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Opening extract from
Life Eternal

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CHAPTER 1

THE LITTLE SISTER



A DIM LIGHT SHONE THROUGH the fog rising off the lake. Wading into the water, I swam towards it until a red rowing boat materialized from the mist. It creaked when a woman leaned out, squinting into the night. She was just close enough for me to see her hands tremble as she steadied herself. My limbs grew still. The ripples lapped against my lips as I sank lower in the water. Alert, the woman pushed the hood back from her face, letting her dull hair flutter about her cheeks.

“Who are you?” Annette LaBarge said, her voice carrying over the water. The beam of her flashlight passed

in front of me, searching the surface.

I didn't dare move lest there was anyone watching us. No one could know I was here.

Her lips quivered. "Show yourself." Her eyes seemed to linger on me, though her gaze was out of focus.

I held my breath. A breeze skimmed the lake, making her boat drift. Switching off the light, she dipped her oars into the water and began to row away from me. The fog folded around her until there was nothing left but a wake, undulating behind her like two dark ribbons. Soundlessly, I followed it.

And then the water went still, and I was alone. I stopped, treading in place as I listened for the sound of her oars, but all was silent. Before I could look up, something swung down over my head. With a swift move of the arm, I grabbed the shovel from Miss LaBarge's hands and twisted it from her grasp, the water splashing around us as it slipped from my fingers and sank into the depths of the lake.

She stumbled back, bracing herself on the seat. Seizing the opportunity, I reached for the edge of her boat and curled my fingers over its wooden rim, raising myself out of the water. The boat tilted towards me.

"Stop!" she shouted, blinking into the darkness. "Don't come closer!"

Before I could speak, something in the distance

splashed. We both froze and turned to search the darkness. Whispers travelled over the wind. The water around us rippled with a nearby disturbance.

Miss LaBarge's eyes darted around the darkness, finally resting on me. "Who are you?" she asked. "Why have you followed me?"

Waves began to swell around us. "Be quiet," I said, my voice low as I watched the water slosh against the side of the boat. I had to take her now, before anyone could find us.

Through the fog came the sound of kicking, as if something were swimming towards us. Miss LaBarge turned, her scarf flapping against her face. "Who have you come with? What do you want?"

"Shut up," I said, grabbing the edge of her boat. The wood creaked beneath her as she backed away from me. "Stop moving!" I said, trying to control my voice.

Frantically, she fumbled with her flashlight as I tried to pull myself onto her boat; but the water was heavy on my clothes. Gasping, she kicked at my knuckles, peeling my fingers off the wood until I couldn't hang on any longer. Thrashing, I made one last attempt to thrust myself onto the boat, but it bobbed away from me, and I slipped back into the lake.

When I surfaced, Miss LaBarge shined her yellow beam into my eyes. I winced, my wet hair dangling at my shoulders.

“You?” she said, surprised. As she stared at my face, the moon reflected off her eyes, making them glow white. Before she could say anything more, something splashed in the distance; this time, closer. She glanced over her shoulder, her features contorting with fear.

I didn’t have time to respond. Miss LaBarge dropped her flashlight into the basin of the boat and grabbed the oars. Rowing as quickly as she could, she disappeared once more into the mist.

I wiped my eyes and peered around the lake, trying to discern her position. Then came the sound of her breath, heavy and quick, in rhythm with her oars as they dipped in and out, in and out, in and out. I followed the sound, pushing through the swells until a small, rocky island appeared out of the fog.

The waves rolled off the lake and crashed onto the shore, carrying Miss LaBarge’s tiny boat. I watched as she jumped into the water and trudged towards the beach, towing her boat behind her. When I picked up my pace, a dark figure rose out of the wave in front of me. Moments later, another emerged, followed by another – what seemed like dozens of dark, irregular shapes, small and slick. They crawled onto the beach, their movements abrupt and frenetic, and began to run over the rocks towards Miss LaBarge. I dived towards the shore, moving through the darkness until I saw her, swinging an oar wildly at the

creatures as I approached. Above us, a shrill and deafening cry resonated through the night.

I awoke to the sound of the phone ringing. Sitting up in bed, I blinked. It was another wet August morning, so early the sun had barely risen behind the clouds. Relieved to find myself in my room, I slumped back into the pillows and listened to the rain tap against the windowpanes of my grandfather’s house. I’d been having strange, dark dreams all summer, all the same in only one way: in each of them, I was desperately searching for someone.

On the pillow beside me sat one of my mother’s old books on Monitoring history. My grandfather had given me a stack of them at the beginning of the summer, to educate me on what I was, what everyone in my family was: Monitors, people born with the innate talent to sense death, or more specifically, the Undead. Once trained, I’d be charged with the task of tracking the Undead and putting them to rest by burial, a task that had been haunting me ever since I’d found out about the undercover world of Monitors and the Undead.

I glanced at the book. Spread across the page I’d been reading last night was a passage on the Monitor migration to the Midwest, accompanied by a photograph of Lake Erie. When I’d seen it, a wave of panic had pushed against

my chest, making my breath grow shallow. Suddenly, everything felt heavy, and I couldn't bear to look at the photograph any longer. That was the last thing I remembered before falling asleep.

The phone rang once more, then stopped. The clock on my nightstand read 5.42 a.m., which was early even for the mansion staff; the only people awake at this hour were the kitchen help. Outside, someone hurried down the hall towards my grandfather's bedroom. There were three loud raps on his door, fumbling, then voices.

Kicking off the sheets, I slid out of bed and peered down the hallway. My grandfather's door was cracked open, letting a thin line of light shine across the carpet.

I crept down the hall and waited by a linen closet.

"You found whom?" My grandfather's voice was sharp. "Where was she?"

Silence.

"Was she trailing one of them? Where was her partner?"

A shadow passed by the door, blocking the light. I strained to hear what was going on, but my grandfather's voice was muffled. He slammed the phone back into the cradle.

Without warning, the door flew open and my grandfather burst into the hall, pulling on his coat. Dustin, his estate manager, struggled behind him with my grand-

father's briefcase and travelling bag. Ducking inside the linen closet, I crouched next to a hamper of dirty laundry and waited. When I was sure both men were downstairs, I slipped back into my room and went to the window.

A damp breeze blew in through the screen. From where I stood, I could see Dustin juggling the two bags and holding an umbrella over my grandfather as he ran out the front door and into his Aston Martin. Dustin deposited the bags in the trunk, and I watched as the car lurched down the driveway, turned, and sped out of sight.

I tried to go back to sleep but ended up drifting in and out of my dream, haunted by the face of Miss LaBarge, my philosophy professor at Gottfried Academy. "You?" she'd said, as if she'd been frightened of me. What had she meant?

A knock on the door pulled me back into the day. Outside it was still drizzling, the sun a faint orb behind the clouds.

I pulled on a sweater and opened the door. "Yes?"

Dustin entered, bald and droopy as an earlobe, balancing an elaborate platter of eggs, pancakes, sausages, and fruit. His suit was tight around his paunch. When he saw me, he froze. "My," he said, his forehead wrinkling as he studied me. "You truly *do* look older. Remarkable."

A draught came in from the hall, and I wrapped my arms around myself. “What?”

“Oh, come now. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten what day it is. I saw your light on and took the chance that you were awake. Breakfast in bed? I’ve brought you exactly seventeen items to commemorate the occasion.”

My birthday, of course. I leaned against my bedpost as Dustin arranged the platter on my nightstand. I hadn’t forgotten it, exactly; I had just replaced it. Now it was the day my parents had died, exactly one year ago. The day Dante had died, seventeen years ago. “I told you, I don’t want to celebrate.”

“Oh, yes, yes. It’s a sombre occasion, I know,” Dustin said, folding a napkin. “But your parents would have wanted you to enjoy yourself. You’re seventeen. Quite the adult.”

“Thanks,” I said, giving him a meagre smile, but all I could think of was Dante. He was Undead – a person who’d died before reaching twenty-one, the age of adulthood, without a burial or cremation, and had thus reanimated. Until last year, he had been doomed to wander the earth in search of the person his soul had been reincarnated into, and take it back through a kiss.

Me.

Against all odds, we’d stumbled across each other – the first known soulmates in history. The only problem was

that we’d fallen in love. The Undead only have twenty-one years after their first death to roam the earth before their bodies decay, and today marked Dante’s seventeenth year. Soon he’d be gone for good. Closing my eyes, I shook the thought out of my head and looked up at Dustin. “Who was on the phone?”

Dustin grew stiff. “Oh, the phone, yes.” Avoiding my gaze, he busied himself with the silverware. “Don’t worry yourself about that just yet. First, eat.”

The food looked syrupy and hot, but I had no appetite. It had been like this all summer. “Will you join me?”

Surprised, Dustin blushed. “I’d be honoured. I’ll set up two places in the dining room.”

After he closed the door, I noticed an envelope lying on my night table where the breakfast tray had been. With the beginnings of a smile, I picked it up. The return address read:

Eleanor Bell
18, rue Châtel
55100 Verdun
France

Below it was a mailing code.

1-11-1-33-7-13-58-1-8-2

I emptied the contents onto my bed. The seal was already broken, but I was so used to my grandfather reading my mail that I didn't care. My best friend from Gottfried, Eleanor, had been travelling around Europe with her mother all summer, and had been sending me postcards sealed in envelopes for privacy, each from a different town: Ascona, Switzerland; Grasmere, England; Utrecht, the Netherlands; Immenstaad, Germany; Frosses, Ireland. Waxy landscapes decorated the mirror over my dresser, a pathetic but welcome stand-in for Eleanor. This one was a picture of a shimmering lake, its blue water speckled with green islands. I flipped it over.

Renée,

Bonjour from Verdun! As in Verdun, France, which is where I am for the next few days. My mother has been dragging me to all of these remote lakes that are apparently famous in Monitoring history. She's also been really paranoid, like we're not safe. She's worried about pickpockets and thieves, but the places we've visited are practically off the map and pretty much empty, so I don't see who could steal our things. It's weird how obsessed she is. To be honest, I think she's actually worried about me. She still refuses to acknowledge what I am. It's like she thinks that by taking me to all of these Monitoring places she can somehow reverse what

happened. Anyway, it's hardly fun without you here. Hope you have an amazing birthday.

Love,

Eleanor D. Bell

I read the last lines again, knowing exactly how she felt. Eleanor had been a Monitor, like me, until last year, when she was drowned and reanimated into an Undead. Now her Monitor parents could put her to rest at will. I knew that fear because I'd seen it in Dante's eyes, a momentary lapse of trust when he realized that I was a Monitor, and that somewhere within me I had a primal urge to bury him.

Placing the envelope next to the postcard, I picked up a pencil, and, following the mailing code, I began counting. I wrote down the first word of Eleanor's note, then the eleventh word after that, then the first word after that, then the thirty-third, and so on, until I was left with the following message:

Renée,

I am safe but empty without you.

Love,

D

I lingered on the letter *D*, feeling an aching hollowness within me. *Dante*. As I said his name out loud, my insides

stirred, as if something inside had just come alive. I hadn't seen him since he'd kissed me in the field behind the chapel last spring and literally given me back my soul.

I shuddered, remembering that night. Dante and I had been brought to Calysta Von Laark's office. She was the headmistress at Gottfried Academy, our exclusive school where the Undead and Monitors were educated together. It was then she told me what Dante had known all along; that I was his soulmate, and were I to kiss him, I would save his life, restoring his soul to him, but transforming myself into an Undead. As she spoke, I realized how afraid I was of life without Dante; how tired I was from the constant pain I felt since my parents' death; how, after all I'd been through, I was not afraid of dying.

It was then that Gideon DuPont, an Undead student, entered the headmistress's office. It was Gideon who had stolen Eleanor's soul, transforming her into an Undead, in a cruel act of vengeance. I confronted him immediately, and Headmistress Von Laark attempted to apprehend him. But before Dante or I could stop him, Gideon had taken the headmistress's soul, her legs quivering before they finally went still.

Dante pursued Gideon outside, pulling him underground in a forced burial, which should have killed them both. I remember sitting there beside him, watching him die. And I knew what I had to do.

I kissed him. I gave Dante my soul to save his life. I died for him, and then ten days later, he gave my soul back to me.

I should have been alive after that. I should have gone back to the Renée I had been before the kiss, and Dante should have gone back to being Undead. But something wasn't right. I could barely even recall what happened that day in the field; I must have left him there like he'd asked me to, because the next thing I knew, I was surrounded by professors, who carried me to the nurses' wing. That was the last time I could remember the smell of flowers or the feel of the sun on my neck. Without Dante, everything was dull and colourless, a world made of cardboard. What did it feel like to drink a glass of cold water on a hot day? To taste the tartness of a summer peach? These days, I could hardly remember what it felt like to enjoy even simple pleasures like that.

My only comfort was the memory of Dante, and the hope that once I saw him, I would be able to understand what had happened to me, and what had happened to him. Was he alive? Was he Undead? Or somewhere in between, like me? He had been sending me messages through Eleanor all summer, each brief and devoid of any information other than that he was safe. I knew he didn't have a choice. He was in hiding; he had to be concise. But where did that leave me? Dante couldn't return to