

# The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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## **Chapter 10**

### **Fractured Lands**

*In which our adventurers are welcomed to  
Lopside by the town guard, before meeting  
two of its inhabitants, one of whom is a  
native to Earth.*

The town of Lopside was built on five hills of varying size and gradient. It was possibly the most uneven town in Britain. Instead of finding a place more suitable, the town's founders, twelve centuries ago, saw the challenge of building a town on such unforgiving terrain and accepted it. They chose the steepest and most irregular hill, or rather crag, on which to found their settlement. Over the centuries, buildings tumbled out over the landscape as if the gods had dropped a bucket of toys from the sky.

Most of the buildings today looked like they were built in Victorian times or maybe earlier, though there was a fair share of modern architecture. Compared to the strength and beauty of the old structures, the new houses looked like hastily built dog kennels. The older buildings looked down on their scrawny young siblings as if they had no right to be there. Those buildings that had the privilege of standing on the tops of the five hills did so like medal winners on podiums. The rest clung to the hillsides, trying desperately to stay upright.

The entire town shone in the sunlight; radiant as a happy memory.

Through Lopside's cobbled streets there echoed the song of children, as it echoed through all of England's towns; for it was the first weekday of the summer holidays. While the adults worked, the streets, fields and parks of Britain were claimed by its children. Sometimes a grey-haired couple might venture forth in order to enjoy the sunshine and birdsong, braving the crossfire of footballs and Frisbees, and evading the squadrons of skateboarders and bicyclists. But such sightings were rare: for now was the season of youth.

Though the young appear to rule, that rule is an illusion.

From every street corner adult eyes survey through the silent hidden cameras they have let spread throughout the land. Wrapped for protection in cloaks of power, men watch from windowless rooms,

content to allow the youth of the nation to play delirious in the Sun, but waiting, always waiting, in case the young get any ideas.

For if the young organised themselves, challenged the complacent notions of their parents, they would have to be stopped; and the monstrous machinery of the state is poised in a constant posture of readiness for any such occurrence.

That machinery waited now, trembling with anticipation like a stalking lioness, as it watched three children descend the steps from Lopside station. Three children not where they should be. Three children who had with them the greatest threat to the Old Order since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; something that could bring tumbling down all the rusted and wheezing traditions of adult society. These three children had with them a Fairy.

Cruising down Chiron Road in a blue Cavalier, a plain clothes policeman and policewoman (whose names were Cook and Butler respectively) received a message over the radio. They were given the descriptions of Meredith O'Connell, Percy Lillycrop, and Esme Glendenning, and received instructions to bring them into custody.

Rounding a corner they spotted three children matching those descriptions. They pulled up beside the children and Butler got out and she stood before Merry.

"I'm a police officer." Officer Butler showed her badge. "Are you Meredith O'Connell?"

"Yes," Merry replied. Percy resisted the urge to slap his forehead.

"All three of you must accompany us to the police station. You're wanted for questioning."

"What about?" asked Percy. "We haven't done anything." After his last encounter with those who flash police badges his first instinct was to run, but the woman already had Merry's arm in a tight grip and he would not leave her and Esme to face these people without him.

“A detective at the station will tell you. Now get in.”

Merry was pushed into the back of the car followed by Percy and Esme.

The door slammed shut, the woman got in and the car began its slow drive through the streets. Merry insisted on keeping a look of calm on her face in all situations, and she did so now, but inside her panic was blossoming. What kind of trouble were they in? If the police searched her bag what would happen to Ayina?

As the children pondered their fate, a few blocks away another police car was travelling the streets of Lopside. This car had typical police markings in blue and yellow. Inside it rode a uniformed policeman and woman (whose names were PC Fisher and PC Shepherd respectively).

PCs Fisher and Shepherd hated summer holidays. Their days were spent chasing up complaints about kids spray-painting walls, climbing into places they shouldn't, throwing over-ripe fruit at traffic, potting windows with cricket balls and turning streets into assault courses for bikes and skateboards.

This moment they were heading to investigate a series of complaints regarding stolen washing lines when a message came over the radio.

“Car 16-9-7, come in.”

PC Shepherd answered.

“Car 16-9-7 here, over.”

“Car 16-9-7, we have an emergency situation. We have a reported kidnapping nearby. Suspects: one woman, one male, driving a blue Cavalier. They have three children, allegedly kidnapped, in the back. We have them on the street cameras, heading south down Tamora Street. Take caution when intercepting, they are armed, dangerous and carry fake police badges.”

The police car turned on its siren and sped to intercept.

With a grin of satisfaction widening across her face, lilac skinned Yahinni leant back in her chair and watched on her monitors,

which were hacked into Lopside's CCTV network, as car 16-9-7 carried out the fake orders she had just given it.

But now was not the time for celebrations, thought Yahinni. There was still much to do.

"Let's get these kids dropped off fast, so we can get on with our proper assignment," said Cook, the plain clothed policeman, to Butler, just as the sound of sirens met their ears.

"I wonder what's going on," said Butler, "that sounds close." And the next sound she heard was that of their car tyres screeching. Her partner had slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the police car that had appeared suddenly in front of them.

They mounted the pavement while the police car came to a halt across their front.

"What the hell's going on?" shouted Cook, as the two uniformed police stormed out of their car, pointing guns at him and Butler.

"Get out of the car! Put your hands on your heads!"

Merry and Esme sat frozen with shock and confusion. "I knew they weren't really coppers," blurted Percy.

As Cook and Butler opened their doors and got slowly out, trying frantically to convince the other police that this was some mistake, a new message came in over their radio, but they were far too distracted to hear it.

"Meredith," said the voice on the radio.

Merry's ears pricked. "Listen," she whispered to the other two.

"Meredith, Percy, Esme. To your left you will see a path going through the houses."

They looked. And there was the path.

"Follow the path. At the end is a road with a park on the other side. Cross the park and find a man in a wheelchair. He will help you. Go now! Unless you want the police to take you and the Fairy."

Not seeing any other course of action open to them, “lets go,” Merry told the others. She opened the car door and ran out with Percy quick at her heels.

Esme was slower getting out. She opened the door on her side, the side where the police with guns were.

“It’s OK little girl,” PC Shepherd told her. “Get out of the car and step away,”

“But those children are wanted for questioning,” pleaded Cook and Butler.

Esme backed slowly away, frightened by the guns. Then she bolted after Merry and Percy. The one thought racing through her mind as she ran was ‘I’m not a little girl’.

“Come back,” shouted both pairs of police.

“Shut up,” shouted Fisher and Shepherd and, with their handcuffs ready, moved in on Cook and Butler.

Merry and Percy reached the park together, Merry with her bag held carefully to her chest, trying not to shake Ayina around. The Sun was hot on their faces.

In the park children swarmed over swings and slides, filling the air with shouts and screams, while teenagers lounged about on the grass or played football. Merry and Percy walked through the throng scanning hard for a man in a wheelchair.

“Over there, at the other side,” Percy pointed.

A man in his sixties sat alone in a wheelchair, as if waiting for someone.

“Come on,” said Percy, grabbing Merry’s hand.

“Wait, where’s Esme?” But Percy couldn’t wait and he dragged Merry through the park, to the old man.

“You seek the Everlaster?” the old man asked urgently when they reached him.

“Yes,” replied Percy.

“Then you must come with me, and quickly! The police will be looking for you, and other men. My wife has turned the cameras off but they could come back on at any moment, and then they will see us. I thought there were three of you?”

“There are,” said Merry. “Thez’ Esme. But we’ve lost her.”

“Its too dangerous to wait,” insisted the old man. “Come now.” With a touch of the stick on his hand-rest the wheelchair sped forward and Percy and Merry walked quickly in his wake.

Esme’s stomach did flips and twists when she reached the park and saw, not Percy and Merry, but instead one hundred other kids, half a dozen mothers, and not one wheelchair.

“I’ve lost ‘em,” thought Esme frantically. She looked round and around, running through the horde of strangers. “They’ve gone off without me.” The accents of the children around her, strange and southern, unnerved her even more.

She clenched her fists and gathered her thoughts. Calmed herself down. Finally she looked up at the bright blue sky. “All right then,” she said. “I’ll find the Everlaster on me own.”

Merry and Percy were led to one of the older buildings in Lopside; a large three story house with a small tower in one corner topped by a dark blue cone. The surrounding modern houses seemed to cower beneath it and were grateful of the large trees that stood in its grounds, shielding them from its stare.

Walking down the shaded path to the rear of the house Merry asked the old man, “is this where the Everlaster is?”

“No,” said Manutius.

“Then where is he?”

“I was hoping you were going to tell me that. Now in you go.”



On entering the house Percy and Merry's senses were deluged. Every room and corridor was filled with objects; from the everyday to the unfathomable, from the miniscule to the massive.

Amongst one thousand other things there were skulls, stuffed insects, saintly relics, paintings, Petri dishes, tiny dancing dolls, diagrams, a gramophone, phials of mysterious compounds, computer parts, a compendium of goblin games, gruesome masks, a mastodon's tusk, a Turing machine, talismans, Olmec jewellery, orreries, a feather from the wing of Archangel Gabriel, an Aeolian harp (which produced music by itself as Merry and Percy walked past), a pirate's treasure, a trident, Japanese embroidery and a deactivated energy shield.

Such a collection of objects brought with it an equal clutter of smells. One moment sweet scents soaked the children's nostrils and tickled their taste buds, and the next stinging chemical odours made them hold their noses. One second they smelled chocolate, the next leather. Machine oil mingled with mustard; death with flowers.

And the sounds.

Mechanical birds warbled, clocks tocked, wood creaked, crystals sang, energy crackled, metal squealed, bubbles popped, devices buzzed, and all accompanied by the Aeolian harp.

In this grand collection of possible things no object on Earth was represented more abundantly than books. Every wall had its book shelf and the largest room in the house was the library. So many books there were, in fact, that they threatened to outnumber the dust motes that spread thinly over every surface. Tidiness and cleanliness were evidently not foremost concerns in the minds of the inhabitants.

It was into the library that Manutius Fluke took Merry and Percy. Every conceivable human interest was represented within the towering bookshelves and one or two beyond human comprehension.

In the centre was a round table littered with books, scrolls and a laptop. As they gathered near it Yahinni entered the room. Merry gasped at the sight of her lilac skin, draped beneath a dress of glistening amber. She was tall, slim and appeared to be about forty years old. Her head was bold but for a small circle of black hair at the

back, which was tied up by white straps into an inch-thick pony tail arching a hands length behind her.

“I believe,” said Manutius Fluke, “that the Fairy in your bag would be grateful for some fresh air.”

“How does tha know who we are?” demanded Percy as Merry opened her bag up.

“We are, what you could call, experts on the Everlaster. We know much that there is to know about him, so naturally, we know you search for him.”

“Then you need to take us to him?”

“Sadly, his location is one of the few things we have yet to learn.”

Merry placed the box that held Ayina onto the desk and the Fairy jumped out.

Seeing the strange old man before her Ayina took her halberd in her hand. “Who are you?”

It was Yahinni who responded. “*Iyesres laseff*,” she said, in the high language of the Fairies. In English it meant ‘we are friends’.

Ayina turned to her:

“The speech of Fairy kings I hear you say  
A dialect long since withered away.”

“I have been gone from Aeval a long time. When I left, that ‘dialect’ was spoken across half of Aeval.” A touch of bitterness and regret crept into her voice.

“Then you are an exile? And a genie?”

“I am human now. My skin is the only remnant of my former life.”

“As for me, I am Manutius Fluke, and I have always had the pleasure of being human. This is Yahinni, my wife.”

Percy’s eyes narrowed. He thought Manutius Fluke looked too old to be Yahinni’s husband, but then his mind began to get round the things that had just been said. There was no telling how old Yahinni really was.

“And what is your name, honoured guest?” asked Manutius Fluke.

“My name is Ayina. You are bleeding.”

“What?” said Manutius, and then he felt the blood trickling from his nose. He quickly plucked a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his face. He felt faint. Yahinni went to him, concerned.

“Have you taken your tablets today?” she asked.

“Yes, but they have less effect lately. Never mind, it will pass soon.” And he changed his attention to the guests. “You all must be parched after your long journey, is the tea ready, Yahinni?”

“I think so,” and she left the room.

“You all drink tea, I hope. Here, help yourself to biscuits. We have sandwiches too. My wife will bring them.”

Before them were two wide plates of delicious looking biscuits. Merry took some. They were much nicer than the digestives and bourbons her Dad got from the cheap shop.

‘Esme’d love these posh biscuits’, thought Merry, as Esme had a real sweet tooth. ‘I suppose its coz she dun’t eat meat. She needs the energy’.

Merry felt a moment’s guilt over Esme’s absence. I should’ve med the old man wait for her.

“Mister, about our friend,” she said anxiously. “We’ve got to find her.”

“I’m sure Yahinni will be able to locate her again. They search for three children. Alone she will go unnoticed. But now we have very important things to discuss.”

I hope she’s OK, thought Merry, she won’t know what to do on her own.

As soon as she’d resolved to find the Everlaster by herself Esme began asking people if they knew where Poppy Field House was. It seemed no one knew so she decided on another course of

action. She asked people where the library was, and to that she quickly got an answer.

At the library it took only moments for an assistant to find out for Esme where Poppy Field house was and provide her with directions.

Fifteen minutes later she was stood by a driveway in front of a sign that read POPPY FIELD HOUSE, LOPSIDE. She hesitated for only a moment before marching up the long driveway, at the end of which there stood a huge Victorian mansion flanked on its left by a small car park.

Esme followed another sign that said VISITORS ENTRANCE, which led her to a pair of double doors atop marble steps.

She took a deep breath and entered... Into a lobby.

Its floor was chequered black and white and plants grew in large urns by the wall. Despite the obvious age of the place everything was clean, fresh and bright. A wide flight of steps lay at the lobby's end twisting upwards to the next floor.

To Esme's right a woman in a white uniform stood behind a dark-wood reception desk.

"Can I help you, duckie?" she asked with a welcoming but concerned smile.

"Erm, I'm looking for someone. Err... the Everlas..."

"You'll have to speak up, dear. I can hardly hear you."

Another woman in white came in through a door on the left. She walked arm in arm with a tired-looking woman in a dressing gown and led her through the door opposite.

"I'm looking for the Everlaster," said Esme a little louder.

"What you talking about, duckie? Are you lost?"

"No. There's a man here I need to see." She racked her brain trying to think of his name. "Utnapishtim. That's his name."

"A Mr Utnapishtim?" said the woman to herself. She thought it over and looked through a book on the desk. "Mr Utnapishtim? What's that? Is that an Indian name?" She looked at Esme.

“I dun’t know.”

The woman finished looking through her book. “No I’m sorry. I didn’t think there was anyone called that here.”

“But he has to be. I have to find him.” Esme was getting anxious.

A man in a long white coat came down the steps.

“He’s gotta be here,” said Esme loudly. “I’ve been told he is.”

“Calm down, duckie,” said the nurse and she came round from behind the desk. “Calm yourself.”

“What’s wrong,” asked the man. He was tall, slim and his coat bore a label with the words ‘Dr Abel Gilpatric’.

“She’s looking for someone, but I’ve told her he’s not here.”

“Who are you looking for?” the doctor asked Esme.

“I’m looking for the Everlaster, but I know he has different names.”

“Hmmm, well, some of the people we get here have sometimes had name changes, for different reasons. Some don’t even know who they are.”

Esme tried to think of some of the other names Ayina had called the Everlaster. “He’s called Utnapishtim and... ohh... something beginning with A. And... the in... the infamous. No! The Infinite Story.”

Dr Gilpatric raised an eyebrow. “Odd. We’ve a patient here who we nicknamed the Infinite Story because he’s always telling stories to the other patients. It’s a very unusual thing to call a person. So it’s possible you mean him.”

“Yeah,” said Esme, bobbing up and down. “I bet it’s him.”

“How do you know him?” asked the doctor.

“Err, he’s a friend of me Dad’s.”

The doctor gave Esme a suspicious look. “He’s been here fifteen years and never had a visitor before.”

“Can I see him?”

“Well, I don’t see why not. He’s not harmful or anything. Come on, I’ll take you to him.”