

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 2

The Prince in the Emerald Tower.

*Of the prince and his chamber of light.
The adventurers become four, and their
preparations for the quest. How the prince
seeks the service of his champion.*

Chandler Dahl was alone in the lift as he checked the time on his watch. It reached 8:58 just as the elevator stopped at level 96. It did so every morning Chandler Dahl came to his office. He had been proud of his punctuality since childhood.

He stepped from the lift into an antechamber. Behind a long grey desk on his right-hand side sat his secretary. Every morning she read a magazine until her watch alarm went off at 8:57, when she knew she would have a little under one minute to put it away and make herself look busy before the lift doors opened.

Chandler Dahl's steps were silent on the green carpet. "Good morning Clarissa," he said, keeping his eyes forward.

"Good morning, sir. There's a gentleman from the research department here to see you." The secretary indicated towards a row of chairs opposite.

An anxious looking man with spectacles sat at the place she pointed to. He wore an identity badge that bore the name EMMETT LIPTROT. He rose warily and spoke. "Good day, Mr Dahl. I have, ah, very important news from our department. An unusual and, ah, puzzling development has arisen."

"Come into my office," said Chandler Dahl, striding towards a pair of double doors at the rear of the antechamber. A security guard stood at either side and one of them opened the door at his approach.

Followed closely by Emmett Liptrot, Chandler Dahl crossed the threshold into the room beyond.

The room was very large and quite empty for an office. An abundance of lights shone in all directions. The walls were white and the furniture, which consisted of one desk and a few chairs, was made entirely of glass or transparent plastic.

It's like standing inside a light bulb, thought the spectacled man.

Since he had obtained his position at SkweezumGabaal&Runne a few years ago, Chandler Dahl had become scared of the dark. Lights at ground level ensured that neither

the men nor the few objects in the room, such as Chandler Dahl's computer, cast any shadow.

Other than the lobby outside, this room was the only one on the 96th and highest floor of the office tower. Viewed from outside, the tower gleamed in the sunshine like an emerald. It stood in Greenwich, London, on the site of the Millennium Dome, which had been torn down seven years previously. Surrounding it was a huge complex of buildings: offices, science labs, research centres, conference halls, canteens, and a recreational centre. This was the nerve-centre for SGR's operations in Great Britain, and Chandler Dahl was, quite literally, the man at the top.

He sat behind his glass desk, on an ultra stylish glass chair, his back straight and rigid. Chandler Dahl's skin was smooth and kept well moisturised, and his blonde hair, the colour of aged ivory, was immaculately combed. His blue eyes were like two shards of the sky behind him, his white suit as smooth as the paper on his desk. Sitting there stiffly, with these young immaculate features, he gave the appearance of a porcelain figurine.

"Go on," he said to Mr Liptrot, inviting him to sit down.

"Sometime yesterday an incredible surge of energy from an, ah, unknown source was detected by one of our Seers. At sometime around five o'clock this morning a second disturbance was detected, though this time the Seer reports it was of a different nature. We believe the phenomena are, ah, linked, and the Seer was able to locate the source of the second disturbance." He took a map from his bag and laid it on the table. An area of it was marked in red. "The, ah, second phenomenon, and probably the first as well, occurred somewhere in, erm, Cradleford Forest in Yorkshire."

"And you have no idea what these occurrences were?" asked Chandler Dahl.

"No, Sir."

"I'll send Her to investigate, she can be in and out discreetly. Can you provide a version of this map for Her?"

"I'll have one made right away, Sir."

“Keep your Seers alert and report immediately if anything new arises. You may go.”

Ten minutes later, Chandler Dahl left his office. He entered the lift and unlocked a hidden panel beneath the column of buttons. Inside was a flat and featureless surface of a pale cream colour, like flesh. Hesitantly, Chandler Dahl moved his hand towards this patch. The surface cracked open to create a wide slit, from which there darted out something very like a dog’s tongue. Chandler Dahl grimaced as the wet and warm organ licked his fingertips. The tongue retracted and the mouth seemed to swallow. “Greetings, Mr Dahl,” it spoke, in an emotionless tone. “Access granted.” The mouth closed.

Chandler Dahl took out a handkerchief and wiped his hand clean of saliva as the lift began its descent to the darkest section, hidden deep beneath the glittering tower.

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The morning was warming up and chalk coloured candyfloss flitted across the sky. Great beams of sunlight marched over the town in yellow columns. A flock of starlings swept like muddy water between telephone lines and rooftops; when caught in the Sun’s net of light they glinted like confetti.

People scurried left and right, hither and thither. In the centre of town they gathered the most, where the market and shops were. They plotted routes, estimated times and dodged each other. Every so often some collided in conversation.

On the edge of the town there was less noise and the people walked slower. The traffic was thinner and you could smell the countryside.

In these outskirts, in a leafy council estate, Merry walked with her friend Esme towards the local park. It was 10:15 and nearly time to meet Percy and Trent.

Esme was a short girl with black hair and brown eyes that never met anybody else’s. She was so small and fragile looking that

people didn't dare touch her in case a part broke off. Because of her size people always thought she was younger than she actually was; but in fact, she was two months older than Merry.

Esme's Mum and Dad gave her as much love and attention as any child could hope to receive. Which was quite an accomplishment considering she had five sisters and three brothers, who all received an equal amount of love and attention.

Esme's Grandma and Granddad on her Mum's side were both born in India; her Dad's parents were both born in Yorkshire. Unknown to her Dad, his ancestors include Celts and Angles, Saxons and Vikings, and a centurion who served under Roman general Aulus Plautius when he conquered Britain. Her Mum's ancestors include Dravidians and Aryans, Mongols and Turks, the odd Persian and an Egyptian merchant who traded in cosmetics and jewellery with the Romans. The merchant's daughter married a legionary in Julius Caesar's Army, who's great grandson was a certain centurion who helped to conquer Britain.

As her house was pretty crowded Esme liked to go outside a lot. One of her favourite places was the park, but it did get a little boring, so when Merry told her they were going to the forest she got very excited.

When Esme and Merry arrived at the park Percy and Trent were already there. The boys were entertaining themselves with a black cat. Trent had picked it up by its front legs and was spinning around with it. After a few spins he released it like a hammer thrower and the cat flew through the air fifteen feet before landing on the ground and rolling. Every time the cat got to its feet, instead of running away, it walked like a drunkard back to Trent and he repeated the process.

Percy was on his knees and nearly wetting himself with laughter at the sight of this cat twirling through the air. He tried to point and make a comment but laughter had him at its mercy, squeezing his guts, and he doubled over gasping and drooling into the grass.

When Esme saw Trent throwing the cat around she went mental. Her eyes went as wide as doorways and she screamed, “stop it! Stop it! Thar hurting it!”

The cat rolled past.

“I’m not,” said Trent. “Look. It’d run away if I were hurting it.”

Esme tried to pick the cat up but it wriggled out of her grasp and staggered back to Trent.

Merry was trying to prevent herself from laughing. “Come on, give o’er nar. I thought we were going to ‘sarnie shop.”

“All right then,” said Trent.

Percy appeared to have sobered up and looked up at Trent with his mouth gaping open.

Trent let the cat fly again and it went screeching over a bush. This time it did not return.

“Haarghh!” Percy cried tears of laughter.

Merry kicked him in the ribs, “Get up, moron.”

He rolled over and looked up at her with mock anger. “If you were a man I would kill you where you stand!”

“And if you were a Klingon you’d be a lot less ugly. Now lets buy some sarnies and get going.” One thing that Percy and Merry both liked doing was to watch Star Trek reruns on the telly.

Percy got up and the four of them made their way to the sandwich shop.

After they had bought some sandwiches, crisps and pop, they put them all in a backpack. “Who’s going to carry ‘provisions?” asked Percy.

“Me,” said Trent.

“Don’t let him. He’ll eat ‘em all when we’re not looking,” said Esme.

“Man alive! You carry ‘em then if you’re so worried,” and Trent gave her the bag.

“All right then,” and she put the backpack over her small shoulders.

“Are you all right wi’ that?” asked Merry.

“Yes thanks,” and she started walking off. “Come on then, let’s get a move on.”

The other three stepped in beside her and they began their journey to Cradleford forest.

“That’n looks like a rabbit,” Trent said as he pointed at a cloud with his stick. “Now it’s turning into a pig.”

“It’s turning into you?” asked Merry, looking up.

“O, how funny,” said Trent.

“Listen,” interrupted Esme, and she stopped walking.

“What?”

“That bird singing,” and she looked up into the sky with a hand shielding her eyes. “It sounds so lovely. I wonder what it is.”

Though they could hear a bird singing above them they could not see it. The sound was shrill and liquidy. Without realising it, they had all stopped to listen.

“I can’t see it. It must be high up,” said Percy, and they continued to walk.

“Maybe it’s an omen,” said Merry.

“What’s an omen?” asked Trent.

“A sign,” said Merry.

“A sign of what?” asked Trent.

Percy’s eyes made wild movements as his imagination started working. “It is a sign,” he said, “that we will succeed in our mission to kill the Vampire Prince and steal his treasure. He can only be killed with the magical sword carried by Trent the Terrible.”

“Terrible is *definitely* a word I’d use to describe Trent,” whispered Merry to Esme. Esme smiled but Trent didn’t hear. He just held his stick aloft and said, “Yes. This sword.”

“Trent’s a warrior,” continued Percy. “I’m an archer. What are you gonna be, Merry?” He aimed at her with an imaginary bow and arrow.

“I don’t need weapons ‘cos I’m a sorceress. I can kill yer just by thinking.”

“That could come in useful,” said Percy, scratching his chin. “Now, what’s Esme going to be?”

“I want magic powers too,” she said.

Percy frowned. “We can’t have two sorceresses. Everybody on a quest has got to have a different skill.”

Merry thought about all the different books she’d read. “I know,” she said and looked at Esme. “You can be a healer. They know magic, but stuff that protects instead o’ killing.”

Esme liked that idea. “Yeah, I’ll be that,” she said.

“Excellent,” exclaimed Percy and he clasped his hands like a teacher. “With our powers combined nothing’ll stop us. Let’s go!”

With the hot Sun drawing the sweat from their backs the four adventurers charged across the farmer’s land, shouting a war cry, crashing through a field of corn that was taller than they were.

They didn’t run for too long though. Trent called out for them to stop. He bent over panting, “bloody ‘ell, ‘am cream crackered.”

“Don’t worry,” smiled Percy, clasping Trent’s shoulder. “We’re ‘ere now.”

They had reached the end of the field, and on the other side of a wooden fence was the forest.

The trees here were far larger than the ones growing in the town. Their cool shade looked inviting to the children. Merry was particularly eager to get out of the Sun’s glare, for it was particularly fond of burning her skin. They clambered over the fence and the shadows of the forest led them gently inside.

Chandler Dahl left the elevator and walked along an empty corridor that ran beneath the Emerald Tower. He stopped at an unmarked steel door and took a few deep breaths; he hated coming down here.

He knocked.

As he waited for a reply he felt a bead of sweat run from his arm pit and down his ribs. Suddenly a lock could be heard sliding within the door and it opened slowly.

Beyond the door was darkness. The light from the corridor lit the floor a few feet in, creating a rectangle, like a diving board over an endless abyss.

He stepped onto this rectangle.

“*Close the door behind you, Chandler,*” whispered a female voice from all directions.

“Turn on the light first,” said Chandler Dahl. Then adding, “...please.”

There was no reply for a moment; he thought he could hear a man sobbing.

“*Close the door, Chandler.*” The voice was a little firmer this time.

He turned around and closed the door. The darkness engulfed him. It seized his body and he could not move. He struggled to breathe as the pillow of his own fear smothered his face. With great effort he spoke. “Will you please turn the light on now?”

The voice took on a playful tone. “*Why do you not turn it on yourself?*” Chandler Dahl gasped as he felt a clammy hand grasp his wrist. A gentle laugh began beside his face. He stifled a cry and held his breath. The hand was strong and moved his own towards the wall until his fingers touched what felt like a switch. He did not hesitate to press it down. At the moment he did so he felt the hand vanish and a dull light flicked on.

“*Hello, Chandler.*”

He span around and looked.

At the other side of the room a figure was seated behind a heavy wooden desk.

She was lit by a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling’s centre. It shone a weak light that tried in vain to push the darkness aside. But it managed enough to reveal bookshelves lining two of the

walls. The spines of the books had raised dots instead of letters. The light was so exhausted in its attempt to illuminate the contents of the room that it ran out of the energy needed to touch the corners and far wall. But this was probably just as well, for the shadows seemed as solid as stone; they appeared to hold up the ceiling and those damp brick walls that the resident so liked the smell of.

She rose from her chair and walked slowly round towards him. Again, Chandler Dahl thought he heard a man sob.

The woman was tall, a full foot taller than Chandler Dahl, and her long slender limbs were clad entirely in white. In places her garments were like bandages wrapped crudely around her; in others they were finely fashioned, with language and people embroidered upon them. The embroidery was also white, making it almost impossible for human eyes to see the proud kings and orphaned babes woven upon her blouse. Around her legs spiralled scenes of war, famine and exploitation; and pearl tears adorned her hems.

She wore an elaborate white head-dress that seemed to grow from the back of her head and then split in two. Each half twisted round and reached forward, giving the appearance of two large starving hands reaching round her face. Her face and hands were the only part of her flesh that showed. Her skin was very pale; in some places transparent, with hundreds of tiny purple and black veins visible beneath it. Her eyes were orbs of black, and a green glow seemed to emit from within them.

Chandler Dahl gathered the courage to speak. "How are you, Woe?"

Woe said nothing but touched Chandler's mouth with the tips of her fingers. He looked down and saw blood on them. He had bitten his lip at some point when the darkness had him.

All of a sudden the bricks seemed to wheeze and the books to whisper. Every object and every surface softly resonated. The sounds were drawn out and came together till they converged at one point to create one sound. It was the voice of Woe:

"I have missed you, Chandler. You know I always enjoy our meetings."

“Yes, I’m sorry. I’ve been very busy with work.”

Woe gave a look of mock sympathy. “O, *I know how difficult it is for you. Reading all those reports and giving all those orders. It’s one of the hardest jobs in the worlds, and I know because I used to do something like it myself. But, since coming here I have learnt to relax a little.*

“*As you can probably tell,*” she gestured towards her books, “*I have taken up reading. I learnt your Braille system.*”

She turned around and walked back behind her desk. She placed the tips of her fingers together in a gesture of contemplation. “*I have been reading the history of your people and it thrills me. It seems that not one second has existed during your civilisation when large numbers of you were not causing great pain and grief to others. I like that. It is the main reason that I accepted this post when my superiors offered it to me. To work among you and experience this anguish and suffering at first hand. They did not think your world offered much but I saw such great potential. As an ambassador for my people I say that our two worlds have a very promising future together.*”

All Chandler Dahl could think of to reply was, “I’m glad you like us.” He then remembered why he was here. “I need your help.”

“*You need my help,*” Woe nodded. “*It seems that the only time you come to see me is when you need my help. You aren’t exploiting me, are you?*”

“Of course not,” he said nervously. His attention was then caught by a whimpering coming from the shadows behind Woe. A terribly weak voice cracked the words “help me.” Chandler Dahl realised they were addressed to him.

Woe watched as Chandler Dahl walked round the desk with confusion and peered into the darkness. He could just make out a bed with a thin man bound to it by leather straps. He stared at the figure open mouthed. “Who is he?” he asked.

The captive winced as Woe spoke. “*Each day in this country people go missing. They run away for reasons unknown by the loved ones they leave behind.*”

She knelt beside the bed, like a praying figure in a Victorian painting, and spoke softly into the man’s ear. “*Every night I visit your wife and child. I listen from the shadows as they weep and ask themselves what it*

was they had done to drive you away. Sophie is taking it especially hard. Her schoolwork is suffering. You know, I could bring her here. I am sure she would be delighted to see you again."

The man turned away. Tears squeezed out through his tightly closed eyelids. "Stop her. Don't let her near my family," he cried.

Chandler Dahl turned away in disgust and walked back to the desk. He tried to ignore the man. "Woe, I haven't got time for this."

She looked at him, surprised by his sudden angry tone. "*What is it you want me to do?*"

As he spoke he took from the briefcase a large, rolled up sheet of jet-black paper. "Our Seers have detected something strange at this place." He handed her the paper and she unfurled it across the torso of the prisoner. The paper was blank, yet her eyes scoured it as though it was rich with detail.

"We have no idea what it is they sensed," Chandler Dahl continued, "so I want you to go and take a look. Just look. Don't interfere with whatever it is. When you've found out what's going on come straight back to me with the information. Understood?"

Woe nodded.

He turned around and walked towards the door. He expected some comment as he left the room but none came. He closed the door behind him.

As he rode the lift back to his office he could not keep the image of Woe's captive from his mind. At times he could not believe that they were working with these people. But then he remembered how helpful they had been and how important they were to the success of the firm. He could feel a change coming and it was important to have these fiends as allies rather than enemies.