

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 14 **Altered State**

*In which Trent speaks Earth's mind. And
how, using her doll, the ex-Genie toyed
with men once more.*

Trent felt tired. He wanted to rest but could not. If he closed his eyes and stopped thinking, instead of silence and darkness his mind would be filled with thoughts and visions from elsewhere.

He felt the humid heat of a jungle on his skin, sensed the emotions of birds and snakes and monkeys.

He shared the final moments of a salmon caught in the paws of a bear and shivered to the bone as tonnes of ice broke from a blue glacier into the Antarctic Ocean.

He tasted the fish being fed to a penguin chick in an Andes forest.

He felt the eyes and throats of sparrows stinging on the exhaust fumes of traffic.

The sound of ancient trees being torn apart by machinery met his ears.

He learnt what it meant for a river's life to be wiped out by chemical waste.

And it became too much for his ten year old mind to take. But she kept showing him these things. Or perhaps she couldn't help it. So he had to keep thinking to himself, or play a tune in his mind to keep it all at bay.

He sat in an arm chair. On a settee by his side sat Jenny and one of the young men. The rest were sat on the floor, while in a second armchair reclined the old fisherman. It was his bungalow, and Trent had eaten breakfast at the old man's table.

"Mother Earth wants to speak," said Trent, "she wo' the one who saved your lives."

"Mother Earth," repeated the old man in wonder. "So that's whose voice I heard when you touched me. I thought it was God."

"Do you all promise to help her as she asks?" asked Trent.

Without hesitation each person nodded and said yes.

Trent's eyes became the colour of boiling lava and this time when he spoke, it was as if another voice spoke with him. "You human beings are always seeking answers and questions. And I know

you often find those answers, using the gifts of science and logic that I gave you.

“I know the success of your logic. You have only legs, yet you have learnt to fly in metal things. You have air breathing lungs, yet I have sensed your kind reside in craft beneath the sea. I have felt exotic radiations and blasts of energy that can only be made by those who are beginning to understand how the universe works.

“So tell me, if you are so clever, why am I ill? I have not felt this sick for 65 million years, after the coming of the great ice-rock.

“But no such event has occurred to cause this new suffering. Tell me why I am ill. Why is my temperature rising so fast? Why is the life on my surface and in my waters receding? Why is my richness decaying?”

There was a silence as Trent waited, his eyes still glowing yellow-red.

“Do you mean pollution?” suggested the old man, helpfully.

“Pollution? Is that what you call it when an entire jungle is scooped away, leaving behind an endless plain of mud? I call it catastrophe.”

Jenny spoke. “You want ‘em to stop cutting trees down, like?”

“Yes. And the rest of the rampage.”

“But we are nobody,” said the old man. “We’re not prime ministers. How can we stop all this destruction around the world? We have no power.”

“You have Trent.”

The Russian entered the room dragging the Moustache Man by his feet. He was bound and bleeding, with the little Russian sat on his chest.

“There’s the fourth man,” Percy remembered. “He drives their car.”

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Driver shifted in his seat. The other three had been ages, but he never left his car except in emergencies. Earlier he had heard faint gunshots coming from the house, recognising the sound of the Fat Man's gun. Usually this meant they were on top of things: someone was dying and it wasn't them.

There came a faint tapping on his door. He looked but no one was there. The tapping came again. Opening the door he found a Russian doll, about one foot long, lying next to the car.

There was no sign of anyone about. Out of curiosity he picked up the doll and closed the door again. Inspecting it in his hands he noticed stains of blood that were not yet quite dry.

The doll began to open and Driver looked closely at the dark, widening gap. An arm darted free from the dolls innards and poked two fingers in his eyes, rendering him blind to all that happened next.

Manutius Fluke had recovered from his ordeal and sat now in his chair outside the front of the house, watching the Men's car roll down the drive.

The car stopped near the front door and out stepped Yahinni, carrying the Russian under her arm. She opened a rear door, revealing a man tied up and gagged.

"Keep an eye on him, Manutius. I'll get the others." She handed him the Russian and entered the house.

In the house Merry and Percy stood watching over the Fat Man and the Moustache Man. Yahinni entered and surveyed the state of the two men.

"We'll take this one first," she said over the Moustache Man. His eyes flared in apprehension.

"Help me get him in the car," she asked of Merry. With Percy keeping watch on the Fat Man, Merry and Yahinni got the Moustache Man into the car.

A few minutes later they returned for the Fat Man. Yahinni grabbed his feet and began to pull him across the carpet. The man

cried out from the pain of his broken bones. She needed the help of both Merry and Percy, who took an arm each. Percy used one hand while still cradling Ayina in his T-shirt with the other.

With great effort the Fat Man was finally brought to the car, where Yahinni began the unenviable task of hauling him into the back.

As Manutius and the children watched her, behind them a hand grasped the front door step. The hand was attached to a blood soaked arm. The blood soaked arm was attached to the mutilated body of the Sniffing Man.

And now he sniffed, for the last time, blood and snot through a caved in nose. With his dying energy he pulled his face into the sunlight and brought forward his other arm; the one that clutched a dread gun.

All present turned his way as he gurgled some malicious sentence. None could recognise his words or his face, so disguised they were with blood. He pulled the trigger of his gun and devoted his final breath to a triumphant chuckle.

The dread grub fell from Percy's chest, having injected its poison through his thin T-shirt into the boy's flesh.

It was then that Percy saw the apparition beside him: a white skull sprouting orange fire for hair and drifting in blue rags. So frightening was its appearance and so sudden its arrival that he fell to one knee, choking with terror. He nearly dropped Ayina before clutching her to his stomach as tightly as it was safe to.

Coming towards him Percy saw a giant worm moving on steam driven wheels. The house behind it heaved like a breathing organism and from its doors and windows flowed torrents of blood, splashing them all.

Percy backed away, looking for Merry or anyone he recognised, but only he and Ayina remained.

With burning arms the orange-haired apparition tried to grab him, but Percy broke free and fled away, away from it all.

*

When Yahinni heard the sounds issuing from Percy's throat, and noticed the gun drop from the dead man's hand, she knew what he was experiencing, having tasted the poison of the dread grub for herself.

She would have grabbed the boy had not the full weight of the Fat Man fallen on her as she pushed him into the car.

Whereas Yahinni had the mental discipline and experience of 3,000 years, which had allowed her to maintain self-control when she had been shot, she knew Percy would thoroughly believe the visions he was seeing, just as Manutius had.

"Don't let him run," she shouted to Merry, who stood not knowing what Yahinni meant until she saw Percy stepping backwards with fear. She reached out to him to ask what was wrong, but he recoiled from her touch and fled.

"He's hallucinating," shouted Yahinni, "don't let him get away."

Despite Merry's panic, or perhaps because of it, her attention was caught by the obsidian staff that lay nearby and she scooped it up as she gave chase.

Percy's ears filled with a screaming that could have been his own or that of the grotesque creatures who walked these streets, he could not tell.

He could not tell where he was or what he could do to stay alive, for he was sure he would die any second and the throbbing of blood through his veins was felt by a brain that sizzled.

Even his own conscience spoke some monstrous language. The only voice he recognised was that of Ayina. It was only her yells of warning that prevented him flying blindly before a car.

Her voice led him to a safe and quiet place: a row of old garages, out of sight behind some houses. She had sent her sprites out to find an empty spot where she could try and calm Percy down. He obeyed her, hiding in an empty garage.

It was dark, and for once the darkness was comforting. For every bead of light that entered Percy's eyes bounced around his head like the sparkle in a diamond. He cowered at the back; the cold wall on his bare arm focused his mind for a moment.

"Close your eyes and hold me close to your face," Ayina told him. He obeyed, and felt tiny hands pat his cheek. "I am getting my movement back." He felt something like a large petal brush his face and a waft of air carried into his nostrils the scents of a new world: the sparkling flavours of the flowers living in Ayina's hair and the strange but soothing smell of her body.

Percy heard pounding footsteps approach the garage. "There's a monster coming," he nearly sobbed.

"Keep your eyes closed," Ayina instructed. "Some of my best friends are monsters. I will talk to it and keep you safe."

In the mouth of the garage Merry appeared.

"Stay where you are!" Ayina shouted at her. "Percy is not ready."

With fine words Ayina calmed Percy's turbulent thoughts and made him think rationally. He considered Ayina's assertions that the red-haired apparition was Merry and all that he was seeing was hallucination. Whether true or not, it seemed to Percy that the apparition obeyed Ayina.

"Just listen to me and you will be safe," said Ayina. "If you can not bare to look at Merry right now then do not, but just go close to her to prove that you are safe."

"Okay," said Percy, and slowly he emerged from the garage to stand by Merry.

At that moment a helicopter passed overhead and they all looked up. Merry wondered whose it was. Ayina stared curiously at this novel vehicle and knew it was called a helicopter thanks to the encyclopaedia photo stored in her sprite's memory.

Percy's newly restored calm was shattered as his senses were bombarded once again from this unexpected direction. He thought some screaming wyvern, just as he'd read of in books, was tearing out

of the sky at him. Holding Ayina tight again, he ran for his life, round the corner, and out into a street lined with houses.

Two green vans were speeding into Lopside. Standing inside one of them, August Landfill gave a final briefing to her squad: men and women of EmSec. Those who paid attention to the business papers knew that EmSec was a private security company owned by SkweezumGrabaal&Runne.

There were seven of them in this van and seven more in the van ahead. They wore green protective uniforms with automatic rifles hung over their shoulders. The uniforms were not best suited for summer, and this, combined with the oven-like qualities of the van, cooked up quite a lot of sweat and odour.

Each person had a number written on their uniform. August Landfill's was JA56. Under her helmet, her brown hair stuck with sweat to her forehead and her cheeks were flushed.

“Our operatives in the field have sent out a distress signal, but we have no idea as to the exact nature of the situation. Expect danger, but use force only as a last resort, especially if children are involved, as we expect there will be. Always remember the rules for urban-engagement. We want to be in and out with the Fairy as quickly as possible, to avoid anybody witnessing this. The death of the Fairy will be unacceptable, so be as careful as possible during capture. You've been given the tools necessary for this.”

The sounds of screeching tires and brakes drew her attention over the driver's shoulder to the world beyond the windscreen. The van in front was swerving violently, and an instant later she saw why: a boy had run recklessly into the road.

The driver of Landfill's van braked and swerved, missing the boy narrowly, but then he gasped in horror as he saw a red-haired girl now in front, far too close to stop in time. He slammed both feet on the brake.

Suddenly there was a loud crunch and the windscreen shattered. The view of the world outside twisted upside down and then everyone was flying about the van and bouncing off all surfaces like clothes in a tumble dryer.

As quickly as the chaos started it stopped and they found themselves lying in a tangle of limbs on the ceiling.

Merry had chased after Percy, begging him to stop while Ayina tried to calm him back down. Merry screamed at him when he ran in front of the van. When it narrowly missed him she ran towards her friend in order to push him to safety. She did not know there was a second van until it was too late.

Shock froze her to the spot as the great, heavy mass hurtled at her. Her knuckles whitened around the staff as the van filled her vision: a giant rectangle face of green, with headlights for eyes. She felt the shock through her entire body.

In the space of a heartbeat the van's front crumpled in the middle as if punched by a colossal fist, the bumper shattered, as did the headlights and windscreen. The smooth van front wrinkled as tin foil and ripped like orange peel, revealing the hot, dark interior where engine parts were snapping and buckling.

The air screamed with the sound of it all and filled with spinning shards of glass and plastic and flakes of paint. But Merry felt none touch her.

She stared at the breaking metal face as it stopped inches from her own and passed over her. Her neck arched back as her eyes followed the path of the van, which kept its own face pointed at her like a partner in a trapeze act. It somersaulted away from her in an arc, then landed, crushing a parked car and decimating a garden wall beneath it.

*

“I’m sure it was here,” the Everlaster told Esme, pointing through the trees as he approached Manutius Fluke’s driveway. And then he stopped dead in his tracks and turned violently around. “Did you feel that?”

“What?” asked Esme staring at an empty pavement. Then the sound reached them: a thunderous metal crash from three or four streets away.

“Quickly,” said the Everlaster, and he and Esme ran hand in hand towards the source.