel to the front door. The gilding flakes against her fingers. The leather, warmed by the sun, feels as soft as petals. But the page block within stands impenetrable, a guardian made of text. She inhales the familiar odor of dusty books. “Ah, it’s good to be home,” she murmurs.

The Magister places one palm against her mind library, as gently as he would touch her face. The breezes dart amongst the jagged rooflines, whistling between loose scalloped shingles. Long rainbow banners snap from lightning rods on the towers. It smells like spring air here, blowing through a cozy, homely attic. “This place has stayed the same,” he says, smiling, “and yet it has changed.” His eyes, so gleeful that they’re golden, rest on her. “As have you, my brilliant, blazing Domina.” Alison makes a confused face at him, so he explains, “You are beaming — literally.”

Stretching her hands out before her, Alison examines them front and back. He’s right. She’s like a warm brown coal with a nimbus of candlelight hovering just centimeters from her flesh. “Oooh!”

“And you are afire,” adds the Magister. “Your hair!”

A few sparks sputter in her peripheral vision, snapping like miniature corn popping. Each strand of her hair now seems to be its own twisted dark brown wick, emitting a heatless, painless light without being consumed. “Wow! And my hair — it’s burning without burning up.”

“From the look of you, you seem now as if you might better comprehend why your Heliantha,” he remarks, referring to Bill by the Latin for sunflower, “calls you Alisonshine.”

Feeling something smooth and heavy slanting across her back, Alison draws her blade, somewhere between a spear and a pen, from its sheath. “And my vorpal sword! You never know when this will come in handy.”

“So then do you now see yourself as I do, as Alison Wonderland?” The Magister’s face crinkles up. He is referring to her form when she’s in his head: a warrior in a blue pinafore dress, armed with a sword — or perhaps an even mightier pen — for slaying Jabberwocks.

“I’ve been Alison Wonderland long before I knew you. I found this key when I was like seven and started pretending.” She fingers the golden key on her narrow leather choker. The heroine of two of her favorite stories — Alice’s Adventures Underground and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There — unlocks phantasmagorical adventures with bravery and aplomb. Alice is a master of her fate if there ever was one and thus one of Alison’s dearest role models. But the key was only symbolic, a tribute to one of her fictional role models, until she and the Magister arranged their peculiar kinky relationship. Now her key opens and closes the padlock on his collar.

“Well, shall we call the council?” The Magister turns for the door.

“Wait!” she cries, getting a good look at him. “Whoa, you’re different too!”

When the Magister came into her head for the very first time, he became as she imagined him: a spiky, kinky wizard, all in black leather like Panjandrum in the modern Defenders of Earth reboot. And when she went into his head the first time, she saw how he viewed himself: as a patchwork mechanical zombie doll with a hole in his chest to expose his burning corroded hearts.

But that was years ago. Now, just as the Magister’s view of Alison has changed, so hers of him has, and so has his form when he appears in her mind. His under-robes shiver between red, silver, and gold like molten rock that has yet to reach its final state. He’s still the kinky wizard, for he wears a leather collar, fastened with a silver padlock at the base of his throat. He needs no defensive spikes, however, when he’s made of night and storm and lava itself.
His very body has altered. His pupils have gone vertical. He has whiskers too, long and white, twitching in the clean cool wind. They spring from his brows, his cheeks, and his chin, making his smirk seem even wider. His ears, now triangular and fuzzy black, stand near the crowd of his head, swiveled in her direction. And he has a tail too, long and plumy, practically wagging at the sight of her. His right ear flicks, then rights itself back to adoring attention. She snickers. “What?” asks the Magister.

“Even your ears are watching me!” Alison puts two pointer fingers on top of her head, cocked up toward him, in illustration.

“My ears?” He raises his eyebrows, as well as his eyebrow whiskers. One of the aforementioned ears turns sideways in puzzlement.

“You didn’t notice?” she says. “You’ve changed too — or, rather, my mental concept of you has. I thought for sure you’d be preening.” Because her imagination creates reality here in her mental realm, she imagines a full-length mirror hanging on the outer wall of her mind library.

The Magister hurries to it. As he accounts for his new features, his tail perks up once more. “But of course!” he cries. “How splendid.” He comes within three centimeters of the glass, apparently counting each of his whiskers.

Alison hugs him around the waist. She really wants to rub his ears, but he might not appreciate that at the moment. “So...you’re not offended?”

The Magister is too absorbed in his reflection to hear. He runs his thumb and forefinger along the outline of his beard. “It’s a stroke of genius, really — a definite improvement.” He straightens his back, his eyes shining, his tail brushing against her back in its excited side-to-side swing. “—Sorry — were you asking me something?”

“I was going to ask if you thought that I made you too, uh, cute, but I think you just answered my question.” With a laugh, Alison knocks on the front door.
Alison and the Magister go into her mind library and say hi to all her other selves. The Magister has an entire fan club of Dominas!

“What goes?” calls a voice within: Clarissima, Alison’s twenty-year-old self. After her abusive ex, Generic White Boy 47 [GWB 47], Alison turned to BDSM for pleasure and control. Alison’s middle name, Clarabella, means bright, beautiful, famous in Latin, so Alison took its superlative form — Clarissima — for her scene name. Clarissima, a cross between Alison’s inner dominatrix and mental guardian, sees everything through a kinky perspective. She also patrols the perimeter of Alison’s mind library very carefully.

“I am Alison Clarabella Cheney, the Magister’s Domina, Bill’s Alisonshine, the Doctor’s companion, and proud member of the Dork fam!” Alison finishes listing her unofficial titles with a flourish.

“Welcome aboard, Captain!” Unlatching the heavy portal and pulling it inward, Clarissima whips off a smart salute. Her hair, in two puffs, one over each ear, is the only soft thing about her. She is slightly scrawny, in black jeans and a black T-shirt that says BULLSHIT with an X through it.

Before Alison can tell Clarissima to be at ease, Clarissima, completely overlooking the Magister, hauls Alison down a short lightless corridor. “You’ll find everything ship-shape, of course,” she says. “Since you were last here, I updated the wards on the subconscious entrances with some spells that I got from the Magister. But I really wish I could ask him — “

At that moment, they emerge into an octagonal atrium. The walnut walls, a door to each, nearly fade into shadow, while a domed skylight forms the entire ceiling. The overhead sunlight provides a stark contrast with the wainscoting. The juxtaposition appeals to Alison’s sense of melodrama.

The Magister too takes advantage of the set. He steps from the darkness of the hall into the well of atrium light, his eyes and his fingertips sparkling, as he executes a bow. “Then your wish is granted,” he proclaims to Clarissima, “for I am the Master, the Domina’s Magister, the Doctor’s inevitable spouse, and Heliantha’s friend.” Of course his robes swirl impressively as he does so. Of course he startles Clarissima. Of course he purrs because he’s the center of attention.

Clarissima grins. “Hail, fellow pervert!” she cries. The Magister has studied, written about, and practiced various kinds of BDSM since before Alison was born, so Clarissima likes to discuss such things with him. She catches sight of his new body parts. “Um, why are you a cat?” she asks. “Is that like your fursona?”

Alison skids on the floor; her trainers emit a high-pitched squeak. She looks down. The inlaid design at her feet describes the path of a spiral labyrinth, with blackish wood for the labyrinth walls and orangish wood for the path. At the center of the maze stands a woman in a chiton with a ball of string in her hand: Ariadne. Alison has just slipped in a puddle by the hem of Ariadne’s skirt.

“Goddammit!” she mutters. “Is the skylight leaking again?” The weather inside Alison’s head
follows her moods. Thus, when she was last here to announce to everyone that she’d acquired a second partner, Bill, a storm of joy, uncertainty, and happy tears battered her mind library. The building leaked a bit, and the smallest Alisons happily sailed toy boats in the puddles, until the older ones reinforced everything.

Alison scrutinizes the skylight. No drips. She frowns at a few white splatters on the curved pane. It would be really nice if the birds in her mind didn’t shit on her library. However, realism takes the least effort, so bird crap it is. She glares at the stains, dissolving them with the power of imagination.

Just then, something knocks against Alison’s foot. She squawks, as do her shoes, and knocks into Errabunda’s mop-bot, a low, round device the size of a dinner plate. Like all Alisons, Errabunda detests housework, but she’s the sort of majordomo, secretary, and coordinator of the mind library, so it’s her responsibility. She delegates maintenances to a series of semi-autonomous appliances.

The mop-bot bounces off Alison’s foot. Leaving a trail of soapy water in its wake, it skates toward the Magister like a large hockey puck. Alison’s robot, curling back his lips, issues a warning hiss. “Control yourself!” he says sharply. Letting out a double bleep of alarm, the mop-bot speeds backward, wiping dry the floor whence it came. Alison giggles.

The octagonal atrium has one door per side: the entry door and then a door for each of the Alisons, including Alison herself. Errabunda appears out of her door, which is covered with a whiteboard, agendas, and to-do lists. Stringently organized and yet lost among all the possibilities of her mid-twenties, she goes by a name that means wandering. With her hair bunned up under a scarf, her shirtsleeves rolled, a pencil behind her ear, and tablet computer in hand, she’s ready for any project. “Hey, Alison! Hey, Magister,” she says, somewhat breathless. “Sorry about the obstacle course. If I’d known we were having company… Let me just take care of — “ Chasing after the mop-bot, she pauses. “Since when does this thing know how to dry?”

“I offered it a very persuasive argument.” The Magister smiles pointily.

“Magister!” Ali C. bursts out of her door, where a sign says Nomen mihi est Alison in careful, nine-year-old cursive. She has a checkered headband, a horizontally striped jumper, brown flowered bellbottom leggings, no fashion sense, no OFF button, and not a care in the world. She’s Alison before inhibitions. “Is the Little Witch here?” Ali C. and the Magister’s kid self, the Little Witch, met in a previous adventure. According to Ali C., they’re bestest friends now.

“Oh obviously not, you goof,” says Errabunda to Ali C., “and I was talking to him before you.” She cocks her head at the improved mop-bot and makes a few notes in her tablet computer.

“And I,” mutters Clarissima to Errabunda, “was talking to him before you.”

Ignoring the older Alisons, Ali C. hangs onto the Magister’s hand, hopping on tiptoes. She begs him to tell her a fairy tale in Latin so she can translate it. Crouching to her level, the Magister holds up one finger before Ali C. and says, “Attende, mea cara. That is the imperative, which is a tense you do not yet know, but perhaps you can guess what it means.”

Sunny, who’s in her mid-teens and ready to take on the world, exits her chambers. The door, marked DO NOT DISTURB, No Entrance, gtfo, and the like, crashes heavily shut behind her. With a pack of books over one shoulder and a laptop tucked under her arm, she dashes past. “Wait, my dear,” she interrupts, offering a translation to the Magister, before Ali C. can speak.

“Hey, Sunny!” Alison calls to her teenage self. “You should take the Magister’s advice yourself.”
“Too much to do! I found another version of The Ballad of Tam Lin for my concordance, and I’ve got some great fairy tale tropes to put in those Latin I readings you’re doing. Oh yeah, and, as for your doll club, you should totally call it Black Dolls Matter and tie it into the BLM movement.” Sunny sails out the door that Alison, the Magister, and Clarissima came in. The door slams, and the skylight vibrates in its frame, as do everyone’s teeth in their heads.

“Yay, Mister Magister’s here!” cries Little Al. She skips from a door covered with glittery stickers of wizards, witches, and unicorns, all pasted as high as a five-year-old’s arms can reach. “This is so much more fun than nap time.” She attaches herself to the Magister’s thigh.

“Salve, mea Dominuculissima.” Hello, my littlest Domina. The Magister picks her up with a swoop and a spin.

“Heeeeeee!” Little Al cries as she flies through the air. When she reaches the Magister’s collarbone, she uses it as a pillow. “Mister Magister…” she repeats contentedly, putting her thumb in her mouth.

Alison laughs. “You do realize it’s an honor, don’t you, when my inner child goes to sleep on you?”

“The profoundest,” the Magister answers with a wink. “Oh…” His nostrils flare as he looks down at Little Al, who’s now sleeping. “The littlest Domina has smeared her nasal output on my robe.” The Magister abhors bodily fluids, which probably contributes to the fact that he’s a sex-repulsed ace. As a robot, he has no secretions, which you’d think would make him happy. But no. He regrets the loss of his tears.

“Fixed it.” Alison imagines Little Al’s snots off the Magister’s robes, and they disappear.

“Here, I’ll take her.” Victa, on the verge of her twenties, appears and extends her arms, into which the Magister gently places Little Al. “Ah, good milord,” she addresses the Magister, bobbing her head, “to what owe we the honor of thy presence? Hast thou some new enchantment to bestow upon us, mayhap?” Her eyes and her cheeks practically glow as she watches him. She’s the self that Alison was when she was with GWB 47: Victa, that is to say, subdued, conquered. The Magister revived her from a Snow White-like coma by giving her one of his hearts. She now tries to cloak her naked hero worship in overdone Shakespearean diction. She’s fooling no one.

“It’s a Council of the Alisons,” Alison supplies.

“My Domina is gathering you all,” explains the Magister, “for she has news of great import in which I am intimately involved. And therefore I attend.”

“A council? Wow!” Errabunda’s eyebrows mount. “Some serious stuff must be going down. I’ll take notes.”

“Sunny!” Clarissima flings back her head and bellows at top volume. “Get your arse back in here! Council time!”

“Shall I look after Little Al and Ali C.?” Victa offers.

“No.” Ali C. crosses her arms. “I’m almost ten, and everyone says I’m very mature for my age.” Little Al, woken up by Clarissima’s yell, glares at Victa. “I’m not a baby. I’m a big girl, and I don’t need to be babysat.”

“I want everyone here,” declares Alison. “This concerns all of us, so we’ll make sure,” she says,
glancing at the Magister, “to pitch our explanation so that everyone can understand.”

An exaggerated sigh announces Sunny’s re-entry. “Is this gonna be a while?” She jigs from foot to foot. “I was on a roll, and now I’m gonna lose my inspiration.”

“Stuff it,” snaps Clarissima, who becomes rude when she’s impatient. “The more you interrupt, the longer it’s going to take.”

Alison rolls her eyes and whispers to the Magister, “Do you ever get a headache from all the bickering?”

“That is the chiefest drawback to personifying and conversing with one’s selves,” the Magister acknowledges with a rueful smirk. “—They never shut up.”
Alison and the Magister try to tell the other Alisons about her upcoming brain surgery. It doesn't go well. Everyone reacts with alarm with the subject of Harry comes up, and the whole thing ends with a death threat.

Alison and the Magister usher all the Alisons into the dining room for the council. The round table where they sit is made of labeled pictures of food as from an alphabet book. Stained glass cornucopia windows provide multicolored light. Everyone has their own favorite chair, and, speaking of favorites, the smell always lingers here of Alison’s current favorite food. Right now it’s roasted intergalactic root vegetables as prepared by the Magister, a dark and garlicky smell.

Alison, in a wheeled and webbed office chair like she currently has in her doll studio, scoots her chair closer to the table. *S is for SUSTENANCE,* says her placemat picture, showing the entire Dork fam talking and laughing over tea and biscuits. Bringing the savory air into her lungs, she begins: “So...the reason we’re all here today — “

“Is it Bill?” interrupts Victa. The wickerwork of her chair weaves flowing calligraphic spirals. “I knew it. We’re going to get married, aren’t we? How romantic!” The picture at her place, *D is for DESSERT,* changes from a birthday cake with candles to a tiered wedding cake.

Sunny, who perches on the edge of a bar stool, looks away from her placemat picture. It shows a can of nutrient-fortified chocolate shake for people, like her, who are much too efficient for actual meals. Her scowl at being drawn away from her work disappears into a huge smile when Bill’s name comes up. “Hey, if you’re getting married, why isn’t she here?”

“I wanna meet Bill of my heart!” Little Al bounces in her chair, boosted up by a thesaurus under her rear. *Bill of my heart is* Alison’s nickname for Bill, who has apparently already won the other Alisons’ hearts as well. In Little Al’s food picture — *A is for ANIMAL CRACKERS* — the seal-and dolphin-shaped biscuits flip excitedly.

“Have you been inside Bill’s mind library yet?” Clarissima asks. *K is for KEBAB,* announces her illustration, though the drawing looks less like a skewer of vegetables and more like GWB 47’s head on a pike. “No...wait...I bet she doesn’t even have a mind library. I bet she has a mind rocket ship, and it looks as cool as her wheelchair.” She sits up straighter in her imitation leather chair, which is as sleek and dark and powerful as she wishes she was.

“I bet she tells space fairy tales,” Ali C. says with a happy sigh, sliding down in her chair, which is engraved in Roman capitals: *SELLA MEA,* or *my seat.* Her picture of alphabet soup rearranges its noodle letters to spell *BILL THE BESTEST.* “I bet she’s amazing.”

“Oh, she’s way more than that,” interrupts Errabunda. Her placemat, *SNACKS,* features granola, crisps, and dried fruit into labeled bulk containers. She presses a button on her recliner arm. The chair elevates and swivels toward Ali C. Errabunda’s kitted-out recliner does everything except for washing the dishes. “You should see some of the memories of her that I file. She’s like a sunflower. She’s strong and tough with orangey brown skin just the color of sunflower petals. And you know how sunflowers reach up toward the sun and sort of nod forward at the same time?
Well, that’s her, all full of eagerness and discovery, looking forward to every new day. She — “

The Magister, in a heavy chair of red leather nailed to the wooden frame, bends forward. His illustration — *M is for MASTER CHEF* — shows him in his kitchen, sampling from a stew pot. “Yes, yes,” he says, his eyes wrinkling up as he smiles, “your inevitable spouse is indeed a marvelous and brilliant person, but she is not the reason for our visit. Please listen!” Once the other Alisons quiet down, he turns to Alison. “Domina?”

“Thank you, *mi Magistre.*” Alison tries again. “So, just as a reminder, about two and a half years ago, the Magister, the Doctor, and I ran into a psychic vampire. When it was trying to suck out my thoughts, it picked me up and dropped me. I got a concussion — a traumatic brain injury — a TBI. Since then, I’ve had all sorts of symptoms. I need three-hour naps every day. I get tired and dizzy really easily. I have trouble concentrating. Having emotions makes me tired.” She closes her eyes momentarily. “Basically my brain is broken.”

“We’re not broken!” says Ali C. “*Broken* sounds bad, but we’re like Bill. She’s part robot, but you don’t call her *broken.*” Her alphabet soup provides an alternative term: *DISABLED.*

*Broken* sounds bad because it is bad,” Sunny mutters. She springs to her feet, and a brown shadow from one of the cornucopia windows darkens her eyes. “And we shouldn’t even have to put up with this!” She rounds on Alison.

Alison sighs. “C’mon, Sunny. We’ve talked about this multiple times. I have a disability now, and I can’t just wish it away.” The rich roasting smell in the air starts to scorch with her irritation.

“Yes, you can! The Doctor told you themself right after your brain broke that they could fix us; they could make us good as new.”

Clarissima rises as well, clenching her fists. She tells Sunny to sit the fuck down, shut the fuck up, and pay attention. Victa chides Clarissima for swearing in front of the little Alisons. Ali C. and Little Al promptly pipe up that they aren’t little.

Sunny forges ahead anyway. “And, even if you don’t want to let the Doctor in your head,” she says to Alison, “we all know that the Magister could help us. He’d do anything for us! Right, Magister?” She turns to him.

The Magister, narrowing his eyes at Sunny, sits quite still. Only the tip of his tail twitches. While he has the greatest patience for most of the Alisons, Sunny irritates him the most because she has trouble listening to Alison and she will not submit to him. “No,” he replies quietly, “I would never do such a thing. *Tace, Domina.*” That’s his and Alison’s safeword: *be quiet* or even *shut up,* depending on context. Whenever one uses it with the other, they must stop what they are doing and pay attention.

Sunny flops back down in her chair and crosses her arms. “Don’t order me around, you self-aggrandizing shit.”

Alison and the others glance between the Magister on one side of the table and Sunny on the other. Little Al imagines the animal crackers into real food and crunches them down. She and Ali C. pass a glass of juice between them, slurping loudly from two straws. A microwave dings, and Clarissima produces an inflated envelope of popcorn from somewhere in her recliner. She offers it around as if they’re in a theatre waiting for the show to start. With the exception of Victa, who clutches the arms of her wicker chair tensely, the Alisons just love a good old-fashioned battle of wits.
The smallest Alisons, Little Al and Ali C., regard the Magister as a grown-up and therefore an authority. The older Alisons, Victa, Clarissima, Errabunda, and Alison herself, recognize that the authority goes both ways between her and the Magister, and they like it. Sunny, who no longer sees adults as infallible, but has yet to fathom the joys of BDSM power plays, does not. In other words, six of seven Alisons wait curiously to see how the Magister talks Sunny into submission.

“And I’m not your Domina,” Sunny tells the Magister belatedly.

The Magister says nothing for a bit. He pulls in his wooden throne, scraping it a bit on the floor, then interlaces his fingers on the table before him. “Oh, but you are,” he says to her, his voice well lubricated with smugness. As he moves forward, he crosses a patch of yellow light from one of the stained glass windows, and it makes his eyes sparkle dangerously. “And I am your Magister, so when will you learn to be my good Domina and obey me?”

“Are you trying to channel Panjandrum? Like your stupid evil goatee is going to intimidate me.” Sunny sneers so hard that she nearly sticks her tongue out. Victa and Errabunda, who know that Panjandrum is in fact one of the Magister’s style icons, share a covert giggle. “Why don’t you try stalking around me and glaring?”

“Certainly.” The Magister stands and does as she suggests. Ali C. and Little Al, taking one look at him, nervously abandon their chairs for Victa’s lap.

Clarissima and Errabunda follow the Magister’s course with avid stares. “Wow…” says Clarissima under her breath. Alison swears that she can see stars in her eyes, while Errabunda’s gaze is one of remoter academic interest. Alison, helping herself to some of Little Al’s animal crackers, just watches everyone watching the Magister.

“Tsk! You’re a very disobedient child.” The Magister wags his finger at Sunny. “There are consequences, you know, for insubordination as provoking as yours.” The provocation is all his; he’s playing exactly the role that Sunny expects of him, though Alison remains uncertain why he’s deliberately pissing Sunny off.

Sunny spins around on the seat of her stool as he paces past her. “Well, get used to it. Maybe you used to be an evil supervillain, but not here, not now, not anymore. You can’t control me with your psychic powers and force me to like you. You’re the Magister now, which means that you do whatever Alison wants. The contract says so.” During her first few days with the Doctor and the Magister, Alison drew up codes of conduct — respect, kindness, honesty, gentleness, explicit communication, acknowledgment of each other’s limits — which they all signed.

“The contract,” repeats the Magister, lifting his chin. He sits down. “And now you understand why I will never do as you demand and perform a psychic fix,” he says with sarcastic emphasis, “on my Domina’s mind. She has twice suffered mental invasion, once from the Shalka and once from a psychic vampire. She mistrusts mental manipulation by means of psychic powers, and therefore I respect her proscription on their use. I will never alter my Domina’s mind without permission. I do not have that permission.”

Alison sees what he’s driving at. “And that right there,” she says to Sunny, “is the reason that he’s not going to magically fix my broken brain. That would mean him using his psychic powers, and I...I don’t want him to.” After a moment’s pause, she adds brightly, “But that brings me around to the actual subject for this Council. There is a way to deal with some of my TBI symptoms that doesn’t involve psychic intervention. And the Magister’s willing to help! Do you want to explain, mi Magistre?”

He doesn’t hear. Head to head with Victa, he assures her and the little Alisons that he is not angry.
at them. The little Alisons, relieved, go back to their seats and continue to snack. Clarissima curls up in her slick black chair and has a vindictive chuckle to herself over Sunny’s chastisement. Errabunda tilts back her neck and the popcorn bag, pouring the remaining kernels into her mouth. As for Sunny, she finally obeys the Magister’s *tace*, but only because she’s trying to incinerate him through the strength of her glare. No one is paying attention.

Alison sticks one pointer finger in either corner of her mouth and gives a two-note piercing whistle. It once froze rowdy patrons when she worked at the Volunteer. Now the sound causes the Magister and the rest of the Alisons to stop and turn to her. “Everyone! I have some good news to report. What I was trying to say before some of us,” she says, eyeballing Sunny, “got distracted is that the Magister will help me with my symptoms. It’s just that he won’t use his psychic powers. He’s going to do brain surgery — “ The other Alisons bombard her with questions and exclamations, and Alison can’t even hear herself think. She does a facepalm; the sparks from her hair pop rapidly in annoyance, while her glow turns into a more glaring light.

The Magister intervenes, calling *tace* again. Alison, starting over, informs her other selves that they should save questions for the end. Anyone who interrupts will be thrown out. Does everyone understand? The six other Alisons nod in silence.

Alison resumes her story. One of the worst symptoms of her TBI is her need for naps. She needs at least one of at least two hours around the middle of the day. The Magister can’t remove her naps, since she needs that sleep. However, he can move her midday naps to the end of the day so that she takes all her sleep in one stint. In effect, he will alter her circadian rhythms.

The Magister will change Alison’s sleep/wake cycles with the use of modified Cyber tech. When used as a device for subordinating people, Cyber tech has two components. One is emotional suppression, which occurs through software running off a nanochip implanted in someone’s brain. The other component, mental conditioning and enforced physical obedience, occurs when someone is placed in a comatose state and jacked into Cyber broadcasts. The Magister is going to work with the first — a nano-implant with custom programming.

At this point, Little Al raises her hand and announces that she has to go potty. Everyone adjourns for a bathroom break, then resumes their places around the council table. Victa not-so-subtly draws her wicker chair closer to the Magister so she can admire him. Errabunda extends the foot rest of her recliner like she’s settling in to watch a movie. Clarissima, in her capacious leather seat, mimics Errabunda’s posture. Sunny fires up her laptop, ready to take notes. Little Al is sorting her biscuits by type of animal. Ali C., her chin propped by both fists, appears dangerously tired and/or bored. Alison decides to keep an eye on her.

Being a cook, the Magister explains the science behind the implant with a culinary metaphor. Light and dark are the raw ingredients, sampled and recorded by melanopsin, a light-sensitive pigment, in the ganglion cell clusters of the eyeballs. The information about the raw ingredients moves to the suprachiasmatic nuclei in the hypothalamus of the brain. The suprachiasmatic nuclei then reverse-engineer a recipe so that the human’s internal circadian rhythms correspond with the light/dark cycle outside. Following this recipe, the pineal gland cooks up the appropriate batches of melatonin, which are distributed throughout the body. Now all bodily systems are running on the same recipe.

To reset Alison’s circadian rhythms, the Magister will install a nanochip in her brain. On this is a program that will feed altered data about light and dark to her suprachiasmatic nuclei. The suprachiasmatic nuclei will use this new data to trigger the pineal gland’s production of melatonin appropriate to her new sleep/wake cycle. This, he and she hope, will get rid of her midday naps and supply her with more energy.
Alison casts a glance around the table. Little Al sleeps with her cheek on her placemat. Sunny’s notes have nothing to do with brain surgery and everything to do with how hot Bill is. Alison rolls her eyes as the sparks from her hair snap with increasing energy. “Ahem!” She clears her throat. “Does anyone have any questions?”

“Um, yeah...Cyber tech isn’t the same as cyberspace and Internet connections, right?” asks Victa. “The Internet can’t regulate people’s circadian rhythms.”

“Indeed, you are correct, Domina.” The Magister leans toward Victa, nodding. She ducks her head, pleased with his attention. “Cyber technology does not originate on Earth. I got these ideas from the Master.” The other Alisons ask if that means him. No, he says; this Master is his counterpart from another universe, whose work with Cyber conversion technology gave him this idea.

Everyone is still confused. “The Magister,” Alison breaks in, “got the idea for my surgery from experiments that Harry did in modifying Cyber tech.”

The council halts. Everyone knows that Harry tried to read Alison’s mind without her consent. Errabunda scrunches her face like she’s just stepped in shit. Clarissima grits her teeth and hisses through them, sounding like the Magister. The kebab in her picture becomes a lance pinning Harry’s gory corpse to the ground. Ali C. wakes up suddenly, crosses her arms, and slides down in her seat defensively. Sunny pantomimes violent retching. Victa gasps so suddenly that she starts coughing. Little Al’s eyes grow bigger as her elephant biscuits form a defensive ring around smaller, more vulnerable biscuits. True to their promise, however, none of the Alisons interrupt.

Seeing their fear, the Magister says that his counterpart will not be involved with his Domina’s brain surgery. He only provided inspiration for the Magister’s repurposing of Cyber tech. He will not be interfering directly in any way whatsoever. If he did, the Magister would personally ensure that his Domina was safe from him.

“But...good milord...methinks something is amiss here.” Victa’s voice, which has been hearty ever since the Magister revivified her, becomes indistinct. “This Cyber tech,” she says, reverting to modern diction, “is made for power and pain. And you’re taking your idea from a villain, someone who’s as evil as you used to be. I just don’t want to be open to control...to...to him.” She twists her hands, one within the other, securing herself against invasion. “That suppression, that subsumption to another’s will — that’s what killed me.” Her tense hands slide jerkily over and around each other. She fixes her eyes on them as her illustrated cake dissolves into dust motes.

“Domina...” The Magister reaches for her.

“I don’t want to die again.” With those words, Victa raises her head, her eyes alight with tears. “I won’t die again! You’re supposed to be our protector.

“Know this then, good milord,” she says, her voice somewhere between a sob and a snarl. “If you let mine Alison come again to grief, I swear that I shall slay thee, as sure as thy heart beats in my chest!”
The Doctor Catastrophizes

Chapter Summary

The Council of the Alisons breaks up. Alison, embarrassed, avoids the Magister and heads over to London to see the Doctor and Bill. The Doctor gives her some advice. Featuring a minor appearance by some Weeping Angels.

Victa’s ferocity breaks up the council. Alison can’t retain the mental concentration needed to stay in her mind library. So, with a nauseating internal swoop, they end up in outer reality once more. Even though he has enough self-discipline to stay in Alison’s mind without her, the Magister follows her. They’re on Alison’s bed again.

Though one of his Dominas just threatened him with death, the Magister has no anger. Instead, he curls his body around Alison’s. Obviously she’s terrified, he says. They should talk about why. He’ll hold her fast and reassure her. He head-butts her and purrs, as if the fears will have no power over her once he marks her as belonging to him.

Alison can’t stand it. She told him she’d kill him, and his response is to cover her with love. Squirming away from him, she says, truthfully enough, that Victa’s rage used up most of her energy. She doesn’t have it in her to analyze her feelings right now. Besides, she’s visiting Bill later in the day, so she needs her rest. For a moment, the Magister looks like he’s going to sink his claws into her mattress and remain with her at all costs, but reluctantly he withdraws. Alison enfolds herself in her duvet and the lingering scent of coconut oil, relaxing into dreams about Bill of her heart.

An hour and a half later, Alison wakes up, free of both headaches and embarrassment. A text awaits her from Bill. Just finishing your surprise okay?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!? You might have to wait a bit. See you soon Alisonshine!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Her message closes with a rainbow of heart emojis: single, double, sparkling, beating, emanating from the eyes of a smiley face, shooting like stars. “Bill of my heart,” Alison whispers, smiling.

The other message is from the Doctor. Come early! I have something to show you. A volcano, a mushroom cloud, and someone’s head detonating in disbelief complete the broadcast. “Well, whatever it is,” Alison remarks to herself, “it’s obviously mind-blowing.”

She goes to London an hour early, partly to avoid talking to the Magister and partly to satisfy her own curiosity. While Alison, the Magister, and Scintilla live in Burlington, Vermont in the States, Bill, the Doctor, and Anima [the Doctor’s TARDIS] live across the pond. After the Master spent much of his robotification unwillingly restricted to the corridors of Anima, he and the Doctor sustain their relationship with separate houses. Alison doesn’t mind living apart from Bill, since they can close the distance instantaneously with help from the Dork family TARDISes. The time changes are still disorienting, though. It’s weird to leave Burlington at lunch hour, then arrive in London at dinner time.

Going from early afternoon to early evening in the space of a few minutes, thanks to Scintilla, Alison enters Anima and asks where the Doctor is. Anima directs her toward the Cemetery of the Lost. Alison descends spiral staircases into the cool depths of the ship. She reaches a mass of metal rosebushes, with stems of verdigris and blooms of dark red rust.
Black or white marble statues of people are entwined in the thorns, their forms peaceful. They’re not particularly frightening. Nevertheless, because statues are life-size and the smell of the rusted roses similar to that of blood, Alison shivers. The Magister, with all his skulls and wizardly gear, is playful and self-mocking in his morbidity, whereas the Doctor’s fascination with the macabre is grave and disturbingly beautiful.

Exiting the rose maze, Alison walks into the Cemetery of the Lost itself. Two marble angels, one red and one grey, kneel, grieving. They huddle before a gleaming black wall of niches containing urns, statuettes, and other monuments. Alison has seen this space quiet and still, a fastness where the Doctor reflects on all those people, even enemies, that they could not save. It’s where she and Bill held a funeral for Deedee, their favorite character from Defenders, who suffered a pointless, evil death. But now the Cemetery of the Lost fills with sound and motion, all generated by the Doctor.

The Doctor, gawky and long-leggedly like a cranefly, brainstorms aloud. Fine grey hair flutters back from their high forehead. A flower-stitched dressing gown flaps around their knobby legs as they bound from one side of the room to the other. “The Olmec portrait heads, obviously, and the moai of Rapa Nui,” they say, spinning and unspinning their watch chain around their wrist until they whack themself in the jutting cheekbone. “And the Winged Victory of Samothrace, though I’d go back and show everyone what she looks like with her head and arms. Fwhoosh!” They pretend to glide in for a landing, then stumble and crumple on the grey angel’s plinth. “Sorry, Patience,” they say.

Hopping to their feet, the Doctor grabs a clipboard and fountain pen from one of the niches and starts scribbling. “And then the Sphinx of Khafre, and — oh! Oh! Oh!” Inspired, they flap their hands. Ink splatters their Edwardian dress shirt, now permanently greenish from grass stains. “Those marvelous Kwakiutl welcome poles — if only I could remember when I saw them. But what else? C’mon, you two!” More flapping, followed by an entreatying look at the angels.

“Doctor! Are you practicing a presentation or something?” Alison calls.

“Oh hello, Alison!” The Doctor, chomping on their pen, waves at her with both hands. Their sleeves bear old ink stains, now faded to a soft, clear blue like their eyes. “I was actually just telling Patience and Verity here,” they say, nodding first at the grey angel, then the red, “about the next trip I have planned. We’re gonna see all the coolest statues on the planet!” Besides Bill, thirty other refugees followed the Dorks home from Dystopiaville. The Doctor has been showing them the highlights of their new universe. “They’re not being very helpful, though,” continues the Doctor, folding their arms and sticking out their tongue at the reddish angel.

“Statues tend not to be, I’ve noticed.” Alison sidesteps to avoid being splotched as the Doctor tucks their leaky pen behind their ear.

“Oh no, Patience and Verity aren’t statues,” the Doctor corrects her. “They’re my friends — Weeping Angels. Usually their kind goes lurking around, looking like artworks and feeding off the potential time energy of humans by zapping them back in time. But Patience and Verity are different. I saved them from decay, so we got to talking. They had never heard of vegetarianism, so I told them all about it, and they decided to do something similar and become griefatarians. Grief is full of potential energy, since it’s all about regrets, what should have been, and unlived possibilities. So they draw off my excess melancholy, which means that they have something to eat and I have more reason to smile, so everyone’s happy.” They do jazz hands and a little soft-shoe in illustration.

“I’ve got an idea, Doctor,” says a voice, slow and magmic. “Why don’t you take your tour group to
the Terracotta Army? We’ve got cousins there who could tell you all about its construction. And then maybe, for once in sixty-eight years, I’d have enough quiet so I could catch up on my sleep!” Startled, Alison swings toward Patience, the greyish angel, who’s no longer face down with grief. She’s frozen in a new position. Her fang-filled mouth open in a yawn, she glares sideways and sleepily at the Doctor.

“Brilliant!” The Doctor pirouettes, applauding. “Wonderful suggestion, Patience! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” They go on effusively for a few minutes, then address Alison: “Erm, why are you here?”

Alison reminds them that they asked her to come early, then suggests that they go someplace less noisy. The Doctor points out that this is the quietest place within Anima’s walls, with the exception of their gardens and greenhouses known as the jungle. However, Alison previously found all the smells and colors there too loud, so the Doctor now meets her in a place with fewer of both. Alison doesn’t want to disturb the Angels’ rest, so she and the Doctor go back into the iron rose maze.

Sneezing on the smell of rust heavy in the air, Alison says, “So what did you want to talk to me about?” She and the Doctor now sit on a semicircular bench near the edge of the roses. There’s one of those disquieting statues in Alison’s peripheral vision: a supine person with a tree growing out of their heart. She turns so that she doesn’t have to see it.

“Oh! Yes! —Catastrophes. You know — accidentally start a war that threatens all of time and space… Watch your best enemy sacrifice his life for yours, but he couldn’t save your companion, so...eh.” With a shrug of defeat, the Doctor droops forward, their voice diminishing along with their posture. Light from electrified torches falls from sconces overhead, casting bladed shadows across the Doctor’s features. “Wither down — shrivel like a bad nut — forget how to bloom.


“But...the thorns, though… They’re...you know…” The Doctor hugs themself about the shoulders and hunkers down. Alison thinks of the iron roses’ shadows sinking into them, binding to them, keeping them together. “You need them, or else it all comes back: memories, feelings, weeds, invasive exotics — too much, too much, too much!” Their hands flail in front of their eyes again and again to clear the air. Then, abruptly, they calm. “Better to have the thorns.

“And then there are two people, and they change everything. One of them chooses your Master, and the other chooses you. And then everything breaks wide open and — oh!” the Doctor cries out, prickling up their head. “Planted in my hearts, Alison!” they say, almost as if asking for help. “Too much, you said, you know, of my jungle — too much to feel — but still — “ They shake their head, disbeliefing. “Planted — growing — here!” With one fist, they strike against their chest. “You and my dear Bill and my Master — my field, my forest, my flowers. My family.” With each word, they curl down around their hands, cupped at their chest, but they’re no longer defending themself with thorns. Instead they seem to hold a seedling within them that they will protect with their very life.

Alison holds her peace for a minute. That’s not a catastrophe, she thinks, not all of it, at least. That’s the Doctor’s life…and love. The Dork family: planted in the Doctor’s hearts. The image brings her a smile, and she’s not sure how to respond.

While she’s puzzling over what to say next, the Doctor apologizes for telling about their catastrophes instead of asking about hers. “But there’s a reason I told you about all my worst fears,” they say, leaning forward, hands bunched up by their chest. “At first I was too scared to imagine them, but then I did. I took them seriously and planned what I would do if they ever
happened, even if I didn’t think they would. So then, when I started a war, nearly destroyed the universe, lost my dear companion, saw my Master die, then I knew what to do. I had rehearsed it already. And here I am, still muddling through.

“My dear Alison,” says the Doctor, their eyes shining earnestly in the torchlight, “tell me your worst catastrophes. My Master said that you said that you would kill him if he fails you. So tell me what you’re most afraid of, and maybe I can help you into a muddle too!”

Ah, so that’s what this is about. She wouldn’t let the Magister reassure her, so now he has delegated this responsibility to his inevitable spouse. Oh, robot of mine, Alison thinks with a little smile, always looking after me, even if I say he doesn’t have to.

Rearranging her butt on the chilly stone bench, Alison studiously ignores the tree-pierced statue just out of sight. She gazes instead at the Doctor. Of all the White people she’s seen, the Doctor is one of the whitest, almost alarming in their wan gauntness. But their pale eyes are as soft and welcoming as old flowers. She’s not as close to the Doctor as she is to her robot, but she has no compunction about disclosing her mind to them.

“I’m afraid,” she begins eventually in a low voice, “that somehow the chip will give him a door into my mind. He’ll settle in, make himself at home there, and...possess me.” The cold of the air impinges on her flesh, and she shudders. “He’ll make me in his image; I’ll become like him; I’ll be... I’ll be his, and I’ll change. It would be like being bugged by a Shalka all over again.”

“Oh no. Oh dear!” The Doctor gasps so dramatically that they cough a few times. “But that’s already happened. You belong to him and him to you because that’s part of your agreement. I thought you loved being the Magister’s Domina; I know he loves being your robot. If you’re not happy, then please — you have to tell my Master that! He wouldn’t do it if he knew you felt that way about it.” They’re flapping their hands again, but now in distress.

“No no, not my robot!” Alison cuts in. “I mean — I’m afraid that the chip will somehow give Harry a way in — Harry, not my robot.”

“Oh! The other Master.” The Doctor heaves a sigh of relief. “The Master of Misery,” they muse, stroking their chin, “the one who thinks he has nothing, so he hates everything. Well, except for my dear Bill. He’s always loved her. It takes a serious amount of grrrrrgh — “ Here the Doctor creases their face in an expression close to vomiting. “—To hate cultivating people and nurturing and making them grow. It must scare him.”

Alison turns the Doctor’s words in her mind. Harry may be miserable, but he does good now. When she last checked, he was ruling Dystopiaville autocratically like his predecessor. But his reforms all promoted human rights and dignity. He created municipally sponsored health care, universal basic income, affordable housing, and measures to integrate formerly Cyber converted people into society. He runs Dystopiaville as a city where all citizens can cultivate dignity, nurture respect, and grow in peace. He even loves Bill. He evinces some strategic compassion and selective empathy. None of these traits make him a friend, but he’s no longer a threat, as he was when she first crossed his path.

With a deep breath, Alison pulls rust-smelling air into her lungs and gathers some resolve. “I just realized something. Harry’s never going to crawl inside my head and control me that way. You know why? —’Cause I’m the ruler of the universe,” she says, picking up on one of Harry’s sarcastic nicknames for her, “and he’s going to obey me. I told him back in Dystopiaville that, if he ever came here, he had to be respectful or I would banish him. He’s too scared of me to disobey. Besides, however much of a fuck-up he is otherwise, he really cares about Bill. He knows that manipulating me would upset her, so he won’t do it.”
“Yeah!” The Doctor nods encouragingly. Anima must be listening to this conversation, as the torches brighten around them. “And this is why you should take your catastrophes seriously. You might realize that what you’re most scared of will never happen like you expect. You already have defenses against the Master’s manipulations.”

Alison frowns. “I’ve been wasting too much time, worrying about him. But he’s not coming anywhere close to my universe. First of all, he’s over there in the one next door, ruling Dystopiaville. He’s too busy to leave. Besides, he’s stuck there without a TARDIS. He doesn’t have a way to come over here anyway.”

“Alison,” says the Doctor with a chuckle, “never underestimate the Master. No matter which universe they’re from, they can accomplish the most improbable things if sufficiently motivated. Mine made the Earth rotate backward once with just a lighthouse, two wombats, and a tin of potted meat.”

“Hah! I thought you were trying to cheer me up, though, not make me worry about what Harry might do if he got his hands on some wombats.”

“No, I was just bettering your mettle so you wouldn’t have a muddle. Is your mettle unbefuddled? Or do you need a cuddle?” says the Doctor, holding out their arms.

Despite all the hugging amongst members of the Dork fam, Alison and the Doctor don’t touch each other much. The Doctor becomes self-conscious, and their unreliable proprioception worsens, so it’s like being jabbed with a bunch of coat hangers. By unspoken agreement, Alison and the Doctor reserve hugs for momentous occasions. This offer of a casual touch is something new.

“Awww, Doctor,” Alison says, breaking out into a grin. She puts her arms around their narrow waist and tightens her grip like a belt. She leans against the Doctor’s chest. The top of her skull barely reaches the bottom of their curved-in sternum.

As she rubs her cheek against their linen shirt and relaxes into them, the Doctor twitches. They square their shoulders, tuck in a shirttail, cough, brush a lock of hair from their forehead. Where the Magister imparts tranquility to Alison through the silence of his body, the Doctor’s touch imparts fidgetiness. But their devotion is the same: an all-encompassing care and protectiveness. Warming in the Doctor’s arms, Alison is now less affected by the low temperature of the air around them.

Alison used to think that the Doctor didn’t touch her because they didn’t love her as much as Bill. But she now recognizes that the Doctor thought that she wouldn’t accept their kind of love. And, now that the Doctor has mustered their mettle, Alison does understand. Though the Doctor is as sharp and strong as the oxidized roses encircling them, Alison is safe in their arms like one of the roses’ statues. Like the Magister and like Bill, the Doctor holds her fast.
The Lonely Little Comet

Chapter Summary

This is the story of how a lonely little comet found her star family, escaped from a black hole, and became a star herself.

Once upon a time there was a little comet who desperately wanted to be part of a star family. She went throughout the universe, looking for a star system to join so that she could have light and warmth. But she was kind of eccentric in her orbit, so, when she passed by stars, they didn’t draw her in. So the little comet was lonely, and her heart was made of ice, and it hurt.

The little comet traveled all across her universe in her search for a star family, but it seemed like all the stars already belonged to systems and they didn’t have any room for her. The little comet thought that she might never find a star system. Maybe she would wander in her erratic orbit for her entire life. Maybe no one would reach out and hold her fast.

The little comet lost hope. She felt colder than ever. Her sadness turned into despair, and she drifted toward a black hole. She didn’t want to give in to the black hole, but its gravitational field was too strong; she was trapped in its orbit. It ate all the light around her, and it started to eat away at her too.

While the little comet teetered on the edge of the black hole, she met another comet, who was brilliant, but very prickly. He said that he didn’t believe in star systems, light, warmth, or holding fast, but he understood why the little comet did. He didn’t want the little comet to be destroyed by the black hole, so he helped her. With the prickly comet’s help, the little comet sent a distress call, trying one final time to find her star family.

Suddenly a new star system appeared in the little comet’s universe! It was made of three stars. Two of the stars were very old, and they had been together their whole lives. One of them was always sparkling and glittering, and they beamed on everything in the universe with kindness. The other one was fiercer and frankly a little scary, but he protected everyone that he held in his gravitational field very carefully.

At the center of the new star system was a young star. She was so hot and bright that the little comet couldn’t look away. The young star had all the welcoming light of the glittery star, but she also burned with the intensity of the fierce star. She was strong enough to hold the two old powerful stars fast, but she was also gentle.

The young star explained to the little comet that she and the two older stars had heard the little comet’s distress call. They had come to help the little comet, the prickly comet, and everyone else caught in the orbit of the black hole. The young star and the two older stars could bring the little comet out of the black hole, but they could not do it themselves. They needed the little comet to join their star system.

The little comet was scared. She thought that she was small and insignificant. She could never be as bright as the young star and the two older stars. She thought that she was powerless. She could never be as strong as they were, certainly not strong enough to win a fight against a black hole.
But the young star opened up to the little comet and turned all of her brilliance on her. The young star said that she too used to be a lonely comet who felt sad, dull, and cold. But then the two old and powerful stars shone on her, the fierce protective one especially. They held her fast in their gravitational field and warmed her up with their light. Then she became a star like them, and everything was bright and beautiful.

The young star said that she had never met anyone as warm and strong and full of light as the little comet. The little comet didn’t believe her. But the young star pointed out that the little comet’s light was so brilliant that it called to her, even though the young star was an entire universe away.

The young star added that she knew that the little comet could be even warmer and more brilliant. If the little comet was brave enough to enter the young star’s system, then the warmth and light from the young star and the two older stars would thaw the little comet.

Then the little comet wasn’t scared anymore, not when she felt the glow of the young star’s light. The young star, the glittery star, and the fierce star reached out for the little comet. The little comet reached out for them. The three stars brought the little comet into their star family. They held her fast.

The little comet changed. The sad lonely ice at her core melt and burst. She cried because it hurt, but it was a wonderful pain. As the three stars shared their light with her, she shone more brightly than she ever had. Their warmth became hers, and so she grew. She became strong enough to hold the stars as closely as they held her. Finally the little comet became a new star herself.

Now that she was a star with the warmth and brilliance of a star family about her, the new star had enough power to pull free of the black hole. And she didn’t just rescue herself. She also rescued the prickly comet and many other comets caught in the black hole’s orbit.

Then the newly formed star system [they called themselves the Dork family] traveled together across the multiverse, helping comets free from black holes, spreading light and warmth to those who wanted it. And they all lived starrily ever after.
Bill gives her Alisonshine a space fairy tale. They celebrate their ten-monthiversary. They also can't say "I love you."

“So...what do you think, Alisonshine?” Bill sprawls supine on her bed, flattening her duvet patterned in thick rainbow stripes. She props her fists under her round, strong chin, swings her legs, and cranes her neck at Alison. Her skin is the perfect color for such a bold, open-hearted person — a warm, lively middle brown with a bit of orangey yellow glow in it. Her sundress, white and printed with paint splatters in primary colors, grants her even more brightness. Alison looks her from head to toe, from her loose black spiral curls, all the way down her curvy body, to her favorite chunky aubergine Mary Janes. What did she ever do to deserve such a brilliant, glamorous person like Bill?

“Awww, Bill of my heart,” says Alison, sit-bouncing as she looks up from the paper. “You wrote me a story — a space fairy tale of how we met!” Her bouncing creates a little breeze that stirs the faceted glass crystals hanging in the porthole windows. The crystals ring together, casting tiny rainbows across the fashion plates and stylized spacescapes covering the curvilinear walls.

“Yeah, well, it’s not like anything you’d do,” Bill says. Alison loves Bill’s eyes. They’re so brown and deep, tilted up very slightly at the outer corners, but now Bill’s glancing down. Despite having been the heart of the Dystopiaville resistance whose orations encouraged and inspired thousands, she still doesn’t believe in her own storytelling gifts.

“It doesn’t matter that you write differently from me. You know why?” Alison seizes both of Bill’s hands. “—Because you have this wonderful poetic directness. Your story reminds me of a children’s book in that it’s really clear and straightforward, but then it sinks deeply inside you and works on multiple levels.”

“So...you like it, yeah?” Crystal rainbows light up Bill’s face, and so does a smile. Two angled lines appear at either end of her mouth. Bill has what Alison calls smirk brackets, and Alison wants to kiss them whenever they appear.

“I love it. I adore it. I treasure it!” Alison pulls Bill’s hands to her breast. “The only other person who has ever made stories just for me is the Magister — and now you too! It’s — “ She breaks off with a sudden sniffle. All the sharp sweet scents of Bill’s hanging flowerpots rush into her nose.

“Phew! So relieved!” Flinging herself backward into a stack of pillows, Bill throws her arm over her face. Suddenly she winces and presses a hand to her chest. “Ow. Probably shouldn’t be flopping around like that.” Bill is mostly biological, but her heart, lungs, and other core organs are made of Cyber robotics. The interface between flesh and machine causes her pain, limits her respiratory capacity, and slows her down.

“Anyway,” Bill goes on, “had the hardest time figuring out what to get you, so I asked around. The Stylist is like, What’s that bullshit poem she loves by that dead white colonialist dude?” The Stylist is the Magister’s oldest and closest friend from the academy. She specializes in frank appraisals, fearsome fashion, intergalactic interference, and dramatic last-minute rescues, not
necessarily in that order. “Those were her words, by the way, not mine,” Bill clarifies.

Alison lies back with Bill. The dark blue ceiling holds glow-in-the-dark constellations, as well as a living confetti of plants from the Doctor’s various greenhouses. Leaves and petals of all hues rustle together. “Yeah, I can tell.” Alison rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “Did she mean Invictus?”

“Yeah, the Stylist thought I should rewrite it since it was so important to you, but that sounded like no fun at all. So then I asked Galleia and Lakis.”

Alison chuckles. “I bet they had some interesting ideas.” Their friends Galleia and Lakis are sisters that Alison and the Magister rescued from 1500 BCE Atlantis. Galleia, the ex-Queen of Atlantis, now works as the Stylist’s apprentice, designing jewelry and engineering diplomatic intrigue. Lakis, Galleia’s former chief handmaiden, goes to high school part of the week and helps the Stylist in her salon the other days. They’re much younger than Alison — Galleia is twenty-two, Lakis seventeen — and their naïveté about modern days can make them seem even younger.

“Yeah,” says Bill. “Galleia thought I should give you ten mind-blowing orgasms, one for every month we’ve known each other.” Galleia, who relishes the role of irresistible seductress, considers herself an expert on sex and other kinds of relationships. “Lakis said I should throw you a kitty party, whatever that is, with some bonus doggies and birdies, and she could invite her eight million friends.” Lakis, who has Down syndrome, gets along with all kinds of people, especially of the feline variety.

Bill thanked Galleia and Lakis for their ideas, then sought advice from the Doctor and the Magister. “But it still wasn’t all coming together,” she says, “until I talked to Razor.” That’s what she calls Harry, since that’s the name by which he introduced himself to her.

“Wait a minute — you talked to Harry?” Alison rolls onto her side, now facing Bill. “How? And why?” Harry derided Alison and her Time Dorks, even as they helped him. He tried to read Alison’s mind without her consent just to see if he could do it. He behaved himself only when Alison threatened to withdraw her aid from his revolution. At best, he’s a nasty jerk. At worst, he’s the Master of Misery. Also he’s an entire universe away, and Alison knows of no communication system that bridges universes.

Mirroring Alison’s position, Bill faces her. She tugs down her short dress, then plays with the hem a bit. “Um, well, didn’t really talk to him, of course — just in my head. I’ve got some people in my head too that I talk to, kind of like you and the Prof.” That’s what she calls the Magister, short for Professor. “Past versions of me and, um, people I don’t, um, have anymore. One of them’s my mum.” Bill, who grew up in the foster care system, has nothing of her birth mother but photos and some books. Nevertheless, she has reimagined her mum as a loyal counselor who cheers her up when she has doubts. “And one of them’s, um, him — Razor.”

“Uh, okay.” Alison frowns.

Bill fiddles with one of her large hoop earrings. “He saved my life. He treated me like a person and helped me come to terms with what the Twelfth Doctor did to me. We were in hell — Dystopiaville — together for about a year, and we kept each other going. So...yeah. Can’t say that I like him, but can’t really hate him either. Please don’t be angry.”

Alison shakes her head. “I’m not angry, Bill of my heart. I know that you had a much different relationship with him than I did. So anyway...what did your imaginary Harry — “
“Imagin-Harry!” Like the Doctor, Bill can’t resist a pun.

“Hah! —So what did he say? And was he using that silly fake accent?” Alison rolls her eyes. Harry’s Razor persona, the one in which he first acquainted himself with Bill, came with a pseudo-Slavic accent. Bill thought it was funny. But it just pissed Alison off, mostly because the accent appeared whenever he was avoiding being serious.

“He said, Well, my dearest person, you know that the Dominatrix — she is loving the fairy tales.” Bill giggles as she replicates Harry’s Razor syntax, complete with nicknames for her and Alison. “So you write her one, yes? Then she will be devoting to you forever.”

“For a narcissistic psychopath, he occasionally has good insights,” admits Alison. “That might be his only redeeming trait.”

“Not his only one!” Bill says. She untangles some of her hair from one of her saucer-size earrings. “He’s also the genius microsurgeon who repersoned me.” Long before Alison and even Bill arrived in Dystopiaville, the resistance and revolution began with Harry’s repersoning surgeries. When he was stranded in Dystopiaville alone, Harry studied the Cyber conversion tech with which Irons robotified and controlled the citizens. With the help of other Dystopiaville denizens, he developed interventions to restore independence, autonomy, and emotional expression to Cyber converted people. With these operations, he saved Bill’s life...and ended up inspiring the Magister’s imminent surgery on Alison.

Speaking of the chip installation, Bill says that she gave Alison a story in part to distract her from any pre-operation jitters. Alison, snapping her fingers and dancing, says she’s not nervous. Even though she doesn’t like hospitals? Bill asks. She shudders, thinking of the creepy Dystopiaville hospital in which she languished, partially robotified and alone, before Harry rescued her.

“It’s not really like being in hospital, though.” Alison shrugs. “I mean — the Magister’s doing the surgery in his lab, and the Doctor’s helping. Even Scintilla and Reeve,” she says, referring to the Stylist’s TARDIS, who is also Scintilla’s partner, “are being nurses. And I can recuperate in my room. To tell you the truth, the only thing I was worried about was Harry. I thought that somehow the chip would go wrong and make me vulnerable to him, but he’s not even here, so he’s totally irrelevant.”

“So don’t think about him then. Think about the Dork fam and everyone else.” Bill takes Alison’s two hands in her own. “You’re right — it’ll all go perfect!”

With a contented sigh, Alison squeezes Bill’s hands and gazes around Bill’s room. The space, snug and compact, seems to have been transplanted from the below decks of an ocean liner. It’s pleasantly crammed with sights, smells, and sounds. In one corner, there’s a chrome-plated battery pack where Bill can recharge her power wheelchair. Her Cyber parts wear her out, her legs and chest especially, so she sometimes uses a chair to move around. In another corner, there’s a desk and a big puffy reading chair, both stacked with fashion magazines, from modern glossies to newsprints a century and a half old. Books, including midcentury sci-fi pulps and first editions from across the ages, lounge everywhere; spreading out over every available flat surface, they remind Alison of the ubiquitous TARDIS cats. Small unidentifiable skulls, desiccated frogs, and bugs in amber scatter across the books, for Bill, like the Doctor, finds beauty everywhere, even in death and decomposition. This little space is Bill’s cabin where, inspired by old-fashioned dresses, unknown constellations, and the ever-present rainbows, she sails away on her voyages of curiosity.

Bill sits up. “Hey...so...Alisonshine...” she says in a confidential voice.

“Yeah?” Alison twists her head.
“Happy anniversary of ten months of knowing each other!” Bill’s mouth widens into a smile as bright as the tears in her eyes. She presses all ten fingers to her scalp, twining them into her loose fluffy curls. She has the adorable habit of clamping her hands to the sides of her skull, like the excitement might fly out of her brain otherwise.

“Aww…” Alison feels a sharp twinge inside her. What has Alison ever done to merit such adoration? Why does Bill think that she’s the brightest and hottest star in the universe? “Happy — “ Though Alison tries to smile back at Bill, she falters. “Happy ten-monthiversary, Bill of my heart,” she says at last.

“I know that you love words, so I knew that I had to give you words for your present.”

“Thank you so, so, so…” Alison’s sinuses, right behind her face, feel waterlogged and swollen. Her eyes sting.

“Not just any words either, but the right words. Like a spell, a spell as powerful as I am the captain of my soul or I am the Master, and you will obey me. But not a commanding spell, just one that would tell the truth.”

“Oh…” Alison sobs once, but swallows it. It hurts going back down.

“Yeah, so that’s what I wanted to put in the story: the truth.” Bill speaks the word softly, like a prayer. “It’s, um, the truth about how I feel about you.”

Alison’s nod of agreement is lost in her shivers. “Oh…” Everything she wants to say is wadded up inside her core. She’s congested with it, brimming over with it, and yet still it’s stuck fast.

“It’s not just that I like you and that you’re my friend and my partner. And it’s not just that you’re amazingly beautiful and hot. But it’s that… It’s that… I just feel so bright and full and happy and warm about you that I…” Bill’s lovely mascara-covered lashes flicker. Her eyebrows — those long high arches as expressive as her mouth — practically flutter as she struggles to find the best language. “Well, I run out of words. And I — “

I love you, Alison thinks, as much finishing Bill’s sentence as providing her own answer. It’s such a powerful spell, those three simple words. The strength of it shimmers in the air between them. She can smell it, as fruitful and strong as the smell of the flowers overhead.

“I — “ Bill clasps Alison’s hands tightly. Her wet eyes shine like the stars she’s made of, and she watches Alison’s face.

I love you, Alison says inside her thoughts, but the words won’t move from her head out into the world. It’s a spell of sharing. It’s a spell of opening yourself up to someone else’s light. And that’s the problem. This isn’t a spell that you can say in fear and despair. This is a spell of certainty and strength. And that’s why Alison can’t say it.

“I — “ Bill pitches her eyebrows upward at the inner edges. Though she’s now a beautiful star, there’s still a bit of the lonely little comet inside her, some frozen grain of doubt. She’s not going to say I love you unless Alison does first. All the curves of her round, full mouth sag. “Yeah…”

“Oh, Bill of my heart,” murmurs Alison. Even though she has the star of her life in her arms, warm and brilliant and sure, she still feels cold, like she’s lost her.
Alison Solicits Advice

Chapter Summary

Alison, having upset Bill, seeks advice from the Stylist and then the Magister. Featuring Crowning Glory, the Stylist's Salon, and also the Magister's little Alison doll and its extensive wardrobe. :D

Alison makes her way to the entrance of the Stylist’s London salon. The line for Crowning Glory extends about twenty people out the door. A guy with half his head shaved and the other half dreads snoozes against the violently violet brick wall. Three girls argue cheerfully about whose braids will be the coolest when the Stylist is done with them. A woman in a hijab says that the jewelry here had better be amazing, considering that she has been waiting two hours just to get in the store. The people ahead of her show off their own ornaments and attest that Galleia indeed does impressive work. A trio of young guys, clustered under the awning of pink and purple vertical stripes, don’t know exactly what they want done with their hair. They agree, though, that it definitely needs therapy. Everyone seems rather calm about a queue that is obviously not moving.

Well, everyone’s calm until Alison approaches the door. Then they grumble — she can’t just jump the queue like that! Alison protests that she wants to talk to the Stylist. Someone says she should make an appointment, since the waiting list for an initial consultation is eight months long.

Alison is about to leave and come back later when Galleia sticks her head out the door. “Alison!” she cries, and a whoosh of chatter and flowery smells follows her. She and her sister are brownish gold, a shade or two darker than the Magister’s sepia complexion. Older, taller, and more fashion-obsessed, Galleia has no hair whatsoever — all the better for wearing wigs from her elaborate collection. Today’s white swirl, arranged into tiers like a marble fountain, has blue cellophane water spouting from the peak. A coronet of bone-colored thorns at the base of her coiffure alludes sharply to Galleia’s status as the last Queen of Atlantis. The sharktooth weave of her silver minidress and the actual fangs in her earrings continue the pointed theme. She carries some pointy jewelry pliers in one hand and a green circuit board in the other.

Lakis appears next to Galleia. She’s a round, brown seventeen-year-old, with sleek black hair that she can nearly sit on. “Yaaaaaaaaayyyyyy, Alison! Hi, Alison.” She waves with both hands, one holding her mobile. As soon as she comes close enough, she envelopes Alison in a hug. “We’ve been bouncing all day.”

“Hey, Galleia. Hey, Lakis.” Alison hugs both of them. “Uh... bouncing? Do you mean hopping? If a place is really busy, then you can say it’s hopping.” As relatively recent immigrants from the past, the sisters don’t always understand English idioms. The Stylist’s eccentric use of the language doesn’t really help either.

“Well, we’re bouncing and hopping,” says Galleia with a chuckle. “Everyone wants to get their hair done before we blast off to Seneschal Five on a mission. And our usual bouncer’s on holiday, so me and Lakis are doing door duty. It’s pretty dull — “

“It’s not dull. There are lots of people to talk to.” Lakis heads off to greet customers. She tells them about a new game on her mobile, Kitty Litter, and introduces them to her virtual pets.
“That’s because you like talking to people,” Galleia mutters. To Alison, she says, “Sometimes I think that she should have been the queen — ya know? She could have won over the populace, and I could have just been the advisor, hiding in the background and making weird bugs.” She specializes in earrings, brooches, pendants, and decoration featuring creepy-crawlies.

Alison asks what Galleia has in hand. Galleia shows her a beetle with a circuit board for a body and colored wires for legs. She’s currently making jewelry from E-waste; she thinks the insides of computers are beautiful. Alison suggests that Galleia should collaborate with the Magister. He could design dark and Goth clothes, and she could make the accessories. Galleia gasps. She’s not worthy of a collaboration with the Lord Master, which is the respectful title that she and Lakis use for the Magister.

Returning to the conversation, Lakis insists that Galleia has to be worthy because she’s her sister and she’s very talented. She asks Alison if the Lord Master put a chip like that — with a nod to Galleia’s circuit board — in Alison’s head. Or was it a chip like you eat for lunch? And was it crispy? Soggy chips are no good.

When Alison first talked to Lakis, she thought that Lakis might not understand metaphors because of either her youth or her Down syndrome. She quickly learned that Lakis loved puns, particularly delivered with a straight face. Now Alison laughs and says that her operation — with the computer kind of chip — hasn’t happened yet, but will in a few days.

Lakis giggles too, then asks if Bill gave Alison The Lonely Little Comet yet. Galleia guesses that the story was a great success, inspiring them to joyous kinky sex. Alison, avoiding this line of inquiry, wants to see the Stylist. The sisters direct her to the back office.

Alison weaves her way through an overwhelming mixture of sight, scent, and sound. The pink and purple color scheme continues indoors as well, along with a significant dose of chrome. The counters, the vinyl chairs, and even the mirror frames feature blocks of sunset color and chrome trim. Silver and gold gleam as people try on jewelry, laughing raucously. Scissors and razors flash over the dull roar of hair dryers. People spin to admire their new ‘dos, and the bright, metallic odors of gels, sprays, and oils linger in the air. A vehement discussion on the price of hairpieces reaches Alison’s ears, as does an increasingly hilarious brainstorm about nuptial hair sculpture. The smell strengthens into the concentrated stink of a greenhouse, with too many plants too close together. Alison, who doesn’t like crowds, plugs her nose, ducks her head, and picks up speed.

She dashes into the back office and pants in relief. Like the main salon, the back office is dressed in pink, purple, and gold for the ceilings, interspersed with mirrors. Since most of the LED overhead lights are off, though, the shadows soften the atmosphere. Alison can bear it better for two reasons. First, only she and the Stylist are here. Second, there’s only one smell in here: that of the Stylist herself. It’s a heady mixture of summery smells, but tolerably strong, rather than cacophonous.

“Hey, Stylist!” Alison still keeps her head low, avoiding the many reflected Alisons in the walls of mirrors. But she still bounces toward her friend, joining her on an overstuffed black leather sofa.

“Oh, my fly whipster!” The Stylist, lounging sideways with her legs across the cushions, glances up from a tablet, waving a slim wrist. A load of bangles chimes. She’s a Black Time Dork woman, with fine gold-toned skin, a pointy face, and dark, deep lips. She appears to be just over twenty, but she’s the Doctor and the Magister’s equal in age. She claims that she maintains her complexion with a secret salve that contains the tears of the vanquished. Since she topples empires and trashes reputations for fun, she may in fact be telling the truth.

“What are you doing?” Alison slides closer as the Stylist swings her legs off the couch.
“Cudgeling the knowledge box for the excursion to Seneschal Five.” The Stylist, who can control the shape of her hair with a thought, forms it into a deep brown, curly question mark. Though her name is practically synonymous with high fashion, the Stylist doesn’t always wear it. She defaults to loose neon tops, leggings, and the good ol’ shit kickers: her black Doc Martens. Nevertheless, the liquid drape to her strong, slender form makes everything look hot.

The Stylist continues: “We’re popping the Corving of Aluet’s clogs — fucking finally!” Huge sigh, eyeball roll. “Should be a surgical strike, for me at least. But I’m midnight oiling here,” she says, whacking the tablet screen in exasperation, “trying to figure out how to keep the ankle biters from waking snakes. Oi, those roisterers — I tell them something’s paw paw tricks, and they’re off mafficking anyway.” The Stylist has lived most of her life on Earth, and her idiosyncratic use of slang varies between countries, socioeconomic classes, and eras.

The Stylist’s slang slinging regularly puzzles Alison, who prides herself on her linguistic prowess. She suspects that the Stylist does it on purpose to challenge her. She tries to translate: “You’re doing something to the Corving — probably killing, since that’s your area of expertise. It should be quick, but you’re trying to keep — I don’t know what ankle biters are — out of trouble. But they’re rowdy, so they’ll probably cause trouble anyway. Are you talking about Galleia and Lakis?”

“You’re a positive Einstein!” The Stylist’s hair flourishes into an explosion like the scientist’s.

“Wow, thank you. Why are you killing the Corving?”

“Oh, let’s see.” The Stylist frowns at a swirl of purples on the ceiling, as if the reasons are up there. “They tried to butter me up into some hogmagundy. I said I’d rather toss cookies, so they said I had a big nose. They’re a draggletailed anti-macaroni with a disaster instead of hair. And they’re a fascist who will ride a tsunami of support to national office until we intervene first.” The scar in the center of her forehead jumps like a spark from a lighter as she frowns. The acute fierceness to her face reminds Alison of Harry when he spoke of vengeance. How similar are the two?

Alison suppresses that thought. “Right then. Can I, uh, ask your advice about something?” She tucks her legs sideways under her butt and leans toward the Stylist. She tells about yesterday’s events: The Lonely Little Comet, her and Bill’s mutual inability to say I love you, and the way that Bill just wilted with disappointment. “Now I feel horrible,” she says, clenching her hands between her legs. “I’m...not sure what to do.”

The Stylist is as old as Alison’s Time Dorks and as flippantly sadistic as Harry. Even so, she seems more like Alison’s age, not as grimly serious as the Doctor and the Magister. She also speaks straightforwardly, without the elaborate concern for Alison’s feelings that her Time Dorks sometimes have. Therefore Alison trusts her implicitly. She peers into the Stylist’s face, waiting for an answer.

“You’re right — my chill level is at absolute zero. Maybe I
should talk to the Doctor and the Magister.”

The Stylist laughs. “The Doctor won’t understand what the problem is because you both obviously feel love for each other, even if you can’t say it, so isn’t that enough? And Koschei,” she says, using a nickname from academy days for the Magister, “will lay it on the line like me. That’s because he’s a reasonably insightful individual. At times, he even reaches my level of perspicacity.”

Alison glances at her sideways. “That was really helpful.”

“You’re just saying that because I told you the truth, which you didn’t want to hear.” The Stylist makes a teasing sneer at Alison. “Now see ya later, alligator. I have fascists to kill.” She picks up her tablet and taps the screen to awaken it.

Alison doesn’t even try to follow the Stylist’s advice. She texts Scintilla on her TARDIS Talk phone. When Scintilla retrieves her and carries her back to the States, Alison hunts up the Magister.

He’s in his doll studio. Because he favors close, dark rooms, it has a silver floor, black clean-lined furniture, and poppy purple drapery on the walls. All the tables and shelves appear to have been arranged precisely with help from a compass and a protractor. The brushes, paints, bottles and other supplies march across the surfaces of said furniture like regiments of soldiers. It smells lightly of paints — a thick, mild scent — and turpentine and a peppermint cleanser in here. All dolls in progress sit with heads bowed, hands folded in laps, and knees together. In other words, they politely wait for the Magister’s attention in the same attitude that the Magister, when turned off, waits to be switched on. The crisp bright light shows a lack of creative chaos on any surface, but that’s because this is the studio of the universe’s freakiest neat freak. Disorder distracts him. Neatness inspires him.

Indeed, the Magister bows over a work table, lost to the world. Alison sees him in perfect profile as he stands with his back curved in a strong, attentive arc. His eyes, lowered to whatever he holds on the table, seem peaceful, almost closed. The downward angle of his nose and the outward angle of his goatee — both of them direct his attention down into his work. His cassock — cardinal red with black skirt lining and black slashes in the sleeves, with a diaphanous gold layer closest to his body — gives him a clerical mien. She sees now why Galleia and Lakis first thought that he was her chief priest. When he does something most fully, he worships with wonder and focus.

Alison sneaks up on the Magister, and the pitchy turpentine smell gives way to the smell of him. As a chef, a dollmaker, and a fanatical housecleaner, he always retains the odor of his most recent activity. Today it’s the faded smell of roses past prime, which means that he was laundering the Doctor’s shirts earlier. Even though the Doctor’s clothes start spontaneously deconstructing as soon as the Doctor puts them on, the Magister does not find this frustrating. He just tries new innovations in stress-proof fibers and reinforced stitching.

“And you, my dear,” murmurs the Magister, “shall be magisterial.” Alison starts, then realizes that he’s not addressing her. Instead he speaks to his project: the doll of her. He has one for each member of the Dork fam, all about thirty centimeters high, sculpted with caricatured lines, big eyes, and wide mouths. Cupping the Alison doll in his right hand, he presses his left palm down on its hair, petting it. A small part of Alison now cringes for thinking about him worshipping, since he’s obviously paying tribute to her. The rest of her just shivers and wishes that he were actually touching her. What’s he doing with it?

As if Alison’s shiver alerts him to her presence, the Magister turns to her. A smile blooms on his lips, sending out circular ripples of wrinkles to all edges of his face. “Increasing your
verisimilitude,” he says, answering the question that she didn’t ask aloud. “Now you look as you
do in your mind library.” He holds out the figure. Threads of golden light flicker on and off among
the loose wiry fluff of its dark brown hair.

Alison notices that he doesn’t distinguish between her and his doll of her. In his view, both of them
are her. Is that creepy? “Awwww, you put fiber optics in its hair!” She applauds and hops on her
toes. “That’s adorable. What’s it wearing?”

The Magister sets the doll down on his work bench as gently as he would a live thing. He arranges
its body with a press here, a bend there, and a few twists. And then there’s Alison, miniaturized,
her hands pressed together as she launches herself forward on the balls of her feet, her eyes and
mouth open in wonder. Her outfit is of deepest yellow and orange, with bold vertical stripes on the
underskirt and chrysanthemum-like billows on the bustle. High in the neck, close and curvy around
the corseted core, and tight in the sleeves, it looks very Victorian. Bill could probably tell her the
exact year that such an outfit was fashionable. It also looks very gaudy, with a lot of gold… Well,
accents is too subtle a word. This ensemble has bling.

“So something of my own design.” The Magister adjusts its skirts. It has those annoying pointy
historical heels on. “It is not completely verisimilar, as you have not yet worn the full-size version.
But this is an accurate representation of how you will look when you do.” He grins so hard at the
thought that his eyes close into curves.

“When I do? Um…” Alison takes a slight step back. If he spends his free time imagining her in
stuff this tacky, then it’s not creepy. It’s just…inaccurate.

“To what about the ensemble do you object?” One eyebrow springs up, inquisitively arched.

Alison says that she does neither pumps nor earrings, so the Magister turns his back, rustles up
some changes, then shows her the doll again. Free of bling, it has only a minuscule black choker
with a minuscule golden key around its neck. Now its voluminous sculptured yellow outfit seems
only slightly overdone. Alison checks under its skirt and cracks up. It’s wearing orange leggings
and small replicas of Alison’s yellow canvas trainers, laced with fine white cord. No, this isn’t
creepy at all. This is amazing. He knows her.

She asks if that’s something he imagines her wearing. He says that, as soon as he makes the hat, it
will. Her small-scale wardrobe, he confesses, is much more extensive than her large-scale one.
She’s surprised that he designs clothes for her. He’s surprised at her surprise because, he says, he
designs clothes for everyone. She says she’d love to see them.

The Magister shuts off the gooseneck lights bending over the doll, turning his back on his project.
Clasping his hands before him, he asks if that is truly the reason for her arrival. She is preoccupied.
About her Heliantha, perhaps? Alison exclaims that she didn’t say anything about Bill. The
Magister says that her scrupulous silence on the subject told him enough. Should they speak of it
now? He paces before her.

Alison leans against the work table and stares at the floor. It’s as silvery as a mirror, but not so
reflective. How does he keep it free of scuffs? “You know what? The Stylist said that you would
probably just tell me not to worry because we’ll get around to saying I love you when we’re ready.”
The Magister halts in front of her. “But we were both hesitant — both of us.” He puts his hands on
her shoulders. “She wanted me to say it first — I could tell. I feel like I failed her. I feel like I had
a chance to reach out and hold her — she wanted me to hold her! — but I didn’t. I couldn’t. And I
didn’t even get her anything for our ten-monthiversary. I feel like an inadequate partner.” Alison’s
last words are muffled because the Magister is holding her fast. She now speaks into his bodice,
which is covered with cat hair and impregnated with the smell of blown roses.
The Magister tries to relieve some of the pressure that Alison is heaping upon herself. He points out that Bill likes surprising people with gifts. She presents them for the joy of giving, not because she demands a gift in return. Alison protests that she could have given Bill a ten-monthiversary present: that of I love you. She missed the opportunity, though.

That’s true, the Magister says. However, she wasn’t the only one. It was a mutually missed opportunity. Bill also wanted to say I love you, but didn’t. Bill almost certainly feels that she too is a failure for not saying love. In fact, she’s probably less upset with Alison than she is with herself and her own perceived shortcomings. Furthermore, knowing Bill, she may also fear that Alison is disappointed with her for not saying love.

“Oh! Oh yeah, I bet you’re right.” Pulling away from the Magister, Alison looks down into his face as the realization hits. “Bill’s the people-pleasingest people pleaser that ever pleased people. She always assumes responsibility for everything, whether it’s hers to assume or not. I should probably hold her fast and give her some reassurance, huh?”

“If you did,” he says with a smile, “she would also give you some of the reassurance that you yourself seem to crave.”

“That’s brilliant.” Alison jumps around. “Yes! Thank you! See — I knew I could always count on you for decent, practical advice that’s actually helpful.”

“I gave you no advice. I only listened to you advise yourself.”

“Thank you anyway!” Alison boings out of the room, calling to the ceiling: “Hey, Scintilla — can you take me back to London?”
Chapter Summary

Alison and Bill get over their failure to say "I love you." Bill reveals that she let Harry [she calls him Razor] into her mind spaceship. Alison hears that story for the first time.

As soon as Alison arrives back in Anima, a clowder of cats emerge from the shadows in the hall, flowing around Alison’s legs. Some of them even rear up on their hind legs and knock against her knees. Alison knows from personal experience that they’d just lie on her feet if she didn’t minister to them, so she pays homage to each, applying pets, scritches, or ear rubs, according to their particular preferences. The cats burble thankfully, collectively reaching a volume equal to the Magister’s purrs when he’s happy.

A white cat with orange ears and orange and red spots gambols down the hall a few paces. Then she stops and cocks her head at Alison. The TARDIS cats here aren’t like the Magister’s flying cat Imp, who could probably speak human language if she wanted to, but the question is still clear. Why isn’t Alison following her?

“What’s up, Pretzel?” says Alison. “Wanna show me something?” This particular cat spends most of her time sleeping in the most hilarious contortions – hence the name.

Pretzel meows affirmatively, then adds a few chirps to explain to Alison exactly what her goal is. When Alison doesn’t instantly hop to it, Pretzel lets out a curt sound of disgust at the human who can’t understand Cat, then trots away.

“Wait for me!” Alison brings up the rear. Most of the cats accompany her, since Race Around the Spaceship is a favorite feline pastime, right up there with Nap Where a Biped Wants to Sit.

Pretzel leads Alison down gloomy corridors fenced with the Doctor’s favorite decorating element: wrought iron straight out of a Victorian cemetery. Shaped into roses, thorns, and other well-armored flowers, it imparts a scent of verdigris and rust to the cool atmosphere. Pretzel stops in front of the door to the Doctor’s library, which looks like a huge, leather-bound book, and waits for Alison to do something useful and open it.

Alison and her feline flotilla enter the library. It’s her favorite room in Anima, a huge rotunda with a mezzanine, divided down the center into light and dark halves. The half near the door creates its own darkness, with lofty black marble shelves as dense as hedges and a plushy carpet like twilight clouds. Drooping violet lamps, heavy with a somnolent incense, dispel light at the end of close, narrow aisles.

Meanwhile, in the half farthest from the door, shadow-colored stone walls yield to glass. The carpet brightens into the shades of early morning, and blond wood chairs and tables scatter across the open spaces. Illumination comes both from the sun through the walls of windows and from trees with an airy scent of flowers and buds made of sparks.

Bounding to the top of a bookcase, Pretzel penetrates further into the library. Then she stops, ears forward, listening to something. Turning back to Alison, she makes a summoning sound. Alison
hurries through the night side of the rotunda to join her. She finds Bill just over the equator, on the edge of the day. Pretzel descends from the bookcase and darts a few steps toward Bill, then meows at Alison. Clearly she needs to take her designated position at Bill’s side immediately.

“Hey, Bill!” Alison calls, jumping the equator.

But Bill doesn’t hear. She’s listening to something on her laptop: a recording of what is arguably the multiverse’s most annoying voice. “Ach, my dearest child,” says Harry in his ingratiating Razor accent, “you are going about this all wrong. I know you, Wilhelmina Jessamine Potts. I’ve been into your mind. I know who lives there. I know who’s strongest, and it’s not the Doctor. We flushed them out — remember? It’s your mum who’s the strongest, and your mum, of course, is you — the best of you. You talk to her all the time, but do you really believe her? She believes in you. She tells the truth. You can do the same. *I am the Master, and you will speak the truth.* Fuck — now you are making me into cheap self-help books. Trust her. Trust yourself. Tell the truth. That’s the only way that you’ll gain the power that’s yours by right.”

Bill clicks off the recording. “Ugh! You say it like it’s so easy, but it’s not.” Closing her eyes, she rubs her face.

“Did Razor record some motivational messages for you before we left or something?”

Bill lurches in surprise, then grins. “Hey, Alisonshine. — Or something. Not really successful, that, huh?”

“It’s motivating me to fling your laptop across the room.” Alison takes a seat at a golden table across from Bill. “But I’d probably break it or hurt one of those living lamp trees,” she says, gesturing at the boughs of brilliant buds around them, “so I’d better not. So…um…Harry’s been in your mind palace?” she ventures.

“Well, it’s a mind spaceship, but yeah.” Bill folds her laptop screen and pushes it to the side.

“Does that mean that you trusted him enough to do what me and the Magister do — to take a tour and talk to your selves?”

“Yeah.” Bill’s voice slinks. “Please don’t be angry! I know you don’t like him or trust him, but — “ She sighs. “I trust him more than you do, but that doesn’t mean I wanted him to be the first person in my spaceship. I wanted — I wanted you. But he was the only one who could help me in this case.”

“Awww, Bill of my heart…” Alison reaches across the table and squeezes Bill’s free hand. “Wow, that’s serious. You only go into someone’s head if you have a profound level of trust and comfort with them. Or you’re really desperate. I’m dying with curiosity about the whole story, but you don’t have to tell me if it’s too disturbing.”

“Well, it is disturbing, but I want to tell you. I want to tell you the truth, like Razor says.” Bill sighs, trembles, then begins her story. After she had been shot, but before she had completely died and been taken to Dystopiaville, the Twelfth Doctor stared at her. Missy and Nardole, to their credit, rushed forward, wanting to help, but the Doctor just stood still. It was almost as if they didn’t know what to do. — Or, more likely, Bill thought as her consciousness dimmed, that they didn’t want to do anything. They uttered only three words — *Wait for me!* — before Bill died.

During her year in Dystopiaville, Bill realized that the Doctor had cursed her. An afterimage of the Doctor appeared at the most inopportune times between her and her real life. When she was extracting people from the hospital and taking them to safety — *Wait for me!* When she was
handing Razor his instruments during a repersoning surgery — *Wait for me!* They hijacked her mind like a bloody pop-up advert.

Bill told Razor about her unwanted mental visitor. He and she tried meditation, drugs, and his own psychic compulsion, but nothing made the Doctor fuck off. As a last resort, Razor suggested mental travel. He described it as *sort of co-dreaming, where your imagination is represented by a house or something full of all your thoughts. It’s easy to manipulate the metaphors because they’re all tangible.* Bill, at her wit’s end, agreed, so, before Bill departed with her Dork fam, they went in.

“But…why didn’t you tell me?” Alison blurts out. “Did you think I wouldn’t understand? I’ve done the same thing with the Magister.”

“Well…but…I didn’t really know the extent of it between you and him. I thought you’d think it was like mind-fucking or something — like a mental invasion. But it wasn’t, not at all.” Bill shakes her head, her fingers tangled in her hair. “It was something we agreed to do. But…you hate Razor. Thought you might not understand why I let him into my head.”

Alison nods slowly. “Okay, that makes sense.” She recalls that time she found Harry using his psychic powers to get rid of Bill’s pain. She assumed that he was illegally entering her mind, and she castigated him. He was, however, truly employing his psychic compulsion for good. Yeah, Bill has good reason to doubt that Alison would comprehend Harry’s mental travel in Bill’s head.

“All thought that…um…that you would be angry that I let him in first instead of you.”

“Well, I’m envious, obviously. I mean — I wish I was the first, but I’m not angry. Sometimes, when a Time Dork messes up shit inside your head, you need the help of another Time Dork to reorganize things. And Harry is a gifted manipulator of minds, so you went to the expert for help.” Alison shrugs.

Bill gives Alison several successive side eyes, as if just waiting for her to lose her temper. After a few minutes, when Alison continues to maintain her composure, Bill resumes her story.

Once they went into Bill’s mind, Bill and Razor found themselves hovering in space between a black hole, which was clearly Otalux Four Eleven, and a constellation of three stars, which was clearly the Dork fam. Nearby, assailed by the gravitational forces of both the black hole and the Dork star system, was a glass globe of a spaceship. It resembled a flying terrarium with a small, bright, green ecosystem teeming inside. Delicate fins decorated its top, sides, and rear. In other words, Bill’s mind palace was a spacecraft, a duplicate of *Stardust*, the Defender’s spaceship in *Defenders of Earth*.

Bill and Razor entered the mind ship and landed in front of a geodesic dome. As they did so, Razor changed. He became a Cyber person, in bulky silver armor and a masklike helmet. Bill bit down a shriek until he removed his headgear. There he was, his usual haggard, smiling self.

He explained that he appeared in her mind as she thought of him. Clearly she envisioned him as a mindless tin can with no fashion sense. Bill was about to protest, but Razor corrected himself. She saw him as a repersoned Cyborganic, one who had finally wrested away control of himself from oppressive authorities, and he was — He broke off, staring at Bill.

Bill realized that she too had changed. That gaping hole that had killed her — it was there again, its edges cauterized, punching through her core, making a window out of her. She didn’t feel any different. She was still alive, still functioning. There was just a gap where her heart, lungs, intestines, and spine used to be. She didn’t have a stomach, but she still felt like she was going to vomit. She couldn’t go around like this.
Razor struggled with his armor, asking Bill to help him remove the chest part. It was a vest of metal, hinged at the shoulders and magnetized at the sides. As she pulled it off and he bade her to put it on, she realized how frail he was beneath. His body was as thin and papery as a mummy’s.

Bill exclaimed that Razor needed protection. He admitted that he could probably use it, but he was tough, hard, shriveled. His wounds were old. She, by contrast, had a deep raw wound that needed careful guarding. She made him promise to be careful. Then she put on his armor.

A vegetable and wildflower garden flourished on the left of the geodesic home. An orchard of apples, pears, lemons, and oranges grew on the right. A battered metal book truck by the front door held well-thumbed paperbacks. A sign affixed to the truck said *TAKE A STORY; LEAVE A STORY.*

Bill’s mum stepped out of the house. She was radiantly brownish gold, full-bodied, as tall as Alisonshine, and made of rich curves. Her neat dark brown cornrows extended past her shoulders, fruiting into beads of swirlily polished wood at her mid-back. She wore jeans, no shoes, and a purple T-shirt with Black Power fists combined with two interlocking symbols of Venus. She held two glasses of iced lemonade on a tray.

“Rocket child!” she cried when she saw Bill. They hugged the warmest, deepest hug that Bill had ever known. Bill cried — how could anyone love her with such a hole in her? “It’ll heal, my starry girl,” her mum said in her ear, “especially since you’ve got armor like this and friends made of stars.” She nodded to the Dork fam constellation twinkling overhead.

“I love you, Mum,” said Bill, wiping her eyes, as she pulled away.

Bill’s mum did not love Razor, even when Bill said that Razor had given her his armor. She looked at him; her mouth turned down. “You’re not Alisonshine.” She was equally unimpressed when he introduced himself by his real name. “An exceptionally obtuse White guy, I see. What do your friends call you?” Beat. “You don’t have any, do you?”

“Well, I’m glad to know what you really think of me,” Razor remarked to Bill. He was already sweating and shambling under the weight of his Cyber armor.

“I’m not apologizing for what’s in my head.” Bill crossed her arms.

“I’m not asking you to. Look — I love interrogations, but I have limited stamina and even less patience. Can we get rid of this Doctor pop-up advert before I pass out?”

“Oh, is that what you’re here for?” Bill’s mum’s eyebrows did curlicues. “Well, why didn’t you say so? I’ve been playing whack-the-mole with that git for weeks now.”

Bill’s mum invited Bill and Razor in and fed them. While everyone ate, Bill and her mum asked Razor his ideas for exorcizing the Doctor. Razor replied that first he had to do extensive research on how Bill’s mind functioned. Once he understood her governing metaphors, he would know how to extract her thoughts of the Doctor.

To that end, he asked Bill’s mum about everything. Who else lived here? Who built the house? Where did the oxygen and the gravity come from? How far did the similarity go between this craft and *Stardust*? Then they went on a tour, where they met some of Bill’s selves along the way. Bill followed along to the wildlife sanctuary, the cargo hold, and the oxygen recycling system, but drew the line at checking out the compost and waste systems.

Bill climbed up from the depths of her ship and returned to the geodesic dome. She found a
bathroom and opened the door, but someone was already in there. On the edge of the tub sat a short, fat, twelve-year-old girl in a too-tight yellow sweater. She was writing in a notebook, and a plunger stood at her foot. “Billie!” cried Bill, recognizing her younger self.

“Bill!” Billie jumped up. “Wow,” she said, registering Bill’s armor, “you’re a space warrior queen! Where’s the other one?” When Bill started to explain that Razor was touring with her mum, Billie shook her head. “No no — the other space warrior queen, the one who rules the universe — Alisonshine!”

Not knowing what to say to that, Bill asked Billie what she was up to. Billie replied that she was hanging out in the coolest, quietest room in the house. Bill, who had often sought solitude in rowdy foster homes just like Billie did, nodded. Billie added that she was outlining a story about becoming a star. She started explaining all about the gasses and heat and pressure associated with the process. It was very metaphorical, she informed Bill.

Bill said she was sure it was and then wondered about the toilet plunger. Billie fidgeted with her laptop keys and looked away. She admitted that she had been sending down the toilet scraps of paper with all the mean things people had said to her. Fatty, crybaby, space case, wet blanket, charity shop kid, No one wants you, and others went down the drain.

Well, at least they had until they got stuck. Billie had thought to take advantage of the nearby black hole and flush such horrible thoughts away for good. But now they were stuck in the pipes — and in her mind as well.

“Ah hah!” said Razor, apparently materializing out of nowhere. “That’s it!” he crowed. “We’re flushing the Doctor down the toilet. You, my dearest child,” he said to Billie, “are brilliant, but I always knew that.” Bill’s mum, he told Bill and Billie, had showed him how nearly everything in Bill’s mind ship was repurposed, reused, or recycled. Only the most unsalvageable refuse was pulverized and then let out into space as nanoparticulates. The Doctor, concluded Razor, was unrecyclable. They needed to take a trip into a black hole.

“So we unplugged the toilet,” says Bill, “shoved the pop-up advert down it, flushed hard, shot it into Otalux Four Eleven, and never had to deal with it again. The end!” She presses a button on her joybox. Her wheelchair speakers send out a teeth-rattling cymbal crash.

The blast of sound brings Alison out of Bill’s story and back into the library. “Ah, I love happy endings.” Alison sighs, breathing in and out the delicate smell of the budding lamps. “And your mum — I also love your mum. She’s like Clarissima, who’s the enforcer over in my mind library. Very protective, very analytical, and very unimpressed by any attempts at bullshit. And Billie sounds adorable, although I bet she thinks that’s too childish an adjective for her. She reminds me of Ali C., the endearing know-it-all with no fashion sense. I’d love to meet them — and everyone else in your head too.”

“Well, you could...if you wanted. But...do you have to have a Time Dork with you to do mental travel?” inquires Bill. Alison assures her that Time Dorks are not necessary, just the willingness, the skill, and, of course, a strong emotional and empathic connection. “Well, we’ve had one of those since you heard my distress call in your dreams,” says Bill with a wide gleaming grin, “so...um...yeah. I’d love to show you my mind spaceship — as long as I get to see your mind library too.”

“Of course!” Alison bounces in her blond chair. “I think the Alisons have been preparing for it for months. You know how all of your selves were asking where I was? Well, all the Alisons do that about you too. The Magister and I went into my head and said we had news. It was news of my brain surgery and chip installation, but they automatically assumed it was news about you, even...
though you weren’t even there. They’re — ahem — somewhat obsessed.”

“Yeah.” Bill ducks her head with a big, beaming smile, like a nodding sunflower. “My mum keeps asking if we’ve...uh...yeah. And there’s an even younger Bill, maybe four, who thinks you’re actually a star, made out of light and everything. Mine might be slightly obsessed too, so...fair warning.”

“I’d be overjoyed to join you in mental travel,” says Alison with all the solemn pronouncement of a vow, “overjoyed and honored.” She seizes Bill’s hands across the table again — both of them this time. “And it would be my privilege to show you around my mind library, assuming you can deal with an adoring mob.”

Bill giggles, then goes silent. Her eyes are full of rainbows, tears and smiles both. “I took Razor into my head,” she says softly, “because there wasn’t any other way to get the Wait for me out. Didn’t really want him there. But you, Alisonshine...I want you there, not because something’s wrong, not to fix a problem, but because — with you — I f-f-feel — so warm and right and happy.”

“Yeah,” whispers Alison, “me too.” I love you hovers in her mind, but the Stylist is right. All the anxiety that she felt a day earlier over saying it no longer exists. She’ll say it when she’s ready, and she’s not quite ready yet. She will be soon, though, especially if she’s ready enough to do mental travel with Bill. First, though, there’s her surgery. Once that’s over with, mental travel with Bill can be her reward.
Surgery Succeeds

Chapter Summary

Alison has brain surgery. The extended Dork fam -- the Magister, Bill, the Doctor, Imp, Scintilla, Anima, the Stylist, Galleia, Lakis, and Reeve -- show up to wish her well.

And then it’s surgery day. A gentle, sweet odor floats to Alison’s nose. She takes several seconds to identify it as coconut. A familiar dense mound supports her back, and a small metal thing, heavy and sharp-edged, lies upon her right thigh. She must be in bed then, and that thing in her lap must be her robot — her toy bot, that is.

Alison’s eyes flutter open. Indeed, she lies in her canopy bed in her own room, enthroned in a stack of midnight purple-blue pillows. Her toy bot, a gift from her parents, is guarding her, its blocky, dial-studded form epitomizing the mechanical people of 1960s sci-fi movies. As she lifts her head, she sees her real, life-size robot by her side, along with Bill and the Doctor. All of them beam at her as if she’s about to raise the sun. She remembers that she just had brain surgery. Judging from everyone’s expression, the chip installation was a success. “Hey, Dork fam,” she says with a slight cough.

“Ah, you’re awake, my dear!” the Magister exclaims, holding her left hand fast. He brings a cup with a straw to her lips, and she drinks in some wonderfully cool water. “You tolerated the procedure well,” he assures her, purring so hard that he shakes her. “According to the monitors, you’re in remarkably little distress. Do let me know, however, if I should give you more intravenous painkillers.” His fingertips shine a gentle blue, the color of the afternoon sky outside Alison’s door-size windows, as he touches her chin.

Alison squints at him. Her head throbs where he shaved away a little of her hair, drilled a hole the diameter of a pencil lead, and, through that, installed the microscopic Cyber chip into her brain. The dull pain is easily ignorable, however. Other than that, she just feels kind of slow and blurry, like she’s slowly waking up from a regular midday nap. “I, um, think I’m good,” she whispers to him. “Thanks, robot of mine.”

“There is something else that you should know.” The Magister holds up a hand. “The anesthesia completely knocked out your shields, but I am confident that they will return as you recuperate.”

“My what?” Alison says. Her brain is not working that well at the moment.

The Magister explains that, like all people, Alison possesses different levels of consciousness and therefore different kinds of mental protection. The anesthesia from her surgery acted upon a peripheral layer of defenses: her mental shields. The second time he mentions them, Alison understands. After having her mind breached by the Shalka and then by a psychic vampire, she had learned from the Magister how to secure her mental borders against further threats. Her resultant mental shields have withstood a lot in recent years, including Harry’s attempt to read her mind; evidently, brain surgery has neutralized them. She’s not really worried, though. As soon as she recovers, her psychic protection will too.

“So glad you’re back, Alisonshine!” Bill, crying for joy, clings to Alison’s right hand. With the
other, she activates switches on her power chair to let forth victorious fanfares. “The operation was so cool! The Prof let me watch him and the Doctor work. They used lasers and scopes and wires finer than spider webs and solder smaller than raindrops. It was like...like...some sort of very small sewing...or a reverse dissection even!” Bill shares with the Doctor an unsqueamish fascination with unconsciousness, blood, injury, and even death. “And now you’re a cyborg too, just like me. We need to get the Doctor some mechanical parts too,” she says, smirking at them, “and then we can be the robotic Dork fam!”

Anima, on guard in her usual form as a navy blue phone booth, blares synthesized trumpets of approval from where she stands by Alison’s louvered closet doors. Though less voluble and meddlesome than Scintilla, she still has plenty of opinions and influence over her Doctor.

“We can coordinate... It’ll be the new fashion...” Alison’s voice isn’t quite coordinating with her thoughts yet, but she smiles.

The Doctor arranges a garden of flowers in glass vases on a table at the foot of Alison’s bed. Straightening and cracking their back, they give her a smile. “Ah, the ol’ sense of humor — always a promising post-op indicator.” They touch the hollow at the back of their skull where it meets their neck. “Actually, I might already be a member of your robot club. Apparently my Master installed this button on me when I wasn’t looking. It knocks me straight into a stage three, non-REM sleep. Does that count as robotification?” Their peaked grey eyebrows flicker hopefully.

“Only because you added a function to my remote control,” returns the Magister, refilling Alison’s water and passing her the glass, “that reduces me to your pet cat.” Though he folds his arms, he sounds distinctly unperturbed.

“Reduces?” Alison repeats. “You think it’s an honor.” Sucking on her straw, she shares a grin with Bill, who’s blotting tears from her eyes. Though their Time Dorks started their acquaintance by inflicting misery on each other, they now wield pain and possession for pleasurable ends. The Doctor and the Magister hack each other’s minds and bodies to get the best of each other. They win by introducing their inevitable spouse to a new source of suffering that they actually really enjoy. It’s kind of sweet in a twisted way.

“You’re such a good kitty!” The Doctor pats the Magister on the head. “And so clever too, giving me a button that circumvents my awful nightmares.” The Magister swats the Doctor’s hand away, hissing, and the Doctor hastily revises their term of endearment. “Best kitty, I mean.”

“[No, I’m the best kitty!]” Imp buzzes around Alison’s bed, head-butting her wherever she can reach. “[Bright Cat! Bright Cat! You’re up from your nap!]” Imp calls Alison Bright Cat, Bill Beloved Cat, the Doctor Cat in a Tree, and the Magister, who she does not think is as good a cat as she is, Useless Cat. “[Useless Cat put a little thing in your head. Now you won’t sleep so much, and you’ll have more time to play with me.]”

“Clueless kitty is more like it!” Scintilla interjects, flicking a painted black eyebrow up toward the fringe of her blue metal bob. She and Reeve, who acted as the Magister’s nurses, are still in the humanoid forms that they assumed for Alison’s operation. Made of peach plastic with glowing green eyes and strongly painted features, Scintilla’s visibly jointed body looks like one of Alison’s action figures, only in human scale. She details in several exhaustive run-on sentences all the near errors that the Magister committed during the operation, concluding, “You only did so well because of our extra assistance. Right?” She glances over her shoulder at Reeve.

Reeve hangs back against Alison’s wall, standing next to Anima. She nods. As the timeship of the Stylist, she looks like a mannequin in humanoid form, with a small, round head, a nipped-in waist, and very long legs. Her dark brown metal skin glows warmly. She carries off everything, from her
current cranberry scrubs to the striking ensembles that the Stylist designs, with angular grace. Unlike the confidently interfering Anima and Scintilla, Reeve observes from the periphery. Seeing Reeve acknowledge Scintilla’s question with a small smile and dip of the head, Alison realizes that she has never heard Reeve speak.

“Salutations, groupies!” The Stylist strolls into Alison’s bedroom with an expansive wave. Her muscular hips switch from side to side as she makes her way over the checkerboard carpet. “Me and the sprogs,” she says, meaning Galleia and Lakis, “are off to Seneschal Five today, but we thought we’d swing by first and see what’s the haps.”

The Stylist does finger guns at Alison. “Well, look at what the cat let out of the bag! You’re the bee’s knees for someone who just got a new hole in the head.” She sends her kinky curls straight up. They look like an exclamation mark for which her head is the dot.

“Feeling groovy,” Alison acknowledges.

“Hi, Alison!” Lakis cries, dashing in after the Stylist. She must concentrate hard to enunciate intelligibly, and, when she’s excited, her words run together as they try to keep time with her thoughts. Hi, Alison! comes out as a single word: I-yason! She drops to the floor by Alison’s bed and slings a capacious canvas tote off her shoulder. She pulls out stuffed animal after stuffed animal, chatting so quickly that Alison can’t understand her.

With a laugh, Galleia squats by Lakis and touches her shoulder. As vicious as she likes to present herself, Galleia is all gentleness with those she loves. “Remember — not everyone’s ears go as fast as your mouth,” she says softly to Lakis.

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” Lakis stops, takes a breath, then counts to five aloud. It’s something she picked up from one of her approximately four billion and three school friends as a way to slow her thoughts and speech. Many of them also have Down syndrome, so they share advice and adaptations.

Focusing on Alison’s face and moving her mouth carefully, as if Alison is lip-reading, Lakis starts over: “I brought you some animals to keep you company when you’re in bed. This is a mexitruce from Avoverriod.” She holds up a blob with lots of eyes on stalks. “This is a uniferis from...um, I forget where.” She holds up something insectoid. Lakis collects plush animals from all the places she visits with the Stylist.

Galleia, whose skirt barely covers her crotch in certain positions,readjusts her clothes as she rises, takes a look at Lakis’ offerings, and sighs. “I just brought you a little ol’ get-well card.” Half her mouth turns down in a doubtful frown. “I hope it’s enough.” For someone who used to be the last Queen of Atlantis and who was clever enough to evacuate most of her island before a past version of the Magister blew it up, she doubts herself a lot.

Then Galleia lifts her head, her eyes lighting up. “—Although I could entertain you with what happened when we went spying in the Valley of the Veil. Let’s see…” She ticks off on her fingers: “I seduced the regent and her lady in waiting, sold what I learned from them to the opposition, had my honor defended, ended that ridiculous embargo with the Mountains of the Midland, and got married twice. Well, it was actually once, but there were two spouses involved. It was purely ceremonial too — you know, to vouchsafe the Veil-Midlands trade alliance. Anyway — “

“Wow, maybe I’m getting old,” breaks in Bill, “but just hearing about that makes me tired. You do more in one mission than I do in an entire year.” She looks to Alison. “Hey, Alisonshine, are we too loud for you? Should we let you rest? How’s my snuggly star doing?”
Alison looks around. Bill asks Lakis about some of her stuffed animals while Imp pesters anyone within range for chin scritches. Galleia inspects the Doctor’s floral offerings, no doubt taking inspiration for future jewelry designs, while the Doctor gives her capsule biographies of every plant. The Stylist, head to head with the Magister, tells him a story that involves many eye rolls and bangle-rattling arm waves. Scintilla, Anima, and Reeve cluster by the wall, supervising their people with satisfaction. The gang’s all here, even the extended Dork fam, as Alison considers the Stylist, Galleia, Lakis, and Reeve. They’re holding her fast with their love.

Yawning and blinking heavily, she slides down so that she’s lying on her back. “I’m exhausted,” she says, “but thank you, everyone, for coming. With this much support, I should be better in no time.”
Chapter Summary

Something’s wrong with Alison’s chip. She’s caught in intractable depression. She feels like she’s losing her Dork fam. And then she hears Harry’s voice. Oh great, not again?!

She isn’t. For some reason, despite the Magister’s meticulous preparations, Alison’s chip doesn’t work, and neither does she. She can’t sleep; she doesn’t want to eat. In fact, she doesn’t want to do anything. The local doll club that she just began organizing now seems like a waste of time. Bill’s breathless readings of Atomic Age science fiction barely make her giggle. She goes back to the passages she was writing for the Magister’s first-year Latin students. It just seems pointless now. The Doctor invites her on a tour of space and time for Bill and other Dystopiaville refugees, but the mere thought makes her tired. She’s slipping away from everything — her interests, the things that once made her happy, even her very appetite. Nothing can hold her fast.

The Magister essays everything. For the first day or so, he tinkers in his lab, trying to replicate Alison’s chip’s malfunction in his model. When he can’t and when his Domina continues to be flaccid and apathetic, he turns his efforts to abatement of her symptoms. At first there’s an alien antidepressant that smells like petrol and slithers down Alison’s throat like a cold snail. Her gag reflex defeats this one; even plugging her nose and hiding the stuff in tastier food, she can’t keep it down.

Desperate, Alien allows the nastiness to continue. Another alien antidepressant, an injectable this time, makes her even worse, feeling so flat that she might as well be two-dimensional. A third gives her chronic and acute dizziness.

The Magister invents his own twist on electroconvulsive therapy. It should, he says, be an easy two-day course of transcranial microelectrical pulses to zap away her refractory depression. But she just ends up with an itching sensation on the inside of her skull. At that she asks for a reprieve from weird treatments, and he complies.

To make matters worse, Alison feels like she’s losing her Dork family too. At first, Bill visits for hours at a time. She recounts her adventures with the Doctor and her Dystopiaville friends and brings Alison present after present. One of Hatshepsut’s ceremonial beards, Cleopatra’s pot of eyeliner, a hymn to Aphrodite that Sappho wrote after hearing a description of Alison, and other tokens of history sit on Alison’s bedside table. Bill makes a list of famous people that she wants Alison to meet, a list that increases after each trip in time.

Alison listens while chewing on the inside of her cheek. Why does Bill assume that Alison will be back to normal within days? She won’t. And why is Bill going on and on and on about what she could do with Alison if Alison weren’t sick? Maybe Bill is getting impatient. Maybe she’s annoyed that Alison isn’t healing according to schedule. Or maybe Alison’s just projecting out of guilt and shame.

In any event, Alison can only cope with so much of Bill’s high spirits. They make her feel inadequate, but she doesn’t want to alienate Bill by telling her to go away. She already put distance between them when she failed to tell Bill I love you. But she just can’t handle Bill’s cheer.
Finally Alison frames it as a matter of exhaustion. She has to catch up on her sleep, she says. Even though Alison’s pushing Bill away, Bill does not seem to hold it against her. Instead she claps her hand over her mouth and gasps. Even though Alison should really be the one apologizing, it’s Bill who says she’s sorry. She’s sorry that she has monopolized Alison’s time; she will leave her alone so that she can rest up. Bill reduces her visits to less than thirty minutes a day.

Though Bill shortens her visits, Alison finds Bill’s company nerve-wracking. With her scintillating chrome-plated retro rocket wheelchair and her rainbow clothes, Bill embodies a brightness that just reminds Alison of the brilliance she herself has lost. With her effervescent plans to introduce Alison to Queen Boudicca or to read the entire library of the Center for Black Women’s Experience, she just makes Alison’s head pound. Why isn’t she angry or sad at Alison’s failure to say I love you? With neither wit nor conversation nor the interest to engage in ambivalent emotions, Alison wants to hide under the covers.

Perhaps a week or so after her brain surgery, everything bad happens successively. First, Alison can’t sleep a wink; she just stares at the inside of her eyelids for eight hours, hating her mind’s inability to shut off. Breakfast time brings boring food, along with Scintilla, who has no concept of peaceful silence. For forty-five minutes, she monologues at high speed about customized classic cars, her latest interest. She waxes poetic on the balance of aerodynamics and aesthetics in hood ornaments while Alison pushes pancake pieces around in circles on her plate.

Scintilla only breaks off when the Doctor drops in, but that’s not much of an improvement. Humming like a kazoo and waving a flask overhead, the Doctor bounces across the checkered rug. They trip on one of Alison’s slippers, jostle her nightstand, and end up on their knees at her bedside. None of this prevents them from flailing with such excitement that their hands blur. In between buzzy spurts of melody, the Doctor announces that they’ve figured it out. Maybe all those other mixtures out of their jungle didn’t help Alison, but this one definitely will. They chose the most soporific vegetation in their gardens, blending it into a savory juice that, they are sure, will give Alison a good night’s rest. A detailed ingredient list follows, with lengthy asides from the Doctor on the reasons for each selection. Scintilla, who has shut her mouth only because the Doctor has opened theirs, notices Alison nodding off. She takes the flask from the Doctor and shoos them out.

Eventually Scintilla too leaves, and Alison, who just wants to fall asleep in her robot’s arms, texts him one word: Snuggles? He usually responds instantaneously, but, even after five minutes, there’s nothing. When she calls, his voicemail says to leave him a message because he’s working as fast as he can to regain his Domina’s trust. He’s in his lab then, researching a reversal for Alison’s depression. But why does he assume that she doesn’t trust him? Alison lacks the brainpower to speculate. Abandoning the idea of robot cuddles, she glances at the clock, then falls back among her pillows and shuts her eyes. She’s only been up for an hour, and it’s already a miserable day.

After a nap bout of staring at the inside of her eyelids again, Alison eats lunch. Her full stomach puts her in a slightly happier mood when Bill comes over with her latest creation, a game called Evacuation. Bill loves games of strategy, but hates competition, so she devises alternatives. In her creations, people either explore worlds or work together to succeed. Alison asks how hard Evacuation is. After reassurance that it is neither complex nor tedious, Alison agrees to a game.

Alison’s bedroom, in which she has been living for the past week, has a stale stink around the edges, so Bill coaxes her into the living room. This chamber takes its cue from the kitsch of the 1970s, the Magister’s first decade on Earth. A fluffy moss-colored carpet yields under Alison’s feet and Bill’s wheels. Mustard wallpaper glows almost as golden as the sun coming through the white lace curtains on the bay window. Dropping into a plush chair, Alison sinks into the hug of its
upholstery. Bill parks her wheelchair and lifts herself from the seat, sitting opposite Alison in a matching chair. There’s a coffee table between them.

Bill pulls a rucksack off the handlebars of her chair and sets it on the coffee table. As Bill arranges game pieces, Alison gazes around. As usual, the living room at first seems like a bright, cozy nest, a refuge from all harshness and harm. Then you notice the Magister’s distinctive details. The glass shades in the ceiling lights seem, at certain angles, to have the shadows of skulls burned into them. The digital thermometer in the lower right-most pane of the bay window switches between time, date, temperature, and MOMENTO MORI. It even smells funereal in here — a vague incense that Alison associates with memorial services. It’s not unpleasant so much as it is unignorably odd. Then again, the Magister has never been a subtle person, and Alison loves that about him.

Having finished her preparations, Bill calls Alison’s attention to her new game. Evacuation involves buildings of stacked, crisscrossing blocks, with game tokens trapped inside. Alison and Bill draw from a deck of cards to determine which blocks to pull out for damage. They roll the dice to see how many game tokens they can help per turn.

Even when the building collapses with people inside, the game continues. Quoting the motto of Razor’s Revolution — Where there’s life, there’s hope! — Bill converts the wreckage into a sort of snakes and ladders challenge. She and Alison race against time to get everyone to hospital.

Alison, much to her surprise, enjoys herself. The game’s simple rules prove easy enough for her benumbed brain, and the play moves quickly. Alison and Bill work smoothly together, as they always have, congratulating each other on particularly clever plays. Bill channels her energetic nature into a running commentary on the perilous fate of the pawns they’re rescuing. She cheers and puts her hands in her hair whenever she and Alison evacuate anyone. In other words, Bill’s adorable, as long as she’s not expecting Alison to get better instantly. The game extends over the usual thirty-minute allotment, but the two play on. They’re almost done…

About fifty minutes after her arrival, Bill tumbles the dice and then extracts the last pawn from the wreckage of the building. “We did it!” Holding the pawn aloft with one hand, she slips back into her wheelchair and queues up a hallelujah chorus from her wheelchair speakers. “Go us! We’re an awesome team.”

“We sure are.” Alison smiles, momentarily satisfied. Then the hallelujahs continue, their high-pitched drone boring into her forehead. “Oh!” She covers her eyes. “Can you turn that down?”

“Oh shit! Sorry, Alisonshine — the button must be stuck.” Bill fumbles in the side pocket of her chair for the sound effects controller. She clicks around on it.

The chorus cuts off, replaced by a voice at once light and artificially raspy. “My dear, you are strong, powerful, born ruler, best I have ever made,” says Harry. “You are my envoy to the universe of Dominatrix. I see you, what you have done, and this pride — is like lightning, shooting through me! I am struck by the thunders.

“But this — this secret — you know is no good, yes?” his voice continues. “Remember the art of losing, my dearest person. Is never as easy to master as you think it is. You should really be giving me up, you know. It may look like disaster, says poem, but it will be disaster if — “ And Bill smacks a button violently, silencing him.
Bill Loves Harry

Chapter Summary

Bill is totally lying about not keeping in touch with Harry, but Alison is too tired to pursue the subject. Bill tells the story of how he helped her wash her back the first night she was in his flat. Bill loves him -- no surprise. Alison hates him -- also no surprise.

Alison snaps her eyes open and lunges forward in her overstuffed chair, staring at Bill. “Secret? What secret? Was that Harry?” she asks, even though she knows it was.

“Oh!” Bill glances at the controller as if she’s never seen it before, but her eyebrows, all creased with worry, belie her. “Yeah. Um, n-no.” Her voice quavers slightly as she presses some more buttons very firmly and hides it in the depths of her side pocket again. “Just voicemail. Well, not really. I mean... Remember when he pulled me aside before we said goodbye? Gave me this recording in case I missed the sound of his voice.” She snorts.

Alison says nothing. Bill, like the Magister, is an utterly transparent person whose every thought writes itself across her face in brilliant flashes. She’s a horrible liar...and yet here she is, obviously dissembling. That was Harry, and that wasn’t voicemail. There’s some secret between Bill and Harry now, even now, months after Razor’s Revolution, that Bill is terrified of letting out.

Even though she just asked about the secret moments ago, Alison suddenly has no desire to learn it. She’s sick; she’s tired; she’s sick and tired of being sick and tired, and she’s been trying and failing to forget Harry for weeks. If she pursues this, she’ll end up talking about someone she hates. She’ll also upset Bill, and she has already caused Bill enough misery by refusing to say I love you. At this point, Alison doesn’t have the physical, emotional, or mental energy for any more drama.

Alison chooses a safe, incurious response. “Like anyone could miss that accent. He sounds like he’s choking on his consonants.” She rolls her eyes. “What’s that about mastering the art of losing? Just an excuse to use his name as a verb? What a loser — pardon the pun.”

“No, it’s from a poem.” Bill pauses. For a moment, everything about her seems to draw inward. The thick, viny twists of her hair still; even her interrobang posture becomes weighted with thoughtfulness. “It was like Razor’s and my code back in Dystopiaville — maybe kind of a poem safeword, you know? — reminding each other to take it easy,” she says at last, and Alison knows from the soft and rhythmical tones of her voice that she’s about to tell a story.

“The first time he told it to me was right after he rescued me from the hospital,” Bill says. “So I’ve just had the heart blown out of me, literally and figuratively. Feel like nothing but a lump of metal, dirty and useless.” Her hands hover at her breast, hesitating to alight on her mechanical center.

“Think I’ll take a shower to feel better, but my core — it’s so new and it hurts so much that I can’t reach to wash my back. Leaning against the chipped tiles, staring at the water stains on the ceiling, smelling the smell of garbage and shit from the alleyway, and just sobbing... This is my life now: in a black hole, in a dying city, in a body that doesn’t feel like my own, no Doctor, no friends, no way home, nothing except this weird greasy guy with an inexplicably Russian accent.”

Bill heard Razor pause outside the bathroom. “You are in pain?” he inquired. First it was a
question. Then his voice was soft: “You are in pain.” She hadn’t said as much to him yet, but he knew.

Between hiccups, Bill told him what was going on. “Do not fear, my dear,” said Razor. “I help you with this. I close my eyes too if you are worrying about the modesties.”

After everything Bill had been through — abuse from the Twelfth Doctor, torture and objectification from the Floor 1056 General Hospital, partial robotification — that was the kindest offer she had heard in months. Naturally she broke into tears.

Razor waited a beat. “Is a yes? ...Or is a no?” Even that early on, he was always cracking jokes, trying to make her smile. Even way back then, a huge grin lit up his face when he succeeded.

Bill said that she did in fact need help washing her back and her lower half. A flicker of alarm moved through her as she realized he would probably handle her roughly, like the hospital staff had. “Don’t...hurt...” she said, but was too limp to finish the rest of the sentence.

“Never,” he said. “We are too much with the pain already, you and me. I keep you from it; you have my word.”

Razor asked what kind of help she needed. Bill, who was on the verge of crying again, said that she just wanted to feel better. He said that he would wash and dry her back first. Then she could wrap up in a towel and sit on the toilet so that he could reach her legs without too much bending over himself. From the way that he caught his breath, she could tell that he was in just as much pain as she. Normally Bill would have insisted on sparing him, saying she could do everything on her own, but she obviously couldn’t.

So...yeah... The first night they met, Razor took Bill out of hospital, and then she got naked in front of someone that she didn’t really know, even though she had observed him for weeks. When he helped her, all that she could think was how different he was from the hospital staff. He told her what he was going to do; he asked her if that was all right; he apologized if he accidentally hit a sore place. He touched her with a brisk, confident efficiency that told her that she wasn’t the first person he had done this for. When he reached the burning, painful scar tissue dividing her biological flesh from her Cyber flesh, he dabbed the washcloth so lightly that she barely felt it. He knew exactly what she had become now, and he gave her gentleness and care.

Razor finished, gave Bill some pajamas, and left the bathroom. As she was getting dressed, he said from the other side of the dividing curtain, “So...there is poem I think maybe I should tell you: One Art, by Elizabeth Bishop. From U.S. No Pushkin, but still...is not bad. You listen?”

He recited it for her. It was a villanelle — nineteen lines, but with only two rhymes in the entire thing. With looping phrases, the poem describes the speaker’s vain attempts to make sense of her life’s myriad losses. The art of losing isn’t hard to master, she asserts in the first line, but the cascading rhymes — vaster/faster/disaster and intent/went/continent — work against her, running away with everything that’s precious to the speaker. Bill wondered why he told it to her if it was really about the opposite of the first line.

Warmer, dryer, and slightly more relaxed, Bill exited the bathroom. Razor settled her on a threadbare couch that leaked stuffing. “You are okayer now?” he ventured. “You want tea, yes? Good tea or bad tea?”

“I don’t... I don’t eat anymore,” said Bill, stumbling over the words. She shivered, despite the thick pajamas and jumpers over that. It was a basement flat, all cracked concrete walls and floor, forever damp, forever chilled. “My stomach is gone. Just have batteries now, I guess. They
recharge with my bodily movement somehow.”

“Well!” said Razor, clanking around in the kitchen section of the flat with a hot plate and a kettle. “I make me a cup of bad tea. I make you a cup of good tea. I drink bad tea, poison self, curl up, and die. You do not drink good tea, but you are holding cup, smelling it, not curling up and dying, feeling more like a person, no?” He smiled at her; he put the mug into her hands.

And what he said came true. Bill held the good tea close to her nose. The flat filled with the strong and tangy odor of something like chamomile. It seemed less like a dank cave that Bill squatted in with a stranger and more like a comfortable tent in which she sat with...well, if he wasn’t a friend, at least he was a considerate acquaintance. Tea was magic, Bill thought. It made everything better. Or perhaps kindness did that.

Razor inquired of Bill what she thought about One Art, and she told him straight away that it was no chamomile. “It just talks about how everything’s always going to slip through your fingers. Already lost my mum, a chance to go to uni, the Doctor, my fucking heart, so that’s not comforting.”

Razor, not yet curling up and dying, sipped his bad tea and stared into the mug for a few seconds.

“Hm. No. Is not comforting in that way, but is not why I recite this poem.” He recited two lines from it: “I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. You are not the only person who always loses things.” He met her eyes then. Some slack and desperate quality in his face reminded her of the expression on people’s faces when they finally realized what they were going to become.

He went on. “I am losing my power, my time, even my mind. Is not comforting at all. Is shit. I am failing for too many years, losing too many things — excepting for you, my dear Bill. So here is comfort: I am not losing you.”

Alison stares at the death’s heads in the light bulbs overhead. It’s easier than figuring out what to do when your partner goes on about how wonderful some nasty shithead was. When Bill completes her story, Alison realizes something. “He...loved you,” she says with slow surprise. “Harry loved you.”

Bill lets out a sigh that shifts her shoulders up and then down. “Yeah, he always has.”

“You wish he hadn’t?” asks Alison. Is it true then? Does Bill finally see what a mean and miserable person Harry was?

“It’s not that. I mean — he saved my life. He was my friend and my support and my confidant when I had no one else. For that, I l — “ Bill is scared of saying love, even with Harry. “He’s important to me,” she finishes anticlimactically, “an important part of my life. But you hate him. Know why you do too; you have every reason to. And you — you’re important to me too!” She bows her head and mutters, “I’m caught in the middle. Can never make anyone happy, no matter how much I try.”

Alison’s thinking again. She has never heard that story of Bill and Harry in the shower before, and it doesn’t correspond to what she knows about him. During the three months that she and the Dork fam suffered his presence in Dystopiaville, he was peremptory, petulant, short-tempered, snide, and sadistic. He obviously cared deeply about Bill, but the ways in which he showed it were abrupt and snappish, as if concern and compassion caused him pain. In Alison’s experience, Harry was never polite, thoughtful, reflective, respectful, or kind. And he was certainly never fiercely devoted or tender...at least not to her.
But Harry was that way with Bill. Overwhelmed and scared, she sought him out for comfort and protection. He gave those to her, and, more than that, he gave her friendship, comfort, wisdom, and strength. Bill was as Alison had been when Alison first approached the Magister. As for Harry, he was clearly something of a Magister to Bill. While not a kinky partner and an equal, he was still an evil supervillain who, of all people, had chosen an Earthling as the one that he would keep safe and whole and happy. Alison knows now why Bill loved him — because he loved her and gave all his power to her service. He kept his promises of kindness and protection, much more than the Twelfth Doctor ever did.

None of this knowledge, though, changes her mind about Harry. He tricked her. He represented himself as an expert in reworking Cyber implants for beneficial purposes. But she really had no reason to believe his claim. Yes, he knew how to reverse the emotional suppression and mental control caused by Irons’ abuse of the tech. Yes, he had successfully decreased and mitigated his frequent panic attacks by modifying a Cyber implant in his own head. As a result, he had extensive experience curing Cyber-based damage, but that wasn’t quite the same as reworking the tech. Now that she thought about it, he only could only cite one case — his own — in which he had put a positive twist on Cyber implants, so to speak. And yet, from this single operation, he claimed with complete confidence that a similar surgery would improve Alison’s quality of life.

Harry lied. He lied, and Alison and the Magister, made gullible with desperation, believed him. They were foolish to assume that he wanted to help. He never cared about her. He just wanted to make her suffer. Is this his attempt to punish her for stealing his dearest person away from him? Is this the way he avenges his failure to read her mind — by colonizing her brain with fear, despair, impotence, and rage? After months of wishing that she’d never see him again, Alison now almost wants him to show up. Then she could take everything out on him and get rid of him for good.
The Magister Confers With His Selves

Chapter Summary

Alison tries to find comfort with the Magister. He's too busy talking to his selves.

Alison’s Dork fam is getting on her nerves. Scintilla won’t shut up. The Doctor keeps trying to fix her with herbal remedies. Bill’s okay when she brings games, but now Alison always worries that she’ll whip another recording of Harry from her pocket, and she really doesn’t want to think about him. As for the Magister, he’s missing in action, holed up in his lab.

The only Dork that Alison can bear is Imp, and that’s because she’s purring. Assuming personal responsibility for Alison’s post-operative condition, Imp installs herself on Alison’s pillow. Whether she’s dozing, kneading Alison’s stomach, head-butting her ears, or petting herself on Alison’s hands, Imp stays surprisingly reticent. Though she must certainly have loud and definite opinions on Alison’s health, all she says is that she loves Bright Cat and she hopes that Bright Cat will be better soon. Alison hopes so too, though she’s not sure how that’s possible.

Most of all, Alison wants the Magister, her robot. The last time she fell this ill was in Dystopiaville. A mere day of front-line revolutionary activities laid her low with enervation. Bill, the Doctor, and even Harry — they raced in and out of Alison’s room, full of anecdotes, jokes, and reports on the revolt. They were determined to restore her to health with their sheer cheerfulness. Alison appreciated it, but it was still exhausting.

The Magister, though, did just what Alison wanted and needed. Like Imp, he stayed by her side, purring. He spoke to her when she asked for stories or other distractions. He helped her around when she felt weak and frail. He didn’t rush or dance about or expect anything or even express hope. As a matter of fact, when she grumbled about her physical and mental limits, he counseled patience and gentleness. In other words, he waited for her to get better on her own terms, as he knew that his good Domina would eventually.

As much as Alison wants the Magister like that now, she can’t have him. He’s either scheming in his study or experimenting in his lab, working on the source of Alison’s chip’s malfunction and how to cure it. At first he thought that he had made errors in programming the new circadian information beamed from the chip to Alison’s suprachiasmatic nuclei. After extensive tests, however, he has discerned no problems. He now investigates the wireless transmission between the chip and the suprachiasmatic nuclei for errors.

The Magister stops in once or twice a day with updates on his progress, but it’s never enough. Even as he holds her fast, he’s thinking ahead to the next experimental modification that might work. She leans into him at these times and feels only the tension in his muscles. He wants to spring up; he wants to race back to his brainstorms, and she... Well, she lets him. It’s not as if he’s really paying attention anyway.

After ten days of this, Alison misses him too much. She seeks out her robot. It’s 3:15 AM, and she can’t sleep as usual, but maybe the Magister is resting. She might open the gleaming black lid of his coffin and find him recharging. Maybe he’ll wake up and hold her. Even if he doesn’t, though, perhaps the sight of his resting face, as golden and still and proud as Tutankhamun’s death mask, will remind her how to fall asleep.
And so she creeps down vaulted halls of stone to the Magister’s study and slips inside. It’s not quite dark in here, but definitely hazy. Brown, red, and yellow orbs bob against the embossments on the ceiling, clinking, as they shed a gentle candlelight. The Magister swears that the orbs are naught but artificial environments for a glow-in-the-dark fungus that feeds on helium. Alison knows the truth, though. Her robot is a wizard in his own mind, and he thinks of these as his flying crystal balls.

As she enters, the low, coffered ceiling of dark wood seems to float down toward her. The bookcases, lined with his dolls and skulls and magical paraphernalia, glow from track lighting on all their edges as they crowd toward her. The furniture, as round and plush as certain TARDIS cats, appears from the shadows, offering rest. Sweet old tobacco touches her nose. The entire room takes her in with the safety and stillness and softness of a hug.

But the Magister himself is neither still nor soft at the moment. He paces from one side of the room to the other. He traverses the narrow spaces between chairs and ottomans with a lithe, propulsive step. A cigar between his teeth juts forward and slightly up. Grey curlicues of smoke flow about him, physical manifestations of his restless power.

The Magister reaches the wall and spins in Alison’s direction. She moves behind a shelf full of his caricature dolls and pinches her nose against a sneeze. He told her that, when he was biological, he had loved cigars, particularly to tranquilize his spirits. He smoked so much that the bookcases in his study now retain the scent.

He gave up the habit when he became the Doctor’s robot, though, in deference to his inevitable spouse’s easily excited asthma. Then, when Alison moved in with the Magister, she and he agreed that he could smoke in private, as long as she didn’t have to deal with fumes, ash, or stains. He vowed discretion, and Scintilla helped him with a new ventilation system that dispersed smoke before it could even accumulate a smell.

But he never picked up another cigar. *I smoked because I worried,* he explained to Alison. *But now that I have my Dork family, I am satisfied.*

Well, that satisfaction is obviously broken now. Not only is the Magister smoking away, but he’s talking to people that Alison can’t see. “Hmm.” He stops short, ducking his head and tapping his chin. He momentarily compresses the arrowhead of his goatee. “Yes!” With a sudden cry, he raises one of his skinless, steel-jointed hands, pointing skyward. The cigar between his fingers now looks like an exclamation point. He’s not just a wizard, but a performer whose every deed requires a vaudevillian flourish. What’s he doing?

“You are quite right,” says the Magister to his unseen conversation partner. With a vigorous nod, he begins to walk again. His passage makes the autumn-colored orbs bobble against the ceiling. “It could be some problem with the neutron flow between the chip and the suprachiasmatic nuclei.” The loose shimmering stir of his skirts does not disguise how sharp he truly is. His tapered glass fingertips shear through the air; his stupendous nose arches forward to a beaky end; he moves his solid and compact body as if he is both the fencer and the foil.

“Indeed it’s an idea worth pursuing, Keller,” he says. “I shall take it under advisement — particularly since you are one of the precious few sensible individuals inside my head.” With a roll of his eyes, he puffs rapidly on his cigar.

Alison now understands what’s going on. He’s brainstorming ways to help her by talking to his other selves. Just as Alison has a bunch of Alisons in her head, so the Magister has a bunch of Magisters. As she has a mind library, so he has a mind palace, populated with all the people that he used to be. They refer to each other by notable pseudonyms that he used during each incarnation,
except for the current Magister, whom they call *Octavian*. Keller, who he’s talking to now, is from his third regeneration. Keller was a frenemy of the Third Doctor, who loved him so much that they used him as the model for the Magister’s current robotic form.

“Well, of course I’ve been consulting the others.” Switching around and starting another lap, the Magister stalks through a lingering cloud of smoke and gestures with his cigar-holding arm. “The Veneficus and Bruce were no help, though. The first blamed the Doctor as usual, even though my inevitable spouse has been working just as hard as I to find solutions.” The Veneficus is the fourth Magister, right after Keller, when he had used up all his lives. He existed mostly on spite and even tried to assassinate the Fourth Doctor. “Bruce attributed the chip’s failure to *the frailties of pathetic human flesh*, which was not constructive at all.” Bruce, the sixth Magister, possessed a human as part of a scheme to steal the Eighth Doctor’s regenerations.

“It has actually been Tremas and Septimus who have rendered me the most assistance,” the Magister continues. Another eye roll as he listens to some objection from Keller. “Yes, I am aware that you think Tremas is out of touch with reality and Septimus is only a useless ghost.” He holds up his hand and his cigar in warning. “However, Tremas’ mechanical inclinations are most useful, even if they do tend to be fiendishly complex.” Tremas, the fifth Magister, complicated the Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Doctors’ lives with impractical plots and a diabolical laugh.

“As for Septimus,” the Magister says, “he personifies the scant altruistic tendencies that I possess. His perspective reminds me that I do this not for myself, but for my Domina.” When Anima’s Eye of Harmony dislodged the Magister from Bruce’s body, the Magister became Septimus. He existed in a netherworld, ghost-like state. He gained full physical form to save the current Doctor and end the Time War. This action, however, annihilated him, so then the Doctor reconstructed the Magister as he is now.

For a moment, the Magister is silent. Then he ejects a harsh laugh. “Yes, Cat, I am aware that you are the premier of the multiverse,” he says at last, blowing out a stream of smoke that forms a pouncing cat. The Cat appeared when the Magister was infected with a virus that nearly made him turn into a wild feline. Though the virus is now in remission, it remains in the Magister’s system, affecting his actions and mannerisms. “I know you have a great opinion of your own wisdom. However, I doubt my predicament will be resolved if I receive beard scritches and ear rubs.” Evidently, like Imp, the TARDIS cats, and most other felines that Alison knows, the Cat thinks that the solution to any problem lies in appropriate petting.

The Magister thanks Keller for his help and bids him return to his research. Then he glances over his shoulder, as if someone else besides Alison has come in on him. When he sees who it is, he wedges the cigar in the side of his mouth and squats down. “If you’re looking for the Cat, Little Witch,” he says, “you just missed him. Please! Do stop jumping. You’re rattling the shelves.” He stands quickly and braces a shelf of handmade figures with one hand.

The Little Witch is the child he used to be, chaotic, outspoken, and affectionate. But something, about which the Magister remains vague, happened, and she died at the Gallifreyan equivalent of ten or twelve. Anyway, as the Magister adjusts dolls on his shelves, she says something to him. He laughs, shaking his head. “The Cat gave me much the same suggestion, my dear. However, no. The solution to this problem is not to be turned into a cat. First of all, I do that with my Doctor, not with my Domina. Yes, she owns me, but it is a different type of possession. Mine with the Doctor is one of transformation, while my Domina’s possession of me is one of...truth.

“What do I mean? Hmmmm, how shall I best phrase this? Peace, Little Witch — I gain peace.” The Magister’s voice becomes deeper as he sighs wistfully. He fidgets with other objects of power besides dolls, tossing the Marquis de Sade’s skull from hand to hand. [Alison, who tossed that into
the Crab Nebula a few years back, wonders how he retrieved it.] “In obeying my Domina,” he says finally, “I do what is good and true. I find my boundaries, my control, my power. Then I am unassailable and unimpeachable; no one will penetrate me, empty me, or occupy me. I have the sanctity of mind that I have always sought. Once I do her will, only then do I have my own once again. I do not expect you to understand.”

The Magister, head cocked, listens to the Little Witch. His voice sinks as he responds: “Yes. You’re right. Of course she would bring me joy if she played with me, and I would be most...most pleased if she were to possess — ” He closes his hand at the base of his throat, as if around an invisible pendant. “Perhaps you do understand then. But I cannot do that myself. She, my Domina, must be the one who does that. Yet she is already much burdened, and so I hesitate to ask her — “ Done with the skull, he now juggles without even looking at what he’s throwing. A box of Tarot cards, a handheld scrying mirror, and a wand of narwhal horn flip up and over his head, again and again.

Alison’s head — and then her stomach — whirls as she watches him. She has never seen him so fidgety. Yeah...he’s busy. She shouldn’t talk to him anyway; with his nervous energy and internal dialogues, he’d just increase her anxiety. She goes back to bed.

“Hold me fast, and fear me not,” Alison whispers into the darkness. It’s a line from her favorite tale, the story of Janet of Carterhaugh, who saves Tam Lin from murder by fairies. This command in particular has significance for her and her robot because that’s what they do with each other. They hold each other fast. Or at least they used to.

Alison looks at Imp, curled in a small black ball on her pillow. Imp falls asleep on almost any surface in a variety of contortions. Alison wishes she were a cat.

Better yet, she could be a robot like the Magister, who can shut himself off and enter an unconscious, disempowered state when he needs recharging. Or she could be a sentient machine like Scintilla, whose power source, an Eye of Harmony, never quits. Therefore Scintilla is always on, always energized, always talking. Alison sighs. Never mind. That sounds exhausting.

She lies on her back in the bed where she spends most of her days now, without motion, but without sleep either. When the Magister and Scintilla constructed her quarters, they filled them with books of fairy tales and Latin, all in golden bookshelves sealed with clear gloss. The Magister designed this room in the colors of fire that he said were Alison’s epitome. What fire? She has no spark anymore.

Alison folds her arms across her chest like a dead pharaoh. She rests in a bed fit for royalty, as ornate and fanciful as anything from one of her favorite fairy tales. By rights she should be enjoying a happily ever after. But she feels as if she’s trapped underwater or behind glass, drowning in shadows and silence from which there is no respite.

If she’s living a fairy tale, then it’s the one of Janet and Tam Lin and the fairies: a struggle for certainty, possession, and connection. Janet and Tam Lin even start their acquaintance with an ownership dispute. He says he owns Carterhaugh Woods. She says that her father gave the land to her, so it’s hers. Both turned on by the challenges and power plays, they have sex [consensually — Alison avoids the versions with rape], creating a mutual claim on each other.

Janet becomes pregnant and tells Tam Lin that she’ll keep the child only if Tam Lin is a human too. Tam Lin explains that he is, but the Queen of Fairies kidnapped him. He has been her pet for seven years, but that ends tonight, on Halloween. Either the fairies will kill him, or, if she has the bravery, Janet will win his freedom. He gives her instructions to do so, repeating the most important line: Hold me fast, and fear me not.
And Janet does. She rides out to Miles Cross at midnight and, when the fairy troops pass, pulls Tam Lin off his steed. She keeps him close as he struggles, changing shape: newt, adder, bear, lion, molten iron, burning coal. Finally she douses him with well water, turning him into his own naked self again. With the Queen of Fairies’ possession of him broken, Tam Lin now belongs to Janet and she to him. And they both live kinkily ever after.

When she’s in good spirits, Alison agrees with the Magister that this story is about two control freaks, Janet and Tam Lin, playing rather BDSM-like power games until they each get what they want: each other. Now, though, she thinks only of Tam Lin, trying to remain human, as the power of gloom pulls him farther away from the person he loves. She is Tam Lin, and the Magister is Janet; they vie for her life against a deathly curse of the fairies, the chief of whom is Harry, whose lies about the magic of Cyber tech brought them to this extremity in the first place.

“Hold me fast, and fear me not,” Alison murmurs again, but they’re just words without will, an enchantment without power.
Imagin-Harry Insinuates Himself

Chapter Summary

Alison has a nightmare in which Harry appears in her mind library. Fortunately the Magister is trapped in her bedroom, and everything works out. Snuggles ensue.

Alison goes into a less-than-conscious state. She finds herself standing in the octagonal atrium at the center of her mind library. A dank darkness fills the room, seeping through her pajamas. Even though she can barely see in the dimness, she can feel that everything is wrong. Somehow she knows that this is a dream, that is, her mind library as she fears it is, not as it actually is. But even the knowledge that it’s only a dream doesn’t make it better.

She notices right away that her light is gone. No glow emanates from her skin. No sparks fly from her hair. It’s as if she’s out of fuel.

And where is Clarissima? She should have greeted Alison. And why is it so dark in here? Casting her eyes toward the skylight, she finds it almost completely obscured by bird shit and mud. Rain drums on the glass; though it taps forcefully, it washes away none of the stains. “Disgusting,” Alison mutters, and the word comes out as a vaporous puff.

A ticking reaches her ears, as if a clock is slowing down. Time’s running out, she thinks. Then she realizes that it’s not a clock, but water. It’s dripping from the walls somewhere, hitting the floor. Glancing at the inlaid labyrinth by her feet, she sees Ariadne at the center, drowned in a centimeter of brownish water.

Alison goes cold with shock. This is her mind, her sanctum, and it should be warm and bright and tight. “But it’s cold and wet,” she says to herself. “Why is everything so...wrong?”

She hears movement on the other side of the main door, a rap of knuckles. “Hello! It’s me,” says a quicksilver voice, a laugh and a snarl both. “The one you love to hate and hate to love — more batshit than all the guano-splattered belfries of creation — your fondest and most diligent enemy. It’s me — Imagin-Harry, Rrrrrrrazor the Rrrrrrrussian — “ He rolls the Rs hard. “And Master of Madness!”

“No! You’re never mind-fucking me again.”

“Excuse me, but, in point of fact, I never used my psychic powers to manipulate you. It was only an attempt — the merest attempt! — to read your mind, which, of course, I should have known I couldn’t do because...wow.” Harry expels a long, low whistle, impressed. Then he bangs on the door, but experimentally, testing its strength. “You’re formidable.”
Alison folds her arms and glares at him through the door. She tightens her fingers around the haft of her vorpal weapon. Let him come. She’ll slice him in two.

“I can help you.” Harry’s voice drops. She tries to ignore him, but his words penetrate her attention like the drip of falling water. “I’m the Master of Madness after all, the multiversal authority on mental derangement. I cause it; I cure it; I even possess it myself. Oh yes, we’re quite intimate, me and madness.”

“Fuck off.” Alison shakes as the soggy air presses closer.

“We’re all mad here,” he says softly, “and you, my dear Dominatrix, are definitely deranged.” His words slide into her ears. Then somehow he himself slides through her defenses, materializing on her side of the door. He’s finely built and trimly suited, as sleek and stealthy as the motorized wheelchair that he sits in.

“I know what it’s like,” he continues, coming closer, his speech all soft and misty in the dark, “to lose the faculties you once held so dear.” His hazel eyes flicker, darker than the emerald drops in his ear, as he regards the rusty sconces and sodden banners. “I know what it’s like,” he says, his voice lowering, “to live like this — in a rotting metaphor — and I’d wish it on no one, particularly not you, my dearest foe.” He looks up at her with the serene and tender smile of her Magister in his mouth.

“Yes,” he says, giving the same nod that the Magister does when he’s about to will a certain future into existence. “I can help you, and I will. I’ll bring back your light; I’ll bring back your warmth; I’ll make you the indomitable Dominatrix once again!”

Harry smiles easily, widely, fully, and, for a moment, Alison understands why Bill trusted him in Dystopiaville. His confidence makes possibility sound like truth, and he has enough power — psychic power, willpower, batshit power, whatever — to translate his wishes into reality. “Yes,” he says again. “I am the Master, and you… You will thank me.”

The sound of leaking water swells and changes, becoming a hail. Blows reverberate outside, as if someone’s charging a battering ram against her mind library’s walls. She catches a glimpse of Harry’s face, as wild and tense as her own. He has no idea what’s going on either. Then the scene falls to pieces around her.

Alison lurches up from sleep. She’s not cold any more, but hot and sweaty, twisted in bedclothes that smell like her moldy mind library. She glances around, just to confirm that she’s awake. Yes, here’s her four-poster bed, her nightstand, her bookshelves set into the walls, her vanity with the story of Tam Lin etched in the mirror, and —

Someone’s in here with her! She sees a person fumble fruitlessly with the door knob, and she bites back a screech. “I am the Master!” he says, though not to her, his voice so harsh that it’s barely a whisper. “I! Not you!”

Alison relaxes. Ah, it’s the Magister, her robot. He runs his shoulder against the door with a dull thud, but it doesn’t budge. Well, that would explain the banging she heard. But what’s he on about?

“Tough shit, Master,” Scintilla’s voice answers from above. “I don’t care who you are. You don’t get to order me around. Just ‘cause I’m your TARDIS, you think you can tell me what to do? You’re so incredibly silly — always have been, always will be.” She chuckles. If she was here in her robotic form, she’d be shaking her head.
Scintilla goes on: “You have the most naive ideas about Time Dorks and their TARDISes. After all this time together, you still haven’t figured out who belongs to who and who’s in control. You think that I should obey you — me, the most brilliant TARDIS in the multiverse! Me, the master of chrono- and hypergeometry, the one who piloted you to your Doctor and then to Miss Alison and the rest of your Dork family. I’m the one who always knows what you need to do before it even reaches your conscious mind. Why should I listen to you?” She laughs again, longer and louder, at the mere thought. “I’m eminently more sensible than you are — “

Arching his neck, the Magister directs his speech to the ceiling. “Oh yes, you are most sensible indeed. You collaborated with Imp to entrap me in the quarters of my dear Domina when I should be in my lab, discovering a cure.” While Scintilla’s sarcasm runs loose with gestures and laughter, his is marked by quiet, precise enunciation.

“Miss Alison doesn’t want you hiding in your lab, fucking around with nanochips and programs!” Again, if Scintilla were here in robot form, she’d be up in his face, rolling her eyes and waving her arms at him. “She wants you with her, here, now! She even came into your study the other night to see you, but you were too busy talking to your selves to notice.”

The Magister drops his chin. “Oh… Dear me.” He deflates a bit then. As melodramatic as he is otherwise, his expressions of dismay tend toward compact understatement. Only in his whisper does Alison detect his distress.

“Me and Imp are more sensible than you are because we know how scared she is, and I know exactly what you have to do about it. So turn around; shut up; sit down; be a good robot, and hold your Domina fast. I’m not letting you out till you do.” Scintilla ends her broadcast.

“Scintilla…” the Magister says, more of a sigh than a reprimand. He presses his right palm against the chamber door, then his forehead against the back of his hand. His shoulders fall.

“Oh…” Tears come to Alison’s eyes. He’s as tired as she is, as hopeless and as lonely. He wants to be held fast just as much as she does. “Mi… Mi Magistre!” Her voice catches in her throat, so she coughs and tries again. “Mi Magistre! Please…” she says with a sniffle, reaching out for him. “I’m not angry. I just miss — just want — “

“I’ve been sorely remiss — “ He closes the space between them.

“But now you’re — “ She struggles to undo her legs from the wrinkled blankets.

“Deepest apologies, my dear. I hope that you might be — “ Pulling her free, he takes her into his lap and his arms.

“—Mine,” she says, now crying. “You’re here, and you’re now, and you’re mine, mine, mine, and you’ll keep me…” She hiccups. “—Keep me…” She can’t finish.

“Hold me fast, and fear me not,” he says, and his words touch her as strongly as do his hands.

“Yes,” says Alison. She subsides, her grip firm about his middle, as fast and fearless as he wishes her to be. Oh, he’s warm, and so is his voice, elastic and languorous enough to fall back into. And so she does, breathing out, giving herself to gravity and groundedness.

The Magister holds her like the earth and warms her like the sun and rocks her like the waves — elemental, deep, and sure. He modifies the ballad’s refrain, pulling it close about her, binding the two of them together: “Hold me fast, and fear me not. I’ll keep thee safe from harm.”
The Magister, frustrated with his inability to find a cure for her, talks Alison down into being his good Domina.

The Magister plucks Alison from her bed, and they retire to her reading chair by the walls made of bookshelves. He lowers into the blond-framed chaise longue. He shoves around oblong cushions, embroidered with smiling suns wearing wavy coronas, making a nest for him and her. The smell of old paperbacks drifts to Alison’s nose, and, as the Magister arranges his arms about her, so does the incense of tobacco.

Alison sneezes. How many boxes of cigars has he gone through since she first glimpsed him lighting up a few days ago? “You were talking to your selves the other night, weren’t you? I thought you usually did that like by thinking, not by actually using your voice.”

“I usually do, except when I am stymied. And I am stymied now. This chip malfunction has me — all of me! — at my wits’ end. I have been working night and day, and I have no idea why your implant should not be mitigating the aftereffects of your traumatic brain injury. Whence this two-week depressive episode? I don’t know! I — don’t — know!” The Magister shifts beneath her so quickly that she expects him to start juggling one-handed again.

“I think the Cat was right. Maybe I should rub your ears. It would calm you down at least.” Alison tilts her head back against his chest and giggles.

“Only if you did so precisely twenty-five times per ear and anti-clockwise only. Otherwise I’d bare my fangs.”

“You don’t have fangs!”

“Just because you have never seen them does not mean that I lack them,” says the Magister, deadpan. Beat. “—In all seriousness, though, there is one thing that you might do for me.” He glances away, hesitating.

Alison wonders if he wants her to do whatever the Little Witch suggested that he do himself, but he
said that only she, Alison, could do it. “Hey.” She takes his chin between her thumb and forefinger, turning his face toward her. “Don’t be scared. What is it? Just say it.”

He looks straight at her, and the golden lights in his eyes lower and intensify. “My dearest and most obedient Domina — give me my collar, please, I pray you. Possess me.”

Alison shivers deeply. So he wants to submit to her. “Oh. Ohhhhhhh.” She fingers the golden key on her narrow leather choker. She has worn it for years, long before she ever knew him, because of her affinity for Alice. Now, though, Alison’s key has a use beyond the symbolic. It goes into the lock on the Magister’s collar, which she keeps under her pillow when not in use.

“You needn’t take any responsibility for guiding or guarding me.” The Magister shakes his head emphatically. “I wish for nothing more than for you to buckle the strap and close the lock. There are few things that bring me back to myself, but...ah! The snap of the shackle into the cylinder is one such sound.”

Alison gives him a snuggle. “You know — that’s exactly why I was coming to find you — to see if you would hold me fast, let me be yours, and maybe...” She yawns. “—Maybe you could help me fall asleep. Haven’t slept well for days...”

He promises that he will. In return, Alison vows to hold him fast, to give him his collar, and to rub behind his ears. Laughing, he forbids the last. He’ll be entirely distracted by the sensation and unable to help her along to sleep. Therefore, if she wants his assistance getting to sleep, she won’t pretend he’s a cat.

“I don’t need to pretend. You are a cat. Best Kitty, right?” says Alison.

“That name is not yours to use!”

“I’ll say it if I want.” Alison sticks her tongue out at the Magister and whacks him lightly with a sun-embroidered throw pillow. She should just be able to admit that she wants him to force her to shut up, but she can’t. She knows that the ideal for kinky games is direct, specific communication at every step of the way. She has tried to extend that principle to all aspects of her life. Hell, she was the one who insisted on a companion contract on day three with the Time Dorks, making them agree to rules of respect.

But real life is messier than the ideal, and even the ideal can be hard to practice. Like I love you.
You’d think that would be the pinnacle of BDSM communication: frank and unequivocal. And yet… She doesn’t want to think of Bill’s face, so bright and expectant, folding into disappointment when Alison couldn’t speak.

Well, maybe if you’re a control freaky Time Dork, you just look your partner in the eye and say, *Possess me.* Alison can’t, though. She’s the master of her fate, the captain of her soul. *Invicta est* — *she is indomitable* — despite everything she’s gone through. She has survived because of her self-protective impulses, her ability to seal herself from harm. But, if she asks something of her robot, then she confesses her vulnerability. She can’t just open herself to him like that. So, because Alison’s too scared to tell the Magister that she wants him to hold her down and make her obey, she pesters him.

The Magister muffles a snort, confiscating the pillow from her. “Impudence ill becomes you. *Tace.*”

But Alison, chewing on the inside of her cheek, is having too much fun to stop. “Or what?”

“Or,” he says, looking down his nose and nearly succeeding at severity, “I shall pounce on you.”

That’s not an idle threat. The Doctor recently invented a cat-o-matic mode for the Magister’s remote control. Essentially it turns him into a very large, very strong, very smart, and very playful cat with opposable thumbs. Alison and Bill have seen him, when in cattitude, ambush the Doctor from the top of a library shelf. The Doctor shrieked, shattering a pane or two in the process, but was quickly subdued for a thorough nuzzling. Yeah, anyway, so the Magister could pin her very easily if he wanted to. [She wants him to.] “What?” she cries. “No! Bad kitty! Bad!”

He uncoils beneath her on the chaise longue. He twists his shoulders slightly, straightens his legs a bit, and then suddenly she has her desire. She’s pinned, but delicately. He leans over her, one knee on either side of her ribcage, holding her right wrist down with his left hand, his right hand spread about the back of her skull, cradling her. “Tsk tsk…” He shakes his head. “You should know by now never to use mere adjectives with me. I require superlative descriptors, whether positive or negative, in all circumstances.”

“Uuuuugh, fine. You’re the worst kitty ever, the most worstest, in fact,” says Alison. He flinches at her intentionally mangled grammar, and she snickers. “There — are you happy n — ?”

She can say no more, for, after putting up with her hitting his buttons for five minutes, the Magister finally presses one of hers. “*Tace,*” he says, laying one glowing glass fingertip, as violet as a flame’s heart, against the middle of her lower lip.
And she’s convinced that there must be an actual button there, just beneath her skin. At the very least there’s a sensor that, when activated, ignites something in her brain, and then she... Well, she can’t move. She lets her limbs go. The dense foam cushions hold her beneath; the Magister holds her above.

Now sweetly immobilized on the outside, Alison takes the same journey to stillness on the inside. She sinks down out of her hectic mind, shucking it like dirty clothes. Then she arrives here, at a pure and motionless place, where they’ve already stated so frankly what they want that words are a waste of effort. If she shifted, she would take herself away from him, but she can’t do that. He wants her here — *Possess me* — and she wants keeping, so he keeps her.

The Magister moves up along her core. “Obey me,” he says. He’s too close for Alison to focus on, but she knows that he’s smiling because his tone goes rich and golden. Though he smiles, he’s not playing anymore, just telling her, with an enviable candor and lack of pestering, what he wants. “No more jokes, no more speech — just be yourself. Be my good Domina, and be mine. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Y — “

“*Tace* — be still. You want to be my good Domina, don’t you?”

Alison nods vigorously.

“So then you’ll obey me, won’t you?”

Alison grins and nods.

“Ah, excellent. I knew you would. You are my good Domina, and you want nothing more than to do as I say and to please me, right?” Now that the Magister has what he wants, he pulls up and back a bit, closing his fist around her key.

Alison can’t even nod now, since the Magister’s hand is in the way. He pulls her choker forward gently by the key, and she follows. The key rings against the warm glass of his fingertips. Each crystalline sound fires within the tired, knotted neurons in her skull, loosening them with its clarity. Her breath is pulsing fast in and out her nose; she forces herself to slow down, taking longer draws of air. Be still, she tells herself, like your Magister wants you.
Alison can’t stay completely still, though, because of his hand at the base of her neck. He brings her toward him by the most vulnerable point: her throat, home to her trachea and jugular, her breath and blood. Just as he has entrusted her with the master Master controller that turns him on and off and basically governs his life, so she now lets him hold the essentials of her existence in his hand.

“You are mine,” the Magister says, his voice as hushed as she herself feels. “You are mine, and you do as I say. You are mine, and you hold your tongue till I let you speak. You are mine, and you heed me always. You are mine, and you defer to me. You are mine, and you give me the best of yourself. You are my dear, obedient Domina, and you are good, and you are mine, and I shall keep you fast.”

Alison weeps, smiling and shaking at the same time. A deep cold shudder rocks her, like starlight thawing the sadness at the core of a lonely comet. Yet it’s what she has wanted all along — to feel such a pain so that she may break out from her grief. She wraps her arms around him; he lets go of her key to do the same to her. Pressing the side of her face against his sternum, she listens to the sound of his double hearts and sighs.

Maybe she can’t sleep or eat or do anything she likes anymore, but she can do this one thing. She can obey her Magister and, in doing so, make him happy. He asks very little of her, only silence and compliance, neither of which require much effort. So of course she’ll be still. Of course she’ll follow his orders because, in doing something so small, she gains so much. She gains him, obviously, but he’s always hers. Most of all, she gains herself and her own still center.

“You know what I like best about having such a lovely, obedient Domina?” the Magister asks, running the back of his hand down her cheek again and again. His voice is sweeping and rolling, as mobile and enchanting as the smoke of his cigar. “It’s the ease with which I can remind you that you’re mine. I’ve studied enough and written enough and practiced enough to appreciate complicated games, elaborate equipment, expensive costumes, and specialized props.” That’s an oblique reference to the human activities of BDSM, in which they’re both well versed. She’s been studying it for over half her life and doing it for just under ten years. He’s done something similar with the Doctor for as long as they’ve been together; he’s also written a shelf full of academic books, monographs, and popular instruction manuals on the subject.

“Pfft!” says Alison, opening her eyes with a dismissive snort. It’s more of a sound effect than an actual word, so it does not technically violate tace. She has never liked all the tools of the trade, so to speak. No matter how modern kinksters try to spin it, all those racks and whips and restraints are still the same instruments with which White people held power over Black. Master and slave might be thrilling roles to play if you’re someone who’s had all the historical power. But she herself can never use such words and their tools. They bring along with them the history of her people, the truth, a pain and degradation in which joy should never be found.
“Well, yes.” The Magister acknowledges her disdain with a nod. “I may use such things with the Doctor, but I have no need of such caparison and accoutrements for you. I have but one word, and that word causes you to become what you truly are — that is to say, mine.”

Yes, Alison thinks again, drawing the darkness of the room about her like a blanket. My magic space robot, here to sing me to sleep… With the tears drying on her cheeks, she uses him as a pillow. Her eyelids close as lightly as his voice enters her ears.

“It’s such a simple enchantment,” the Magister says, caressing her face, “that its very simplicity belies how thorough and profound its effects are. I can silence your voice; I can restrain you into immobility; I can make you obedient to my whims. Then, when you are silenced, you turn inward and know your own mind. When you are still, you rest, feeling your place in the world. And when you do as I say, you discover what you want, which is this — this light, this void — this space, this brilliance — this clarity, this certainty…this peace.”

“Mmm-hmmm…” Alison hums in agreement, or maybe she just thinks it. She can’t really tell because she’s too far gone, whisked down the flow of her robot’s voice, to a clear and endless lake of sleep.
Chapter Summary

Alison follows the Magister's orders while he makes breakfast. She has a meltdown upon the state of her hair. Magister to the rescue!

Alison regains consciousness, her face squashed into a pillow damp with drool. She flips to her back. Orange and purple drapery hangs over her. Her robot put her to bed. “Imp!” she cries. “I slept! I actually slept!”

Imp lies on a square of sunshine from a door-size window, curled on her back in a C of comfort. At Alison’s call, she hops up, yawns, then flies on bat wings to Alison’s bed. “Prrrt prrrt!” She prances back and forth, tail and neck held high for Alison to pet. “[Of course you did! That’s because I sat on your head most of the night.]”

“Aw, thank you, Imp.” Alison scratches the cat’s pointy little head, and Imp’s entire body hums with gratitude.

“[Oh look — a toy!]] Imp attacks something under Alison’s pillow, dragging it out. It’s a thick black leather strap, lined with padded velvet. Each end terminates in a steel ring, a silver padlock hanging from one of the rings. Yes, Imp is playing with the Magister’s collar.

“Oh shit!” Alison’s skin gathers in cold clumps, and she touches her key choker. She promised to give him his collar last night, but she fell asleep before she could do so. He said she was his good Domina last night, and she was so happy because she thought she was, but here’s the proof that she’s not. She has disappointed him. She doesn’t fear any punishment from him — that’s not how the Domina and the Magister work — but it’s just that she hates to make him sad. “Hey, Scintilla,” she calls to the ceiling, “do you know where the Magister is?”

“Master, get out of the kitchen!” Scintilla’s voice echoes throughout her ship self. “Miss Alison wants you — now!”

“Domina!” The Magister appears in the doorway of Alison’s room. Ever since he started wearing louder and more drapey things, his previous black Nehru suits with white at the cuffs have been relegated to work clothes. So he’s all in old-fashioned black at the moment, with black gloves on [to protect his skinless mechanical hands], and a long apron white apron with DON'T KISS THE COOK; IT'S UNHYGIENIC on the bib. With a wooden spoon in hand and a smudge of flour on his
nose, he’s obviously been baking. “What’s wrong?”

“Your collar!” Alison holds it up. “I’m sorry. I must have been so tired that — ”

“[Who cares?]” Imp swats a few times at the padlock dangling from one of the collar’s rings. “[Put it back and pet me instead!]” She wraps her front paws around Alison’s hand, pulling it down, and then sinks her teeth into the collar.

“Oh!” The Magister, who has been holding the spoon like he’s about to fence with it, lets his arm fall. He smiles. “I thought you were in distress.”

“I am! I know how much you wanted it; I know you were looking forward to it, and I was totally intending to — Hey, stop chewing on that!” Alison says to Imp.

“[But I wanna play!]” Flapping her wings, Imp tugs, straining the collar between her and Alison.

“Imp!” The Magister snaps his fingers. “That is neither yours nor a toy. Leave it.” Imp holds her position. The Magister repeats himself. Imp flounces out of the room, muttering about cats who don’t know how to have fun.

Wiping his nose free of flour, the Magister enters Alison’s chamber, bearing the smell of curry on his robes. He leans against one of the spiraling bedposts and says that he’s very pleased that she has obviously slept well. He hopes that she will obey him as well this morning as she did last night because he wants to do something that will make her happy. Does she consent? The sparkles in his eyes are the same color as the mid-morning sunshine outside, and he looks like he might start juggling for joy.

Alison reminds him that, since she forgot his collar, she is obviously incapable of being his good Domina. The Magister, polishing flour off his sleeves with a corner of his apron, grins. “It does not signify at the moment. I make allowances for extenuating circumstances such as sheer exhaustion. You shall give me my collar when you are ready. Now, though, will you obey me? Don’t worry; I’ll ask of you nothing out of the ordinary.”

Alison, now motivated by her desire to please her Magister and by her insatiable curiosity, agrees. The Magister gives her the first set of instructions: to make her bed, select new clothes, take a shower, and get dressed. “Wait a minute,” Alison says as the Magister heads for her door. “You don’t need to tell me to do that.”
“Oh, of course not.” Turning around, the Magister shakes his head, his eyebrows bouncing.
“You’re much too prudent to need a reminder for those essential activities. In the same way, I too
never require my TARDIS and my cat to lock me in with my Domina before I realize how badly I
have ignored her. I would never commit such folly!”

Alison laughs. He has a point, as usual. When was the last time she did any of what he now
requires? She can’t remember, so it’s probably a good idea that his orders demand her basic self-
care. Clever robot.

The Magister returns to his baking, and Alison rushes to make herself presentable. She pulls off her
stale pajamas and pitches them in the hamper. Then, free from grimy clothes, she feels light and
fleet. She strips the bed and remakes it with wintergreen-scented sheets, slightly stiff from the
clothesline. Now her room smells zingy, just like Alison herself feels, and it’s an improvement over
the stench of old sweat and tears.

Heading for her closet again to pick out clothes, Alison catches sight of herself in her oval vanity
mirror. She often stops before the mirror to admire its border decoration: precisely etched vignettes
from the tale of Janet and Tam Lin, done by the Magister himself. This time, though, she halts in
horror.

There she is in the glass, narrow of face and limb, one sharp peaked eyebrow lifted. She has always
thought of her complexion as a medium brown, with a little red to boost it toward the warm end of
the spectrum, but she doesn’t resemble any sort of happy medium these days. Gauntness dwells in
the hollows of her cheeks. The delicate skin under her eyes, always shadowed, now looks saggy
and bruised. She looks as sick as she feels.

If she possessed the Magister’s or Bill’s skill with cosmetics, she could enliven her face at least,
but the drooping greyness extends throughout her flesh. She’s one hundred and seventy-five
centimeters tall when she’s well, but this depression has bowed her. Even with her explosion of
fine black curls zigzagging everywhere, she’s still reduced.

“My hair!” says Alison. She usually maintains it in a spherical puff, but now it’s just a dry,
missshapen blob. Her hair needs more than just a wash; it requires a trim of all the split ends and a
really good conditioning too. Then she should braid it, just to lock in the moisture and give it some
protection. And, of course, she should start wearing a silk cap again, especially if she’s going to be
lying around in bed like a slug. This is going to take a while to deal with properly, and she just
doesn’t have the stamina.

Alison slumps. She’s going to fail the Magister again. He gives her the simplest tasks in the world
to accomplish, but even those are beyond her. She can’t give him his collar because she’s too tired, and she can’t even clean herself up because of her hair. No matter what he says, she’s not able to be his good Domina. Alison leans on the vanity, her face in her hands, and cries.

“Dear me — have I asked too much of you?” The Magister, back again, touches her on the shoulder.

“My hair!” wails Alison, dashing into his arms.

“Sh sh sh, sh sh sh,” he says. He smells like flour and warm dough. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“It’s… It’s… It’s...crunchy!” Alison says between sobs. “And I’m bad, and I’m disobedient, and it’s all my hair’s fault.”

The Magister holds himself still for a second. “Domina carissima,” he says at last, “I know that you are distressed, and I’ll listen to whatever you have to say. Do please tell me how I can help you.”

Alison shoves her sobs back down her throat. She wipes her nose on the back of her hand. The Magister gives her his handkerchief, thinks for a second, then gives her another one. She expels the contents of her sinuses into both. He supplies a third, with which she dries her eyes and her perspiring forehead. Finally she answers his question. “Give me a haircut,” she mutters, snorting phlegm.

“Gladly,” he answers, “but why? How will that solve your woes?”

Alison explains, then widens her eyes. “Wait… Wow. You know how to do Black hair? How? Did the Stylist teach you?”

“Well, more precisely, she dared me,” the Magister explains. “Once we had done erotic activities, we thought that we would erase those horrible memories with a duel.” The Stylist lusted after the Magister when they were in school. Though the Magister knew he was ace, he wanted to make the Stylist happy, so they had sex. It was awkward and mutually miserable. With a sigh of relief, they returned to assassination games. “The conceit was that we would each learn enough of the other’s specialty so that we could deliver a subtle and mortal attack. So she tried to kill me by means of psychic power, and I tried to kill her — “
“—With a pair of scissors or something? You do realize that this gives me no incentive whatsoever to trust you with my hair, right?” Alison shakes her head, pulling away from him. She has been hugging him so hard that slight vertical imprints from his stays run down her chest.

“Well, then consider this.” The Magister puts up both pointer fingers like he’s about to teach her a lesson. “I had to master the basics and advanced techniques of washing, maintaining, cutting, and styling hair like yours and Avé’s before I could pervert such techniques to murderous ends. I am, of course, no Stylist, but I would excel at what you need done.”

Alison chuckles. “You are exceptionally weird. Only an ex-supervillain would think that talking about perverting techniques to murderous ends was reassuring.”

“And yet you are reassured, I see, and even cheered, judging by your sarcastic asides.” The Magister smiles. He moves his hand down her cheek and shares a lingering look with her. “Oh! You are naked. Here.” He undoes his apron and pulls it over his head, then removes his over-robe and gives it to her.

“Thanks.” Alison wraps the robe around herself. With puffed sleeves and the dark yellow of chrysanthemums, it’s not her style at all, but it imparts a bit of warmth. “You just noticed I was naked? How could you miss that?”

“I was rather more preoccupied by the fact that you were upset than by the fact that you were unclothed.” The Magister pauses, then cocks his head. “Are you unhappy with your body? Do you need my help in that regard as well?”

Alison smiles. Nakedness isn’t automatically sexy or sexual to him. It doesn’t invite him to stare at her and make her feel like she’s on display. Instead it prompts him to ask why she’s without clothes. He assumes nothing about her; he waits instead for her to tell him who she is. Well, he assumes that she’s his Domina, but she’s okay with that because it seems to be a term for the best of her, which she always wants to be. “No, I was just going to take a shower, silly! But then my hair betrayed me, and you popped in to see what was wrong.”

“Do just that then, and then I shall ensure that your hair commits no more treason. I’ll be in the kitchen when you are ready.”

“Thank you!” Alison calls over her shoulder as she goes to her en suite and the Magister back to whatever he’s making.
Alison gets a haircut from the Magister. The Dork fam has breakfast. The Magister gets his collar.

“Do I look okay?” Alison frowns in the mirror a few hours later. She’s taken a shower and gotten dressed. The Magister did her hair, from trimming to washing to oiling to braiding; it now runs in several neat, tight braids from her temples, over the crown of her head, to the nape of her neck. Of course, only the tails of her braids are visible, since he gave her a golden silk scarf, all sequined, and said, **Wear this.** She was about to tell him that he was the meretricious one, not her, but then she figured that it was probably a test. She wrapped it around her head and received a beaming expression of surprise in response.

“I certainly wouldn’t say **okay.**” The Magister makes short circuits behind her. She watches him in the mirror as he strokes his beard, evaluating her from different angles. He touches her sleeve, brushing it lightly with his fingertip. She can tell that he’s imagining her in something more interesting than a threadbare red *MAGIC SPACE ROBOTS* shirt [her favorite Web comic] and pale grey bellbottoms whose cuffs fray against the floor.

“I can see you mentally redressing me,” she informs him with a laugh.

“Well, yes,” says the Magister. Alison’s casual question has clearly catalyzed a serious consideration. “You look much more than okay,” he concludes at last. “You are brilliant and confident, and you demonstrate ninety-seven percent more bounce and squee than I have seen in the past seventeen days and fourteen hours since I operated on your brain. How marvelous!” He swoops his hands together in a resounding clap of satisfaction. He puts his arms around her from the back and pulls her against him, purring and head-butting and generally tickling her with his beard.

“Eeeeee!” Alison wiggles, rubbing her cheeks against his. “I’d better be getting some huge reward for putting up with you and your prickly whiskers.”

“I am the reward,” he says.

“Where’s my Alisonshine?” Bill’s voice sings out from another room. A lively, lilting symphony skips through the air. Bill’s wheelchair has sound effects for all moods and occasion, and Bill uses
them expertly as punctuation.

“—And so is your Heliantha,” the Magister adds.

Bill arrives in her aerodynamic, rocket-like power wheelchair. She bends forward, her body a question mark, as she zips eagerly into the future to learn everything she can. All the chrome fittings on her chair shimmer like her iridescent dress of horizontal rainbow stripes. When she sees Alison, she clicks a button on her joybox, and a jangle of wind chimes accompanies her: the sound of gladness. Her thick curls twist around her face, springs of energy, and her eyes and her mouth are wide with happiness. Okay, well, maybe she does forgive Alison after all for not saying love.

Alison and Bill rush together, Bill standing from her chair to twine her arms around Alison. “Wow, what a scarf,” she comments, rising from her chair and hugging Alison with one arm as she pets her head with the other. “And nice braids.” She tugs the end of one poking out from under the head wrap that the Magister loaned Alison. “The Stylist did it, yeah? Thought she and Galleia and Lakis were on Seneschal Five or wherever.”

“She is,” says Alison, hugging Bill back. “The Magister did it.”

Bill’s eyebrows pop up as she regards the Magister, who’s wondering where their inevitable spouse is. “Wow! Does everything, doesn’t he? You’re really shining today, Alisonshine, with all the sequins and stuff.” She gives Alison another squeeze before resettling herself in her chair. “My shiny, snuggly star!” she says with a giggle.

The Magister whistles for the Doctor. “Here, Doctor, Doctor!”

The Doctor, pallid and gangly, appears, caroming off the door jamb. They wear a Victorian coat and tails on the top, a fluorescent pink bubble skirt with silver net leggings on the bottom. “Tada!” With arms out, they loosen their fingers wide in one of their favorite gestures: jazz hands. “You rang? Waaah!” The force with which they spread their arms overbalances them. Flying forward, they flail, saving themselves with a neat series of twists and flips that might actually be intentional.

The Doctor hurtles toward the Magister, hitting their inevitable spouse’s shins hard enough to make him wobble. Alison winces. “Doctor!” gasps Bill. “Prof! Are you okay?”

Silence. Alison opens her eyes. The Magister looks down at the Doctor, who wraps both arms
around his calves. They push a thin grey lock of hair out of their morning blue eyes. They speak in
the world’s gravest voice, belied by the world’s widest smile: “Really, my dear Master, we simply
can’t go on meeting like this. People will talk, you know!”

The Magister raises his chin regally, his beard pointing skyward. “Let them talk. For I am the
Master of Ham and Cheese, and the world is my stage. The masses of humanity are my
groundlings, the stars my spotlights, and there are — no limits — to my — vaudevillainy!” He
closes his eyes and lets his sonorous voice ricochet throughout the room.

“I’m impressed.” Alison applauds, then turns to Bill. Humor is great for disguising guilt, anxiety,
and other emotions you’d rather not be having. “Are you impressed?”

“Oh yeah, definitely.” Bill nods. “Too bad you can’t eat your words, Prof, ‘cause that amount of
ham and cheese could make breakfast quiche for like fifty people.”

“I never eat my words,” says the Magister, smirking, “because I’m always right.”

“You never eat your words,” counters Alison, “because they’re made of hot air, which you’re full
of.”

“Whereas me…” says the Doctor, hopping up and presenting themselves with a half bow, “I’m
always going off half-baked. But I think that’s better than being overdone, don’t you? It’s like
biscuit dough — better raw than cooked.”

“Heeeee!” Bill lets out a laugh with a squeal. “You are so overdone, Doctor. You’re practically
Time Dork flambé!”

The Doctor whips a tuning fork from one of their many pockets; a sand dollar, a lint-covered
chocolate truffle, and a mascara brush follow. They jab the fork at the Magister’s belly, though the
Magister’s stays protect him. “What are you doing?” the Magister asks, vibrating with laughter.

“Well, you’re obviously done,” says the Doctor innocently, “so I’m sticking a fork in you.”

“En garde!” Wielding his wooden spoon, the Magister starts fencing with the Doctor. Their match
soon takes them out of Alison’s chambers and into the hall.
The Magister and the Doctor duel throughout the house. Alison and Bill, cheering on their respective Time Dorks, follow. Because the Magister and Scintilla have vastly different tastes in decor, the interior of Scintilla’s ship self is split in two. Alison’s quarters balance on the boundary between the two halves, and the Magister chases the Doctor into Scintilla’s side first. The two thrust and parry through spare, lofty rooms filled with pastel rainbow drapery. Glass crystals cut the vast natural light into small spectra. Cool, fresh air blusters through the open windows, sending a rainbow tapestry around the Doctor’s legs. When they trip, Scintilla orders everyone out of her side. The Dork fam follows the fight back into the Magister’s echoic hallways and dim, Gothic clutter.

The Doctor, wheezing with laughter, makes a break for the living room. Incongruously Earthling and rather 1970s in design, it satisfies the curiosity of any strangers at the front door who may peer further in. Accelerating on the moss green carpet, the Doctor launches past the Magister’s dark old desk, stacked with specimen jars and scrolls. They trip on a skull-engraved andiron and grab for the mantelpiece. As they do so, they skew the mirror above the fireplace. The Magister follows, adjusting the mirror without stopping, then clearing a worn yellow stuffed chair in one leap. Alison and Bill hang back by the bay window and the hall through which they entered.

The Magister pounces, flattening the Doctor backward onto a doily-draped sofa. He pulls the Doctor’s heavy-duty inhaler from one of his pockets and announces that this is the end. Then he drops the breathing mask over the Doctor’s mouth and counts time for them so that they can respire regularly and calm themself. Indeed it is the end, for the Doctor soon gives thumbs up, signaling that their asthma has gone.

Then everyone repairs to the breakfast nook, where it’s always Halloween. Above the black wood wainscoting, dark crimson wallpaper prickles with thorn-entwined skulls. Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor sit down at sandstone slabs, rough like cat tongues, left from the Magister’s days as a carver of tombstones. Bill drives her wheelchair up to the head of the table, which is an actual coffin lid, polished to reflectivity. An iron chandelier lurks overhead in which skeletal birds guard eggs of light bulbs. It smells like turmeric and cardamom in here, a bright, layered smell. As always, Alison wonders how much of this reflects the Magister’s actual aesthetics and how much his love of ham and cheese. Come to think of it, the two are probably indistinguishable.

Anyway, there’s a bit of everything on the coffin smorgasbord. The Doctor supplies a goat-cheese frittata. They confess that Bill cooked it and they just put the basil on top because they still don’t trust themself with kitchen appliances after the Cling Film Disaster of 2007. Fortunately, their other contribution, a syrupy, piquant cold-brew drink called dossessia, required no special machines to make.

The Magister offers beans and toast, boiled eggs, sliced fruit, granola, coffee, and hot tea. He has also whipped up pomegranate and clementine yogurt and cornbemverine. This delicacy, which the Magister was baking earlier, is a savory, almost undercooked loaf with lots of little bemverinus, or
beetle-like things, in it. You dunk it in the nectar of the flower that the bemverinus feed on, and the sweetness of the nectar brings up the nuttiness of the bread. After reviewing the menu, the Magister hopes that he has made something that will please everyone.

There’s such a variety of food because the Magister and Bill can now eat again. The Doctor recently invented external stomachs for them, slim pewter cases that clip to their belts, connecting invisibly to their guts by tubes. Bill, who has been running on rechargeable batteries ever since she was partially robotified, no longer needs to content herself with the mere smells of Alison’s food. She can consume her own! And the Magister can again enjoy his own cooking. In any event, half the Dork family are still figuring out what and how much they can digest, so meals have been wide-ranging as of late.

Everyone finds something to satisfy their appetite. Alison does not want beetles for breakfast, so she trades them with Bill, who dislikes the pomegranate arils in her single scoop of yogurt. Now Alison enjoys a huge heap of pudding-like cornbemverine with surprising squirts of pomegranate juice. Bill says that bemverinus in yogurt taste like citrus ice cream with sugar strands. The Doctor slurps ten sloppy slices of toast, topped with butter, raspberry jam, beans, and slices of egg. The Magister, meanwhile, has only a shot glass of dossessia, his eyes fixed on the thorny curlicues on the wallpaper. Since his reconstitution as a robot, he didn’t eat for years, so it’s still a novelty verging on the transcendent.

The Doctor tells about the latest installment of their universal tour for Bill and other Dystopiaville refugees. First they weathered a fierce storm in Rapa Nui, and half the tour group got too sick to see any moai. The other half, however, swore that they saw human-size turtles, but the Doctor thinks they were probably aquatic Silurians.

They had better luck when they visited the Terracotta Army. Zheng, cousin of the Doctor’s Weeping Angel friends Patience and Verity, regaled the group with first-person perspectives on thousands of years of Chinese history. He also cracked everyone up with stories of the pranks he and his brothers pulled on annoying tourists. Their flapping hands nearly clipping the chandelier, the Doctor declares that they quite like teaching. The professorial life offers endless thrills and chills!

As for Bill, she says that, now that she has been on this Earth for seven months, she should be making herself useful like Alisonshine. Alison, Bill points out, develops syllabi for the Magister’s classes and writes paragraphs for the Latin I students to translate. Not only that, but she’s also organizing a club to introduce Black girls to the awesomeness of dolls that look like them. Compared to Alison, Bill feels like an underachiever.

That’s why Bill plans to volunteer at the Center for Black Women’s Experience, which she just discovered a few blocks from where she and the Doctor live. She wants to reorganize their lending library of science fiction and fantasy. She’s drafting an E-mail to the library director, offering her
organizational services. She’ll send it soon when she finds the right words. How can someone who inspires people to revolution with her frank, heartfelt speeches, improvises riffs on classic poems, and writes beautiful space fairy tales ever believe she could have the wrong words? Alison, whose tongue and nose have turned yellow from chasing the last cormbemverine crumbs from her bowl, has no idea.

Bill spends much of the meal watching Alison like the meaning of life is in her eyes. In between spoons of yogurt, she puts her hands on her head and emits little sighs, smiling so deeply that her smirk brackets show. Tears slip from her eyes as she proclaims her joy at Alisonshine’s improved health. Alison would love the Center for Black Women’s Experience’s library! She should come and see it! How about tomorrow?

Alison laughs and shakes her head. “Don’t be fooled by my makeover. I may look better, but I’m really not. In fact,” she says with a yawn as she pushes away her empty plate, “I think I’m reaching my limit of fun for the day, and it’s only 11:30 AM. Sorry — I’m still sick, and no one knows how or when — or even if — I’ll get better.”

“There’s no if. You will get better.” Bill presses her wonderfully bold and curving lips together. There’s a slight pout of determination in the set of her full, strong jaw, and she has all the strength of the Magister, the Doctor, or Harry. The certainty and power of her convictions reshapes reality. “Help will come,” she insists. “He’ll come; he’ll know what to do. Where there’s life, there’s hope, yeah?” She repeats the motto of Razor’s Resistance and the Dystopiaville revolution. If only Alison could share that belief...

The Magister stands. His Domina grows tired, he tells the Dork fam; they must let her rest. So Bill unplugs her external stomach and gives Alison one last snuggle, whispering to her lovely star that help will come if she just has faith. The Doctor, still sticky with jam around the edges, gives a big squeeze around the waist to the Magister, then squashes Alison into the hug too. Then they blow a bunch of kisses that smell like dossessia, waving heartily with both hands, till they and Bill are out the door.

The table is cleared, the leftovers stowed, and the kitchen cleaned. The Magister beckons Alison into the living room with a cock of his wrist. “And now,” he says, “shall your obedience be rewarded, Domina carissima.”

Alison yawns. “Oh! Sorry about that. I feel like I should be kneeling for my knighthood or something. I know you can go down on your knees for days, but that makes my shins hurt. Patellas weren’t made for sitting on.”

“You need not genuflect to be granted honor.” The Magister puts one of his hands on the side of Alison’s face and smiles at her in silence for a few seconds. Then he lowers himself into one of the
moss-colored overstuffed chairs. Balancing his left ankle on his right knee and his elbows on the armrests as he interlaces his fingers, he turns the worn upholstery into a throne with his proprietary posture. “Go.” A jerk of the head toward the hallway that leads to her chambers. His eyes are filled with light, almost completely golden. “Bring me my collar.”

Alison, moving for her room, stops by a brass standing lamp with a lace-edged shade. She has never noticed it before, but those are definitely stylized cobwebs woven into the trim. Well, they go with everything else in this surreptitiously Goth room. She smiles as she addresses the room’s flamboyantly Goth decorator: “For someone who’s supposedly submitting to me, you’re awfully bossy.”

“I no longer believe in aut regnere aut servire.” The Magister cites the maxim he once followed: Either rule or serve. “It’s regnere atque servire.” He emphasizes the conjunction: Rule and serve.

“—Or,” says Alison, crossing her arms, “if you subscribe to certain theories of BDSM, which I kind of do, regnere ut servire or servire ut regnere.” Rule in order to serve or Serve in order to rule. “By ruling, you may be serving someone else. Or, by serving, you may rule someone else.”

“Just so,” the Magister agrees. His fuckin’ ridiculous eyebrows write their own alphabet of glee in their arcs and curves upon his forehead. “Now...my collar.” Now he stands, spine loose and ready, but straight and attentive, his hands behind his back.

Alison laughs. “Of course. My reward for obeying you is the privilege of making you happy. Collar time!” She returns in less than thirty seconds, waving his collar over her head triumphantly. “Here it is! Finally!”

The Magister laughs, closing his eyes and tilting backward at the waist. “Ah, mea Domina obsequentissima!”

Alison puts her fingers right under the Magister’s nose and snaps them. He gets the Doctor’s attention like that on occasion; in fact, they appreciate it when he literally snaps them out of a tangent and back onto track. Anyway, he knows what it means: Obey me — now.

Her robot heeds at once. He brings himself back upright as if she’s pushed a button on his remote control. His mouth slightly open, his brows up, he watches her for his next cue.

Alison points straight down at the carpet, which, padded underneath, is not just as green as moss,
but as plush too. The Magister nods, acknowledging her, then goes to his knees. He folds his legs beneath him, sitting back on his haunches. He laces his fingers loosely before him and declines his chin, as smoothly as a machine that had been engineered to bend and compact itself thus.

“Mmmm,” says Alison. “Meus Magister obsequentissimus.” My most obedient Magister. He assumes this deferential position under his own power, and that choice imbues his submission with all the more of him. She witnesses his strength in the broad curve of his back, his precision in the exact arrangement of his limbs, his joy in the purr that rumbles out from his core. All of this he presents to her in a form as clear and logical and supple as an etymological chain. And it’s beautiful.

She raises his chin with one hand and carefully encircles his throat with his collar. She runs the stainless steel loop of the lock through both rings and snaps it shut. He quivers, as if the sound itself effects some profound change — and perhaps it does. And then he is still.

Now there’s only one key that can open him: the golden one on the choker around her neck. She takes the lock, solid and strong and cool, into her palm, pulling him up and toward her with it. “Mi Magistre — es meus.” Magister, you’re mine. She can’t remember how to say the next sentence in Latin, so she reverts to English. “Never forget that.”

He nods. “Semper.” Always.

She gets a sudden inspiration. “Wear this till I’m well, so you’ll remember who you are and never lose yourself in your lab again.”

“Maximo cum gaudio!” he replies, purring so loudly that she can hear the trill under his words. With the greatest of joy! He smiles so widely that she feels it all through her body. It warms her up from the center out. It dazzles her eyes with its brightness. It rings inside her with its reverberations. It’s the sort of thing that usually makes her bounce and squee.

—Except she can’t. She can’t move because he swings her up into his arms. She gasps a bit as he binds her against him enough to compress her lungs. There’s no chance that she can slip loose now and no chance that she wants to. She can’t even squee because she hasn’t enough breath to talk. He said, Possess me, but now he’s the one who has her. He holds her so fast that he wrings tears from her eyes, and this is the reward of their obedience.
Someone Will Come

Chapter Summary

Alison returns to the depths of depression. Galleia and Lakis call, frustrated with the Stylist's strict control on their movements. The Stylist tries to cheer up the Magister, who's upset that he hasn't yet fixed Alison's chip problem. The Stylist promises that she will come help as soon as she is done with her mission.

But even obedience can’t make her happy. The next day, Alison succumbs again to the weight of the depression. She slogs through hair care, a shower, and a change of clothes, just to please the Magister, but the whole production takes two hours. With that done, she retires to the reading corner in her chambers. She’s still spent from yesterday’s breakfast and socializing.

Ever since her chip malfunctioned, Alison has lost some of her mental quickness. Her thoughts become tangled in the fibrous fog filling her skull, never reaching their destination. Twenty-four hours after the fact, she realizes that Bill wasn’t just saying, *Help will come* yesterday. She also promised, *He’ll come. He will come.*

Who will come then? Who’s he? Does Bill have secret health care provider friends who would be able to help her? Alison, now languishing on her bed, startles upright with an idea. Was Bill referring to the Twelfth Doctor?

Alison makes herself lie back down. No. First of all, the Dork family deplores the Twelfth Doctor and would never trust them with anything, least of all Alison’s life. Second, the Twelfth Doctor, like the Doctor of the Dork fam, goes by third-person plural pronouns. It can’t be them.

Who is it then? If Alison’s brain was working as it should, she’d have some idea of this mysterious person who will fix everything. But she doesn’t. It had better not be another Time Dork, she thinks, lying back and counting the spirals on her bedposts. There’s enough drama around here already.

Alison may have had her fill of interstellar intrigue, but no one tells Galleia and Lakis. Scintilla alerts Alison that the sisters are on video chat, bursting with urgent exciting news from their mission on Seneschal Five. Of course, everything’s thrilling for two voyagers from ancient Atlantis who are still stunned by the marvels of modern invention. Anyhow, Alison welcomes the distraction. She asks Scintilla to put them on.

A large flat screen lowers from Alison’s bedroom ceiling. Galleia and Lakis’ images, larger than
life, clarify before her. Galleia has drawn glimmery black dagger blades along the angle of her cheekbones. Her necklace, a silver articulated snake skeleton, unsheathes its fangs by her left ear. As for Lakis, she’s more concerned with cuddling than intimidation. She parts her thick black hair in the center and holds it back from her face with a band that has kitty ears.

“You wanna hear about our latest adventures? The Stylist tried to keep us cooped up in here while she went off on some assassination mission,” says Galleia, gesturing to the interior of Reeve, where she lives with the Stylist and Lakis, “but fuck that!” She whips off her wig — a tiered confection of blond curls — and tosses it aside for emphasis. She keeps her head shaved, so, now that she’s bald, her makeup seems to intensify in brightness till she’s ready to fight or fuck. “We totally circumvented that shit. You can’t keep Atlantean royalty locked up like kids.”

“Hi, Alison!” Lakis waves. “We’re in Aluet, which is on Seneschal Five. Stylist Mom is doing a mission, and we’re doing shenanigans.” She pronounces the word with a wicked gleam in her eye. “Stylist Mom didn’t want us to go out without Reeve,” she continues, “so Reeve went with us. Then we weren’t without her — ‘cause we’re clever.” She nods.

Alison chuckles. “Wait... Stylist Mom?” The sisters, whose biological parents were clueless at best and abusive at worst, apparently see the Stylist as a maternal figure. “So how’s Aluet?”

“Everyone is the same,” says Lakis. “They’re all short and brown and black-haired. It’s really weird — not that they’re all short and brown, but that they all look the same. Well, almost all of them. The ones who aren’t short and brown and black-haired aren’t from here. There aren’t very many of them. That’s because xenophobia runs high here. That’s what Stylist Mom says. She says we have to be careful and lie low. But we look like we’re from here, so I think it’s okay.”

“Um...well...” Alison pauses, wondering how to explain this so that Lakis can understand. “You might look like you’re from Aluet, but that doesn’t mean that you know all about its politics and xenophobia. I think that’s why the Stylist wants you to be careful. She doesn’t want you to get involved in things that you don’t know all about.”

“Eh, we did our research.” Galleia gives a dismissive wave of the hand. “We also got an extensive lecture from the Stylist — like we’ve never been in politically precarious places before! We’re ambassadors,” she declares, lifting her chin. “Political precariousness is our business.

Galleia either ignores or doesn’t hear Alison. “So we hit the town,” she continues, picking up the story from Lakis, “and I completely femme fataled the Corving of Aluet’s eldest scion. Then I saved their life — in a devastatingly dramatic manner, of course. So now they’re thoroughly smitten, entirely in my debt, and therefore at my disposal for future use.” She stretches both arms straight before her and cracks her knuckles as she imagines the possibilities.
Theirs speech overlapping excitedly, the sisters narrate their latest shenanigans. Blending in with the dominant ethnic group by virtue of their features, they took advantage of their anonymity to learn more about Aluet. A free Belvidaridian dance competition, celebrating the artistry of Aluet’s most populous minority, caught their eye. They headed to the arts complex along with crowds of Aluetans.

In the plaza before the arts complex, protesters pressed close, denouncing the dance competition as *unwholesome, unhealthy, and unhygienic*. With her regal stride and queenly glare, Galleia intimidated the protesters, but others fared worse. Galleia and Lakis rescued two kids — teenagers, really — who were being shoved and teased by protesters. And that was how they met Javvy, the older, and Ne-Selsi, the younger, the Corving’s scions, who had snuck out to defy their parent’s prohibition of *filthy* Belvidaridian entertainment.

Alison tries her hardest to follow Galleia and Lakis’ shenanigans, but she can’t stay awake. Her head keeps tipping down. She jerks herself upright again, then pitches forward a second later. She interrupts Galleia and Lakis, saying that she needs to nap. Galleia and Lakis sign off, promising to visit when they’re off Seneschal Five. Alison, who’s still recovering from yesterday’s small gathering, hopes that the extended Dork fam stays in outer space for a good long time. Then she can recover peacefully.

The Magister, though, disagrees. He wants the Stylist here now. Alison finds this out when, after about seven hours of less-than-consciousness, she goes to his study to hold him fast. He is, however, otherwise engaged, conversing with a life-size holographic projection of the Stylist. He wants her to come back to Earth at once.

The Stylist watches the Magister pace and plead. Her hologram stands right in the middle of the Magister’s coffin, but she just glides through it with a sure, strong step. She looks severe, with a triangular face and inward-slanting eyebrows, yet she floats through life with airy self-possession.

“Dude,” she says to the Magister. Her masses of kinky dark brown hair float out around her head. “Seriously — no need to get the morbs.” The muted light from the sunset spheres overhead and the edges of the bookshelves gives her insubstantial form a witchy glow.

“So one of your partners is under the weather.” The Stylist waves a hand, tossing her head. Alison imagines the fragrance of her hair conditioner — something like honey, lilacs, and freshly spilled blood together — fluttering through the air with that gesture. “Alison’s a daisy! She’ll bounce back in no time. Besides, if we’re playing suffering Olympics, you can’t have it worse than me. You wanna know what my darling daughters did?” She has been plotting for years to kill the Corving of Aluet, she tells the Magister. She goes off on a rant that Alison can’t really follow. Somehow the fact that Galleia and Lakis have befriended the Corving’s kids negates the Stylist’s entire plan.
“Argh! Those girls!” The Stylist’s hair streaks in zigzags from her head, like cartoon lightning bolts. “They give absolutely zero fucks, larking around the city when I told them to stay put, leaving me to think that they’ve gotten shanghaied or something. Then they waltz on in, smirking like butter wouldn’t melt, just glowing with pride about how they totally trashed three years of planning. Them and their...their...their compassion — and their smarts — and their infuriating...” Her mouth twitches for a few seconds as she searches for a word. “—Their infuriating humanity! If they know how much of a wringer they put me through — “

“Avé!” The Magister uses the Stylist’s first name, the name that only he, her best friend, may say. He holds out his hands to her image. “You know what it’s like then — to have someone in your care and yet be unable to hold them fast. You know what it’s like...to fear...that you have lost — “

“Whoa there, Koschei.” The Stylist, who answers to no master, calls the Magister by the nickname of his school days. “You’re a drama monarch if there ever was one. Alison isn’t anywhere close to kicking the bucket. Wait... Is she?”

The Magister’s arms fall to his sides. “No, but her condition is intractable. The Doctor can do nothing for her, nor can I.!” He drives his fingertip against his breast. “I, who swore to hold her fast against all harm, now cannot keep her. I keep thinking that I must rectify something about the neutron flow, but I cannot tell what. I have increased it, reduced it, parsed it according to Juvan’s formula, yet nothing works.”

He moves toward the Stylist, trying to take her hands. But of course he cannot grasp them, and his fists close on nothing. “Come back — now. You must have learned some arcane piece of knowledge in all your travels and consultations and intrigues and surveillance. Tell me what you know. Bring me what I need. My Domina...” He starts the sentence, then seems to forget where it was going. “My Domina!” he says again, his voice going up in pitch. “She is... She is...mine. My Domina.” One of those catlike sobbing sounds rises in his throat, but he aborts it.

The Stylist shakes her head, her hair loosening into waves that soften about her face. “You’re really cut up about her brown study, aren’t you?” She steps forward, peering at the Magister. “Are you...crying? I thought all your tears am-scrayed when you were remade as a robot and you couldn’t cry for real anymore.”

By the light of the glow-in-the-dark spheres on the ceiling, the Magister lowers his eyebrows at the Stylist. Alison sees that, though he may no longer weep, the fierce tears still flicker in his eyes as sharp golden sparks. “I may be mechanical, but I am still true. Do not insult me by implying otherwise.”
The Stylist sighs. “Aaaaah, fuck. No. I didn’t mean it like that. Me and my fucking big mouth. I’m sorry. You’re real, whether you cry tears or not. And I know why you’ve got the fantods. It’s the threat — the prospect of suddenly maybe not having someone who’s so dear — You want to keep them from harm, but —“

“You know then. You understand.” He nods, as if settling everything in his head. “So come. Come now.”

The Stylist frowns. “I can’t — not right this instant. The Corving is still alive, and my contacts and I need some contingency plans. But I’ll come just as soon as I can, okay?”

“Great,” says Alison under her breath, shutting the Magister’s study door. “That’s exactly what I need: more insufferable, know-it-all, superpowered aliens.”
An Insufferable Alien Arrives

Chapter Summary

You know it was coming, folks. Harry -- Razor -- Alison's closest thing to an enemy -- makes a fabulous debut from Alison's closet, along with his sentient scorpion service furniture Kitty. Harry claims he's here at Bill's behest to "fix the Dominatrix." Kitty wants to be friends with everyone. Alison wants them to fuck off. Fortunately Harry passes out pretty soon.

There is no such thing as sleep, especially not now. Alison, back in her bedroom after going to the Magister’s study, lies in blankness, as empty and useless as the night against her eyeballs.

A curious wheezy noise flickers for a second in the vicinity of her closet.

The Magister gave her this chip to keep her safe and whole and happy. She trusted him with her health, her future, and indeed her whole life, as she always has, and he did not come through.

The sound increases in volume. It sounds like someone trying to hum through a partly plugged horn — buzzy, cramped, and harsh.

She thought that her robot could heal everything, fix everything, make everything better, just as he always has, but he can’t. He has no solutions, nor does the Doctor or the Stylist. Between them, the three Time Dorks must know most of the answers in the universe. If they have no ideas — well...then...there are none.

She’s out of hope then. She’s going to be like this forever, obeying the chip’s endless command of depression. Under the duress of its programming, she’ll be locked into compelled obedience, and she’ll never be safe or whole or happy. Nothing and no one in this universe can help her, and it’s not like she can just import some specialist from the universe next door to —

The grinding noise cranks up about fifty decibels. A crackling bang occurs, cutting off the wheeze. The light goes on in Alison’s closet, showing shadowy forms within the louvered doors. Alison’s heart speeds up, ready to run away, but, as usual, she goes numb in the face of danger and just stares.
The closet opens with a flourishing clatter, and the star of the show balances with one hand on each of the folded doors. A luxurious mantle of long-haired, reddish black fur slips to the floor. From beneath the billows of the wrap appears a slight, angular figure clad in something flowy and clingy that appears to be made of blood-infused ice. The spikes of dyed crimson hair, the point of the matching goatee, the cant to the narrow hips, and the drumming of pointed nails on the door frame — *tummety tum, tummety tum* — all suggest a performance that’s either going to vamp you or slay you...or both. “Rejoice!” cries Harry, “for I have arrived!” He steps from Alison’s closet, leaving dented wire drawers and a pile of downed hangers behind him.

He stumbles on a pair of Alison’s jeans, then catches himself with a small step forward. He’s wearing black vinyl boots with short stabby heels and laces up over the knees. As he bends over with a cough and a shiver, Alison realizes how much frailer he is than he used to be. The mica-flecked foundation across his long and narrow cheeks only highlights the sagging flesh beneath his eyes. Time went quicker in Dystopiaville. It’s been seven months for the Dork fam, but how long for him?

Harry assumes a nonchalant pose, one hand propping himself against a folded door. Only a split-second contraction of his facial features hints at the amount of pain he’s in. “Vortex manipulation,” he says in a low voice, like he’s imparting a secret. He winks, and his dark hazel eyes flash with the same fiendish spark that she’s tried to forget for over half a year. “It’s frigid; it’s disorienting, and it’s absolute murder on the complexion.” He flicks out a compact, grimaces into it, does something to his lipstick that makes it look exactly the same, and then dematerializes his cosmetics.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no — Maker, my Maker, you have a hurt!” An articulated robotic scorpion appears next to Harry from the depths of Alison’s wardrobe. It’s huge, its curled-over tail at least two and a half meters at the apex of its loop. It’s not just a robot, but also a chair, with mahogany arm rests and leather cushions along its segmented back. “You need to sit down, my Maker — yes, yes, you do.” Deftly but gently, it wraps its tail around his waist and drops him on its back. “Kitty!” Harry swats the scorpion’s barbed stinger aside, but without much force.

The scorpion — Kitty? — ignores him as it moves its padding in slow, careful increments so that it best supports him. “Oh no, oh no, and you have a shiver too,” it remarks, feeling another chill move through his body. “You need your coat.” Using its stinger, it hooks Harry’s fur mantle from the floor and deposits the wrap directly on his head. “There — now you are a warm kitty, yes, yes, very warm.”

“Umph!” Harry yanks the pile of furs off his head. “Thank you, but was it truly necessary to ruin my hair?”
“Yes, yes, it really was truly necessary,” Kitty replies. “I’m a service furniture. You made me to help you with everything, and you had a hurt and a shiver, so I was helping you. I’m a very good kitty — a very, very good kitty!”

“Upstaged by my chair.” Harry groans. “Again.”

Alison, blinking and rubbing her heavy eyes, finally gets a few words out: “You! Speak of the fucking Devil.”

“Oh no, dearest Dominatrix mine,” says Harry with a chuckle. “I’m not one of your pathetic deities. I’m the Master.”

Kitty perks up, turning toward Alison. “Oh! Dominatrix, I know you. My Maker told me so much about you and Dork fam — oh yes, oh yes, he did. You’re a good kitty, a very, very good kitty. I’m a good kitty too. We can be friends! I like having friends. I love you, Dominatrix.” Its little red eye lights shine up at her.

“You love everyone,” mutters Harry.

Kitty tips from side to side in a little hopping dance. “My Maker loves you so much, so, so, so much, and so do I,” it tells Alison. “He could not find any other kitties like you in all of Dystopiaville when you left. Such a sad kitty, so very sad, alas, alas. So that’s why he made me. But now… Now he is back with his friends! And I finally meet Dork fam!”

Right on cue, three Dorks appear: the Magister, Imp, who’s perched on the Magister’s shoulder, and Scintilla, who’s in her robot form. “Domina!” The Magister crosses Alison’s floor in a few long light bounds. The last of his leaps places him on her bed, where he winds around her, holding her fast, just like the Cat. “Domina, are you all right?” he asks, as if Harry isn’t even present.

Kitty gasps. “Friends! More friends! Look, my Maker — it’s Bigcatfriend...with a small cat friend too. A flying kitty, just like me, but with wings. Wow! Hello, hello, hello, Bigcatfriend and Smallcatfriend. Please don’t be scared. I’m a good kitty too, just like you, yes, yes, yes. I just have more legs, but you can still pet me. I like it when my friends pet me. I can pet you too if you want.”

“Woke me up,” Alison mutters in answer to her robot’s question. “Started yammering. Hasn’t tried anything, though...yet.”
Scintilla watches Harry pull one of Alison’s socks from behind his back and toss it over his shoulder into her hamper. It must have gotten caught on Kitty when he crashed in. “Well, he tried stealing your socks,” she says to Alison. “Are we sure this guy’s a Master?”

“Oh! A shiny kitty!” Kitty’s attention turns to Scintilla. It stands speechless for a second or two, wagging its tail, before pronouncing, “Wow, Shinyfriend, you’re as beautiful as...as a ring full of keys. My name is Kitty, and this is my Maker, and I...I love you all — yes, yes, yes, I do. I love having friends, and I love Dork fam!”

“[Did you make that mess in Bright Cat’s den?]” Imp demands of Harry, her tail switching, as she looks beyond him into the remains of Alison’s closet.

Finally the Magister turns his attention to his counterpart from the universe next door. “What have you done to my Domina? What have you done to my TARDIS? Why,” he says, “have you come to where I am the Master?”

“Angry kitties? Oh no, oh no, oh no!” Kitty’s tail drops flat and scoots between its legs. “I’m sorry, Bigcatfriend! I’m sorry, Dominatrix. I’m sorry, Shinyfriend. We didn’t mean to crash into Dominatrix’s closet! I’m so sorry — yes, oh, yes, very sorry, yes, I am. I’m just a little indoor service furniture, and I’m not very good at universe hopping. I’m not a big outer space kitty like a TARDIS, like Shinyfriend. I did my very, very best; yes, yes, I did, because I’m a very, very good kitty.”

“Kitty!” Harry cuts in. He snaps once loudly, as the Magister does to the Doctor sometimes. Alison expects him to pull that I am the Master, and you will obey me shit or at least lose his temper. However, he only says, “Hush!”

Being as full of words as its maker, Kitty, of course, does not hush. “But flying in space made me so cold, so very, very, very cold, and we were running out of power. So tired, such tired kitties, oh no, oh no. And so that’s why I crashed. I’m sorry, Dominatrix. I’m sorry, Bigcatfriend. Did I give you a scare? I’m sorry, Shinyfriend. Did I give you a hurt? I didn’t mean to give you a hurt!” It hunkers down, losing half its height as it tries to become smaller.

“Awww...” murmurs Alison. Poor Kitty. Whatever Harry told it about the Dork family, it expected new friends who would be just as happy to meet it as it was to meet them. It never asked to be created by Harry and caught in the middle of the enmity between him and three quarters of the Dorks. It just wants friends.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no, my Maker, so tired, so scared. Kitty is scared; Kitty is tired. Why are friends
angry? I don’t know.” Kitty’s voice dwindles in volume.

After not losing his temper with his loquacious service furniture, Harry does something else unprecedented. “Good Kitty, good Kitty.” His voice goes soft as he strokes its arm rest. “They’re not angry at you at all. They’re angry at me. Yes, you are a little service furniture, but you’re my service furniture, and you do big, important things. You brought us here, just like I hoped. We’re here, and we’re safe, and it’s because you’re a very, very, very good kitty and very brave.”

“Kitty...needs to recharge.” Kitty’s voice slows. “Oh no... Too much. I love you, my Maker. You’re a very...very...very good kitty, and so am — “ Its red eye lights wink off, and it goes still.

Alison stares at Harry. Did he just love someone in a calm, gentle, complimentary, protective and affectionate manner? Sure, Kitty is his own creation, which he probably programmed for devotion. Still he seems to be treating it as one would one’s pet: with affection and [something Alison has never witnessed before from him] patience. Where did that come from?

“Ah, fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Cursing in a rapid stream, Harry swings his tablet computer up toward him on an articulated arm attached to Kitty’s side. Back in Dystopiaville, he used the tablet to communicate when his pain was too great for him to speak. “That power drain can’t have been good for the system,” he mutters, scrolling, swiping, and stabbing at the tablet screen. Apparently now the tablet also gives him access to Kitty’s software or hardware or something.

Thrusting the tablet away, Harry sticks his hand in the pouches hanging from Kitty’s arm rests, “Where is it? Where is it? Did it fall out in the ride? Oh shit. It can’t have. It’s attached. Then,” he says, throwing his wrap on the floor and groping violently under his seat, “where the fuck is that fucking thing? Ah hah!” He holds up an extension cord like it’s a fish he just caught. Then he lies back, breathing quickly, spent from those moments of activity. “Well? Make...yourself...useful,” he says between gasps to the Magister. “Plug...this in.” A shiver runs through him. “And fetch me... my coat...while you’re...at it.”

No one moves. “My Master,” Scintilla says, “is not yours to command. He serves only who he belongs to, which is me, the Doctor, and Miss Alison.” Her neon green eyes usually have a warm yellow cast. Now, though, they brighten and sharpen with a cooler, bluer anger.


“Scintilla?” The Magister, who hasn’t lessened his grip on Alison, lifts his chin toward Harry. “Would you, please?”
“Sure, Master,” says Scintilla with an answering nod. Alison, who has never before seen Scintilla follow an order without objection, stares some more as Scintilla puts Kitty’s plug into a wall outlet and then gives Harry his coat, all in silence. “You see?” she says to Harry. “Mine knows how to ask because I trained him. Okay, well, the Doctor and Miss Alison trained him too, but, anyway, clearly you need someone to belong to who will teach you how to behave.”

Harry raises his eyebrows, but, digging for something in his coat pocket, says nothing. Then he suddenly flops.

“Gah!” Scintilla jerks back from Harry. “Master, he’s going green! Zero Room?” She turns to the Magister.

“No!” cries Harry. As sick as he is, he wrests a finger-size syringe from his coat. Its needle, nearly as long as the blade of a paring knife, looks nasty. He rams it into the inside of his thigh and discharges its contents — maybe into his femoral artery? — and then immediately straightens. “No, I’m good.” He flashes a reassuring and toothy grin at them, one that closes into a smirk as he says, “Well, actually, I’ve never been good. But I am functional for the next ten minutes, thanks to qualimantutab!”

Harry kicks his legs out from under his mantle and slings one of them over an arm rest. “Well, shall we get this coming-out party started? Apologies for that, by the way,” he says with a wave of the wrist at Alison’s wardrobe. “While I do love a gratuitous piece of closet-based humor, I certainly didn’t intend to cause such — ”

“Oh stuff it,” Scintilla cuts in. “We don’t need ten minutes of bad jokes and worse apologies. It’s the Zero Room for you — with a medically induced coma and maximum security so you’ll stop fucking up everyone else’s shit.” She advances.

“Scintilla,” the Magister says in a rather mild voice, holding up his hand. “Wait but a few minutes. The Master will collapse soon enough. Until then, however, he has time to answer for himself.” To Harry, he says, “Speak. Why are you terrorizing my Domina? Why have you invaded my domain? And how? You had no TARDIS in Dystopiaville when we were there.”

“Master, please!” Harry, craning his neck back at his counterpart with a smile, holds up a palm. “There’s a certain dramatic pacing that I’m trying to develop, and you’re ruining it. I was just about to answer that question anyway. No, I had no TARDIS in Dystopiaville, and I still don’t. No clue where she is. But I did liberate this vortex manipulator from my sorry excuse for a Doctor,” Harry says, showing the audience his wrist. It is encircled with a thick cuff that holds something like an old-fashioned electrical calculator.
“And our brilliant counterpart Missy invented this little device: the psycholocator,” he says, patting a machine hitched to Kitty’s right side. It looks like an inside-out record player, cocooned in strands of bluish light and surmounted by a miniature dish receiver. “Genius that I am, I combined both pieces of tech, and that is how I came to stand before you — “ Beat. “—Sit before you — “ Beat. “Ensconce myself here in answer to your call.”

The Magister shakes his head. “Who called you? Not I.”

“Not me,” says Alison.

“Me neither,” says Scintilla. “Neither did Reeve or the Stylist or Galleia or Lakis. And neither did the Doctor, because I think Anima would have mentioned it to me when I last talked to her. See? No one wants you here. Go away.”

Slouching more horizontally among his chair’s cushions, Harry talks over her. “If you would all cease interrupting my narrative flow, I could educate and illuminate. You see — traveling by vortex manipulator is an inexact science, and its imprecision is only compounded by the psycholocator. According to my intrepid counterpart and hopper of universes, Missy, the psycholocation tech takes guidance from your thoughts about your intended destination. However, it’s also influenced by whatever else is top of mind. Since deep space is a tad on the chilly side,” he explains with a shudder, “I was obviously wishing for some insulation, so I landed in the Dominatrix’s wardrobe full of it.

“How do you stand it, though, my dear?” Harry asks Alison. “It’s all so threadbare and subdued and...practical.” He closes his eyes, as if to block the view, and his chin sinks slightly.

Alison narrows her eyes at him. “Go away.” How can he nap after scaring the shit out of everyone? Her gut still fizzes from the shock, like there’s agitated pop in it, even as the fuzzy blurriness increases in her mind. She’d love to lose consciousness and rest, but her self-proclaimed dream come true won’t shut the fuck up.

“But don’t worry!” Harry, raising his head suddenly, snaps his fingers. His nails, as dark and glossy as his boots, resemble talons: short but still vicious. “I’ll soon have you back to your own indomitable self again! And then my dearest person can advise you on a suitably glamorous style befitting both your powerful personality and your station as co-ruler of the universe. But all that’s in the future.
“For now — “ He sucks in a huge breath, about to launch into another paragraph of his monologue. Then he droops. “Well!” he exclaims, reeling slightly, as he rights himself with a smirk and a wink. “Vortex manipulation sure sucks a lot out of you — and not in that good way.”

“Oh great.” Scintilla casts her eyes toward the ceiling. “And now, on top of everything else, we’ve got an acute case of PVML to deal with.” She turns on her heel, heading out the door. “I’m firing up the Zero Room. He should keel over in a few seconds, right?”

“PV what?” Alison whispers to the Magister.

“Post-vortex manipulation lassitude,” he says. “Our TARDISes usually protect us from the effects of the Time Vortex. But the Master used a more...primitive...means of travel that afforded him little barrier between him and the Vortex. He is exhausted. Though he injected himself with qualimantutab, it now nears the end of its effectiveness.” Lowering his voice, he mutters, “— Thankfully enough. He shall soon fall unconscious. And then he’ll have sustained weakness, physical debility, and limited stamina during his recovery. It is possible that he could be slightly less obnoxious during that period.”

“Fuck! You mean he’s stuck here?” Alison cries. “In my house?”

“Do not fear him.” The Magister purrs in Alison’s ear, his whole body vibrating. “You are mine, and I will keep you safe and whole and happy. Trust me, my dear.”

“Ugh.” Alison leans against him. “I don’t have the energy for this.”

“My Maker, my Maker!” Kitty suddenly powers up again. “You are tired from doing the universe hops — yes, yes, you are!” it says to Harry. “You need a pillow,” it adds, pulling one out from an internal compartment and wedging it behind Harry’s head, “and a sleep. Be a good kitty and have a sleep.”

“Wait!” Alison bursts out, rubbing her eyes. “Who… What… Why? Why are you even here?”

Harry, rearranging his pillow, blinks heavily. “Why, I am here for rulers of universe, of course: you, dearest Dominatrix mine, and my favorite person Bill,” he says with a slow smile, reverting to his Razor voice and that miserable excuse for a Russian accent. Back in Dystopiaville, Harry sneereded that Alison must be the ruler of her universe to have such inordinate influence over her Time Dorks. As Alison and Bill became closer, though, and Harry’s affection for Alison increased,
the term became one of endearment that he applied to Bill as well.

Alison squints at him. “What the fuck are you talking about? I have a chip in my head that doesn’t work and an intractable depression because of you. You ruined my life! No one wants you here.”

“Oh, but you do.” Harry smiles. His eyes remain closed one second, then two, before he opens them slowly. He’s as tired as Alison is. “In fact, is my dearest person Bill who asks me here.”

“Liar.”

“She is crying so hard that I am barely understanding,” Harry goes on. He mimics Bill’s voice exactly: “Please, Razor — Alisonshine is so miserable, and nothing’s working. Please come help her! Please come help me!”

Harry closes his eyes for another extended blink and slides down under his mantle into a more supine position. “And me…” he says, opening his eyes again. “Well, I am expert of hacking into the Cyber tech. I must investigate what the mechanical Master has done wrong, no? I must make it right. Dearest person cannot be crying all the times! Dominatrix should not have the depressions!” The exclamation points take up the last of his energy, and his voice falls to a mumble: “You are inevitable spouses — you must be marrying by now, yes? — deserving of...happy...endings.” His eyes shut.

“Rock-a-bye Maker / In the treetop / Kitty will hold you / When you go flop.” Kitty swings its seat from side to side, crooning. “You are a very good kitty, my Maker,” it says, brushing the side of his face with its stinger. “Such a good kitty — yes, yes, yes, you are.” It quiets and seems to go back to sleep.


“[He’s not a good kitty,]” Imp remarks under her breath, “[not if he disarranges other people’s dens.]”

“Bill,” Alison says again, blinking at the Magister. “He said that Bill asked him to come here. Does that make any sense?”
“We need the full story,” the Magister answers with a nod, arms crossed. “I shall summon the Heliantha and the Doctor.”
Alison Enters the Vault of Pain

Chapter Summary

An uproar occurs in Alison's mind library. All the Alisons are scared, worried, stupefied, or several of the above by Harry's arrival and its implications for their relationship with Bill.

Alison tries to sleep. The excitement doesn’t end when she hits her pillow, however. She slides directly into a softly cushioned darkness, filled with sharp voices, sharp elbows, and even sharper chill. She falls to the floor. Screeches erupt from Little Al, who thinks she’s being attacked. She lashes out, jabbing Alison in the chest. Alison lets out a breathless squeak. Sunny, recognizing Alison’s cry of pain, tries to reassure Little Al that it’s just Big Alison, but she trips on Alison’s foot. Both Alison and Sunny lie entangled for a moment, shivering. Despite all the activity and insulation in the room, a raw-edged cold lingers here. Obviously Alison’s in her mind library, but why is it so cold and dark?

Little Al complains that she’s lost her Mister Magister doll and asks if anyone has seen it. Clarissima points out that she can’t even see her fuckin’ face. While Alison and Sunny disentangle themselves, Ali C. tells everyone to stop stealing her blanket. Victa says that Ali C. can borrow her robe, but...uh...she doesn’t know where Ali C. is.

Alison realizes that she’s probably sitting on Ali C.’s blanket, so she lifts one side of her arse off the floor. She tries to conjure up her own warmth: a radiant nimbus from her skin and sparks from her hair. It’s no use. Her radiance refuses to light up the dank, clingy air. She’s out of brainpower. She has no magic anymore.

“Well, if I could find the light switch,” mutters Errabunda, “I might be able to do something about this blackout.” A ratcheting noise sounds, and a crank-powered torch clicks on. It sheds only several candles’ worth of light in a small globe around Errabunda’s head and shoulders.

Squinting around, Alison sees all of her selves in the reading nook, made from a converted padded cell. Ah, so they’re in the Vault of Pain. This windowless chamber, set deep inside the bowels of Alison’s mind library, once contained Alison’s worst fears. She imprisoned, tortured, and finally killed an imaginary GWB 47 here. His blood lends the stone walls — made of SUPPRESSION, REPRESSION, POSSESSION, and OBSESSION — a vivid, undying red. After that, there were some Shalka too, as well as a psychic vampire. It also once held her deepest shames too — Little Al and Victa — until the Magister, with seemingly no effort, found them and brought them out.
Now that it’s no longer a jail, the Vault of Pain functions a room of last resort, furnished for long-term stay. The blood-red walls and torture devices remain, but converted, like the padded cell she’s now in. Glancing out the door, Alison glimpses the shadowy door to the sensory deprivation chamber, now a bathroom with shower stall. The Iron Maiden has turned into a fully stocked refrigerator, the electric chair a hot plate. The iron-framed racks and the wooden Procrustean bed now serve as innocent suspended supports for plush-topped mattresses. Alison can see none of that either, since the only illumination comes from Errabunda’s torch.

Errabunda is right. There should be a light somewhere. Alison thinks of the nightmare she had where everything was dank and raining and leaking. That was the time that Harry slid right through her defenses. With a shiver, Alison shakes the image from her head. That’s never going to happen. “Why are the lights off?” she asks.

Clarissima answers both Errabunda and Alison. “I don’t think it’s the switch. I think it’s the whole library. Fuck...” She sighs out her favorite word. “Why does the power keep going out? That’s — what? — the second time this week.”

“It’s ‘cause we’re sad,” speaks up Little Al.

“Yeah,” says Ali C. “When you’re sad, you’re in a Vault of Pain. And there’s no windows and no light, and you feel like it’s never gonna stop raining.”

“Well, we’ve got a little bit of light.” Flipping the mitten covers off her hands to reveal orange fingerless gloves, Errabunda removes a small satchel from her shoulder. She produces the squat cylinder of a battery lantern. She flicks it on and hangs it from a hook in the center of the ceiling. It gives pale bluish light, soft but clear.

“Why are we all hiding out down here?” grumbles Clarissima. Her black hoodie cinches so closely about her cheeks that only her narrowed eyes are visible. “The asshole could barely stay awake; he was totally exhausted from using his vortex thing. I bet he’s comatose in the Zero Room as we speak. He’s absolutely no threat to us — and I should know. I’m the first line of defense.”

“I thought it was better to be safe than sorry,” says Errabunda, “having everyone together where I could easily account for them.” She unzips her puffy vest, which is lined with wrenches, hammers, pliers, and other tools. She pries off the light switch plate with a screwdriver, pokes around, then reassembles it. “Just as I suspected — the switch is fine. It’s a central power problem. Ugh...if only we could get to the power center.”

“Um, why can’t we?” Alison asks.
“We don’t know where the fuck it is,” Clarissima says.

Sunny, with a long yellow scarf coiled about her shoulders and over her head, rubs her hands together to warm them. “We’re here,” she says, “because some of us freak out way too easily.” With a significant nod to the side and a corresponding glance, she indicates Victa.

Victa sweeps back the loose hood of her velvet cape and glares at Sunny. “I wanted everyone here because a known violator of minds just crashed in, much too close for comfort! I’m prudent and justifiably wary, given what’s happened to me. And maybe someday you’ll be that way too, instead of rushing hopefully into everything without any common sense.”

“Harry’s not gonna come get us, is he, Big Alison?” Little Al’s knit hat, resembling a wizard’s peaked cap, migrates down over her eyebrows. She pushes it back up.

Alison settles, crossing her legs, and holds out her arms, into which Little Al promptly dives for a hug. “We’re all very safe here, especially in the Vault of Pain. Besides, the other older Alisons are right. Harry really overexerted himself coming here. He’s sick with something called post-vortex manipulation lassitude, and Scintilla has locked him in the Zero Room. He’s entirely out of commission at the moment and for the foreseeable future, thank God.”

“Ugh, what’s under my butt?” Sunny pulls free an object that she was sitting on. “Oh, this is yours.” She tosses it — a stuffed felt replica of the Magister with cat ears — to Little Al, who clasps it with a squeal of delight.

“Brrrrrrr.” Alison shudders again. Her flannel pajamas, the sun and moon pattern nearly faded off, serve well in outer reality, where the central heating works. Here in her mind library, however, she’s a mass of gooseflesh.

“I’m not worried about Harry!” Ali C., cloaked in a duvet embroidered with fairy tale characters, puts her hands on her fists. “I made up protection spells against him. If he’s smart — “

“He thought I’d rejoice to see him again,” points out Alison. “He’s really not that astute.”

“Besides...what about Bill?” says Ali C. “Harry said that Bill wanted him to come here. Bill — our Bill! — invited him here. And I know he’s a sneak and a cheat and a liar, but he sounded like he meant it.”
“No! Bill would never lie to us! She wouldn’t!” Sunny shakes her head so hard that her scarf falls down. “She’s the truest person ever.”

“But she did,” says Errabunda softly. “Look at the data.” She withdraws her tablet computer from another inner pocket of her vest and reviews her notes. “First of all, when Bill gave us *The Lonely Little Comet*, she said that she had asked Harry for advice about a present. She claimed that she was just talking to an imaginary version of him in her head. But that’s not necessarily true.

Using her finger, Errabunda scrolls further down her tablet screen to another piece of information. “Second of all, when Alison went to talk to Bill in the Doctor’s library, there was a recording of Harry. He told her to tell the truth about something. After they played Evacuation, it was the same thing. Bill accidentally triggered a voicemail from him, telling her to give him up and stop lying. Finally, when all the Dorks got together for breakfast, Bill said, *Help will come. He’ll come.*” Clicking her tablet off, she replaces it in her vest. “All the evidence strongly suggests that Harry’s telling the truth. And the truth is that Bill has been talking to him for a while, like several months, but keeping it secret.”

“Now that you mention it,” says Clarissima slowly, “Bill was stuttering when she was talking about that so-called voicemail. She was really scared. She only stutters when she’s really upset.”

“And I told you!” Ali C. raises her voice, projecting it at the older Alisons. “You just didn’t want to listen.”

Alison knows exactly what Ali C. is talking about. In fact, she remembers the precise moment when Harry’s voice blasted from Bill’s wheelchair sound effects controller. She knew, as soon as she heard him talk about Bill being his envoy to Alison’s Earth and how she had to stop keeping this secret, that it wasn’t an old message. It was current voicemail, and he was the secret that Bill had been hiding. Even back then, Alison recognized intuitively that Harry was still an active part of Bill’s life. “You’re right, Ali,” admits Alison in a low voice. “I was tired, and I was scared, and I didn’t want to listen.”

“But why would she do that?” Untying her hood, Clarissima reveals her face, crumpled and confused. The puffs of her hair droop, squashed. “Why would she do that to us?”

“She loves him,” says Victa with a flat smile, “and love makes people do really foolish things. Trust me.” She veils herself in the folds of her velvet hood, probably thinking of her denial-based attachment to GWB 47.
“But we have a contract.” Clarissima, still shaking her head, falls back on the concrete details that she’s certain of. “It’s mostly about safety and wholeness and happiness, but it’s also about truth. If you’re going to be part of the Dork fam, you have to be honest with the other Dorks. And Bill signed the contract; she promised to tell us about all the important things. She agreed. She said she would. Why... Why didn’t she?”

“And it’s not fair,” pipes up Ali C. “We told the truth! We opened up to her. But she... It’s not fair. It’s just not.” She wipes her nose and then her eyes with a corner of her duvet printed with fairies.

“Well, she’s scared,” mutters Alison, though she’s not sure that anyone is listening. She swallows tears away. That wouldn’t set a good example. “People do desperate things when they’re scared. They lie to the people that they love. They ignore the truth. They pretend that upsetting, messy things don’t exist because they don’t want to deal with that shit.” In other words, she and Bill are both terrified.

“But why does Bill love him?” Little Al, curling up in Alison’s lap, tucks her Magister doll against her chest. “She’s part of our Dork fam now. She doesn’t need him anymore. And he’s just an old prickly comet who doesn’t believe in star systems or warmth anyway.” She quotes from The Lonely Little Comet.

Alison gulps. Tears well up from inside. At the same time her sinuses hurt. She feels like all of the dankness of her darkened mind library is invading her head. She doesn’t know if she wants to cry or go to sleep more. “Well,” she says, “he was mean to me and my Time Dorks at first, but he was always kind to her. He saved her life; he repersoned her and typed up stories for her and took away her pain for her. He treated her with a respect and gentleness,” she says, thinking of Harry helping Bill to bathe, “that she hadn’t gotten from very many people in her life — not her foster families, not Moira, not the Twelfth Doctor.”

“But what about us?” Sunny bursts out. “She loves us, doesn’t she? I mean...I thought she did. But she lied.”

“It’s possible to love more than one person at a time,” says Victa, her face shadowed. “And it’s possible to love someone even when you know that loving them will upset other people that you love. It’s possible to love people and lie to them at the same time.”

“Yeah, she lied to us!” Clarissima stares at her clenched fists. “I still can’t get over that. We made a contract; we promised to be honest and kind and faithful. She agreed...but then she wasn’t! She lied!”
“It’s like Ali C. and Alison said,” says Errabunda, the wandering one. She knows all about running away from things: uni and Sheffield and Joe and the Volunteer and the entire planet Earth. “She told a bad lie because she was really scared and desperate. You know how she said that she was caught in the middle? They’re both important to her — Harry and the Dork fam. So she’s trying to make everyone happy, as she always does.”

“Yeah,” says Alison, wrapping her arms around herself. Little Al adds her arms too, giving her as much of a hug as she can. “But then it ends up that no one’s happy. Me and the Magister and Scintilla are angry and defensive. Kitty’s confused — that’s Harry’s service furniture — because it just wants friends. And me...well, I’m just...scared...filled with this absolutely incapacitating dread.” The mere admission of her feelings sends a shudder down her spine and all her nerves. “What’s going to happen to us now?”

The full effect of Harry’s debut and everyone’s anxiety winds around her like a wet and heavy wind. It presses down on her eyelids and sets her teeth a-chatter. She feels like Kitty: so very tired, so very scared. She can’t hold the dream fast, and it dissolves into a headache.
Bill Talks to Her Mum

Chapter Summary

Having been caught hiding her communications with Razor, Bill hides from her Dork fam, scared that they'll reject her. Alison tries to coax her out. Bill talks to her mum instead. Alison realizes how much she loves Bill. Now she can say it.

A few painkillers and the company of Imp, purring regularly on her pillow, knock Alison out. She drops into a deep sleep without dreams or other disturbance.

She opens her eyes after twelve hours of rest. She blinks for a few minutes at the late morning sunshine streaming in through the French windows. It gives the colored spines of her Latin reference books and her colored Fairy Books such jewel-like glows that they seem to shimmer. The coconut smell hovers about her, close and sweet. Imp, nudging Alison’s hand with her little nose, sends a tickly frisson up Alison’s arm with her whiskers. Alison giggles.

Everything seems so quiet, so usual, so extremely, vividly normal. Did all of that commotion really happen last night — Harry and his talking scorpion busting out of her closet? Alison looks across the room at her closet. The louvered doors hang askew, one of them off its track. Her hamper, on its side, disgorges dirty clothes. The wire drawers bow inward, as if something large and heavy dropped in on them. Okay, maybe it was r —

“Hey, Miss Alison!” Scintilla, all shiny and perky in her robot form, enters without knocking. The sunlight gleams off her plastic wedge cut; her black painted brows arch in high curls. “Ah hah!” Bracing herself on one of Alison’s spiral bedposts, Scintilla hops up to the foot of the bed, sitting there with a bounce. “I’m glad you’ve finally come out of standby. It’s so boring when my people sleep.” Five minutes of monologue follow. Scintilla decries the Magister’s need for more sleep these days. “He used to be rambunctious, ambitious, energetic — you know, interesting. Now his hobbies are cooking, cleaning, making teeny tiny clothes for teeny tiny dolls, and...uh...taking naps. I miss having adventures.” With a dramatic sigh, she languishes against a bedpost.

“[Hey, Metal Cat!]” Imp says, fluttering her wings in annoyance. She stands up, turns around in a circle, then curls back up on Alison’s pillow. “[You’re shaking my den.]”

“Scintilla,” says Alison, rubbing her eyes, “the Magister was trapped in Anima for decades. He couldn’t go out and have adventures. Of course his activities are more domestic these days.”
“Domesticity is boring. The Master’s a renegade Time Doofus; he’s not supposed to settle down.” Scintilla bounces on her butt for emphasis. Alison’s entire bed joggles, as well as Alison. “Why can’t he make like the Stylist and zip around the multiverse, killing fascists and causing mayhem? Ugh! Reeve always has such exciting stories — narrow escapes, scathing insults, clever stratagems, amazing outfits! She’s out there, fulfilling her destiny...

“And what am I doing?” Scintilla asks, fidgeting and wiggling the bed again. “I’m sitting in suburbia, pretending to be a split-level ranch from the 1970s. Gahhh, that yellow upholstery in the front parlor gives me hives. Oh yeah — and, in a truly thrilling turn of events, I’m playing nursemaid to some impostor who thinks it’s the height of class to come out of your closet and collapse at your feet.”

“I’m finding someplace quieter.” Imp jumps into the air and leaves Alison’s room for a bed that doesn’t vibrate.

“Wait! Scintilla!” Alison waves in her face. “Okay, so Harry fell to earth, and the Magister called the Doctor and Bill. What happened after that? And can you please just summarize it in like two to four sentences — of less than thirty words apiece?”

“Thhhffttbtphhhht! You’re no fun. Okay, here goes.” Leaping from Alison’s bed, Scintilla puts one hand to her chest in an oratorical pose. “The prisoner and his service furniture are in the Zero Room, turned off and recharging. The Master wouldn’t let me restrain him, but I did give him a shock collar to keep him contained. Heh. Bill and the Doctor and Anima are here, but Bill bolted when she heard that the prisoner had arrived. I can’t tell what she’s scared of, but she won’t come out of her room for anyone, not even the Doctor, who’s very, very, very upset about that. There — four sentences of fifteen, nineteen, eighteen, and twenty-eight words respectively. How’d I do?” Beat. “Hey, where’d you go?” she calls to Alison, who’s in the en suite bathroom.

“I’m taking a shower,” Alison yells, “having breakfast, and then going to see Bill!”

Forty-five minutes later, Alison wends her way through Anima’s coiling corridors. She goes over wrought iron catwalks and under cool yellow spotlights that reach through the Doctor’s preferred gloom. Then she steps Bill’s hall, and a contrast brightens around her. Bill’s hall shines with pale blue walls where glowing white clouds race by on a digital breeze. Rainbows follow Alison, bouncing from cloud to cloud alongside her. Small brownish sunflowers growing from the floor swivel their heads toward her. They emanate a light, grainy scent like that of daisies.

Alison inhales the smell of sunflowers, then texts Bill. Hey sweetie. Scintilla said you were extremely upset. Do you want to talk?
Bill’s reply appears after an uncharacteristically long pause and without a single exclamation point. 

*Talking to my mum.*

Alison approaches Bill’s bedroom door. *Okay. Well, let me know when you’re ready because I’d really like to talk to you.*

*Even after what I did??????????????????????????????????*

“All, says Alison aloud, and a sunflower peers over her shoulder with interest. “So there’s the interrobangs.” Yeah, Alison answers in text. *I feel angry and hurt by your secret, but you’re still the Bill of my heart. You’re still my brightest sunflower!*

Bill hears only the first part of Alison’s reply. *I knew it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Knew you’d be disappointed!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

*But I still want to talk to you! When you’re ready, of course.*

*Okay. After I’ve cried about 85 liters………………………………*

Alison reaches Bill’s bedroom door, guarded by several TARDIS cats. Seeing Alison, they unloaf themselves and trot toward her. They wind through her legs and then return to Bill’s door, as if reeling Alison in. Their claws skid across the door as they scratch it, making those *Alas, alas* meows that sound almost human. The cats eye Alison expectantly. Surely the one with opposable thumbs can let them in. They have an urgent delivery of purrs and cuddles for the occupant.

Alison knocks, but there’s no answer. The TARDIS cats teem around her, begging more loudly. She tries to calm them with pats and scritches. “I’m sorry. She needs some time alone.” The cats hunker down and coax Bill from the crack under the door. “She’s talking to her mum. Shhhhh!”

With small worried beings parked on her shoes and trying to climb her trousers, Alison presses her ear against Bill’s door. She’s used to internal dialogue. She and her Magister go into their minds to do it, while Bill voices aloud both sides of her internal conversations. Most frequently, she talks to an imaginary version of her dead mum. Knowing that she shouldn’t break Bill’s privacy, nevertheless Alison succumbs to curiosity and concern. She listens.

“Mum, what are they going to do to me?” Bill cries. “None of them lie. Alisonshine thinks lies are
right up there with racism and sexism and ableism and other kinds of hatred. Calls it all *bullshit*, and it’s her life’s mission to fight it. And the Prof...the Prof is so precise.”

Bill tells her mum about the Prof — that is, the Magister — but Alison can’t make out the words. A TARDIS cat is climbing up her trousers, insisting that she open the door. She tries to pry the cat from her leg. The cat resists, but then settles in as soon as Alison holds it in her arms. Alison tries again to overhear, though the resonant purring of her newest friend makes things a challenge.

Bill is now talking about the Doctor: “—But my Doctor sees beauty everywhere and trusts everyone. They wouldn’t understand why I couldn’t tell them the truth. Staring at me with those eyes deeper than the sky — *Why?* they’d ask. *Why?* And I wouldn’t have an answer because I’d have betrayed them. What are they going to do, Mum? What are they going to d-d-do to me?” A sob cracks into Bill’s voice.

Bill swallows a few times, suppressing the tear. Then she speaks for her mum, almost keeping the tremble out of her low, sweet voice. “You just told me yourself what they’re going to do. You know your Dorks well enough; you don’t need me to tell you anything.”

Bill’s voice veers back into the upward register as she answers. “Yes, I do! We made a contract — a contract! — all about how we’d act toward each other. As detailed as one of those BDSM discussions you have before you play, as serious as marriage. The truth — that was one of the things we agreed on. Tell each other the truth. Be honest. But I lied, Mum. Don’t you get it? I broke the contract and lied to them. Oh God, what are they going to do to me?”

“Anyway, Alisonshine already knows.” Her voice sinks to a scratchy, flat whisper of despair. “She pulls away from me, doesn’t want me to visit her, can’t say *I love you* to me; it’s like she can tell what I’ve done. She knows. She read my-my-my mind or something. Gonna be like the Ferrises and then the Rhodopoulouses and — “

Bill gulps. “Hey... Hey now, rocket child, listen to me,” she says for her mum, and the quaver and the stutter sink away. “Things are different now. You chose this star family. They chose you. You made up rules together built on fairness and love. This star system is yours, and they’re not going to freeze you out because of one lie.

“But they love you, constellation girl,” Bill tells herself. “They love you so much that you that they gave you a place at their side. And even if you tell a lie or do something wrong, you’re still that warm and brilliant spark that lights up their lives. If you tell them what you did, they’ll be sad and angry, just like your Alisonshine said in her text. But they’ll forgive you and sparkle at you just the same. That’s because you shine, constellation girl. Never forget that. You shine with power and strength and brightness, and you’re always lovable, even if you make mistakes.”
At that moment, Alison realizes the truth. She has loved Bill, this brilliant, beautiful, starry person, for months already. She loved Bill so much that she heard her calling out from another universe. She loved Bill so much that she gave her sunflowers and stories, held her fast when she cried, put up with her nasty jerk of a self-appointed guardian, joined her revolution, stared down her former Doctor, brought her back here, became her partner, took her into her family, and chased off her slimy evil ex Heather. She melted the ice of loneliness around Bill’s molten core, turning her into a bright, hot, shining star. Everything she has done in the past ten months has been for love of Bill.

Actions won’t suffice, though. Bill, just like Alison and the Magister, believes in the power of words. Every occasion requires the right ones. She believes in the enlightening power of honest words delivered in prudence, kindness, and candor. If you speak the truth and you do it right, Bill believes, then the truth will shine back to you. And sometimes that truth is just one word. If you say that word, you will crack open. If you say that word, you can finally feel all that wonderful, painful warmth that you’ve been squashing for so long: love.

Alison puts down the TARDIS cat that she’s been holding. The cat complains, but Alison has something important to do. Bill of my heart, she texts, I love you. I love you even though I’m hurt and upset by what you did. But still I want to talk to you. I want to listen to you too. Please talk to me when you’re ready.

About to put her phone away, Alison thinks of something else. One more thing. You never were a comet. Semper mea astra clarissima es. You’re always my most brilliant star.

There — now Bill will have an assurance of love whenever she decides the time is right. She slips her phone into her pocket and turns back down the hall. The digital clouds frolic beside her while the sunflowers nod their approval, sending sweetness into the air.
Chapter Summary

Alison, the Magister, the Doctor, and Scintilla press Harry for his side of the story. How did he travel between Dystopiaville and Alison's Earth? Well, actually, it's Alison who makes the connection. Everyone else is too busy glaring at Harry.

Alison takes a nap and eats lunch. Bill is still hiding. However, Scintilla informs the Magister that the prisoner, whose name she’s evidently going to avoid, is awake and available. Alison suggests that she and her Time Dorks should seek details from him.

The Magister reports that Harry will not let him in the Zero Room because he’s, in his own words, making himself presentable. Scintilla gives zero fucks and wants to march right in and question him. Alison points out that he’ll be much more cooperative if they allow him this time alone. Over Scintilla’s protests, they do.

Eventually, Alison, the Magister, the Doctor, and Scintilla in her wireless robot form gather outside Scintilla’s Zero Room. They peer in through an observational window next to various screens showing vital signs. Scintilla’s onboard hospital is a space seemingly without walls, impregnated with light from no discernible source. Red, orange, blue, and purple, the colors of the dying sun, coalesce and swirl like acrylic paints stirred with an invisible skewer.

These liquid flames lap around Harry, who lies supine on a levitating bed in the center of the room. Kitty, sitting like a cat loaf at Harry’s side, guards its Maker. An IV sticks in the back of Harry’s right hand, while a translucent oxygen mask covers his mouth and nose. He needs nothing to monitor his pulses, for the colors in the room beat in time. Alison thinks of the tummety tum, tummety tum that was the secret knock of Razor’s Revolution back in Dystopiaville.

Alison pulls open the Zero Room door. The lack of walls and the indistinct floor give her a moment of vertigo. To add to the disorientation, it seems hushed in here, as if the first deep snow has fallen on everything. But yes — there’s a floor under her feet, wonderfully solid. Without looking down, she makes her way toward the center of the room.

Harry widens his eyes. Mostly covered by his red fur wrap, he slips his hand out from under it and waves with a very small twist of the wrist. Whatever he injected himself with last night for a burst of energy has long since worn off. Despite a change of shirt and some artificial color on his face, he’s as crumpled and pale as an old napkin. As Scintilla said, he does in fact wear a shock collar — a red leather strap around his neck with a small rectangular bundle of electronics on one side. On
the left of his bed, Kitty strokes his hair away from his forehead, murmuring that he will soon be a big, strong, happy kitty again, oh yes, oh yes. To Alison, though, he looks like he’s about to dissolve into ashes.

Alison glances back at her entourage. They’re all busy glaring silently at Harry. Sighing to herself, Alison assumes the responsibility of spokesperson. She asks if he has the strength for storytelling. He gives a minuscule nod. He signs something so quietly that Alison can barely see his hands move.

The Magister steps forward, finally making himself useful. “The Master requests an interpreter,” he says. “He wishes to answer our questions telepathically, for that will require the least of his effort. His psychic powers have a greatly reduced range, and he sends the best signal when touching someone.” No one moves, so the Magister holds his palm up to Harry. “Very well then. I shall volunteer.” For a moment, an incipient snarl twitches his upper lip. Then he presses his mouth into resignation.

The Magister holds Harry’s had for but a moment. Then Harry flinches as if the Magister’s body is too loud. The sunset colors around the room throb faster as his heartbeats increase in agitation. He replies in small, twitching signs, with the Magister translating for Alison’s benefit. “You’re hissing at me: HHHHHHHHHhhhhhhhhHHHHHH.” Harry mimics the Magister’s rising, falling, and then rising sound of warning and anger. “Too much for me to concentrate.” Harry turns his eyes to the Doctor instead.

The Doctor murmurs, “O rose...” Their voice rises accusingly for the next phrase: “...Thou art sick!” It’s obviously the beginning of a poem, a lament, but they change the meaning completely with their enunciation. O rose is a sigh, full of regretful sadness for the frightened Bill, the depressed Alison, and even perhaps the weakened Harry. But Thou art sick! has no sympathy. It’s their indictment of Harry, the sick — that is, cruel — person that they hold responsible for Alison’s depression and Bill’s fear. The Doctor will not touch Harry unless absolutely necessary.

Scintilla is no help either. She mutters snarky comments about the pointlessness of Harry’s makeup, but reluctantly sits in a chair at his right. When she takes his hand, however, she immediately loses patience. Harry says that he wants to start this story the right way, back in Dystopiaville, right after the Dork fam departed.

“No!” interrupts Scintilla, jumping up from her chair. “That’s not the right way to tell the story because that’s not what we want to know. We told you — we don’t care about your amazing dictatorship, you...you...crass, craptacular closet crasher! We want to know what you and Bill have been talking about for the past seven months.”

The Magister tells Scintilla to hush. She just glares at him. The Doctor scoots their seat away from
Harry, as if they’re going to catch his cruelty by contagion. They’re all so immersed in their petty vendettas against Harry that they’re missing the point. He has information that they need, and this glowering and pouting is just wasting time. “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” says Alison, taking the chair abandoned by Scintilla. She holds her hand out to Harry. “I’ll interpret for you.”

The Magister, the Doctor, and Scintilla exclaim in united consternation. They thought she disliked Harry. Should she really translate for him in her current state? They think not.

“I don’t give a shit,” Alison informs them. “I’m sick and tired of slogging around like an insomniac slug. I want to do something, and this… Well, this I can do.”

The corner of one of Harry’s eyebrows jumps in surprise. The Zero Room records a leap in his heartbeats too, but the spikes of red, blue, and purple soon settle down to mere ripples. It’s as if he trusts her. “You…trust…me?” he asks vocally.

“There’s no need for such language,” Alison informs him, “but I trust that you’re too sick from PVML to try mind-fucking me again.” Harry lowers his eyes, an ocular nod, confirming her guess. “And I trust that the Magister, the Doctor, and Scintilla will defend me if you so much as think about hurting me.” The three of them nod too. “So here are my rules for this telepathic interpretation thing. Do exactly as I tell you. Follow my lead. Obey my limits. Respect my privacy, and don’t poke where you aren’t supposed to — which is like everywhere. Be patient since I’ve never done this before. Do you agree?”

She expects Harry to hang back, but he gives her a slight nod, as if they’re about to start dancing. Then he takes her hand. *Dearest Dominatrix mine, you are hearing me?* His words appear in her head with all the lightness of a breath — and yet still inflected with that goofy Razor accent.

“Um, yeah. Connection’s nice and clear.”

*Good, good! But...is surprise to me.* Harry arches an eyebrow. *I thought you have mental shields of great strength. But you have none.*

Alison remembers what the Magister told her right after surgery — that the operation disrupted her peripheral mental defenses. He thought that they would restore themselves in time, but that hasn’t happened yet. Fuck — she really is sick. “I think, um, it’s a side effect of the depression.”

*Ah yes, I know this.* Harry’s voice drop, as do his eyes. *I am Master of Madness, after all. Mania, mental illness, melancholy — all are mine.* Harry sounds like he did in Alison’s dream when he
slipped through her defenses. *When I have the depressions or the manias, I am the cheese from Switzerland — full of holes. But I never meant to inflict this madness upon you.* Harry looks into her face acutely, his head cocked with... Is that regret? *She said you — I didn’t — Ah, my dear Dominatrix — my dear, dear Dominatrix, I am so sorry...* He trails off, shaking his head and patting her hand.

“Sorry for what? And please stop, um, patting me like that. It’s kind of creepy.” Alison withdraws her hand. Then she realizes that, without her touch, Harry can’t talk to her.

In a combination of signs and gestures, Harry promises to do as she says. Alison slowly advances her hand back to him. He places his hand palm down on the bed next to him, then her hand over his. Now it’s physically impossible for him to pat her, thank God.

*Listen, dearest Dominatrix mine, Harry says. I come here for to help you, to cure you, to tell you whatever you need, to do whatever you ask, yes? He smiles at her, his eyes green and hopeful, his expression ingratiating. But I want you to know — you are not needing to do this translation with me if you do not want. I can wait till mechanical Master stops hissing — or Scintilla stops yelling — or even till I am stronger. I do not want to hurt you or scare you.*

Well, then you shouldn’t have burst out of my closet, Alison thinks. “Since when do you care about what I want?”

He replies with a sentence that makes little sense. *Since I realize you are not the Doctor, but more like my best person.*

“Uh, okay, whatever.” Alison rearranges herself into a more comfortable position. She draws her chair closer to Harry. “Tell us about your and Bill’s secret relationship.”

*Before you left me in Dystopiaville, Harry says, I gave my dearest person a gift. Is like multiversal mobile. I say — if she needs me, she calls; I answer; I come. But I am not disturbing her anymore. I wait, yes? He stops, watching Alison.*

“That’s only the beginning of the story.”

*Yes, I have not the power for total download to your head. Now you tell this bit of story to your Dorks. Go on, my dear. Give to my words that inimitably sarcastic interpreting of yours.*
Alison faces the Time Dorks and Scintilla. “Basically Harry and Bill exchanged mobile numbers that would work between universes. He didn’t call her, though. He waited for her to initiate.”

“Oh dear. Harry’s eyes go so round that Alison can see almost the whole pupil. If you are out of sarcasms, then this is worser than I thought. He shakes his head, as if thinking to himself. You are very truly sick. Oh, my dear Dominatrix…”

Harry eventually continues. Time moved much more quickly for him in Dystopiaville. One month for Alison, Bill, and the whole Dork clan meant about ten whole Earthling years for him. Well, that explains why he looks so old.

Harry kept vigil by the multiversal phone for the first few years. But then one decade, then a second, passed in silence. Bill was grown up, he realized; she was gone. She had a family, a wife, and, most importantly, a home. She obviously didn’t need him anymore.

His telepathic voice falls silent. He pulls his hand from under Alison’s and removes his oxygen mask, sniffing wetly. Hopping to its feet, Kitty supplies its Maker with a handkerchief. Imploring him not to be a sad kitty, it leans up on the side of his bed, watching him with its little red eye lights.

Alison, not knowing what to do, faces away. She’s seen him cry before, but out of physical pain. But she has never seen this — this naked grief. He’s actually crying because Bill’s absence actually saddened him. Huh...well, Alison didn’t expect that.

Harry regains Alison’s hand and goes on. His thoughts are briefer now, without transitions and with longer pauses between them. Thirty years — she calls, he says, with several breaths between clauses.

Alison tries her best to translate and add in the words that Harry has omitted. Thirty years passed for him. Then, finally, Bill called. She said that Heather, who was her ex-crush, had stalked her from Bill’s universe to Alison’s. Fortunately, the Dork fam kicked Heather out.

But Bill was still scared. She thought that someone else from her old universe — the Twelfth
Doctor — might track her down. She had nightmares, but she didn’t let her Dork fam know. She called Harry instead.

Alison watches Harry’s tears wash away every shaky attempt at a smile, and she’s not afraid of him anymore. Yeah, he’s a sadistic piece of shit, but he obviously loves Bill. And so do Alison and her Time Dorks; that’s why they came for her.

Harry could have recognized his and Alison’s shared desire to keep Bill safe and whole and happy. He could have welcomed her. But no. He chose to be a hypocrite and a liar who took Alison and her Dorks’ help while attacking them. What a miserable, nasty person! Alison’s not scared anymore; she’s just angry.

Harry’s telepathy slows even more. He’s nodding between thoughts, obviously reaching the limits of his endurance. He advised Bill to tell the Dork fam about her dreams. Bill said no. She needed him. Now Harry’s crying again, but this time in joy.

Bill and Harry talked for four of Bill’s months and forty of Harry’s years. Then Alison got sick. Dearest person, says Harry, smiling. His breath quiets down, rustling in and out through the oxygen mask. She calls me...home. Take care...of Dominatrix. He says nothing more. Alison censors that from her translation, saying only that Bill asked Harry to help.

“Oh, my Maker, you are such a tired kitty. Yes, oh yes, you are.” Kitty, who has been mostly silent during this conversation, pets Harry carefully. “You are a very good kitty, my Maker. Such a good kitty — yes, yes, yes, you are. Have a sleep and do a recharge now.”

Alison looks closely at Harry. His eyes are closed, and his head tilts slightly to the side as he sleeps. The visual manifestations of his heartbeats flutter regularly about the walls of the Zero Room, relaxed. Alison turns to her Time Dorks and Scintilla. “Shit — I think I wore him out. We should go.”

“He didn’t finish the story, though!” Scintilla objects. “We still don’t know how he got out of Dystopiaville.”

“Missy,” the Doctor speaks up suddenly. Their eyes refocus on Harry as they come back to the group. “This Master got his universe hopping tech from Missy.” They turn to their inevitable spouse: “Right, Master?” The Magister nods, and the Doctor says, “Missy and the Doctor over there must have helped him. No… No… Wait…” They flap their hands in the air before their face, erasing that thought. “Just Missy. Masters are a fractious bunch, but there’s always a certain solidarity between them.”
The Magister makes a contemptuous sound at this supposition, but Kitty hops down from Harry’s bed. “Yes, yes, yes, Bigdogfriend, you’re right,” it says to the Doctor. “Yes, you are. I can tell you the rest. Kitty will finish the story! I’m a helpful kitty and a smart kitty, and I know lots of things.”

Kitty relates that the Twelfth Doctor and Missy arrived in Dystopiaville. For some reason, the Twelfth Doctor accused Harry of killing Bill. Alison guesses that it was probably just a pretext to imprison Harry, since Twelve stuck them in their TARDIS and said they’d take him back to Gallifrey. Harry didn’t care because he wanted to leave the black hole. Kitty, however, was very distressed by Twelve’s unfair accusations.

“But Missy — Messyfriend — she was a friend to me and my Maker!” Kitty continues, perking up and shaking its tail. “She gave me my keys — oh yes, oh yes, she did.” Kitty pulls a ring of all different shapes and sizes of keys from some storage compartment. It jingles them. “Aren’t they beautiful? Just like you, Shinyfriend!” it adds with a glance at Scintilla.

“And she gave my Maker what he needed to get away from the Doctor and come home so he could see Dork fam again and be happy, happy, happy!” Kitty wiggles in a little dance. “He asked her to come with us and be happy too,” Kitty says in a lower voice, “but she said no. She wanted to stay with the Doctor and be sad. Why, why, why? Why did Messyfriend want to be sad and alone? Kitty doesn’t know, oh no, oh no. Alas, alas, Messyfriend is such a sad kitty.” Curling up into a ball, it contemplates Missy’s misery.

“Do you or the Master need anything else?” the Magister inquires, turning to Kitty. Kitty says that it and its Maker have to recharge now.

“Okay, we’ll go now then.” Alison rises from her chair. “Thanks for your help, Kitty. Will you tell Harry thank you for his help too?” Kitty promises that it will, so Alison, the Magister, the Doctor, and Scintilla leave the Zero Room.

As soon as the door closes, the Doctor blinks thoughtfully a few times and recites:

“O rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm
“Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.”

“Ugh, a poem.” Scintilla shakes her head as the Doctor closes with a sigh. “I hate figurative language. I’m leaving.” She heads away down the hall.

“Ummmmm...what?” says Alison after a moment. “Sorry, Doctor, but I’m really not up for poetry right now. The rose is Bill? The worm is Harry? But that poem sounds kinda sexual, and they certainly aren’t.”

“Hmmm.” The Magister taps his chin. “No, I believe the Doctor is saying that the Master is both rose and worm.”

The Doctor nods. “He,” they say, waving a hand at the Zero Room door, “keeps his love secret — thorns in his heart — reaching out — “ Splaying their fingers, they stretch their arms like talons. “Reaching out from inside — tearing into people around them. Thorns, lies, pain — you think they protect you, but they only destroy others.” They frown and wince at Harry through the window — sympathy and pain. “It’s why he’s so mean.” With various weights on their minds, everyone goes their separate ways.
Bill comes out. Apologies, hugs, poems, purring, holding fast, that sort of thing.

Alison returns to Anima later that evening. Pretzel and a true rainbow of TARDIS cats trot around her, chirping with excitement. *Hey, lovely loving beloved Bill of my heart!* she texts. *Me and a herd of cats are coming. We’d like to see you. Maybe you’d like to come out?*

Just as Alison approaches Bill’s bright hallways… “Alisonshine?” says a shaky voice behind her. “Alisonshine!”

Alison spins around so quickly that her head fills with the smell of sunflowers and she goes dizzy. Bill stands in her open doorway, peeking around the corner of the jamb. Her eyes, still covered with tears as if by magnifying lenses, are full of wonder and disbelief. TARDIS cats mill about her, covering her from feet to knees in cat hair and head-bonks. “Bill of my heart!” Alison runs to her.

“Thought you’d hate me.” Bill, shaking her head, looks down. She catches her fingers in her hair. “That you’d send me away.”

“I’m hurt,” says Alison, as hot tears run down her face, “but I’d never send you away. I’m keeping you, you sunflowery dorky interrobang.” She hugs Bill and tries to kiss her cheek. A TARDIS cat knocks her shin with enough force, however, that she goes off balance. The kiss connects with Bill’s right ear.

Bill hugs her back. Her warm, thrumming Cyber core presses against Alison’s chest. “I love you too, Alisonshine, as much as sunlight, as much as starshine, but… I wasn’t strong enough. Didn’t do the right thing, loved someone you hate, lied over and over and over, broke the contract, failed at being a Dork.”

“I know you feel horrible about keeping secrets. But you have to listen to me. Doing something wrong doesn’t necessarily make you a failed block of ice. You’re always *mea astra clarissima.*”

“Well, maybe I’m not a lonely little comet. I feel like one, though.” Bill shivers.
“Okay, then I’m gonna hug you till you warm up.” Alison holds fast to her shining, trembling star. TARDIS cats, purring like tiny generators, nudge against Alison and Bill’s feet, helpfully contributing their body heat. “Hold me fast, and fear me not,” she whispers.

“—And I’ll do thee no harm,” Bill, finishing the line, promises, then bursts into sobs of relief.

After emptying her reservoir of tears, Bill apologizes with hiccups and sniffles. She knows that she hurt Alison by lying to her and disappointing her. She’ll never do it again. She can’t. It hurts too much, even more than being sent away. Lying is like being pulled apart by a black hole, but following the contract is hard. It’s like pushing through the atmosphere at first, struggling against so much pressure and difficulty, but the relief and the peace are like calm, pure weightlessness.

Alison, with sunflowers crowding all around her, thanks Bill for apologizing. She says that Bill’s distrust hurt the most. She herself had told Bill all the important and embarrassing and painful things in her life. And Bill trusted Alison with some of them — like the story of Harry going inside her head — but not all of them, and that’s why Alison was so grieved. Bill promises to do better if Alison gives her a chance. Of course she will, Alison says.

“Oh!” Bill cries; Alison feels her warm tears pattering down onto her skin. Bill draws closer, carefully resting her head against Alison’s chest. “I just love you so much, Alisonshine. You’re so sexissima and snugglissima and brilliantissima! I could hold you fast forever.”

“I could do the same thing with you. In fact, let’s start right now, shall we?” And so they do. Meanwhile the TARDIS cats, assuming responsibility for Alison and Bill’s feet, twine around their ankles, holding them fast too.

“Bill! My dear flower! You’re alive!” The Doctor barrels down the corridor of animated clouds and rainbows. They charge into Alison and Bill, pinning them both against the wall, miraculously avoiding damage to any cats. In fact, the TARDIS cats, thrilled to see their ship’s pilot, turn into a fuzzy vibrating mass of happiness. One jumps up to the Doctor’s shoulder and begins licking their hair.

“Oh — oh — oh! Doctor!” Giggles and sobs mix up in Bill’s mouth.

Poetry bursts forth from the Doctor as they put their arms around Alison and Bill: “And, as I looked, a quickening gust / Of wind blew up to me and thrust — “ Their sharp shoulder blade clips Alison’s ear. “Oops, sorry. Into my face a miracle / Of orchard-breath,” says the Doctor, whose
face is a miracle of smeared lipstick, “and, with the smell — / I know not how such things can be! — / I breathed my soul back into me.” They sneeze. “Whoops — sunflower up my nose.”

“Just as long as that sunflower isn’t Bill,” says Alison with a smirk, rubbing her ear.

“No no no,” says the Doctor. “My dear Bill’s not up my nose; she’s in my arms. Wait — are you? Or is that Alison I’m squeezing?” As the TARDIS cat on their shoulder burbles, they say, “Oh, that was a cat.”


“If I knew I was going to have a reception like this,” Bill says in between laughs, “I’d have come out sooner!”

The entire Dork fam — and many of their feline fans — retires to Bill’s room. Cats bound over Bill’s electric wheelchair and stacks of vintage pulp magazines. Nesting on her rainbow duvet, they entice the bipeds with purrs and chirrups. The Doctor nearly walks into a cascade of blue umbrella-shaped blossoms hanging from the ceiling, but the Magister sweeps the flowers aside for the Doctor. Brushing by a few fashion plates, Alison hops onto Bill’s bed with her back against the headboard. She stretches her legs out before her and her arm out to the side. Bill takes her hand and nestles on her right. The Magister leaps up to Alison’s left, the Doctor to Bill’s right. Arranged all in a row, everyone puts their arms around one another.

Bill explains. Her voice is low and clear, but free of tears. She has always wanted a family, she says. She started out with hope and happiness in every one of her foster homes. Maybe this would be the star system where her little comet could find light and warmth.

But her little comet was never good enough. The Rhodopolouses thought that she was ungrateful because she wanted to read and star gaze instead of taking lessons for ice skating, softball, piano, and conversational French. The Ferrantis said that she wasn’t a good fit, which really meant that she was too brown and working class for a couple that was trying really hard to be White. And Moira, a White Irish Catholic, just couldn’t understand Bill’s casual queerness and agnosticism. Bill’s foster families always discovered the cold, dirty snowball at her little comet’s core, and they did not want to light her way anymore. The Doctor, shaking their head in distress, begins to hum.

Bill’s so-called friends turned out not to think much of Bill either. Heather, the sort-of ex and stalker, didn’t really look at her. She was always focused on the next escape, the next adventure.
There had been some prospective housemates, but the potential house was alien-infested and ate some of them, and no one wanted to hang around her after that. The Twelfth Doctor… Well, fuck them. Bill felt like a superhero with negative superpowers, like the Incredible Ignorable Lesbian or something.

In the spirit of full disclosure, though, she has to mention that there was one person who recognized her. That person was Missy. A counterpart to the Magister and Harry, Missy was the Master from yet another universe. She had the power to travel to any universe she chose; in fact, she had been through many already. But still she stayed in Bill’s with the Doctor, even though Twelve had locked her in the Vault. She said Bill wouldn’t understand, but Bill did. Both of them knew about isolation, loneliness, and being used as a pawn in someone else’s game. “And...so...yeah…” Bill falls silent, petting the nearest cats instead of fidgeting.

In the silence, the Doctor’s humming forms a wordless little song. It’s mild and sweet, rain lightly falling or a brook gently flowing. They pull Bill closer to them with one arm, as if trying to fill her with their rising music.

“Wait a minute. I thought you hated Missy and were afraid of her,” Alison objects. “I mean — she didn’t seem to like you very much when we told her and Twelve to fuck off. She couldn’t even remember your name.”

Bill shakes her head. “Performing — she was performing, doing what she thought the Doctor wanted her to. She’s desperate to be liked...you know, like me. Said I was scared of her — said I didn’t like her — because that’s what I thought you expected.”

She returns to her story. She couldn’t choose between Razor and her Dorks. They were both equally vital parts of her life. But the Dorks despised Razor with good reason. Razor even knew that and urged Bill to give him up. Bill feared that, if she revealed her association with him, the Dork fam would ostracize her. Yet she could lose neither her fellow stars nor Razor, so she contravened the Dork family code. She lied. She kept everyone in her life.

Bill’s little comet wobbled between two gravitational fields: Razor, the single star, and the Dork fam, her constellation. Both exerted an equally strong pull. She found herself trapped, unable to move toward either source of light. The lie too created its own abyss, a black hole of doubt and dread. Drawn in three directions, Bill felt like she would be torn apart, ripped into dust, and scattered into the void of space.

Then Alisonshine fell ill, and Bill worried even more. At the same time, she saw an opportunity to bring the important people in her life together in transparency and agreement. She would call Razor to cure Alisonshine of her malfunctioning chip. He would make her safe and whole and happy again. Then Alisonshine, the Doctor, and the Prof would relent, admitting that Razor was in fact
worth having around. Bill didn’t really think about how his presence would force her to face the lie that she had been telling her fam for months.

And so, when Razor arrived, Bill panicked. She could deny him no longer. She’d have to confront the inevitable consequences of betraying people who loved her. They would punish her by withdrawing their love, and the black hole of fear might swallow her whole.

Bill repeats to the Doctor and the Magister the apologies that she made to Alison. She should have trusted Alisonshine and her Doctor and the Prof, just as much as they trusted her. She didn’t, though, and she’s very sorry. She listened to her doubts instead and assumed that the past would happen again; yet another family would deem her unworthy.

But she wants to trust them, even though she’s scared. And she knows that her Dork fam wants her trust as well. So she’ll practice trusting them, and, if they’ll be patient with her, they’ll all slowly, carefully, cautiously become closer. Alison, nodding and snuggling with Bill, promises that she will. The Magister avers the same, with many rolling Rs.

And the Doctor says nothing, for the Doctor is singing. Bill pulls her shirt up to her armpits, and the Doctor presses their spidery hands against the metal Cyber casing that contains Bill’s mechanical core. As they bend their body around their human partner, they sway their torso from side to side, making themself a metronome, and they sing. It’s their usual repair song, the rocking, wordless melody with which they keep Bill’s Cyber parts in tune.

This iteration of Bill’s repair song varies the theme. It echoes into the deeper registers. Low and slow, the sounds expand to fill the entire room, holding carefully and tightly everyone within. Yes, I’m your Doctor, this song says, and yes, you’re my dear Bill. You’re part of our family, and we’re part of yours. No matter what anyone claims, you belong where you choose to be. You choose to be with us, and we want you here, so...here you are: ours, ours, ours. Bill, her hands covering the Doctor’s, lowers her head, swinging it from side to side in time with the Doctor’s beat. The two of them are dancing in their own little world, one of sweetness and surrender.

The Doctor’s song, while addressed to Bill, includes Alison and the Magister as well. We belong to each other, the song says, because we choose that possession. Alison, who’s grinning like a doofus, and the Magister, who’s purring enough for at least seventeen cats, look at Bill and the Doctor. Bill and the Doctor come up from their private dance, blinking in dazed wonder, and smile back at them.

We are linked to each other because we choose those bonds. Everyone shifts around awkwardly. The Doctor sits on a TARDIS cat’s tail. Bill hugs Alison a little too hard. The Magister banishes cat hair from his clothing with such force that it makes Alison sneeze.
Eventually, though, they line themselves up, pressing against each other, warmth against all sides, without any interruptions from TARDIS cats. With their arms intertwined, the Dorks all form a chain. Alison feels strong enough to brave anything in the multiverse.

_We hold each other fast to make each other happy and because we are happy when we ourselves are held fast._ Wrapped around by her Dork fam and surrounded by the harmonizing purrs of TARDIS cats, Alison decides that her constellation has finally reached its perfect arrangement. She smiles softly and closes her eyes, allowing herself to be held fast without fear.
Bill and Harry Reunite

Chapter Summary

It's electrifying! Also Harry lets slip how he really feels about Bill, which is...unexpected and illuminating.

After the Dork fam reconciles, negotiations continue. The Dorks have another discussion about their contract. They solemnly renew their commitment to their principles of respect, kindness, and truthfulness, especially the latter. Feeling left out of the negotiations, TARDIS cats park on, under, and around Alison, Bill, the Magister, and the Doctor. Thus the new agreement is ratified with lots of holding fast and sealed with lots of purrs.

Bill reunites with Harry. Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor stand aside in Scintilla’s Zero Room and watch. Bill weeps, tangling her fingers in her hair, even as she smiles all the while. As for Harry, he sits up in his floating bed in the Zero Room, pulls down his oxygen mask, and reaches out toward Bill with both arms. His heartbeats speed up, causing brilliant blooms of red, orange, and yellow to burst across the walls.

And Harry lights up — literally. Lightning flashes from his blissfully closed eyes along with tears. Kitty leaps about joyfully, wagging its tail.

Bill and Harry embrace. The lightning streams from him, coiling around them both. “Master! Stop!” the Doctor shrieks in terror. They leap forward and sweep Bill into their arms, yanking her bodily away. “Oh Bill… Bill my dear…” They hold her face with a trembling hand. “Are you all right?”

“Um, yeah.” Bill wrinkles her nose as she searches the Doctor’s face. “Why?”

Placing a hand on the Doctor’s shoulder, the Magister scans Bill. “There are no scorch marks on your clothes or your flesh, Heliantha.” He turns to Harry. “Nor yours, Master. How do you feel?”

“Ach.” Harry drops back to his pillows. “What is this for, Doctor? I think you wrench something.” Kitty procures him some analgesics, which he swallows in a dry handful. “Thank you, Kitty.”

“You, uh, had lightning coming out of your orifices,” Alison interjects to Harry.
“Didn’t feel anything,” Bill volunteers as the Doctor carefully sets her on her feet again. “Well, maybe a little static shock, but no scorches.”

“Lightning?” Harry repeats. “I have the lightnings?” His eyes sparkle like lit fuses. “Again? Finally! Ah hah hah hah hah!” He squeezes his eyes shut and laughs. “Ahem.” He resorts to his oxygen mask for a few breaths. “These lightnings — they are no harm, just energy leaking, flashy fairy lights of feelings.” In a lower voice he says, “Shitty side effect of my shitty resurrection.”

“Energy leak?” Alison moves closer. “Are you in pain?”

“That’s because he’s a happy, happy, happy kitty!” Kitty pipes up. “He told me that he goes zotz when he’s happy, oh yes! Oh yes, he does. But I have never seen him go zotz before. Oh wow, oh wow. Bestperson,” it says, referring to Bill, “makes him the happiest kitty ever, yes, yes, yes! Bestperson really is the best person. Such a happy kitty, so very, very, very happy!” After some ecstatic bouncing, it settles down to bask raptly in Bill’s awesomeness.

But Harry and Bill are already back in each other’s arms. His lightning surrounds them, binding them to each other in pale blue ribbons of love, trust, and memory. He cries, murmuring something into Bill’s hair.

“What?” At Harry’s words, the Magister pivots abruptly, staring at him.

“Huh?” Bill detaches from Harry and looks back at the Magister.

“What?” Alison looks between them both.

“What did you say to Heliantha?” The Magister advances a step toward Harry.

“Master, are you related to Bill?” the Doctor asks Harry.

“Huh?” Bill’s voice grows a little wilder.
“What?” Alison’s voice grows a little louder.

“You didn’t hear?” The Doctor lifts an eyebrow at Alison and Bill. “The Master said, *Oh, Bill, you are my dearest, dearest daughter.*”

“Not biologically.” The Magister folds his arms, obviously analyzing their DNA with his magic robot eyes or something.

“Razor!” Bill yells at him.

“Harry!” Alison chimes in.

“What the hell?” both of them cry in unison.

Harry’s eyes dart among four very loud, very confused Dorks. He babbles. There were so many others before Bill, but they didn’t have the same quickness and brilliance. But she was like him, a survivor in even the worst conditions, a warrior, blazing with impassioned cleverness. She, just like him, wanted the constellations, the future, the entire universe.

And so she left him to live, to shine, to thrive, to be with her star family. With her power and her light, her marriage to the Dominatrix, and her ruling of the universe, she had all the command and strength that he ever wanted. Now she’s his success and his successor, his hope and his future: his dearest daughter.

That had better be a nickname or a metaphor, Bill says, because she’s not Razor’s little girl or his offspring. She’s already someone’s daughter: her mum’s. Harry cringes, reddening. She’s not his child or anything. It just means that he was foolish to believe that, even for a very short time, she wanted...him. He’s sorry. He should probably stop talking, he says, and yet he can’t. He chatters on, all in that smarmy Razor accent.

Bill cuts him off. She’s her mum’s daughter, she declares. And yet...she never had a dad. Beyond half her genetic material, she has no idea what he gave her. She knows what Razor gave her, though. He gave her free will, hope, and power. Even though her Dork fam dislikes him, she hopes that they can be a part of each other’s lives. “I think,” she says slowly, smiling a bit, “that I wouldn’t mind having you as my sort of foster dad — maybe.”
“Ah?”

“Don’t have any family left, especially not in this universe,” says Bill with a shrug, “so I’m making my own. I wouldn’t mind you being a member of mine. Just as long as I know that it’ll be like we talked about before you came — that you’ll be better than you were in Dystopiaville, yeah? Polite and kind and not taking me for granted and all that?” The lines on her brow and around her smirk brackets deepen, becoming more serious.

Kitty, Harry’s personal cheerleader, hops to its feet. “Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, Bestperson! My Maker is a very good kitty, a very, very good kitty! He is polite and kind and all that. He is; he is.” It jumps with each adjective.

“Shhh, Kitty.” Harry touches it lightly on the arm rest. It stills, but remains standing, just in case it has to advocate for its Maker again. “My dear,” says Harry to Bill softly, “you are like daughter to me. I am sorry for this meanness of mine where I did not treat you like my dearest daughter. From now on, this is what I will do if I have chance.” His makeup dribbles in black drops down his cheeks as he weeps.

“Okay,” says Bill softly. She opens her arms to him. “Just one more chance.” The two of them return to each other’s arms, crying and sparking and grinning as widely as possible.

They’re happy, Alison thinks. Bill is as happy to see Harry as she is to see me or the Doctor or the Prof. And he — he reaches toward her and blooms for her like the Magister does for me. After so much separation, so much grief, so much doubt, so much travail, Bill’s happy. She can’t help but smile to see Bill’s joy. Even Harry’s open jubilation makes her smile, mostly because she never thought him capable of rejoicing about anything.

“The Wealth might disappoint — ” the Doctor remarks, knitting their brows, and Alison realizes that they’re quoting. “Himself a poorer prove,” they go on, clearly eyeing Harry, “Than this great Purchaser,” they say, meaning Bill, “suspect, / The Daily Own — of Love / Depreciate the Vision…”

The smile drifts off of Alison’s face. She agrees with the Doctor. With all the hope of a lonely person who wants a family, Bill takes Harry back. She assumes that a wealth of gentleness and respect will follow Harry’s declaration of her filial equivalency. Harry has a poor reputation of love, though, and he doesn’t deserve a second chance. He probably won’t do any better this time. While it’s nice to know that Harry can feel happiness, Alison doubts that his and Bill’s will last too long.
“At least — ‘tis Mutual — Risk.” Stepping forward, the Magister puts his arm around the Doctor. “Some,” he says, continuing the quote, tilting his face up toward the Doctor, “found it — Mutual Gain — “ He’s referring to the chances that he and his Doctor took with each other. The creases radiating from the outer edges of his eyes turn upward at the ends as he smiles.

Alison rolls her eyes. Just because the Magister and the Doctor were able to change does not mean that Harry can. Her Time Dorks’ relationship doesn’t somehow ratify the highly suspect acceptance going on here. Some people might find mutual gain in hazarding a second chance, but not everyone.

“Some — found it — Mutual Gain — “ Repeating the line, the Doctor bends over the Magister, hugging him. They snuggle him, rubbing the side of their face against the top of his head. Then, with a brief sigh, the Doctor turns from their inevitable spouse toward Bill and Harry. Their mouth is screwed up to the side. They really hope that Harry will do better, but they still doubt. Okay, that’s more realistic; Alison feels better.

Alison sighs. With Bill officially dubbing him her sort of foster dad maybe, Harry’s here to stay. He’s like that odious in-law that you have to put up with. That doesn’t mean that Alison has to let him into the Dork family proper, though. She doesn’t need to love him, like him, or even spend time with him. She just has to treat him decently. Given how much she wants to punch him in the face, she thinks she’s doing a pretty good job of it so far. She decides to confront him soon, though, and remind him who’s in charge in this universe.
Galleia and Lakis' conflict with the Stylist heightens on Seneschal Five. Alison and Bill wonder how to advise them. Alison and Harry meet alone. She tells him what he must to in order to stay. She also asks him why he's really here.

The Dork family goes into the Doctor’s robotics lab to inspect the memory sticks from Harry’s luggage. You have to move carefully in the Doctor’s lab because there’s just...so much of it. With its mirrored ceiling, the space seems twice as vast and twice as cluttered as it really is. A somehow electric smell of greenery, underscored with the pitchy grease of engine oil, swirls around them. Trees with glass fruit extend their branches through the ceiling. Robotic skulls serve as planters for squid-like vines. A computer has its motherboard replaced with a tray of lichen that grows in slightly fuzzy circuit-board patterns. Alison can’t really tell where she is in space unless she holds onto something. She trails her hand on a silver counter to keep her balance.

The Doctor stops before their central work bench, where electrodes are lined up like glimmering metal seeds. The Doctor pushes them aside with their sleeve. The Magister places on memory sticks on end before the Doctor. The organic/robotic odor in the air takes on an invigorating edge. There’s a storm of creativity brewing, sparked by the fertile brains of the two genius Time Dorks. She and Bill share anticipatory grins with each other, then gather close to witness.

First the Doctor holds their arms out, points their mouth toward the sky, elongates their throat, and sings to the memory sticks. With a high, reedy song as fine as a scalpel, they explore the construction of the sticks. The Magister, ear bent to the sticks, listens to the results.

The Doctor ends their song, folding themself back into their usual posture. At the same time, the Magister stretches his spine. Their eyes connect; matching smiles appear on their faces. Without a word, they split for opposite ends of the lab.

Within seconds, the Doctor dumps a hurdy-gurdy, a trowel, a packet of dahlia seeds, and other miscellaneous items on the bench before them. To this pile the Magister adds a soldering gun, a metronome, and various safety gear. The Doctor, hopping and flapping, darts their hands across the pile, selecting pieces and matching their edges, like they’re putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The Magister parks goggles on both his and the Doctor’s heads, then organizes electronic components into neat rows. With an excited murmur and an intake of breath, Bill edges her wheelchair forward.

Alison is about to follow, but a familiar voice calls her. “Hey, Miss Alison!” Scintilla in her robot
form pops up on a nearby monitor. “Queen Galleia and Lady Lakis are calling. They sound pretty pissed off, so do you want to talk to them now? I can always tell them to wait if you’re in the midst of something.”

“No, I’m just watching the Time Dorks geek out here.” Alison smiles. “I’ll talk to them.”

Scintilla catches sight of Bill next to Alison. “Oh, Miss Bill, do you want to talk to them too? The Queen mentioned that she needed advice.”

Bill laughs under her breath. “Galleia always needs advice.”

Taking the leave of their Time Dorks, Alison and Bill go through the portal that connects TARDISes, moving instantaneously from London to Burlington. Alison settles in her bedroom in the chaise longue, and Bill pulls up beside her. Then they answer the video chat of Galleia and Lakis on a tablet, settling on her chaise longue. “Hey!” Alison greets them. “What’s going on?”

“Galleia! Lakis!” Bill waves hard. “How’s Seneschal Five?”

“Hey, you two,” says Galleia, her annoyed eyebrows elongated and blackened. “A lot more would be going on if the Stylist wasn’t being so unreasonable! By Poseidon’s balls, I could just...just stab her!” She plucks the spider-shaped fascinator from her fancy black updo wig, then jabs the fascinator pin into the belly of an imaginary opponent.

“Hi, Alison and Bill.” Lakis waves, but without energy. She’s kind of mumbling, as she does when she’s upset. “We’re bored.”

“You both sound pretty frustrated.” Bill nods sympathetically. “What’s wrong?”

“Stylist Mom is being exasper — exacer — exasperat — “

“Exasperating?” Alison suggests.

Lakis gives up on the polysyllabic word. “—Mean,” she finishes. “She says that we can’t go out and do more shenanigans. But nobody likes the Corving! Even Javvy and Ne-Selsi don’t like the
Corving, and they’re the Corving’s kids.”

“So what’s happening now?” Alison asks. “The last I heard, you had snuck out with Reeve and made friends with Javvy and Ne-Selsi. Then the Stylist thought that you were missing and ran around to find you.”

Since Lakis tends to start in the middle of stories, Galleia gives Alison and Bill the details. After the sisters’ first meeting with the Corving’s kids, the Stylist lectured everyone, including Reeve. She yelled at Galleia and Lakis for diving into a perilous shark-infested sea of a city and making spaghetti out of the mission. She wanted to do a surgical strike on the Corving and remove the controversial, but popular, politician. But Galleia and Lakis, in making friends with the Corving’s kids, had entangled themselves unwittingly in the plot. It was now pointlessly complicated because of them.

There was a reason, the Stylist said, that she had wanted Galleia and Lakis to stay put with Reeve. She trusted the sisters and knew that they could take care of themselves, but she also wanted them to stay safe. The situation in Aluet was volatile, and she wanted to assassinate the Corving as soon as possible with the least amount of risk. That meant that the sisters and Reeve needed to stay out of her way.

Lakis takes over the story, more excited. When she and Galleia first met Javvy and Ne-Selsi, Javvy had a great idea. They thought that the Corving was mean and wrong and unfair to oppose immigration. They wanted to tell people how wrong the Corving was and how immigration was a good thing, but they didn’t want to be found out and caught. Alison bites down a wry laugh; this is obviously what Lakis was referring to when she said that even the Corving’s kids didn’t like the Corving. Javvy and Ne-Selsi’s politics diametrically oppose their parent’s.

Anyway, Galleia, Lakis, and the Corving’s kids continued to plan, even after the Stylist’s reprimand. Lakis starts speaking very fast and with great animation about pointy masks and sneaky papers, so Galleia paraphrases more intelligibly. The four decided to dress in the uniforms of the Moral Hygiene Auxiliary, an anti-immigration youth group. The full face masks of these costumes, reminiscent of plague doctors’, would make them thoroughly anonymous. They would go out at night and put up pro-immigration, anti-Corving posters on public transit stations. But then Reeve snitched on them to the Stylist and ruined everything.

Galleia gather her breath to tell Alison how condescending and infuriating the Stylist is, but there’s a tapping at the door and a skittering on the floor. “Hello, hello, hello, Dominatrix,” Kitty says, pushing open her bedroom door and waving with both pincers. “And Bestperson too! Hello, Bestperson!” it greets Bill. “I love you, Bestperson. I love you too, Dominatrix. Are you a busy kitty right now, Dominatrix? If you’re not a busy kitty, my Maker wants to talk to you.”
“Just a minute, Galleia,” says Alison. To Kitty, she says, “You can come in. Harry’s up?”

“He’s in Shinyfriend’s Zero Room, but he has woken up. He is a much happier kitty than he was when he fell into your closet; yes, yes, yes, he is. Come on; come on, Dominatrix!” Kitty dances in the doorway.

“Sorry about that,” Bill tells Galleia and Lakis. “It’s just that Alison has another call.”

Galleia sighs dramatically, then explains for Alison’s benefit: “I was sighing about the Stylist, not you. Do you have any advice on how to deal with exasperating Time Dorks who treat you like a kid when you’re really an adult?”

“She’s mad that we did shenanigans,” Lakis says, crossing her arms and screwing up her face. “She says it’s too dangerous. But we’ve done dangerous missions before. We saved all those people and you and the Lord Master from an earthquake, and that was dangerous. She’s not fair.” Lakis refers to the time that Alison and the Magister went back to Atlantis to keep an earlier version of him from causing an earthquake and sinking it. They could not prevent the drowning of the island, but they did save many Atlanteans. Alison and the Magister worked with Galleia and Lakis to evacuate as many people as possible. Then Alison and the Magister brought the sisters to the present to live and work with the Stylist.

“Ahhhhhh...can you hold a second?” Alison mutes her and Bill’s speaker and tells Kitty she’ll be right there. “Advice on exasperating Time Dorks?” she repeats to Bill. “Aren’t we still trying to figure that out ourselves?”

Bill snickers. “Hmmm...” She wrinkles her nose, thinking. “The thing is that they want to be treated like adults, but the Stylist is ordering them around and punishing them like they’re kids.”

Alison cocks her head. “Yeah, but I understand why she’s being so strict, though. They’re really smart and even kind of politically precocious in some ways because they’ve experienced Atlantean court politics. But they’re also naive and impulsive. They need limits made by someone with more common sense, like the Stylist.”

“The Stylist?” Bill shakes her head. “Are you sure she has common sense? She doesn’t always look before she leaps either. Besides, she’s not doing it right. She’s just ordering them around and having them do things because she said so. Maybe that works on toddlers, but not on people Galleia and Lakis’ ages. She should explain to Galleia and Lakis why she’s setting the limits. That would be more respectful.”
“We could tell them they need family counseling,” Alison says half jokingly, getting back to Galleia’s question. “Gah.” She presses her hand to her forehead. “I have no idea what to tell them.”

“I’ll figure out something.” Bill promises. “Go talk to Razor. Kitty’s going to start tap dancing over there!” she observes, seeing Kitty fidget as it waits.

Saying goodbye to Bill, Alison follows Kitty to the Zero Room, where it says it will leave her to talk to Harry in private. Alison hits the button on Scintilla’s Zero Room’s intercom. “I’m here.”

“Just a minute!” Harry calls. Alison sees through the window that he’s putting in earrings. Rather, he’s putting in a single earring, since he only has a left ear.

Alison goes in anyway. The Zero Room is just as disorienting as the Doctor’s robotics lab, but because there are too few cues, rather than too many. There’s no smell. There’s no sound. The walls and the floor merge into glowing, undefined whiteness. They display no colors of Harry’s heartbeats, so he must have unhooked himself from the monitors. As the peculiar snowy hush of the isolation room drops around her, Alison identifies the floor by touch alone. Once she has satisfied herself that it exists beneath her feet, she sets her eyes on Harry and advances.

Harry sits bolstered against the headboard of his floating bed. His long-haired fur coat, red fibers on black pile, enwraps him with its loose sleeves and flaring skirt. He wears black gloves with mother of pearl curlicues on the backs. His makeup depends on a blackish red palette, with flashes of iridescent white on lashes and lids. He would look like a king at his leisure, except that he has his tongue poking out and his hand to his ear lobe because he’s trying to put in his earring.

Alison almost laughs at his expression. “Harry,” she says, and her laughter gives her voice a much friendlier tone than she intends. Well, that’s what she’s here for: to establish friendliness, respect, and the proper power differentials. “Let’s talk.”

“Ach, what is this?” Harry, instantly assuming that fucking Razor voice, makes shooing motions. “I am not ready.” His earring, a slanting set of iridescent white beaded dangles, swings, brushing against his jaw.

“Well,” says Alison, “I am.” And, after years of admiring villains pacing and monologuing impressively, she decides to do the same. “Before we go any further, here’s my first rule.” She holds her hands together behind her back, walking up and down at the foot of his bed. “When you’re talking to me, drop the accent. I don’t care if you use it with other people. But, if you have
any hope of me listening to you and taking you seriously, get rid of that Razor voice.”

Harry blinks twice. “Oh. I… I didn’t even notice,” he says in his usual Northern tone. “But yes… Yes, of course, Dominatrix. *Fiat voluntas tua.* "Thy will be done.

Alison, calculating her steps so they fall to the rhythm of her clauses, gives him the rest of her rules. Second, even though he might call Bill daughter, Harry can assume no such familiarity with Alison. He must address her as the Dominatrix and nothing else. Third, he must treat her and everyone else in the universe with the same respect, kindness, courtesy, compassion, and honesty that the Dork fam treat each other.

She stops, letting her conditions rest in Harry’s ears for a second. Now that she has been walking on the invisible floor for several minutes, its invisibility no longer disconcerts her. Now that she has been talking for a while, the white silence no longer seems so still. In confidence, she waits, watching him understand that she’s in charge. Eventually he looks at her, lifting his chin, giving her silent permission to go on.

Alison folds her hands over the back of the guest chair beside Harry. In conclusion, she makes one thing perfectly clear. He stays because she permits him to, and she permits him because, first, he’s important to Bill, and she respects that. Second, he might be useful with this whole Cyber chip fiasco. That’s it. “Or,” Alison finishes wryly, “to put it in words that you’ll understand, I am the Dominatrix, and you will obey me.”

“I understand perfectly. I may be part of my dear daughter’s family, but you do not consider me part of yours. I stay here only on your sufferance — and only then if I follow your edicts. Though I cannot be a member of the Dork fam, you expect me to abide by the familial code of respect, kindness, honesty, compassion, excruciatingly explicit communication about everything, and the acquisition of mutual consent for every single activity you even think about undertaking. To put it another way,” Harry concludes with a self-conscious smirk, “I am the Master, and you… Well, I will obey you.” He punctuates this statement with a nod, as if at the end of a prayer.

“Good.” Alison fixes her eyes on him. It’s not quite a glare, but she is trying to tell him with her eyeballs how serious this is.

Harry, his own eyes dark hazel and sparkling, nods slightly as if he knows what she’s thinking. “Now can I — ?” He reaches for the tablet beside him on the mattress.

“Not yet.” Alison holds up her hand. Finally she sits in the chair by his bedside. “In the spirit of honesty and excruciatingly explicit conversation, I want to know something. Why are you here?
You say that you have loyalty to Bill and that you truly want to help me, but what do you hope to gain from this visit? What do you really want? Tell me, directly, precisely, and in all truthfulness. I’m not going to necessarily grant your desires, but I want to know them.”

Harry sets his tablet aside. “Do you really, Dominatrix? I guarantee you won’t like the answers.”
Harry Reveals What He Wants

Chapter Summary

1) His daughter. 2) The Dork fam. 3) Most of all, the Dominatrix. Then he gives Alison a monologue seven decades in the making. Should she accept it?

“I figured that I probably wouldn’t. But yes — I really want to know. Tell me.”

“I want my daughter,” says Harry, then adds, closing his eyes and smiling, “and I already have her. But…” He opens his eyes. “I want your family, Dominatrix, and I want your love. Your adoration grants people control over the entire cosmos, and the power that you wield inspires love. I want that. I want you,” he says, launching the word at her in a harsh half-whisper.

“Me?” Alison sits back from him, even though he hasn’t leaned forward. “How?” She analyzes his expression. His eyes are wide, his straight brows drawn together. He holds his lower jaw forward a bit, his lips pressed together, his eyes flicking from side to side as if he’s reading her. He looks grave, intense, and… “Hungry,” she says under her breath. “Not hunting, but hungry.”

“Hunger.” Harry folds his coat tighter around him and pulls the loose sleeves over his wrists. “That’s a good word for it.”

“You hunger for me. Do you want me to be yours in the way that I’m the Magister’s Domina?”

Harry folds his hands in his lap and expels a long breath. At the same time, he says, “Yes...” The word comes out with rough reluctance.

“Do you, like, lust after me?” Alison ripples her top lip.

His voice is flat as he avoids her eyes. “I always lust after what I cannot have. Power is beautiful. Fucking is possession.”

“That’s just gross.”
“It’s a compulsion,” he says with another hopeless shrug, “a flaw in the system, lodged just as deeply in here,” he says, tapping his temple, “as the Drums. Believe me — I don’t relish it any more than you do.”

“So what do you do with it?” Alison scrutinizes Harry. “You have your own Cyber implant for panic attacks and your traveling pharmacy for pain management, so what do you do for the, um, compulsion?”

“I recognize it for what it is: a pathological manifestation of my drive to control everything in my environment,” says Harry. “I remind myself that it’s largely a desire to possess the power, self-control, and mastery of people like you. Then I figure out how I can obtain those qualities for myself without fucking everyone I see.”

“Okay, well, that’s good, I guess,” says Alison slowly. He has these desires, but he doesn’t want to have them, so he works hard to redirect them. It would be best if he never lusted after her at all, but suppressing and redirecting that shit is the next best option. Still Alison tightens her arms over her chest. “This, uh, lust isn’t going to be a problem, is it?”

“As much as your lust for the mechanical Master is — which is to say, no, it won’t. I’d rather not feel it, so I have every incentive to avoid its expression. Besides, if I did anything with it, I would violate your commandments, and you’d probably kill me. I like being alive, so no. My lust for you will not be a problem.”

Alison refuses to address his implication that she has the hots for the Magister, even though it is probably true on some level. “Good.” She loosens her tense neck.

“You believe me!”

“I do?”

“You do. You recoiled when I first said, I want you. But you just completely relaxed when I said it wouldn’t be a problem.” Harry lets down his shoulders in a parody of her relaxation. “Why do you believe me on that point, but nothing else?”

Alison doubts his ability to adhere to the Dork fam code of honor, but she knows that his pathological lust will not interfere with his efforts on her behalf. While he hasn’t successfully been kind in the past, he has successfully managed his desire. In fact, he has managed it so well that she
didn’t even know it existed until a few minutes ago. “Yeah, well, I believe you because I’ve seen it not be a problem.”

“Fair enough.” Harry darts conspicuous glances at his tablet.

“You’ve got something you want to read to me?” Alison points to it. “Go ahead.”

Harry taps and slides on the screen, keeping up a commentary under his breath: “My lines! Where are my lines? Where did I put that fucking file? For fuck’s sake, don’t sort by file name,” he says to the tablet. “I don’t think like that. Sort by last modified date! I have got to change the defaults on this thing. Ah, here we go. No, wait — this is draft six, the one with the huge digression. Fuck that shit!”

After several minutes of scrolling, he finds what he wants. “Okay. Here we go.” He adjusts his posture to regal rectitude. He addresses Alison without referring to the screen: “I realized too late what I should have done. I should have welcomed you. I should have told you from the first how bright and wonderful and important and brilliant my daughter was. I should have charged you to give her respect and love. And I should have known that you would, from the way that you acted toward her. I should have recognized that you and your Dorks were everything that I had ever hoped for her.

“But I didn’t,” he continues, “obviously. Um…because…um….” He scrolls down; he really does have his lines written out word by word. “I made you my enemy,” he says, his voice gaining strength as he finds his cue. “I was too distracted by possessiveness and rage to make you love me as you should. I made you miserable instead, and I will always regret that.”

“You should have made me love you?” Alison repeats with a laugh. She starts an epic eye roll, but then checks it. Momentously enough, Harry is acknowledging that his possessiveness and rage caused Alison’s dislike and misery. He even claims to regret it. In that context, I should have made you love me is his control freaky way of saying that he should have been respectful and kind. Then she would have liked him. She objects to the phrasing, but she can’t fault the sentiment behind it. “Yeah, you had a chance to be my friend,” she says, “and you wasted it by being a bully.”

“And, now that the mechanical Master tried to use my Cyber tech to help you, but failed — now I’m the chip in your brain, the depression in all your days, the insomnia in all your nights, the pinhole in your balloon, the tear in your psychic fabric, the shock of fear in your — “

“That’s an inaccurate statement. I’m not scared of you anymore,” Alison interrupts.
He talks over her, speeding up. “There’s a Master in your mind. There’s a Master in your mind, Dominatrix, but not the one you want, not the one who holds you fast. It’s me,” he says, his hand to his chest for a moment, “and you don’t want me. You’re not safe or whole or happy at all.

“I would go back and undo what I did to you if I could, but I don’t have a TARDIS.” Harry pushes his tablet from his lap. Either he has memorized these lines, or he’s extemporizing. He keeps his eyes steadily upon her, forcing himself to look at her. “So...well...I can only apologize and say that I will never do what I did again. And, if you’ll permit me, I’ll do everything in my power to restore your safety and wholeness and happiness. I’m... I’m sorry, dearest Dominatrix mine.” He bows and falls silent, relieving her of that creepy eye contact.

The sound-absorbing whiteness around them seems to wait for Alison’s reply. “Okay,” says Alison after a moment, just because she feels that she should say something.

“Holy shit,” Harry speaks up after a moment, focusing on middle distance, rather than Alison. “I said it. I got through it.” He lets himself fall backward against his pillows. “I — ow!” His entire body curls up.

“Oh fuck!” Alison jumps up. “Do you need some help?”

Harry uncurls long enough to breathe out a few words. “Your hand?” He reaches for her. “Telepathy — easier — please —” Alison warily slips her hand into his. His run-on instruction pours into her head: Okay, so clearly I was holding a lot more tension in my spinal muscles than I expected because they completely seized up when I finished talking, but if you would be so kind as to pull out my medicine chest and get me two — no, three — no, five — pentacholamine tablets from the top tray, red bottle, yellow cap, then I think I might not feel as if my shoulders were being picked apart by needles quite so much. Oh...and please. And thank you.

Alison does as Harry requests, giving him some water from the night stand just in case. With a few crunches and swigs, the pills disappear. Harry shudders as if cold, slides down among the folds of his coat, and closes his eyes. “Ach,” he says, but it’s more of a sound of dismay than a Razor exclamation. “Thank you, Dominatrix. One of these days I should teach Kitty how to give back massages.” He lies back again and closes his eyes.

“Probably a good idea.” Alison accepts the empty glass from him.

“I haven’t fallen asleep,” Harry says after a moment, his eyes still closed, “not yet at least.”
sigh. “I’m just...trying…” Deep breaths. After several seconds, the small vertical crease between his brows disappears. “Okay.” He turns his head, still against the pillows, toward her. “So — my performance — what do you think? Be brutal...or excruciatingly explicit, if you prefer.”

Alison takes a moment to understand that he’s talking about his apology. “How long did it take you to write that? How long have you been practicing?”

“Sixty-nine years, fourteen hours, and twelve minutes — approximately.” Self-deprecating smirk.

“And you still forgot your lines?”

“Stark terror tends to have an adverse effect on one’s memory.” The pills must be kicking in, as Harry evinces no terror whatsoever at the moment. With a small smile on his face, he’s finally peaceful.

“Stark terror of what?”

“Why, you, of course.”

“Me?”

“I control my own actions, of course, but you are the one who makes the final decision about whether I stay.” Harry’s eyes keep drifting halfway closed, even though he keeps opening them back up.

“Okay. That makes sense.” Alison can’t think of anything else to say, and she kind of wants him intimidated by her. Then he’ll have more of incentive to behave.

“Do you… Do you accept my apology then?”

“Of c — “ Alison stops herself before she can reflexively absolve him. She knows that she should. Her dad stood over her often enough when she was a kid, supervising some obnoxious White kid as they delivered an insincere apology for touching her hair or calling her 

charity shop case or something. Alison was expected to lie and say that she forgave them. Alison’s parents — indeed,
her entire family — were very big on apologies and forgiveness. Her dad said that they built
strength of character, while her mum and gram always said, You have to be the bigger person.

She knew it was because she was a Black girl. Her parents always reminded her that, if she wanted
to succeed in a White world, she had to prove herself smarter, calmer, more generous — better.
People would lose respect for her if she lost her cool. She had to play nice so that she didn’t come
across like an angry Black woman. Fucking respectability politics.

Why should she, though? Why should she smile at bigotry, accepting it just because some White
person has followed it with an empty apology? She is, in fact, an angry Black person with
countless legitimate reasons for her anger. She doesn’t want to bite down on her anger. It gives her
power, drive, self-righteousness, and strength. Her anger fuels her goodness. It makes her a better
person.

“I’m glad that you made it.” That’s as far as Alison will go. Certainly it would be easier if she
accepted it and reconciled with him, but she isn’t ready for that yet. Maybe she never will be.

“But no — you don’t accept it.” Harry shakes his head. Despite looking and acting like the
epitome of a privileged White guy, he, interestingly enough, doesn’t seem to be too bothered by her
lack of playing nice. In fact, he expected as much. “If I needed seventy years to figure out the right
words, then you probably need some time to figure out what to do with them. But...thank you.” He
moves to take her hand, then realizes that he doesn’t have license to. He stops, withdraws, then
reclines among his pillows. “I just wanted to tell you that before we did everything else so that…
Finishing sentences now takes effort that he doesn’t have. “You needed to know the truth, even if
you don’t believe... I wish you... I’m sorry, but I can’t...” He closes his eyes.

“Master!” The Magister’s voice makes Alison jump out of the chair. He strides briskly toward her
and Harry as he enters the Zero Room. “I have a question about your notes. They appear to be more
of an emotional journal than a series of scientific notes, and I was — “ He catches sight of Harry
asleep. “Oh,” he says in a low whisper.

“Yeah,” says Alison in a whisper as she stands. “That question will have to wait.”
The Dorks Examine the Evidence

Chapter Summary

The Dork fam reads Harry's diaries basically. The documents reveal interesting information about the Twelfth Doctor, Lulu Lucy, Bill, the Dominatrix, and other significant figures in his recent life. Kitty ties up a loose plot thread -- what happened to the terrorists of the renovated Dystopiaville? -- and tells the story of its creation. Alison ponders all of this.

While letting Harry recover from his total depletion, the Dork fam lodges in the 1970s living room and pores over the contents of his memory sticks, trying to figure them out. The Doctor and the Magister construct a crude device to read the files quickly enough, but the content of the files puzzles them. None of it has anything to do with Cyber tech.

Instead, as the Magister mentioned, Harry’s memory sticks seem to be more of an emotional journal of his past seventy or so years in Dystopiaville. The Magister’s batch analysis of the thousands of files reveals few scientific terms. Instead he finds I think, I feel, I wonder, and I suppose employed again and again. Seated at his dark, nook-filled desk, the only Victorian item in the room, the Magister writes these phrases in his regular, unornamented print.

Alison, lurking over her robot’s shoulder, wonders how many of Harry’s subtexts these diary files could illuminate. She really wants to know how his mind works. Ugh, but then she’d have to go through millions of files. Good thing the Magister is running analyses on them.

Writing some more lines, the Magister then reads aloud. My dearest daughter is Harry’s statistically favorite subject, along with the heart of my revolution, with the Dominatrix and Lucy in second place. Dork fam and Clara are in third, Yasmeen Mazandarani and other members of his cabinet fourth. The Doctor is in fifth place.

Alison has to sit down at that news. She joins Bill on a sofa with mossy green, slightly squishy upholstery. The doilies on the seat backs, as fine as spiderwebs, have ghostly forms woven into them. With my dear daughter in first place, the Dominatrix in second, and Dork fam in third, Harry has had the four of them on his mind constantly for the past seventy years. He really did miss them, all of them. Alison can’t argue with the statistics.

Wondering what Harry and his Doctor once felt for each other, Alison and Bill ask their Time Dorks if they found any insight on that subject. The Doctor, lying prone on top of the upright piano, folds a paper plane and launches it across the room into Bill’s lap. Bill unfolds it, finding an
entry written after Twelve took Harry away from Dystopiaville and imprisoned him in their TARDIS:

*We had an unspoken pact to always balance each other out. They would be a selfless liar, and I would be selfish, but honest. They would do heroic, terrible things, all the while insisting that they were good, while I would practice cruelty and call myself the villain that I was.*

*They’ve betrayed me, though; they’ve broken their vow. They’ve taken over selfishness, which used to be my domain, but they have no honesty. They’re a selfish liar calling themself noble and true. They’ve abandoned me, our principles, our game, our very relationship. They left me to the caring. Traitor. They’re not worth me anymore.*

Bill sets the paper in her lap and stretches her legs out straight on the glass coffee table, her feet covering an etched design of Father Time snuffing out a candle of life. The Magister coughs warningly at her. Bill, putting her feet down, observes that Razor was cool with the Doctor when they stayed within the bounds of their proper role. But, when they became a hypocritical liar who called themself noble and true, they demonstrated a capacity for cruelty and villainy that threatened Razor’s mastery. He’s all about being the best, but he suddenly found himself in competition for a role that had always been his by default. Of course Razor broke it off with the Doctor, Bill says. He couldn’t let them beat him at his own game.

Not only that, points out Alison, but Harry’s Doctor messed up Harry’s neatly organized universe. When Harry and his Doctor acted out the roles they had tacitly agreed on, the game was routine, even in its unexpectedness. As a control freak herself, Alison knows how important routines and predictability are to people like her. She also knows what a betrayal it would feel like if one of her partners made an unstructured mess of a relationship she held dear.

While they’re on the subject of Harry’s former partners, what about Lucy? Alison twists around on the sofa to face the Magister at his desk, while Bill inclines herself forward to the Doctor. The Magister shuffles papers across the mahogany wood of his desk, finally plucking up a sheet. Elaborately folded in the shape of a pouncing cat, it glides into Alison’s hands. She undoes the paper to find the following paragraph:

*Fuckin’ Lulu Lucy. She was a beautiful blazing light, power and rage and batshit and love. Brilliant Lucinda, shining in the void against despair. She went out for good. Well, for ill. I probably killed her spirit when I took her to the end of the universe. I do have a history of breaking...everything, really.*

The Dork fam isn’t sure what to make of this. On one hand, Harry’s analyses of people and summations of their character tend to be accurate and unnervingly insightful. On the other hand, he’s an admitted unreliable narrator and liar. Was Lucy really batshit? Did he really kill her spirit?
The Dork fam decides that, at the very least, Lucy was a courageous, determined, even indomitable person with a secret agent’s canny intelligence. They also agree that Lucy had every right to kill Harry once and a half.

Turning to the subject of Bill, the Dork fam finds that nearly all Harry’s thoughts and feelings about her may be distilled rather easily:

*I really should never have had a daughter. I become a fool where she is concerned. And yet I fail to see how I could have not had a daughter. She never proclaimed that she was my daughter, and I will never tell her that she is because she never wants to be. Somehow, though, she has become my daughter, and I have become an ill-judged fool.*

Alison and Bill laugh. Poor Harry. Someone should play him the universe’s saddest song on the smallest violin. He’s so socially clueless that the act of caring for someone will be his downfall. He seems to think it’s even a threat to his good sense and possibly his sanity. Imagine being that sadly divorced from your emotions!

The Doctor interjects that the Magister feels kind of the same way: continually gobsmacked by his affection for Alison and consequently concerned about his self-mastery. Alison and Bill quit laughing. But the Magister only admits that it’s true; he is indeed an old fool. The Doctor says he’s *their* old fool, so it’s okay. They hop down from the top of the upright piano and hug the Magister from behind. The Magister purrs contentedly.

Next Alison gathers the courage to search in Harry’s archive for evidence of his power-driven infatuation with her. It shows up readily enough, with, uh, unexpected complexity:

*Another dream — her, him, them — the three of them, all blessed with precognition, even her. My desires, the ones I can’t control, were granted without speech. Knowing why I feel this way does not make the sensations any easier to bear. Sometimes I wish that I could lose my memories of such moments, as I do when the Drums become too loud.*

After Alison reads this aloud, Bill, the Magister, and the Doctor turn to her in silence, their eyebrows hovering uncertainly on their foreheads. At first Alison makes a grimace. She suddenly has a vision of the three of them and Harry, and they’re all naked, and — ugh. The rest of her fam makes faces too.

Rereading the paragraph, Alison is struck by Harry’s shame. He hates the fact that he lusts after Alison, the Magister, and the Doctor. Well, good. Hopefully that disgust prevents him from ever bringing it up again.
The Dork fam turns away from such disturbing thoughts to investigate Harry’s other luggage besides the memory sticks. Kitty provides running commentary. First it pulls from some interior storage compartment a battered metal lock box. The box is not pretty, it says, but the things inside are the most beautiful in the universe.

Kitty shows them its treasures, laying them out on the coffee table: all sorts of keys, from key cards to magnetic badges, skate keys and clock-winding keys, remote control car key fobs, old-fashioned keys with slender necks and filigree handles, even a heavy iron medieval one. They were a gift from Missy, who it calls Messyfriend. Isn’t Messyfriend such a very, very good kitty? Aren’t Kitty’s keys wonderful? They’re so shiny, and they make such pretty ringing noises; yes, yes, yes, they do. The Doctor agrees and asks Kitty for the story behind every one of its keys. The two collect the keys and exit the living room, chatting about things that open doors.

With the Doctor otherwise engaged, Alison, Bill, and the Magister make quick work of the rest of Harry’s luggage. He has brought relatively little; they spread it out without difficulty on the round glass coffee table. There’s his fur wrap, in which he’s always swaddled these days, his pillows, and bottled water. There are also dry, nut-studded nutrition bars, a pharmacy’s worth of painkillers, ultralight telescoping forearm crutches, a set of clothes, and something like a sonic screwdriver, only laser-powered. Bill identifies the last item as a laser screwdriver. From what she has seen, it functions like the Doctor’s sonic screwdriver, although Harry tends to weaponize his screwdriver more often.

They linger with more curiosity over Harry’s sentimental items. He cherishes a brittle clutch of dried sunflowers, a bouquet that Alison gave Bill as a welcome gift when they first met. He also has a copy of James Tiptree’s science fiction short, *And I Awoke and Found Me Here on the Cold Hill’s Side*. Harry had typed it from memory for Bill, who had then given it to Alison in exchange for the flowers. If these are among the very few things that he chose to pack, Alison thinks, then she and Bill really are extremely important to him.

And there’s a scrapbook inscribed For Bill. Kitty, reappearing after an hour and a half with the Doctor, says that yes, yes, yes, this is a present for Bestperson from Kitty’s Maker. Bill, with her fam hanging over her shoulder, leafs through seventy years of news clippings all about her.

Harry inaugurated a holiday in Bill’s honor, the Festival of the Heart of the Revolution. It began as a commemorative revel at the Wilhemina J. Potts Speculative Fiction Collection in the Dystopiaville library, but later articles show that the celebration expanded. People wore clothing with a sunflower motif, paraded and danced and sang, created murals and statues and poems. Thousands turned out to hear and tell stories of the city’s beloved warrior. The Festival of the Heart of the Revolution extended into an annual week-long carnival.
Every article about storytelling during the festival includes a remembrance from Harry about Bill. The first ten or so memories focus on her in relation to him: how he evacuated her from the Floor 1056 General Hospital, how he repersoned her, recruited her for his revolution, typed up stories for her, et cetera, et cetera. The next twenty or so memories focus solely on Bill: her frank friendliness, her instant popularity among Dystopiaville denizens, her brilliant idea to distribute subversive literature, her sense of humor, and her refusal to tolerate Harry’s bullshit.

The final group of memories concerns Bill in the context of the Dork fam. Harry reminisces about how the Dorks commandeered Harry’s revolution and made it better. Bill’s radio addresses and speech at the grand rally drew more people to the cause than he ever could. Alison and Bill’s communications coordination during the First Day Massacre kept everyone informed and hopeful. The Dork fam [and, incidentally, Harry himself] united their powers to destroy the central Cyber transmitter, freeing all Cyber people from Irons’ mental control.

The Dork fam notices the obvious change in Harry’s perspective. He begins with a belief in his own centrality and importance, so much that he overshadows Bill when he told stories about her. He moves to an exclusive focus on Bill, the person that he cares for so much. By the end of his stay in Dystopiaville, however, he appears to have recognized the Dork fam’s prominence in Bill’s life. Furthermore, he accepts her membership among the Dorks and perhaps even makes some peace with it. Sure, it takes him about seventy years, but he ends up being happy for Bill without being sad for himself.

All of this examination fills about a day and a half, during which Harry remains unconscious. On the second day, when the Dorks’ perusal of Harry’s diary concludes, Kitty suggests another activity. The Dork fam can play with its keys. They can help it sort them by shape and color and size, yes, yes, yes! The Doctor politely demurs, saying that key sorting sounds like a perfect activity for when they’re upset and need to calm down. But right now they’re very interested in Kitty itself. What information can it share about how its Maker constructed it?

Kitty gladly tells Alison and her family what it knows about its creation. Kitty’s Maker was such a sad kitty, oh no, oh no, when Dork fam left Dystopiaville. He was lonely; yes, yes, yes, he was, so he decided to make a friend: Kitty!

Apparently Harry was going for an imposing mobile throne of evil, but the first three were too disobedient. Despite Harry’s programming, Mark 1 hissed all the time. Mark 2 crapped in his shoes. Mark 3 clawed the drapes.

Mark 4 yielded the excitable service furniture now before the Dork fam. Disappointed with Kitty’s friendliness, Kitty’s Maker decided to erase its personality and try for Mark 5. But Kitty was a very smart kitty — oh yes, oh yes, it was! It connected to its Maker’s tablet and from there to the Dystopiaville Internet. It learned how to talk just like other kitties. It told its Maker how it was a good kitty and a smart kitty and it loved him so, so, so, so much. Its Maker sighed and smiled and
said he guessed he had a service furniture now.

Alison repeats that just to make sure that she has understood correctly. Harry, the misanthropic, sharp-tempered, and generally disagreeable person who once believed in compassion as a strategic ploy and nothing more, became so incredibly attached to a cute little talking chair that he unabashedly fell in love with it? Kitty says no; its Maker is not attached to it. As Dork fam can see, Kitty is here in Shinyfriend’s living room with them, while its Maker is still resting in Shinyfriend’s Zero Room. But yes, Kitty’s Maker does love Kitty, so, so, so very much.

The Magister inquires if Kitty can tell them what work its Maker did in Dystopiaville before his removal by the Twelfth Doctor. Of course Kitty can. It was always with its Maker, helping him, because it’s a good kitty and a smart kitty. It remembers lots of things, so it can tell them everything if they want. What does Bigcatfriend want to know?

The Magister and Alison speak up simultaneously. What about the terrorists? Alison, Bill, and the Doctor left the Magister in post-revolutionary Dystopiaville while the three of them went to tell the Twelfth Doctor to fuck right off. When Alison picked her robot up after three months in his estimation [and fifteen minutes in hers], the city was plagued by terrorists known as the Liberators. They tried to assassinate Harry, and the Magister, who shielded Harry, was injured in the process. Whatever happened to the so-called Liberators?

Being essentially a talking house cat shaped like a robotic scorpion, Kitty does not provide minute details of the counter-insurgency efforts. It says that the terror attacks persisted until, one night, one of the Liberators’ leaders, Audrey Gregory, snuck into Harry’s bedroom. She and Harry got into a fight. Kitty pulled Audrey off Harry and sat over her, using its legs and pincers to cage her. It didn’t mean to kill her — really, it didn’t, no, no, no. But she kicked Kitty’s legs out from under it, and Kitty fell down on top of her. She went crunch, and then she didn’t move anymore.

Kitty was so very, very, very sad. But then Kitty’s Maker told it about self-defense. If someone was hurting you or someone you loved, you could hurt them back to make them stop, but only if you couldn’t stop them any other way. Kitty’s killing of Audrey Gregory was a perfect example of self-defense. Kitty’s Maker was very proud of it for its bravery and heroism. Kitty was such a happy kitty because its Maker still loved it, but it never wanted to kill anyone again, no, no, no. Its Maker promised that it would never have to. Audrey Gregory’s death evidently caused the dissolution of the Liberators and an end to their atrocities.

Bill wonders what Razor did between the Dork fam’s departure and the Twelfth Doctor and Missy’s arrival. She has a vague idea that he retired from his dictatorship, but he never elaborated much on that. When she talked with him in secret, he directed conversation away from himself and toward Bill and her Dork fam.
Translating from Kitty’s idiom, Alison, Bill, the Magister, and the Doctor learn how Harry kept busy. Within a year after he assumed power, he got bored. He let Prunella Kim, formerly his revolution’s head of logistics, and other former revolutionary leaders take over as a democratically elected selectboard. Then he started on his next mission: freeing \textit{Newland}, the ship that held Dystopiaville and many other people on its decks, from the distorting pull of the black hole.

Harry traveled all over \textit{Newland} by means of the gravity elevators, always returning to Dystopiaville for the Festival of the Heart of the Revolution each year. He gathered the most brilliant scientists and engineers from Dystopiaville and the smaller communities on nearby floors. They worked diligently, and they were very close to freeing the ship the Twelfth Doctor interrupted Harry. Kitty hopes that its Maker’s scientist friends discovered how to extract their ship by themselves after he left. If they did, then Kitty’s Maker would be oh so, so, so very happy to know that his friends were out of the hole.

Alison slouches back among warm green cushions, contemplating Harry’s luggage and its contents. When he told her he was here because he wanted Bill, Alison’s Dork fam, Alison’s love, and Alison herself, she didn’t know if she could trust him. However, his sentimental souvenirs, his emotional diaries, and his news clippings corroborate his claims. He’s definitely telling the truth now. She has proof of it.

Alison also has proof that Harry has changed in the last seventy years or seven months. He started off, as his reminiscences in the news clippings indicate, self-centered and self-serving. Gradually he became...uh...well...somewhat less self-centered, even capable of being happy for Bill’s union with her Dork fam, though that meant her departure from Dystopiaville. While Harry’s not on the Magister’s level of compassion, consideration, and respect [because very few people are], he’s more courteous and observant of others’ feelings now. He truly has become slightly less insufferable.

Five or so days ago, Harry asked if Alison trusted him. The best that she could say was that she believed that he was too debilitated by PVML and too intimidated by the Magister and the Doctor to even try to harm her.

Today, though, she finds that her thoughts have shifted slightly. She now believes that he wishes to help her, for motivations both selfish and altruistic. He also wants to impress her, please her, and win her favor. At the very least she can quit second-guessing his every action. Right now, that’s good enough.

Besides a recognition of Harry’s change over the past seventy years, Alison also feels her general perceptions of him alter. Back in Dystopiaville and even when he crashed in her closet, he was easy to read as a caricature, a stylized personality without depth. His flashy theatricality and his penchant for mannered performance just added to her sense of him as someone who basically ceased to exist without an audience. Of course, she knew that he had an interior life — his past, his
pain. But he seemed to dramatize everything deliberately, feverishly, to distract her from his thoughts, feelings, and secrets.

Well, Harry can’t hide himself from Alison anymore. She now demands the truth; she requires revelation, and he, knowing this a condition of his stay here, provides it. He tells her the truth strategically, for ulterior motives, just as he does everything else, but it’s still the truth. Now that she has connected to him telepathically, heard from him exactly what he wants, perused his scrapbooks, and read his diaries, she knows who he is.

And, of course, he’s a person. She can’t just laugh at his folly and dismiss him. She can’t separate herself from his nastiness and relegate him to her past. He’s here and now, in all his infuriating, contradictory, obsessive, zealous, intense glory. He feels emotions that are all too familiar to her and acts in ways that she understands all too well. He’s a person; he’s like her.

His loneliness and his joy affect Alison most of all. She never really believed that it was possible, but he missed Bill and the rest of the Dork fam because he loved them. They made him happy, and, now that they are back in his life, he’s happy again. And Alison knows exactly what that’s like. She voluntarily left the Magister and the Doctor after traveling with them for a while because she felt scared, at risk, and in danger. She cried so much during that time without them because she missed them, and their reunion made her life complete again. Harry wants that sense of wholeness and coming back home because of course he does.

Harry finds some of his home and wholeness with Bill, whose sort of foster dad maybe he is, but he could be happier. He has told Alison how much he wants her love and her Dork fam; she knows that he would be thrilled if she let him be part of the Dork fam. She could give him the same sort of fulfillment and peace that she gained when she and her Time Dorks reunited. She knows how happy that would make him. She knows how profoundly that would change his life.

Alison thinks that she’d have to change her perspective on Harry even more, though. She would have to accept his apology for his dehumanization and attempted mental invasion. She would have to accept what he did as well — accept it as a past transgression that would never occur again. She would have to quit holding it against him, and she can’t do that yet, especially since he has yet to prove that he can do right by her.
Harry Explains His Diary

Chapter Summary

Harry reveals the reason that he left his diaries for the Dork fam. The Magister explains why he wears a collar. Alison hopes that Harry continues to play nice.

There’s a knock on the door jamb to the breakfast nook: *tummety tum, tummety tum*. The Dorks and Scintilla turn to see Harry, of course, borne by a cheerfully prancing Kitty. He’s dressed in one of the Magister’s all-black Nehru suits, from the round collar to the trousers with creases sharp enough to cut, albeit all tailored for his slender frame. His crimson hair sticks out in a strategically gelled tousle. The diamond-studded hoop swinging in his left ear flashes like his wide smile. His own gloves, the ones with the mother-of-pearl fireworks embroidered on the backs, shine like his black vinyl boots with the stabby heels. His combination of severity and flamboyance makes Alison think of her own Time Dorks. His straight and supple posture testifies that it’s a grand day, pain-wise, and that energetic, joyful smile… Well, Alison has never seen him so relaxed and happy.

“Good morning, all!” he sings out, crossing his legs one over the other, waving with his right hand. “It’s an electrifying day, isn’t it?” To illustrate his pun, he conjures a spark of blue lightning from his right thumb. He gives the short length of light a casual glance, and it conducts in a small arc to his first finger. From there it hops across the rest of his fingertips, one by one, then disappears into his little finger.

“Well, that’s shocking,” Alison says under her breath. After leaking blue lightning out of all orifices, Harry has evidently learned — perhaps rediscovered — a masterful control of it.


“Razor!” Bill swings away from the glossy coffin table and toward him. She heralds his arrival with a shimmery cascade of chimes from her wheelchair. “You look like you slept well.”

“I did; I did. Thank you, my dear. I think I finally have my energy back.” Harry nods. “You look good too!” They exchange a few pain-related pleasantries, confirming that it’s a good day for both of them. “And Dominatrix…” He looks her up and down with a squinty, analytical expression. “How are you feeling today?”
“Well, still physiologically depressed,” Alison responds truthfully, shifting around on her stone bench, “but I had a really good night’s sleep, and I’m much calmer than I was a few days ago.” She mops up the last bit of bean sauce with butter-saturated toast and crunches it down. 

“Excellent!” Harry claps his hands together once. “You’ve read my notes then.”

“Extracts thereof,” the Magister breaks in. He sits at the head of the coffin table, fingers curled around a demitasse of dossessia. “Thank you, Master, for providing them. They were rather illuminating, but not at all germane to the challenge before us.”

“Really?” The Doctor glances up at their inevitable spouse from their plate stacked with pancakes and vegan sausage equivalents. “Because I kind of thought they were.”

“Hm,” says Harry, tilting his head at the Magister. “You should probably listen to your Doctor on this one.”

“Hm?” The Magister echoes his counterpart’s thoughtful noise, but with puzzlement. “Yet your files contained nothing about your work with Cyber technology and everything about your...feelings...about other subjects.”

“Yeah!” The Doctor raises their voice, then pops up from their seat. “That’s precisely why they’re sort of germane.” They point at Harry with their fork, on which wobbles an entire link of sausage wrapped in a pancake. “We, the Dork fam, have suspicious and unfriendly feelings toward you, Master,” they say to Harry, pointing at themself with their fork, “because you’ve been mean in the past and we’re not sure if you’re going to do it again. So the challenge before us is one of Alison’s chip, but it’s also one of everyone’s feelings. You gave us your diary on purpose. Then we could figure out what you felt, and we would trust you.” They narrow their eyes very slightly at the Master, which seems to be a gesture of approbation. Then they sit down, stuffing the entire pancake-wrapped sausage into their mouth and chewing with gusto.

“Indeed I did, my dear Doctor,” says Harry, mirroring their expression. Relations have obviously improved between the two since the Doctor called him a sick rose. “And I see that you have drawn the helpful conclusions that I expected you to.”

“Hm,” says the Magister again, smirking. “I suppose I should have guessed you had a reason for sharing your diary.”
“You really should have, my dear Master,” says Harry, but teasingly rather than archly.

“Hey, how did you get out?” Scintilla cuts in, her arms folded, her eyes flashing cool green.

Though Scintilla tries to look down on Harry by virtue of her greater elevation, she fails in the face of Harry’s regal, languid self-possession. “I am the Master,” he tells her, “a free agent, and I do as I please. Oh yes!” He snaps his fingers. “I have something for you.” Reaching under the neck of his Nehru jacket, he pulls the shock collar from around his throat. Alison is not sure how he removed it, but it’s sliced neatly in two, as if by a box cutter. He flings it to Scintilla’s feet with a vicious flick of the wrist.

The Magister’s eyebrows nearly blast off from his forehead in surprise. Then he glares at Scintilla, remembering that she affixed Harry with a shock collar when he first entered her Zero Room.

The broken collar hits the floor, and the small rectangular package of electronics fixed to the side cracks. “Oops. Sorry,” says Harry with a shit-eating grin.

Bill elicits a trombone of dismay from her wheelchair. “You had a shock collar on, Razor?”


“The Master,” murmurs the Magister to Scintilla, “is an equal and a guest. He is neither an inferior nor a prisoner, and you have been irresponsible to treat him as such. Please leave — your robot form, that is — so that the five of us can have at least the semblance of privacy.” It is a semblance only, of course, since Scintilla also forms the very building that they’re now in. She has the capacity to see, hear, and interrupt anything going on within her walls, but Alison gets the impression that she doesn’t employ it all the time.

“Aww...shit!” More angry over being found out than being called out, Scintilla picks up the broken shock collar and stalks off.

“I do apologize for Scintilla’s behavior, Master.” The Magister bows toward Harry and pauses for a sip of dossessia. “I have been greatly preoccupied of late, and I did not notice what she had done to you without my permission or yours.” He touches his own collar self-consciously, stroking the padlock that hangs at the base of his neck.
“I’m not faulting you,” says Harry. “Seriously, I’m not. I’m faulting your ship. Can you at least kick her in the arse for me?”

“Yeah,” Alison speaks up. “We’ll make sure she doesn’t do that again.”

“Oh, that wasn’t your idea?” Harry asks. “I thought it might have been, given what you did to the mechanical Master.”

“I gave him a collar because we agreed on it!” Alison sets down her fork with a clink. “He consented!”

“Maximo cum gaudio,” says the Magister, purring, with a proud clasp of his padlock.

“Alisonshine would never treat you like the Council did, Razor!” Bill pipes up.

“Yeah, she’s a nice sadist,” says the Doctor. “She only gives pain to people who want it.”

“Ahhhhh...why?”

“Because Bigcatfriend is a very good kitty, my Maker!” Kitty says suddenly. “He is a very good pet and not a stray, so he has a collar. That’s how you know that he has a home and people who love him so very much, yes, yes, yes!”

“Well, someone was listening when we were making leash laws and such,” comments Harry, chuckling.

“Can I have a collar too, please please please?” Kitty’s red eye lights flash eagerly. “I want a shiny thing to wear. I’m a good kitty, a very, very good kitty, just like Bigcatfriend. Then everyone will know what a good kitty Kitty is, yes, oh yes!”

“Uh...we’ll talk about that later,” Harry mumbles to Kitty. To Alison he says, “So...you own him,
and that’s...good?”

“I had no choice in being the Doctor’s robot and possession,” says the Magister softly, “and so I was deprived of a measure of my self, my mastery, and my self-mastery.”

“Ah. Yes.” As he sits back in his gel-filled cushions, Harry’s voice goes limp. “As I was when the Council weaponized me for their Time War.”

“I regained my self in two ways,” the Magister continues.

“Oh? How?”

“I left my Doctor so that I could choose of my own volition to be with them.” The Magister nods at his inevitable spouse. “I also chose to belong to my Domina and vice versa.” He nods at Alison, then marks the end of his speech with another drink.

“Hmmm… If you choose the manner of your subjection,” says Harry, drumming his fingers on his arm rest as he thinks, “then you retain your command of the situation. And, if you subject yourself to someone worthy — “ He gestures at Alison. “It’s not humiliating. It’s... glorious.” He closes his eyes when he says that and exhales as if he’s lost something.

Harry had something similar, some power play, with his Doctor at one time, Alison thinks. So all that bullshit he gave Alison about kink being disgusting and her relationship with the Magister being a perverted travesty among unequals — all that was coming from his pain and envy and grief. Of course, it was also coming from his immaturity, nastiness, and inability to treat people with respect, so Alison doesn’t feel too bad for him.

“Are you looking for breakfast, Razor?” Bill asks. “The Prof made tons extra.”

“Solid food? Yes please!” Harry’s eyes glow nearly brown with excitement. “I am beyond ready for something more substantial than an IV drip.”

The Magister and the Doctor fill the table with enough food to feed the entire Dork fam all over again. Beans and toast, boiled pudding, porridge with berries atop it, pancakes and maple syrup, and vegan links and chicken sausage appear as main dishes. Boiled eggs, sugared grapefruit and plantain, and some sort of bug hors d’oeuvres on toothpicks join the other food. Freshly squeezed
citrus juice, sparkling water, and two kinds of tea are available to drink.

Alison watches Harry eat in fascination. There’s nothing unusual about the food [except for the bugs], just about the amount and the manner in which he fills his plate. She is particularly interested when the Doctor passes the plate of peeled eggs. As happens occasionally, they lose their balance, and at least seven eggs roll into Harry’s lap. He makes a revolted intake of breath when the damp eggs hit his trousers, and Alison expects a tirade.

But no. The Doctor apologizes; miraculously Harry accepts it. He places the eggs on the tray, saying that they’ll be fine after a rinse in hot water. The Doctor, not quite paying attention, heads into the kitchen. They return a minute later with all the eggs in the bottom of a bowl of steaming water. Everyone peers at the eggs and giggles. Even the Doctor realizes their error and produces a pair of salad tongs from their pocket for Harry. Harry opts to use his own fork instead. Much to Alison’s relief, the past seventy years have taught him how to keep his temper.

Alison remembers that Harry ate a lot back in Dystopiaville, but she still has never seen a performance quite like his now. He eats everything, literally everything, with an efficient precision, including the burnt ends of the toast, the eggshells, the grapefruit rinds, and the looseleaf tea. Once done, he licks his fingers, his lips, his silverware, his cup, his plate, his bowl. Then he scans everything closely and licks off any particles of food he missed the first time.

Once Harry has consumed everything except the kitchen table, the Magister comes back to the question of Harry’s notes on Cyber hacking. Where are his notes on the technological details of his experiments? What relationship do the missing technical notes have to the diaries that the Dork fam has been reading?

Harry points to his head. The technical information is up there, he says, eating the leaves from his third mug of tea. He never writes any of that stuff down — too risky. Instead he writes down what he’s thinking and feeling. These notes then serve as reminders for the scientific experiments he was doing at a certain time. Anyway, he has bookmarked certain files as especially pertinent to the Dominatrix’s case. He can certainly review those after breakfast, recall the related science, and confer with any and all interested parties. If no one minds, however, he thinks he’ll have some more of those delicious bugs. He crunches them down methodically like candy, sticking toothpicks on his plate like miniature kindling.

“He’s working really hard at being agreeable and congenial and all,” Alison whispers to Bill.

“I know!” Bill whispers back. “What a change, huh?”
“So how do I communicate to him that this is the exact sort of behavior we want to encourage,” Alison mutters, “without making it seem like I’m rewarding him for meeting abysmally low standards of decency?”

“Hey, Razor.” Bill lifts her head. “Two things.” She holds up two fingers. “First, Alison’s very happy with how you’re behaving yourself, but she’s not sure how to say it.”

“Ah! Then have I found favor with the Dominatrix?” Harry sets down his latest empty toothpick and sits up in his chair. Just like the Magister, his entire being expands and blooms in her presence. He bends forward in expectation; he falls open and brightens, like a flower in the presence of the right light.

“Well, sort of,” says Alison.

“Sort of?” All his light disappears. “What more should I do? Please tell me!”

“I mean sort of because I’m still, uh, wary,” says Alison. “If you keep doing what you’ve been doing this morning, then that’s a good start. It’s necessary, but not sufficient.”

“Oh, okay!” Some of the light comes back. “Of course! Good to know. Thank you.”

“You’re, uh, welcome,” says Alison. Hopefully he continues to try this hard at being nice. She could get used to polite Harry.
Alison and Bill Suggest Katabasis

Chapter Summary

The Magister, the Doctor, the Stylist, and Harry join forces to find Alison a cure, but they're too distracted and/or frustrated for success. Alison and Bill come up with a likely idea. They propose it to Harry, who loses his shit.

Now that everyone is on comparatively good terms with each other, Harry does what he came here to do. He tries to fix her chip. He zips about in front of her bed, pacing, narrating possibilities into his speech-to-text conversion app on his tablet, and Alison figures that he’s brainstorming. This seems to be a good sign, until he stops abruptly, announcing that he has it. The key to the solution lies in electricity.

The theory makes sense. As the Magister has determined, there’s some flaw in the artificial sleep/wake data that Alison’s chip feeds her suprachiasmatic nuclei. Since this data hits her suprachiasmatic nuclei in electrical impulses, it should be possible to either change those faulty impulses to the appropriate type or to override the faulty impulses with correct ones, right?

Harry’s idea makes logical and intuitive sense. Its execution leaves a lot to be desired, though. Unlike the Magister, who runs trials in his lab before bringing them to Alison, Harry runs trials on Alison. He builds an experimental electromodulator, has Alison try it, then abandons it after thirty seconds of use. His explanation is only that it was a foolish idea, but his successive tries seem to be equally ineffective. He adjusts the electrical signals about four or five times, but, no matter what, they all make Alison feel as if bugs are running around on her organs.

On the third day of this, Harry drags his electro-bullshit apparatus in to Alison, who’s trying to read in the sunlight of her bedroom. Kitty, gamboling across the black and white checked carpet, says that its Maker has really gotten it this time! Harry says he is confident that he has correctly calibrated the signals.

Alison lowers herself in the chaise longue. She makes a wall between him and her with a hardback copy of Angela Carter’s Bloody Chamber. His shock treatment isn’t getting anywhere near her head, she says. Harry might have confidence in himself, but she doesn’t at the moment. Also she’s going to puke if the inside of her skin starts itching again.

Harry fumes. How dare she insult his methods just because they differ from her robot’s? He works in an experiential, iterative process. That’s nice, Alison replies, but she’s had enough. He needs to stop — now. Though irritated and defensive, Harry stops instantly, which she appreciates.
However, Bill, the Magister, and the Doctor have to explain to him why she’s frustrated.

Now everyone’s on edge. Alison, trying to forget the squiggly sensation of things beneath her skin, finds herself in full-body shudders on occasion. The other three Dorks worry about Alison. Meanwhile Harry, still offended by Alison’s rejection, also chastises himself for failing to help her. Kitty is upset because its Maker and all its friends are sad, oh no, oh no!

Since all the Time Dorks on site are out of ideas, the Magister organizes a conference call with him, the Doctor, Harry, and the Stylist. Even though she’s busy finishing up her mission on Seneschal Five, surely the Stylist can at least provide a new perspective.

Everyone sets up in the Magister’s wizard’s study, where the Magister takes his hologram calls. Kitty assumes that the Magister’s shelves of dolls, wands, crystals, and skulls are full of toys. It wants to play with everything, particularly the illuminated crystals floating on the ceiling, or at least examine things very closely. Harry draws it up short and educates it about certain things that we have to keep our claws off of because they aren’t toys and they don’t belong to us. Kitty understands this, but still interrupts the conversation with exclamations about how pretty all the shiny things are.

Once the hologram call connects among the Time Dorks, the Magister introduces the Stylist to Harry and vice versa. Harry looks at the Stylist the way that Kitty does at Scintilla — nearly speechless with infatuation. The Stylist says that she doesn’t call anyone master, so he’d better find something else to go by. Harry glances at Alison and Bill, recognizing that the Stylist is as adamant on this point as they are. He offers Harold Saxon, which the Stylist accepts. Alison sighs with relief that the two have not antagonized each other.

The discussion does not go well. No progress is made on Alison’s problematic chip. Instead the the Stylist, whose image flashes in and out of the study’s deep shadows, goes on about the Galleia, Lakis, and the Corving of Aluet fiasco. The last that Alison and Bill knew, Reeve told the Stylist that Galleia and Lakis planned to sneak out again to distribute pro-immigration, antifascist propaganda with the Corving’s kids. Bill was going to try to offer conciliatory advice, which Alison never heard because Harry wanted to talk to her.

In any event, none of Bill’s advice seems to have worked. The Stylist remains incensed by Galleia and Lakis’ second proposed transgression. Galleia and Lakis remain infuriated at the Stylist’s peremptory and disrespectful treatment. Any attempts at communication devolve into accusations, shouts, and extended, silent retreats. Any discussion of Alison’s condition devolves into the Stylist ranting about the menage a trois with Scylla and Charybdis that Galleia and Lakis have stuck her in.

Alison and Bill watch the Magister, the Doctor, and Harry grow increasingly impatient. The
Magister paces in tighter and tighter arcs, weaving between the overstuffed chairs and ottomans. The Doctor, more baffled by the Stylist’s digressions than anything, interrupts her repeatedly; they’re supposed to be talking about Alison, not Galleia and Lakis. Harry says nothing, but knocks *tummety tum, tummety tum* faster and faster on his arm rest. Even Alison and Bill exchange eye rolls when the Stylist starts talking about her kids for the fifty-fifth time.

Eventually Bill hits a button on her joybox; her wheelchair speakers emit the *awooooooogah* of an old-fashioned klaxon. The Magister starts; the Doctor, the Stylist, and Harry laugh. Rising from her chair, Bill usurps the silence in her low, even voice. Unfortunately, this conversation seems to be going around in circles, she states. Everyone should step back, take a break, and then return to the subject later with fresh energy. She says goodbye to the Stylist and asks her to say hello to Galleia and Lakis for her and Alison. Then everyone signs off.

Alison and Bill lie down side by side on Alison’s bed. Alison, angered by the Stylist’s fixation on Galleia and Lakis, feels ignored and dismissed. Bill has more sympathy for the Stylist because she thinks that a mum should be that concerned about her kids. Both Alison and Bill agree on one thing, however. The conference call accomplished nothing. The four brilliant Time Dorks at their disposal disappointed them with tangents instead of impressing them with solutions.

“And Harry can’t do anything except for highly scientific random poking,” Alison mutters with contempt. She jabs her fingers into mounds of yellow-covered pillows in illustration. “It’s great at making bugs crawl under my skin, but it’s doing nothing for my chip.”

Bill fidgets less. She keeps still because, for one thing, she’s generally a calmer person than Alison. For another thing, she’s using a hot water bottle on the border between Cyber and biological flesh to allay the persistent ache of partial robotification. “But that’s the way Razor works, yeah?” she responds quietly. “He jumps into things, experiments, then learns from his mistakes.”

“Well, yeah, I know that,” acknowledges Alison. She falls back with a *whump* against the pillows. “But the way he works isn’t really working.”

“Mmmmm.” Bill adjusts the position of the hot water bottle on her chest. “Kinda makes sense. It works when he has things to poke, like when he went into my mind to evict the Twelfth Doctor. Not so effective when he’s trying to work with electrical signals from your suprachiasmatic nuclei.”

Alison grimaces at the canopy above them and the sunset organza streamers falling from it. The cheerful colors are not making her happy. “Okay, well, the solution is obvious then. I need to let Harry in my mind library. Then he can do his random poking technique by pulling books off the shelves. He’d probably have a better chance of hitting on something helpful than he does with his
current shot in the dark.”

“Yeah!” Bill, one hand pressing the water bottle to her chest, swings upright in enthusiasm. “Ow — moved too quick.” She reclines slowly. “Seriously, Alisonshine — he knows how to fix things by going into people’s spaceships or libraries or whatever. He did it for me! But...you probably don’t want the guy who tried to sneak in your head actually in there on invitation, huh?”

Alison pulls an exaggerated sigh for about five seconds. “You know what I don’t want? I don’t want more useless treatments with itchy side effects. I don’t want Harry living in my house. I don’t want the Magister hiding in his lab all the time and the Doctor being all anxious and hoversy. I don’t want you staying out of my way because your, um, interrobangness feels exhausting. I don’t want my library’s lights to keep going out. I don’t want to be fucking depressed anymore!” She eventually recognizes the truth. “I don’t really want to let Harry into my mind, but I’m so sick of being sick that I’ll bring him in if there’s a chance he can help. Fuck.” She sits up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. “Well...I’d better go talk to him.”

“We’d better go talk to him,” Bill corrects. She sits up with more delicate slowness and performs a careful transfer from the mattress to her wheelchair. With a wave of her hand, she activates her wheelchair and calls a tally-ho of horns forth from her sound library.

“But I’m not scared of him anymore,” Alison says.

“He’s still scared of you, though,” Bill says. “My presence will keep him calm. Besides, Alisonshine,” she says, holding Alison’s hand, “I can give you some moral support too.”

“Bill of my heart!” Alison smiles at her.

They enter the Zero Room. The muted white emptiness envelopes them in quietude. Somehow tranquility transfers from the softness of the white walls into Alison’s own mind. With such a sensation in her mind and with Bill by her side, she feels steady. “Hey, can we talk?” Alison calls to Harry.

“Oh! Hi! Sure, Dominatrix.” Harry instantly sits at attention in his levitating bed, as if waiting for orders. To Bill, he says, “Hello, my dear,” with a much more relaxed and warmer smile.

“Hey, Razor.” Bill smiles back.
“Hello, Dominatrix!” Kitty, loafed up beside Harry’s bed, jumps to its feet, wagging its stinger. “Hello, Bestperson! Hi, friends. Kitty’s so happy to see you. Yes, yes, yes, I am!” It frolics toward them.

“Hi, Kitty.” Alison pets it on the foot plate, which also serves as the top of its head, while Bill, in her chair, pets Kitty’s arm rest. It purrs loudly, nudging against Alison’s knees and Bill’s wheels, and declares that it loves them oh, so very much. Of all Harry’s achievements, Alison admits that this one is the most endearing. Somehow he has managed to imbue a scorpion-shaped piece of furniture with the soul of a cat.

Bill pulls up parallel to Harry’s bed. “Alisonshine’s got a serious question for you, okay?”

Harry blanches. His cheeks go momentarily bloodless, his eyes wide. “Ahhhh…” He draws out the word, allowing himself a few seconds to regain his composure. “But of course. This has to do with your chip, I assume?” He directs his words to Alison. “Otherwise you probably wouldn’t be talking to me.”

Alison nods. “Bill told me how you went into her mind. It was just before she left with us to come back here.”

“Oh! Yes! I did!” All the color returns to Harry’s face. He smiles so hard that his eyes close. “A transparent terrarium bubble of a world, floating in a black starlit sea of space.”

“It looks kind of like the Defender’s spaceship in Defenders of Earth,” says Bill shyly, naming her and Alison’s favorite TV show.

Harry turns his face up to Alison, his eyes dark and eager. “Isn’t it beautiful in there? How do you like the sun room? All those sun-and-cloud motifs and the refracting crystals in the windows — it’s so brilliant and full of light — the perfect tribute to you. The stained-glass window of you that changes colors depending on the time of day and the light — that’s amazing.”

“Well, I actually haven’t been in her mind yet,” Alison says.

“You’ll love it!” Harry nods enthusiastically. “Everyone in there is waiting for you. When I went, they were all very disappointed that I wasn’t Alisonshine.”
“Oh God...Razor!” Bill clenches her fingers in her hair. More of a sigh than a reprimand, her groan sounds mostly embarrassed.

“Wow.” After a few blinks, Alison turns to Bill. “Really?”

“Really,” continues Harry. “In fact, her mum’s first words to me were literally, *You’re not Alisonshine.*”

“Yeah,” Bill confirms with a small nod. “My mum is in there, along with lots of other Bills. They’re all very curious about you.”

“Awwww, that’s so sweet.” Alison feels a boing and a squee mount inside her. “But...Harry...that’s not really what I came here for. You went into Bill’s mind spaceship — katabasis, mental travel — to help her get rid of the Twelfth Doctor’s *Remember me* pop-up advert. And you took a tour and learned how everything worked and then flushed Twelve down the toilet — which is the best place for them to go, in my opinion.”

“Right, right,” Bill puts in. “Then they were sucked into the black hole along with the rest of the space waste, and I never had to deal with *Remember me* again.” She leans in a bit toward Harry. “I told her you were very good at figuring out how people’s minds work and making solutions based on their internal logic.”

Harry folds his arms. “Of course I am! I’m the strongest and most advanced psychic in the — Wait. No, I’m not. I was the strongest and most advanced psychic in *my* universe, but I assume I’m tying with the mechanical Master in this one.” He strokes his chin. “Hmmmm...I wonder if Cyber tech could increase my effective range. I’ll have to look into that when I’m not half dead. Oh, who am I kidding? I’m always half dead! I — “

“Razor!” Bill raises her voice, but not meanly, and snaps her fingers twice at him. “No rambling, please. Alisonshine still has something to say.”

Harry shakes his head as if to clear the tangent from it. “Ah, right. Sorry. Nerves. You were saying, Dominatrix?” *Tummety tum, tummety tum, tummety tum.* He knocks his right knuckles against the bed rail, more and more rapidly.

Alison takes a big breath, holds it till she feels like exploding, then lets it out in a gust. “I want to talk to you about doing that with me. Mental travel, I mean — going into my mind, looking around,
figuring out why my chip is fucked up, and fixing it from the inside out.”

“It’s how you work best,” Bill elaborates. “You know — hands-on exploration, experimenting with stuff that you can actually see and hold.”

“Me? In your —?” Harry’s jaw moves a few more times, but no words come out. “The Drums,” he says eventually, shaking his head like it’s a bottle he’s trying to get a screw out of or something. “Damn Drums!”

“Maker, my Maker!” Kitty cries, at his bedside in an instant. “What’s wrong?”

“Sorry — the what?” Alison cocks her head at him.

Harry shakes his head again, this time in a dismissive negative. “Fuckin’ Drums. They always act up at times like this.”

Alison remembers him mentioning the Drums as a flaw in the system, lodged in his mind as ineradicably as his lust for powerful people. “Um, what’s he talking about?” she says under her breath to Bill.

“Ah! Fuck!” And he’s lost to them. With another wince, he mashes his hand against his forehead. His fingers blur with tummety tums. Is that how fast the Drums beat in his head?


Harry connects with her eye to eye, and, just like he was somehow gone before, he’s back. He forces himself through some slow deep breaths. He pries himself loose from his arm rest and sits on his right hand, suppressing all opportunity to tap. “Sorry, my dear. Yes?”

“Maybe we should do this later,” Alison says.

“Why?” asks Harry.
“You seem really distracted by the Drums,” Bill puts in.

“I do?” It’s as if the past two minutes of conversation have been erased from his mind. “No, I’m fine. What were you saying?”

“Um…” Alison, unsure, slides a look at Bill, who shrugs again with her eyebrows. She’s not sure what this is about either.

“What? Please don’t hold back.” Harry leans forward. “Let me know how I can help you. I want to help you, and I obviously have been doing fuck-all on that front so far. I need to earn my keep and prove my worth, so please — tell me — please!”

“Well, I’m bringing it up because nothing else is working,” Alison says. “Besides, this way you’ll actually have shit to poke at!”

“Plus,” says Bill, “we know you can do it. You did it with me and my Twelfth Doctor problem. Okay, it wasn’t exactly the same problem, but still…”

“What is this it that you’re talking about?” Harry’s tummety tumming again.

“Going into my mind,” says Alison. “Not by yourself, of course. I’d be there, and so would the Magister. But you could look around and do your tinkering, but with actual concrete stuff.”

“But…you don’t…want me there.” Harry, his eyes going wider and wider, is either shaking his head slowly at Alison or trembling; she can’t tell which.

“I didn’t when you weren’t invited,” says Alison. “But I’m thinking about inviting you now because…well…nothing else is working.”

“But…if I go…then I change.” Harry’s eyes drop. His fingers tap faster, as fast as fluttering wings, and he’s obviously not talking to Alison any longer. “I become…how you see me. I become…what you make me — yours. Ah!” He flinches as if hit. “Those fucking Drums!”

“Maker, my Maker!” Kitty peeks over the edge of the bed, its tail switching in distress. “What’s
“Razor!” Bill gets up out of her chair and draws close, her hand on his non-drumming hand. “Talk to me.”

“My dear.” And Harry’s lucidity returns, as if summoned by her touch, her voice. “The Drums — they’re filling up my head. My skull — ah!” Another gasp — he holds his head, keeping it together with his hands.

And then he’s gone, speaking to someone out of his past. “No, no, no. You had me once; you used me once; I won’t do it again!” he cries. “I won’t be your creature, your tool, your weapon, your... thing.” His entire body shakes now. “I am the Master. I am the Master! I am the Master! Get out of my head!” He hunches up, pulling chunks of hair from his scalp. Blood spatters his fingers.

Bill pulls back. “Razor! What the fuck?” she cries, tears in her eyes.

“Oh no, this is bad. This is very, very bad. Oh, such a sad kitty!” says Kitty. “Please don’t hurt yourself, Maker. Please don’t be a sad kitty!” From the way that it stands rigid, its little red eye lights flashing from side to side, Alison guesses that has never seen him like this before.

“Scintilla!” Alison yells. “Get the Doctor and the Magister, please!”

“On it, Miss Alison.” Scintilla’s voice responds crisply from the ceiling.

Bill, steeling herself with a deliberate breath, touches Harry’s shoulder. “Razor, Razor, Razor — listen to me — please! What’s wrong? What’s up? How can I help?”

Immediately, magically, he returns to her, lucid for a moment. But his eyes are all pupil, his lips white with panic. “The Drums, my dear,” he says, panting. “Too much... They’re taking over... Can’t speak, won’t remember, just pain. Ah!” He huddles up in another convulsion. “But...your voice, your words... Keep talking, please. Ground me. If it’s too much, then just...just stay. Just...don’t leave me.” His eyes fill with tears and then overflow. “Please...don’t leave me alone. No!” He curls up again, rocking, lost.
Harry Hears the Drums

Chapter Summary

Bill grounds Harry with One Art. Harry explains the origin of the Drums and why he freaked the fuck out. The Doctor offers Harry a cure for his Drums if he stops being a jerk.

Kitty wraps its tail around Harry’s huddled form and deposits him softly on its cushions. “Oh, Maker, my Maker,” it says, swinging its seat from side to side like a cradle. “Please don’t hurt yourself, Maker. Why do you hurt yourself? This is so bad; this is very, very bad. Oh, you are such a sad kitty.” It strokes his scalp slowly with the side of its stinger. “Why are you such a sad kitty? Kitty doesn’t know, no, no, no. I’ll take care of you, my Maker. Kitty won’t leave you. Kitty is a good kitty, a very, very good kitty. I love you so, so, so very much. Be a good kitty and have a sleep.” Lowering its voice, it continues to rock him. “Be a good kitty and have a sleep.”

“Listen to me, Razor.” Bill pulls back, settling again in her wheelchair. But she keeps her voice low, firm, and pitched at the balled-up figure on Kitty’s back. “Remember the art of losing, okay?”

“The art of what?” Alison says.

Shaking her head slightly, Bill speaks conversationally as if for Harry alone:

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master.
So many things seem filled with the intent
To be lost that their loss is no disaster.”

Alison realizes then that it’s a poem. It’s Bill and Harry’s poem, One Art, the one that he told her the first night out of Floor 1056 General Hospital. Bill’s casting a spell. Soon her voice gains a marked cadence, placing each syllable as deliberately as she would find her footing across wet stones. She pauses a bit between each word, each phrase, and squeezes Harry’s shoulder. She seems to be leading him through the words, and Alison wonders if she is enticing Harry to speak the verses in her mind.

Now Bill invents her own rhymes:
“The past and the pain — throw it off; let it go.
Lose farther; lose faster; forget what you know.
Now you are free, no matter the cost.
You’re still alive, no matter the loss.”

Alison remembers that Bill spoke like this once back in Dystopiaville. She was reciting from the Bible. It was Ecclesiastes: *To everything there is a season* … She started with the exact words, but then began adding her own rhymes. Bill goes on, improvising new lyrics:

“It’s not hard to master, not hard at all.
Just listen to me and let yourself fall.
Let loose your universe, your city, your star.
Master yourself and become who you are.”

Alison, always susceptible to the enchantment of the spoken word, falls in line almost instantly with Bill’s verse. She measures her breaths to the rhythm, and her scattered heartbeat follows. “It’s okay,” she whispers, to herself as much as Harry, nodding in time. She wraps a hand around Harry’s bedrail to steady herself. “It’s okay…”

As Alison exits her poetic trance, she witnesses the changes wrought by Bill’s words. Giving a sigh, Bill plunks back in her chair, even her hair flopping tiredly. Now more relaxed, Harry sleeps, one arm hanging loosely off Kitty’s back. Kitty, its legs tucked beneath it and its tail wrapped around its legs, vibrates Harry with soothing purrs.

Not only has everyone calmed down, but — oh thank God! — the Doctor and the Magister are here too in answer to Scintilla’s summons. The Doctor, squatting near Harry, tests his pulses with two fingers against his dangling wrist. Satisfying themself with the results, they rise and stand behind Bill, their hands on her shoulders. Placing one of her hands over the Doctor’s, Bill leans into them, closing her eyes.

“Domina,” says a softly rumbling voice, “are you quite all right?” The dear heavy weight of the Magister’s hands comes down on her shoulders.

“Mmmmm, no.” Alison stands, turning as she does so. She looks down into his face as he looks up
at her, cupping her cheek. “Just tired.”

“Hmmm.” The Doctor regards the unconscious Harry. “That looks like a good idea. I propose that we hook the other Master up to the monitors here and then go to sleep ourselves.” Everyone agrees that this is a brilliant idea, so they do just that.

Harry recuperates much more quickly from the Drums than from his PVML. The next day, after lunch, he calls the Dork fam to the Zero Room and apologizes. The Drums are what he calls a sensory deviation, a means of control that the Council of Time Lords implanted in his head during the Time War. Triggered by fear, anger, or grief, they overwhelm his mind. He remembers nothing of what he does then, so he recalls only moments of yesterday’s episode: those times when Bill broke through to him. In such a memoryless state, he was easily manipulated by the Council to be their worst warrior.

He sighs, drops his eyes, then tenders abject apologies for anything he said or did during his periods of amnesia. Alison and Bill inform him that he pulled out his hair, curled up in the fetal position, and then fell asleep while Kitty was rocking him. Hearing that he was incoherent but not abusive, Harry practically collapses with relief.

Alison asks Harry why he never revealed any of this before. He says that he never tells anyone exactly what was done to him in the Time War. Of course, Alison realizes. He finds his exploitation and objectification by the Council especially shameful. He kept the Drums secret because he could be so easily mastered. And he was able to keep that secret because he hadn’t felt fear, anger, or grief strong enough to prompt such an attack.

With her usual insight into emotional matters, Bill voices the subtext on everyone’s mind. If the Drums are activated by anxiety, obviously Harry is scared shitless at the prospect of entering Alison’s mind library. Why? Why does he associate Alison with the Council when the two are nothing alike?

Harry replies that mental travel entails transformation. You become how someone else sees you. If he goes into Alison’s mind, he will literally become what she thinks he is. He knows how she feels about him, and he fears that he would become… Alison expects him to say ugly or distorted, but the word that he says in a whisper is exploitable.

Silence follows. It expands outward from their small group, merging with the listening whiteness of the indistinct walls and ceiling. No one is sure how to respond.

Alison rubs her forehead, then passes her hand down over her eyes. Should she even press the idea
of Harry going into her mind? If he experiences such fear at the mere suggestion of mental travel, maybe he can’t enter her mind library at all. No, she decides, he really can’t. He’ll freak out, and then he’ll be no use at all.

“Well fuck,” Alison mutters. Now what? The Magister and the Doctor have reached the limits of their expertise. So apparently has Harry. As for the Stylist, she’s off in her own world. Who else is there to help her now? What hope does she have of a cure?

“Could I hear them?” The Doctor speaks suddenly, meeting Harry’s eyes.

“The Drums? Do you want to?” Harry squints up at the Doctor.

“I always want to do new things!” The Doctor goes down on one knee by Harry’s levitating bed.

“Masochist,” Harry mutters, but with more puzzlement than derision. He holds out his hands. “Forehead to forehead?”

The Doctor and Harry go head to head for a moment. Then the Doctor jumps backward so violently that they flip over Kitty’s arm rest and plop into Kitty’s seat. Kitty, happy to have an occupant, purrs and pets the Doctor with the side of its stinger against their face. “Oooh oooh, Master, Master, you’re like me!” the Doctor cries.

“Ow! I mean — how?”

“I get noises stuck in me all the time,” explains the Doctor, “like the spit sloshing around in my mouth, the blood flowing in my veins, my bladder filling up. Everything’s so loud! It’s overwhelming!”

Harry shakes his head. “But those are...natural noises. You make them because you’re alive. This... This... This...isn’t natural!” *Tummety tum, tummety tum* — he rings out the Drums on his bed rail, hammering hard, emphasizing their mechanical rhythm.

“Yeah yeah yeah, it is!” The Doctor pops up from Kitty, hurtling toward Harry again, tripping and ending up on their knees by his bed. “It’s your heartbeats!” they cry, waving their arms over their head.
“It’s in my head,” Harry counters, “not my chest.”

The Doctor repeats the beat on Harry’s bed frame. “That’s the sound of life, Master, for Gallifreyans at least.”

Alison leans against the Magister’s chest. Sure enough, his artificial pulses follow the same rhythm. The Doctor’s right.

“Yeah, but how do you make it fuck off?” Harry asks. He starts *tummetum tumming* impatiently, glares at his hand, then shoves it under his thigh.

The Doctor answers his question literally. If they themself become drowned out by their own noise, they resort to celery. It’s the food equivalent of white noise, the Magister explains, and it has a pacifying effect on his inevitable spouse. The Doctor also mentions that they are an expert at selective focus, so they can usually shift their exclusive attention to something else. Then the disturbance basically ceases to exist for them.

“Switch to Cyber tech,” jokes Bill, tapping the metal of her Cyber core. “It doesn’t beat so much as it kind of hums.”

“Yes!” roars Harry, pointing at Bill. Everyone jumps, even Kitty. “Yes, yes, yes!” He turns to the Doctor. “Take out these fucking pieces of shit,” he says, smacking himself in the chest, “and replace them with something that doesn’t tick so fucking loud! Oh!” Now he’s staring, his eyes round, at the Magister. “You make people into robots! Yes!” Back to the Doctor. “Do to me what you did to your mechanical Master. Then I can get rid of it all — the Drums, the pain, the energy leak. Ow.” He drops back suddenly among his pillows. “Flailing makes my hair hurt. Fuck...I wish I were a robot.”

“Master,” says the Magister gently, squatting by Harry’s bed, “my Doctor does not make people into robots. I am not precisely a conversion of my biological self. Rather, I am an inorganic person constituted from the Doctor’s intricate, detailed memories and desires of my organic self who died in the Time War. I am largely the same, but something is always lost or altered when a person changes from flesh to machine. I am the Master, but as seen by and desired by the Doctor. That is why I was programmed at first to be physically incapable of leaving them.”

“I altered my Master’s self-mastery,” the Doctor says, picking up the story in a low voice, “even though I didn’t intend to. He’s been working ever since then to regain his self-possession. If I
translated you into a robot,” they say, now addressing Harry, “you’d, um, lose something of yourself and gain something of me.”

“No.” Harry withdraws, shuddering. “I’ve lost enough control already.”

“I would do that for my Master, but — “ The Doctor shakes their head. “I couldn’t do that for you.”

Harry flops back and glances toward the indistinguishable white ceiling. “Fuck…” he says in an exclamation of consternation with everything.

“Buuuuuut…” The Doctor draws out the word, thinking. “I could probably engineer something like a mental volume control.” They jump around. “Oooh oooh oooh! I could install the microelectronics, and then my Master could go into your head and make you like a psychic switch so you could turn it down by thinking!”

“Hmmmm…yes. That certainly would work! You are brilliant, my dear Doctor.” Rising from his squat to look into the Doctor’s eyes, the Magister smiles almost dreamily at them.

“Obviously, my dear Master.”

“Bigdogfriend, Bigdogfriend, you could repair my Maker?” Kitty pops to its feet. Without Harry to carry, it capers about, wiggling from side to side. “You can make him a happy kitty? Oh yes, oh yes — please help him! Please make his Drums be quiet!”

“But...if you made a mental volume control for the Drums, then I’d be in your debt.” Harry frowns.

The Doctor shrugs easily. “Not really. Just quit being a jerk, and we could call it even.”

Harry sighs. “I deserved that.”

“Yeah, that’s why I said it,” answers the Doctor. “See — it’s a nice trade. I do experimental microrobotic surgery on your brain, and you stop hurting slightly so much. Throw in some non-jerkitude, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”
“A brain to poke? Is that all I am to you?” Harry demands.

“They see everyone, including themself, that way. It’s not personal,” Bill speaks up.

“Can confirm,” adds Alison with a smirk.

“Why thank you, Alison!” The Doctor beams. Alison decides not to tell them that it wasn’t really a compliment. “So let me know when I can poke your brain,” they say to Harry.

“As soon as possible.” Harry nods briskly, all petulance gone. “I can’t keep the Dominatrix waiting.”

“Me?” says Alison. “I don’t have you on a deadline!”

Harry interlaces his fingers, sets his hands in his lap, and gives her a look out from under slightly lowered eyelids. He will not be gainsaid. “I came here to help you, my dear. And yet I’ve done nothing but faint and swear and seize up in the fetal position, diverting medical resources that really should be directed toward you, the fixing of your chip, and your recovery.”

“You shouldn’t blame yourself for being sick, though,” Bill says.

“I’ve been useless, my dear,” Harry states with finality to Bill. Even as Kitty creeps closer, purring and insisting that he’s a wonderful kitty with many uses, he says again, “I’ve been useless — even worse than useless! I’ve made everything worse.”

“Razor!” Bill’s offended that he would say such a thing.

“Accurate,” the Doctor judges, nodding to the side.

“Doctor, I — “ The Magister speaks up to make some pedantic objection.
“So,” Harry says with a deep breath, now pledging to Alison, “as soon as your Time Dorks give me a volume control for these fuckin’ Drums, I’m fulfilling my promise to you. If you want me to go into your mind library, then I will, especially since I’ll be able to crank down the volume on my panic. You and the mechanical Master can show me around. I’ll figure out your primary metaphors and how we can use them to fix your chip.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay with it?” Alison frowns.

“I’ll make myself okay with it,” Harry says fiercely. “I want to help you. I need to help you. I have to help you. I am the Master, and you — I’m going to help you.”
The Alisons Meet Harry

Chapter Summary

Alison and Harry [with Kitty] go into Alison's mind library with the Magister as bodyguard. The Alisons love Kitty. As for Harry, they challenge him to tell a fairy tale.

“Shall we?” The Magister extends a hand to Harry in the melting shadows, lit overhead by softly glowing spheres.

Alison, seated cross-wise in the Magister’s lap, hesitates. Harry, on top of Kitty, sits next to Alison and the Magister. They’re all ensconced in the Magister’s wizard’s study, about to enter her mind library. Harry requires physical contact for mental travel, though, so Alison has to hold his hand, as does the Magister.

The Doctor and the Magister have successfully operated on Harry, giving him a way to control the internal Drums that have plagued him so long. Now he can change their level with a mere thought. Though he’s only two days past the surgery, he works the mental control proficiently. In fact, he has now elected to mute the Drums so that he may better concentrate on going into Alison’s mind.

She stalls, though. It’s one thing to link up with Harry for a telepathic conversation — that’s a superficial connection — but another entirely to pull him down on a katabasis to the inmost chambers of herself. What will he find of her that she’d rather keep hidden? How might he wound those vulnerabilities that she has tried so hard to hide?

There are worse considerations too. What if he finds no way to help her? Or what if he randomly pokes something and makes things worse? What is she dooming herself to?

That’s why she’s in the Magister’s lap; linked as much as she can be to him, with the warm solidity of his thrumming body around her, she feels still, sure, and safe. She assumes that Harry requested Kitty’s presence on this mental journey for the same reasons of familiarity and reassurance. “Let’s do this,” she says, finally presenting her palm to Harry.

Harry ignores both her and the Magister. While Alison and her robot wear their usual — a Magic Space Robots T-shirt for Alison, a blooming flower of layered robes for the Magister — Harry dresses as if for a royal audience. He wears a sharply tailored suit the color of a coal, both orange and black at once. It sears the eye with a dark glow, so gored and padded and tightly fitted that it
becomes armor. Alison wonders how he procured something that customized on such short notice. The black gloves with the mother-of-pearl fireworks match the stabby vinyl boots. His makeup — strong diagonals of burnt red — gives his whole face an elongated, feral cast. His choker, a band of irregular, drop-shaped crimson stones, guillotines him around the neck. He looks old and wise and dramatic and powerful — a handsome devil, really, and very much of a kind with her robot.

“Well,” says Harry, patting Kitty’s arm rest, “are you ready?”

“Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes!” Kitty tries so hard not to jostle Harry with its dancing that it just twitches in anticipation. “I can’t wait to go inside Dominatrix’s mind library. It will be so exciting. I’ve never been in another kitty’s mind before, especially not one as amazing as Dominatrix. Yes, yes, yes, my Maker; Kitty is oh, so very ready to take you into Dominatrix’s head. I will help you and guard you and do everything you need because I am a very, very, very good kitty. You don’t have to worry because I’m very, very, very ready. Wow!” it remarks with a happy sigh. “I’m just a little service furniture, but I have big adventures, yes, yes, yes!” It subsides into purrs.

“Ahem!” Alison says, flicking her hand in a come-here motion.

The handsome devil swings his head toward the Dominatrix, his face paling. “Um,” he says.

Alison can’t muster any impatience for him, now that she sees his worry. She puts her hand down. “I’m… I’m scared too,” she admits.

“Oh.” Harry goes still. Then he reaches to her. “Well, hold me fast, and fear me not, / And I’ll do thee no harm?” It’s a question, and his fingers are shaking.

Alison stiffens in shock. “How do you — ?” She never mentioned Tam Lin to him, nor her and the Magister’s spell of safety.

“Ahhhhh, fuck.” Harry pulls back. “I didn’t mean it like that! I’m sorry.”

“Like what?” Now Alison’s confused.

“Like sexually.”
“No,” says the Magister. “My Domina means — why did you use those particular words?”

“Well, you obviously know the story; it’s etched all over your mirror in your room.” Harry waves his hands. “I just thought that the reference would reassure you. You’d understand that I knew it was a momentous, scary occasion with the potential for, uh, great transformation, and...uh…” He runs out of explanation. “Obviously it didn’t work.”

“I was just surprised,” Alison says, “because that’s kind of the Magister’s and my spell.”

“Ahhhhh, fuck.” He’s going to apologize again.

“But it’s okay,” Alison continues hastily, “now that I know where you’re coming from.” She regards Harry. He’s not her robot; he gives her no tranquil, deep strength. He’s so edgy that he has literally painted on a brave face. His eyes flicker with an anxious curiosity. Whatever he’s going to do in her mind library, it will be his most diligent effort to benefit her. In return, he hopes for her to do the same. Their fears are by no means equal, since hers is justified on his past actions and his is unjustified by hers. Nevertheless, they share the same intent to do good, and they will, as much as they can. “Right then,” she says. She flips out her hand to Harry. “Hold me fast, and fear me not, / And I’ll do thee no harm.”

Harry snorts skeptically even as he takes her hand. “I’ll do the first, but I can’t promise the second until I know that the third is true. Let’s get this over with.”

Alison and her entourage enter her mind library. They appear on the threshold of the building itself under a chill night sky. A wash of damp, clingly air tingles across Alison’s skin, while rain splashes on her scalp. Limp grey shadows swath everything. Ever since she got depressed, she has been unable to emanate light, either from her body or in the form of her mind library’s electricity. Shivering, she gropes for the door knob, but it eludes her numb fingers. Fortunately, the Magister, being a cat, sees even in the dark, so he lets them all in.

Everyone attempts to dry off in the lightless, narrow vestibule without knocking into each other. Nevertheless Alison bumps against a solid, jointed, wooden leg, which must be Kitty’s. The Magister’s tail brushes by under her nose, its fluffiness almost making her sneeze. As she flails around, trying to keep her balance, she grasps something warm, curved, and hard. “Hey!” says Harry. “When I said, Hold me fast, I didn’t mean you should ambush me.”

“Oh no, oh no, this is very dark. This is very scary,” Kitty says to itself. “Kitty needs a light, yes, yes, yes. Then Kitty won’t be a scaredy cat, no, no, no.” There are several clicks. Then Kitty lights up. Tracks of small starry LED bulbs appear along its length, as well as two headlights, one to
either side of its head. Its stinger glows, shedding a small spotlight’s worth of light. “Yes, yes, yes, light is good. Now there is less to be scared of.”

As Kitty glows helpfully, they all look around at themselves for changes. Alison is just her dull, sparkless self — her usual these days. The Magister, head held high, flicks his pointy fuzzy ears sideways and wiggles his long white whiskers to banish water drops, indignant that any should mar his feline perfection. Kitty looks in Alison’s mind just as it does in outer reality — a scorpion chair of articulated mahogany segments. As for Harry, she can’t make out much in the shadows, but his silhouette appears much the same. “Did you, uh, change?” she asks him.

“No!” Harry sniffs, offended at the very thought. Something cape-like rustles around his back and shoulders as he draws himself upright. “I have always been this magnificent. You have merely lacked the ability to appreciate me until now. Behold...my true grandeur!”

He slings his legs rakishly over Kitty’s arm rest, like he’s about to either pose for his portrait or seduce someone. Here in Alison’s mind library, his fine build becomes an almost insectile narrowness. An impossible gracility carves his limbs and torso away to bony essentials. He’s not skeletal or starving, just light, quick, nimble.

He unfurls from his back two wings of skin and bone, one of which Alison probably grabbed earlier. They’re ribbed like umbrellas, stretched with translucent flesh, like those of a bat. But the shimmering designs, bold arcing fireworks of red and white on a black field, are pure butterfly. “Oh!” Alison says, recognizing her sources of inspiration. “Batshit Harry!”

“At your service, Dominatrix.” With a smile nearly as wide and bright as his wingspan, Harry swings his legs off his arm rest. He gives her her best sitting-down bow. “Now,” he says, glancing around, “where can I meet the rest of you?”

Alison leads them to the octagonal atrium. Pallid moon rays stretch through the glass dome over the center of the room. The light flashes off shallow puddles collected in the saggiest depressions of the tiled floor. She warns her followers to step carefully. She cuts across the unicursal labyrinth design set into the floor, walking on tiptoes so that she doesn’t bog down into the icy puddles. Once everyone clusters at the center of the atrium, Alison calls, “Hey, Alisons, we have company!”

Alison’s younger selves assemble. The littlest Alisons, puffed up with oversize wool jumpers, resemble small spelunkers with headlamps strapped to their foreheads. They skip, skidding a bit in the puddles. Sunny strides, wrapped in a bright yellow shawl; Victa glides, enshrouded in warm shadows. Stalking quickly, Clarissima blends into the darkness with her layered black hoodies. Errabunda, with reflective safety strips on her vest and a kerosene lantern in hand, stands out the most.
“Six Dominatrixes!” Kitty exclaims as the Alisons enter. “New friends! So many new friends!” It jumps up and turns a few circles in sheer joy. “Hello, new friends, I’m Kitty,” it announces to them, its tail wagging with great swishes. “Please don’t be scared of me. I’m a good kitty, yes, yes, yes. That’s how my Maker made me. I’m a good and helpful kitty, and I don’t hurt people or sting you at all. I’m so happy to meet you because I’ve met the big Dominatrix already, and she’s such a wonderful kitty, so very kind and smart and good. I love her very, very, very much; she is a very, very, very good friend. Will you be my friends too, little Dominatrixes? I’m so happy to see you, so very, very, very happy! You can pet me if you want. I like it when people pet me. Then you can hear me purr.”

“Awwwww…” Thoroughly charmed, most of the Alisons let out a collective sigh of affection. They turn their attention to Kitty, talking to it and petting it.

Only Alison hears Harry let out a long-held breath and wilt in his seat, saying under his breath, “Upstaged by my furniture — again. Thank fuck.”

“I heard that!” snaps Victa. With a metallic slithery sound, she reaches back over her shoulder and unsheathes Alison’s vorpal pen/sword/spear. Moonlight gleams off the blade as Victa holds the tip mere millimeters from Harry’s throat. The other Alisons gasp and scramble out of range. “I know who you are,” Victa says, she shoulders and her voice trembling. “You are not the master here, and you never will be. Explain yourself quickly and truthfully, or suffer the consequences.”

“No, Dominatrix, no!” Winding its tail around the haft of Alison’s blade, Kitty pulls it from Victa’s grip and raises it high over its head. “Oh no, oh no, oh no, don’t do a mean thing! Don’t hurt my Maker, no, no, no! I know he was a bad kitty in the past, and he did very mean things, and he hurt you. But he has changed, yes, yes, yes. He is a good kitty and a kind kitty. He is; he is; he is! He doesn’t want to do mean things anymore. He wants to help you with your chip so that you can turn the lights on and be happy kittens again. He is a helpful kitty; oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, he is.”

“Kitty, give the Dominatrix back her weapon, please,” Harry says calmly with a snap of his fingers. Kitty balks; it doesn’t want its Maker stabbed, no, no, no! Harry repeats his command firmly, and Kitty returns the blade to Victa. “I am the Master, my dear,” he says almost softly, as if those words will make everything better. “My specialties are madness, mayhem, and melancholy. Your Dominatrix suffers from the last, mixed with some of the first, so she invited me here to help. That is why she herself is here, as well as the Master that you know and love. They will watch me and guard you.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Alison speaks up. “Nothing else has been working, cure-wise, and I’m desperate. I haven’t forgotten that he tried to sneak in here of his own accord. Despite that, he’s also an expert in hacking Cyber tech and doing mental travel. He’s touring here, under the close
supervision of me and the Magister, to see if he can fix my chip problems by doing some, uh, hands-on work on my operational metaphors, so to speak.”

“Ahhhh...what?” say all the Alisons.

“My attempts to help you, Dominas,” says the Magister, stepping forward, “have been medical in nature, from the outside looking in. I have worked with surgical equipment and experimental technology to help you. My counterpart will try to aid you from the inside out, so to speak. He’ll be working in here — in your mind library — so that you will no longer suffer from the dysfunctional chip.”

Harry watches the Magister speak. Then he cocks his head toward his audience and lifts his hands, surrendering. As he does so, he involuntarily spreads his wings. “What can I do to convince you to trust me?” he asks the Alisons.

“Ooooooh!” A sound escapes Little Al, and her eyes shine as she sees his wings. “He’s a fairy,” she tells Ali C. in a whisper that everyone can hear.

“Accurate, my dear,” says Harry with the brightly painted smirk of the flamboyantly queer villain he so loves to play.

“Right,” says Clarissima, narrowing her eyes and crossing her arms, “and we’ve all read enough tales to know about his kind: proud, sneaky, tricky, and clever. They only ever do exactly what you tell them to, and they always try to make everything come out to their advantage and your disadvantage. If you want to help us,” she says to Harry, “you have to prove yourself first.”

“Sure,” says Harry with a loose shrug of his shoulders and his wings. “What do you want me to do?”

“Tell us a fairy tale!” Ali C. calls out, only to be shushed by several older Alisons. “A good one,” she adds, irrepressible, “with character development.”

“A true one,” says Clarissima, the protective and punctilious, “without lies — if that’s even possible for you.”

“A hopeful one,” says Sunny, who relies on buoyant confidence to keep herself going.
“A happy one,” says Errabunda, who wants to know that her uncertain wanderings will find an answer at last.

“A romantic one,” says Victa, who appreciates grand passions, “where virtue triumphs, love prevails, and evil is punished.”

“And magic!” says Little Al. “And wizards!”

Silence. “Harry?” Alison glances at him. Lost in thought, he runs his fingers around the edge of his goatee as if fastening it firmly on his face.

“Master?” The Magister lifts his eyebrow, embellished with a fine spread of long white whiskers.

“Maker?” Kitty pokes him gently on the padded shoulder with its lit stinger.

“What? Of course I have a tale!” says Harry, tossing his head. “Find me a theatre better than this antechamber, and I will begin.”
Harry tells a story about a heartless wizard, the starlight wizard that he rescued, and the fire wizard who ruined his life.

Once upon a time, there was a wizard who cared about only two things: power and pain. In his quest to become the most powerful wizard in the universe, he attacked other people, overtaking them with his spells of cruelty. If he hurt them first, he thought, then they couldn’t hurt him back. This was how he would acquire all the power of the universe without any of the pain.

The wizard thought that he was preserving his own safety and supremacy. Nevertheless he suffered a loss with each defensive cruelty he visited upon someone. Every time he harmed someone, he lost a piece of his heart.

He did not think that the gradual disappearance of his heart was a problem. After all, his heart was the source of his emotions, and his emotions tended to cause him pain. The more of his heart that he lost, the less he felt. The less he felt, the more invulnerable he thought he was. The more invulnerable he thought he was, the more powerful he appeared. And he was happy.

Despite his steadily dwindling heart, the wizard of power and pain did have one friend: the wizard of kindness and kin. Where the wizard of power and pain saw only suffering and struggle in the universe, the wizard of kindness and kin saw hope and connection. They worked against the pain of the universe by opening themselves to trust and love.

Of course, the wizard of kindness and kin was always hurt because vulnerability always meant exploitation and sadness. But they were foolish. They kept hoping anyway. They kept making friends, saving people, helping them, delivering justice and kindness everywhere, even as their good deeds had painful consequences. And the wizard of power and pain was a fool too because he kept his friendship with the other wizard.

The heartless wizard and the foolish wizard had an unspoken agreement. The foolish wizard would be a selfless liar, and the heartless wizard would be selfish, but honest. The foolish wizard would do heroic things, good deeds that brought as much pain as they did peace, all the while insisting that they were good. Meanwhile, the heartless wizard would practice cruelty, but he would call himself the evildoer that he was. They would threaten each other and hurt each other because that was part of their game; that was what made it real. Thus they would balance each other out.
For years, the heartless wizard and the foolish wizard played against each other. The foolish wizard accomplished some good, along with much ill, the heartless wizard much ill, along with occasional good. People fell all around them, but the heartless wizard didn’t care because he was happy.

The two wizards had a second unspoken agreement in which the foolish one would always save the heartless one. The heartless one’s bids for power often endangered his own safety. In his reckless attempts to secure himself against pain, the heartless one risked his life again and again. Again and again, the foolish wizard rescued the heartless wizard so that the balance could be restored and the game could begin again.

Then there was a war, the worst war in the universe. There were beings made of hatred who stole hearts and replaced them with pain, and they wanted everyone in the universe to become like them. All the wizards of the universe joined forces against the monsters of hatred. Even the heartless wizard and the foolish wizard fought against them. Neither wizard wanted the monsters to change the universe into a joyless one of pain where only the monsters had power.

The two wizards fought the monsters of hatred in different ways. The foolish one, of course, became a warrior. They led troops with courage, planned attacks with cunning, and beat impossible odds with their magic of confidence and kindness. But it was still a war, and the foolish wizard sometimes did horribly cruel things in the name of victory and peace. At the end, they were the salvation, credited with vanquishing the enemy, and everyone loved them.

The heartless wizard could have been a wonderful warrior as well. He had grown sadistic, manipulative, and uncaring as his heart disappeared. He could have wielded his power against the monsters of hatred. He could have dispatched them quickly and efficiently. He could have rid the universe of one of its greatest sources of pain. Then he would have had power beyond measure.

The leaders of the wizards did not trust the heartless wizard, though, with good reason. They knew that, if they allowed him to fight as a warrior, he would not follow their cause. He would seek his own glory without a thought for any greater good. So, because the leaders of the wizards could not make the heartless wizard an effective warrior, they made him into a weapon.

They controlled the heartless wizard with pain. They made the sound of what was left of his heart so loud that he was overwhelmed with a sense of his own mortality and vulnerability. He was easy to control at such times, so the leaders of the wizards set him on the monsters of hatred. He committed atrocity after atrocity under the other wizards’ command, but remembered nothing of it. When the war was over, all he knew was that he would never suffer in such a manner again.

After the war, perhaps because of it, the foolish wizard changed. They became more defensive, more sadistic, more like the heartless wizard. They cut people to draw first blood; they sneered at the pain of others. They were so foolish, though, that they did not recognize their change. They still
insisted that they were heroic and kind. The heartless wizard watched with contempt because at least he acknowledged his heartlessness.

One day, the heartless wizard’s wife, having enough of his heartlessness, killed him. When he came back to life, his wife tried to kill him again. He survived, but he was changed. After lifetimes of avoiding pain, he now found it his constant companion. He entered a state of permanent dying, always leaking out his life force. No spell of his could heal him.

The heartless wizard was banished from his wife’s world. He landed on another world, a doomed one on the edge of a black hole of despair. It was ruled by a wizard of misery who controlled people by removing their hearts of flesh. The miserable wizard replaced them with hearts of metal that followed the miserable wizard’s commands. Thus the miserable wizard had ultimate power and ultimate painlessness.

The heartless wizard was alone in the miserable wizard’s doomed world. He had no health, no love, no wife, and no way out. He did not worry, however. He knew that the foolish wizard would find him soon enough and bring him back for another round of their age-old game.

While he waited for the foolish wizard to come for him, the heartless wizard looked at the people of the doomed world. Directed by the mechanical hearts that the miserable wizard had given them, they fought, suffered, and hurt themselves for the miserable wizard’s pleasure. The heartless wizard hated the miserable wizard who reminded him of the wizards who had made him into a weapon. He hated the people of the doomed world because they reminded him of himself during the worst war in the universe. There was too much pain in this doomed world, the heartless wizard thought, and he had no power against it.

The heartless wizard began to change the doomed world. He couldn’t cast spells against his own constant pain, but he did what he could for the people of the doomed world. He learned enchantments to remake their hearts. He could not transform their mechanical hearts back into hearts of flesh, but he could free them from the miserable wizard’s command. Then there was slightly less pain in the doomed world, and the heartless wizard didn’t hate the people quite so much.

As he worked his magic on the people of the doomed world, the heartless wizard won their gratitude, loyalty, and obedience. They hated the miserable wizard as much as he did, so he gathered an army to oppose and crush the miserable wizard. Then he would gain power, and perhaps there would be less pain in the universe when he was through.

The heartless wizard went one night to the dungeon where the miserable wizard kept the people whose hearts they were taking. He only planned to steal one person away that night whose heart needed remaking. There were two people waiting for him, though. One of them was the person that
he expected, and the other was someone completely different.

He knew just by looking at her that the other person was a wizard too. She had a mechanical heart, but she was only partly under the miserable wizard’s power. Her face was strong and full of questions that she would ask the universe whether it wanted to answer or not. Her eyes were as dark as endless space with lights in them as keen and bright as stars, and they saw the truth of everything.

He introduced himself as the wizard of power and pain and asked her who she was. She said that she was the wizard of starlight and passion. She had watched him come to the dungeon for a while, and she knew what he was about. She said that he was a helper, a rescuer, someone who got people out, and she was coming with him. And she said it so fiercely, so truthfully, that, for a moment, the heartless wizard became what she believed him to be: a good wizard, a triumphant warrior.

The heartless wizard warned the starlight wizard that he was no hero. He ran on anger, bitterness, and spite, not kindness and bravery. She said that she had not called him a hero, only someone who did the right things. He ignored her because she was wrong and said that, if he were to remake her mechanical heart, then she would owe him.

She said that she wasn’t from here. She had been abandoned in the doomed world; she had no money to pay him. He said that she must join his army. She had all the heart and care that he did not, and she had a magic of belief that made even the most painful causes right and good. She would be the heart of his revolution, since he had none.

With his tactics and cunning and her compassion and clarity, the heartless wizard said, they would win. They would defeat the miserable wizard. Then the heartless wizard and the starlight wizard would take over the doomed city and use all its magic so that they could find their way back to their own homes. The starlight wizard agreed.

The heartless wizard remade the starlight wizard’s heart. She became the center of his revolution. She worked with him and the people of the doomed world to kill the miserable wizard and stop the pain that they were spreading. At the same time, they cast spells out into the universe, seeking someone who would take the starlight wizard home.

The heartless wizard asked the starlight wizard how she had ended up in the doomed world. She said that she was an orphan who had been friends with another wizard. She had thought that they were daring and clever, but they were only reckless and self-satisfied. They said that they were a kind warrior, but they never cared about her. They had incinerated her heart of flesh and left her to die here.
He recognized who she spoke of. It was the foolish wizard, his erstwhile friend, the one who had become more enamored of themself and of cruelty than of the heartless wizard and their balance. And now the foolish wizard had gotten even worse. They weren’t just harming the heartless wizard, someone they had agreed to harm as part of their game. Now they were harming people like the starlight wizard, who had never asked for pain, only trust and kindness. They were treating the starlight wizard as the miserable wizard treated the people of the doomed world.

After so many years of meanness, the heartless wizard had only the withered dust of his heart left. Then, when he heard what the foolish wizard had done to the starlight wizard, the dust of his heart caught fire and burned away to ash. All the friendship that he had ever felt for the foolish wizard disappeared. There was now nothing left but a hard, fierce pain.

The heartless wizard promised the starlight wizard that he would keep the foolish wizard from hurting her ever again. Moreover, he would find her a place of hope and security, unlike this doomed world. He would do everything he could to end her loneliness and find her a family who would accept her just as she was.

One day a family of three wizards arrived in answer to the starlight wizard’s spell. At the center of this family was a wizard of fire and truth. Her brilliance was such that she chased away all lies. She had deep dark eyes that saw right through people’s pain and into their hearts. Her magic was the magic of rightness and righteousness and truth.

The heartless wizard watched the starlight wizard and the fire wizard. The starlight wizard and the heartless wizard had drawn close to each other on the doomed world because of their pain and because they were useful to each other. By contrast, the fire wizard and her family shared more than their misery. They made each other happy because they believed in each other’s strength, defended each other against threats, and loved each other even when they were feeling unlovable. The fire wizard’s family was based on safety and wholeness and happiness, and the heartless wizard saw how much the starlight wizard yearned to join it.

The starlight wizard took the fire wizard into her arms. The questions in her eyes found answers of truth in the fire wizard’s. The starlight wizard, who had been ignored by the foolish wizard, discovered someone for whom she was the brightest star in the sky. Once lonely and unloved, she now had someone to accept all the passion of her ardent mechanical heart. The fire wizard took the starlight wizard in her arms and promised that she and her family would always keep the starlight wizard safe and whole and happy.

The heartless wizard hated the fire wizard and her family. He hated them because the starlight wizard, the heart of his revolution, loved the fire wizard and her family with more devotion than she had ever loved him. He foresaw how the fire wizard would take the starlight wizard away from the dangers of the doomed world, away from him. He would be abandoned again in a black hole of despair.
And so the heartless wizard was cruel to the fire wizard and her family. He mocked them, insulted them, and goaded them. But they only returned him kindness for his meanness. They helped him with his revolution, and they strengthened his cause far beyond what he could have done by himself. They gave him enough power to win against the miserable wizard. And then the starlight wizard, with her arms around the fire wizard, left the doomed world for her new home of hope and goodness.

The heartless wizard and his army waged war against the miserable wizard. The miserable wizard was cast down from their castle and their spells of fear broken. The heartless wizard ruled instead. He did what he could to alleviate the pain that the miserable wizard had caused and prevent it from ever happening again. He wished that he could alleviate his own pain, but there was no spell to quit the ashen dust of his heart from hurting.

The heartless wizard realized too late that he was the foolish one. He should have welcomed the fire wizard and told her and her family how wonderful the starlight wizard was. He should have rejoiced that such kind people had responded to his and the starlight wizard’s spells. He should have opened up to the fire wizard and her family; they probably would have let him into their family too. But he had repelled them with his bitterness and possessive rage. He had lost his chance, and he had lost the starlight wizard.

As for the starlight wizard, she spoke to the heartless wizard sometimes, telling him about her new family. She said that they loved her and trusted her even when she made mistakes. They were gentle with her when she felt ashamed. Unlike the heartless wizard, they never said that she owed them anything; they only wanted her to be honest and fully herself.

The starlight wizard said to the heartless wizard that the fire wizard was wonderful. The fire wizard was so brilliant and fierce that she made liars tell the truth and evildoers practice goodness. Her fierceness was scary because she demanded to know the truth about everything. Yet something about her compelled trust and openness and confidence. And she was a happy wizard, full of warmth and snuggles and loving words. She was more than the starlight wizard had ever hoped for.

The heartless wizard had power in the doomed world, but not enough power to assuage his pain. He had been foolish to help the starlight wizard, foolish to grow attached to her, foolish to antagonize her new family, and foolish to let her leave with them. But he couldn’t deny that the starlight wizard was happier now than she had ever been with him. She had gone to the home of safety and security that the heartless wizard had told her that he would find for her. She had a family now who loved her just as she was, and no one would ever hurt her again as the foolish wizard had done when they let her die. The heartless wizard had fulfilled his promise to her. The starlight wizard and her family were going to live happily ever after.
Alison and the Magister Show Harry Around

Chapter Summary

The Alisons are unimpressed by Harry's semi-autobiographical fairy tale. Harry is impressed by Alison's Vault of Pain.

“No.” Little Al shakes her head when Harry finishes. “That’s not right.”

The Alisons, the Magister, Harry, and Kitty sit in the reading room, a multi-level, irregularly shaped cave. It’s warmer here than in the rest of the library, although it may just seem that way because of the close, soft walls. The usual skylights cast shafts of moonshine down into a padded interior full of lofts, inglenooks, couches, and other snug places to curl up. It’s basically a big bed, since that’s where Alison spent many late-night hours when she was a kid, headlamp on under the covers, poring over some book.

“No right?” Harry’s eyebrows hit his hairline. He sits center stage, on Kitty’s back. The Alisons and the Magister surround his roundish carpeted dais that rises organically from the floor. Kitty, hunkered down into a loaf, vibrates cheerfully. “What are you talking about?”

“The ending is...off.” Ali C., cocooned in blankets, scrunches up her nose as she tries to explain. “It’s not really a happy ending because the heartless wizard isn’t happy.”

“The starlight wizard and her family are,” Harry counters. “That’s what matters.”

“But the starlight wizard isn’t the protagonist,” says Sunny. “The heartless wizard is, and he needs to have the right ending for the story.”

“What’s the right ending then?” Harry sneers. “Should I tell you that the heartless wizard meets up with the starlight wizard again and joins her family, and then they all live happily ever after?” Pulling back in his seat, he folds his arms and sniffs sharply. “Should I lie to you? You were the ones who wanted it to be good and true before all else.”

“The heartless wizard’s conclusions in the last paragraph are incorrect,” says Victa. She sets aside her vorpal blade. Because the temperature is rising in this close space filled with people, she unwraps herself from her shadowy shawl. “He was foolish to antagonize the starlight wizard’s new
family, but it wasn’t foolish to care for her and protect her and ultimately let her go.”

“In case you didn’t notice, the heartless wizard,” says Harry, narrowing his eyes at Victa, “is kind of an unreliable narrator. That doesn’t mean that my story is wrong.”

“Okay, so it’s not wrong,” says Clarissima, adjusting a hair puff at the side of her head, “but you have to admit that it’s narratively unsatisfying.”

“You ended it too early,” says Errabunda. “You didn’t let the heartless wizard realize everything he had to realize.”

“The heartless wizard isn’t a heartless wizard. He does so have a heart!” says Little Al, jumping up. One of her overall straps slips down her shoulder when she hops to her feet.

“Did you all miss the part where he chipped away at it, day by day, year by year, and then the dust burned and turned to ash?” Harry cries.

Little Al, Ali C., Sunny, Victa, Clarissima, and Errabunda exchange sideways glances and eyeball rolls, then turn on Harry, yelling in unison, “It grew back!”

Alison herself has been quiet, along with the Magister. This is the younger Alisons’ chance to ascertain Harry’s trustworthiness. Alison and the Magister, who have already ratified him, hang back. Nevertheless Harry’s asseveration of his heartlessness causes Alison to turn to her robot, who sits at her left hand. “Shit,” she whispers. “He really hates himself.”

“Indeed. He has realized very well what he has done wrong,” replies the Magister, “but he does not fully understand what he has done right.”

Harry just stares at the audience of Alisons, stupefied. For a minute, he’s silent. “This is a waste of time,” he snaps eventually, shaking his head. “I didn’t come here for literary nitpicking and mockery.” Alison notices that he omits Victa’s holding him at rapier point, which seems to have hurt him less than the Alisons’ comments on his story.

Alison reflects. Harry has changed significantly in the past seventy years. Even so, he hasn’t changed his perception of himself. In his mind, he’s still an evil supervillain, incapable of consideration, mercy, thoughtfulness, and care. He cannot be a better person than he was in the
past. He believes that he is trapped, doomed, by how he has been. He doesn’t even deserve to be happy.

If Harry has changed, should Alison do the same? Is she being too hard on him? It would be so much easier if she accepted his apologies and his changes. It would be so much simpler if she trusted him like Bill did, if she was his friend like Bill was, if she considered him part of the family. That’s what Bill would like — or what she used to want. That’s what Harry would like. It would make him happy. Her parents would be happy, even though they’re not involved with this at all; she knows that they would applaud her generosity and strength of character, especially in the face of someone that they would interpret as a White guy. She, Alison, could make him happy; he wouldn’t have to suffer that loneliness and divorce that she herself knows all too well.

She even knows what kind of family member he would be; he has given her a preview in all his actions so far. He’s short-tempered, impatient, touchy, and unjustifiably arrogant, true. However, he loves fiercely and fully, with unquenchable loyalty. He’s quick, brilliant, wry, humorous, insightful, even playful in a tightly wound way. His disarming commitment to honest self-revelation and accurate insight kind of counterbalances the bad temper. He wants, with genuine eagerness, to be a better person. And, more importantly, he’s succeeding. Wouldn’t it be better to accept that? The other Alisons, who are yelling at him that he does so have a heart, accept him.

Alison avoids her thoughts by answering Harry. “They’re not mocking you. It’s just like...constructive criticism. They’re analyzing. They give each other shit like that all the time. They give me shit like that.”

“Dominiculae meae chide me thus as well,” speaks up the Magister. Adorably enough, he calls the other Alisons my little Dominas.

“It’s an honor then to be contradicted by your inner child, dearest Dominatrix mine?” says Harry with a snort, even as he smiles halfway. The idea both pisses him off and amuses him.

“Master,” says the Magister in a low voice, stepping to Harry’s side, “might I point out something that you may have overlooked? You insist that you have no hearts. My Dominas insist that you do. They believe it has regenerated. In other words, they trust that you care about them and wish them well.”

“They do?” Harry surveys the assembly. All the Alisons nod helpfully.

“They may not welcome you enthusiastically, but they do permit you to enter their mind library,” the Magister continues.
“Victory is thine, milord.” Victa, standing from her place in the amphitheatre seats, sweeps her cape back from her shoulders and bows to Harry.

“Don’t bow to him!” Clarissima whacks Victa on the forearm with the back of her hand.

“Ow! I was just trying to make him feel better,” Victa protests.

“You have passed their test. You have won, Master,” says the Magister with a smile. “Now you could keep fighting, or you could savor the triumph.”

“Don’t keep fighting, my Maker, no, no, no,” advises Kitty, wagging its light-studded tail. “Fighting is no fun, and we don’t need to fight with the Dominatrixes. They’re our friends; they like us, yes, yes, yes. Now we need to find out the problem with their chip so that they can feel better and be even happier, yes, yes, yes!”

“I think we should listen to Kitty,” Alison says, stooping to pet its head. Kitty, blinking its eye lights, burbles with satisfaction. “After all, it is a very good and very smart kitty. Let me show you two around.”

Alison and the Magister lead Harry and Kitty on a tour of her mind library. After going around each Alison’s quarters under the supervision of the appropriate Alison, they go to the memory cellar. Built out of the bedrock of Alison’s mind library, the walls of the memory cellar comprise the principles by which she lives her life. There are grim crumbling phrases as cold as tombs: IMPASSIVITY, IMPREGNABILITY, and INDEPENDENCE. But MY CHOSEN FAMILY, CONSENSUAL OBEDIENCE, and PRUDENT TRUST arise magmically from Alison’s core as new foundations to her life. As she waits for Harry to finish his survey, Alison aligns her spine along CONSENSUAL OBEDIENCE, which feels like the Magister, strong and warm.

Harry travels up and down aisles of shelves, noting the strictly organized memories stored there. He cocks his head at them; he places his hand against the stone wall, feeling the warmth of its new words. Surprisingly, though, he asks for no memories.

The four ascend from storage and into the Lang Collection. It is a vaulted cathedral of a room, filled with hanging crystals that send rainbows darting about the walls. It centers on the Fairy Books. Collected and edited by Victorian folklorist Andrew Lang, the Fairy Books extend from the Blue, Red, and Green through to the Lilac. With their international scope and fastidiously brilliant watercolor illustrations, the Fairy Books introduced Alison to the wonders of such stories from
around the world. Her own reprints of them stand on an altar-like shelf, swirling with rainbows.

The Lang Collection encompasses much more than the Fairy Books. It also contains a copy of every fairy tale she’s ever read or made up or forgot, along with the most memorable items from her favorite stories. Harry opens a wardrobe, but finds only Many-Furs’ disguise of animal skins, a crimson hooded cloak, and a pair of seven-league boots. He sighs with something like exasperation and pulls faces in Beauty’s clairvoyant mirror, Snow White’s stepmother’s, and the distorted one that catalyzed Gerda’s quest for the Snow Queen. Turning to Alison, he informs her that he looks and feels like a hot mess. Does she have any magical items to replenish his stamina?

Alison considers and rejects fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, meat and cheese from a neverending sack, a gingerbread house, Alice’s metamorphic mushroom, a poisoned apple, and the millet that Psyche was to sort as one of her trials. None of these are precisely what he’s looking for. The Magister proffers a flask of water from the fountain of youth, which will give Harry the vitality of his younger self without turning back his age. Draining the flask, Harry perks up, asserting that he could fly around the room. Kitty tells him that’s a very, very, very bad idea because he could break something. He remains seated.

They move through other rooms. The tour concludes when Alison and the Magister allow Harry and Kitty into Alison’s sanctum: her Vault of Pain. Harry catches his breath at the sight of the red, bloodstained walls, built of SUPPRESSION, REPRESSION, POSSESSION, and OBSESSION. He swings open the sensory deprivation chamber’s door, finding the bathroom. He chuckles at the electric chair turned into a hot plate. He stands gingerly, supporting himself on the iron bedpost of a converted rack.

Sitting on the mattress with a sigh, he stretches out his wings. The silver swirls on them glitter in the low light. “Shit, Dominatrix.” He sighs deeply. “This is amazing. The whole makeover is just genius. I never... I never... I never would have thought I could...”

“Makeover?” says Alison. “I’ve never had a makeover. I don’t do makeovers.”

“The Master is referring to what you have done with the Vault of Pain,” interposes the Magister.

Harry nods. “You have turned a place of rage into a place of safety. You have turned a place of fear into a place of strength. You have turned a place of secrets into a place of trust. You have...a Vault of Peace.” He sighs again, tearing up. Kitty produces a handkerchief for him; he wipes the edges of his eyes precisely so as not to disturb his makeup.

“Uh...thank you,” Alison ventures. She realizes that she has what he wants. He envies her. “Do
“No!” Harry stands abruptly, clapping his wings closed. “I didn’t come here to snivel. I came here to help you.” Suddenly he pricks up his head. “Oh! The water of youth must have worked. I’m standing, but I’m not in pain. Well, I should take advantage of this. Now then — dearest Dominatrix mine — “ he says, coming quite close to her and lifting his chin as he looks her in the eye. “You have shown me nearly everything, for which I am grateful, and I’ve learned quite a lot. But I have yet to see your power center. I don’t know what form it takes, but, anyway, I need to go there.”

“I...um… I don’t really know where that is,” Alison confesses. “I’m sure I’ve imagined it somewhere, but I don’t know where. And I can’t just magically come up with the answer because...because...I don’t have any magic. I don’t have any power.” She hangs her head.

“Ah,” says Harry. “I understand then.” He turns smartly to the Magister. “I suppose it’s your turn to be tested now, Master. How well do you know your Dominatrix — I mean Domina? Can you help me find her power center?”

The Magister’s golden eyes flicker as he considers every room in the Vault of Pain. He clasps his hands together, making a decisive smack. “The door to your power center is here, my dear,” he says to Alison after a moment, “guarded safely in the most private part of you. In fact, it’s so safe that there is no door. I’ll need your vorpal pen/spear/sword if I am to make us a way through. Do I have your leave to use it?”

Of course Alison grants him permission. Kitty, assuring everyone that it knows the way back to the octagonal atrium and the Alisons’ quarters, scampers off to find the vorpal weapon. It returns half an hour later. apologizing for being late. It had to receive some tail scritches from the Dominatrixes, who were so, so, so very nice. They are its new favorite friends, yes, yes, yes! It gives Alison’s vorpal blade, which it has wrapped in its tail, to the Magister.

He makes a door simply enough. In his hands, the weapon shimmers into its other possible form, an oversize fountain pen the length of his forearm. With sure, fast strokes, he sketches the outline of a door on the rough, red wall. He adds a handle and a label that says Power Supply.

Placing his hand flat against the drawn door, the Magister says softly, “Fiat voluntas Dominae meae.” My Domina’s will be done.

The two-dimensional door takes on three-dimensional reality, becoming as solid, tangible, and useable as all else around them. Alison lets out a squee. Kitty gasps. Harry allows himself a grunt
of surprise. The Magister pushes open the door, looks back at them with a self-satisfied smile, and beckons. “This way.”
Alison, the Magister, Harry, and Kitty find her mind library's power supply. Harry uses his wings, his shocking abilities, and his ingenuity to restart Alison's power.

Alison, the Magister, Harry, and Kitty pass through the door, entering a circular, vertical shaft. A wan glow follows them from the Vault of Pain, and a far-off skylight shines down over them. Other than that, however, it’s like standing in the bottom of a well — dark and deep and chilly.

A spherical thing eclipses most of the skylight. It seems to be made of riveted metal, dull silver, banded with ladders. Windows, bulbs, dials, and gauges stud its surface, all still, all dark. It hangs above them, suspended somehow, with no staircase, elevator, escalator, or ladder for access.

“Fuck,” says Alison, slumping against the wall. “I don’t need this shit right now.” The wall imparts a dampness to her back, as cold as a cave. She springs away, shivering.

“Hmmmm…” The Magister paces, stroking his chin. He cranes his neck back, examining the device from different angles.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no,” Kitty murmurs. “It’s very, very dark in here and not very warm, no, no, no. Dominatrix needs to recharge, but her power supply is failing, oh no, oh no. How can Kitty help her? How can my Maker turn the lights back on? Kitty doesn’t know, oh no, oh no. This is hard. This is very, very hard.”

“That’s your power center?” Harry flares his nose at it. “It’s rather, uh… Huh.”

“What?” Alison massages her forehead.

“Well...it’s just that I’m kind of surprised by your aesthetic choices here.” Harry flicks his eyebrows, as well as his wings. “I was expecting something out of a fairy tale. You know — Snow White’s bloody heart in a chest, Koschei the Deathless’ separable soul, maybe even Ariadne’s guiding ball of thread or something. But this is some vintage 1970s evil space computer sort of shit with a dash of H.G. Wells’ Time Machine. Very retro.”
“Oh!” The Magister’s ears and whiskers bend forward and his tail lifts, curling at the end. “Of course! You’re right, Master. This is the Cosmognosis Machine.”

“The what?” say Alison and Harry.

“It’s Panjandrum’s secret weapon from series two — the original, of course, not the reboot.”

“Are you talking about a TV show?” asks Harry.

“Yeah, Defenders of Earth,” says Alison. “You watched some of the classic episodes with us back in Dystopiaville. Remember?”

“No.”

“It’s a BBC sci-fi show from the 1970s. It had an original run in the 1970s with cardboard spaceships, rubber monsters, and silly puns. Then it got a reboot maybe ten years ago with better effects and a lot more angst. It’s basically Hope, the protagonist, and the Defender, who’s her mentor, versus Professor Panjandrum, who tries to fuck up the space/time continuum with his incompetent robots. I’ve seen all the classic episodes, but I’m still not remembering the Cosmognosis Machine. Probably because mine is clearly malfunctioning,” she adds with a glare at her dead power supply.

“Oh, Defenders!” exclaims Harry. “That’s the show that all you Dorks were obsessed with. Wait a minute.” He looks at Alison. “Your power center — the thing that keeps your mind running — is a supervillain’s world-taking machine? Didn’t Hope and the Defender have like inventions of compassion you could have used?”

“Why would I want to model myself after Hope?” Alison makes a face at Harry, shivering again. “She was a White girl whose mentor gave her all these amazing lessons and trips around the universe. She was rich, and she was privileged, and I wasn’t. Panjandrum, though — he was always a bit raggedy and old-fashioned; I figured that he got his clothes at charity shops, like me. And he was always trying to prove himself. I knew what that was like.

“Besides, Panjandrum had power,” Alison continues. “Oh, now I remember the episode where this is from. It was the first Defenders episode I ever saw, and Hope and Deedee and the Defender were staring up at the Cosmognosis Machine, wondering how to approach it. Then all of a sudden,
the sides opened up, like double doors, into two hemispheres, and Panjandrum was inside. He was doing something — “

The Magister inserts an answer: “Harnessing the latent psychic energy of the world’s population, I believe, so that he could recreate the fabled Spark of Life and make ensouled robots, which he thought would be more powerful and reliable than unensouled ones.”

“I just remember,” says Alison, “the sight of him working that machine. He looked like you,” she addresses the Magister, “when you’re laser-focused on one of your dolls, or like you,” she says to Harry, “when you’re telling a story with dramatic pacing. Very intense, absolutely sure of himself, full of such excitement and confidence. And the lightning bolts were radiating from where he sat, jumping through the banks of equipment, and his eyes were shining; he was just so...brilliant! I was like, Right then, that’s who I want to be when I grow up. Of course, then Hope and Deedee and the Defender kicked his arse, but I mostly ignored that part.”

“So there’s a cockpit up inside there? C’mon, Kitty.” Harry zips away to contemplate the Cosmognosis Machine from the underside. He paces orbitally now, just like the Magister. “Well, then that’s where we need to be. How do we get up there?”

“The actual episode involved jet packs, although I’m not sure that’s relevant.” The Magister frowns, twitching his whiskers.

“I can’t imagine a jet pack! Look!” Alison waves at the dull, silent bulk of her Cosmognosis Machine. “I’m literally out of power.” She says. The Magister pulls her to him and holds her fast. “I hate this shit,” she sniffs, her eyes burning with tears. “Why do I have to be sick? Why do I have to be powerless? Why does everything have to be so hard?”

“No no, please don’t cry. That’s why I’m here,” says Harry. “Me and my wings,” he says, standing and spreading them to their fullest extent, “and that hit of energy I got from the fountain of youth. Maybe you can’t fly up there and switch your power back on, but I can. Do I have your permission, Dominatrix?”

“But how are you going to get into the cockpit?” Alison turns to the Magister. “How did Panjandrum get in there?”

“Mmmm...the episode never showed that, as I recall. He was already in there when Hope and Deedee and the Defender found him.”
“Well, that’s not helpful. Who writes these things?” Alison bursts out. “I fuckin’ hate plot holes. Sure, you have my permission,” she says to Harry, “but I don’t know how you’ll open it up.”

“Eh…” Harry shrugs. “I’ll just do what any supervillain with dreams of universal conquest would do! I’ll improvise!”

“Don’t break anything!” Alison calls.

The Magister wraps his arm around Alison, stroking her cheek with the tip of his tail, as they watch Harry. Leaping into the air, he moves upward with grace, rising straight and swiftly like an untethered balloon. His broad, translucent wings cut through the air with deft flexions. He calculates precisely the amount of force needed for each flap so that he reaches his destination in the most efficient way possible.

All clad in red, with his wings flickering behind him like a cape, Harry streams upward, bright and magical, a wizard just like her Magister. Alison realizes something about him that she has never noticed till now. He’s beautiful, in that sharp, brilliant, enviable way of all her favorite villains.

Harry grabs a ladder rung soldered to the underside of the Cosmognosis Machine. Swinging his legs up, he wraps them around another rung, clinging there. His wings, partly open, rise and fall as he breathes harshly.

“Are you okay?” Alison yells.

The Magister sniffs with laughter. “He says, *No* — telepathically, I mean. He wants to know if you consent to communicating psychically with him again.”

*Sure, why the fuck not?* she answers Harry telepathically.

*Thanks. Easier’n yelling.* Harry’s thoughts, made brief by exertion, appear in her mind. He crawls up from the Antarctic end of the Cosmognosis Machine.

Moving cautiously, his wings trailing, he reminds Alison of a butterfly just out of its cocoon. He looks so small and frail. *Be careful,* Alison thinks. *I want to see you flying again, all translucent with power and shot through with glory.*
Always glorious! Just not always flying.

Hey, you said you wouldn’t read my mind!

Wasn’t. You were thinking that to me.

Shit.

Don’t worry. Won’t tell anyone. Even all the way down on the ground, Alison hears Harry panting as he heads toward the equator. Found seam, he reports, pausing right at the middle of the globe. Now to open…

“A spell,” says the Magister, mouthing the words that he must be sending telepathically to Harry as well. Though he doesn’t speak telepathically to Alison, he’s obviously in on the conversation.

“A spell,” says Harry, both in thought and speech. May my Dominatrix’s will be done! Nothing happens. Ahhhhhh, fuck. His wings droop. Excuse me, dearest Dominatrix. Do you happen to know that enchantment you used to get me out of your head back in Dystopiaville?

Ummmmmm… Alison’s overtaxed brain doesn’t help her. It ended with Get the fuck out of my mind. That’s all I’ve got, though.

Harry turns to the Cosmognosis Machine. Pressing both palms against its metal hull, he declaims into it with surprising sonority:

“It matters not how strait the gate.
I will be good; I will be kind.
I am the master of my fate.
Unlock and open up your mind.”

With a low metallic creak, Alison’s Cosmognosis Machine swings apart into left and right halves.
Ah yes, wonderful, Harry remarks to himself and Alison. He collapses his wings, settling easily into the seat. There’s a moment of silence in which he slides his hands up and down the arms, looking at the webbing of wires. Huh, he says finally. Does the episode give us any clue how this thing works?

“It, and I quote, destabilizes the fluctuations of the quantum chronometrical field,” supplies the Magister.

What the fuck does that mean? Harry calls down.

That’s the show’s standard scientific-sounding jargon whenever they can’t be arsed to explain shit, Alison elaborates.

Leave it to humans to come up with something so asinine, Harry mutters. Any other ideas?

Well, when Panjandrum was working in it, it looked like he was inside one of those lightning balls, says Alison. You know, like those crystal balls with pale lighting in them, radiating out from the center?

Ah hah! Harry arches his wings as he gets an idea. Lightning! Of course, of course! I can jump-start your Cosmognosis Machine then. Do I have your permission?

How, though? Alison asks.

“How, though?” Alison asks.

“With the electricity that he manifested when he reunited with your Heliantha,” the Magister says.

So now you’ve mastered it? Alison asks Harry.

“Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes, Dominatrix!” Kitty speaks up, apparently also in on the conversation. “My
Maker is a very shocking kitty. He has been practicing. Now he has very good aim. Yes, yes, yes, he does! He is very, very, very shocking now.”

There’s a crackle. Blue lightning leaps from Harry’s right upturned palm and traces a swooping curving path to his left. A lemniscate, an infinity sign of light, weaves itself between his hands. *Trust me, my dear.* Lit from below, the handsome devil’s painted face seems to be made of flame and shadow rather than flesh. She can tell from the curves and flashes of his features that he’s smirking.

*Okay, go for it, I guess,* says Alison. *Just be careful.*

Harry doesn’t listen. He bends down upon himself, his silhouette sharp and hawkish, concentrating on where to strike. The air buzzes. The hair stands up on the back of Alison’s neck. The Magister’s tail goes frizzy. The two of them press against each other, hoping that they won’t give each other static shocks. Everything’s itchy, fizzy, with expectation, like before the first lightning strike.

With a flash, two pulses of blue lightning, one from each of Harry’s hands, leave the arms of the control chair. They ignite all the interlocking branches of wires, but only a moment, before the light wavers and dies. *Well fuck,* Harry curses. His wings fall limply behind him. He bows his head for a moment.

Alison dashes forward, standing right underneath him. She yells up to him: *Are you — ?*

But then he raises his head and sits straight. He’s on a throne now, his chin slightly inclined, his hands draped over the ends of the arm rest. He speaks like he did at the revolutionary rally back in Dystopiaville, in measured, penetrating tones, a voice to marshal multitudes. “I call forth the light in darkness. I call forth the hope in despair. I call forth the mastery out of defeat. I am the Master, and I hold fast the power!”

The air sizzles like bacon frying, and again he sends out the blue lightning from within himself. Stronger and paler, almost neon blue this time, the energy burns down the dendritic wires inside the casing of the Cosmognosis Machine. With a cascade of clicks and blinks, the bulbs on its shell pop into illumination. There’s a whir, starting low and slow, moving higher, like a propeller winding up. Banks of lights snap on up the shaft, winking on like Kitty’s tail lights.

A hum builds in the shaft, radiating out from the Cosmognosis Machine. The low, almost subaudible thrum descends from the power supply, rises up from the cement floor, and even flows from the metal walls around Alison. It’s a deep, regular sound, perhaps more of a feeling, with its own slightly buzzy pulse. It rubs against Alison’s flesh, chafing heat into her cold limbs, then sinks
into her bones, into her very core, where it makes its home.

Alison smiles and gives a little squee to herself, even as tears come to her eyes. It’s so...comfortable, so warm, so right, like being held fast by her Dork fam or sat on by a bunch of TARDIS cats. Her Cosmognosis Machine has finally woken from its overextended nap. Now it purrs along with the Magister and Kitty, the former of whom head-butts her enthusiastically on the right, the latter of whom does the same on her left. Life is good now. She’s starting to feel a little like herself again.

She lifts her head, bending her neck back, so she can get a view of Harry, the one she has to thank for all of this. Even as his spell and his lightning succeed, forcing the lights back on in Alison’s mind library, Harry himself fails. The strength leaves his spine. He crumples forward, his torso in his lap. His hands slide from the arm rests. He rolls from the seat of the Cosmognosis Machine and falls.

Alison goes as cold as a stone in shadow. She suddenly remembers the cost of Harry’s power. Ever since he came back in that aborted regeneration, he has been bleeding out his life force in the form of lightning. He just sacrificed a significant portion of that to revive her mind library.

Alison holds out her arms straight before her, palms up. Harry falls without grace, like a swatted bug. He lands in her grasp solidly, but not with so much gravity that she goes to her knees. Those hollow bones and flight-ready frame render him nearly weightless. She draws him to her chest instinctively, stabilizing him, holding him fast.

Harry looks up at her. All the strength from the water of youth has been used up. Cold sweat stands on his brow; even his wing feels clammy when he accidentally pokes her. He shivers feverishly. He’s so pale that the red color on his cheeks resembles bruises. “And now,” he says, pushing out the words past gritted teeth and pain, “if you’ll excuse me...I feel...an attack...of the vapors...coming on.” He puts his hand to his forehead in the stereotypical wilting gesture. Then he goes limp and actually does pass out.
Alison's Alisonshine is restored! All and sundry rejoice. Alison and Bill have sex.

Harry and Kitty go back to the Zero Room to recharge. As for Alison, she wakes up. She goes to bed after the mental travel only because the Magister tells her to. She doesn’t feel as if she needs to rest. Now that Harry has restored power to her mind, she feels like her usual sunshiney self. She doesn’t have sludge in her veins anymore, but light, fizzing sparks. They warm her up from the inside out and gleam on everything, making it shine with potential.

Alison sleeps very little after mental travel. The sparks bring so many possibilities to her mind! There’s so much to do. She pops out of bed. Imp, overjoyed that Bright Cat is back to herself and also awake during the hours when the boring Useless Cat — that is, the Magister — sleeps, jumps off Alison’s pillow. Buzzing around Alison’s head, she issues commands for Alison to feed her, pet her, and play with her. Alison, glad to have energy once more, she does everything that Imp demands. Imp snuggles Alison with her face and asserts undying love based on the quality of Alison’s caresses.

Though Imp is an energetic, nocturnal creature, she is also a small one. After bouncing around with Alison for several hours, she runs out of energy and sleeps, leaving Alison alone. Then Scintilla appears in her robot form, her green eyes bright and glad. Miss Alison’s alive again, and the prisoner is comatose in the Zero Room, so no one has to listen to his nervous yammering. It’s all good!

Alison says to Scintilla that Harry’s not a prisoner; he never was. Also he has a name. Scintilla, folding her arms, asks if Miss Alison expects her to call him Master. He’s obviously not the master of anything. Alison says no; she just thinks that Scintilla should address him with a specific name, one that’s more respectful than the prisoner. Scintilla decides on Batshit Harry. Even though she thinks that’s not the best choice, Alison drops the subject.

Anyway, like Imp, Scintilla is thrilled that her ward — for both she and Imp consider themselves guardians for Alison and the Magister — is well again. She wants to play tricks on the Magister. Alison agrees, as long as they’re not mean. Scintilla transforms the Magister’s study with iridescent rainbow wallpaper and pink heart-covered carpet. The Magister’s coffin, in which he’s sleeping at this very moment, becomes a red padded box laced with white frills. Carousel music fills into the Gothic stone halls, with fairy lights that blink to the rhythm.
Just before dawn, Alison, whose synapses are finally firing at full speed again, realizes that Bill is up! In fact, Bill, being in a time zone seven hours or so later, has been up all this time. The Magister and Harry might be resting, but Bill and the Doctor can celebrate Alison’s resurrection with her. Alison scoots through the portal connecting Scintilla in Burlington to Anima in London. She calls out to everyone within earshot that she’s alive. Anima magnifies her voice and adds some grandiose sound effects. Alison’s voice resonates like a deity triumphantly incarnating.

Bill and the Doctor materialize promptly from the lunch table, the Doctor still with a sandwich in hand and a salad fork in their breast pocket. Alison frolics and squee. Bill kisses her and cries. The Doctor twirls around, waving their hands to the beat of an improvised song. Alison’s appetite returns in a piquant rush, filling her mouth with saliva. They all go back to the lunch table, where Alison eats as much as the Doctor. She tells them and Bill about her recent adventures in her head.

This calls for a celebration, the Doctor says. They use their psychic connection to check on the Magister. He’s still asleep in his chocolate truffle box, so the Doctor says that the three Dorks can nip out for a quick adventure before he wakes up. Bill wants to revisit Sappho. After all, Sappho was so inspired by Bill’s description of Alison that she wrote a hymn sequence. Sappho should definitely see the genuine article!

Alison, Bill, and the Doctor travel back to around 600 BCE, landing in the city of Syracuse on Sicily. Alison inquires why they’re not going to Lesbos, only to hear that, by this time, Sappho and her family have been exiled from there. Grieving the loss of her beautiful homeland and its beautiful women, she could probably use some inspiration. Alison hesitates at the implication. Are Bill and the Doctor implying that she’s like Sappho’s muse?

No, Bill and the Doctor aren’t implying anything. They’re just telling the truth. Sappho, a tall woman, narrow like the Doctor, with a nose reminiscent of the Magister’s, is definitely, uh, inspired by Alison. She recognizes her old friends Lady Bill of London and Great Doctor of Time and Space, smiling widely and flicking her head to the side. Then she looks at Alison; her smile freezes. She cocks her head more quickly from side to side, as if poems are now jumping around in her skull, eager to get out. She grins as widely as possible, and her fingers twitch, already shaping verses in the air.

Once she has a wax tablet and a stylus in hand, Sappho calms down. Fixing her eyes on her work, she speaks easily, now that she doesn’t have to look at anyone. The image of Lady Alison, she says, has haunted her for years, ever since Lady Bill and the Great Doctor first visited her. Lady Bill’s tribute to her wife — a word which makes Alison wonder what’s been lost in translation — prompted Sappho’s best work since her familial exile.

Now that Sappho sees Lady Alison in the flesh, she knows why Lady Bill loves her so. Sappho starts nodding her head, full of poetic thoughts again. Alison even detects some Doctor-like hand gestures of excitement now. Lady Alison surpasses the Lesbians in her stupendousness, Sappho
tells her. In fact, she is the epitome of brilliance, a goddess worthy to drive the chariot of the sun.

Alison grows hot. She protests that there’s got to be some hyperbole on Sappho’s part, especially since Sappho herself is quite amazing. She has amazing talent, amazing exuberance, and amazing charisma. She especially has an amazing nose. Sappho tells her that it’s too large. Alison says that it’s the perfect size for sniffing out poems. Sappho cracks up, first in nervous giggles, then in deeper, relaxed laughter. The Dorks join in.

A deeper and more restrained voice informs them that Sappho’s is, without a doubt, a magnificent nose. He should know because he has one in the same mold. The Magister appears on the scene, having somehow tracked down the rest of his Dork fam. He is most pleased, he says with his eyes sparkling, that his Domina is having fun without him. He mentions that he’d like to talk to her when she has a chance, something that she promptly forgets. The conversation turns to noses in general — is there a quintessential Lesbian nose, and, if so, what does it look like? — and Alison is greatly relieved that she is no longer the focus.

The Dorks return to the present. Alison gets Bill alone in her room. Underneath the burnt orange drapery on her canopy bed, Alison asks why Sappho thinks that she’s Bill’s wife. For that matter, why does Harry keep calling them inevitable spouses? Why did he assume that they were married by now? Why does everyone think they’re married?

The thought moves through Alison’s mind, as bright and quick as a comet, that she could propose to Bill right now. Now that they have the matter of trust sorted, now that they know that they really, truly love each other, they could get married. Then they really would be inevitable spouses.

But Alison wants to finish with Harry first. She wants him out of her house. She wants things back to something approaching normal before she makes a suggestion that will alter the Dork fam radically.

Besides, Bill now mounts Alison’s hips. She blooms down in Alison’s direction, with her hair as dark and strong and twisty as vines, her strongly featured face as golden and brown as a sunflower, her minidress shimmery green with leaf-like promise. She smells like sharp sweat and sweet tears. Before Alison marries Bill, she wants to reach down into the deep soil of her and hold her fast, roots and flower and all.

Bill says that everyone must think that they’re married because they’re so, um, good together. Lying slowly upon Alison so as not to poke her with her Cyber heart casing, she notes that she and Alison certainly fit well. Alison tries to bounce and squee. Bill says that they would fit together even better if Alison stopped wiggling. She comes down upon Alison and drinks her up in a kiss. Alison feels herself sliding down inside Bill, past her humming, purring Cyber heart, into all sorts of wonderful curves and caves that she has always wanted to explore.
Coming up out of Bill, Alison calls for her to stop. Before they go any deeper, she needs to know what Bill is up for. Does she want something like soft, poetic lovemaking? Some more energetic and raw fucking? Hilarious teasing and play? Something else entirely?

Bill knows a lot about poetry because that’s one of the primary languages of her other partner, the Doctor. Poetic lovemaking, she points out, can mean a lot of different things. Does Alison mean Dickinsonian fucking, which is short and sweet, with odd, perfect pauses and a lingering effect? Shakespearean sonnet fucking, orderly, tightly bound, but still satisfying? Limerick fucking, short and funny and dirty? Or maybe something even more epic?

Epic! Yes, that’s it. Alison wants epic lovemaking. Epics are, after all, narrative poetry. They’re long, deep, hard, and intricate. Demanding your full engagement, they challenge you with their complexity, amaze you with your technique, and show you unexpected and peculiar beauties. They have their own rhythm, neither Dickinsonian, Shakespearean, nor limerick, but more measured and storylike. They take so much time to fully appreciate, but they’re so worth it. Yes, Alison wants to share an epic fuck with Bill.

They begin with a sarcastic invocation to the deities of divine lubrication — that is, coconut oil. Their prayers end when they anoint Alison’s bed instead of each other. Now it smells like coconut under the canopy, wet and thick, as well as the sweat of two naked people.

Bill laughs. Alison stares at her, stupefied and adoring. This wonderful cyborg sunflower, with her robotic core as warm and purring as a cat, as enduring and beautiful as gold, chooses her, Alison, out of all the people in all the universes that she wants to be with. It’s such a miracle that she could cry.

Alison’s tears fall. It’s happy crying, she explains, and it’s all about Bill. Bill, who turned her love into a fairy tale for Alison. Bill, who was so alarmed by her Alisonshine’s chip problem that he called Harry from across the multiverse so he could help her. Bill, who confessed her secrets despite her terror and discovered that her love was stronger than her fear. Bill, who keeps the peace between the Dorks and Harry and mediates disagreements, while still asserting the importance of her own feelings and needs. Bill, who wants to visit Alison’s mind library. Bill, in whose mind spaceship her mum and all the little Bills are apparently waiting to meet Alison. Bill, the hottest person in any universe, who thinks so much of Alison that she makes her into — Bill, now crying at all these compliments, pushes her lovely eyebrows up and kisses Alison to make her quiet.

But Alison does not stay quiet. Nor does she stay still. Just as Kitty says that it has too much dance, so Alison has too much bounce and squee to contain herself. She checks with Bill. Is it a good day or a bad day? Is she up for rough activities, or — ? Bill cuts her off, saying that it’s a good day, and she’s hungry, and she’s going to sit on top of Alison and hold her down and bite her and eat her up.
Alison says she’ll have to catch her first. Bill points out that she is literally kneeling over Alison’s pelvis this very minute. She’s relatively certain that Alisonshine is already caught. Grabbing onto her twisted bedposts, Alison tries to haul herself out from under Bill and escape.

Now the action of the epic begins in earnest. Bill doesn’t let Alison move very far. She pins her by the wrists and kisses her all over, biting her breasts and inner thighs. Alison sinks back under Bill’s weight as Bill presses one hand over her mouth. Warm and loose from Bill’s touch, she cannot liquefy completely. Bill bites her and sends a shock from her tender skin all through the rest of her.

Bill holds a mouthful of Alison’s thigh — the delicate darkened skin and the coarse crinkly hair — in her mouth long enough to cause a deep purple bruise. The pain penetrates deep inside Alison. That will take a while to heal. Every time her legs move together as she walks, Alison will ache and remember that Bill ate her. Oh yes, it’s definitely a good day for pain.

That thought pushes her over the edge, and Alison comes. She shoves Bill off her before the swings of her hips toss her off. Then she rides the involuntary waves till they reach their crescendo.

She falls against her bed, stuck there with sweat and spilled coconut oil. She ripples with orgasmic aftershocks, stunned at the strength of her shaking. She trains her breathing slower, allowing herself time to recompose.

Bill told Alison she was up for rough stuff, so Alison gives it to her. Bill, breathing hard after subduing Alison, doesn’t have the energy for a struggle. That’s okay, though. Roughness need not mean wrestling.

Alison goes for a slower, more tender violence. She moves Bill so that she’s lying on her side, then spoons behind her. She twines her top leg around Bill to keep her still, and she talks. Bill is hers, all hers, she whispers, and she wants Bill to remember that. Bill, much better at stillness than Alison, bends forward, offering the curve of her spine to Alison with a low, muffled gasp.

She abrades Bill’s flesh, then kisses the raw places. The weals will make Bill hurt and remember and feel again how much Alison wants her. Bill’s gasps turn into sobs, and she shoves herself hard back into Alison. Alison knows she’s almost there.

She increases the intensity of her work, going over all the scratches she has already created. Bill’s blood slips between her teeth, along with coconut and sweat. Bill screeches and Alison instantly
halts. Oh shit! They have always discussed blood and agreed upon it before drawing it.

Alison rolls away, apologizing for her overenthusiasm. Bill says she was just surprised, but that shock from the bloodletting was just what she needed. She’s going to come — if Alison would only —

Alison pushes Bill back to the spooning position, one leg around her waist, one hand wound tightly in her hair. She commands Bill to come for — She can’t finish before Bill obeys her, coming once, twice, each time as open as a sob. She is so fierce and clear, so tearful and joyful, so much her own self and yet also Alison’s, that Alison comes again herself, just by watching.

When it’s over, Bill groans, but with a different pain. All her Cyber parts feel especially heavy after they screw, and her legs always tingle. Alison rubs Bill’s calves a bit while Bill plops back among the pillows, murmuring amazed and muzzy thank yous. After several minutes’ dispute over who’s the more stupendous lover, Bill turns away from Alison, drags the duvet over her head, and falls into a deep, snoring sleep.
Alison Is Interrupted

Chapter Summary

Lakis reports in from Aluet, distressed about how "Stylist Mom" is treating her and her sister.

The next few days pass in a whirlwind. Too excited to sleep, Alison works and plays throughout the night. She organizes her dolls and customizing supplies in her studio. She wonders for a while if she should make retractable ears and tail for her doll of the Magister. Then she decides to 3D print a new head with cat ears.

After that, even though she’s not that proficient at sewing, she finds herself doodling outfits for her Alison and Bill dolls. One is a long black gown, tight in the sleeves and low in the neck, awash in pale rainbow swirls of stars. As they condense toward the rear hem, the stars turn into layers of nacreous, sequined petals. The other outfit is a Nehru suit like the Magister’s, but vacillating somewhere between gold and red and orange and lacking gloves. With a squee, Alison realizes that she has just thought up her and Bill’s wedding clothes.

When she’s not playing with her dolls or daydreaming about her wedding, Alison is either having sex with Bill or waiting for Bill to rest up so that they can have more sex. No longer hampered by fear and secrets, Bill holds Alison fast and swallows her up every time they meet. No longer half dead with depression, Alison compensates for a month without lust by cramming it all into several days. She bites Bill; she scratches her; she makes her bleed; she makes her come; she loves her. The week becomes one long fuck, sometimes urgent, sometimes luxurious, occasionally interrupted by naps, snacks, and Bill’s inevitable need to sleep.

The Magister, the Doctor, and Harry keep looking in on Alison in various combinations. Alison gives her Time Dorks lots of encouraging thumbs up so they don’t worry. To Harry she repeatedly signs Good and Go away. After his third peek in, she remembers that she has not yet thanked him for his heroic efforts on her behalf. She starts signing Thank you — good — shoo after that.

Alison would speak with her Time Dorks and Harry, but she and Bill have an emergency before them. Calls from Galleia and Lakis intersperse Alison’s rapture of creativity and libido. One day Scintilla announces that Lakis is calling for Alison and Bill, and she’s upset. Alison answers because Bill is having her usual post-fuck nap.

Alison takes on a tablet as she curls up in the recesses of a 1970s love seat. Lakis appears on screen, holding three stuffed animals to her chest with one hand. With her other hand, she twirls
and untwirls a lock of thick black hair around her finger, which she does when she’s worried. “I’m really scared,” Lakis confides in Alison. “Galleia and Stylist Mom are fighting. I really wish that I had a kitty, like you have Imp and Bill has all the TARDIS kitties. Then I’d have someone to pet when I was sad. I’m trying really hard to pretend that my stuffed animals are kitties, but they aren’t.”

“Awwww, Lakis, you sound really worried,” Alison says. “Do you think it would help to talk to me?”

Imp alights on Alison’s shoulder. She trills a greeting to Snuggly Cat, her name for Lakis, then immediately meows with concern. Bumping up against the sides of Alison’s tablet, she asks why Snuggly Cat is crying. A little smile comes to Lakis’ face when Imp enters her sight. She says that Alison should pet the kitty for her.

After a few minutes of petting Imp by proxy, Lakis talks more coherently. “It’s a political connection!” she says suddenly. “It’s an ambassador thing.”

“Um, what’s a political connection?” asks Alison, confused.

“I made friends with Ne-Selsi, and maybe it was a shenanigan, but that’s a political connection. That’s what Galleia says. Political connections are important for ambassadors. Galleia says that too. So does Stylist Mom.” Lakis nods solemnly, repeating the words of her favorite people.

“Ohhhhhhh,” says Alison with understanding. “You’re saying that you and Galleia were making political connections when you snuck out.”

“Yeah!” Lakis nods. “We’re ambassadors. I don’t find secrets like Stylist Mom or make love like Galleia, but I did a good thing.” Her voice drops. “Stylist Mom is mad, though. She doesn’t think it’s a good thing.”

Alison sighs. “Yeah. She wanted you to stay out of the city with Reeve because she wanted you to be safe.”

“But we’re not safe!” Lakis wipes her nose on a stuffed animal. “We’re ambassadors.”

“What do you mean?”
“Galleia is the last Queen of Atlantis, and I’m her chief handmaiden,” says Lakis, pronouncing the titles carefully. “We’re not safe. We made sure that the mean Lord Master didn’t get Atlantis. We saved people from the earthquake.” That’s her summary of her involvement with Alison and the Magister back in Atlantis. “We’ve helped Stylist Mom on her other missions. Well, mostly Galleia does, but I’m also not safe too. I listen for secrets in the salon, and I tell them to Stylist Mom.”

“So you do risky, dangerous things as ambassadors? Is that what you mean?” Alison clarifies. When Lakis says yes, Alison realizes something. “Wait. Wait. I thought you were just brushing and braiding hair at the salon. You’re spying too?”

At this point, Imp bolts from Alison’s shoulder. “[Eight-Legged Cat!]” she cries, trilling in welcome.

Turning around, Alison sees Imp and Kitty sniffing and rubbing against each other like two conventional cats. “Smallcatfriend!” cries Kitty, reaching up one of its pincers for Kitty to land on it. “Hello, hello, hello, Smallcatfriend. Kitty is so happy to see you, oh yes, oh yes, oh yes! I love you so much. Yes, yes, I do!”

Harry, on Kitty’s back, snaps his fingers, trying uselessly to hush it. “Kitty! Kitty! Be quiet.” Kitty does not. Listing to one side, with brambly hair and baggy eyes, Harry sighs and sips from a mug of tarry coffee. He wears his black/red coat, but no makeup or earrings. In other words, he looks like he just got up. “Can we talk, Dominatrix?” he asks in one-handed sign.

“No,” Alison signs back. She shakes her head, holds up the tablet, and points at it. Mercifully, Harry retreats.

Back on the tablet, Lakis explains her activities at Crowning Glory, the Stylist’s salon. “People like when I brush their hair, and sometimes they talk to me. Sometimes they try to bribe me too, like to mess up someone’s hair,” says Lakis with a shrug, “but I don’t do that. I was just going to take the money and give it to Stylist Mom, but she didn’t like that idea. I don’t know why. Lakis always cleans out her enemies.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Bill appears in Alison’s peripheral vision, her eyes wide and shocked. She drives around a few mossy chairs and the glass coffee table, drawing near Alison. She transfers from her chair to a seat next to Alison. “Can you mute the mike?” she requests, so Alison does. “So the Stylist is teaching Galleia how to lie, cheat, and steal?” Bill says in slow, stunned tones. “That’s what her so-called apprenticeship is about?”
“Well, yeah,” says Alison, “but that’s not news. The Stylist was clear about that from the beginning, and they’ve been doing it for months. Besides, we both know that Galleia learned quite a bit about lying, cheating, and stealing from being the Queen of Atlantis.”

“But now Lakis is doing it too? Lakis, of all people?” Bill crinkles both her nose and her forehead. “Thought she wasn’t in spy training. Thought she was going to school most of the time anyway.”

Alison frowns. “Yeah, me too.”

“And now the Stylist is angry that her adopted daughters are taking right after her. What did she expect?” Casting her eyes upward, Bill shakes her head.

Alison and Bill return to her discussion with Lakis. Lakis hugs her stuffed animals more closely and tangles her finger in her hair again. “I’m so mad at Stylist Mom,” says Lakis, sniffling, “and sad too. But I don’t want to be mad at Stylist Mom; I love her!”

“It’s okay to be angry at someone, even if you love them.” Bill nods at Lakis’ image. “That doesn’t mean that you love them any less. It doesn’t mean that you’re a bad person either.”

“But I love her!” repeats Lakis. “I want me and Galleia to be part of her family forever.”

“You can be angry at the Stylist and still be part of her family,” says Bill. “And she can be angry at you too, but you can still be part of her family.”

“What if I’m a useless idiot and Galleia is a scheming whore?” Lakis wipes her eyes with the end of a lock of hair.

“Do you know what she’s talking about?” Bill appeals to Alison.

“Yeah, those are direct quotes from her and Galleia’s birth parents,” says Alison in a low, disgusted voice. “They fought a lot. Both Galleia and Lakis found their own ways to escape. Galleia, of course, married the King instead of the asshole her parents had chosen for her. Hence the scheming whore. And Lakis spent her time with the animals in the temple of Chronos. So yeah — for them, anger and fighting mean loss and rejection.”
“Ohhhhh.” Bill nods with comprehension. “So what I’m saying isn’t really doing any good, huh?”

“Please don’t go away, Alison and Bill,” Lakis begs. “I don’t want to be all by myself.”

“We’re not going anywhere, Lakis.” Bill shakes her head emphatically, as does Alison, leaning on Bill’s shoulder. “It’s okay; you don’t have to worry about being all by yourself. And you don’t have to worry about not having a family. You and your sister will always be part of the Dork fam, which means that you’ll always have friends and people who love you.”

The Magister enters the room and throws Alison an inquiring look. Alison waves him away. Can’t people see that she’s on the phone? Nodding, the Magister busies himself with the drawers of his old Victorian desk. He sorts among scrolls and specimen jars, finds what he wants, and slips out.

Bill, the master of mediation, reconciliation, and counseling, listens gravely to Lakis. She nods and says *mm-hmm* a lot. She knows why Lakis is scared. Bill herself would be scared too in a situation like that. Alison observes that she doesn’t try to tell Lakis that everything will be okay. Instead she acknowledges Lakis’ worry and, since she and Alison aren’t there, helps her list things to do to make herself feel better. Lakis says that she can hold her stuffed animals, brush her hair, and talk to Galleia. Maybe Reeve too. She’s a little too nervous to talk to the Stylist right now.

Bill agrees that Lakis’ ideas are good ones. Then she says that she and Alison have to do some, uh, stuff. But Lakis and Galleia should call again if they want to talk. Lakis has them promise that they will give Imp and the TARDIS cats pets on her behalf. They sign off.

“What kind of stuff do we have to do?” Alison asks Bill.

Wrapping one arm around Alison’s shoulder, Bill smiles, her slightly slanted brown eyes full of mischief. “Don’t know about you,” she says, “but I’m refreshed after my nap. I’m hungry again...for you!” Her amazing eyebrows jump provocatively. “Sooooo...fancy a bite?”

“Oh yeah!” Licking her lips, Alison tows Bill back to her room.
Chapter Summary

Things have gotten worse on Seneschal Five; the Stylist, Galleia, and Lakis are avoiding each other. While Alison and Bill try to help them out, the Magister and Harry interrupt Alison with some bad news about her chip.

The next day, Galleia and Lakis call together. The Stylist has blasted off from Aluet. She and her fam now circle Seneschal Five in low planet orbit. They’re close enough for the Stylist to communicate with her confederates as they debate what to do with the Corving. They’re also far enough away from the Corving’s kids so that Galleia and Lakis can’t just run away and find them again.

Suspended in space, no one is talking to each other. From what Alison and Bill can discern, the Stylist is so furious over Galleia and Lakis’ disobedience that any attempt at reasonable conversation just causes her to fume and fulminate. The sisters don’t want to provoke the Stylist, so they huddle in their rooms. At night, they dream of hopeless futures. They whisper during the day, trying to console one another. But they can’t do much for each other, not when they expect the Stylist to manifest in a cloud of fire, disown them, and evict them at any moment.

As Alison and Bill try to comfort their friends, Harry knocks tummetry tum, tummetry tum on the living room door frame. Then he enters. Much to Alison’s surprise, Kitty doesn’t accompany him. In fact, he’s walking with the help of the slim collapsing forearm crutches that he brought in his luggage. “My dearest daughter!” He beams at Bill the way that the Magister unfurls and beams at Alison. “Dominatrix.” He gives Alison a more restrained nod.

“Hi,” says Alison without much enthusiasm. Why does he keep bothering her?

“Razor!” Excusing herself from Galleia and Lakis, Bill smiles fully at him. Alison notes that they both seem to be totally cool with the dearest daughter nickname now. That was quick. “Oh! Good day?” she inquires, referring to his levels of pain.

“Oh no, my dear,” Harry corrects. He spreads his arms out, palms up, as if basking in the sun. “It’s a glorious day! The volume control shuts up the Drums and makes life much more bearable. And how are you?”

Today’s outfit is, uh, something else, as usual. He wears a tailcoat, the full skirt of which hits above his knees. The embroidery depicts clouds of silver stars, nebulae between pink and gold, and
celestial bodies afire. With big, rolled-back cuffs, a pointed collar, and red-gold buttons down the 
front, it looks like outerwear from the nineteenth century. However, given the silver — silver?! — 
leggings he has on beneath, Alison thinks he’s wearing it as a dress. His gloves, as always, match 
his leggings, and a lightweight, shroudlike shawl about his shoulders. It occurs to Alison that 
Harry’s fur coat might be not only fashion, but also insulation. Maybe he’s cold all the time.

Bill rubs her upper chest. The metal edge of her Cyber core glimmers just above the low neckline 
of her sweater, which is black, shot through with silver streaks. “Some shortness of breath, but 
that’s usual, and some tingling in the legs,” she says in answer to Harry’s question. “All in all, 
pretty good. Where’s Kitty? I thought for sure it would try to follow you.”

“It did.” Harry smirks. “Then we had a little talk about how sometimes your Maker doesn’t want 
you to hear everything he says, but that doesn’t mean that he’s a mean kitty or that you’re bad, just 
that he wants some quiet time.”

Alison snorts at the thought of Harry very earnestly telling his service furniture that he loves it, but 
it does not need to follow him absolutely everywhere. She can’t resist asking, “How’d Kitty take 
it?”

“It said it wanted privacy too and went off to play with its keys, which, of course, means sorting 
them according to arcane principles known only to sentient scorpion chairs.” Harry chuckles, then 
says more thoughtfully, “The keys must be a meditative activity for it. It’s always calmer and 
happy after it rearranges them.”

“Like the Doctor eating celery.” Bill nods.

“Can I steal your inevitable spouse, my dear?” Harry moves toward Alison and Bill, his crutches 
clicking and flexing slightly as he puts them down for each step. “It’s important.”

“Excuse me,” Alison says. “We’re on the phone.”

“Having sort of a familial crisis,” explains Bill with a sigh.

“What’s going on?” Harry does not take the cue to go away. Instead he cocks his head and 
approaches. Alison can’t really fault him; she, being indefatigably inquisitive too, would have done 
the same thing.
“The Stylist and Galleia and Lakis are trying to figure out if the Stylist is the parent and the sisters are the kids or what.” As usual, Bill gets right to the heart of the conflict.

Harry folds his arms. He sits on the arm of a nearby overstuffed chair. His crutches, suspended by their cuffs on the undersides of his forearms, swing, flashing silver. “I really need to talk to you, Dominatrix. You’ve been avoiding me long enough.”

“I am talking to my family here.” Alison enunciates the word as she taps the tablet. Hopefully she won’t have to spell it out that he, not being part of her family, has no claim on her time the way that the Stylist, Galleia, Lakis, and Reeve do.

“Domina.” Materializing behind Harry, the Magister says her name quietly, with a slight nod.

With the appearance of the Magister, Alison knows there’s something serious afoot. She stands, nodding back to the Magister. “Coming, mi Magistre.” To Bill, she says, “Will you tell them I had to go?” Bill assures her with a thumbs up that she has everything taken care of. Alison leaves the living room with Harry bringing up the rear.

As soon as they’re in the hallway, Harry speaks. “Master — how did you do that?”

“Do what?” He turns about, arching his eyebrows.


“Of course,” says the Magister coolly.

“How?” Harry bursts out.


And you’re never getting the first from me, Alison says silently to Harry, because you so clearly failed on the second. “What’s going on, mi Magistre?”
“The Master and I wish to speak to you about your Cyber implant,” he says, pushing open the door to his wizard’s study. An obscure scent of old cigar smoke, underlaid with some kind of incense, greets them.

“Why?” she says as he leads her into the comfortable dark. “This had better be really important. I don’t want to leave Bill alone to deal with Galleia and Lakis, who are both in a total panic.”

Harry picks his way around the plump purple furniture. He lowers himself into a chair, propping his crutches against a bookcase full of scrying orbs, crystals, and skulls. “Sit,” he bids her, like it’s his study. “Now...your chip — “

Alison slots herself next to the Magister on a sofa perpendicular to Harry. A prickly cold slithers down her spine. “It’s still fucked up, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” says Harry. “Let me — “


“Domina.” The Magister puts his hand on her shoulder. “Please. Do listen to me and the Master without condemnation.”

“Mmm.” Alison stifles a grudging noise. The quicker this goes, the faster she can return to Bill, Galleia, and Lakis.

“Right...so...” Harry stretches his arms out in front of him, cracking his knuckles on both hands. “I figured that a carefully calibrated influx of someone else’s thought power — that is, mine, my lightning — might jump-start your Cosmognosis Machine.”

Alison gives a small nod. “Yeah, jumper cables for my brain or something.”

“Just so,” says the Magister, “and the Master’s application of his power did indeed have some effect. You are no longer depressed, but I have noticed that you are no longer at your homeostasis either.” Alison opens her mouth to argue with him, but he holds up his hand. “Please consider,” he says, “that, for the past few days, you have had an unusually high level of energy, creativity, and erotic interests.”
“Yes, that’s my bounce and squee,” Alison tells him, folding her arms. “You told me that you adore them.”

“Yeah,” acknowledges Harry, “but this is excessive bounce and squee. You’re not really eating; you’re not sleeping.”

“Turning my coffin into a box of Valentine’s chocolates,” murmurs the Magister with a smile, throwing a glance at his sleeping place. Swags of white lace and ribbon decorate its red padded sides.

“Is that right?” Harry asks Alison with an anxious squint. “And your mind is racing?”

“Yeah,” admits Alison.

Harry falls back in his chair. “Shit. That’s what I thought.”

The Magister picks up the explanation. “Normally, your mental energy — or, more metaphorically, the lights in your mind library — regulates itself. You and your selves should be able to adjust the levels — or turn the lights on and off — according to your activity, the time of day, and other factors. However, this is not the case.”

“In other words,” paraphrases Harry, “your lights are stuck on. It’s like a manic episode, maybe more of a hypomanic episode. And those — well, I know what they’re like, and...I’m sorry, Dominatrix.”

Alison shakes her head harder and harder. “Fuck this shit. Just...fuck this shit!” She slouches down on the couch, sliding till her butt nearly hits the floor. “So...then...I’m not better? You’re saying that what you did was useless? I let you into my mind — into my fucking Vault of Pain! — and it was one of the most nerve-wracking things I’ve ever done, but it didn’t work?”

“I had every indication that it would!” Harry protests. “I’ve done it successfully in the past — twice, in fact.” He tries to knock tummety tum, tummety tum on his crutches, then grabs his drumming hand and sits on it, squashing it beneath his full skirts. “One of the people had a Cyber implant, and one didn’t. Your chip shouldn’t have made any difference. I’m so... I’m very sorry, Dominatrix. I’m sorry it didn’t work. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.” His hand slips out from under his thigh and goes tummety tum without him noticing.
“I thought — you said — “ Alison cuts herself off. She was about to tell him that he promised that he would help her. She thought he would make everything better somehow. “I’m a fool!” she says to herself. “Why did I even believe — ?”

“Sh sh sh, sh sh sh.” The Magister holds Alison while she cries on his shirt.

“Oh no no no, please don’t cry.” Harry moves to the couch, his crutches letting out little flexing sounds as he moves. He sits on Alison’s other side, close, but not touching. “Please stop crying.” He reaches for her as if he’s going to put his arm around her. Alison shies toward the Magister. “Fuuuuuck…” She hears him slap his hands down as he draws out the word with a sigh. Then — *tummety tum, tummety tum* — he starts knocking his knuckles against his chair’s arm. “Ah!”

Alison jerks her head up. Harry bends over, one hand to either side of his skull. She throws a questioning look at the Magister, who says to Harry, “Master? What’s wrong?”

“Drums!” he gasps.

“Well, you have a volume control,” Alison and the Magister remind him in unison.


Alison wipes her nose, glad for this distraction. “Did you forget?”

Harry gives a small, embarrassed nod. “When I become particularly — ahem — anxious, it’s easy to forget that I have a means of controlling it.”

“And my crying really scared you,” Alison concludes.

“Hmmm...volume control…” Harry muses, obviously not wanting to address Alison’s analysis. “If you could just turn down the volume…” He trails off, eyeing Alison speculatively.
“I don’t have a Drum problem,” Alison points out.

“Yes! Yes! That’s it!” Harry sticks his fists in the air. “Ah hahahahahah! You just need a volume control, Dominatrix. The Master can make you a mental switch just like he did for me. Of course, it’ll be a workaround, but it will function, albeit with your conscious intervention.”

“A mental switch for what — my mind library’s lights?” Alison blows her nose.

“Yes…” The Magister nods, at first slowly, then quickly. “Yes! Yes! That’s precisely what the Master is suggesting, my dear — a means of controlling your circadian rhythms with conscious thought.”

“You’d have to remember to explicitly trigger your night’s sleep about an hour or so beforehand,” Harry says, “as well as the time you want to get up, but that’s not too hard. It’s just like setting an alarm. And hey!” His face lights up as he turns toward Alison. “This should make you happy. It’ll be quick. You, the Master, and I will zip in, establish the switch, then zip out. The Master can do it all. You wouldn’t need me.” Beat. “Although, come to think of it, maybe I should supervise the installation on the metaphorical realm — your mind library, that is. I want to make sure that it hooks up correctly to your Cosmognosis Machine and that you know how to interact with it effectively.”

“Awesome.” Alison folds her arms. “Can I go back to my phone call now?”

“Is that a yes?” Harry sweeps to his feet, snapping his crutches out smartly. “Well, c’mon then! We could do it right now, and then you’d be happy and back to usual, at least for the moment, and I wouldn’t have to watch you — “

“Wouldn’t have to watch me what?” Alison repeats with a dangerous edge in her voice.

“Cry. I wouldn’t have to see you cry.” Harry sits back down.

“Pffft.” Alison blows out annoyance. What is it about him and tears? He can cry whenever he wants, but he can’t stand it when other people do. There’s probably some fascinating material for psychological analysis, but Alison doesn’t care at the moment. “No,” she says resolutely, “we are not going into my head for a quick fix right now.”
“Do you doubt that it will work?” The Magister furrows his brow at her.

“I don’t know,” says Alison. “I just don’t want to do it right now. I was right in the middle of an emergency with Galleia and Lakis, and my mind’s still half back there. Plus I just learned that apparently I’m having a hypomanic episode, so I need to...get used to that.” She stands. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready, okay?”

“Yes, of course.” The Magister, his hand in hers, holds her back a moment, smiling up at her with eyes full of gold and trust, then lets her go.

“It’d better be soon,” Harry calls. “Hypomania really burns you out — trust me! I’m not going to let that happen.”

Alison looks backward. “You know, Harry — it would probably make your life much easier if you just admitted that you love me.” She sails out to the sound of the Magister’s laughter before Harry musters a response.
The Dorks Counsel the Stylist

Chapter Summary

The Dork fam and the Stylist have a conference call. The Stylist realizes something important about Galleia and Lakis, and the Dorks give her advice.

“Are we ready?” The Magister scans Alison, Bill, and the Doctor. They all sit in the moss-colored living room on a couch opposite the fireplace. “I’ll make the call. Scintilla, ring Avé, please.”

Alison and Bill nod. “Ready!” they say in unison. It’s time for the Dork fam to talk to the Stylist and motivate her reconciliation with Galleia and Lakis. Recognizing how much time and energy Alison and Bill have already devoted to this cause, the Doctor and the Magister will address the Stylist. Alison and Bill, rather worn out from all the impromptu therapy they had delivered, readily agreed. They attend the call in case the Stylist needs testimony about the effects of her anger on Galleia and Lakis.

“Okay. Connecting…” Scintilla announces from overhead. She lowers a flat screen from the white molded plaster ceiling. It covers the mirror that hangs over the marble fireplace. The flat screen before the Dorks shows static as signals fly from Earth to Seneschal Five.

“Hmmm.” The Doctor scratches their head. Their receding grey hair now resembles a pile of brush. “Do you think I should do the talking, Master, or you should do the talking? Maybe you should start off talking. You’re her best friend, and we know she takes what you say seriously. On the other hand, maybe I should start off talking.” They cock their head to the other side. “I mean — no one really expects me to be all monologue-y.” The Doctor gestures before their chest with both hands, as if wellsprings of emotion are gushing forth from their hearts. “I could like ambush the Stylist with a feelings monologue, and maybe she — “

“What’s up, my Dork fam?” The Stylist appears on the screen. She seems to radiate light from just beneath her burnished golden skin. Alison imagines the scent of lilacs and many other flowers drifting from her loose snaky coils of hair. “Wow, all four of you! Both rulers of the universe, the Doctor, and the doofus,” she says, pulling a teasing face at the Magister. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The rulers of the universe and the doofus open their mouths, but the Doctor speaks first. “You’re being immature, nasty, and downright mean to Galleia and Lakis,” they say, narrowing their pale eyes, “and you need to stop.”

“Poppycock and horsefeathers! Don’t try to pull the wool.” The Stylist has one sharp eyebrow up in confusion, the other squashed in toward her nose with annoyance. She stands defensively, one hip cocked, her hair seething about her head as if it’s nearly boiling. Nevertheless, she watches the Doctor with wide, attentive eyes.

“Well,” says Alison in an aside, “I guess they went for the ambush.”

“And she’s definitely listening,” Bill comments.

“And I know what kind of person you are,” the Doctor presses on, even when the Stylist tries to
insert an objection. “You’re pretty much exactly like my Master, which is probably why you’re such good friends.” They hunch toward the screen. “Come to think of it, that could also explain why you’re such good enemies. Sometimes double the amount of a good thing is too much. If there was another person like me running around, I bet we’d get on each other’s nerves all the time.”

“Oh, we did, my dear Doctor,” murmurs the Magister, patting them on the bony shoulder. “We did indeed. Then we grew older and slightly wiser.”

“Tangent, Doctor,” Bill alerts them in a discreet murmur.

“Thank you, my dear Bill. —But anyway! Anyway! Anyway!” Lots of hand waving from the Doctor as they again direct their attention to the Stylist. They set their legs on top of the circular glass coffee table, knocking a pile of books to the shag carpet. They put their legs down. The Magister, who can’t stand even minor disorder, goes on hands and knees, retrieves the books, and replaces them.

The Doctor rattles on with easy, expansive hand gestures: “You’re just like my Master, which means that you think you’re the only smart person in the universe. Your actions are justified, and everyone else’s opinion is just wrong. You never want to upset the people you love, but sometimes you do anyway, because you can’t imagine how your completely sensible obsessions could make someone else unhappy.”

“They’re describing themself very well,” Bill remarks.

“Do you think they realize it?” Alison asks.

“Oh yeah!” Bill asserts. “They just don’t express it verbally. When they say really-on-the-nose things, they know exactly what they’re doing because they know with their whole self and all their intermingled senses. Everything’s so obvious that words are irrelevant.”

“I know you love Galleia and Lakis and everyone,” the Doctor continues to the Stylist. “and you, like my Master, want them to be happy because you love them. But you’re being stubborn and silly. Silly!” They fling their long arms out from side to side; the Magister ducks smoothly to avoid being clipped on the ear. “Actually, we’re all silly: me, the Master, Alison, my dear Bill, even Galleia and Lakis. Hm.” They laugh, stroking their chin. “Seems to run in the family. Maybe that’s why we’re called the Dork fam.” They give a sudden, lopsided smile.

“Ahem!” Bill tries a wordless cue.

“Bless you, my dear,” says the Doctor without missing a beat, but they do resume their original subject. “Anyway, anyway, anyway!” More hand waving. “The thing is, Stylist — when everyone else is being silly, someone has to be sensible, and that person is you.” They point with finger guns at the Stylist’s image. “Galleia and Lakis are petrified in the face of your wrath. They worry that you’re going to get rid of them. You need to talk to your humans and tell them that they’ll always be part of the Dork fam and that you still love them.”

“Petrified?” the Stylist echoes. “Well, good. Maybe I should be shaking their timbers. But what’s this about giving them the heave ho? They know I love them; I’ve told them that for yonks.”

As the Doctor quits waving their arms, the Magister returns to his upright position. He uses his palms to flatten nonexistent wrinkles from his closely darted bodice and pleated skirts. “Avé,” he interposes, “allow me to enlarge upon my inevitable spouse’s thesis. My Domina and her Heliantha have spoken to the Queen and the Lady Lakis many times in the past few days. They have firsthand intelligence that the sisters are quite distraught over their disobedience.”
“Glad they realize the chips are down.” Stepping back from the screen, the Stylist now appears smaller. Her wiry, lithe body shows from the waist up in the frame, rigidly set against appeals from her best friend. During the Doctor’s discourse, the Stylist’s hair has rolled up tighter and tighter from the ends toward scalp. Now it ties against her skull in Bantu knots of tension.

“They should know better than to absquatulate and dick around with a fascist’s spawn!” she cries. “They could have gotten themselves snatched! Tossed in the clink! Thumb-screwed! Deep-sixed! Or worse!

“And the thing is — they knew it was sketchier than an artist’s notebook, shadier than a grove of trees, shiftier than a town on a fault line.” She pauses, lowering her muscular shoulders. The knots in her hair unroll, dropping her hair against her shoulders with defeated flops. “They knew I was out to knock off the biggest and topmost dog in Aluetan fascist circles. I made sure that they totally grokked the Corving’s social hygiene bullshit and how it might affect them, especially Lakis. She’s one of the ilk that the Corving wants to clean up by literally wiping out. So what do they do? They cozy up with the fascist’s kids and expect me to do a victory dance about their political maneuvering or some shit.”

“But you are not solely angry at them,” says the Magister. “You care for them very deeply.”

“Care for?” The Stylist smacks her forehead with a loud clap. “Wow, Koschei, for all your gift of gab, sometimes you just can’t see the point, even if it dresses in rainbow sparkles and does pelvic thrusts in front of your nose. Care for — you make it sound so wimpy, so poltroonish and candy-assed. Caring for is an obligation, a business transaction.

“And...okay. Okay. So maybe it was at first. It’s always been just a wheel ‘n’ deal before,” she allows, lowering her voice as she thinks. “But then — there’s these two, Galleia and Lakis. I would have taken them on even if you hadn’t craved a boon of me, Koschei. For once in all my lives, I didn’t want to toughen someone up. I wanted Lakis to be as nice as pie as she always was. And even Galleia, for all her experience in court politics, had this wide-eyed sense of wowness about everything, kind of like you, Theta,” she says, nodding to the Doctor. She comes closer without thinking about it, and a beautiful smile lights on her angular face. “I wanted to protect that. More than that, I wanted to make sure that they came out as awesome as possible without losing any of their...awesomeness.”

The Doctor nods, flapping their hands so hard that they blur. “Yeah! Yeah! That’s called nurturing. I do that with my plants all the time. Tending to them, warming them, watering them, singing to them, caring for them, caring about them, helping them become the best they can be.”

“It’s like you Dorks always say — safe and whole and happy,” says the Stylist. “I want them to be safe and whole and happy because...because...they’re my kids. They twigged that before I did, you know; they started calling me Stylist Mom. Oh fuck, I love them so fuckin’ much.” Tendrils of her hair waft around her face, giving her a scrim of privacy while she sniffs and wipes her eyes.

“Avé...” The Magister lifts his hand, fingertips glowing a tender rose, toward the screen, as if he wants to hold her fast. “Avé, Avé, Avé... Of course you love them. The Queen and the Lady Lakis are wonderful people, fully worthy of your esteem and affection. And you — well, they have chosen you for their family. They want you as their parent, their guardian, their mother, their Stylist Mom.”

“Yeah,” says the Stylist, pushing her hair from her face. She smiles wryly beneath her tears. “And I’m such a clueless dolt that it’s taken me this long to wise up to the fact that that’s exactly what I want too.”
“Indeed. I am very glad for you, Avé,” says the Magister. “Now...shall I advise you? Or would you prefer to be left to your own devices with your daughters who have adopted you?”

“Well, Koschei, since you’re constitutionally incapable of zipping your lip, you’re going to advise me, no matter what.” The Stylist sighs as if the weight of the world has rolled onto her shoulders. “Let’s get this shit over with,” she says, her voice so heavy with resentment that she’s clearly joking.

The current disagreement among the three, the Magister says, arises from disparate expectations. The Stylist relates to the sisters both as a parent would to her children and also as a senior politician to juniors. The Stylist, acting as protective parent, told Galleia and Lakis to stay out of the Seneschal Five mission. Galleia and Lakis, acting as political operatives on equal standing with the Stylist, rejected her edict as restrictive and condescending. Instead they went out on their own mission like the operatives they were. Obviously the three should explicitly discuss what they expect from each other in both the familial and the pedagogical senses. The Stylist agrees, her curls tightening and flexing all around her head to the rhythm of her thoughts.

Before that, however, Bill says, everyone needs to know that they’re loved. This same sort of thing happened to her not too long ago. She broke the Dork fam contract by lying to Alison, the Doctor, and the Prof about Razor, keeping her calls with him a secret. Their discovery of her secret frightened her so badly that she hid in her room. But Alison shine coaxed Bill to come out by saying that, even though she was angry, she still loved Bill. There was lots of holding fast and tears until Bill felt convinced that her Dork fam really did accept her, mistakes and all. Only after all that did they revisit their Dork fam contract and renew its terms.

Speaking of contracts, says Alison, do Galleia and Lakis have companion contracts with the Stylist? The Stylist rejoins that no, they do not; moreover, despite what Alison believes, contracts are not the solution to everything, including earthquakes, tornados, and climate change. Alison says that it’s true; they are. Furthermore, a contract follows the Magister’s advice, telling people exactly what their code of conduct is so there’s no ambiguity. It conduces respect among parties by insisting on clear, respectful communication, and —

“Basically, if you have any tendencies toward acting like a nasty jerk, you can just remember what it says in the contract and then restrain yourself — for the tactical advantage, of course,” says Harry’s voice from behind them. Alison refuses to dignify him with so much as a glance.

But the Stylist, knowing that Harry’s present, recognizes that it’s time to leave. “Okay, Dork fam, I’m signing off. Thanks for listening to me spill my guts.”

“Bye! Say hi to Galleia and Lakis! You’re going to talk to them soon, yeah?” Bill says.

“And let us know how everything goes, okay?” Alison requests.

“Posi-lutely! In the flesh, even!” The Stylist talks to the Magister now: “Hey, Koschei, thanks for talking some sense into me.”

The Magister shakes his head. “I don’t talk sense into people. I only present information so that they can make informed conclusions.” But then he smiles, his eyes crinkling affectionately. “Best wishes, Avé. I of all people know how difficult it may be to admit one’s errors, but remember — the Queen and the Lady Lakis will love you the more for it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when I’m trying to swallow my pride and gagging on it instead,” says the Stylist, laughing. “Hey, Theta,” she addresses the Doctor, “thanks — although you weren’t quite on the mark when you said I was just like Koschei. Thinking you’re the best person in the
universe, loving really hard, getting lost inside your head sometimes, and thinking that only you can be right — that’s not only just like Koschei. That’s just like you too, you know.”

“Well, yeah, of course,” says the Doctor, “but you like the Master more than me. I thought I’d flatter you by comparing you to him. Anyway, go! Go! Water and prune your kids!”

“Aye, aye!” With a snappy salute, the Stylist ends the call.
Harry Is Surprisingly Okay

Chapter Summary

Harry discovers the entire Harry Potter heptalogy and rhapsodizes about it to Alison. He talks about where he's going to live once this is over. It better not be Burlington.

While three quarters of the Dorks congratulate each other on a job well done, Alison faces the interloper. He's using his crutches for help instead of Kitty, probably because it's easier to sneak up on people when you're not accompanied by a cheerfully chattering service furniture. He lounges languidly in the doorway, a Harry Potter book tucked under his arm. There's a certain shit-eating width to his toothy grin, and yet he glances from Dork to Dork with expectant green eyes, as if he was an instrumental part of the call as well. Then he joins Bill and the Time Dorks, asking how the Stylist and her fam are doing.

Alison sighs to herself. Harry, once formidable threat of her nightmares, has now been officially downgraded to minor nuisance. He's not a menace worthy of worry. At least as far as Alison is concerned, he's a lonely person whose natural charm is impinged by his bad temper and social awkwardness. His interruption of the phone call demonstrates with blatant transparency how much he's motivated by a desire to be part of the fam.

And Alison knows about loneliness. Before she left the planet with her Time Dorks, she felt as if her analytical nature and sense of justice cut her off from making friends easily. Then, at the beginning of her travels with the Time Dorks, she watched them with envy. They each had an empathetic, understanding partner throughout their adventures, and she had no one. She knows about watching a close camaraderie and feeling forever excluded. She also knows that crashing others' conversations and sticking yourself in doesn't endear you to anyone.

Yet Alison doesn't feel sorry for Harry. His inept attempts to connect with others and care about them are no more or less pathetic than those of everyone she knows, from herself to the other Dorks to the Stylist. She knows what he's feeling, which gives her a pang on his behalf, but it doesn't diminish him in her eyes. It makes him equal to everyone else — a person, neither larger nor smaller than life, neither a sorry wretch nor a storied opponent, but a particular individual. He's not necessarily a good or a lovable person, but he's still a person, with all his own rights and thoughts and feelings and actions. She respects that.

Alison now smiles. Resolution of the Stylist's family's fight appears imminent, so no more emergency commiseration sessions are needed. At long last, the Stylist, Galleia, and Lakis can speak to one another, reconcile, and come out of their stasis. Finishing up in Aluet, the Stylist can finally consult on Alison's chip problem. Hopefully she can offer a solution that everyone else has neglected; then Harry can get out of her house, and everything can return to its usual abnormal...
“Oi! Potter!” Alison summons Harry by the surname of the character whose stories he’s been reading. Since he has snapped his fingers at her enough in the past to get her attention, she figures that she is entitled to some of the same. Extending her right arm out straight, she snaps her fingers loudly thrice in his direction. “Potter! Over here!”

Harry lifts his head quickly, on edge at first because of her heightened tone. Then he recognizes the playful cock of her eyebrows and smiles. Whispering something to Bill, he pats her on the shoulder once. Then he straightens as much as his forearm crutches will allow and nears Alison. His steps, slower and jerkier than the last time she saw him, indicate that his pain has increased. As he halts for a rest, the book slips from his armpit and plops in front of Alison. “Ahhhhh fuck,” he says. “Dominatrix? If you please.” He points with his chin at the book. “You can just stick it on a table.”

Alison does. “You like this?” she says of the book.

“Yeah! And your universe has all seven! Rowling died after book five in my universe,” Harry says parenthetically, “so having the whole heptalogy at my disposal is — “He looks at the ceiling with a happy exhalation.”—An inexpressibly fulfilling consummation of a decades-long desire. Are you a fan too? I tried to hook my daughter on them, but she’s much more into science fiction.”

“Frankly I haven’t read any of ‘em, and I don’t plan to.”

“No? They seem like they’d be of interest, though, especially with all the wizardry and Latin-inspired spells.”

“I’ve heard too much about its neo-Victorian, sexist, racist, ableist worldview to want to read it.”

“That’s fair.”

“And, on another subject, Potter, we need to talk about your accommodations.” Alison points at him like she’s the headmaster of the wizard school. “We’re housing you in the Zero Room for medical reasons. However, when this is all over and my chip is functioning, you’ll be moving elsewhere — at the earliest possible moment,” she enunciates, lowering her voice seriously.

“Don’t worry; I have no desire whatsoever to hang around here any longer than I have to. I remain
here at your beck and call only because I am, as always, at your service.” Harry bows. “In fact, as soon as the Master and I have gone into your mind library to install the manual circadian switch, I’ll be out of here.” He makes a tchewwwww sound of an aircraft taking flight. “Of course, you can always call me in the event of any complications, but you don’t need to encourage me to leave. I’ve been planning my departure for quite some time.”

“Really?”

“My dear Dominatrix, do you really think I haven’t been looking ahead?”

“Well, Bill did say that you were a more leap and then look sort of person.”

“About some things, sure, but not about where to site my next base of operations.”

“If your base of operations is anywhere near Burlington — “

“No, don’t be silly. London, my dear, London! My daughter is there, as well as an infinitely greater array of...well...everything. Why the mechanical Master prefers this...this...isolated, monoglot, homogeneous, whitewashed farming village is beyond me.” Harry dismisses the entire town of Burlington with a disgusted flutter of the hand. “I’ve purchased a wonderful property in Grace’s End, had it renovated, and furnished it to my specifications. Just say the word, and I’ll decamp to my new home.”

“Wow, that was quick. I never expected that you were doing real estate transactions in your spare time!”

“I’ve done quite a lot, my dear Dominatrix, that you’ve never seen.” As Harry smirks, his fingertips sparkle. Blue light leaps forth, tracing an infinity sign in the air, reminding Alison that he perfected his electrical powers without her scrutiny. “So when are we going to install that switch in your head?”

“Well, now that we’ve got the extended Dork fam sorted,” says Alison, “I’m not so worried anymore, sooooo...now. How about now? Think you can hold me fast, and fear me not?” She wiggles her eyebrows in challenge. With a sudden breath, Harry deflates, his shoulders drooping as he leans himself against the arm of a chair. “What’s wrong?”
Harry looks up at her. His face is somewhat saggy and shadowed, but his green eyes still sparkle. “Do you know, my dear Dominatrix, after all that talk about wanting to do this as soon as possible, that I find myself unable? I’ve been so eager to dial down the Drums and walk again that I would have to rest for at least a day before doing mental travel. I’m so sorry to make you — “

“Hey! You’ve done plenty of shit worth apologizing for,” says Alison, “but being in pain isn’t one of those things. You can regret facts of your life, but don’t ever apologize for being in pain.”

Harry stands slowly, breathing audibly. There’s that mocking little smirk under his goatee, but turned toward himself rather than her. “Yes, Dominatrix. Of course, Dominatrix. Whatever you say, Dominatrix.” He bows and limps for the door, calling Kitty.

As Kitty bounces in and collects its Maker, it strikes Alison that she and Harry have just done something she never thought possible. They have just conversed without rancor, animosity, or insult. Moreover, their discussion was even somewhat humorous and thoroughly neutral in tone. It didn’t alarm her, enrage her, or grieve her. In fact, it was informative and slightly entertaining.

If she forgives him, he’ll be like that all the time. He’ll be annoying and always self-centered, but mostly playful, witty, sincere, and affectionate. It would be easy to have him like that. She wouldn’t have to be in the awkward position of disliking and avoiding someone who does everything he can to make her happy. It would be easy to accept him as he is. It would be easy to be happy. Can she? Should she? Will she?
Chapter Summary

Alison's manual circadian workaround functions properly! Much rejoicing!

Light kisses of air bump against Alison’s face, followed by equally light knocks that are somehow both pointy and fuzzy. Warmth constricts around Alison as Imp’s voice trills: “[Attention, everyone! I have just given Bright Cat a thorough nuzzling. She should be waking up shortly.]”

“That sounded like an announcement,” observes Bill, who unlike Alison and the Magister, does not understand Imp.

“Yes, yes, Bestperson,” says Kitty. “Smallcatfriend said that Dominatrix is waking up soon! So happy, so happy — Kitty is so very, very, very happy! I love Dominatrix. She is such a wonderful kitty.”

Even though she enjoys the delicious sensation of warmth draping heavily about her, Alison struggles toward consciousness. A sweet, constant pressure on top of her prevents her from fully rousing. Besides the chatter, a variable droning hum surrounds her. She lies tucked on her right side as usual, but she can’t push herself upright. Something holds her fast around the waist. When she moves, it holds her tighter. Must be her robot, especially since he smells vaguely like breakfast: freshly ground coffee beans and a hint of burnt toast. Huh. What’s he doing in her bed? The last she checked, he was keeping vigil in the chaise longue.

“Is the Master...purring?” says Harry. “Please tell me he’s just snoring.”

“He’s doing both!” puts in Bill. Her wheelchair horn toots for emphasis. “I like to call it snurgling: snoring and snuggling.”

“He’s my best kitty!” says the Doctor with a sigh. “Isn’t it cute?”

“He’s purring, oh yes, oh yes, oh yes!” says Kitty. “That’s because he’s a happy kitty!”

“Masters aren’t supposed to be...cute,” pronounces Harry. He slurps something, probably that 90%
caffeine sludge he calls coffee. “Striking, inimitable, perfect, beautiful, stunning — anything but cute.”

“Oh, he’s all of those too. He’s versatile,” says Scintilla. “You’re just clearly envious.”

“Of what? His ability to turn into a helplessly vibrating lump in the presence of certain people? No thanks. I’ll keep my dignity.”

“My dear Master…” says the Magister airily. He shifts position, propping himself up on one elbow, but keeping his other arm securely fastened around Alison. “A very wise individual known as the Doctor — perhaps you’ve heard of them — once said to me that dignity was quite overrated. The older I grow, the more I am inclined to believe them. Too often what passes for dignity is merely a rigid self-consciousness based on fear of embarrassment. However, if one allows oneself the enjoyment of novel experiences, one gains so much more than if one restrains oneself in a vain attempt to adhere to outmoded standards of conduct.”

“In other words, Master,” the Doctor translates for Harry, “chill.”

“Alisonshine, Alisonshine, are you sleeping?” Bill calls.

“No, thanks to the running commentary from all your weirdos. Mmmph,” she murmurs muzzily. “So...nice ‘n’ warm in here…”

“You’re welcome. So how do you feel?” Harry leans toward her, his voice lilting upward eagerly.

“Held so fast,” says Alison, nestling her head in the divot of her pillow. The residual smoothness of coconut oil still wafts from the sheets. “So fast...can barely breathe…” Putting her arm over the Magister’s, she pulls him closer around her and slips back to sleep.

She reawakens in the midst of the Magister’s sentence. “—Don’t completely remember how I ended up in my Domina’s bed. I suppose that I wasn’t fully conscious, so I thought I might find the warmest location in the room. I should apologize for the intrusion — “

“Nooo,” mutters Alison. “Purry cuddly cat Magister… So nice ‘n’ warm…”
“He does that to me too, Alison,” the Doctor puts in. “I wake up and find two billion kilos of robotic cat pinning me to the bed.” They sigh. “Bliss!”

“So — so — so cute!” Bill echoes, probably clamping her hands to the sides of her head. “Sleepy happy Alisonshine! Awwwww…”

“See? There, Master!” the Doctor says to Harry. “Objective proof that my Master is cute.”

“Uh huh.” Harry doesn’t sound convinced. “You keep drifting off.”

“Can’t drift.” Alison snuggles into her pillow. “Held fast…”

“Domina carissima,” says the Magister, his voice vibrating deeply against her spine, “you should be waking up more promptly than this. Well, that is, if you remembered to set the internal alarm on your morning circadian cycle before going to sleep last night. Did you?”

“Mmmmmm...not sure,” Alison confesses.

“I went to all that trouble to install a switch so you could control your Cosmognosis Machine like I do with my Drums,” Harry cries, “and you forgot to use it?” He lets out an incredulous chuckle.

“Master!” the Magister reproaches him. “We only gave my Domina the workaround yesterday. You yourself have occasionally forgotten that your volume control exists, so surely you can comprehend how my Domina may not yet have perfect mastery over her new mental hardware.”

“Yeah, be nice, Razor,” says Bill, more teasingly than anything.

“Can you wake up, though, Dominatrix?” Alison feels some pressure on the edge of her mattress, probably Harry leaning in on it.

“Wake up!” Kitty decides to help by repeating the words at a higher decibel level. “Wake up; wake up; wake up! You have had a good sleep, but you’re all done recharging now. Now you can say good morning to all your friends. Good morning, Dominatrix! I love you. You are such a wonderful and kind and good kitty. Yes, oh, yes, you are.”
Alison empties her lungs in the world’s biggest yawn. Still she feels as if she could sleep for another year. “Kay, lemme go,” she instructs the Magister. He undoes his arms from around her middle, but holds her around the back. She sits up, with his help, in a series of slow lurches.

“Yayyyyyyyy! Alisonshine!” Bill plays a tuba- and cymbal-heavy march. “See, Razor? She’s waking up fine. It’s just that it’s harder without the circadian alarm going off.”

“Uh huh, Bill’s right.” Alison rubs her eyes with her knuckles and finally looks around. The golden-walled expanse of her bedroom now crowds with a horde of observers. To her left is the Magister, still half reclining, in case she needs more holding fast. He beams upon Alison with large, deeply socketed eyes of nearly amber brown. Beyond him sits Bill, her curvy self held forward in anticipation, hand poised over her joybox for more exultant sound effects. The Doctor, pressing two hands sideways over their mouth, appears overwhelmed by the cuteness of the scene.

To Alison’s right, both Harry and Kitty peek over the side of her bed. Harry props himself against her night table. Steaming mug in hand, crutches hanging from his forearms, he smiles down at her, his nostrils flared in happy surprise. Kitty stands like it’s going to jump on her bed, and it wags its tail enthusiastically when she opens her eyes. At the foot of her bed is Scintilla in her robot form, a smirk on her dark blue lips, Imp on her shoulder.

“Bill’s right,” Alison repeats, boosting herself up to sitting. The Magister delivers a prickly nudge to her cheek — his whiskery robotic version of feline head-bonking. Then, pushing a length of dark orange drapery aside, he retreats off her bed. “Yeah, um, I can so wake up. ‘S’ just hard. Must’a’ forgotten to set the ‘larm. Ugh, gonna slog through the rest of the day.”

“Ah, no, my dear,” Harry exclaims, his red gelled hair standing out from his head like stylized sparks. “Remember — now you have control. Just go back into your mind library and set the circadian alarm for — oh, a minute or so from now. It’s thirty-one minutes past eight,” he adds.

“Oh. Um, yeah. Thanks.” Alison holds up her finger for a moment’s pause. “Hang on. Flicking circadian switch.”

Closing her eyes again, but purposely this time, Alison sends herself downward and inward. She arrives in her mind library, just like she did yesterday, when she, the Magister, and Harry came to install the workaround. She ends up in her octagonal atrium, at the center of the tiled labyrinth, standing firmly on the depiction of Ariadne.
The somnolent churn of her Cosmognosis Machine enfolders her, rising up ticklishly through the soles of her feet. And, since Harry turned her mental lights back on a few days earlier, she glows. Her own personal radiance emanates, gold undershaded with brown, several centimeters from her flesh. However, she forgot to set her circadian alarm before she went to bed last night, so it’s still dark in here — no ambient light. Without the clingy dankness of her depression, however, the shadows from the paneled walls welcome her warmly. Even though her chip hasn’t truly been fixed, Alison still feels like she’s at home again in her own head.

With a stifled little squee, Alison reaches out telepathically to the other Alisons. When she last visited, the always-on lights gave them an excuse to make a room with trampolines on all surfaces. They were literally bouncing off the walls, floors, and ceilings.

Several days of perpetual motion have tired them out, though. She senses them all sleeping soundly. Sunny, Ali C., and Little Al lie in Sunny’s boat-size brass bed, *The Lonely Little Comet* still open in Sunny’s lap. Little Al, of course, holds her Mister Magister felt doll to her chest. Victa sleeps in state in her coffin of glass, while Clarissima fortifies her position amidst walls of pillows and blankets. Errabunda, her cheek mashed against the keyboard of her computer, rests at her desk, where she has been cataloguing and cross-referencing memories. They’re all safe and whole and, at long last, happy.

With a thought, Alison calls her vorpal weapon to hand. Just like the Magister did when he first found the way to her power supply, she outlines the shape of a door on the door off the atrium that goes to her own quarters. The drawn door becomes real. She steps through.

In the Cosmognosis chamber, the hum of Alison’s power supply rises, palpating her. She flashes a smile up at the machine. The lights studding its spherical hull wink like the Magister’s eyes when he’s happy, full of amber. Again she thinks of a giant cat — maybe a cross between her mechanical Magister and the airborne Imp — who keeps her imagination running with its contented snurgling.

Feeling her way along the curving wall of warm concrete, Alison finds the manual override controls. The Magister, Master of Mental Control, placed them yesterday under the supervision of Harry, Master of Metaphor. Then she, master of her fate, learned how to use it. Her fingers moving across the keypad, she wakes the system from standby and sets her circadian alarm for 8:32 AM. “Rise and Alisonshine!” she says softly to her selves before returning to outer reality.

The clock on Alison’s night table clicks over to 8:32 AM. At the same time, her circadian alarm goes off. She doesn’t hear it so much as she feels it, an upsweep of sensation, a rising tremble through her thoughts. It’s the mental equivalent of that inquisitive noise — vrrrt? — that the Magister and other cats make when you pet them to wake them up. “Ah hah! Helloooooo, universe!” she sings out. “I — am — awake!”
“Time to rise and Alisonshine!” Bill, somehow now bookending Alison along with the Magister, hugs Alison, laughing while dripping tears into her hair. “I love you,” she whispers.

“I already made that pun, you silly interrobang.” Alison hugs her back. “I love you too, Bill of my heart.”

“Domina carrrrrrrrrrissima!” The Magister, purring resonantly, rolls his Rs and tries to scrub Alison’s cheeks with his beard.

“[Let’s all sit on Bright Cat!]” Imp launches off Scintilla’s shoulder and flies onto Alison’s thigh, kneading with her tiny claws.

“Let’s not,” says Scintilla with a snort. “I think I’d squash Miss Alison if I did that.”

“Alison!” Flopping behind Alison on her pillows, the Doctor joins the group hug from behind. “G’morning!” They poke the Magister in the chest with the elbow. “Ow.”

“Dominatrix! Hello, Dominatrix!” Kitty waves its claws and wiggles its rear, hopping a bit.

“Kitty…” Harry clicks out his crutches and stands, looking at his service furniture severely. “Do not jump on the Dominatrix’s bed — do you hear me?”

“I want to say good morning. Yes, yes, yes, I do!”

“There’s not enough room for you on the bed. You can say good morning from the floor — like me.” Enunciating slowly and obviously setting an example for Kitty, Harry stands his ground and greets Alison: “Well, good morning at last, dearest Dominatrix mine. I’m glad that you remembered how to operate your alarm — and that it worked just like I said it would.” Even the chain of five reddish pearls hanging from his left ear sways smugly.

“It does,” Alison acknowledges briefly. “Thanks again. As long as I remember to set my circadian alarm for morning and evening, I’ll be able to function, even if my chip doesn’t.”

The Magister scowls to himself, thinking. “Granted, and yet we still have no idea what’s causing
“My dear Master,” says Harry, raising a palm, “as a very wise Doctor once said, *chill*. Why don’t we have some breakfast? After that, we can contemplate the mysteries of malfunctioning Cyber chips with renewed inspiration.”

With a *whoosh*, the pressure in the room changes. A surge of lilacs and somehow brassy hair products overwhelms the smell of coconut oil. “Speaking of inspiration,” says a sharp, snappy voice, “apparently I’ve got a metric fuckton of it more than you eggheads. Really? None of you had yet had the brilliant brainwave to play around with the neutron flow? I guess I really do have the cleverest clogs in the closet — not to mention the snazziest!”
The Dea Ex Machina Arrives

Chapter Summary

The Stylist, Galleia, and Lakis show up. They introduce themselves to Harry and Kitty. Wait a minute, though. "Neutron flow?" How is that relevant?

“Stylist!” squeal Alison and Bill.

“Unroll the red carpet and pop the bubbly! The *dea ex machina* is here!” The Stylist spins around. The straight legs of her low-slung pink yoga pants flare. Her black babydoll T-shirt advertises her salon in slanting, sketching letters of vivid orange: *Crowning Glory — where the hairstyles are out of this world!* With her creased, worn black combat boots and minimal mascara, she does not look much like an embodiment of high fashion. Then you see her move in an even, hip-swinging, muscular glide, and you realize that she’s glamorous enough to make a T-shirt and workout trousers high fashion if she wants.

“It’s about time, Stylist!” The Doctor runs to her across the black and white checked carpet with outstretched arms. “Of course, isn’t it always about time when you’re a Time Lord? — *Dork* in your case,” they add deferentially to the Stylist, who, not taking herself as seriously as others of her kind, likes an affectionate insult as a title. They hug the Stylist in a very poky embrace, then pull back, dancing to themself.

“Avé! Dearest friend!” The Magister rises with a swirl of his layered cassock skirts. He wears a stiff boned waistcoat adorned with narrow black straps and silver rings. One of the myriad belts from it squirms loose — telepathically controlled, no doubt — and whizzes through the air, cinching around the Stylist’s neck.

The Stylist, with her conscious control over her hair, uses it as another appendage. Her dark brown curls immediately spiral down across her face. They slip under the Magister’s would-be garrote and snap it in two, though it’s made of leather. “You must have really missed me, Koschei. It’s been ages since you last tried to bump me off. Lucky for me — I’m always prepared. Right back atcha, ya goof.” She raises her hands to her ears.

“How do you kill a robot?” Harry interjects.

“I don’t.” The Stylist taps her forefingers against her earrings — miniature windchimes — letting out delicate crystal sounds. “I just rejigger my earrings to emit subsonic frequencies that disrupt his
functioning and cause him to flatline.”

“You can’t — “ With a laugh and a shake of his head, the Magister gets out only two words before he freezes in place. His eyes flicker as if his power has been interrupted.

“Oooooh, very clever, that.” The Doctor nods approvingly.

“I’m in lust.” Harry’s eyes sparkle like his earring as he fixes his entire attention on the Stylist.

“Hey, that’s mean!” Bill protests to the Stylist.

“Oh no you don’t!” Whipping the master Master controller out of her pocket, Alison taps a few buttons to abort her robot’s shutdown.

“ —Really stop me, Avé dear,” says the Magister. As Alison’s keystrokes cancel out the Stylist’s sonic interference, he continues walking toward her with barely a hitch in his step. He concludes, “Unless, of course, you want to try a trick like that on my Domina, and I know,” he says, clasping her in what is apparently an innocent hug, “that you’re much too sensible a person to even dream of wishing ill on the ruler of your universe.”

“Ehhhh, you big cozener,” the Stylist grumbles, squeezing him around the middle. “I would have gotten somewhere if you didn’t have secret Domina defenses in your back pocket.”

“You are merely grieved, my dear, that no human who regards you with such perfect adoration and obedience.”

“Ah hah!” The Stylist draws back from the Magister and points at him, jabbing her finger against his waistcoat. “You’re wrong because I have two extremely loyal groupies who think the sun rises and sets out of my ass! Holy cannoli, who thought up that metaphor?” She makes a horrible face. “That’s less about adoration and more about a pain in the rear. Anyway… Hey!” the Stylist yells out the bedroom door. “Where are you kids at? Come on and be an Exhibit A for your Uncle Koschei. Mom’s trying to win an argument here.”

“You had kids on Seneschal Five? How long have you been gone?” The Doctor squiggles their eyebrows.
“Mom?” Bill repeats, clapping her hands as she catches the affection with which the Stylist says that word. “Think they might’ve made up,” she says under her breath to Alison.

“I hope so,” says Alison, “although that would have been pretty fast.”

Lakis runs through Alison’s bedroom door, puffing a bit and flipping her two long braids over her shoulders as she does so. As usual, she wears some flower-splashed knit leggings that, with black and teal predominating, don’t really coordinate with her pink striped sweatshirt. “Hey [pant], Mom! I’m [pant pant] here! I was just looking for my kitty headband, but I couldn’t find it.” Skidding to a stop, she lights up when she sees the Dork fam, greeting them all by name, even Imp and Scintilla.

Lakis slows her pace to a regal tread when she catches sight of Harry. She walks precisely toward him, and then, about a meter away, bows carefully. “Good morning, my lord. I am the Lady Lakis of Akrotiri, sister and chief handmaiden to Queen Galleia of Atlantis and daughter of the Stylist, Great Dork of Time and Space.” She pronounces each word of her title with a formal, proud enunciation. “And who has the great Poseidon borne to my shores?” she asks, which always makes Alison laugh, since it’s the royal Atlantean equivalent of Well, look at what the sea washed up!

“I am honored to make your acquaintance, my dear.” Harry, now sitting in Kitty once more, nods to her as if he is the king receiving her fealty. “I am...the Master.” There’s a slight pause in the middle of that sentence. As much as Alison will never call anyone that, she understands why the Magister and all his counterparts make it their name. Harry says his name with such simple, expansive ease that it soaks up all the power in the room. Even Lakis’ impressive titles are rendered superfluous and empty.

“Forgive me for not giving you full reverence,” Harry goes on, “but I do not often have the strength to stand for long. That is why I rely on my faithful service furniture. Kitty?” Harry bends down to look at Kitty, who has been uncharacteristically silent since the Stylist’s appearance. “Would you like to say hello to the Lady Lakis?” Kitty doesn’t speak, but it does muster a little wave of its claws. “Hm, it’s not usually so reticent.” Harry taps his chin.

“Stylistfriend and Lakisfriend are such beautiful kitties,” says Kitty quietly, its electric red eyes shining. “Kitty doesn’t know what to say, oh no, oh no. Kitty is very, very, very shy.”

“Awww.” Squatting, Lakis holds her hand out for Kitty to sniff. When it doesn’t move, she pets it, muttering sweet things to it, for a few more seconds, before craning her neck at Harry. “Lord Master, your service furniture is buzzing.”
“I’m purring because you make me happy, Lakisfriend,” says Kitty. It bumps against her hand with its head. “Yes, yes, yes, you do. You are such a beautiful kitty and a very, very, very nice one too. I love you, Lakisfriend.”

“So... Master.” Galleia, materializing right in front of Harry, says his name like she’s eating it. She wears a stretchy, semi-opaque, golden sepia minidress, nearly the color of her skin. Over the dress is an open-work layer of fine chain mail that looks like it’s made from thorns or insect legs. It tinkles whenever she shifts and yanks down her skirt [which is often].

“Don’t do it,” the Stylist warns her, slanting her hook-shaped eyebrows.

“Obviously you’re an engineering genius with a killer sense of style.” Galleia has no wig today, just precisely milled steel spikes adhered to the crown of her head like an artificial mohawk. As she looks Harry up and down and back up as if her eyes can dissolve his clothes, her dangerous headgear flashes in the morning sun. “Tell me — what else are you endowed with?”

“Galleiafriend!” Kitty murmurs. “Such a pretty kitty! So very, very, very shiny and jingly!”

“If he flirts with her — “ Alison cringes. Galleia, having cannily traded on her sex appeal to achieve a safer, more comfortable life for herself and her sister, defaults to femme fatale tactics. Alison, Bill, the Stylist, and Lakis have encouraged her to do otherwise, but she still resorts to old habits, especially when she’s attracted to someone. Alison remembers Harry describing his reflexive lusts for powerful people as pathological. Maybe he’ll recognize something of the same in Galleia’s interest and shut it down.

“He won’t,” says Bill with a confident nod.

“Well, my dear, you must be Lady Galleia of Akrotiri, the last Queen of Atlantis, sister of the Lady Lakis, and daughter of the Stylist of Space, Time, and Hair.” Harry, though lower in altitude than Galleia, nevertheless manages to lift his chin, half close his glittery eyelids, and look down on her. “It’s wonderful to meet you. But please — do stop ogling my crotch. If you know who I am and what I am,” he says with a nonchalant flip of the hand, “then surely you must know that my skills, talents, mastery, and endowments have no limit to any particular portion of my anatomy. My entire being is suffused with magisterial magnificence. In other words, my dear, I know what you want. However, I also know that the fulfillment of such a desire would overwhelm you, and so I must decline to consent.”
“Well shit.” Galleia droops. “It’s a Semele thing, isn’t it?”

“A what?” Bill says to Alison. “You know your ancient Greek mythology better than me.”

“It’s probably a person who had the misfortune to be screwed by Zeus.” Alison shrugs and looks at the Magister.

“Precisely, Domina carissima. She was a human who made the ill-advised wish to see the god Zeus in the flesh, a desire that he was ill-advised enough to swear on the Styx to grant,” the Magister tells them. “He appeared to her without disguise, and she spontaneously combusted.”

“Indeed,” says Harry to Galleia, “it is, as you say, a Semele thing. Truthfully, I cannot recommend going crispy around the edges, even in pursuit of the ultimate pleasure. I have done so before, and I did not relish it.”

“Besides, Galleia…” Giving Kitty a last pat, Lakis gets to her feet. She says something in Galleia’s ear.

“He is not! You just have no taste in men.” Galleia gives her sister a playful elbow to the ribcage. Lakis elbows her back. A mild shoving contest ensues.

Harry watches the sisters for a minute, then calls Alison to his side, cocking his finger at her. “Dominatrix — help me out here. So this is Galleia, last Queen of Atlantis, and Lakis, her chief handmaiden? Because, over in my universe, Galleia is thirty-five, and she married the king, who was like three times her age, and I seduced her into betraying Atlantis. And Lakis wasn’t related to her or disabled. Also they’re both dead.”

“Yeah, and these are their counterparts in this universe,” confirms Alison with a big grin. “The Magister and I went back in time to unsink Atlantis. We couldn’t, but we, along with Galleia and Lakis, did help lots of Atlanteans evacuate. And we brought Galleia and Lakis to the present.”

“I understand why the Stylist was going on about them. They’re like my daughter — the sort of people you’d do anything for.” The smile on Harry’s face is almost paternal as he surveys the sisters.

“Speaking of daughters,” says Bill to the Stylist, “you’re on good terms now with these two
“And where are the kids you suddenly had when you were on Seneschal Five?” the Doctor inquires.

“Oh, that would be the aforementioned goofballs.” The Stylist nods at Galleia and Lakis. “They had pretty much already adopted me, so we had a talk and made it official the other way around too.”

“Good, then you took my advice,” says the Magister, more pleased with himself than with the Stylist.

“Oh wow! Okay! Hooray, now you really can be part of the extended Dork fam — for good!” The Doctor performs a celebratory dance.

“Yeah, but you’re a Time Dork,” cuts in Scintilla, addressing the Stylist, “which means that you’re ridiculously, irrationally stubborn and incapable of listening to reason, even if someone forces it in your ears, which Miss Alison and Miss Bill and the Time Dorks over here tried to do a day or so ago. What made you change your mind?”

“Who do you think, my little spark?” says a low, laughing voice. Reeve, just like her pilot, makes a calculated and breathtaking entrance. She moves through Alison’s bedroom door with silent, swinging strides that make her long limbs seem even longer. While the Stylist brings the smells of flowers and life with her, Reeve carries a cloud of silence, even awe, as everyone admires the grace of her gleaming dark brown form.

“Reeve!” cries the immediate and extended Dork fam. Scintilla picks Reeve up in her arms and swings her around. Imp lands on Reeve’s head and burbles loudly.

“I flew into the Vortex,” Reeve says, “and said I wasn’t letting anyone out until they started behaving like the loving and respectful family they already obviously were.”

“TARDIS intervention for the win,” remarks Alison to Bill.

“Of course you did, sweetie!” Scintilla hugs Reeve. “You’re so clever — almost as clever as me.”
Reeve glares at her, and she corrects herself: “Okay — as clever as me.”

“Reeve? We haven’t met,” Harry says to her. “I am, naturally, the Master. And who, my dear, might you be?”

Even slung in her partner’s arms and with a winged cat happily kneading her hair, Reeve achieves a nonchalant elegance. She appraises Harry. “I’m Reeve, of course. The Stylist belongs to me. Who do you belong to?”

“What?” says Harry indignantly.

“Reevefriend is a TARDIS kitty, my Maker, yes, yes, yes, just like Shinyfriend,” Kitty says. “But Reevefriend — my Maker does not belong to a TARDIS kitty. No, no, no, he doesn’t. So sad, so very, very sad. He was separated from his TARDIS kitty, and they haven’t been able to find each other, no, no, no. But, after he was lost from his TARDIS kitty, he made me! Even though I am just a little service furniture and not a big outer space TARDIS kitty, I am still a very, very, very good kitty. I’m very smart and very good and very, very, very helpful. Yes, yes, oh, yes, I am! I help him when he needs his crutches or when he needs a water or a food or a sleep or a med. Yes, yes, yes, he is a very good Maker, and I love him very much.” It pats Harry on the head with the flat of its stinger.

“Well, that’s settled then.” Scintilla smiles at Harry. “You belong to Kitty — obviously!”

“Hey, Stylist.” Alison waves her hand like she’s in class, at which Bill snickers. “Can we go back to what you said earlier? What’s this about the neutron flow? And how is it going to help my chip?”
The Stylist solves the problem of Alison's chip's polarity. Alison and Bill are dubious, the Doctor excited, the Magister thrilled, and Harry highly entertained. The Doctor offers to sing Alison.

Before the Stylist speaks about Alison’s chip, everyone moves to the funereal breakfast nook since Alison, the Magister, and Harry haven’t eaten. The Stylist rolls her eyes at the dark wallpaper, while Lakis gleefully pets its burnt velvet roses. The Doctor accidentally knocks their head on the birds of prey chandelier with the light bulb eggs, pulling Galleia’s attention to the metal nest made of thorns. While everyone pulls in on the cool marble benches and the Magister takes breakfast orders, Galleia stands on tiptoe on her bench for a better view of the chandelier. She sits down when tea and blackberry scones with creamed butter arrive.

“So I’ve been thinking about Alison’s malfunctioning chip.” The Stylist picks up her thought ten minutes later when everyone has made significant inroads into breakfast. She, Galleia, Lakis, and Bill, having already eaten, take mint tea. The Stylist’s, much to the Magister’s horrified eyebrows, is rather more sugared milk flavored with a fragment of dried mint. “You thought I was just blathering on about my sprogs during that conference call, didn’t you? Hah, joke’s on you.” She does finger guns at the Magister and the Doctor. “I was listening all the while, and I was cranking the ol’ thought wheels. And Koschei was saying that Keller was thinking — “

“Keller?” Harry, head low over his stack of poached eggs and roasted eggplant bacon equivalent, starts at one of his early aliases. Alison can’t help but stare in amazement. He has been averaging two bites per egg, and at least fifteen remain on his plate.

“The Master has a bunch of little Masters in his head,” the Doctor says, “just like I have a bunch of Doctors.” They make a few roasted eggplant strips hop in front of their plate, illustrating their internal population, then crunch them down, licking their fingers.

“Fork!” The Magister hands it to them. He still contents himself with a small amount of the Doctor’s dossessia.

“ Seriously?” The Doctor, topping a buttered scone with bacon, looks at the Magister. “Everyone knows you can’t stab bacon with a fork. It’s like a law of nature.” They ignore the utensil.
“You know — like I have the little Alisons,” Alison says. She cuts a strip of her toast and pushes it around on her mostly empty plate. The toast sucks up a precise amount of runny yolk that will taste good, but not overwhelm the existing butter.

“And I have all the little Bills and my mum.” Bill nods.

“I call my selves by past aliases for easy differentiation,” the Magister tells Harry. With a slow gliding movement, he raises the glass to his lips, pours liquid into his mouth, and rolls it over his tongue. He swallows it with a look of transcendence, sending it to his external stomach. In the same amount of time, Harry eats three eggs and drains a full mug of coffee.

“What’s an alias?” Lakis asks. She sips her tea, which she has just like Stylist Mom, much to the Magister’s dismay. When Galleia tells her, she says, “That is easy! I don’t have aliases, so I just call mine Baby Lakis, Little Girl Lakis, Big Girl Lakis, and Bigger Girl Lakis."

“Maker, my Maker,” Kitty says, “when can I go in your head and meet all your little Masters? I want to meet them. Yes, yes, yes, I do.”

“Later,” Harry promises. “Shhhh, we’re listening to the Stylist.”

“Seriously — stop interrupting my monologue.” The Stylist rolls her eyes at Harry, probably just to annoy him. “Anyway, Koschei said that Keller thought the fly in the ointment was something about the flow of the subatomic particles. Then Harry here thought that the solution to life’s woes was electricity. I just did the basic math that apparently you guys can’t do, added two plus two, and came up with four.”

“Huh? You’ve got five seconds to say something in plain language, Mom,” says Galleia, “before I find something better to do.”

“Backtalk! From my own kids!” the Stylist gasps.

“Oh, wherever could they have picked that up?” mutters Harry.

“Yeah, Stylist, we’d really appreciate a straightforward summary,” says Bill, ever the diplomat.
Alison, going for another scone, nods vigorously. Airy and smooth, the scone tastes wonderful. “I followed all the technical jargon about my suprachiasmatic nuclei when the Magister was talking about it, but I’m not getting any of these weird allusions.”

“The Stylist’s intellect is light-years beyond everyone else’s. There — I summarized,” says the Doctor with a smirk. In deference to their inevitable spouse, they stab an egg-topped scone with their fork and take a big bite.

“Oh! Of course!” The Magister sits up straight, clapping his hands together so hard that Kitty jumps. “Domina carissima, the problem lies, as Keller proposed, in the flow of information from the Cyber chip to your suprachiasmatic nuclei. The polarity of the neutrons needs to be reversed, and then everything will work perfectly! Brilliant, Avé, just brilliant — as usual, of course,” he congratulates his friend.

“Neutrons don’t...have...polarity.” Bill wrinkles her nose at the Magister, then the Stylist. “That’s not even science. That’s just like science fiction.”

“I’m pretty sure neutrons don’t flow either.” Alison makes a similar face.

“They don’t!” says the Doctor. “The whole thing is a bad translation from some Mondasian idiom that makes no sense, even to Mondasians.”

“What do the Mondasians have to do with anything?” asks Alison.

“They invented Cyber tech,” Harry reminds her.

“It’s like putting ketchup on the dog or something,” says the Doctor. The Magister starts to offer the correct information, but the Doctor just flaps at him. “Who cares? At least reversing the polarity sounds cool and scientific. Just go with it.”

“Next thing she’ll be telling us,” says Bill to Alison with a giggle, “we’ll have to destabilize the quantum chronometrical field or something.” That’s a phrase used repeatedly in Defenders of Earth when the show writers need scientific jargon, but don’t want to expend too much effort.

“Yeah.” Alison laughs. “Vaguely scientific bullshit fills another plot hole!”
“Reverse the polarity of the neutron flow!” Harry bellows like he’s commanding a subordinate officer, waving his butter knife like a baton. “That’s what you’re suggesting? Ah hahahahahah!” He laughs so hard that he cackles. He bends over, slapping his thigh, wheezing, nearly helpless.

“Well, he’s a few bubbles off plumb.” The Stylist drinks tea and stares at Harry, then at everyone else. “Does he usually bust a gut when someone comes along and says something smarter than him?”

“Maker, my Maker, oh no, oh no!” exclaims Kitty. “What’s wrong?”

Harry struggles to shut up and sit back. With an audible sound, his back cracks. “Ow.” He grits his teeth. “You know what all those cheesy TV programs never show you? Paroxysms of diabolical laughter hurt.” He finds some painkillers in his pocket and crunches them down.

“Indeed. That is why I prefer a haughtily arched eyebrow.” The Magister illustrates proper technique. “It’s more restrained and less injurious.”


“Are you okay, Razor?” says Bill.

“What’s so funny about neutron polarity?” Alison asks. “I mean — besides the fact that the Doctor told us it doesn’t mean shit.”

“Back in the 1970s or 1980s,” Harry says, “whenever the Third Doctor was trapped on Earth, we had this running joke. Occasionally we’d end up on the same side of things, and the Doctor would invent something useful without fully understanding all its functions.”

“Mmmm, yes.” The Magister strokes his chin, savoring his dossessia. “That does bring back memories.”

“Of school days too,” the Stylist adds. “You were always taking apart things, Theta, and then repairing them,” she says, making air quotes, “into weird-looking shit that was entirely irrelevant
until, six months or six years later, we remembered that it was exactly what we needed.”

“It’s true.” The Doctor crosses their arms, nodding proudly. “I knew that left-footed nuclear quattacamass percolator would come in handy one day, and I was right. I think it saved two and a half endangered species on that particular Festival of Pink Clouds!”

“Five and three quarters,” corrects the Magister.

“Anyway,” says Harry, “so, whenever the Doctor created some device, it would always look so ramshackle that I’d ask them what it was supposed to do. They always replied, Why, it reverses the polarity of the neutron flow, of course! And then we’d laugh because, in my universe at least, that phrase is a meaningless scientific impossibility. I just never thought one of our in-jokes would be the answer to the Dominatrix’s chip problem.”

“Wow.” Bill shakes her head. “So the solution is really that simple?”

“Is it, though?” Alison looks to the Stylist for details. “So how do we do this reversal? Is it invasive? How long does it take?”

“It should just be two seconds of reprogramming the chip,” says the Stylist. “Hmmm… Well, unless, of course, all Koschei and Theta and Harry’s experimental tinkering has altered the hardware as well as the software.”

“It probably has.” The Magister frowns. “In that case, we’d need someone with the skills of a surgeon and the instincts of a poet, someone who can dance along the interface between flesh and computer, sewing them back together in an artful pattern.”

“That’s meeeeeeemeeee!” the Doctor sings. The fork finds another use as an improvised microphone. “If I programmed you with a song, Master, then I’m sure I can improvise a melody to polarize Alison’s chip’s neutrons correctly. You’ll be in tune with the universe again in no time!” they assure her. “Okay, that’s an exaggeration. The only way that it would take no time was if we went into the Vortex to do it, then came out at the same moment we went in. Anyway, I’d be very glad to sing you, Alison, if you want me to. Hm. You know — I sing my Master regularly, and I sing my dear Bill’s heart all the time, and I’ve even sung Scintilla and Imp — “

“And me,” says the Stylist. “Remember when Koschei kept telepathically inducing my gag reflex, and I couldn’t keep anything down, and I was like starving to death?”
“Oh, oh yeah!” The Doctor dances from foot to foot like Kitty when it’s excited. “Then I sang your stomach back into shape, and you finished your transhistorical costuming project and won. And didn’t you turn his hair orange or something?”

“It was more of an eye-searing gradient of neon.” The Stylist nods. “By the way, Alison, if you ever need to piss this doofus off,” she says, elbowing the Magister, “just mess with the hair. It infuriates him like nothing else. Once I put fiber optics in his ridiculous little goatee, and he went ballistic. Like literally — he tried to nuke me with intercontinental ballistic missiles, probably because he couldn’t stand how adorable he looked.”

“Well, that would explain why the Doctor installed this recently when I was sleeping,” says the Magister. “For nostalgia’s sake.” He activates something. The white blazes over his ears, at either corner of his beard, and at the center of his goatee ripple through pastel colors. He chuckles.

“All the best kitties have electric whiskers. It’s the new trend.” The Doctor pats the Magister.

“Gag me.” Harry retches.

“Sure!” says the Stylist. “Bit, ball, muzzle, or what?”

“Hey, Doctor,” calls Bill, “what were you talking about before electric whiskers and singing the Stylist’s stomach back into shape?”

“I have no idea,” says Alison, snickering, “but this tangent has been very educational, not to mention entertaining.”

“Oh! Oh!” The Doctor snaps their fingers on both hands. Waving their hands over their head, they narrowly miss the chandelier. “Right. I was saying that I’ve sung almost everyone, but I haven’t sung you, Alison. So how about it?”

“It...wouldn’t hurt, would it?” Even as she inquires, Alison knows that it wouldn’t. While the Doctor can wield their voice as a weapon, like when they vaporized the invasive Shalka, they much more happily use it to repair and create. Alison has witnessed the Doctor singing the Magister’s mechanics into perfect working order and even calibrating Bill’s Cyber parts. In both cases, the Doctor enters an altered state of both fierce and abstracted concentration. At the same time, either the Magister or Bill falls down and back and open. They enter a transcendent and still
state of content submission. Come to think of it, they look like Alison feels when she submits in a BDSM context. She goes down, opens up, and waits in happy silence to be remade. “It’s like going down, isn’t it?” she says. “Like submitting, into subspace, submerging and letting go. It’s about vulnerability, rather than pain.”

The Magister nods. “It feels disturbing, especially at first, though that sensation does diminish, and it effects a profound alteration.”

“Yeah.” Bill nods. “It’s like all the squashed-up matter inside you bursts forth, but the Doctor’s song spins it out into an organized cosmos, with galaxies, constellations, stars, planets, and comets, forming patterns, moving in their spheres. Everything in you is clean and sparkling, singing and ringing and shining. Even if you’ve never felt that way before, it feels...right.”

“It’s fun!” The Stylist’s hair describes fantastic explosions. “Like fireworks going through your cells.”

“You just described the internal equivalent of a Big Bang,” says Alison. “That’s not peaceful!”

“The Master…” Harry reaches toward her, but pulls his hand back without touching her. “Let the Master hold you fast, dearest Dominatrix mine. His presence — “

“Oh.” Alison understands. “He helped you. He grounded you. But...when was that? What are you talking about?”

Harry clears his throat and gathers his thoughts. “It was during the volume control operation I had for my Drums. Part of the procedure involved the mechanical Master entering my mind and rearranging things. I’m used to that; that’s what he did when he brought me back from a manic episode in Dystopiaville. The other part of the procedure involved some help from the Doctor’s, uh, song. The Master helped me endure it.” His voice shakes; he’s thinking of being occupied by the Drums.

“Oh, Razor…” Bill gets out of her chair, walks over to him, and hugs him.

“I will, of course, do the same for you, if you wish me to,” says the Magister to Alison, smiling tenderly.
“You’ve always held me fast, though.” Alison smiles gently at him. “And so have you, Bill. But there’s one member of the Dork fam that I haven’t really let hold me fast.”

“Who’s that?” the Doctor wants to know.

“You!” says Alison. “It’s time I trusted you that way too.”

“I have just the song!” the Doctor cries. “I know how you think, so it even has words!”
The Doctor Sings Alison Whole

Chapter Summary

The Doctor tunes Alison with a special song. It even has words in it! They share closeness and realize how much they love each other. Featuring an appearance by the universe's goofiest Weeping Angels.

In the catacombs of the Cemetery of the Lost, Alison stands in front of the votive wall. Spinning slowly in a circle, she scans the metal rosebushes through which she came. They smell like rain and rust, and they hold within them all those lifesize statues of thorn-pierced people. She shudders as the cool rusty air from the flowers wafts to her and turns away quickly.

Alison’s sight moves past the two guardians of the votive wall, the Weeping Angels, Patience and Verity. More accurately called *Sleeping Angels* at this moment, they nap against their plinths, seemingly made of marble.

Taking a glance to the left and then to the right at dark, dusty rows of untouched sarcophagus and mausoleums, Alison doesn’t bother to search them. She calls, “Doctor? Hey, Doctor?” No answer. Did they forget to come to a meeting that they themself arranged? Probably.

The gleaming black votive wall attracts her attention: a columbarium of archway-shaped niches honeycombing the very stone of the catacombs. Somehow LED lights thread throughout and behind each niche, giving each inhabitant enough light by which to glow. And oh yes, everyone in the niches is most definitely an inhabitant, rather than a mere canopic jar, hologram, sketch, or miniature stone effigy. Each of the people depicted shows something of their character; the Doctor has observed and known all of them, then created small versions of them to represent who they are.

Alison gazes at hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people. She thinks of the Magister’s shelves full of dolls; despite the rose-heavy silence about them, the figures here have the same lively air. For example, there are figures of the Magister, one for each of his selves. Though blotted, nicked, and otherwise roughly done, each contains a likeness of their personalities. The Little Witch has a chaotic boldness in her frazzly hair and defiant stance; the Cat coils his tail about him in smug precision. And there is a representation of the Magister as he is now, chin lifted, formidable, keen, and great-hearted.

Two people in particular catch Alison’s eye. One is Bill, woven of vines and flowers, shining with a sunflower smile, peering out at the universe with observant brown petal eyes. And the other is Alison in the form of a sloppily crocheted doll. It doesn’t really look like her because it has short,
bead-ended cornrows ending just above its shoulders. She had cornrows when she first met the
Doctor and the Magister, but she took them out after she went home temporarily; she has styled her
hair in a loose round puff since then. Furthermore, the little Alison wears a long yellow gown.
Loose fibers stream from its hair and its robes.

Plucking the doll from the niche, Alison scrutinizes her. The doll is just the color of her — a warm
brown with middle red undertones. The little Alison’s sharp, bright eyes, made of black jet, are
hers, as are the little eyebrows, stitched with hook shapes at the ends. She squints, and the threads
hanging from the doll transform into rays of light, swirling around like the voluminous skirts.
Alison takes in a gasp, for she sees herself as the Doctor sees her: living sunshine, intelligent
illumination, consolidated and irresistible warmth. The little Alison doesn’t look exactly like her,
but it feels exactly right.

“Boo!” At the sound of a deep voice behind her, Alison whips about and squeals. Between one
blink and the next, the grey Weeping Angel sweeps to her feet, baring claws and fangs.

Between blinks two and three, the red angel whacks the grey one upside the head. “Be nice to the
human! Sorry… ‘bout that,” the red one, Verity, says in a slow, grating voice. At first Alison thinks
that she speaks this way because she’s made out of stone, but Verity’s voice accelerates to a normal
speed as she yawns and wakes up. “She didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Yes, I did.” In another frame skip, Patience now puts her hands on her hips as she glances at
Verity. “Ugh, you are such a mood killer.”

“I’ll marry someone from the Terra Cotta dynasty, I think. She’ll be youthful and fun, I think. Hah!
Turns out she’s a total dingus just like all her wingless brothers.” Verity is caught in another eye
roll.

“I’d rather be a dingus than a lichen-covered rock with no sense of humor,” rejoins Patience. “By
the way, darling, I think there’s a touch of moss on your butt.” Frame skip. When Verity checks
out her rear, Patience says, “Hah! Made you look!”

Verity stands as straight and regal as the statue she appears to be, ignoring Patience. She introduces
herself and her blockhead—wife. Alison introduces herself. Do they know where the Doctor is?
Presumably in the building with the open door and the torturous sounds emanating from it, says
Patience. She gestures to a small grey mausoleum, with a plain peaked roof and two unadorned
columns supporting its triangular front. The door looks closed to Alison, who can’t hear any noises
from it. Why would the Doctor sleep down here anyway, instead of in their room?
Verity explains that, over the past several weeks, the Doctor has been down here at all hours, brainstorming ideas for herbal remedies, pacing around when those failed, then collapsing to the floor when exhaustion overcame them. She theorizes that this was the only place where they felt like they could relax. How’s Alison’s head doing these days?

“Uh, are you sure the Doctor’s in here?” asks Alison. “The door’s not even — “

“Trust me. We have better senses than you.” Patience teleports from her plinth to the mausoleum door. Much too late, Alison jumps back. Patience, pushing the mausoleum door inward, reveals the Doctor, curled up on a granite bench and breathing at a regular volume. “Behold — the universe’s loudest sleeper.”

“Hello, Alison!” The Doctor sloughs a tatty wool blanket to the floor. They sit up, sliding reading glasses from their forehead onto their nose. They wear a blue chambray long-sleeve shirt fastened with safety pins instead of buttons and trousers with the legs zipped off to make shorts. “Come here for a nap? Quite tranquil, really.” They roll their sleeves down from the elbows against the cool air. “Sort of a sensory deprivation chamber in stone. You can really fall inward and examine your own thoughts here — or snooze.” They zip one of the legs of their trousers on, but can’t find the other one. “I’m sure I can rustle up a pillow or two for you.”

The Doctor drops to their knees before an oblong sarcophagus at the back of the mausoleum. Pushing the heavy stone lid aside, they sort through various objects: a plastic devil duck, a sheaf of sheet music, a box camera, two switchblades, a model engine, and a crescent-shaped neck pillow. Alison decides that all of the Doctor’s storage spaces, including their pockets, must contain a similar diversity of random things.

“I’m here for you to sing me,” Alison reminds the Doctor. “You said you’d do it just to make sure that the chip was interfacing all right with my brain.”

“Cool, cool.” The Doctor nods, still rooting through the apparently bottomless sarcophagus. “We’ll still need some pillows, though, to make this place more comfy.” They toss out a self-inflating sleeping pad, a wool cape, and a World War II wireless.

While the Doctor is setting up, Alison figures that she has time to ask a question. “Doctor, I saw figures of me and Bill and the Magister in the columbarium. I know that’s where you commemorate all the people that you couldn’t save, so why are we three there?”

“The Master…” The Doctor sighs. They screw open the cap on the self-inflatable pad, allow it to increase in thickness, test its squishiness, then close the cap. They sigh again. “The Master is there
in all his incarnations, because...well...I could have done things differently. We never had to hate each other and destroy so much in the process. That weighs on me every single second of every single day.” Another sigh.

“Oh. Well, that makes sense.” Alison pauses. The Doctor moves the sleeping pad to the long stone bench perpendicular to the sarcophagus. Alison, picking up the free end, helps them. “But what about me and Bill? Why is there a doll of Bill without a wheelchair or Cyber parts? Why is there a doll of me with cornrows? You never knew Bill without Cyber parts. How could you have saved her if you didn’t even know her then? And me — how could you have saved me even more?”

“All my companions are there, not just you and my dear Bill.” The Doctor waves at the columbarium. “They all changed in some way. They all died in some way. You know…” Their swooping hands describe at a cosmos full of regrets. “Safe and whole and happy,” they murmur, bowing their head.

“And you and my dear Bill — well, you’re my Dork fam,” the Doctor goes on, meeting Alison’s eyes. “I always could have been better for you. Safer and wholer and happier. You know what my nickname when I was young? The Little Fixit. And here I am, with time and space at my disposal, and I still can’t keep bad things from happening to my family!” For a moment, they sound like they might cry.

“But I want to, and I hope, and I try,” they conclude. “You’re there because you’re planted in my hearts. My Dork fam flowers.” They smile widely, fond and foolish and unashamed of it. They touch their fists to their chest, then open them, their fingers stretching into rays.

“Planted in your hearts,” Alison echoes. That was what the Doctor said the last time that they made such a blooming sort of gesture in the Cemetery of the Lost. They were talking about how their Dork fam had rooted itself in their life. “Awwww, Doctor,” she says. She and Bill and the Magister aren’t in the columbarium because they’re dead. They’re there because they’re alive and beloved, and the Doctor will do everything they can to keep them that way.

The Doctor bids Alison lie supine on the bench before the sarcophagus. She does, supporting her head on some old feather pillows they found. She covers herself with the wool cape for warmth. The Doctor, suddenly remembering that Alison has found the Cemetery of the Lost disturbing in the past, asks if she wants to go elsewhere. Alison says that she’s fine as long as she doesn’t see the statues transfixed by thorns. And so she lies down, and the Doctor cups their hands around her head, and they sing.

“Your hands lie open in the long fresh grass,—

The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:
Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and glooms

'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass."

The Doctor sings fast, each note a drop of water, falling onto her, falling into her. Slipping inside with a soft touch, each word slides through Alison’s neurons with quicksilver sweetness. The poem clears out the heady stuffiness of sleeplessness and despair. The Doctor’s song ripples and billows, a breezy sky of blue-bottomed cumulus, pushing away the glooms of fog. The water of the Doctor’s song seeps down to the depths of her brain, giving her thoughts and her chip the succor they need to grow.

Alison feels the Doctor’s hands on her head. They lie open against her face, tracing the lines of her narrow-bridged nose, her long cheeks, the circles beneath her eyes. Then they move into her hair, a forbidden zone for non-fam members, but she wants them there. The Doctor is exploring her with their hands, learning about her, getting to know her through her flesh. Alison shivers and tingles, then lies still, listening. She tastes the Doctor through their touch, and she knows about their curious joy in everything, their exclusive, intense focus, but, most of all, a love for everything in the universe, a love that now streams into her.

When the Doctor’s hands dance against Alison’s scalp, they skim as quickly as wind, amassing a delicate pressure here, scattering there. After weeks of flapping in anxiety and frustration, the Doctor now performs jazz hands of happiness. Alison murmurs contentedly, and her mouth smiles peace.

“All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,
Are golden kingcup fields with silver edge
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.
'Tis visible silence, still as the hour-glass.”

As the poem’s scope expands outward, so does Alison’s sensorium. For all her reading and research, she has no idea what kingcups are, nor why they’d have silver edges when they’re golden, nor what cow-parsley is. And so she imagines herself outward in terms of people.

Here, now, she and the Doctor meet. She submits to the Doctor, and the Doctor submits to their song. Just beyond, Patience and Verity rest. Then Anima, who sees everything within her walls, watches with silent, but close, attention, like a spectator leaning forward, waiting for the performers to stick the landing.
Beyond Anima, there is Scintilla, who Anima is parked next to, and Reeve. They’re talking about how much better they could do this, and they’re waiting to take over if the Doctor fucks up.

In Scintilla’s living room, Bill and the Stylist sit on the sofa, swapping stories of times the Doctor sang them. At least that’s what they were doing when Alison left to find the Doctor. In their tales of miraculous aid is the unspoken hope that the Doctor will help Alison just like they helped them.

At the base of the piano, Galleia and Lakis entertain Imp and Kitty. When Alison departed, the sisters had charmed Kitty so much that it rolled over and put all its legs in the air so they could give it belly undercarriage rubs. As they idly play with the cats, Galleia and Lakis await the moment that they can jump to their feet and congratulate Alison on her functioning chip.

Finally, the Magister and Harry sit side by side in a capacious chair, hands intertwined, eyes closed. With Alison and the Doctor’s permission, the two counterparts are satisfying their scientific curiosity by watching the Doctor at work. The Magister and Harry, boosting each other’s psychic strength through touch, attend clairvoyantly, suspended in hope.

Alison’s family [except for Harry], her circle, spread out concentrically from her fixed point. She is an island in a deep, profound pool. Everyone’s expectation stirs the surface of the waters that encompass them all. Nevertheless, the depths stand unmoving, unmoved, knowing that happiness will come. For all their anticipation, everyone yet sits in visible silence, waiting for goodness.

“Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky:—
So this wing’d hour is dropt to us from above.

“Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,
This close-companioned inarticulate hour
When twofold silence was the song of love.”

The Doctor hushes their voice, nearly whispering, as their focus turns back to the near and intimate. The bright dragonfly — the darning needle — of their song flies into Alison, and this is a creature that, unlike the Shalka, she welcomes into her head. Dropping into her brain like a winged hour, the darning needle refastens frayed synapses one to the other. It stitches her chip firmly in place. It threads a clear path from her chip to her suprachiasmatic nuclei to her pineal gland. It examines every part of her new circadian clock with its keen, multifaceted eyes and finds them good. It lifts away and disappears.
“There now.” The Doctor removes their hands from the sides of her head. “How do you feel?”
Their sharp dark eyebrows peak expectantly.

Alison, blinking in the dimness of the mausoleum, sees the Doctor’s sky blue eyes shining in the dark. She breathes in slow sighs, through which she smells the chill iron smell of the metal roses. Though surrounded by dark stone, she vibrates with warmth. She is replete. Her radiance, her Alisonshine, is finally fully returned, thanks to the Doctor.

She realizes something then. The Doctor loves her. For a long time, she thought that they didn’t. They touched their partners, the Magister and Bill, but not her. They danced and flapped, physically at ease with their partners, but not her. They sang their partners, but not her. They never told her in words — not even someone else’s — how they felt about her. And they never, ever sang her.

Alison’s first intuition that the Doctor loved her came to her here in the Cemetery of the Lost before her chip malfunction. She and they had been talking about catastrophes and how to face your worst fears. The Doctor asked her if they had unbefuddled her mettle or something and if she needed a cuddle, which she did. And they had held her fast, as fast as she had always wanted them to hold her, and she knew that they loved her as much as she wanted to be loved. Then, of course, she had promptly forgotten all of this in her ensuing depression.

Now that Alison remembers what she had forgotten, it strikes her with renewed force. The feeling of it rings through her with an airless buzz, like being knocked in the solar plexus. She thinks of what Patience and Verity said — that the Doctor paced and worried and tried everything they could when she was sick, losing sleep just like the Magister. She thinks of the Doctor’s revelation that they want to save everyone — not just the Magister, not just Bill, but Alison too — and make them safe and happy. She thinks of the little Alison in the columbarium, which, as far as she’s concerned, is an Alison doll and therefore a symbol of deep, honor-bound possession and care. She thinks of how the Doctor did something unprecedented and put words to a song for her. They touched her, with their words and their hands and their song. They do love her.

“Twofold silence was the song of love,” she quotes softly. She sits up and presses against the Doctor, leg aligned tightly against leg. “You felt that way, but you didn’t know how to say that. And you knew that I felt the same way too, but wasn’t sure how to express myself.”

“Yes,” the Doctor says very quietly. “And now you’ve — “ They spread their fingers out, slower then jazz hands, as if unfurling and looking for something. “You’ve — And I’ve — “

“Planted in your hearts,” says Alison, a smile coming up from deep inside her to spread throughout
her mouth and her whole being. “Your field, your flowers, your family.”

The Doctor nods faster. “Yes! Yes! The pasture gleams. No more glooms. Sun-searched growths now, sun-searched growths! Everything’s brilliant; everything’s illuminated. It’s because — because — because — oh!” They shake their hands in irritation, combing the air, trying to snag the right words.

In the Doctor’s expressive beating hands, opening up to words, Alison envisions their expressive beating hearts, opening up to her. “The pasture gleams — everything is clear and understandable — because your hands lie open,” she cries in a rush of inspiration. “Well, your hands fly open, but so does your heart. I mean — I understand because you opened up to me. You found words, which you usually don’t, for a song, and you sang me. You gave me words, and you held me fast, and that’s just what I always wanted and always needed. And now… Now I know… I thought…”

“Yeah, no, I do. I have, Alison. I always have.” The Doctor nods and flaps in earnest quickness. “I know I sang my Master into being, and I know my dear Bill is my flower, but you, Alison — you’re planted in my hearts too. And now — “ They make the blooming gesture. “Your hands lie open in the long, fresh grass… Your hearts lie open because you opened them to me. You trusted me; you let me give you words. You let me sing you. You let me be myself with you, and now… Well, do you understand? A little bit? Maybe?”

“Well, now it’s not silence anymore. It has words to it, so…thank you.” Hot tears stand in Alison’s eyes. “I needed you to sing me for chip maintenance, and I needed you to say it — those words — love.”

The Doctor squints at her, trying to read her expression. “Are you happy now? Or sad? Or both? Can you be both at once? I can, but I’m not really sure about other people.”

“My heart hurts,” says Alison truthfully, putting her hand over it, “but [sniff] I’m [sniff] happy.”

“So…can I hold you fast and fear you not now? Or…wait…no. Holding fast is for you and the Master — or you and Bill. I think we need something different. Oh! Clasp we to our hearts — “ They reach out for Alison.

“For deathless dower — “ says Alison. They meet and hug. The tears are squeezed out of her.

“Close-companioned — “ The Doctor murmurs, skipping some words. They hold her with all their
fidgety closeness, poking her here, twitching there, but always fast and true.

“Song of love,” Alison finishes. They warm each other, heart against hearts. Though she cannot sense it, Alison imagines that the Magister and Harry withdraw their clairvoyance, rejoining the others. They report the good news — the Domina, the Dominatrix, the ruler of the universe, Alisonshine of the Dork fam, is back.
Chapter Summary

Alison finally sleeps without difficulty, much to everyone’s relief and joy. The Stylist, Galleia, and Lakis say farewell, snarking amiably with the Dorks and Harry. They’re back to Seneschal Five to conclude the anti-Corving campaign, but WITHOUT murder [thanks to clever strategizing from Reeve].

“So your reversed neutrons are flowing?” the Stylist asks Alison three days later in the time capsule living room. Tossing her sonic curling iron from hand to hand nonchalantly, she flips it end over end like a juggling club.

“Mind the light fixtures!” the Magister cries. With a swoop of his hand — unnecessary for his telepathic powers, but appropriately dramatic — he stops the Stylist’s curling iron. It hangs suspended in air, a centimeter from one of the glass lampshades with a shadowy skull burned into it.

The Stylist’s hair — microbraids interwoven with Pride rainbows — twines up like a tornado from her head. It plucks her curling iron from the air, then, just to alarm the Magister further, launches it toward the MOMENTO MORI digital thermometer in the bay window. “And your circadian rhythms have got the groove?” she goes on to Alison, turning her back on the speeding projectile.

“They do. For the past three days, I’ve been waking up in the morning and going to sleep at night with no fucking three-hour naps in between. And look at my groove!” Snapping her fingers, Alison shimmies, trying to move her hips as liquidly as the Stylist does. She can’t.

“Shake it, Alisonshine!” Bill conjures up a backbeat from her wheelchair, and Alison does some pelvic slams.

Meanwhile, the Doctor hurls themself into the air, intercepting the curling iron with a full-body slam. “Hwoof!” Fortunately there’s enough padding on the moss green carpet to cushion their belly flop. “I got it, Master.” they announce from the floor.

Harry lifts his boots — the shiny black ones with pointy heels — away from the Doctor’s impact zone. “Are you sure you’re okay?” As the Doctor coughs and gives a thumbs up, Harry shakes his head. For his farewell outfit, he’s got that silvery blood-colored thing that he was wearing when he crashed into Alison’s closet, as well as the ruby red slit-throat choker and a mass of silver bangles.
on one arm. “Wow, you really do remind me of my Tenth Doctor,” he remarks to the Doctor. “They were always jumping off cliffs without checking to see if they had a parachute. Of course, they were also a mopey, self-righteous bastard, so you have them bested there.”

“Hey!” The Doctor, whose powder blue, zip-up leisure suit flourishes with a riot of cornflowers and Queen Anne’s lace, points at Harry. “I’ll have you know that I have an entire room devoted to moping: the Cemetery of the Lost. I can maunder with the best of them.”

“I was trying to give you a compliment, you dolt.”

“Oh. Okay. Then you’re welcome, you pompous jackass.”

“Dominatrix’s neutrons are fixed, hooray, hooray, hooray!” Kitty cheers. It stops scratching Imp on the head with the tip of its stinger for a moment. “Dominatrix is very, very, very happy, and so is Kitty. I love you, Dominatrix. I wish we could live next to you so I could see you all the time, but I can’t.” Harry has been trying to explain to Kitty that, even though it loves Dominatrix, Dominatrix does not want to see Kitty’s Maker, except at designated check-ins to make sure he’s behaving himself. “That makes Kitty sad, oh no, very sad. But Kitty is still happy that you’re happy.”

“And my Domina hasn’t nodded off at all during the day,” the Magister says. He extends his hand to the Doctor, helping them up. Then he takes the Stylist’s curling iron from her and jams it back in the holster on her belt, fastening the snaps with finality.

“Not once!” Bill conjures a theatre full of applause from her joybox’s sound effects.

“Even once?” says the Stylist. “Are you sure?”

“We’re very sure!” The Doctor flashes a grin. “She won’t shut up about it!”

“They ought to know,” puts in Harry. Using his crutches at the moment, he perches on the arm of an overstuffed chair. “The mechanical Master has been following the Dominatrix around constantly, purring and looking like a cat seeing a Christmas tree for the first time. And she keeps running over to see my daughter and the Doctor periodically throughout the day, just to inform them that she is not, in fact, taking a nap.”

“And naturally we have to dance around in celebration every time,” says the Doctor,
demonstrating.

“Bigcatfriend loves Dominatrix,” Kitty remarks. “He rubs his whiskers on her all the time — oh yes, oh yes, oh yes — so that everyone knows she belongs to him. He is such a happy, happy, happy kitty when he snuggles her. He loves her so, so, so very much, as much as I love my Maker. I love my Maker oh, so very much. I like to pet my Maker too, just like Bigcatfriend likes to pet his Dominatrix.” It scoots over and pets Harry’s leg with one of its pincers. “He is a very, very, very good kitty.”

“You just want an excuse to jump around,” Alison says with a laugh to the Doctor.

“Not really,” says the Doctor. “I jump around at the slightest provocation anyway.”

“Plus,” says Scintilla, “I’ve been monitoring Miss Alison’s vitals, and she really has been awake during the day and asleep during the night, just as she says.”

“Well, natch. I’m a genius,” says the Stylist.

“Not the only one.” Harry glares at her.

“True. I did have some lesser minds aiding me.” Turning to the Magister, the Stylist indicates Harry with her thumb. “This one’s fun: all prickly and huffy, like you used to be. Not to mention the hair.” She snorts at his dyed red spiky ‘do. “You know — that disaster on your head could really use the services of a master,” she informs him.

Harry points his left crutch at her, and a dagger flicks out from the bottom. “You stay away from my head.”

“Maker, my Maker, no, no, don’t do that!” Kitty confiscates Harry’s crutch, retracts the dagger, then hands it back to him. “Stylistfriend is a very, very, very good kitty. Yes, yes, yes, she is. You don’t want to stab her.”

“Awww,” says the Stylist, “now he wants to kill me. Or do you just want to fuck me?”
Harry looks down his nose at her. “I should have thought that someone of your supposedly staggering intellect would be familiar with the concept of murderous flirtation.”

“Well, get in line,” the Stylist tells him. “There are about four billion and three people ahead of you.”

“Do you really want the other Lord Master to be your girlfriend...boyfriend...personfriend?” Lakis, entering the living room with Galleia, frowns from the Stylist to Harry. “I mean — he’s really too — “

“Lakisfriend! Galleiafriend!” Kitty hops up and scuttles over to them. “Will you pet me? I like when you pet me. I love you so, so, so very much!” They comply with Kitty’s request, and Kitty starts purring nearly as loud as the Magister.

“Now I’m curious — I’m too what?” Harry cocks his head.

“Too old, I presume,” the Magister says. “When my Domina and I visited the Lady Queen and the Lady Lakis in Atlantis, the Lady Queen remarked on my handsomeness. The Lady Lakis disagreed, saying that I was too old to be attractive.” At that Harry breaks out into belly laughs.

“So! Stylist!” Bill speaks up. “Are you four back to London now?”

“Oh! Where in London?” Harry perks up. “I’m in Grace’s End.”

“Well, Crowning Glory, which is the Stylist’s salon and headquarters,” says Galleia, “moves around the city. But I can certainly let you know where we’re stopping if you need some...personal attention.” Eyebrow bounce.

“I don’t think the other Lord Master wants to be your personfriend, Galleia,” Lakis says in a low voice. “He wants to be Stylist Mom’s, but she doesn’t want to be his.”

“You are very generous, my Lady Queen,” Harry says, “but I am not interested in that kind of ministration.” He asks the Stylist, “So do you take drop-ins? Or should I make an appointment?”
“Thought you just told her to stay away from your head, Razor,” Bill says.

“This is the flirtatious part of the murderousness, my dear,” the Stylist explains to Bill. Back to Harry, she says, “In all seriousness, though, I’m not making appointments for a while because I’m headed back to Seneschal Five, and I’m not sure how long that will take.”

“Didn’t you finish up there already?” Alison says.

“No no!” Lakis, standing up from Kitty, shakes her head. “We’re going to give fascists bad haircuts and make them ugly clothes.”

“So you’ll weaponize atrocious style in your campaign against fascism?” The Magister raises his eyebrows. “Do tell.”

Reeve and Scintilla enter the living room in their robot forms. Alison assumes they’ve been having some private partner time. “During the discussion in the Vortex,” Reeve interrupts, “the three of them established appropriate familial relationships. Meanwhile I,” she says, making sure that everyone absorbs the full import of the pronoun, “revamped the anti-Corving campaign to exclude assassination.”

“The Master and the Stylist can claim they’re geniuses all they want,” says Scintilla, “but we know who the real brains of the operation is: me and you!” She hugs Reeve from behind.

“Clearly!” says Reeve. “Anyway, Galleia and Lakis are teaching the Corving’s kids how to spy. Then they can supply the antifascist movement with pinpoint information about the Corving’s vulnerabilities, which we will then, of course, exploit with great glee.”

“And I,” says the Stylist, “will be taking advantage of the Corving’s vanity. They’re a slatternly wannabe who’s jonesing for star power, so I’ll pull some wretched fashion trends out of my ass for them to follow. Then I’ll seed the populace with contempt and vicious image macros, and they’ll end up as a meme for political ineptitude and bad hair.”

“Your ruthlessness is enchanting, my dear.” Chin in hand, elbow on arm rest, Harry ponders the Stylist’s magnificence.

“Yeah, I know,” says the Stylist. “Well!” She heaves a sigh and puts her hands on her hips. “Reeve
— Galleia — Lakis — come on. Those fascists aren’t going to crush themselves.”

“Thanks again!” Alison runs into the Stylist’s arms and hugs her. Taking in a big breath of the Stylist’s brassy lilac hair products, she says with tears in her eyes, “I really mean it. Thank you so much. You came in just in time and fixed everything, just like you always do. I’m so glad. I really, really, really appreciate it.”

“Last-minute saves,” says the Stylist, hugging her. “They’re my thing, along with expert rumormongering, killer style, and...well...just killing. Anyway, glad I could help.” Her brown eyes darken, reminding Alison of the Magister’s. She cups her hand against Alison’s cheek, her touch lighter than the Magister’s, but equally protective and proud. “Honored,” she says. “I’m honored that I could give the queen of the universe back her bounce and squee.”

“And I,” says Alison, “am so glad to have it back.”
Chapter Summary

Harry takes his leave of Alison. They understand each other at last. There’s still the question of forgiveness, though.

Fifteen minutes later, Alison and Harry stand in her room. The Stylist’s fam has left to fight fascism, while the Doctor and Bill have gone back to London. The Magister, Scintilla, and Imp have withdrawn to allow Alison and Harry some privacy. Kitty has too; in fact, the Magister is helping it pack in Scintilla’s Zero Room. Now Alison and Harry have the lack of scrutiny that they both requested, but they’re just watching one another.

After several seconds, Harry breathes out quickly, sitting on the edge of the chaise longue. “Well,” he says, looking over to Alison’s built-in bookcases and reading the spines, “this is awkward.”

“Yeah.” Alison leans her butt on the side of her bed, wrapping one arm around a spiral bedpost. “I feel like I should say something more ceremonious than Thanks! Goodbye! But...uh...”

“I can always solemnly swear to obey you and punctiliously fulfill the requirements of my parole hearings,” suggests Harry. Parole hearings are what he’s calling their scheduled check-ins. “Are you absolutely, positively sure you want to force yourself to talk to me over lunch once a month for an entire year?”

“I need firsthand evidence of your good conduct,” says Alison, “and you can’t argue me out of that. You’ve already tried. Speaking of arguing, Kitty seems not to be arguing with you over when it can see me. Your explanations got through?”

Harry puts a hand to his forehead. “I truly hope, for your own peace of mind, that you never have to stay up all night because you’re soothing a crying piece of furniture. Eventually I was able to cheer it up by reminding it that it would still be able to see Bestperson, Bigdogfriend, Stylistfriend, Galleiafriend, and Lakisfriend. It’s already very attached to the Lady Lakis. I also told it that it would have an entire neighborhood of friends to make in Grace’s End. So...well...it’s adjusting — slowly.” He’s banging out tummety tum, tummety tum on his leg now, the sound underscored with the chime of his bracelets and the click of his swinging crutch.

“Good. I think giving me one of its keys made it feel better.” Across the room, Kitty’s favorite key sits on her vanity. Kitty presented it to Alison the day before with uncharacteristic shyness, darting
back to hide behind Harry’s legs after it deposited the key at Alison’s feet. Harry had to explain that the key was Kitty’s goodbye gift.

“Yeah.” Harry chuckles, then suddenly cries, “Ah! Fuck!” He grabs his drumming right hand with his left as if he wants to rip it off and hurl it across the room. Squeezing his right hand tightly, he says, “Dearest Dominatrix mine… Ah…” He sighs. “Dearest Dominatrix mine, I don’t want to tell you this at all, but I know that I failed you, and...I apologize.”

“Uh, what are you talking about? You turned the lights in my library back on and installed a switch that allowed me to work around my malfunctioning chip. You helped me!” exclaims Alison. “That’s not failure. Also, despite what you think, you actually have some empathy now. That’s progress.”

“That’s very diplomatic of you, my dear, but we both know you’re wrong.” Harry smiles sharply, sadly. “The empathy is merely strategic, tactical, cosmetic. Besides, it was the mechanical Master who began the investigation into your malfunctioning chip, the Stylist who divined the true problem, and the Doctor who sang you back to yourself. I may have temporarily allayed some of your suffering, but that’s not what I said that I would do. I said that I would make you safe and whole and happy.” He confesses in a lower register, “I broke that promise.”

“You really didn’t,” Alison says. Harry doesn’t respond. He truly does believe that he has failed her. What’s she supposed to do with that information? Eventually she shrugs. “Okay, well, it’s not my problem if you can’t realize that you helped me. Thank you for what you did do. It was very...uh...illuminating.”

“Shockingly so, even!” Harry puns right back. “You’re welcome. Hey, Dominatrix?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. I know I’ll never have you, but I have my daughter, this world, this universe.” He spreads his arms out. “This volume control.” He taps his temple with an index finger. “This chance,” he says, gazing with soft, unfocused reverie at everything in Alison’s universe. “That’s more than I ever thought possible,” he says, his eyes meeting hers, “and much more than I deserve.”

“That’s true,” says Alison. “Ummmmm...you’re welcome.”
“Well, I know you want me out of your room, your house, and your life as quickly as possible.” Harry snaps out his crutches and rises, leaning into them. “Can I ask you one question before I leave, though?”

“You can ask whatever you want, and I can choose whether to answer it.”

“Fair enough. When I apologized to you for how I mistreated you when we first met,” Harry says, “you were glad that I made the apology. You didn’t accept it, though, which makes perfect sense. I thought you might need more time. So I’m wondering — has anything changed?”

“Me. I’ve changed,” says Alison without really thinking. “I...uh...I mean — “

She reviews her reasons for forgiving and accepting Harry. Mostly they boil down to the fact that it would make the lives of him and those around her happier and less awkward. None of them, however, consider her own feelings and interests. When she does consider those feelings and interests... “I don’t have to forgive you,” she says slowly, blinking in wonder.

“No,” says Harry, giving her a weird squinty look. “Is that what your Dork fam told you? Is that what my daughter told you? They really should know better — all of them!” Now he’s indignant on her behalf.

“Not my Dork fam.” Alison shakes her head. The obligation to reconcile and the feeling that she should make everything better come from her family of origin. Their model of Black womanhood blends intimidating strength of character, serene endurance, and moral superiority based on forgiving the injuries done to you by a racist, misogynist system and racist, misogynist White people. It’s all bound up in the struggle of her barely middle-class parents to give their only child a respectable upbringing and a decent future.

Alison, while she may have that strength of character and moral superiority, doesn’t accept serenely. She challenges, fights, rages, and maintains the truth. And, in truth, she neither accepts nor forgives Harry. She refuses to reconcile herself to what this White man — which he may not technically be, but which he certainly acts like — has done. She has better things to do.

“I accept the fact that you’re here to stay,” she says. “I accept the fact that you think Bill is somehow your daughter. I accept the fact that you’re part of her family. I accept that you’ve changed in the past seventy years and rediscovered some empathy. I accept that you’ve helped me a lot in fixing my chip. I understand that you regret being mean, disrespectful, and dehumanizing when we first met. I’m even starting to understand that, yeah, you actually will do anything I say, even if I don’t really like you or want to talk to you.
“But I’m never going to accept what you did,” she tells him. “Nonconsensual objectification and dehumanization is always unacceptable. No matter what you do now, I’ll always remember that you didn’t think I was a person in the beginning. I’ll never forget it. I’ll never forgive it. I’ll never accept it. So no, I acknowledge your apology, but I don’t accept it.”

“Okay then. Good to know.” Harry dips his head. “I’ll just get Kitty now. I can’t imagine that packing took that long, so it’s probably running around with Imp.”

“That’s it?”

“What do you want? Wailing, gnashing of teeth, rending of garments?”

“Well, I know you wanted me to forgive you, but you don’t seem particularly bothered that I haven’t.”

“Oh, Dominatrix, no one has ever forgiven me for what I’ve done. There was only my Tenth Doctor, but that’s because they were desperate. It wasn’t even their place to forgive in the first place. And so — goodbye. I would bow, but I can’t really do so with these crutches.”

“Um...wait.” Alison looks at Harry. Bent forward on his crutches like a racer at the starting line, he clearly can’t wait to scramble away. He still cowers before her, but not vice versa. She has him exactly where she wants him. That satisfaction is worth so much more than the peace that her family always insisted that she would gain from forgiving and forgetting.

She remembers when he startled her before mental travel, asking her to hold him fast. He appropriated the Magister’s spell — and hers. That’s not his spell, though, and it never will be. This is her universe, her world, her words. “Hold me fast?” Taking back her spell, Alison offers him her hand, lifting her eyebrows. It’s neither a pledge nor a plea, but a challenge, a test.

“Ahhhh...” Harry temporizes.

“Oh shit. Wait. Sorry. Maybe you can’t shake hands when you’re using your crutches either?”

“I can.” Before Alison withdraws her hand, Harry clasps it in his own. “Hold me — Hold me fast, /
And fear — ” he says, panting slightly from the exertion of standing without additional support. “And fear me not.”

“And I’ll do thee — “ Alison says.

“—No harm,” Harry promises. His eyes darken to hazel as he focuses on her, but they also glimmer with light and tears. Then, finally, he limps out the door, finds Kitty, and takes it and his baggage to his new home in Grace’s End.

In the silence, Alison sits. The golden walls brighten under the sunshine in the French-door windows. The etchings from the story of Janet and Tam Lin gleam on her oval vanity mirror, giving images to the spell of fearlessness that she has relied on during her illness. With the indelible scent of coconut oil from her bed, the room seems to wrap her in comfort and promise.

She’s back to herself again, but, for the first time in a long time, she’s also into the right circadian groove. Her chip now cooperates with the rest of her brain. Her moods, thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams are now her own again, as are her days and nights.

All four members of the Dork fam are together as they should be, and they hold each other fast in affection, respect, honesty, and trust. Lies and secrets will never estrange Alison and Bill like that again because they have a contract. Not only that, they love each other, and they’re sure of it.

“Everything is back to normal,” Alison says to herself, smiling, “but also completely new.”
The Alisons Say Yes

Chapter Summary

Alison takes Bill into her mind library. Bill meets her adoring fan club of Alisons and asks them all, including Alison, a very important question.

“Oh wow, Alisonshine!” Bill gawks at the exterior of Alison’s mind library. The rain has long since washed away, but an extra silvery sheen brightens the air, making all colors a bit keener. The rainbow banners, flying from lightning rods on the conical tower tops, trace grand, energetic curves in a cool breeze. “A Pride castle!” she says, fixing her sight on the banners first. Her smile flashes out like the sun rolling out from the blue cumulus puffs overhead.

Bill gasps. “—Made of books! The dormers…” she murmurs, seeing that their steeply slanted roofs are picture books with their spines cracked. “And the doors... Oooh — and all the stained glass!” Her eyes seek out the translucent mosaics of art embedded in various Gothic windows. “It’s a library made of books and rainbows. Oh — oh — oh! Alisonshine! This is so beautiful... —And here I go, crying again.”

“I don’t mind, my snuggly space interrobang,” Alison says, touching her hand. “That’s how I know that something touches you deeply.”

Bill sniffls. “Awwwww! Oh.” She glances at the stone lintel, which raises the front door of Alison’s mind library perhaps five and a half centimeters from the flat ground where Alison and Bill are now situated. “How am I going to get in?” Seated in her silver and chrome rocket-shaped power chair, she frowns.

“Ah shit,” says Alison. “Sorry about that. Hang on while I use my magic.” She imagines the lintel flush with the ground. While she’s at it, she widens the entrance corridor and tells all rugs in the general vicinity to temporarily fuck off.

“Alisonshine!” Bill exclaims again. Alison loves how Bill says her name; she makes it all sparkly and quick and bright, full of wonder. “You’re not just snugglissima and sexissima. You’re magicissima and wizardissima too.”

“Well, not really.” Alison pushes the front door open and holds it for Bill, motioning her through. “It just looks like magic because my thoughts become reality here. Doesn’t that happen in yours?”
Bill, coasting through the newly accessible door, scrunches her nose as she thinks. “Huh. Obviously my thoughts are reality there, but I guess I never thought that I could consciously create things. Have to try that sometime.”

“Hold on.” Alison closes the front door behind them. “Before you go any further, I should let you know that, um, everyone’s a little obsessed with you. They’ve been asking to meet you since we met. I imagined The Lonely Little Comet into a picture book, and the littlest Alisons read it every night. Errabunda tells everyone the best memories of you that she files everyday. Victa’s already imagining our wedding. So...um...be prepared for a fan club of Alisons.”

Bill fidgets. Her white minidress, made of space age fibers, coruscates as she moves. She uncrosses and recrosses her legs, and her matching go-go boots shine with iridescence. She brushes imaginary dust off the patches — a rocket ship shooting rainbows, WOW! in a starburst, and a stylized sunflower — on her bodice. She straightens the aerodynamic silver fins on the arms of her gloves, which match those on her epaulets and on her rocket chair. “Gosh.” She turns big brown eyes, accented with glittery, silver makeup, to Alison. “Um, no pressure then, yeah? Heh heh heh...”

“Don’t worry, Bill of my heart.” Alison puts her hand on Bill’s cheek. “There’s no need to impress anyone or charm anyone or win anyone over. You’ve already done that, or else you wouldn’t be here. Remember — I only let the coolest people in the multiverse in here.”

Bill, placing her hand over Alison’s, snorts. “You let Razor in, and he’s totally not cool.”

“I didn’t let him in because of his coolness. It was for maintenance purposes. You know — I was losing my cool, and he was helping me keep it.”

“I look okay, yeah?” Bill crinkles her nose. As usual when she’s nervous, she winds her hands through her fluffed-out curls, touching the deep yellow sunflowers wreathed around her head. “Oooh! This crown — it’s tugging at my scalp. Think it’s — ow! — attached to my head?”

“Well, yeah.” Alison smiles gently. “Like I told you, people look like how I imagine them here. And you look stupendissima — like a pulp-fiction Atomic-Age sunflower astronaut.”

“Oh!” All of a sudden, Bill sits up, understanding. “I’m a heliantha clarissima! Like literally! Awww, Alisonshine...” A tear trickles out of the corner of her eye. Alison kisses it away, swallowing the drop. Bill carefully pats the garden on her head, then rests her hand in her lap.
Alison and Bill go down the short hall to the octagonal atrium. Bill cranes her neck to admire the skylight. She even descends from her chair to squat and trace the intricacies of the unicursal labyrinth with Ariadne at the center. It smells fresh in here, like spring air coming through windows that have been closed for the winter.

Stomping noises emerge from the main bulk of the library. The floor vibrates. “Brace yourself,” Alison says, standing up. “Here come your biggest fans.”

“Squeeeeee! Bill of my heart!” Little Al, dressed in starry wizard robes, dashes to Bill and hugs the nearest portion of her, which happens to be her leg. Ali C., with striped jumper, flowered sweatpants, and mismatched socks, follows.

“And those would be what we call the littlest Alisons,” mutters Alison, rolling her eyes fondly. “Little Al is the younger, about five, and Ali C. is the nine-year-old.”

“You’re so pretty!” Ali C. says to Bill. “I could...I could...I could hug you forever!” She whips her copy of *The Lonely Little Comet* from under her arm and a purple pen from the pocket of her sweatpants. “Can you autograph this?”

“Hi, little Alisons!” Bill waves, then whispers to Alison, “They’re adorable!”

Victa, humming *Here Comes the Bride*, draws near. Her hair seems princess-like, spilling loose and held in place by a diadem. Her clothes — poet’s blouse, leather vest, and matching trousers — recall a brigand’s, though. She gazes speechlessly at Bill for a moment, then folds her hands on her chest with a sigh. “It’s our wife,” she announces to the other Alisons with the satisfaction of someone whose wish has finally come true.

“Victa,” Alison says to Bill, “the incurable romantic.”

“Fuck me dead.” Clarissima, her hair in its customary double puffs, looks Bill down, then up, then down, then up again. She has dressed for the occasion by adding a red T-shirt over her black long-sleeve cotton shirt, paired with black jeans. “You’re hot. Wow.”

“Clarissima, my inner dominatrix,” says Alison.
“Um...I’m your what now?” Bill, realizing what Victa has just said, makes a curve of one long elegant eyebrow.

“Bill’s gonna marry us!” Ali C. informs Little Al in a not-quite-a-whisper. “Aren’t we lucky?” Little Al lets go of Bill’s leg and starts dancing with Ali C.

“Awesome! So...when’s the big day?” Errabunda leans in, finger poised over her tablet, which is open to a calendar app. Her hair, held in a bun with a pencil, falls loose. Wrenches on her tool belt and drill bits in her utility vest clink. “I need some idea of the date so I can get to planning.”

“Errabunda, organizer extraordinaire,” says Alison for Bill’s benefit.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!” Sunny, in a cotton shift tie-dyed in orange and yellow starbursts, bounces higher with each exclamation. “So much to do — guests and vows and a place and food and music and...and... Oh my God, I’ve got so many ideas!”

“Sunny,” says Alison, “who’s convinced that she can accomplish anything by dint of sheer enthusiasm.”

“Can I borrow a pencil? And some paper?” Sunny asks Errabunda, who supplies the first from her bun and the second from the pockets all over her utility vest.

Clarissima, slightly stupefied, blinks a few times. “The wedding night,” she murmurs, still staring at Bill. A smirk spreads across her face as she clearly starts to think up perverted activities. “The wedding night! Heh heh...” She rubs her palms together as she plots.

“I finally get my fairy tale! It’s my happily ever after!” Victa exclaims, her eyes welling up. “No...wait...it’s more like my once upon a time ‘cause it’s not an end, but a beginning. But wait...we’ve got Time Dorks... So we can have as many once upon a times as we want. Oh...my...God...” She hops on tiptoes. “I’m going to cry!”

“So...” Bill turns to Alison with a wry grin. “You didn’t tell me we were getting married.”

“Aw shit, Bill of my heart.” Alison smacks her forehead. “I’ll admit that I’ve been fantasizing about it, but I never meant to pull a Harry on you and plan everything without your — “
“Hmmm,” says Bill, her smile widening. “Should probably ask your consent first.” She takes Alison’s free hand, then rises from her chair and removes Alison’s other hand from her forehead. With both of her hands in Alison’s, she lengthens her willowy question-mark frame into an interrobang. With warmth and laughter swelling in her voice, she asks, “Alison Clarabella Cheney, will you marry me?”

With her warmly toned skin, Bill is as bright as the sun. With the silver of her makeup and clothes, she holds the light of the moon and stars. In the loose cloud of her hair is a blackness as deep as space. She encompasses a universe of darkness and brilliance both, and Alison’s love for her expands to fill her entire universe.

Alison starts to cry, all seven of her. And Alison says yes, all seven of her.

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