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Opening extract from

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Everlasting

Chapter 1 & 2

‘Ever – wait!’

Damen reached toward me, grasping my shoulder, hoping to slow me, to bring me back to him, but I keep moving forward, can’t afford the delay. Not when we’re so close, almost there.

The worry streaming off him like rain from a windshield, not dimming in the least when he picks up the pace, matches my stride, and laces his fingers with mine.

‘We should head back. This can’t be the place. Nothing about it looks remotely the same.’ His gaze travels the distance from the disturbing landscape to my face.

‘You’re right. Nothing about it is remotely the same.’ I hover at the perimeter, my breath coming too quick, my heart beginning to race. Taking a moment to survey my surroundings before I hazard a step forward again. One small stride followed by another, until my feet sink so deep into the mud-laden earth, the tops of them vanish completely. ‘I knew it,’ I whisper, the words barely audible, though I don’t need to speak for Damen to hear me, it’s just as easy to communicate telepathically. ‘It’s exactly like the dream. It’s . . .’

He looks at me. Waiting.

‘Well, it’s just as I expected.’ I glance to the side, my blue eyes meeting his dark ones, holding the look, wanting him to see what I see. ‘All of this, everything you see here, it’s like . . . it’s like it’s all changed because of me.’

He kneels beside me, fingers splayed on my back, running his palm in slow circles up and down the path of my spine. Wanting to soothe, to refute everything I just said, but choosing to swallow the words instead. No matter what he says – no matter how good and solid an argument he may wage – he knows better. Knows all too well that I will not be swayed.

I heard the old woman. He heard her too. Saw the way her finger pointed, the way her eyes stared accusingly – listened to the haunting tune of her creepy song with its cryptic lyrics and lingering melody.

The warning intended solely for me.

And now this.

I sigh as I gaze upon it – Haven’s grave – so to speak. The spot where just a few weeks before I dug deep into the earth to bury her belongings – all that was left of her – the clothes she wore when I sent her soul into the Shadowland. A spot I held sacred, hallowed – now transmuted, transformed. The once rich earth turned to a wet, soggy mush with no sign of the flowers I’d manifested, no life of any kind. The air no longer shimmering, no longer glistening, virtually indistinguishable from the dark part of Summerland I’d stumbled upon earlier. So bleak, so foreboding in both its feel and appearance, Damen and I are the only creatures willing to venture anywhere near it.

The birds keeping to the perimeter – the carpet of nearby grass shrinking back on itself – providing all the evidence I need to know it’s changed because of me.

Like fertilizer sprinkled onto a small patch of weeds – each immortal soul I’ve sent to the Shadowland has tainted and infected the Summerland. Creating its opposite, it’s shadow self

– an unwelcome yin to Summerland's yang. A place so dark, so dreary, and so contrary, magick and manifesting cannot exist.

'I don't like this.' Damen's voice is edgy, as his eyes dart, eager to leave.

And while I don't like it either, while I'm just as ready to turn around and never look back, it's not quite as simple as that.

It's only been a few days since my last visit, and despite knowing that I did what I had to, that I was left with no choice but to kill Haven, my former best friend, I can't seem to keep myself from returning, from asking forgiveness – forgiveness for my actions as well as hers. And that short amount of time is all it took to go from light to dark – to grow murky, muddy, and barren – which means it's up to me to do something to stop it from spreading even further.

From getting any worse.

'What exactly did you see in the dream?' Damen's voice softens as his eyes pore over me.

I take a deep breath and sink my heels deeper, the pockets of my old worn jeans dipping into the mud, but not really caring. I can manifest a clean, new pair just as soon as we're out of here. My clothes are the least of my concerns in the face of all this.

'It's not a new dream.' I turn and meet his gaze, seeing the flash of surprise that crosses his face. 'I've had it before. A long time ago. Just before you decided to leave me on my own, so I could decide between you and Jude.' He swallows hard, flinches ever so slightly at the unpleasant memory, which makes me feel bad, it wasn't the point I was trying to make. 'Back then, I was sure Riley had sent it. I mean, she appeared in it, and she seemed so vibrant and . . . alive.' I shake my head. 'And, well, maybe it was her, maybe it was just wishful thinking, a result of my missing her. But, just after she'd gotten my attention, I realized it was you she wanted me to see. You were the point of the dream.'

His eyes widen. 'And . . .' he prompts, jaw tightening, poised for the worst.

'And . . . it's like you were trapped in this tall, glass, rectangular prison, and you were fighting like hell to escape. But no matter how hard you fought, you couldn't break free. Even though I tried to help, tried to get your attention so we could work together, it's like . . . like you couldn't see me. I was right there on the other side, with only the glass between us, and yet, I may as well have been invisible to you – you had no sense of my presence. Couldn't see what was right there in front of you . . .'

He nods. Nods in a way that tells me his logical side, the side that likes tidy explanations and easy solutions, is raring to take over. 'Classic dreamscape scenario,' he says, brow slanted with relief. 'Seriously. Sounds to me like you think I'm not paying you enough attention – that I don't really listen – or maybe even –'

But before he can go any further, I cut it right there. 'Trust me, it wasn't the kind of dream that can be found in some Dream Interpretation One-oh-one book. In tonight's dream, just like the dream I had before, when you realized you couldn't fight it, when you realized you were trapped forever, well, you gave up. You just dropped your fists, closed your eyes, and slipped away. Slipped into the Shadowland.'

He swallows hard, tries to take it in his stride, but it's no use. He's clearly as shaken as I was when I dreamed it.

'And then, just after that, everything disappeared. And by everything I mean you, the glass prison, the stage – all of it. The only thing left was this gloomy patch of earth, a lot like the one we're in now.' I rub my lips together, seeing the scene so clearly in my head it's as though I'm

immersed in it. ‘But that last part was new. I mean, it wasn’t in the original dream. Still, the second I woke I knew that not only were the two dreams connected, but that they were connected to this place as well. I knew I had to come here. Had to see for myself. See if I as right. I’m just sorry I dragged you along for the ride.’

My eyes graze over him, taking in his bed-ruffled hair, the soft, wrinkled T-shirt, the worn-in jeans – clothes gathered in a hurry, in haste, just seconds before I manifested the golden veil of light that led us both here. Feeling his strong, capable arms sliding around me, the warmth of them reminding me of just a few hours earlier when we slid between the sheets, tucked our bodies tightly together, and settled in for the night.

Back when our only immediate concern was that of Sabine and how she would handle the second week in a row that I’d failed to go home.

How she’d handle the fact that I took her at her word when she warned me not to come back until I sought the kind of help she’s convinced that I need.

And while I’ve no doubt I need help, especially in light of all that’s before me, unfortunately it’s not the kind of help Sabine meant. It’s not the kind of help that can be found in a prescription, a psychiatrist’s couch, or even the latest self-help book.

It requires something much greater than that.

We linger, the two of us gazing upon Haven’s grave. Damen’s thoughts carefully melding with mine, reminding me that no matter the consequences, no matter what lies ahead, he’s there for me. I had no choice but to do what I did.

By killing Haven, I saved Miles. Saved myself. She couldn’t handle the power, pushed every last limit. My making her immortal brought out a whole new side of her – one that we didn’t expect.

But that’s where Damen and I differ. I’m more inclined to believe what Miles said just shortly after I’d spared him from her. That there was nothing new or surprising about Haven’s dark side, it’d always been there, she exhibited signs all along. But, as her friends, we fought to ignore it – chose to look past it, to see only the light. And when I looked into her eyes that night, saw the way they gleamed with victory when she tossed Roman’s shirt – my last remaining hope of getting the antidote that will allow Damen and me to be together – into the flames, well, there was no doubt in my mind that her dark side had completely extinguished the better part of her.

And as far as Drina’s death is concerned, well, it was either kill or be killed. It’s as simple as that. Roman’s the unfortunate one – but still an accident pure and simple. A misunderstanding of the most tragic kind, I’m sure of that now. I know in my heart that Jude’s disastrous interference was an act he committed solely in my best interest. His intentions were good.

I saw it unfold in his head.

We rise to our feet, slowly, solemnly, all too aware that the answers we seek won’t be found here, that our best bet is to start at the Great Halls of Learning and see where that leads. And we’re just about to go there, when we hear it. The tune that causes us to freeze:

From the mud it shall rise
Lifting upward toward vast dreamy skies
Just as you – you – you shall rise too . . .

Damen grasps my hand tighter, pulls me closer, as we turn to face her together. Taking in the long wisps of hair that, having escaped the confines of the braid that trails down her back,

float freely around her crumpled, ancient face, making for an eerie silvery halo effect, while her rheumy, cataract-clumped eyes settle on mine.

From the deep and dark depths
It struggles toward the light
Desiring only one thing
The truth!
The truth of its being
But will you let it?
Will you let it rise and blossom and grow?
Or will you damn it to the depths?
Will you banish its worn and weary soul?

She repeats that tune, emphasising the end of each verse. Her voice rising as she sings, ‘Rise – skies – too – depths – light – thing – truth – being – it – grow – depth – soul – soul – soul –‘ repeating the last part again and again, her eyes moving over me, analyzing, observing, even though they appear to be sightless, as her gnarled, bumpy old hands lift before her – cupping, rising – her fingers slowly unfolding as a spray of ash spews forth from her palms.

Damen’s grip tightens, flashing her a harsh meaningful glare as he warns, ‘Stay back.’ Maneuvering in front of me, when he adds, ‘Stop right there. Don’t come any closer.’ His voice level, sure, containing an underlying threat that’s impossible to miss.

But if she heard, she pays him no notice. Her feet keep moving, shuffling forward, while her eyes keep staring and her lips continue to utter the tune. Stopping just shy of us, poised, right at the very edge of the perimeter – the place where the grass ends and the mud begins – her voice suddenly changing, lowering, when she says, ‘We’ve been waiting for you.’ She bows low before me, bending with a surprising amount of agility and grace for someone so aged, so . . . antiquated.

‘So you’ve said,’ I reply, much to Damen’s dismay.

Don’t engage her! he mentally warns. Just follow my lead. I’ll get us out of here.

Words I’m sure she overheard when her gaze switches to him. The sun-bleached blue of her clumpy old irises practically rolling in their sockets when she says, ‘Damen.’

The sound of it causing him to stiffen, as he mentally and physically prepares for just about anything – anything except what comes next.

‘Damen, Augustus. Notte. Esposito. You’re the reason.’ Her wispy hair lifts and twirls in a manifested breeze that swirls all around. ‘And Adelina, the cure.’ She presses her palm together as her gaze pleads with mine.

I glance between them, unable to decide which is more disturbing: the fact that she knows his name – his full name, including one I’ve never heard of before, along with one pronounced in a way I’ve never heard before, or the way Damen’s face blanched and his body stalled the moment she blamed him.

Not to mention, who the heck is Adelina?

But the replies that swirl through his mind die long before they can reach his lips, halted by the lilt of her voice, saying, ‘Eight. Eight. Thirteen. Oh. Eight. It’s the key. The key that you need.’

I glance between the two of them, noting the way his eyes narrow, his jaws grind, muttering a string of undecipherable words under his breath as he grips my hands tighter and attempts to heave us both out of the mud, away from her.

But despite his warning me not to look back, I do anyway. Glancing over my shoulder and staring right into those rheumy old eyes, her skin so fragile, so translucent, it appears to be lit from within, her lips softly yielding as she sings, 'Eight – eight – thirteen – oh – eight. That's the beginning. The beginning of the end. Only you can unlock it. Only you – you – you – Adelina . . .'

The words lingering, haunting, taunting – chasing us all the way out of Summerland.

All the way back to the earth plane.

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