

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 12

Corporeal Punishment

In which Ali makes a confession. How, the night before, Trent met the twilight people. What the Genie said to the Fairy. How Merry discovered the Obsidian Staff; or the Obsidian Staff discovered Merry.

Esme and Ali entered a small bedroom. Ali closed the door and spoke. “Utnapishtim...? Utnapishtim? I see a mere girl before me, young in this world, yet she speaks of things far older than her language. Utnapishtim, he who survived the flood and lived everlasting.

“So tha really are the Everlaster?” asked Esme in wonder.

“I am an inmate in an asylum. Why would’st thou think I was someone from a story that has long since ceased to be told.”

“A Fairy called Ayina is looking for yer,” said Esme. “She said tha’d be here.”

“The Fairies have returned to Earth?” He gave a laugh, though it seemed tinged with sadness. “I’m sure they’ll take one look around and fly themselves back again.” He laid down on the bed and crossed his arms and stared at the ceiling. He sighed. “Yes. I’m the Everlaster.”

Esme looked closely at the man in front of her and felt a distinct sense of disappointment. She was expecting someone old and wise looking, but instead, what lay in front of her was a slim and rather jaded looking man. And he wasn’t even tall. She been sure he’d be tall. His clothes didn’t look like much either: just a shabby grey T-shirt and fading black jeans.

“So, explain thysen. How does a little Yorkshire lass know who I am, let alone that there’s a Fairy looking for me? I know the Fairies aren’t talking to us yet cos it’d be on the news if they were.”

“Me and me friends were rescued by her, from this like alien thing, but she got injured and so we had to help bring her to Lopside.”

“How did she know I was here?”

“She never told us that.”

He sat up and looked out the window giving a suspicious look at the trees. “I can imagine who told her. There aren’t many alive today who would know the face of the Everlaster, let alone pick it out from a crowd of six billion.”

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“What’s happening to me?” Trent asked himself earlier that day, in the hour before sunrise. He sat holding his head beneath a tree that overlooked the reservoir just east of Tiverton Preedy. It was no longer dark but the landscape was grey. In the sky pink leaked upwards from the horizon like banners unfurling to announce the coming Sun.

The reservoir’s water looked tranquil but Trent could sense the drama beneath its surface, and above it: hundreds of fish, thousands of insects and millions of microbes living and dying, eating and being eaten.

Though the tree against his back seemed still he knew it was teeming with bacteria and other microscopic life.

“YOU MUST MAKE FRIENDS,” came Earth’s voice in his mind.

“I already have friends.”

“THEY HELP THE FAIRY NOW AND WILL BE NO USE TO ME.”

“Who, then?”

But Earth did not reply, and he was alone.

Eventually Trent got up and walked into the parkland beside the reservoir. He passed the rusted bandstand and the disused paddling pool; its blue floor spoiled with dirt and fallen blossom.

As he walked worn flagstones bursting with weeds, he became aware of human voices. Stealthily he approached the source of the voices and from behind a bush he saw six youths. They looked scruffy and unhealthy and their words were slow. They’re druggies, thought Trent with some disgust and fear.

Amongst them, lying on the path, was an old man. By his side was his fishing rod and tackle box. His palms were pressed against his ears and his whole body shivered violently, as though with extreme cold. Or perhaps, thought Trent, he was having a fit.

“Are thy alright, mate?” said one of the youths, a boy of about 19. He bent over and shook the old man’s shoulder. “Mate? Mate?!” he said, raising his voice in concern and confusion.

“What’s wrong with him, Rob?” a girl asked.

“I dun’t know. Can you hear me, mate? Shall we call an ambulance?”

Soon, one of them was over his mobile to the emergency services. “We’re in the park near the reservoir... ..In Tiverton Preedy... ..Where’s Tiverton Preedy!”

“Hey kid, what yer doing in yer pyjamas?” asked the girl in concerned tones as Trent approached them.

Her hair was brown and matted. Her skin was pale and blotchy with many spots and sores. There was red bags around her dulled eyes. She looked ill, but Trent knew it was drugs that made her look so bad. His Dad had taught him what drugs did to people and how stupid they were to take them.

“Put him on the grass,” Trent told them.

“Why?”

“Perhaps he knows first aid?” suggested the girl. “Do you know first aid?”

Despite their doubts the youths lifted the old man onto the grass, and there he lay, silent and trembling in his new position.

Trent kneeled beside him and placed a hand on his forehead.

“Whoa, what’s going on?” said one of the boys behind him. The whole field seemed to ripple, like a pond after a stone’s thrown in. But the ripples travelled inwards, not outwards, converging beneath Trent, the old man and the group gathered around.

Trent had sensed the sickness in the old man when he first approached and now sensed it going. The Earth was channelling her life force through Trent; just one drop in the ocean of her being.

The old man stopped his trembling and Trent knew he was well. Now Trent could feel the sickness in the young woman beside him and he took her hand.

She doubled over in pain, and vomit spewed from her mouth, yellow and brown and streaked with white foam, while her friends looked on in concern. Trent never let go of her hand and as quickly as her pain had started it was over.

When she stood up her eyes were no longer dull but bright, the irises conker brown. The redness was gone from around them and so too had the spots and sores. When before her cheeks had been gaunt they were now fleshy and warm with health. And she was pretty, as she had once been as a child.

She looked at Trent, not knowing how or why he had cured her addiction. She felt eternally grateful, but knew no words to express herself. “Save Rob too,” she pleaded. And Trent did. He saved them all. One at a time he took each of them by the hand.

As they vomited away the drugs that had consumed them, the emptiness and hopelessness that had steered them down that path was replaced with peace and purpose.

“My name’s Jenny,” said the girl. “What’s your name?”

“Trent,” he replied.

“Like the river,” said the old man, who was now back on his feet and as grateful as anyone there.

With Ayina sat on Yahinni’s hand, the lilac woman climbed the steps to the second floor. “So why are you searching for the Everlaster?”

“He holds information that will be of strategic value to our war effort. I cannot divulge the specifics. And some back on Aeval wondered whether humankind would prove to be an ally against the Jae-Mareeda.”

The ex-genie responded with an imperious snort. “I’d say you have a fifty-fifty chance of the humans siding with you. Whether they’ll fight a war is not the question. Those vermin only feel alive during wars and revolutions. The thought of a war over three worlds will have them frenzied like spawning frogs. The real question is which side of the coin they join. Heads or Tails? They have not the wit to tell the difference between the two.”

“You obviously have no respect for the human race?”

“They love inventing gods and how lucky they were when I arrived to play the part. I quenched their thirst for miracles and tragedies. I brought drama to their drab lives; and yet I was deemed a criminal by my own kind. I was destroyed by the Commune and reconstituted into the feeble form you see now.”

In a room that was once a bedroom but was now nothing less than a science lab Yahinni hoped to find what she was looking for. She placed Ayina down on a worktop while she looked.

“And yet you live with a human,” the Fairy pointed out.

“Manutius is not like the others. He’s intelligent, for a man. He rarely interacts with other humans unless he has to.” Yahinni opened a jar and poured out a yellow blob into her hand.

“What is that?” Ayina asked.

“What *are they*,” Yahinni corrected her. “They are millions of micro-organisms, genetically engineered by the Merfolk a thousand years ago, to heal wounds. No doubt these things are no longer used on Aeval, but they are more effective than the prehistoric mockery that humans call medical knowledge. At least, that is, when they use their medical knowledge. For you wouldn’t believe, Ayina,” and Yahinni chuckled, “the pseudoscientific claptrap and daydreams that inundate this civilization. Even their so called advanced nations crawl with charlatan’s and mountebanks and faith healers. Instead of human knowledge increasing it is actually regressing. For example, millions of them believe that all manner of pains and ailments can be cured with a simple crystal or a magnet.”

“A magnet?!” Ayina giggled, then composed herself. “You can’t blame the human race for their follies any more than you can for their plagues. They live under a system where wealth matters more than sense. It’s your derisive attitude that got you exiled in the first place.”

“Well, as I was saying, Manutius, he wants more than the life he was born into. He looks for it in the dreams of others, as they have been bound by words into books.” Yahinni’s voice softened. “When they share their dreams they are, by a tiny fraction, like us.”

“Those scars on your arms. Unlike other Genie you know what pain is.”

“These wounds were my own doing, to help null the pain. But after I met Manutius I no longer had to. Which is why I have to save him.”

Yahinni instructed Ayina to lay face down with her wings outstretched. She plucked a section of the blob away; about the size of a strawberry. She squashed it flat, then laid it over the torn wing.

“Save him? From what?”

“From the disease that is eating him away. The disease I can not cure.”

“Then how do you intend to save him?”

“By taking him to Aeval with me.”

A heaviness came across Ayina’s limbs. “I can not move.”

“The organisms anaesthetize a body they work on: the accelerated re-knitting of nerves and tissue would otherwise be exquisitely painful. The paralysis is a safety function: to move around when your entire body is numb would be dangerous. Your face is unaffected.”

The yellow glob turned orange as the organisms went to work on Ayina’s wound.

“If you wish,” said Ayina, “when I return to Aeval I can forward your request to the Genie Commune and they might reassess your punishment. Accept you back.”

“They would refuse and ensure I never return.”

A few minutes passed and then the glob became yellow again.

“It’s worked,” said Yahinni, who peeled the glob aside and showed Ayina in a mirror. “Your wing is repaired.”

“When does the paralysis wear off?”

“That’s up to you,” Yahinni almost whispered. She bent over Ayina and looked her in the face. “I need you to get Manutius and I to Aeval. Once there we are bound to find a cure.”

“No! Let me go. I must find the Everlaster.”

There was no malice in Yahinni's voice, just desperation. "I'll let you go, Ayina, when you help us. If you don't I'll jack into the cerebral implant you use to communicate with your sprites. I'll shutdown your free will, tweak your ethics centres so that you'll want to help me."

"You must not. Aeval is in peril. I must be on my way!"

The door opened and Manutius Fluke entered. "What is this?" He looked in confusion at the panicking Fairy.

"She's going to help us," Yahinni explained. "She can get us to Aeval. And there you'll be cured. Their technology is so much better than humanity's."

"Please let me go," pleaded Ayina, "time is wasting. I can not help you."

Manutius noticed then that the Fairy was paralysed.

"What have you done?" he cried in dismay.

"I'm saving your life." Yahinni clutched her husband's arm.

"On Aeval we'll find out what's killing you."

Manutius put his head in his hands. "Oh, my poor wife."

"What is wrong?"

"I already know what's killing me."

"What?" she said, confused as to why he had not mentioned this before. "When did you find out? We can work to a cure."

Tears dripped from between the man's fingers. "It is you." He put his arms around her. "My darling wife, you are the cause of my disease." The words broke in his throat and his heart broke to say them as he held Yahinni tight.

For a moment Yahinni was silent, not fully understanding what she had just heard. Then the truth dawned on her. She withdrew from his embrace, shaking her head with desperation. "No! No!" she wailed. But it made sense. It fitted with the facts.

Falling to her knees, through tears she asked, "how long have you known."

"five... six years."

“And you stayed with me,” she said angrily, “while my presence killed you.”

“Because I love you too much to ever leave you. I will die by your side.”

Yahinni was silent for many moments before her shock and grief gave way to anger. Anger, not at one person, but at existence. “Is this some new curse inflicted by my sisters; that, should I ever be close to a human being I would unwittingly hurt them; that I should kill the one I love?!”

With both hands Percy picked up an oval mirror, a little bigger than a dinner plate. At the bottom of its simple wooden frame an inscription read: *The Windowe Into Paradise*. He looked into it and saw himself, the room behind him and the window.

Expecting some kind of magic or gimmick Percy turned the mirror over, looking for a switch or something.

The back of the mirror was not bare but was reflective too. Upon this side an inscription read: *The Windowe Into Hel*.

Percy looked into the mirror and this time saw himself and the room behind him and the window. Percy pulled a face.

Merry, meanwhile, was incredibly curious about an old, long and slim case that was resting against the wall behind some statues.

“Percy, can you hold my bag a minute?” He took it from her back. “Your back’s all sweaty,” he told her.

“I know,” she said shaking her damp top. She lifted her hair away as she aired her back.

“Tha’ must have a million freckles on your back.”

“So what?” said Merry, embarrassed over them.

“So, I like ‘em.”

There was silence for a moment. “I’d give thee ‘em, except they’re glued to me.” She looked at him, then smiled.

“I’ll carry your bag a bit if you want.”

“Ta.”

Merry squeezed between the statues and grabbed the long case.

It was made from yew wood and inlaid with ebony. A small golden plate was pressed into the wood with words written on it: *The Obsidian Staff*. She opened it, and inside, resting on a bed of crumpled red silk, was a black staff. Merry took the object in her hands. It felt like glass, or crystal, and it was slightly brown and translucent at its edges, reminding Merry of frozen cola. At its top was a large ornamental eye, and Merry was reminded of the eyes in Egyptian hieroglyphs and art.

The pair's perusals came to a halt when they heard raised voices upstairs. Merry gave Percy a quizzical look. "Let's check it out," he said.

They tiptoed their way up the stairs.

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"We're close now, slow down."

"Mind that dog!"

"I've got eyes, thank you."

On the road by Fluke's driveway a moss-green car pulled up.

"According to this, they're in that house."

"Who do you think lives there?"

"Perhaps this Everlaster guy. It's better to be careful. You two go in with me and you stay in the car."

"Now's our chance to test these dread guns out." The speaker referred to objects they all held, that looked roughly like guns but seemed organic; though they could have been made from some synthetic material designed to look that way. They were very pale grey and transparent in places, much like deep sea fish.

Three car doors opened and out stepped three men: one with a thin moustache, one with excess fat and one with a sinus problem.