

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 13

Unlucky For Some

Of the mercenaries' attack. Yahinni places faith in the Russian. How the Russian met the intruders and is beside itself at being shot.

In the house an alarm was sounding quietly. Yahinni went to the window. “There are men coming down the driveway. They have... I think they’re guns.”

“Oh god, Yahinni,” cried Manutius.

“How have they found me?” wondered the ex-genie aloud.

“You can’t expect to sit hacking the worlds most secret systems for years without them someday tracking you down.”

“Free me now,” shouted Ayina angrily. At the sound of her voice Percy and Merry came rushing into the room, Merry still clutching the strange staff from downstairs.

The staff immediately caught the eye of Manutius Fluke and all other concerns at this moment seemed to flood from his mind.

“Young girl, do not toy with that staff. It is very dangerous.”

Looking to the source of Ayina’s voice Merry spotted the Fairy lying prone on the desk. So shocked and angered was she by the sight that she did not hear Fluke’s warning. She and Percy ran to Ayina’s side. “I’ve been paralysed by this yellow stuff,” Ayina told them, glancing at the glob.

“Undo it,” shouted Merry at Yahinni, her knuckles whitening round the staff.

The lilac woman was looking out the window. “It will wear off eventually,” she replied as if she barely cared. She turned around and made for the door. “Let’s see what the Russian makes of our visitors.” Those last words served only to agitate Manutius even further and he followed his wife in a state of total panic.

“What is that stuff?” Percy asked, gesturing at the jar of yellow.

“It heals wounds,” Ayina said.

“Quick, I’ll put it in the bag,” said Merry to Percy. Percy turned around and Merry put the Jar in the backpack. “Now, carry Ayina and lets go.” Percy pulled the front of his t-shirt up and out to create a pouch to lay Ayina in. Gently, he lay her limp body inside it.

They rushed to the top of the staircase just in time to see Yahinni dart from the hallway below and Manutius enter a small caged lift. Someone outside was trying to open the front door. The handle

was turning and the door shook in its frame but it was obviously locked.

“Lets get out the back door,” said Percy. They ran down the stairs as a smash was heard from another room. They ran past the library and to the hallway leading to the back door, but to their dismay found the back door blocked by a man Percy recognised.

The Sniffing Man grasped a weird looking gun. He recognised Percy immediately and flashed the boy a thuggish grin. When he saw Ayina cradled in Percy’s t-shirt the grin widened, contorting the man’s ugly face beyond recognition. “Thanks for leading us to the Fairy, Percy Lillycrop. We thought you were being a naughty boy and skipping out on us.”

Percy didn’t hang around. He bombed off back the way they came.

Merry ran tight at his heels. As they rounded a corner she felt something whiz past the back of her head. Whatever it was it made a gibbering screech as it flew and seemed to suck the heat from the air. Merry shuddered as she ran and had the sense not to look behind her.

“Rubbish!” blurted the sniffing man, lowering his weapon.

Percy and Merry ran down the hallway towards the front door when the Fat Man strode out of a room to block their path. His gun pointed at Percy, “remember what we talked about, boy?” Merry glanced between the two, intensely puzzled. “You’ve led us this far, hand over the Fairy and you’ll get your reward.”

In the basement the Russian was stirring, waking at the sound of the alarm. Cobwebs broke and dust fell from its chunky limbs as it moved to fulfil its purpose: to destroy the intruders.

Merry and Percy stood back to back in the middle of the cluttered hallway, each end blocked by one of the men. Keeping his

strange gun aimed at Percy's chest the Fat Man stepped slowly towards him. "Don't make me use this."

"You wouldn't kill me."

"It doesn't kill, but it sure will hurt."

And at the mention of the word hurt, a poker smashed into the Fat Man's shoulder. He gave a shout from the shock and fell on one knee. Manutius Fluke sat in the doorway, raising the poker to strike the Fat Man again. But he was too slow.

The Fat Man had experienced his fair share of violence through the years. He ignored the pain exploding in his shoulder, turned the gun on his attacker and pulled the trigger.

Manutius Fluke's scream chilled the blood of all who heard it. Of all the screams conjured from the throats of the Fat Man's previous victims, this was the worst, chilling even his already cold heart. He felt like throwing down the weapon that could do this to a man.

Manutius fell from his chair and passed out. On his chest quivered a small transparent slug-like creature. It was the gun's ammo. Its poison spent, the purpose of the slug's short life was over. It released its tiny hold then turned to stone on his chest.

Percy took advantage of the brief distraction. With his free hand he picked up a bronze statuette and quickly but quietly lunged towards the Fat Man, swinging it like a rounders bat at his nose.

At least, that was the plan. But halfway through the lunge Percy's shoulder impacted with the basement door, which had been flung open that very second. He fell backwards, dropping the statuette but managing to keep a careful hold of Ayina.

From the opened basement door toddled the Russian. One foot tall it stood, in crude imitation of the human form. It looked like some tasteless household ornament, yet it moved with the articulation and awareness of a living creature. Its unrealistic and ill proportioned body was painted with flat bright colours. Its head shaped like an upturned bucket. On one side was painted a smiling female face with two scarlet spots for cheeks.

It slammed the door behind it to gain a clear view of the hallway and assess the situation. Four enemies: three armed, one not. It was outflanked at the moment so it decided to take the one on its right-hand side first.

It moved towards the Fat Man as fast as its legs could allow, which admittedly was not that fast. The Fat Man had no idea what this doll-like thing was, but he could tell it was no toy. He shot at it with the dread gun. Two slugs splattered into the Russian's ceramic torso to fall, writhing on the ground. It crushed them beneath its feet and then leaped upon the Fat Man's stomach climbing him like a hill.

He threw the dread gun down and grappled with the Russian, trying to shake it off. Black lines were painted on its mitten hands, to suggest fingers. With those stumps the Russian clutched the Fat Man's neck squeezing his windpipe. His face turned the colour of beetroot and his lungs burned hot. Resorting to more conventional means he took a handgun from his jacket, placed the barrel against the Russian and fired.

The Russian span through the air, struck the wall and, after bouncing off a shelf, fell on the floor.

The Fat Man kept his gun aimed at it. And he was wise to, for the Russian got to its feet, a black scorch mark the only evidence of damage. It walked slowly forward and the Fat Man emptied his gun at it.

The force of each impact caused the Russian to stagger backwards. After the final bullet had hit, it tottered like an infant learning to stand. Just as it seemed about to topple it became still. Its arms went to its side, its legs went together and it stood inert as if whatever power drove it had run out.

But the evidence against that theory began as a straight crack, which appeared from the top of its head and ran all the way down its centre. The crack became a widening gap as the two halves of the Russian opened on invisible hinges. It opened like some jewellery box, but instead of necklaces, inside was a figure, curled up foetus-like, with its knees by its painted ears.

The Fat Man reloaded his gun as this figure unfurled itself and stood, twice as high as the figure that had held it. Its features too were crudely painted but, while still out of proportion and ill defined, its head and limbs were crafted slightly more realistically and with extra detail.

Percy rose to his feet, while Merry looked anxiously between the Sniffing Man and the Russian: she did not know which was more dangerous. The Sniffing man himself looked over the children's heads watching the Russian and hoping desperately that the Fat Man would tell him what to do.

The new emerged Russian took a step forward and behind it the Russian closed up and stepped forwards to stand beside itself.

The Sniffing Man received his order from the Fat Man:
"Run!"

The Fat Man scrambled past Manutius Fluke, pushing his wheel chair aside. The Sniffing Man and the children ran the other way.

In the kitchen pans and plates were crashing to the ground as Yahinni and the Moustache Man fought hand to hand. He thought this was his day when he came into the room to find the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, all slim, lilac skinned and helpless looking.

He was bitterly dismayed then to find that, in order to save his own life, he had to change from an upright standing position to arching his back like a limbo dancer in the space of 0.5 seconds. 0.5 seconds being the time between him noticing the heavy spiked mace hanging in Yahinni's hand by her thigh and the moment where said weapon was swinging through the spot his head had just pulled back from. If he was any slower, or a little less supple, his face would be adding colour to the kitchen wall right now.

She swung at him several more times, on each occasion narrowly missing him and obliterating some unfortunate piece of furniture or kitchen utensil.

She stopped her frenzied swinging only when the dread slug from his gun bit into her and began the injection of its poison.

An expression of surprise and fear came over her and she looked around as if seeing the world for the first time. She seemed entirely oblivious to the Moustache Man's presence. But then she frowned with suspicion, put her fingers to the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes in the manner of someone attempting to solve a difficult sum.

For a few moments she remained this way before giving a triumphant smile. "Nice try," she said to the Moustache Man. But she opened her eyes to find him gone.

The Sniffing Man ran down the corridor followed by Merry and Percy. He reached the back door and yanked on the handle, but it was locked.

Merry grabbed Percy's free hand and pulled him in to the adjacent room as the sound of the Russian's footsteps approached behind them.

The Sniffing Man turned to see the two foot Russian bearing down on him. He picked up the nearest object for a weapon, which unfortunately for him was a commemorative tea-towel. He flicked it at the Russian before squealing as the creature jumped on him.

As the Sniffing Man and the Russian grappled, Merry and Percy moved across the room they had entered for a door in the opposite wall. But the Fat Man emerged to block the way. He was desperate now. "Give me the Fairy. Don't make me shoot you!" He pointed the gun at them.

Merry knew this man would kill them and, as if in response to this thought, she became aware of the staff in her hands. Instinctively

she knew the staff would defend her and she pointed it at the Fat Man, willing it to do so.

The carven eye of the staff opened, revealing a large and living eyeball beneath. It looked at the Fat Man and winked.

The floor trembled a second and objects rattled. There was the sound of breaking bone and the Fat Man fell down, dropping his gun.

“Did you see that?” Ali asked Esme, with a raised eyebrow. They were looking out of his room window.

“What?” asked Esme, seeing nothing special.

“Just as I thought,” he muttered. “Well it can’t be mere coincidence. You’re friends are in trouble.”

“Oh dear,” said Esme, “we’ve got to help ‘em.”

“If you say so,” said Ali as if the whole thing bored him. “I might as well come and check it out. You are, after all, the first to ever visit me, so I should return the complement. But I want to be back for dinner. Peaches and ice-cream for afters.”

He got up off the bed and made for the door, but stopped half way. “You know, the roppers might not let me out. At least not right away. We should fly unseen, like bandits with their swag. Come.”

He walked over to a desk that stood before the window, climbed upon it and peered outside. “Quickly, while our path is unwatched.”

Esme knelt on the desk and looked out the window. They were three stories up. “I’m not going out the window. It’s way too high.”

“I’ll soften the fall of thy fragile frame.” Without giving Esme a chance to protest, he grabbed her round the waist with one arm, slid the window open with the other (bursting the soldered lock), and leapt from the building.

Esme screamed, but Ali must have anticipated it because he put his hand over her mouth the instant before the sound escaped.

Esme felt the rush of air but saw nothing, as her eyes were squeezed shut.

Far quicker than she expected came the jolt and the Everlaster was standing her up on the ground.

“Quickly,” he said and he began walking fast towards the driveway. Esme followed as fast as her shaking legs allowed.

The Sniffing Man held the two foot tall Russian off the ground by its head. At arms’ length, the Russian’s flailing limbs could not reach his body and it beat against his hands in an attempt to break his grip.

He tried swinging the Russian against the wall in an attempt to break it, but soon began to despair as it seemed he was having no effect on the thing. But finally it stopped trying to bash his hands and he thought he must have finally broken it.

The Russian’s arms hung by its sides and its legs were still. Then the crack appeared up its middle and it opened, as if hinged at the top. A leg poked out from the bottom and then another; legs twice as long as its own. “Oh God,” moaned the Sniffing Man in fear, as the legs, and the body they were attached to, dropped to the ground.

“You did that didn’t you?” said Percy, looking down at the Fat Man, who was so injured he could barely move.

“Yes,” replied Merry shakily. She swallowed hard, her mouth was so dry.

Over the Fat Man jumped the little Russian. The eye on the staff winked at it and again the room trembled with a wave of energy. The Russian froze in mid leap. It hung in the air for the briefest moment before one of its hands shot off like a popped cork and the rest of it flew back the way it came.

A horrible scream came from the Sniffing Man, wrenching the children's attention behind them to the other doorway.

It waddled the larger Russian and beside it walked an even larger self, which was almost as tall as Merry. Its white limbs, splattered with blood, were finely carved to accurate proportions. Its mannequin-like face, carefully painted to look real, was forever fixed in cheer.

Through the opposite doorway hopped the Russian's smallest self once more, for a second attempt to get at Merry and Percy.

All of its six feet moved in unison as the Russian closed in around the children.

Then came the word 'stop' and all six feet halted.

It was Yahinni.

The lilac woman entered the room and the Russian aimed three pairs of unfocussed eyes in her general direction. She gestured at the children. "These three people are our guests. I believe there is a third adult male around here somewhere. Catch him, but keep him alive."

Despite showing no evidence of comprehension, the Russian left the room, presumably to fulfil its order.

Yahinni looked at the unmoving Fat Man, who seemed on the verge of passing out, then turned back to the children.

"You three had better leave now and find the Everlaster. More men are likely to come here."

"They were after Ayina not you," said Percy. "There were four of 'em, but I don't know who they worked for."

"How'd you know all this?" demanded Merry of Percy.

"They found me yesterdi' morning and asked me where the Fairy was. They knew about us in the woods, but I didn't tell them anything."

"Why din't you tell us before?"

"There weren't no need."

Merry felt angry over this, but let the issue drop. There were more pressing matters. “How did they know we were coming to Lopside?”

“Well I didn’t tell ‘em, if that’s what yer wondering, Merry.”

“No doubt they worked for SGR,” interrupted Yahinni. “In which case they will have had behind them the resources of a global corporate empire. Despite that you are still in possession of the Fairy.”

“Yes, and you’re not having her,” Merry warned.

“I’m sorry for my behaviour earlier,” Yahinni said to the Fairy laying in Percy’s jumper.

“Never mind that,” piped up Ayina. Fairies forgave far more readily than humans. “What you have here is very important. Your access to SGR’s systems might help us in the war and you can find out more. You know of them. They do not know of you. It is vital we keep it that way.”

“Reinforcements could be coming already,” said Yahinni.

“Then it’s vital we act right away,” insisted Ayina. “We must keep this house and its computers a secret from them for as long as possible.”

Yahinni turned to Percy. “Did those men give you anything?”

“Yes, this.” He handed over the mobile phone, which Yahinni promptly smashed on the ground with her mace.

She picked up the remains and plucked from them a chip.

“This is a tracking device, which is how they knew where you were. And when these men’s friends come looking for them, they’ll come straight here.”

“Then the house is lost,” said Ayina.

“On the contrary,” said Yahinni, “the fact that this tracking device still works is the one thing that will save it.”