

# The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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## **Chapter 7**

### **A Meeting of Minds**

*In which observations are made,  
conclusions arrived at, and plans drawn  
together.*

When Percy finally arrived at Merry's her Dad was surprised to see him, having never met the boy before.

"Is Merry in?" asked Percy.

"Aye. I'll just go tell her," said Merry's Dad rather gruffly, "what's your name?"

"Percy."

Merry's Dad went to the foot of the stairs and shouted up to his daughter. "There's some boy here to see you. Calls himself Percy."

"Tell him to hold on a bit, we're coming darn in a minute," came Merry's shrill voice from above.

Her Dad returned to Percy at the back door. "She's coming. You a friend from school?"

"Yes, we've been friends ages," said Percy.

"O, she's never mentioned you. You don't like playing wi' boys then?" He looked at Percy very closely.

"No, I usually play wi' boys."

Merry and Esme appeared. Merry carried a small box with tiny holes in it. She led Esme and Percy quickly away before her Dad could notice she was carrying something peculiar.

"Don't worry about mi Dad," said Merry, when they were out of earshot. "He's been funny all morning."

"Tell me about it," groaned Percy. "Mi Mam and Dad's been arguing since they woke up."

"When we woke up we could hear my Mum crying," said Esme. "But Dad sez nothing's happened."

As they walked they passed the odd adult. Every one of them looked unhappy, shuffling quickly to their destinations, ignoring the world around them, worry etched on their faces.

The three children turned at the screech of a car behind them. It had braked and swerved to narrowly miss a man who had run out into the road. The man was young and bleary eyed. The driver bellowed at him through the window, "you idiot!". But the young

man did not hear him, he stumbled over the curb and ran on down the street as if his world was ending.

“What is going on?” whispered Percy.

“I don’t know,” said Merry. “We’ll go back to me Auntie’s shed. We won’t get intruded in there. And she’s cool. She’ll know what’s going off with everyone.”

As the children walked the streets the clockwork butterfly fluttered from garden to garden behind them.

Two blocks away the men were parked in their car, watching a monitor. On it Percy and the girls could be seen through the eye view of the clockwork butterfly. The angle kept changing as the butterfly fluttered around them. The men could hear the children’s voices through a speaker, but there had not yet been mention of any Fairy.

Esme told Percy about Trent being in hospital.

Percy’s first thought was that the men had got him and beaten him up, but then Merry said he’d had some kind of fit.

“We should go and see him,” said Percy.

“I’ll see if me Dad can take us to the hospital this afternoon,” said Merry. “Ayina thinks that Trent’s trouble might be to do with what Woe did to him”.

Percy looked up and down the street anxiously. “I dun’t think we should talk about owt like that till we get to yer auntie’s. Somebody might hear us.”

“Okay,” said Merry, frowning at his paranoia.

The men watched them on their monitor.

“Pass me some cola,” said the Moustache Man. “Thanks.”

PKSST!

“These chip butties are nice,” said the Sniffing Man.

“Napkin. USE A NAPKIN!” yelled Driver. “Someone’s gonna Hoover this thing out tonight, and it’s not me.”

The Fat Man was scribbling down notes on a pad.

They watched the children enter a gate to a house and proceed towards a shed. When they entered the shed the picture zoomed in as the butterfly followed them. KTSHH! The screen went black.

“Aww, what’s happened?” blurted the Sniffing Man with a mouth full of chips.

Merry had closed the shed door the instant the clockwork butterfly was about to fly through it. It had crashed and fallen to the ground. It did not break but returned to the air in an attempt to look through a window. But the windows were too dirty to see through so it landed on the roof and waited, unable to hear what the children were saying.

Inside the shed Merry opened the box she was carrying. Inside it sat Ayina amongst crumpled handkerchiefs.

“Are you okay,” Merry asked Ayina.

“Yes, thanks. Though can you take me out of this box. I need to stretch myself.”

Merry put her hand in the box and Ayina climbed on it. Merry then placed Ayina down on the floor, where the others sat cross-legged. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” cheered the Fairy as she stretched her limbs.

“Just a minute,” said Merry, excusing herself from the shed. She wanted to tell her Aunt about the change in her Dad.

She turned the door handle to enter the house but it would not open. Her Aunty had not yet unlocked it from the night before, which was so unusual for her as she always did so first thing in a morning.

Merry knocked, harder than she usually would. After everything that had happened the past day or so this was the first time she felt panic.

Eventually, Aunty Rosemary answered the door with the chain still on. “What is it?”

“It’s me. Can I come in?”

“Not this morning, Merry. I’d like to be left alone.”

“Oh.”

“Was it important?”

“No,” said Merry, hopelessly. Then her Aunty shut the door.

“What’s wrong?” asked Esme, seeing Merry enter the shed with her hand at her head, struggling to contain her emotion.

“Good question,” was her only reply.

“Everyone’s all miserable and weird,” said Esme.

“Not everyone,” said Percy. “We’re not like it, though we’ve got loads to worry about. Your brothers and sisters aren’t like it, are they?”

“No,” said Esme, “except me oldest sister.”

“So it’s as if only adults are like it.”

“What is wrong with the adults?” Ayina asked, curious.

“I dun’t know,” said Merry. “They’ve all changed overnight. It’s like they’re all upset about something. But how can they all get upset at once. Me Dad and me Aunty were both perfectly happy before I went to bed.”

“And same’s happened to my Mum and Dad,” said Esme.

“And mine,” added Percy. “And we’ve seen other people, strangers, all looking upset and miserable.”

Ayina paced up and down a floorboard as she spoke, her broken wing trailing limply behind her. Even with her wing ragged the children marvelled at her beauty and grace. “It may be coincidence,” she suggested, “but I have seen a phenomenon such as this before, on my own world. When Woe was on my world she was able to spread depression and misery amongst our people. “Usually she did this to a place the Jae-Mareeda were about to attack. Unlike most generals, Woe always leads her armies from the front. If left unchecked her effect can intensify and spread.”

The children were shocked at what Ayina was implying. “You mean Woe has done this to our parents and everyone else. But why?”

“That I do not know. Woe has placed her curse upon this town. Somebody wants your people weakened.”

“Are people going to die?”

Ayina merely shook her head.

“Can we stop her and make everyone better again?” asked Merry.

“Perhaps, but I do not know how. The Everlaster may help us in this.”

“Who is this Everlaster?” Percy asked.

“As far as we know The Everlaster is a human who, thousands of years ago, was granted immortality. He has watched the history of humanity unfold before him. He is neither good or evil, having committed thousands of crimes through the centuries, but even more acts of goodness. I have no idea what to expect when we find him.

“He has been known by many names through the millennia, such as Atrachasis, which meant ‘the exceptional wise one’. One society of ancient humans called him ‘the Infinite Story’.”

“That’s a weird name for a person,” said Esme.

“Maybe, but some ancient cultures on Earth, and some on my planet today, consider a person’s life equivalent to a story.

“But I have learned he was born with the name Utnapishtim. That is the name he will answer by.”

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Trent sat up in bed and smiled when he saw Percy, Merry and Esme enter accompanied by Merry’s Dad. His own parents were by his side. They looked dark around the eyes and tired.

His parents rose and shook hands with Merry’s Dad. They told him and the children that the doctors didn’t know what had happened to Trent so they were keeping him in to do some tests.

Trent asked his parents if he and his friends could talk on their own for a bit. His parents were feeling tired and frustrated having been waiting beside Trent’s bed for so long. Grateful for the relief of having another adult to talk to, they left the children alone and went with Merry’s Dad to the Hospital café for a cup of tea.

“So what happened,” asked Percy.

“Urrhh, I dunno,” said Trent, and he put his hand to his head and laughed. “I had an headache all last night. And this morning I woke up in ‘ere. They’ve gid me some tablets to stop me headache and in evening I’m going for a brain scan.”

“Really?” said Merry, rather excitedly.

“Tell em to crank their brain scanner all the way up,” said Percy, “or they might not find it otherwise.”

“It’s not funny,” said Esme. “You haven’t got a brain tumour or something, have you?” she asked Trent, very worried.

“How am I to know,” said Trent rolling his eyes. “That’s why I’m having a brain scan, yer thick head.” Esme looked down at her feet. There was a pause for a moment and then he said, “so, did all that stuff with the Fairy yesterday really happen?”

“Yep,” said Merry. “Yer din’t dream it. Ayina thinks what happened to you is cos o’ what Woe did. It’s like an after effect.”

“I suppose it could be,” said Trent. “So where is she now?”

“Somewhere safe,” said Percy before Merry could reply.

“Yeah,” said Merry. “She’s getting plenty o’ rest before her journey tomorrow.”

“O.R.” said Trent. He’d forgotten they were going to Lopside. “It’s a shame I can’t come wi’ thi. Do yer know what trains to take?”

“Yep,” said Merry. “Esme’s got a time table wi’ Lopside on.”

“But how much is it gonna cost yer?”

“It’ll be about 15 quid each all together, there and back?”

“Percy’s lending me some money, cos’ I ‘ent got much,” said Esme.

“Really,” said Trent looking at Percy.

“Yeah,” said Percy and he gave a weak smile. He was feeling uncomfortable talking about something that probably wasn’t going to happen. He thought about the possibility of going ahead to Lopside and helping the Fairy find that man she was after, but the threats that the Fat Man had made scared him.

“What’s up?” Merry asked him. She saw that his mind was working over.



Percy didn't hear her. "Esme?" he said.

"Yes," said Esme.

"If we all left our houses at the earliest time possible without raising suspicions from us mums and dads, lets say quarter past eight, and we got down to 'train station for half past, then what train would we be able to catch?"

"There's always a train at twenty-to," she said. "So we could get the twenty-to-nine."

"And the trains will be busy at that time," said Percy. "So no one's gonna take much notice o' three children on their own." And, thought Percy to himself, it'll give us plenty o' time to find that guy the Fairy's after, and if we do I can make a better decision about whether to contact those men.

"I din't think o' that," said Merry, pleased that Percy was finally showing some enthusiasm.

"So what are your excuses for being gone all day?" asked Trent.

"O, just the usual," said Percy. "Going o'er to someone's house, staying for dinner. It's not hard."

"It's not like were lying for fun," said Merry. "We have to do this."

"Thy'll have a laugh," said Trent.

"Maybe," said Merry. Then she started laughing.

"What?" said Percy.

"Nothing," replied Merry, smiling. "It's just this is the most exciting thing I've ever done."

"Yeah," said Esme, and she grinned too.

The girls felt an energy they had never felt before. They were about to embark on something unknown, possibly dangerous, and their parents didn't know a thing about it.

Usually Percy would have felt excited too, but instead he just felt scared. He didn't expect to enjoy a single minute of this adventure.

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At the parish hall there was a gathering again of the striking workers of SkweezumGrabaal&Runne. Concerns had been raised by a few and echoed by many more. Issues had to be discussed, and so democracy demanded that a new meeting be held.

Less came today than had swelled the previous meeting but still many came.

Ernest Steer was out of town, gone to speak with those of another region.

“I can’t pay my rent and shall be thrown on the streets if this strike dun’t end soon,” said one young woman.

“Yes, I think we’re making a mistake,” said another.

Woe had overcome them. All they could see ahead was defeat and more misery and they swapped their fears with one another.

“Perhaps we should end the strike and accept bosses’ demands. At least most of us will keep our jobs.”

A man entered the hall and when their eyes came upon him all fell silent. His face was scorched with tears, his hair and clothes hung dishevelled; he was marked as if by battle: a battle lost.

“Friends,” he croaked through a throat parched with weeping. “Mary Shaw’s son, he’s only 23, he’s been fon’ dead, his wrists cut open. His mother grieves at home. What more can we lose when our children take their lives for hopelessness?”

A murmur of sympathy swept the hall and tears too, and then whispers, rumours of a second suicide in the town.

And when it finally ended a vote was taken. The workers of Tiverton Preedy were tired of fighting. They decided to end the strike and return to work tomorrow morning.

Night had returned and in their chamber slept the Seers. At the chamber’s center, beneath the elementary sextant, sat Christal Whitelaw. She was spending the night there, firstly, to study the data from the previous night, and secondly, in case ‘it’ happened again. She

was studying reams of paper filled with numbers and wavy lines, by the glow of a fluorescent lamp.

So different was the scene now from the night before. Around her the Seers slept, their faces as close to serene as they could ever be. Their monoliths, which warped and rearranged themselves when they were active, were still. The only sound was the deep pulsation of the chamber wall. It was like being inside the inner ear of a colossal giant. One with a throbbing headache.

As Christal puzzled over what the readings meant, two new sounds awakened in the chamber. One was the sound of paper sliding out of the elementary sextant; a new ream of numbers and wavy lines for her to analyze. The other was the sound of metal groaning.

Christal Whitelaw looked up. One of the monoliths was activating. Its surface writhed as mechanisms rearranged themselves and new circuits formed, mirroring a process taking place in the Seer's brain, though in a sense the monolith was her brain, for the organic and the mechanical had long since ceased to be separate.

The Seer opened her eyes.

"What's wrong?" asked the scientist, walking towards her.

She blinked her eyes loose of sleep and focussed on her. "I can sense a great gathering of energy."

"Can you tell the location?"

"It is close to the event we detected two days ago."

"The one attributed to the Fairy activity?"

"Yes. There are similarities to what I felt that day, but great differences also."

"What do you mean?" asked the scientist as she went back to the elementary sextant and looked at the new output falling away.

"Just as one instrument can play two very different tunes and produce two very different effects, so is this the same source as before but with very different intentions."

"Intentions?" said the scientist, raising an eyebrow. She removed from a folder data gathered on the morning of the Fairy's arrival.

“O yes, intentions,” said the Seer. “There is an intelligence behind this force.”

“What are you saying? That a living creature is creating this?”

“Whether it is a creature, or even living, I cannot answer. But a mind is at work here.”

Christal now had the readings taken from last night, when the Seers were in pain. She lay all three sets of data along side each other. “Do you think this is the same source as what you and the others were experiencing last night?”

“I can not know. Last night was too overwhelming. We had to struggle just to stop from going insane.”

“I couldn’t see it before,” said Christal, not looking up from the data. “The similarities are subtle, but none the less they are there. Whatever happened in that forest and what ever happened to you last night were produced by the same thing. And whatever that was, it is right now active in Barnsley.”

Unpredicted by the weather man, a storm was building to a rage in Barnsley. Unlike most storms, this wasn’t blown across the land by the wind but remained in one place. At its centre was Barnsley General Hospital.

In the safety of the hospital most of the patients were unaware of the storm and slept as well as their ailments allowed them. One of those sleeping patients was Trent Tuffnell.

He had been sleeping soundly, dreaming the same nonsense that anyone else does. But at the same moment that the storm arrived the nonsense of his dreams was arranging into a strange order. The typical random shift of characters and landscapes stopped and one voice began to dominate. It was a voice he had never heard before until last night.

Last night when the voice invaded his dreams it was as if he was overhearing something not intended for him to hear. The voice had been upset, it had cried as if in grief. Then there was fright, and

anger, and a thirst for vengeance. It had produced in his dreams such images of violence and terror that it sent him into a screaming fit. Just before the doctors had given him the injection that happened to stop his visions, the owner of the voice had detected him listening.

Trent had forgotten all this when he woke up. But now, back in his dreaming state, he remembered.

Now the owner of the voice wished to speak to him.

“Who are you?” asked the voice.

“No one,” said Trent in his dream.

“Why can you hear me, when no other human can?”

“How should I know?”

“I need your help?”

“Why? Who are you?”

In place of a reply a series of visions took place. Trent was given a glimpse of the mind that the voice belonged to.

As the wind outside grew stronger and the rain fell faster Trent learned who the owner of the voice was. He learnt its fears and wishes and came to understand why it must do the things it shall, and why it needed him.

“Will you help me?” asked the voice.

“Yes,” said Trent. “I’ll help you.”

Suddenly Trent was awoken by a loud smashing sound. He sat up and looked around the room. Glass lay across the floor and bed, and wind and rain swept into the room. But most startling of all was the huge tree branch that reached across his bed, spanning the room and pressing against the door.

Two nurses had heard the crash and came running. They could not open the door for the weight of the branch, and were reduced to shouting through its small window. “It’s all right Trent. We’ll get you out.”

He saw their alarmed faces. One nurse went for help, while the other remained to hammer against the door. She kept shouting things like “hold on, we’ll have you out in a minute,” and “it’s all right,

just don't touch any glass." But he ignored her. He looked at the branch and saw the tree it reached from.

More nurses had arrived and they all called out, "stop! What are you doing?" as they saw Trent get out of bed and walk, barefoot, along the thick tree branch, towards the wind and rain.

And as he went through the window the rain ceased and the wind died down.

Two nurses ran through the corridors and to the exit. By the time they got to the area outside Trent's room he was nowhere to be seen. In fact, they could barely see each other, for a thick fog had descended.

The nurses walked hopelessly about, shouting Trent's name, but no reply ever came.