

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 11

Tea and Sandwiches

In which the adventurers learn the true extent of the power of the Empire. What Esme found in Poppy Field House.

Yahinni entered the library with a tray of tea.

“So how long have the people of Aeval started coming to Earth again,” Yahinni asked Ayina as she set out the cups and poured the tea. All three guests privately observed the myriad scars that cross-hatched her lilac forearms.

“I am the first and only one, since the period connections were severed.”

Yahinni put a smaller tray before Ayina. On it was set a tiny chair and a table, upon which there had been placed an equally tiny tea set.

“Luckily,” explained Manutius, “we had some old Fairy furniture and utensils lying around.”

“The table and chair are part of a set I bought from a Scotsman who believed it to be dolls furniture,” added Yahinni. “Sometime in the early nineteenth century, I think. Exquisite condition, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” agreed Ayina, sitting down on the chair.

Yahinni explained to the children: “you can tell the difference between a doll’s chair and a Fairy’s, not only by the quality, but also by the unusual shape of the Fairy backrest, which is designed like that to accommodate the wings.” As she said that her attention was drawn to Ayina’s wings.

“What has happened to yours?”

“It was torn in a fight.” Ayina gulped dry the Fairy sized cup, and poured herself some more tea.”

“I’m sure there must be something in the house to help heal it.”

“We’ll find something later, my dear,” Manutius told her. He directed a question at Ayina: “so is it true that you search for the Everlaster?”

Percy rose to his feet angrily. “How do you know so much?” he demanded, his voice tainted slightly with panic. “I don’t think we should tell you owt till you tell us what you’re up to.”

Yahinni nodded in acquiescence. “Very well, young man. You are aware, I am sure, of the cameras that spy from every corner, of ID cards and the powers of the police to hold and interrogate anyone without charge, as they were about to do to you and your friend.

“Less known about is the surveillance, by secret agencies, of every telephone call, text message and email on the planet. This system of information gathering is called Echelon 2.0.

“The vast majority of the information gathered is useless, but the point is, if those humans with power wanted, they could know who your friends are, where you like going, what you read, who or what you hate and love, while you don’t even know they exist.

“And today the most powerful and wealthy organization on Earth is SkweezumGrabaal&Runne, and it is they who make best use of Echelon 2.0.

“And they know the Fairy has come to Earth. They know she is in the hands of Meredith O’Connell of 1 Tamber Lane, Tiverton Preedy.” Merry’s face contorted with shock but Percy’s barely registered surprise.

“They know Meredith has come to Lopside with Percy Lillycrop and Esme Glendenning in order to find the Everlaster. They know their friend Trent Tufnell was with them when they first found the Fairy. They know that he was submitted to hospital Saturday night, was diagnosed with an unusual brain tumour and that on Sunday night he escaped and has vanished, beyond all their surveillance.”

Percy was as equally astonished as Merry at this last detail.

“What they don’t know about,” continued Yahinni, “is me. I have observed the rich and powerful of this world, originally because of my interest in collecting. My collection you will have seen around the house. The only objects worth having that I do not already own sit behind bars and infrared beams in private mansions and corporate labs.

“When the internet age arrived I mastered its secrets, used it to make deeper my connections in the black market. I used my

computer knowledge to infiltrate private systems, take down security and take that which interested me.”

“You’re a thief,” Merry accused her.

“I hear judgement in your voice. Yet is it immoral to steal loose change from the pockets of gangsters?”

“In recent years the only thing I’ve stolen is information, since Manutius became ill and needed me constantly by his side.

“Some of the secrets I have discovered during these years have been puzzling, their implications disturbing. The activities of SGR have held most of my attention.

“At first I could follow their activities like everybody else’s but about seven years ago they began using a form of encryption for their internal communications and documents that I have, to this day, been unable to comprehend. It is so different to the ciphers and codes developed by humanity that I can only conclude, and Manutius agrees with me on this, that their encryption method does not originate from Earth.”

“Do you have any examples of this encryption?” asked Ayina.

“Here.” It was Manutius Fluke who answered. He placed a print out on the table in front of Ayina.

“That is part of an intercepted file.” It was a page of random squiggles and blobs, like the fall out from a sneeze.

Ayina recognized it immediately. “That is the language of the Jae-Mareeda.”

And so Ayina told Yahinni of the invasion of her home world and who the Jae-Mareeda were.

When Ayina had finished her story, she said, “if SGR is working with the Jae-Mareeda then it will be very useful if I can gain access to their databases. There might be information about the Jae-Mareeda’s activities that could help our war efforts.”

“But how will you get that information back to Aeval,” asked Yahinni.

Ayina revealed her sprites. “These are the latest we’ve developed in computer technology. They can read and copy

information on any type of database in existence except organic brains. The amount of information each one can hold is more than sufficient.”

“Can you interpret the Jae-Mareeda language?”

“No, but the sprites can. If I want to access the Jae-Mareeda information they hold, they would translate the relevant pieces as they transmit them to my cerebral implant.”

“I see. So you have a neural interface hooked up to your brain. Well, I have lots of SGR information on my computers. You might as well download the files to your sprites. My computers are in the basement.”

“Then I will send them now.” Two of the sprites flew out of the room, heading for the basement. “If they have any difficulties I will know of it.”

Manutius showed Merry and Percy around some of the rooms, describing a few of the objects that filled them. “You may take a souvenir if you wish. After all, you helped the Fairy in her mission. And we have so much, we’ve forgotten what half of it is. Feel free to look around and come to me with your chosen item. I will check your pockets before you leave, in case you take something dangerous.”

“Do you have anything that can cure woe?” Merry asked him.

“Would that be your own woe or all the world’s woes? The second one I certainly can’t help you with.”

She told him about Woe’s curse on the adults of Tiverton Preedy.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what such a cure would be”, said Manutius afterwards. “But, you know, the Everlaster knows many things about life and death. Once Yahinni has repaired the Fairy’s wing we will go and find him and hopefully he will answer all our questions. Now I will leave you to look around.”

“Wow,” said Percy when Manutius was out of sight. “Look at all this cool stuff.”

“This is the best house ever,” said Merry quaking with excitement.

“Listen,” said Percy, drawing close to Merry. “How can we trust these people? We don’t know what they’re up to.”

“I don’t know,” Merry replied, “but Yahinni’s from Aeval and Ayina seems OK with her.”

“What I mean is, we don’t know why they’re looking for the Everlaster. Perhaps they want to add him to their collection.” His hand swept the room.

Merry’s expression told Percy he was being silly. “What they going to do?” she said, picking up a dead lizard, “stuff him?”

“I suppose your right.” He picked up a high spiked crown cut entirely from some blue gemstone. “How does this look on me?”

“Like a handsome prince,” laughed Merry. But laughter gave way to concern when she saw the trance-like expression on his face. “Percy?” She waved her hand before his eyes but no response came. Almost panicking she pulled the crown from his head and put it down.

“Merry!” Percy grabbed her by the wrists, laughing. “The birds outside, in the trees and on the roof. I could feel ‘em. And see what they saw. I felt ones flying through the sky, eating flies. And the pigeons in the square, all thinking about food.”

Merry laughed at his giddiness, and the joy on his face. Something she’d not seen on him since leaving Cradleford forest.

She browsed the objects and her eyes were caught by a large gold ornament in the shape of a Mayan pyramid. When she touched it the pyramid opened up like a flower with four petals and inside there was a tiny detailed city scene. Beneath a golden Sun golden men and women danced to a fragile tune that emanated from within the base. The music was the most beautiful Merry had ever heard, and to it the movement of the figures seemed to tell a long lost story.

Merry wanted to take it home so she could listen to it everyday.

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“What did you call him, again?”

“Urm... Utnapishtim,” replied Esme, trying to stay as close as possible to the doctor as he led her down wide corridors peopled by the inhabitants of this huge house: men and women of all ages, some sitting or standing on their own, some still and staring, others rocking back and forth. Some greeted the doctor as he passed while others did not notice him though he passed right before their noses.

It’s some kind of hospital, thought Esme, but what would the Everlaster be doing in hospital if he’s supposed to be immortal.

“Utnapishtim, ay? Well that’s very interesting to learn his real name, if this is the man you’re looking for. You see, we never knew his real name because he never talks to anyone except to tell stories. But when he first arrived, because he had no name the nurses called him Ali, after Ali Baba. Because, well,” the doctor shrugged his shoulders as if embarrassed, “he looks Arabian you see. So we call him Ali usually. The Infinite Story is just a joke name another doctor came up with.”

“In all the time he’s been here he’s been very well liked by the other patients. He tells them adventures and fairy stories. And he never tells the same story twice. That’s why he got called the Infinite Story. And the stories always involve him, like’s he’s telling you something from his own past. And you half believe him too except for the fact that he’s talking about the Aztecs or medieval times or something. He’s very good.”

He opened the door onto a room scattered with chairs and tables, sat at which were people doing jigsaws and playing board games. At one corner was a telly semi-circled by comfy chairs.

“There he is,” said the doctor, pointing.

By the window sat a man who looked to be thirty-five years old. He seemed middle eastern in appearance, with long straight black in a pony tail. He looked out the window as he talked, which gave the impression that he was talking to the world. Around him sat half a dozen people, each one visibly engrossed by what the man was saying.

A young woman with blonde hair sat on the floor by his side with her head resting on his knee. He didn't seem to know she was there.

"He looks quite young for his age you know," the doctor told Esme, "not that we know his date of birth. But he hardly seems to have aged since he first arrived here."

The doctor stood with Esme behind those listening to the Infinite Story speaking in an unfamiliar accent that seemed to alter subtly.

"Their trireme rammed our sides, its bronze tipped bow ripping through our hull like a lance through flesh. Our boat quickly began to sink and those of the men who did not drown made for the shore. But I did not follow them. Instead I clung to the underside of the enemy's hull and held on as they rejoined their fleet..."

As he told his tale emotion played upon his face like actors on a stage: hope and despair danced across his features, battles were fought across his brow, and the dead were resurrected in the sparkling of his eyes. His lips drew dreams, but his face made them real.

"Sorry to interrupt," said the doctor, and as soon as he did, emotion abandoned Ali, leaving his face as still as a corpse. But some scattered remnants of emotion did remain. Like wounded soldiers, boredom and sadness, with the faintest hint of disgust, crawled across his features.

In his silence Ali did not shift his gaze from beyond the window.

"There's a visitor here to see you, Ali."

His audience all looked at Esme with great curiosity. A young man nibbling his nails shook his head and said, "Ali never, never gets visitors. Hello." He smiled shyly at Esme who smiled shyly back.

"He won't say anything to you," one old man said, rising to his feet. "So if you get bored you can come over with us and play monopoly," and he shuffled over to one of the tables.

"Can we have a moment with Ali alone please," the doctor told the others. They all got up and left them alone, except for the blonde girl.

“You too, Abigail,” the doctor told her. “Go on.” She got to her feet reluctantly and walked off on her own looking quite upset.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to your visitor, Ali,” said the doctor, though he knew full well he’d get no response. And he was right, Ali didn’t even look at Esme.

Esme plucked up her courage and very shyly asked Ali, “are you Utnapishtim?”

He turned his head further round so Esme and the doctor could not see his face.

The doctor gave Esme an apologetic look and was about to suggest they leave when suddenly Ali shouted loudly, “the air is filled with hungry things! Look!” A plump and red-faced woman pointed at the empty air and began to wail. Others joined her in a chorus of shouting and crying. They each looked terrified, as if something was coming for them. Those patients not effected by this sudden hysteria were becoming upset by the noise. The doctor joined the nurses in their attempt to calm everyone down.

As Esme looked uneasily upon this disturbing scene Ali spun round and grabbed her wrist. Within seconds he was dragging her out of the door of the ward and into the corridor. “Quickly, come with me,” he ordered, not that she had much choice, and briskly they left the scene.