

ALICE

THE WANDERLAND CHRONICLES

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ALTERNATE CHAPTER

ALICE
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"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the *momerath* outgrabe."

- Lewis Carroll
Alice in Wonderland



DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

CHAPTER ONE

His head exploded. I'd never seen someone's head explode. I never thought I would. Maybe in the movies, but not in real life.

It's amazing what a 12-gauge can do at close range. The gun wasn't even ours, just a rusty old rifle we found on the side of the road. It only had one shell left. I don't even know why I picked it up. It was just supposed to be used as a safeguard, but it gave Dinah and me enough time to put some distance between ourselves and the monsters. I guess it did its job.

No one ever stops to think how one day life can be mind-numbingly ordinary and then the next, completely go to shit. Not that it matters whether you think about it or not. What matters is how you deal with it. Like Dinah says, "We can only play the cards we've been dealt. It doesn't do any good to wish about things you can't change."

Alice wiped her tired eyes and peered at the journal on her desk. She scrunched her nose as she looked at the crude sketch she had drawn next to her entry. While it was no artistic rendering, her pencil had captured the raggedy, emaciated figure with its unhealthy soot-gray skin and vacant dead eyes quite accurately. Her brow furrowed as she remembered how it looked after the gun bucked--face half gone with its thick

blood forming a gruesome shower. It took hours to wash the black stains from her silvery hair.

She studied the haunted creature glaring at her from the page. A shiver shot through her, ending in a violent twist of her stomach. The ghost of a scream echoed in her ears and she was ten years old again, hiding in a ransacked gas station with her mother. Her hands trembled as she remembered pleading in hushed tones for her mother to stay behind the cashier's desk with her while the creatures outside howled in rage.

We have to get out of here before they come inside. If not, we'll both be trapped. Her mother's forest green eyes filled with a sadness Alice had never seen in them before. It was wrong; her mother was never sad. She was joy—*life*.

Alice's lower lip quivered. She hated what came next. Begging. Tears. *I love you, Alice*. Running. Yelling. Terror. All followed by a flash of ripping, bloody claws. Death.

A teardrop fell on the monster in the paper, blurring the graphite lines. Alice brushed it away quickly, smearing the picture further. She ran her hand back over it angrily, wishing she could wipe out the memory the same way. When she pulled her hand away, only a gray blob remained, ruining the page.

That's appropriate.

Alice thought about the way the monsters had shown up and ruined everything. Her stomach turned as she remembered the first time she saw them. She had just crawled out of bed and walked into the living room where her mother was watching her favorite news station. Rounding the corner, she heard confused shouting and terrible screams above the reporter's voice.

“...I can’t tell you exactly what happened in Washington District this morning, Trey, but it seems a mob of citizens turned violent and began attacking other pedestrians on the streets outside Borogove Industries...”

Her voice died out and Alice stared at the screen in stunned silence. It was a nightmare. The cameraman panned the shot to a large pack of men and women in business suits rampaging the streets. At least, they looked like men—except they were mauling people.

Suddenly, the screen blacked out.

“That’s enough of *that*.” Alice’s mother set the clicker on the coffee table and compulsively started tidying the room the way she always did when she was upset. She went to the kitchen and brought back a dust cloth and some varnish. “Here. Help me with this.” She handed the cleaning supplies to Alice. “I think it would be best if you stayed home today.”

Alice never made it back to school. By the time the evening news aired, all major channels were reporting unnatural attacks surging out of the Phoenix area. Momerath, CNN called them, a mixture of “moment” and “wrath,” since a person could turn into a raging killing machine with less than a moment’s notice. She supposed it stemmed from the media’s obsession with conjoined nicknames like “Bennifer” and “Brangelina.” She didn’t get it, but the name stuck.

That was six years ago. Now, at sixteen, she should be a junior in high school, but instead of her mother teaching her to drive, Dinah was teaching her how to keep rampaging monsters from tearing her to pieces.

Alice sighed and flipped lazily through her journal. Bits and pieces of the world after the Plague jumped out at her as she skimmed the pages.

... Momerath reported in all fifty states. . . military fighting back, but it's not enough...people say it's gone international. Flip.

...They can be killed! . . . have to destroy the nervous system. . . ask Dinah what the heck that means... Flip.

...There's more than momerath. . . there are Carriers too. . . people who have the virus, but don't show it until it's too late... Alice paused to look at another rough sketch she had drawn inline with her entry. It was a box that she had split into two sections. The first showed a little stick girl lying in bed, coughing. The next box was the girl standing on the bed with her arms raised and long claws reaching out from them. The word "momerath" had been written above in scratchy red pen.

Alice remembered that entry. She drew it after she had snuck downstairs to watch the news with Dinah and her mother one night after she had been sent to bed. They sat on the couch together, her mother's pale hands clutched Dinah's as they watched the report in stunned silence.

Terrifying images flitted across the television screen, and she had to strain her ears to hear the hushed volume to make sense of what she was seeing. A man was on the screen, pale and shaky as he spoke with the reporter.

...we just thought she was sick—the doctor said it was pneumonia...

He trailed off, his voice broken. The background switched to gruesome pictures of a mother and two boys lying on the floor, their bodies disjointed and mangled. Another picture flashed to a different angle, revealing the mother's eyes, wide with fear. The rest of her face was missing. The final photograph showed a decapitated momerath, dressed in a frilly pink nightdress with golden plaits twisted around the

stump of its bloody neck. Alice had to clap her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out so she didn't get caught. She had nightmares for months after that.

She took in a deep breath and looked once more at the picture. Now that she was older, the image didn't torment her any longer, but it still made her stomach squirm. She flipped the page again, burying the memory.

...CDC says the Plague is a virus. It lives in the blood, makes it bad somehow...momerath kill because they need clean blood...Dinah won't tell me what it means. Mom won't let her. I wish Dad was here. He could explain it to me...

This time, a blaze of anger surged through her chest. How much time had she spent wishing he would come back? *Too much*, she thought bitterly. What a waste of her time. Angry Flip.

Alice sighed and shut the cover of her journal. "That's enough depressing thoughts for today," she grumbled, tapping her pencil against the desk. "Maybe tomorrow, you can relive the day Mr. Carroll left. That's *just* what you need." She snorted. "Yes. Then afterward, you can seek professional help for talking to yourself."

"It would probably be a good idea," a musical voice agreed, startling Alice from her monologue. "It's getting kind of creepy." Dinah stood in the doorway, brown eyes crinkling as she flashed a teasing grin.

Alice rolled her eyes but smiled at her older sister. Technically, her *adopted* older sister. Both girls had been taken in by the Carrolls when they were babies. First Dinah, then Alice a few years later. Standing beside each other, it was obvious they weren't related. Though both girls had pretty faces and petite frames made slender by strict food rationing, all similarities ended there. Barely older than 22, Dinah was

gorgeous, with beautiful dark skin and rich mahogany eyes. She kept her curly ebony hair cut short and out of her face, which only emphasized her natural beauty.

Alice was the complete opposite. Her smooth, porcelain skin was so fair Dinah often joked that she could glow in the dark, and she was probably right. Her hair was the same: pale blonde that looked silver when the sun hit it right. It was one of her favorite features, which is why, even though it drove her crazy half the time, she never cut it. Paired with her high cheekbones and heart-shaped lips, it accentuated her dusky blue eyes and gave her a striking appearance. She wasn't a captivating beauty like Dinah, but she wasn't plain either.

Alice scoffed, used to her sister's teasing. "Whatever. I only talk to myself because I don't have anyone else to talk to. It's a coping mechanism."

Dinah slapped her hand across an imaginary wound on her chest. "You can talk to *me*. I'm always here for you, little sister," she said, wrapping her arm around Alice's shoulders to hug her tight. "Because. I. Love You." She squeezed her close with each word for emphasis, then finished by planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek. Alice shrieked and hurried to wipe her face on her shoulder. Dinah laughed and let her go.

Alice huffed and tried to glare at her sister, but only succeeded in letting out an unattractive snort. Like their appearances, the two girls had completely different personalities. Though Alice whined about not having anyone to talk to, it wasn't a valid complaint. Even if people were around, her preference was to stay at home, reading or writing in her journal. If she did have to go out, she would rather watch the people in the Sector than have to interact with them. It was probably where her habit of talking to herself came from. Dinah always teased her about it. But then, Dinah didn't have problems talking to anyone. One would think the apocalypse could put a

damper on anybody's spirit, but not Dinah's. She had an easy smile and quick quip to offer to anyone in the Sector, especially Alice.

"You about ready to head out?" Dinah stretched lazily against the doorjamb.

"We need to make sure we get back before dark."

Alice groaned. Scavenging through abandoned homes and old belongings was depressing and made her feel guilty. It set her nerves on edge.

"Don't give me the pout." Dinah grimaced at Alice's sulky expression. "We have to eat."

"I know," Alice whined, "it's just so *creepy*." She shuddered for emphasis.

"That may be true, but it doesn't make it any less necessary."

Alice wrinkled her nose. Dinah was right—as always—but low stock in the pantry didn't make traipsing into momerath territory any more appealing. "Can we at least stop at the library on the way back?" She needed new reading material. She had gone through all her other books at least twice already. Her favorites were on their fourth or fifth read-through each.

"Sure," Dinah promised. "But that means we need to get going. We don't want to run out of daylight, and I have to stop at the Peterson's before we leave the Sector. Mrs. Peterson says the baby has a fever and wants me to check her out."

"Alright. Let me get my books and I'll meet you out front." Alice picked up her backpack and searched the room for the borrowed books scattered around her room.

"I don't know why you bother returning them." Dinah shook her head "It's not like anyone is going to notice they're gone."

Alice shrugged. One of the things she hated most about scouting was taking things from people's homes. It didn't matter if the owners were long gone or dead, it

still felt like stealing. Returning library books might have been completely irrelevant, but it gave her guilty conscience a reprieve.

She scanned her room, making sure not to forget anything. Her eyes landed on a picture of her family prior to the world falling apart. It was taken a few months before the Plague began, on a weekend trip to Huntington Beach. Alice could almost smell the salty sea air and feel the sand between her toes. She and Dinah leaned together with their mother holding melty ice cream cones on the pier next to Ruby's Diner. Mr. Carroll had been long gone, but it didn't stop them from having a blast. They spent the day playing sand volleyball, swimming, and hunting for seashells before ending with dinner and dessert on the pier. They asked a stranger to snap their picture and before he could, Mom smashed her cone in Dinah's face, covering her nose in vanilla ice cream. Alice smiled, remembering how she shrieked when Dinah snorted, spraying ice cream everywhere.

Curious how a memory can make you happy and sad all at the same time, she thought, looking wistfully at the picture.

"Maybe those are the best memories of all," she said, then realized she was talking to herself again. Sighing, she swung her backpack over her shoulder and hurried downstairs to meet her sister.



CHAPTER TWO

Alice followed Dinah down the Sector's Main Street. The Petersons didn't live far. Considering the commune's small size, everyone lived relatively close to each other. Main Street wasn't even really a street. It was a common area where Sector residents spent their days. Ratty kids ran up and down the pavement playing tag with each other, weaving in and out of makeshift stalls where vendors would hawk their wares. Loud voices clambered over each other as men haggled over payment. Paper money was a thing of the past. No one had use for it anymore—now people bartered goods or services for things they needed. Alice was willing to bet that was why Dinah was going to the Petersons' today. Before the Plague hit, Dinah attended school to be a nurse. Though she never graduated, she had almost completed her course. It was more qualification than most people had, so now she worked as the community's resident caretaker.

"It shouldn't take long, I just need to stop in and see the baby," Dinah said. "It sounds like she's got a bit of a cold. Seems to be going around right now." She sneezed, as if to emphasize her point. "See what I mean?"

Alice didn't answer. She was busy wondering what she was going to do when it was time for her to start contributing to the house. For now, she helped Dinah with scouting and shadowed the occasional house call. But she wasn't skilled like Dinah. To be fair, Dinah had a head start. She had wanted to be a nurse since she was little

and had seen Mr. Carroll come home in his scrubs. She said any job that let her work in her pajamas had to be a good one.

Alice couldn't remember much about Mr. Carroll. Most of what she knew came from the stories Dinah would tell.

"Dad used to be different from the way he was before he left," Dinah would begin. *"He was happy and fun. His work was important to him, but he always made time for us too. And the time I got so sick, he was the one who took care of me. He had to take weeks off work, but he did, staying with me to make sure I was alright. It's too bad you didn't get to see the best of him."* Here, Dinah's smile would always fall to a frown. *"Then something changed. He and Mom started fighting a lot and he wouldn't come home until really late at night. When he was home, he would lock himself in his office and stay there for hours. I'm sure he still loved us, but his work consumed him."*

Dinah's stories didn't help Alice understand why she would want to pursue a career in the medical field. It sounded terrible. But Dinah must have seen something good in it. Then again, Dinah always saw the good in things. She also had an extra eight years with Mr. Carroll. Alice tried not to dwell on it, but sometimes when she thought about all she had missed out on, bitter resentment would gnaw at the pit of her stomach.

A sharp pain on the top of Alice's head jerked her from her thoughts as Dinah rapped knuckles against her forehead. "Hello! Earth to Alice! Anyone home?"

"Ow! Hey!" Alice massaged the spot her sister whacked.

"You zoned out again." Dinah shook her head in disbelief. "Did you hear anything I said? I swear, it's a miracle anyone tries to keep you company."

Alice scrunched her nose and stuck out her tongue at her sister. "I'm *wonderful* company," she said.

"Obviously." Dinah rolled her eyes. "You definitely keep yourself entertained, that's for sure." She huffed. "Anyway, *I was saying* Mrs. Peterson is concerned about a fever and cough the baby has. I guess she's been like this for a few days, so the worst is probably over. I'm just going to pop in for a minute and I'll be right down. Wait here, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Alice didn't want to go upstairs anyway. The Petersons were nice people, but Alice didn't think they realized they were living in an apocalypse. They had six kids and Mrs. Peterson was pregnant *again*. Their house was always loud and busy and messy. No thanks. She would stay down here with the street vendors and their noise. It was less obnoxious than the kids. She sat on the stoop of the apartment building and gazed out at Main Street. Several stalls had sprung up and four of the Petersons were playing outside, chasing a striped tabby cat with a couple of other boys from the Sector. A few women cackled loudly, exchanging commune gossip while neatly folding stacks of laundry to take home.

Over the busyness, a familiar voice rang out across the pavement. "News from the outside! Updates from outside the Sector!" Alice turned towards a gangly boy about her age walking through the streets, yelling at people he passed to make an exchange for information. He was skinny with mousy brown hair that grew just past his oversized ears. They suited him, considering he was the self-appointed Sector messenger. As such, it was his job to find and share any news coming into the commune, and he was good at it. How he always seemed to be the first to get the scoop, Alice had no idea.

“Oi! Alice!” His face lit up as he waved and hurried to cross the street.

“More news, Lewis?” She punched him softly on the shoulder. “Don’t you ever do anything besides make up stories?”

“No stories, only God’s honest truth!” Lewis’s voice rose as he countered her jibe. “Heard it from a group we met travelin’ out of the city and headin’ to the country—Buckeye, I think. Had family out there or somethin’. They said there might be a way to fix everything! Said they heard about some doctor who was working on a cure. Made it sound he was kind of crazy though. Guess he’d have to be to not have given up yet. But think! What if it worked? What if he found a cure?” Lewis’s features sparked in excitement as he spilled his news, too enthused to attempt to work out a trade.

Alice shook her head as she listened. “What if rivers flowed in the desert?” she sighed. Lewis exasperated her, always talking about life before the Plague and how it would be if everything was different. He was a dreamer. “It would be nice, but it’s not gonna happen, Lewis. You shouldn’t spout off talk like that, giving false hope to people. It’d be better if they focused on surviving. It’s more important than some silly dream.”

“But Alice, dreams are how people get by in a place like this,” Lewis countered. His freckles faded with his smile. “We gotta find somethin’ to hold onto, else we’ll all go mad.”

“You’d be better off holding on to your head,” Alice quipped. Lewis couldn’t read past a fourth-grade level—he had no business trying to get philosophical on her. She glanced at him and her expression softened when his shoulders slumped in defeat. Lewis couldn’t help but dream; it was who he was. She let out a guilty groan before

forcing a small smile to her lips. "Look, Lewis, I gotta go." She nudged his shoulder apologetically. Dinah and I are going on a supply run," she said. "Try not to make up too many more stories while I'm gone."

Lewis brightened, all hurt forgotten. "Ain't stories, Alice. You'll see. One day, sure enough, you'll see." In a flash, he was off, yelling again to catch the attention of someone willing to trade for information.

"Sure thing." Alice waved as she walked back to the Petersons' building to meet Dinah, who had walked out of the complex and was sliding the wooden barricade back into place. "You ready?" she asked, hurrying to her sister.

"Always." Dinah coughed at the dust the barricade kicked up. "Let's get out of here. The baby is sicker than I thought. I'm not sure what it is, but she's going to need stronger medicine than I have. We'll have to see if we can find a pharmacy while we're out. We'd better get moving."

Alice matched Dinah's brisk pace away from Main Street. They walked back the way they came, towards their apartment building, but instead of going in, they kept south, not stopping until they reached the abandoned outer edge of the Sector. No one wanted to live in the buildings closest to momerath territory. Alice didn't blame them. She still remembered how hordes of the monsters used to scrape along the sides of the fence searching for points of entry before eventually giving up and shuffling off through the desert.

After the momerath departed, people eased up a bit, but no one was keen on setting up camp on the edge of the Sector. This worked in the girls' favor, since what they were about to do was technically not allowed. People weren't supposed to leave the safety of the Sector, and it wasn't easy. To keep momerath out, two heavy chain-

link walls had been set up with barbed wire bordering the tops. The inner fence served as a backup in case the first one fell. Between the fences was an added layer of protection: a five-foot gap filled with more coiled barbed wire. The ground was littered with shattered glass and sections of two-by-four with huge nails sticking up at every angle, intended to slow down anything that risked walking through it. Lewis had told her there were even supposed to be land mines scattered in as well.

So far, the safeguards had held and no breaches had been reported. But that was only because the girls had never been caught. They had been sneaking out together for almost four years, after Dinah decided Alice could be trusted enough to help.

Alice followed Dinah to a large group of withered prickler bushes. Behind them, Dinah had cut a small hole into the inner chain fence and cleared out an incognito path they could cross safely. With careful steps, they followed it out, just like every other trip they made. When they reached the outer layer, they used a small mesquite tree to hoist themselves up and over. Outside, scattered Joshua trees provided cover for the girls to bob and weave through until they were out of sight.

They had left so often over the past few years, it only took a few minutes for them to break out. Once they were through, the rest of the trip was pretty uneventful. Tolleson was part of the web of smaller towns that made up one huge suburb. They all merged into the sprawling metropolis of Phoenix, which meant Alice and Dinah didn't ever have to go far to reach a new area to scout. Thankfully, since Dinah needed stronger medication for the baby, they wouldn't scour homes today. Instead, they found an old shopping center with a pharmacy inside. They crept through the aisles, careful not to make any noise. There hadn't been any signs of momerath, but it was better safe than sorry. Sorry meant you were dead.

At the pharmacy, Dinah snuck behind the counter to search through the few remaining medications for antibiotics she could use. On the other side of the counter, Alice checked the shelves for basic health care supplies and filled the small bag Dinah had given her, then peeked back to the pharmacist's desk to check for her sister.

Where is she?

It shouldn't have taken long for Dinah to get what she needed. Her bag wasn't that big. The store had also been picked pretty clean, so there wasn't much to choose from. Alice wouldn't have been surprised if someone had helped themselves to the controlled medicines in the back as well. After the Plague, most people became opportunists.

Granted, she thought, we're doing the same thing—but it's different. She argued with herself, attempting to ease her conscience. *We're only taking what we need. And I'm not happy about it. That counts for something, right?* A small pang twinged the pit of her stomach. She pushed it away. She didn't have time for post-apocalyptic guilt trips. Survival was more important. She glanced nervously around the store, watching for movement.

Where is Dinah?

Silently, Alice slunk back to the counter. She strained her ears, listening for the sound of her sister rifling through shelves, but couldn't hear anything. The building was eerily quiet. Her heart pounded erratically. She stretched on her tiptoes to peek over the tall counter, searching for Dinah. Nothing. She was about to whisper for her when something lunged over the counter.

"Hey!" Dinah growled and grabbed Alice's forearm. Alice nearly peed herself. Panicked, she gasped in a huge breath of air and choked on it. She burst into a fit of

coughing. By the time she could finally breathe, Dinah was doubled over in hysterics. She stood next to Alice, her hand on her shoulder.

“Oh...my...God.” She dissolved into a fit of giggles. “I’m...sorry.” She paused, succumbing to more laughter. “I couldn’t...” Alice rolled her eyes as Dinah let out a loud snort. “...help it. You should have seen your face.” Tears streamed down her cheeks as she fought to compose herself.

“Ha. Ha.” Alice bristled; her heart still beat violently against her chest. She scowled at her sister, but couldn’t stay angry for long. Dinah was a mess. Clutching her side and leaning against the counter for support, she was practically falling over. Finally, the lack of oxygen caught up to her, and she broke into a fit of heaving coughs before slowly standing.

“Serves you right,” Alice hissed. “I could have died of heart failure.”

“Oh, you’re fine.” Dinah wiped the tears from her cheeks. “You need to lighten up. Come on, let’s get the rest of our groceries. Then we can go to the library.” Just like that, she crept to the grocery aisles as if she hadn’t nearly scared Alice out of her skin. Like there wasn’t anything to be worried about. Alice shook her head, resigned.

That was Dinah.

Dinah behaved the rest of the time they were at the store. They filled their bags with anything imperishable they could carry. When they were finished, they zipped their bags and left for the old library.

Though the library was technically part of Tolleson, it remained outside the area that turned into the Sector. It was a little under a quarter mile beyond the fence at the end of the commune, so even though Alice could see it from the safety of the Sector,

she was only able to go when they went scouting. It was infuriating. Dinah knew how much Alice loved books, though, so she took Alice whenever she could.

The library was exactly as Alice remembered it. Even through the apocalypse, it remained the same, a small haven in the middle of the end of the world. The smell of books lingered in the air, and the silence that was so awkward everywhere else was perfectly acceptable and welcome here.

“Go find your books. I’ll wait for you.” Dinah picked up an old tabloid and plopped into one of the oversized armchairs in the front sitting area. A cloud of dust puffed out of the faded burgundy fabric and flew in her face. She coughed and waved the dirt away. “Ugh!” She spluttered, turning to face the window. She looked warily at the dimming skyline. “You’d better hurry up though,” she said. “We need to get home before dark.”

“I’ll be quick,” Alice promised, walking to the checkout desk. First, she needed to return her old books. “Here you go,” she said softly to the imaginary librarian as she set them on the counter. “Right on time, so there won’t be any late fees.”

Smiling at her own joke, she ventured to search for the perfect books. *Fantasy*, *this time*, she decided. She settled on three titles—*Peter Pan*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*. She collected them together and knelt to tuck them safely into her backpack. She was in the middle of squeezing *Peter* between a pack of cookies and a case of noodles when she heard a small crash followed by what sounded like the dulled thudding of books toppling to the carpet. She sighed and rolled her eyes. Probably Dinah trying to scare her again.

“Very funny, Dinah,” Alice singsonged, walking to the end of the aisle. “You’re not going to get me twice,” She leaned around the shelves to see where her sister was hiding.

“What are you talking about?” Dinah called from behind. A nervous thrill shot through Alice’s chest. She whirled around, dismayed to find her sister.

“Wait.” She pointed dumbly. “If you’re here, what was...” Her voice trailed off as she turned to where the crash came from. A shadowy figure lunged at her, letting out a guttural howl. Alice lurched back into Dinah. For one awful instant, she took in its patchy hair, milky eyes, and missing fingers. Alice froze, paralyzed until another gurgling cry from the momerath snapped her into action.

“Go, Dinah! Go!” Alice pushed against her sister. Dinah didn’t have to be told twice. She clamped her hand around Alice’s wrist and yanked, dragging her towards the library exit. Behind her, Alice heard the ragged, wheezing breaths of the momerath furiously chasing after them. They moved quickly through the rows of books, hustling to the main entrance. She scanned the dusty library, looking for anything to use as a weapon. An ancient book cart had been left in the middle of one of the aisles, overloaded with untended literature. Alice shoved it backwards as hard as she could, hurtling it into the momerath pursuing her. The rusty wheels moved for the first time in years, causing the heavy cart to groan in protest until it stopped abruptly, followed by a loud crash. Alice had the satisfaction of hearing the momerath cry in rage as the obstacle smashed into its decaying body.

“Don't look back, *don't look back,*” Alice coached herself. She urged her legs forward. She knew checking behind would only slow her down, but curiosity overpowered her will. The momerath was on her heels, less than six steps away. Dried

blood caked the sides of its wounds and coated its fingers, the only evidence it had torn its own flesh to shreds. It limped after them on a horribly shattered ankle, forcing its weight on the side of its foot instead of the sole. Still, it was fast. It prowled after them in a fresh burst of speed, a stark contrast to the raspy gasps coming from its chest.

“Now is really not the time to be talking to yourself, Alice!” Dinah wheeled around the corner of the self-help section towards the main entrance. “Pay attention!”

“I’m doing fine, thanks!” Alice snapped back. “But if you don’t pick up the pace, we’re going to be dead meat!” *Pun intended*, she thought.

They escaped the corridors of books and Alice pushed to catch up to Dinah. She could make out the shaky rattle coming from the momerath’s chest—it was still too close.

“We’re almost there! I can see the door!” Dinah’s cry pulled Alice’s attention forward. The front entry waited for them as peacefully as it had when they first came inside. Looks really could be deceiving.

Only thirty feet...twenty feet to go. Alice’s sides burned as she pushed her body to its limit. *Keep going,* she instructed herself. *Ten feet...* They were going to make it.

Suddenly, Dinah was no longer beside her. Alice turned and saw her tuck and roll off the dusty carpet. Her heart lurched as the momerath lunged, rage flashing in its dead eyes. Luckily, Dinah fell well and kept moving, almost seamlessly. She scrambled up, commanding Alice to keep running.

“Are you okay?” Alice screamed, acutely aware of how shrill she sounded over the lump of her heart in her throat. At least it was beating a little more regularly now that Dinah was up and running again.

"I'm fine," Dinah said. "I just tripped. I might have twisted my knee, but I'll be alright. Just...keep...going." Alice could hear how winded her sister was. She glanced over and saw beads of sweat sprouting from Dinah's forehead, her face flushed with exertion. Worried, she turned to see how far they were from the door and almost cried with joy when she saw they had made it. She pushed all her energy into slamming the front door open, bursting through with Dinah on her heels.

The extra energy used was worth the effort. Right after Dinah passed through the frame, the momentum from the swing slammed it shut. The heavy glass door barreled into the momerath, shattering the door's paneling and sending the monster sprawling flat on its back.

They didn't stick around to see what happened next. Alice clutched Dinah's hand, sure the momerath was mere seconds from getting up and following them home. They sprinted the rest of the way to the commune, weaving around lonely Joshua trees before finally flinging themselves up the branches of their mesquite tree and dropping into the fencing median of the Sector. They didn't stop until they slid themselves through the rabbit hole in the fence and climbed out from behind the prickler bush. Alice didn't even care about the twigs caught in her hair and clothes. They made it. She couldn't believe they had made it.

Finally safe, she scooted out from under the bush and lay flat on the desert floor, exhausted. She greedily gulped air, relishing the way it felt whooshing in and out of her lungs. Turning to her sister, Alice felt the gritty earth on the side of her cheek. Unlike her, Dinah stood hunched, gasping. Suddenly, her ragged breaths turned into a large bout of coughs, and she fell to her knees, her arms the only thing keeping her from collapsing to the ground.

Alice was up in a flash. “Dinah, are you okay? You weren’t bit, were you?” Panic flooded her chest, freezing her in place.

“No, I don’t think so. It didn’t even come close to me,” Dinah said. “I was pretty awesome, if I do say so myself.” She pretended to pat herself on the back, but Alice didn’t miss the way she warily eyed her arms.

“We’d better check you out anyway.” Alice extended her hand to hoist Dinah up. “Let’s get you home and cleaned off.”

It was dark by the time they made it home. Dinah went straight upstairs to clean herself up while Alice shuffled to the kitchen to prepare a makeshift dinner. Beanie Weenies with canned peaches and a glass of cola were on the evening menu. She set the plates on the table, looking at their sad presentation. *What the hell*, she thought, dropping four cookies on each plate, *we earned it*.

“All clear.” Dinah towed her hair as she walked into the kitchen. “Got a pretty good carpet burn on my back from when I hit the floor, but otherwise I’m clean.” She lifted the hem of her shirt to show Alice the evidence.

“Good,” Alice said, although *good* didn’t begin to cover it. If Dinah had been bitten, or the momerath had gotten her... She wasn’t going to think about it. Dinah was fine. There was nothing to worry about.

“Good,” Dinah agreed, a huge yawn escaping from her mouth.

“Tired?”

“Yeah.” Dinah stretched out her arms. “Actually, if you don’t mind, I’m going to take my food to my room and head to bed. I’m pretty beat.” She reached for her plate.

“That’s fine. I’m gonna head up and read for a bit before I go to bed too,” Alice said. Truth be told, she was going to suggest Dinah go to bed anyway. She looked

awful. Dark, heavy bags had started to form under her eyes and she couldn't stop yawning. It had been a traumatic day though, and Alice was tired too. Hitting the sack early wouldn't hurt either of them.

"Thanks, Alice. You did great today, by the way." Dinah flashed her a small smile. She turned and padded up the stairs to her room. The door shut softly, and the house was quiet.

"Yeah, way to not get eaten, Alice," she told herself. She picked up her plate and dropped it in the sink, not bothering to rinse it. She would clean it in the morning. Right now, she was exhausted and ready for bed. "Maybe next time you can actually kill the thing instead of just knocking it out." She grimaced, fully aware it was only dumb luck that had saved them. She walked upstairs to her room, wondering what she would do the next time she ran into a momerath— if there was a next time. All she knew was if it did happen, she didn't ever want to be that helpless and scared again.

