

# The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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## **Chapter 6**

### **Clockwork Magic**

*In which the ladies consider art and magic,  
while Percy has a lesson in the ways of  
adults.*

When Merry went downstairs for breakfast none of the curtains in the house had been opened. She found her Dad in the kitchen, boiling some eggs in the near darkness.

“Why ‘ant you opened curtains?” asked Merry.

“Hmmm?” muttered her Dad.

Merry opened the curtains herself.

She sat down to her boiled egg and soldiers. With her mind on Ayina still upstairs she barely noticed the taste of the creamy orange yolk as it slid down her tongue and throat, and it took some time before she noticed the miserable expression etched on her father’s face.

“What’s up?” asked Merry.

“Nowt,” said her Dad grimly.

Merry tried to lighten things up. “Do you believe in Fairies, Dad.”

He looked at her like she was strange. “Course I dun’t. Why?”

“Nothing,” said Merry, putting both her hands over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“What’s up wi’ thi?” he growled, in irritation. “Tha gone daft?,

“No.” And she shut up.

After a few long and uncomfortable minutes of silence the phone rang. Merry was glad of the excuse to run out of the room and answer it.

“Hello?”

“Ayup, Merry, it’s Esme,” said the phone. “Have you heard about Trent?”

“What about him?” asked Merry.

“He was taken to Barnsley hospital last night in an ambulance.”

“What happened to him?”

“A neighbour sez he were havin’ a fit or somert. If he’s ill are we still going to help the Fairy find the Everlaster?” Esme whispered that last bit.

“Come round and we’ll talk about it,” said Merry.

“SHUT UP!” shouted Esme.

“What!” said Merry, quite shocked.

“Oh not you. I were talking to our Meena.” Meena was Esme’s oldest sister of 18 years. “She’s been nasty all morning. I’ll be round in a minute then, see yer.”

“See you in a minute.”

As usual the old promise was a lie and it was actually eight minutes before Esme turned up on Merry’s doorstep.

Merry’s Dad let her in. “She’s upstairs. Go on up,” was all he said.

Esme nodded shyly and went up. She ran up the stairs and into Merry’s room where she found her friend sat on the bed with her back to the door, talking to the bedside drawers. Esme was surprised to see even more books scattered about Merry’s room than usual. Usually there were novels and puzzle books strewn about but now there were other kinds: boring books.

“Ayup, Merry,” said Esme, closing the door behind her.

“Hey, Esme,” said Merry, not bothering to look round.

Esme laid across the bed and peered over the edge to see Ayina sitting in the bedside drawer. She was carving a roasted peanut up into eatable chunks with a dagger the length of a wren’s beak.

“Hello Esme,” said Ayina.

“Hello, Ayina,” smiled Esme. She still couldn’t believe they’d found a Fairy.

“Did you sleep soundly?” Ayina asked.

“Yes, thanks,” replied Esme. “But Trent was taken to hospital.”

“Yes,” said Ayina, “Merry told me. Do you know what is wrong with him.”

“No, but I heard he kept screaming as they took him away.”

Esme seemed quite shaken by the thought.

“It may be something to do with what happened in the forest. Whatever Woe did to him, it might be having an after effect. If that is

the case the doctors will not be able to do anything. But it could wear off.”

“We should go and visit him,” suggested Esme.

“Percy said he’s gonna come round. We’ll see if he’s heard owt,” said Merry. “But yeah, we should try and see Trent at the hospital.”

“Let us paint,” said Ayina, surprising the two girls with the change in subject.

“What do you mean?” said Merry.

“I’m bored,” said Ayina. “Lets do something interesting. I’ve got my paints with me.”

“You’ve brought paints?!”

“Of course, I have brought all essentials: my rations, my weapons, my paints. Perhaps I will paint your portrait on the side of a grain of rice. Or I could carve a seahorse from the nib of a pencil.”

“I’d like to see that,” said Esme.

“Then you can have it when I am done. But you have to give something you made in return. That is a custom amongst my people. When you make a new friend you must both exchange a work of your art, so that you are giving a piece of yourself to that other person.”

“But I can’t draw,” said Merry.

“How can you not draw? You’re not paralysed.”

“I mean I’m not very good.”

“Inconceivable,” said Ayina, almost to herself, for she was truly confused. “Art simply ‘is’. How can it be good or bad? It’s like saying a mountain is good or bad, or a star. That is bizarre.”

Neither Esme or Merry knew how to respond. So Merry found some paper and pencils and she and Esme started drawing a picture each. Ayina did as she said and started to carve a tiny sculpture from the end of a pencil.

As they worked Esme asked Ayina a question that had been on her mind since yesterday. “Ayina, can you do magic?”

“No,” the Fairy laughed. “What makes you ask that?”

“It’s just I thought Fairies were supposed to be magical.”

“Well, I suppose some things we can do may seem like magic to humans. Especially those humans who encountered my ancestors centuries ago. Do you believe in magic?”

“A bit,” said Esme.

“I didn’t,” said Merry, “until I saw Woe disappear through shadows and turn grass into stone. In’t she magical?”

“She is different, but I do not think magic is the right word to use. There are certain things we do not yet know about her people. But to call her abilities magical is dangerous. If we do that we give up trying to understand them and assume that they are unexplainable. But everything has an explanation: a set of rules governing them. It is no good couching the unknown in vague terms. However Woe does the things she does, I am sure others could do what she did if they only had the knowledge and the technology that is at her people’s disposal.

“Do you wish you had magic powers?” Ayina asked the girls.

“It wun’t be bad,” said Merry. “I can think of a few nice places I’d go if I could fly.”

“But your people have flying vehicles,” stated Ayina, puzzled again.

“Planes you mean? Yeah. But you have to pay and book a place. You can’t just fly off.”

“Pay? So humans still use money,” said Ayina. “Then it is no surprise you want magic powers.” Merry frowned, as she couldn’t quite see what the connection was.

“Human beings have the power to fly to anywhere on Earth,” said Ayina. “Everyone of you could have the freedom of a healthy-winged Fairy, without the need for magic.”

“So magic doesn’t exist?” said Esme, sounding a little disappointed.

“Many strange and wonderful things exist in both our worlds. I would call love or life itself magical. But as to the kind of magic you have in mind, I do not know. If anyone knows the truth of that, it would be the Everlaster.”

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While Ayina and the girls sat chatting, Percy walked along a street on his way to Merry's house. He had yet to hear of last night's incident with Trent.

The whole town was very quiet. Other than the cheerful chirrup of birds the only sounds were the drifting voices of two lads playing in the playground behind him.

Percy walked past Perry's Flower's, the baker's, and the hardware shop, which were all shuttered up, and onto a path that wove down the sides of houses, past people's back yards. Two men appeared at the end of the path, walking in his direction. When they reached him they didn't make way for him to go by but came to a halt and looked down at him. They wore jeans, with shirts and ties beneath their jackets.

"Let's see your ID card boy," said one of the men through thin teeth. He had a thin moustache too, short and brown like rat fur.

"Why?" said Percy getting ready to run.

"Because I'm asking you to," and the man flashed a police badge at Percy. The boy hardly got a look at it, and he'd never seen a police badge before anyway.

"You're police?" asked Percy.

"Of course," said the second man. This one was a little bit overweight, like an ex-footballer who had let himself go, and he was constantly sniffing.

Percy handed over his ID card and the men took a look.

"Percy Lillycrop," said the Moustache Man handing the card back, "you were in Cradleford Forest yesterday." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," replied Percy instinctively.

"No," said the man, shaking his head in a patronising manner. "No. You didn't go to the forest with one or two mates because there's just so much to do around here isn't there?"

His friend chuckled. “Aye, din’t yer know? Bloody Disney Land this place.”

“You didn’t have a picnic yesterday,” continued the Moustache Man, “just like you didn’t trespass on private property. And you didn’t rob that farmhouse, did you?” he added sarcastically.

Percy had maintained a nonchalant expression while the guy talked, with a hint of fake disbelief and confusion, up until that last bit. His face lit up in genuine surprise. “What farmhouse? En’t bin near one.”

“No, of course you haven’t,” the man continued. “You were in your house all yesterday with your parents. So we’ll go and talk to them just to confirm.”

The Sniffing Man put his hand on Percy’s shoulder and started to march him back the way he came.

“Wait,” said Percy, digging his heels in. “I did go to forest, but din’t rob no house. Don’t tell me Mum and Dad. I en’t done owt illegal.”

“Well, if you didn’t do it you have nothing to worry about. You can’t be charged without evidence. But we still need you to come with us and answer a few questions to help us in our investigations and eliminate you as a suspect.”

They walked him back to the main road.

A car that had not been there earlier was now parked at the entrance to the path. It was the colour of pale moss and looked old but in good condition.

The rear door was opened by a man in the back. “Hurry it,” he said.

The Moustache Man pushed Percy in then sat down beside him. Percy felt squashed between the two men. The other guy was fat, like a bouncer. His fingers were like the legs of a pink balloon animal, strangulated by thick gold rings.

The Sniffing Man made a long loud snort. He spat a great gob of phlegm onto the pavement, gluing a woodlouse to the ground, and then got into to the front passenger seat.



The car started moving.

“Put your seat belt on,” said the Moustache Man, giving the end of the belt to Percy. Percy took it and shoved his hand between his hip and the suited flesh of the Fat Man. The Fat Man frowned in annoyance as Percy dug his hand deeper into the fissure between their thighs in his attempt to find the belt fastener.

After struggling for what seemed like ages Percy found the fastener and clipped the belt in. He pulled his hand out of the hot crevice and gave a sigh of relief.

They were driving fast down a bypass now.

The Sniffing Man gave another long snort. He wound down his window and spat out another green orb of phlegm. The wind caught it and it splattered on the window beside the Moustache Man’s head.

“Auugh! You dirty beggar.” said the Moustache Man and he punched the back of the Sniffing Man’s head rest.

“You din’t just gob on my window?” asked Driver. He glanced round and saw the green smear. He looked forward again to concentrate on his driving, his face now red. “YOU DID NOT JUST GOB ON MY WINDOW! You’d better wash that off once we’ve stopped.”

“Calm down,” said the Fat Man, staring bored out of his window. “It matches the paint job anyway.”

After ten minutes or so the car stopped and they all got out.

Percy looked around.

They were behind a junkyard. They stood on a ground of pink dust that jutted out into a vast lake of tall grass. Far across the rippling green a small row of houses stood, like cottages on the coastal-edge of a fishing village. They seemed to beckon him across the waves with a lure like that of the Sirens. Percy imagined the families in those houses, sitting in comfort and security with the intoxicating smell of cooking Sunday roast wrapped around them. Percy wished he could escape these men, who he was now sure were not police, and wade through the grass to those people and play with

their children. But the Sniffing Man held his arm fast and even if he did break free the men would probably just watch him run recklessly into the deep grass and drown beneath its surface, leaving his body to rot while the field mice and spiders scurried around it.

“There’s no need to be afraid, Percy. We’re here to help.” It was the Fat Man. He’d taken his jacket off and was sitting on the car bonnet. The Sun was getting higher in the clear sky and it would soon get very hot.

The Fat Man opened a brief case and perused some papers. “You’re a good boy really, aren’t you?” he said. “Your school reports all have the same basic theme: ‘An intelligent, capable boy, who needs to settle down and apply himself more.’ You’re a good lad, Percy, well meaning, and that’s why we want to help you.”

The Fat Man closed the briefcase and put it on the ground. “Come and sit next to me,” he said, patting the car bonnet. The Sniffing Man let him go and Percy sat down warily on the warm car bonnet. He heard raised voices behind him and looked round. The Sniffing Man and Driver were arguing over a piece of cloth.

“Did you see anything out of the ordinary in that forest yesterday?” the Fat Man asked.

“No,” said Percy, rather unconvincingly. The usual confidence that he oozed when bluffing his way through the headmaster’s interrogations was gone before these men.

“I know you’re lying,” said the Fat Man, and he stuck a cigarette between his lips and lit it. “Lying’s a terrible sin. You shouldn’t lie to your elders, especially when we’re trying to help you.

“Listen, I’m going to make the assumption that you did see something in the forest. And that you know what’s happened to it. Has it occurred to you that you and your friends may be in great danger just knowing of its existence.”

“I admit I saw somert,” said Percy, “but it flew away, and I’ve no idea where it is now.”

Suddenly the Fat Man’s hand was round Percy’s throat. He was pushed down, hitting the back of his head against the car bonnet.

“Do you think I’m an idiot,” growled the Fat Man into Percy’s face.

Percy tried to say no but the Fat Man was squeezing his neck too hard and the shining rings bit into his skin.

“Don’t think we won’t hurt you badly just because you’re a kid.”

The Fat Man relaxed his grip and Percy coughed.

“Now,” said the Fat Man. “You’re going to tell the truth.”

Percy was definitely scared now. He could feel the blood pumping through the veins past his temples. He didn’t know how he would get through this without telling the men what they wanted. All he cared about now was getting home without any cuts and bruises to explain to his parents.

“If you don’t help we have the power to make your life and the lives of your friends short and miserable. On the other hand if you help us we can reward you. But I promise you, whatever you decide, we will catch that Fairy and you don’t want to be in the way when that happens.”

Percy didn’t know who the men were, but he had no doubt that they were capable of doing what the Fat Man said. After all, they’d managed to track him down less than a day after he’d been in the forest.

“It’s wounded,” said Percy. “The Fairy’s wounded so it won’t be going anywhere soon. So yer dun’t have to be in such an hurry.”

The Fat Man nodded. He believed Percy was telling the truth. That the Fairy was wounded was consistent with the information he had been given.

“It’s not dying is it,” the Fat Man asked. “We don’t want it dead you should understand. We just need it to tell us some things.”

“No, it’s not dying,” said Percy. “It just can’t fly.”

“So are you going to tell us where it is?”

“I dun’t know where it is exactly, at the moment,” said Percy, which was kind of true. Merry could be taking the Fairy for a walk for all he knew. “But I’ll be able to find out for tomorrow.”

“Alright then,” said the Fat Man. “You’ve got till 3 o’clock tomorrow afternoon. I’ll give you this,” and he gave Percy a mobile phone. “It can only be used to contact us. Press that button and it will dial automatically. If anything happens you ring us. Be in the graveyard behind St Peter’s church at 3 o’clock with the Fairy or with it’s exact location. Now, if we don’t have the Fairy in our possession by the end of tomorrow you will find out the hard way just how serious this situation is. Is there anything you don’t understand.”

“No,” said Percy.

“Good, now get back in the car and we’ll drop you off near your home.”

Percy and the men got back in the car. The Sniffing Man was relegated to the back seat by Driver. Now Percy was squashed even tighter against the Fat Man. The return journey was hot and silent.

After the car dropped Percy off it drove around a corner and pulled over.

The Moustache Man took from a bag a small felt box, which he opened, revealing a butterfly made entirely from a shiny orange metal. The butterfly was delicately made and extremely detailed.

With a pair of tweezers the Moustache Man lifted it carefully out. “Right, how does it work?”

The Sniffing Man lent forward between the front seats with an instruction manual in his hand. He read from it. “The Clockwork Butterfly Visual Surveillance Device Mark IV. When fully wound the Clockwork Butterfly will operate for approximately 72 hours. To wind up the Clockwork Butterfly insert the winding key provided carefully into the slot found on the underside of the central segment of the thorax.”

“Where’s the thorax?” asked the Moustache Man.

“Here, there’s a picture.”

The Moustache Man looked at the picture then back at the butterfly, “ahh, got it.” He took out the long needle-like winding key

and inserted it into the butterfly. After winding it for about a minute it wouldn't wind no further. "I think it's done."

The Moustache Man removed the key and the clockwork butterfly immediately began moving its wings and legs like a real butterfly. It was still held by the tweezers.

"Now what?"

The Sniffing Man continued to read. "Turn on the flower peripheral."

"The flower peripheral?" said the Moustache Man, confused. "Look in that bag," he said to Driver. Driver took the bag from beside the Moustache Man's feet and took out another box. Inside was a device that looked like a personal CD player with a plastic flower on top.

The Sniffing Man kept reading. "Place the disc containing the necessary data about the target into the flower peripheral. The following information should be contained on the disc: visual images of the target, the target's voice patterns, places where the target frequents and geographical information of the local area."

The Fat Man took a disc from his briefcase and gave it to Driver, who inserted the disc into the flower peripheral.

"Place the butterfly on the flower peripheral and it will automatically find and insert its proboscis into the NECTA port and upload the data from the disc."

The Moustache Man released the butterfly onto the flower and it did as the instruction manual described.

As the clockwork butterfly uploaded the information the Sniffing Man read the last of the instruction manual. "When data is finished uploading, the Clockwork Butterfly will be ready for release. The butterfly may be called back at anytime by pressing the return button on the flower peripheral. The Clockwork Butterfly will automatically find and return to the flower peripheral when you do this or when it needs winding up again. When not in use, store the Clockwork Butterfly in a cool, dry place and do not expose to naked flame or temperatures beneath 1 or above 60 degrees centigrade."

The butterfly finished uploading the data and began flapping its wings. It was a pretty sight and the men smiled in delight as the delicate creation took to the air and flew off in the direction... PLINK! The butterfly struck the inside of the window and fell down the side of the Moustache Man's seat.

"You idiot," cried the Fat Man. "Open the damn window."

The Moustache Man did so, rather shakily.

"Where is it? Is it broke?" asked the Sniffing Man. But then the butterfly emerged crawling carefully up the door. It reached the now open window to shine triumphantly in the sunlight before flying away in erratic bobs and spirals.

"I hope it's meant to fly like that," said Driver.

"All butterfly's fly like that, moron," said the Moustache Man.

When the butterfly was finally out of sight the men drove away.

After Percy had left the car he had begun to make his way to Merry's but after a short distance his legs began to feel wobbly. There was a tree by the path he was walking on and he went behind it and sat down. He suddenly realised how helpless he had been with those men. He wondered whether or not to tell Merry about them. The men had threatened him, his family and his friends and there was no way to stand up to them.

I'm gonna have to betray Ayina, thought Percy.

First his lip started to tremble and then he began to cry. Stop crying yer stupid puff, he told himself, and then he buried his face in his T-shirt.

As he sat sobbing, on a branch above him, there landed an orange metallic butterfly.