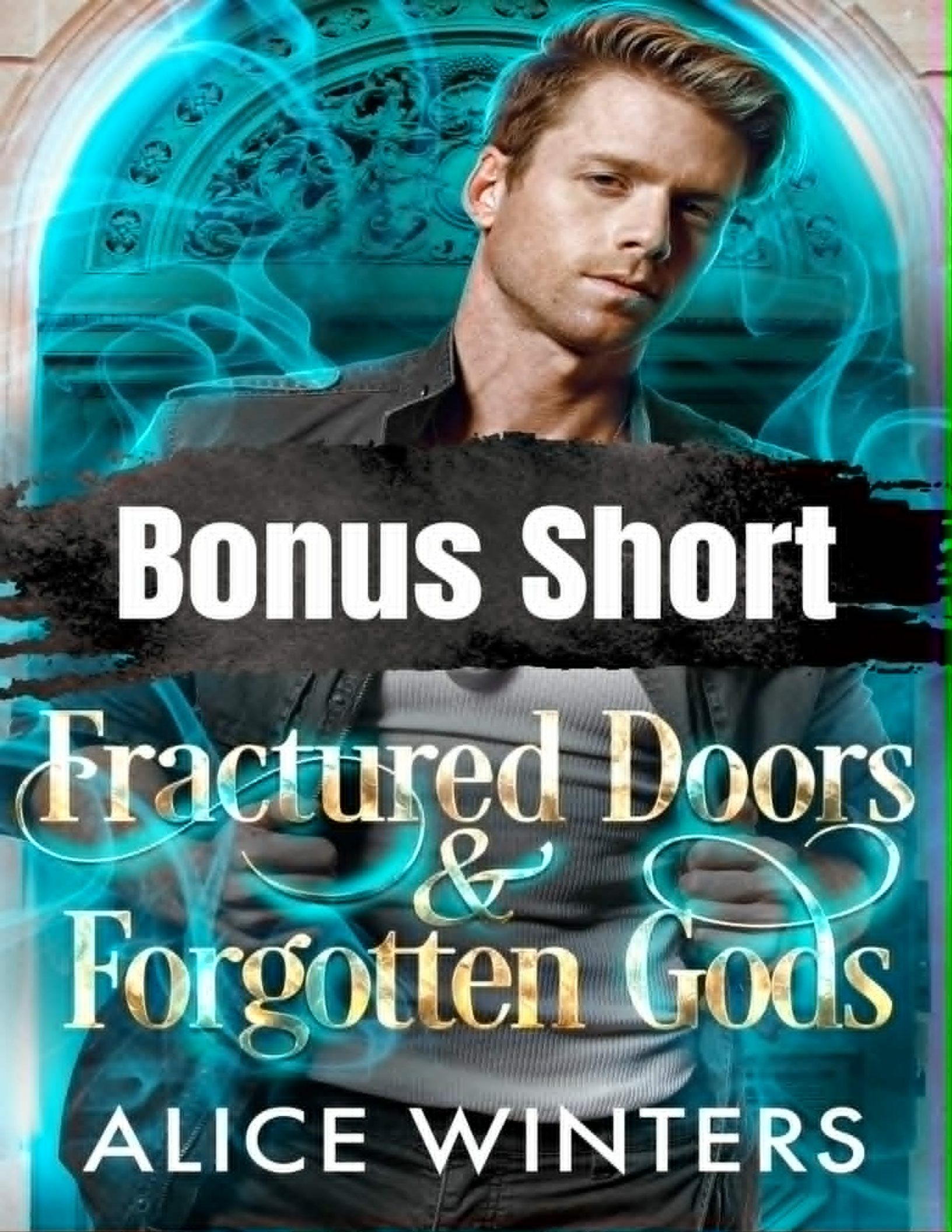




Bonus Short

**Fractured Doors
&
Forgotten Gods**

ALICE WINTERS

The Necromancer vs. The Endurance Course

Alice Winters

Proofed: Courtney Bassett

*This short is to be read after the events of Fractured Doors. In this short, we are jumping back to Mickey and Riley at the academy.

Mickey

“You’re going to be late.”

I crack open one eye and look up as Riley and Tommy look down at me. I’d found a nice little spot in the sun to nap, right out of sight of the professor who surely stormed by and would have offered me a boot to the ribs if he caught me.

“I’m never late,” I announce.

“You’re always *trying* to be late. If it weren’t for your undead, you’d be significantly late every day,” Riley says as I stretch. Tommy seems to think that me stretching was me offering him my arms since he takes them and starts to drag me.

No part of this is pleasant, but I don’t complain because I make it to class on time. If anyone is even a second late to his class, he won’t allow them to join until they run ten miles and write an essay about why being on time matters.

The last time I was late, I had someone carry me for the ten miles *while* I wrote the essay and was reprimanded, as though I possibly did something wrong. How was being efficient wrong? I honestly should have gotten bonus points.

“All students should be on their *feet*, Mr. Rowe,” Professor Dean barks.

Tommy puts me on my feet.

Professor Dean does not seem to appreciate my valiant efforts to live by his rules.

“Today we will be participating in the obstacle course. If you do not finish within the time limit, you will be removed from my class, do you understand?” he asks, oddly looking right at me.

I lean into Riley. “Do you kind of feel like the professor is trying to get rid of me? Or do you think he keeps looking at me because I’m his favorite?”

Riley looks over and offers me a thumbs-up and a smile. “I have faith in you.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Do you?”

“No. But I’m hopeful,” he says.

I don’t quite know which part he’s hopeful about because the only part of this that is going to go well is Professor Dean smiling as he thinks about how fun it’ll be to kick me out of his class... and this class is an absolute requirement to become an agent.

“This class is only for tall people. It’s biased toward tall people,” I grumble until Riley points over at Macy who is a good four inches shorter than me and has never placed lower than fifth in any of these competitions. I pretend I don’t see or notice her or comprehend the fact that she tends to place extremely well.

“You can do it, Mickey!” she says, clearly pitying me.

We head outside to the starting line where Tommy rushes over to retie my left shoe. Professor Dean scowls at this because he’s obviously jealous he doesn’t have a Tommy to tie his shoe.

“You know the drill. Two miles, then hit the tires, over the wall, complete the crawl, then up the rope and back again, including the two

miles. You are not allowed to ride on the back of anything, *Mr. Rowe.*”

“I would never dream of such a thing,” I say as I try to quickly cram the undead horse back into the earth. Although... he never said anything about being dragged by something. I could just cling to the horse’s tail and hope I don’t burn the skin off my ass on the other side.

“You may not be *dragged* by anything, *Mr. Rowe.*”

My arm shoots up.

“Yes, *Mr. Rowe.*”

“Why do all of your comments seem extremely pointed toward me? Is it because I’m your favorite?”

“Sure,” he says. “Now on the count of three. Three... two... one.”

And off everyone goes. I take off as well, but they’ve already left me in the dust.

“Riiiiileeeey. Don’t leeeave me,” I whine as he leaves me without even a single care in the world. Like... who really needs to learn how to run for more than fifteen feet? Would we really chase an enemy for two miles and then climb a wall *and* dangle from a rope to catch up to them? I’m more than confident that if they can outrun me after twenty feet then they fully deserve to go free.

After the one-mile mark around the track, my legs are burning, and my lungs have decided that residing in my body is too much of an ask and are threatening to explode.

I’m just going to lie down and die.

They can drag my body off the track so others don’t trip on it as they rush back.

Just as Riley charges by on his third or fourth lap, I feel the slightest touch from him as energy tears into my body, pushed into it through whatever magic Riley has just borrowed.

I gasp as I realize that Riley is the most amazing thing to have ever existed in my life. I feel *renewed*.

“Five minutes!” Riley shouts, and I realize that he means that whatever magic he’d just slapped into me will only last for five minutes... and I need to take advantage of it.

I pump my legs as I question if this is what it feels like to have energy. To actually *enjoy* running. I guess this isn’t all that bad! I feel like I can fly! I feel like I’m free!

I’m doing so good that I finish the final mile and head straight toward the wall where Professor Dean stands so he can watch and scrutinize. There’s a small moat right in front of the wall, requiring a jump before one can scale up the wall.

I’m feeling so good I could probably fly at this point. I have no idea what Riley hit me with, but it let me catch up with the others. I rush forward, bursting full of energy, and smack right into the side of the wall as that energy is savagely ripped from my body, leaving it as a husk.

Smashed against the wall, I hug it while I skid down and roll down into the moat, which is where I reside when Riley leaps over on his way back.

“You okay?” he asks as he stops to help me, like he has so much spare time he can help the lesser beings on his merry way.

“You are a monster,” I whisper.

“Because I can run?” he asks.

“Strand, no helping,” Professor Dean barks, and Riley pulls back like I’m made of acid.

“Sorry,” he says, and off he goes to frolic around the track like he’s having the time of his life.

“Tommy, Riley’s annoying me,” I whine as I look over at where my undead are cheering me on. Joy is staring at one of my classmates, a rather ripped man with his shirt off, and Tommy is giving me a little clap.

“You are doing good.”

“He’s really not,” Joy says, not even bothering to look away from the man who heaves himself off to the track with a hair flick. “Don’t give him false hope.”

“Why are you here, Joy?” I cry as I leap up and catch onto a handhold. Everyone else is scaling the wall like they’re fucking spiders and I stagger, scramble, and fumble my way up it. “Why can’t we do like a nap marathon? I’m pretty sure I’d win,” I complain as I reach the top and am pleased with the fact that I can just like throw my useless body over. I hit the ground with an oomph and try to roll my way back to my feet.

The next part is crawling along under a rope through thick sand that I sink down into, but I’m allowed to be in my favorite horizontal position, which is pleasant.

“Tommy, he’s not looking,” I whisper. Tommy rushes over to help drag me, but the second he gets close, Professor Dean’s eyes snap over to me.

I decide I shall just sink into the sand... it’s honestly rather nice. I can pretend I’m at a beach.

“You can do it,” Tommy says.

“Don’t cheer me on, it makes me try harder and I don’t want to try harder,” I whine as I drag my body out and look at the rope dangling from a tall post. At the very top of the significant climb is a little bell we’re required to ring. “Why do we have to climb a rope? Is our enemy just going to scurry up a random rope? When’s the last time you saw a rope just dangling in the wild?” I cry.

No one seems to care about my logic as they climb and ring the bell and hop off like annoying creatures. I jump up, hook my arm over it, and then give myself a massive rope burn when I skid all the way back down the rope to the ground.

“Owie, Tommy, the rope is evil. Fuck it up for me.”

“I will after you’re done, sir,” he says.

I sigh and try again as I struggle to wrap it just right so I won’t slide back down. This is absolutely dreadful and should be considered inhumane and banned, yet here I am doing my absolute best to climb this stupid rope.

When I reach the top and hit the bell, I really expect more applause than just Tommy and Joy clapping away.

“Tommy, catch me,” I say as I let go and Tommy catches me in his arms.

“You only have fifteen seconds left,” Tommy warns me.

“Fifteen seconds to climb all of that and run another two miles? Who the fuck could complete this in time?”

“Ninety percent of the class,” Joy says.

“This is foolish,” I growl as I wave my hand and a flying beastie emerges from the ground. I grab its taloned legs and it lifts me over the wall and drops me down on the other side.

That’s when I notice that Professor Dean hasn’t taken note yet of my flying beastie and is, instead, fixated on his own son who has not finished the course. How sad would that be for him to have caused his own son to be kicked out of his class?

I wave my hand and a row of about seventy undead climb out of the ground, rushing the field so that the second Tommy counts down to zero, Professor Dean’s son who is five seconds too late can’t pass.

“Oh nooooo. That’s so sad. So many of us have failed,” I say as Professor Dean, who would have certainly altered the time so his son could have slid through the finish line, snaps his attention to me.

“What did I say?” he growls.

“That I couldn’t use my undead during the test, but the test was over,” I say as I drop to my knees and decide that I will succumb to death right at his feet as I slide down onto my back. “My lungs have exploded. My legs have burned off. Death awaits me.”

“You’re not dying,” Riley assures me as he kneels next to me and gives me a pat.

“No, but I am awfully sad to have been kicked out of class. But at least Professor Dean’s son can join my pity party with me.”

“Who is being kicked out?” Lt. Lindsey asks as she walks up. While Lt. Lindsey isn’t part of the academy, she is one of the top field agents who graduated here and has a lot of pull at the academy. I’ve never talked to her, although I’ve seen her here and there.

“All of us.” I wave at my flock of losers that I proudly belong to. “Professor Dean said that anyone who didn’t finish his test on time was kicked from his class, so none of us can become agents.”

Lt. Lindsey’s eyes are on my undead who have noticed a cat and are all crowded around it to pet it like it’s some magical being.

“Some of us are extremely talented physically but others are very talented with their magic and their smarts,” Riley says. “It’s a shame to lose such a talented group of people who excel at magic and intelligence all because they can’t climb a wall with their measly little legs.”

“That was like... really kind until that last bit, Riley. We should be best friends.”

“Are we not already?”

Lt. Lindsey is still staring at my undead, and now I wonder if I did something to offend her. It's rare, but I do get the occasional person or two who find my magic quite distasteful.

"All of those people are dead, are they not?" she asks.

"Yes. All but the cat. But if you want a cat, I can give you one," I say as I call up a cat and hand it off to her.

She takes it and examines every inch of the purring feline. Then she sets it back down and goes, "I see." Then she starts off as Professor Dean stands there staring at his son who won't make eye contact with him. Professor Dean is a proud man who refuses to back down. Everyone knows that if he goes back on his declaration, it'll be to save his son and it'll look quite poor for him, causing him to lose respect.

"Riley, drag me to the gate. My legs cannot carry me to my pity party."

Lt. Lindsey stops and looks back at us. "No one from this class will be dismissed. I will be monitoring each individual myself."

There are murmurs among the class, seeing as Lt. Lindsey never concerns herself with the students.

"Work hard and don't make me regret this decision," she says.

"She was definitely not talking to me," I mutter.

"You sure?" Riley asks. "I think she was rather impressed with how alive your undead look. They were so alive she had to *ask* if they were undead. Lt. Lindsey, one of the best, had to ask if something a necromancer called up was undead."

I consider that for a moment before brushing it off. "Carry me."

"Why?"

"As your final feat of strength," I say.

Riley laughs and picks me up off the ground before unhelpfully putting me on my own two feet. They're made of Jell-O as I stagger and then climb onto Joy's back. She'll probably try to run my head into a doorframe, but it'll be worth it not to use my own legs.

I dismiss the undead before I grow attached to them, but I feel guilty doing so.

"Those of you who did not finish the course will run it every day this week," Professor Dean demands.

I cough. "Oh no, *cough, cough*, I think I've come down with something. Riley, feel my forehead. Don't I feel hot?"

"I really don't want to touch your sweaty forehead," Riley says.

"*Cough, cough*. My life is so sad. I've never wanted to do anything more than torture my body for four days straight, but I got a horrible sickness and now must rest in my bed."

"If you miss this week for any reason *including illness*, you will run it every day for a month," Professor Dean threatens.

"Oh, joyous day, I've been cured," I say.

"Fear cured you?" Riley asks.

"Sure as fuck did," I grumble. "Hey, Riley... what are your thoughts of smacking me with that spell you did earlier... but like every five minutes during the course?"

"It will make you extremely sick. I can do it once a day."

"Why are all my fun plans destroyed so easily? I simply want to become a medical examiner. I plan to work with dead bodies. How many dead bodies are going to climb a rope to the ceiling? I can simply unalive them if they do! I wouldn't even have to get out of my chair! And while I'm off going through intensive medical classes, some of you get to just run around, and yet we're all tossed in the same class together? Unfair."

“You want to get a beer to drown your sorrows?”

“I sure do. And then we’re going to find me a sexy man who will love everything about me.”

“And that brings us to me meeting you! The sexy man of my dreams! I’m so glad Riley found you and brought you home to me,” I declare.

The sexy man in question is sure giving me a menacing look. I really feel like it should be more of an “I adore everything about you, Mickey, and I will move mountains for you.” Like why did Riley get a guy ready to risk his life for him and the only one I can find looks like he’d enjoy crushing me?

“I’m very confused. Which part of that story was supposed to make me fall in love with you?” he asks.

“I really don’t know. I was just enjoying having your captive attention,” I admit.

“Disgusting. I’m going to go see if I can punch something.”

“How delightful! Carry me and I will go with you.”

“I would rather you throw fire at my back than your body.”

“Ahhhh, so you’re saying that being near me makes your body feel like it’s on fire. Mine too. Mine too.”

“Fucking hell. What a mess.”

I beam at him and trot after him, pleased as could be.