

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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The Everlaster

'Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and rebellion.'

- Oscar Wilde

Part I

**“Destroy All Dreamers
With Debt And Depression”**

Chapter 1

Where in the World is Tiverton Preedy?

*Of Tiverton Preedy and its inhabitants,
most especially two adventurers. Of the
coming of a herald, and a distressing
message for an old lady.*

Out of the school gates burst children, like champagne uncorked, yelling and cheering, faces raised to the Sun. And the Sun beamed back; it's golden rays glinting off rooftops, off car bonnets, dropped cans and the eyes of dogs, and off the hair of ten year old Meredith O'Connell.

For Meredith was blessed, or cursed as she saw it, with hair the colour of polished copper. There were as many freckles on her skin as stars in the night sky when seen far away from any town or city, and, as always, she was wearing at least one item of blue clothing; in order to match her eyes.

She strolled amidst the mass of delirious children with her hands in her pockets. When she saw someone fall over her laugh joined the shrieks of joy, the squeaks of pushchairs and the chirrup of swifts that were crisscrossing the air above like jet planes at an air show. Meredith was in no rush to get home because none of her favourite cartoons were on today.

"See you next year, carrot head," shouted a girl called Emily Ayers, displaying typical originality.

Not only was Meredith red-haired but she also happened to be poor at sport, liked to read a lot, and always got the teacher's questions right. Separately these four characteristics are harmless, but together they made her a prime target for fun poking. Meredith was, however, quite capable of looking after herself. "See you next year, excrement scalp," she replied to her brown haired taunter. Laughter rang out from the blondes and black-haired people nearby, and Emily ran off in defeat.

The last day of school had ended. Now summer could truly begin. The possibilities of the next six weeks raced around Meredith's mind, just as her less laidback peers raced around her body. She smelt the salt and vinegar from the chip shop mingle with the fumes of cars.

A hand slapped her hard on the back and a voice said, "ayup Merry."

Merry was what her friends called her. This particular friend was Percy Lillycrop: the tallest and strongest boy in her year, and

therefore a very useful friend to have. Nobody made fun of him for hanging around with Merry because he would smack them one if they did. He liked Meredith because he thought she was funny, and she liked him because she never knew what he would get up to next.

“Ayup Percy,” she replied without looking round at him.

He walked along side her and started talking in a fake posh tones, gesturing wildly with his hands: “because tomorrow is the beginning of the summer holidays I’m going to celebrate it by going on a quest. I, Percy The Brave, shall be going to Cradleford Forest to find the forgotten treasure of the Vampire Prince... erm... Steve.”

“Steve!” laughed Merry. “Good name. Anyway, if this treasure’s forgotten, how comes you know abart it?”

“I’m an Adventurer. Stop spoiling ‘mood.”

“Thar spoilt it first wi’ a name like Steve.”

“It’s hard coming up wi’ names, yer know.”

“You’re not going all the way to Cradleford Forest on your own, are yer?” asked Merry.

“Course not, Trent’s coming and so are you.”

“I don’t wanner go, it’s too far away.”

“Look, we can spend most o’ day there. We can buy some food from ‘sarnie shop to take wi’ us. It’ll be a right laugh, and tha can bring a friend. I’m sick of hanging around here all ‘time. Every summer we do same things. I want to see more o’ world. Just tell thi father tha spending day at yer friend’s house and everything’ll be right.”

Merry was very excited at the thought of exploring Cradleford Forest but she still wasn’t sure. “What if someone sees us on ‘way?”

“No one’ll see us if we walk through ‘farmer’s fields and stay away from ‘roads.”

“OK, I’ll go.”

“Great,” said Percy, grinning. “Meet us in ‘park tomorrow morning at half-ten, all right. I’ll see yer.” He ran off down a different street, head bowed and screeching like a speeding star-fighter.

‘That boy’s crazy,’ thought Merry, smiling.

The streets had now calmed as she walked to her own home at number 1 Tambur Lane. Merry lived in a terraced house on the edge of Tiverton Preedy: a little town in South Yorkshire. It sat right where the countryside and the town met. From her bedroom you could see a vast patchwork of fields, and beyond them, Cradleford Forest.

While Merry walked home, a few miles away, in the middle of Cradleford Forest, something appeared. Something that had not been seen on this world for a very long time.

It began with a tiny point of light floating about two metres above the fern-covered ground. Slowly the light expanded till it became a sphere one foot wide. All the colours of the rainbow swirled about its surface like oil on water.

The timid animals of the forest ran or flew away to hide, while the brave and curious watched with gleaming eyes.

After a moment the colours began to unravel from the sphere in long thin strands, like streamers. They floated away in all directions, dissolving slowly. As the colours swept away, the sphere shrank and shrank until eventually the shape of a tiny humanoid form emerged. The final strands of colour left the figure like bandages unwrapped from an Egyptian mummy. The figure floated in mid-air a few seconds after the last colour had vanished, then fell into the undergrowth.

The creature lay face down on the ground. Large silk-like wings the colour of a sunrise sprouted from its shoulder blades, covering its body limply. Apart from the wings the only thing that could be seen was its long hair, which took the form of thick dreadlocks and was the colour of a bright summer sky, complete with cloud white wisps. Around some of these dreadlocks tiny green vines wound, from which there sprouted minute flowers of various metallic colours.

For a few moments the creature lay completely still, as if dead. Suddenly it rolled over and gasped. It took in huge gulps of air, like a person saved from drowning.

For the first time in over five hundred years a Fairy breathed Earth's air.

Merry returned home to an empty house. Usually when she got home from school her Dad would still be in bed; for he worked during the night as a security guard.

Each weekday evening, at half-past-nine, he drives to work. He gets home in the mornings at half-past-seven, when he wakes up Merry. He makes himself some supper while Merry has breakfast, and after seeing her off to school he goes to bed. When Merry gets in from school she wakes him up, though she usually lets him sleep a bit longer before she does.

Today, however, and for the past two weeks, he had been getting up and going to bed at the same time as everybody else, because now there was a strike on where he worked. He was, at this moment, with other strikers picketing outside their workplace.

Merry sat in the kitchen enjoying some orange juice and daydreaming. It was silent but for the ticking of a solar driven clock on the wall. Above the fireplace were photos, many of which featured her Mum. Her Mother had died five years ago after getting drunk and crashing the car. Merry didn't cry at her Mother's funeral because she didn't love her very much. All she can remember of her is her shouting and hitting her Dad. Merry's Dad was a strong man but he would never hurt anyone and when her Mother got drunk and started hurting him he would just take it. He did cry at the funeral and was very upset for many weeks. To see her Dad suffer; this is what hurt Merry more than anything. She rarely thought about her Mother now.

The most prominent photo on the wall, and Merry's favourite, was an old black and white one. It showed a group of 40 men standing in front of a coal pit, all dressed in their Sunday clothes and

cloth caps. One of them was Merry's great, great grandfather who'd come over from Ireland looking for work and had found the mines. She often wondered what life must have been like for those men. She did not know why, but the pride on their faces made her feel proud too.

Merry heard the back door open and voices. Her Dad entered with his sister, Aunty Rosemary. She had just finished her job of driving the buses for the day.

Aunty Rosemary was a tall woman, strong of heart and body. She was beautiful and funny, always able to reduce Merry to tears with her stories. She lived on her own and, since Merry's Mother died, showed her niece a lot of attention.

"Go on then, you can make me some dinner an' all," Rosemary told her brother, with a cheeky smile on her face.

"Merry," said her Dad, "run across to 'farm and get some horse feed for yer Aunt."

"That would probably be tastier than your cooking," replied Rosemary.

"Oh, in that case you can cook instead."

"No, that's OK. I shall endure your cooking this once," and she winked at Merry. "It's Friday night. Corned beef hash night. In't that right, our Merry."

"Yep," answered Merry, mouth wet with anticipation.

Contrary to Aunty Rosemary's teasing, Merry's Dad was a good cook.

"You've got scrambled eggs too," he told them both.

The smell of her Dad's cooking tantalised Merry. Her stomach shouted and screamed in its own language and rattled her skin like a prisoner wanting out. Eventually her Dad dished up. The first few swallows stopped her belly's grumbling. The scrambled egg was on a slice of toast and there were lots of tomato sauce and salt. Always her Dad tells Merry not to put so much salt on because it's not healthy, but she never listens.

“I’m going to a meeting this evening, Meredith”, he told her, while she ate chocolate ice cream for afters. “The union’s holding one about the strike and I need to go to it.”

“I hope the strike keeps going,” said Merry, “I get to see you more.”

“I know that, love, but the strike’s serious; it’s no fun. I’m not getting paid. We can only survive thanks to the support money from the union, and Aunty Rosemary’s helping out.”

“Why are you doing it?” asked Merry. Her Dad had explained the reason for the strike before, but it was complicated and she’d forgotten.

“The firm I work for told us it wants to lay a lot of people off and cut everybody else’s wages. We all think that’s wrong so our union’s organised a strike in order to make the firm change their mind.”

Merry’s Dad worked for a firm called SkweezumGrabaal&Runne. They were a very big company with factories, laboratories and offices in countries all around the world and they made all sorts, from light-bulbs and stationery to computers and medicine. Each year they told their workers around the world to work harder and so they did. No matter how many billions of pounds the firm made its owners always wanted more. To repay the workers’ hard work, every so often the firm would cut their wages or lay some off, as they were doing now at Tiverton Preedy.

“You know,” interrupted Aunty Rosemary, “if they’d been bad workers and lazed about they’d probably have kept their jobs.”

The workers at the factory that Merry’s Dad guards made some of SGR’s most high-tech range of products: hardware for both space exploration and the military.

“Do yer know what the scientists are doing yet?” asked Merry.

“No,” said her Dad, “I’m not in a high enough security grade to ever get close to the labs. They get guards from outside for guarding those. They don’t use local people. These other guards are like super loyal to the company, so they’ll never strike. I just guard the

factory. The company must be right paranoid over their trade secrets. They don't want their competitors stealing their technology."

Merry suddenly remembered tomorrow's trip to the forest.

"Dad, I'll be going to a friend's house tomorrow morning and she sez I can stay for lunch."

"Which friend's this?"

"Esme."

"All right, but you'll be back for teatime won't tha?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Nar wash up and yer Aunty can dry. I have to get going."

Aunty Rosemary kept Merry company that evening. They played trading card games before watching some comedies on TV.

At a time that was not too early for the weekend but not too late to threaten decency, Meredith went to bed.

Crammed into the parish hall, Merry's Dad and over 300 of his fellow workers sweated with the warm evening, waiting to hear the words of their union representative. His name was Ernest Steer and he stood before them now. Percy's Mum was in the crowd too and with them she heard him speak with great passion.

"It gladdens me to feel the confidence I have felt among you today. You have not let their threats or the propaganda of the press blind you to the truth: that not only can you win this dispute but it is your God given right to.

"For too long have SGR, the government, and the rest of the rich walked hand in hand over your rights and your conditions. They have sold your children's schools to greedy business men and religious fanatics; they have torn up your parents' pensions."

The air came hotter still with the anger of the workers and they nodded and called out in agreement.

“Just when SGR have published the biggest profits in history they dare to slash your wages. You! Who have created the wealth they wallow in.” The crowd erupted with angry cheers.

“Your factory is an important part of their business. Every day that you remain on strike costs them millions. They need you more than you need them. So your wages should reflect your importance. Their UK chief executive, Mr Chandler Dahl, earns 40 million pounds a year. But do you think we would even notice if he went on strike?” There was much chuckling and shaking of heads. “No. Things would still get made and sold without him. But not without you. Now you deserve your fair share.”

The crowd applauded.

Others spoke that evening and their words gave them all courage, and when a vote was taken everyone agreed to continue with the strike.

It was very early in the morning, shortly after the Sun had risen, when the Fairy finally stirred. She was exhausted by her journey and had slept longer than she would have liked.

Fern leaves towered over her like a circus big top. She stood up, brushed the dirt from herself and stretched her wings: revealing colours that dazzled like a bursting star. The large wings could not be more different from the insect wings of popular imagination. They seemed more like sheet metal than anything organic, yet flexed like no metal could. Their pattern consisted of many straight lines radiating outwards, and contained every shade of red, yellow and gold that can be imagined.

Her outfit was of purple and blue. The two colours seemed to roam randomly around her body, twisting like the necks of courting swans in places while spreading out in flat patches in others. Tied to her back, between her wings, was a weapon almost as long as herself. It was a halberd: a long pole with a thick blade at the top. It's shaft was made of platinum and gold and wrought with ornate patterns. It's

blade was a crystal, in which all the colours of the rainbow could be seen to shimmer.

The Fairy's face was long, and her skin, taut over her prominent cheekbones, was darkest brown. Her eyes were indigo, though to notice that you might need the aid of a magnifying lens. Those eyes explored the forest around her.

As she had been promised by those who had sent her here, the Fairy had arrived in a place hidden from human eyes. She opened a pouch that hung from her waist and out of it flew four tiny shining orbs. With an obvious intelligence they flew around the Fairy, darting off sometimes to inspect the nearby grass and trees, but never straying far. Though they appeared to be alive, these shining spheres were actually robotic devices known as sprites.

The purpose of the sprites was to help the Fairy collect and record information during her time on Earth. The Fairies suspected that Earth would have changed a lot since they were last here five hundred years ago; so it was vital to collect as much information as possible.

The sprites could see, listen and scan objects with great speed and efficiency. Each one could hold up to ninety-nine terabytes of information and could communicate directly with the Fairy's brain, allowing her to see and hear what they did. She could also access the information that they stored as if they were her own memories.

Thanks to her sprites the Fairy knew she was alone and safe. Her mind turned to her mission; but she did not know quite where to begin. She needed the guidance of a person very old and very wise. In fact a person simply would not do: something more was needed.

She knelt down and, in an ancient language lost amongst humans, she began to sing. The wildlife listened, puzzled at this new voice in the forest. All the while the sprites ran patterns around her bowed form.

A few minutes passed before her song was silenced by a faint tremor. A tremor which grew in strength until the trees shook and the birds took to the sky in fright.

The Earth beneath the Fairy began to rise slowly, across an area the size of two houses. The ground rose evenly to begin with, then hills and valleys formed. Stones tumbled and trees fell left and right, while the Fairy clutched the stalk of a shaking fern. As the trees fell, the birds circling overhead saw a recognisable shape forming in the clearing created. When the movement stopped not a sound could be heard from the forest or from the sky.

The Earth beneath the Fairy had taken the shape of a face twenty metres long, and she was stood on the centre of its forehead.

The trees that circled this face of soil and stone bowed and shook their branches in the wind like worshippers in the presence of their god.

A tremor erupted once again as the mouth of the face burst open, sending dust and small stones into the air. A deep but feminine voice pounded the atmosphere with three simple words:

“HOW... DARE... YOU?”

The anger of the colossal voice frightened the Fairy, but she overcame her fear and with quivering lips spoke:

“Earth, Mother of All, I beg you listen.

Fearing death come I, on my grave mission.

On my success the fates of three worlds lie

And your guidance I seek on where to fly.”

The Fairy was silenced as the Earth trembled once again and the stony lips spoke. "YOU FAIRIES DARE TO ASK ME FOR AID? CENTURIES AGO YOU ABANDONED ME TO THE MERCY OF THAT WICKED RACE, HUMANITY. YOU SHOULD BEG FOR FORGIVENESS, NOT DIRECTIONS".

The Fairy had not expected such hostility from the Mother Earth; she could not understand it. She tried to plead:

“With good reason my kind left long ago,

But our absence should not have caused you woe.

We saw the humans beginning to learn

And for more and more knowledge they did yearn.
The world around them they learnt how to shape,
So, avoiding conflict we did escape.
Back home we returned to leave them alone
For they had to develop on their own.”

“THEIR DEVELOPMENT IS TAKING TOO LONG.
THEY DIMINISH AND DEFORM ME. MY LUSCIOUS GREEN
FORESTS SHRINK SMALLER. THE LIFE IS DRAINED FROM
MY OCEANS. THEY CUT DOWN MOUNTAINS AND FILL IN
RIVERS. AND SURELY KNOWING THAT THEY DOOM
THEMSELVES THEY ONLY QUICKEN THEIR VIOLENCE.

Then the Earth’s voice took on a softer tone. “I FEAR
THAT I AM DYING.”

This greatly troubled the Fairy but she could offer the Earth
no comfort, only more worries. She explained to Earth what had
happened on Aeval, her Fairy homeworld.

“There is a threat to Aeval, your sister,
And all the life that lives rich upon her,
For wicked creatures came some years ago;
More destructive than the humans you know.
They kill, enslave every species they meet,
Mean to conquer, have us kneel at their feet.
They have damaged their world beyond repair,
Laid waste to its seas, its forests and air.
They have come to steal our world for their own;
Devour all life that upon it has grown.
If we lose this war our world shall be doomed,
As all life upon her will be consumed.
A gluttonous century they might last,
Then at you their lustful gaze shall be cast.”

“IT HAS BEEN SO LONG SINCE I HEARD WORD
FROM AEVAL AND THIS NEWS SADDENS ME. BUT WHAT
DO YOU EXPECT TO ACHIEVE BY COMING HERE?”

“There is one human who knows of our world;

Human history he has seen unfurled.
Great knowledge and power are his to wield,
And to us his help I hope he will yield.”

The Earth thought for a moment and said, “YOU SPEAK OF
THE EVERLASTER?”

“Yes”, said the Fairy.

“I TOOK PITY ON HIM MANY CENTURIES AGO.
AND NOW I TAKE PITY ON YOU. LET ME LOOK.”

The face was silent a moment. All that could be heard was the
rustling of leaves on the breeze.

“I SEE HIM SITTING BY A WINDOW, STARING OUT.
THE BUILDING IS LARGE AND FILLED WITH MANY
PEOPLE. SOME SIT AROUND HIM IN AUDIENCE: HIS
STUDENTS OR DISCIPLES MAYBE. MEN AND WOMEN IN
WHITE ROBES WALK THE CORRIDORS. I SEE A SIGN:
POPPY FIELD HOUSE, LOPSIDE.

The Earth stopped what it was saying and the voice took on a
new, worried tone. “I MUST STOP NOW. SOMETHING IS
AWARE OF ME.”

The Earth beneath the Fairy began to sink to its original level.

“Wait! What is the Everlaster’s true name?” shouted the Fairy,
over the din of the collapsing Earth.

“HE WAS BORN UTNAPISHTIM”, uttered the mouth of
soil, just before it dissolved into the ground. The nose was last to
vanish, and when it was gone all was silent. The ground was once
again flat and inanimate.

The Fairy sat pondering in the new clearing while the birds
returned to the trees around her.

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.

*

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.

Chapter 3

A Drawing of Blood

*Of our heroes' journey into the forest and
what befell them therein.*

The children had been in the forest a couple of hours; following paths beaten by past explorers; though they did not see or hear any other humans. Often they were made alert by the sounds of rustling in the undergrowth. The creatures of the forest mostly avoided the children's curious eyes; but once or twice they saw a squirrel leaping through the treetops, or a mouse scampering over wormy roots. Sometimes the children were inspected by ladybirds or brightly coloured butterflies.

They hadn't yet found the vampire or his treasure, but that did not matter. Where silver birches grew amongst mossy boulders, they had fought imaginary goblins and skeletons; Trent had become wounded and Esme healed him with her magic. One dead tree; a lightning blasted hulk with twisted black arms; became a giant in their minds. Merry saved Percy from being eaten by blasting the giant with a mega-fireball spell.

After their long battles they rested now. They sat on grass that grew like thick fur, where sunlight shone through the canopy like laser beams from a fleet of tiny spaceships. Nearby lay an ancient fallen tree; semi-circles of fungus clung to its carcass like barnacles.

Merry took the sandwiches out of the backpack.

"This un's thine," she told Trent as she threw him a ham and mustard sandwich.

"Eurghh," said Esme, wrinkling her nose at the sight of it: she didn't like mustard and she didn't eat meat.

"Mine's the egg and here's your salad un," said Merry giving Esme her sandwich, "and here's thine, Percy." She gave Percy a sandwich with cheese and pickle. They ate quietly as they rested and shared a big bottle of traditional lemonade between them. The birds in the trees sang calmly and the children became lost in the world of their own thoughts.

Esme was looking at the others with their ham and cheese and eggs, and was wondering how they could bring themselves to eat that stuff. Those little pigs getting killed just for someone's sarnie, she thought, it's not right for all those animals to be locked up waiting to

die just to feed people who can eat other food anyway poor little things I couldn't bear hurting anything shouldn't be allowed it's wrong barbarians mum says barbarians all those tiny cages and lambs snatched from their mums just so people can eat them...

Esme often worked herself up into a state when she thought about this. She ate her sandwich very slowly.

Her mind was distracted from such thoughts when she spotted a tiny shrew a few metres away, snuffling its way through the undergrowth. She watched with delight, not daring to move or make a sound in case she frightened it away.

As Esme watched the shrew Merry finished her sandwich. This is nice umm this is nice it's so peaceful I like this grass what's Esme staring at she in some sort o' trance it'd be nice to live in 'forest with all animals and stuff its so quiet and peaceful it wouldn't be no cop in winter though and when it rained I suppose and then there's no electricity maybe it won't be so good after all but living in some sort o' tree house wi electricity could be fun as long as its warm anyway brick houses are boring I wonder why they're all so same but at least I live in an house there's those people who are homeless must be hard to survive I wonder why they don't stick some in one o' empty houses on our road there's three boarded up I'm sure no one 'ud mind I know I wouldn't...

Hmmm nice, thought Trent, when I get in I've got to beat that stupid boss on Deathkill 3 I'm sure thy has to shoot it in its eye but it dun't work maybe thy has to use rockets but its rock hard dodging its lightning un all dun't know why they put it in ruins bleedin' game but I'm not using no cheat they're for saps now where's that sherbet err ahh here it is careful lolly's nice mmm delish O God always get some darn me never fails look bloody ell...

As Trent brushed sherbet off his T-shirt, Percy lay on his back staring at the leaves above and the sky and sunlight poking through the hundreds of tiny gaps. This is cool exploring the forest it's like a real adventure I wonder what's up ahead there could be a witch's cottage or a cave or pond or anything and there's no one for miles we

can do owt we can make a den make it right big put food and stuff in it we could come back on other days there's no one else about it's like ours...

“Come on, let's make a den,” said Percy.

“We don't have any good materials,” said Merry, dismissing the notion.

“We can use branches and stuff,” he pleaded, “we can have passwords.”

“Sounds boring,” said Esme. “I'm going over there to look at those flowers.” She walked off towards a glade that was covered in blue and yellow flowers. The colours of the flowers were particularly vibrant: it looked as if monkeys had thrown paint all over the grass. She decided to pick some to take back to her Mum. As she did this she became aware of the sound of running water. She looked up and could just see a little stream a short distance away. She glanced back in the direction of her friends before trotting off to it.

The stream slid its way between moss-covered rocks and the air above it buzzed with insects. The water was shallow and crystal clear. Through it could be seen many rocks and stones of different colours. The stones glimmered like the contents of a treasure chest: there were sparkles of sapphire and ruby amidst gleams of silver and gold. This could be the vampire's treasure, thought Esme.

Esme crouched, peering into the water that trickled with the sound of tiny bells. A few metres behind her a great oak tree stood; an ancient of the forest. The shadows that it spilled were like a pool of black ink. And from that pool emerged a shape as an object emerges from water. First the top of a head broke the surface of the shadow, rising slowly 'til a pair of eyes peered over the short grass.

Those eyes, with their strange green glow deep within, saw and observed Esme. They did not see the world in the same way human eyes do. They did not see colours and shades. Instead, they distinguished objects by their different temperatures.

The eyes watched the warm body of Esme remove her sandals and step into the stream.

More of the head seeped from the shadow. Its nose emerged and the figure could now smell Esme and confirmed that she was a human child. Its sensitive ears heard Esme's sharp intake of breath at the touch of the cold water, heard her beating heart over the din of the stream.

Now all the head and neck had emerged and hundreds of purple veins throbbed with anticipation. Woe had become bored of searching the forest. She had found no evidence of what the Seers had detected; but now, here was a child for her to play with.

Woe's entire body poured up from the shadows, coming to a halt when the soles of her feet had emerged. She stood on the grass as though she had stood there all along. She stood in a world without colour, where light was merely the absence of shadow. She knew there were flowers all around her because she could smell their many scents; she could hear the noise their petals made as they scratched together in the breeze. But apart from that, as far as she was concerned, there was no difference between a bluebell and a blade of grass: they were both something you trod on.

And that she did, as she strode silently into the light of day and towards unknowing Esme.

Esme's scream shot through the forest like an arrow for almost a mile. Through leaf and bush it flew, poking birds off their perches and wasps from their nests, until, just as it was about to run out of energy and disintegrate, it pierced the sensitive eardrum of the Fairy.

The little creature was sitting astride the tip of a branch, legs dangling in the air. She had been thinking about how to begin her search for the Everlaster when her mind began to wander. She was daydreaming and singing to herself in her own language. The singing was accompanied with hand movements so that her wings had to flutter periodically in order for her to remain balanced on the branch.

But now, pricked by Esme's yell, the Fairy looked round with a start. Recognising that the sound was made by a human, she tried to pinpoint where it had come from. Maybe she could find a human being willing to help her in her search for the Everlaster, for she did not know the ways of modern Earth. But she knew she would have to be cautious: she had been warned that human beings were not always friendly.

Percy and Trent were climbing a tree and Merry was putting their rubbish into the backpack when Esme's scream hit them. It wasn't the sort of scream made like when a girl finds a spider, or has an earthworm dangled in her face. This was a real scream: Esme's terror burst into the minds of her friends as though they experienced it with her.

Trent and Percy leapt from the tree, ignoring the height, and ran with Merry, their bodies surging with adrenaline. They arrived at the stream to find Esme struggling in the water with the tallest and strangest looking woman they had ever seen.

The woman had hold of Esme and was trying to restrain the girl's flailing limbs.

"Get off her," shouted Percy. Woe turned around and looked at them with large terrible eyes. Never had the children known such menace as they now saw in those eyes: the spite of a thousand bullies burning in their green fires.

Esme was held tight and tears ran down her cheeks.

"*Abh, more children come running to be my friend,*" said Woe. Her voice seemed to be formed, not just by her throat, but by the sighing of the leaves, the droning of the insects, the babbling of the brook. "*This girl and I are having a wonderful time. Look, she is just weeping with joy.*"

Merry replied. "You'll be the one crying when the police throw you in jail for kidnapping."

"*O, you are mistaken,*" said Woe. "*Stealing this child was never my intention.*"

“I don’t believe you,” said Merry.

“Neither do I”, said Percy. He picked up a stick and shouted, “now let her go!” He ran at Woe and swung the stick at her back but she twisted around and caught it in her hand. She let go of Esme, who fell to the ground sobbing, and grabbed Percy’s head between both hands.

“You like violence do you?” she asked him. “I must say, I understand your appreciation of it but I do find it a little dull at times.”

Percy struggled, hitting Woe in the arms and chest. She stared into his eyes and he soon stopped that. *“You see, there are more amusing ways to hurt a person than through physical violence.”*

Percy squeezed his eye’s shut, but Woe put her mouth up to his ear and began to whisper. First his breathing quickened and then came his tears. She stroked his hair and face until he dropped to the ground, weeping.

Woe turned her attention to Merry and Trent. She walked towards them, leaving Esme and Percy lying on the ground.

“You should consider yourselves honoured,” spoke Woe as she walked, “you and your two friends. Honoured that you have been given a chance few humans ever have. The chance to look into the face of Woe. It is a pity, though, that you will not be able to boast about your accomplishment. For who would believe you, children and all?”

At that moment, Merry’s concern for her friend overrode her fear and she sped past Woe to kneel beside Esme and help her. While Woe was paying attention to Merry, Trent made a run for it.

He ran as fast as he could, ignoring the ferns and branches that whipped against him.

When Woe saw him running she ran also, but not in Trent’s direction. Instead she ran towards a thick tree, whose dense and heavy branches shrouded its trunk in shadow.

Merry watched puzzled as Woe ran head first into the tree trunk. To her surprise, instead of breaking her head open and falling to the floor, Woe disappeared into the dark trunk like a ghost walking

through a wall. No sooner had Woe's heel disappeared into the tree than Trent cried out and Merry looked in his direction.

Trent was pressed to the ground by Woe, where a second ago she had leapt from an adjacent shadow. He was dragged back to the other three before he even knew what had happened.

Woe threw Trent to the ground alongside Esme.

Merry got to her feet and looked Woe in her fearsome eyes. "I dun't know what thy are, but tha dun't scare me! If you do owt to us tha'll be hunted darn and killed!" Merry wasn't so certain this would happen but she hoped it would make Woe think twice.

Woe's only response was to smile and move to grab Merry.

Merry knew she couldn't run away; so, in her desperation she did something slightly crazy. Merry jumped up and flung her arms around Woe's neck to give her a big hug. At least it looked like she was giving Woe a hug. With her legs dangling in the air Merry clamped her teeth around Woe's nose.

All Merry's anger and strength collected in her jaw muscles. Her teeth pierced Woe's skin and blood gushed into her mouth.

Woe screeched in pain as Merry's teeth cut deeper and deeper: a monstrous screech that sent every bird in the forest flying frightened to the sky. Just as it seemed she would bite Woe's nose clean off Merry let go, for the taste was so vile.

Woe threw Merry from her with such strength that the girl flew eight metres through the air.

Landing safely amongst thick ferns Merry looked back at Woe. The woman was standing with her hands covering her bloodied face. For a very long moment there was silence as the children watched and waited.

Woe's shoulder's shuddered and a muffled sobbing came from behind her hands. All of Woe's body shook as she began to cry. But when she finally removed her hands from her face the children saw that she was not crying. The giant grin upon her face showed that she was laughing.

As blood poured from the ruined thing that was once her nose, running down her mouth and neck, Woe spoke. *“Good. I see we can be friends after all. Because tell me, little girl, did you not just enjoy making me hurt?”*

Merry could find no words to respond with.

Looking at Merry Woe clutched Trent by the neck with one hand and lifted him from the ground. *“If, as you say, I do not scare you, let me give you a lesson in fear through your friend here.”*

She turned her face towards Trent’s and her head-dress began to move. The fingers of the white material flexed and groped towards his head. The tips of the fingers split open: hundreds of thin black threads shot out. Trent could neither see nor breathe as the strands engulfed him.

Despair pulsed through the threads like blood, indulging Trent’s mind with a hundred terrible images. An evil cabaret performed on the stage of his imagination; the acts showed his future, the future of his friends and the future of the world; its main performers were greed, spite, death and grief. Trent saw a curtain of shadow come down upon the Earth. He thought he would remain in the darkness forever, but then an image flashed before him. It seemed to be a butterfly, and no sooner had it appeared than light returned and he could see and breathe again.

Woe dropped Trent and stumbled backwards. *“No!”* she screamed. *“No! What is this?”*

The black threads had been severed from her head and were now laying on the ground around Trent: it looked as if someone had sliced them with a big pair of scissors.

A new voice spoke:

*“What dark schemes forged with hatred and fear
Bring this foul pollution to Earth’s blue sphere?”*

Woe looked around puzzled before finding the source of the voice. Merry followed her gaze and saw, floating above them, a tiny woman. Around her flew four shining dots.

The woman had wings that fluttered so quickly they were a blaze of gold and red. Merry couldn't believe what she was seeing. But then again, everything that had happened in the last few minutes was unbelievable. She had stopped believing in the tooth Fairy when she was six, but now she was seeing something that looked just like it, though she didn't know that Fairies were brown; or had dreadlocks; and it's wings didn't look like a butterfly's. But Merry was sure it had to be a Fairy.

As for Woe, on seeing the Fairy, she was instantly filled with such a powerful feeling of disgust and loathing that she bent over and vomited.

She spat the remaining bile from her mouth and looked up at the Fairy again. Filthy liquid dripped from where the fingers had been cut from her head. It ran down her face and dripped from her cheeks and chin, staining her white garments.

Woe grinned. Through the spit and filth and vomit, Woe grinned.

So my journey here was not in vain, she thought. This is what the humans' Seers have sensed.

The Fairy spoke again:

“Unless you desire to die by my hand,
Tell me, what is your purpose on this land?”

The woman laughed, *“I am Woe, and it will take far more than an arrogant insect to destroy me. Now, what are you doing here? You seem to be a long way from home.”*

“Across my world there has fell a shadow
And I find now to Earth its margins grow.
But as darkness dissolves always to light
So you shall fall before great Aeval's might.”

As soon as she said this, the Fairy flew at Woe, spinning and twisting like a high diver. She struck Woe in the stomach and pushed her flying backwards until they crashed into a tree trunk, several feet above the ground.

The Fairy remained hovering as Woe dropped to the grass and rolled.

Woe immediately sprang to her feet and jumped to grab the Fairy, but it avoided her and flew high amongst the branches.

The Fairy hovered still, holding her halberd in one hand with the blade pointed at Woe:

“How long has your presence darkened this land ?

What nefarious schemes have your kind planned?

Answer me and I'll send you home breathing,

And Earth can sleep soundly on your leaving.”

Woe fell to her knees and bowed her dripping head. *“I knew you would show mercy. You Fairies are good folk. I try to tell my people that, but they do not listen. I will tell you everything you want. I only want peace between our worlds.”*

As she said these words she tore a handful of grass from the ground behind her back. As each blade left the ground they turned to stone in her hand.

Merry saw this and she shouted to the Fairy, “look out,” just as Woe whipped her arm round and threw the blades of grass. They sped towards the Fairy like a cloud of darts.

Unable to dodge them all the Fairy cried out in pain and fell out of the air.

Woe walked to where the Fairy lay wounded in the grass, and crouched down. *“A Fairy will make a wonderful trophy,”* she said as she reached out a hand to pick it up.

In a motion quicker than the eye could see the Fairy swung her halberd in a rainbow arc and Woe's fingers went somersaulting through the air.

“Arghh,” Woe cried as she stumbled backwards, clutching her ruined hand. She spoke through clenched teeth, *“I look forward to meeting you again, Fairy filth. When your screams will echo all the way back to your world.”*

Woe walked over to the shadows of the oak from which she had first appeared. As though a trap door had opened beneath her, she dropped into the dark ground and was gone.

Chapter 4 **Fallout**

*How the prince in the Emerald Tower
learnt of Fairies. Of what was said
between the Fairy and the adventurers,
including some detail of the Fairy's home
world.*

With Woe gone the whole forest seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

Percy and Esme's tears had dried up. All four children now turned their gazes to a patch of grass from where there came the Fairy's voice.

"The germ is purged from this body of leaves;
It is safe once again the forest believes.
But for the pale lady we are still prey;
To be safe we must slip quickly away"

"What did she say?" whispered Percy to Merry.

Merry went over and knelt by the Fairy. "Thank you for helping us, and that. But we can't quite tell what yer saying."

"Ahh," said the Fairy in understanding. She seemed to think hard to find the right words. "I'll try to speak crudely, as humans do".

She spoke slowly, as if speaking without rhyme was difficult for her. "That creature may return. We aren't safe here."

"Who were that woman who attacked us?" asked Percy

"She walks the shadows of worlds and of minds, bringing despair to each person she finds... Sorry, this will take some getting used to. I mean, her name is Woe... of the Jae-Mareeda. Amongst her people... A fearsome leader."

Merry frowned. "What is the Jae-Mareeda? I've never heard of it."

"The Jae-Mareeda is the species that Woe is of. From Omaur. You probably know them by another name. In our language Jae-Mareeda means *the light extinguished*."

"Know them by another name?" said Merry. "I don't know who yer talking about. I thought she were human till she vanished through a shadow and came out another. I've never seen owt like that before."

"Then you do not know that creatures from another world walk your planet?"

“Another world?” exclaimed Percy. Percy, Trent and Esme had joined Merry, kneeling down around the Fairy. “What do you mean, another world?”

The Fairy didn’t answer. She thought for a moment then said, “if you are unaware of the Jae-Mareeda there can not be many of them on the planet. Which could mean that they have only just discovered Earth. At least they have not yet attacked your world, which means I still have a chance of getting help.”

The children had a thousand questions to ask, but the Fairy spoke again before they had a chance to voice them.

“Please, we must leave.”

“Okay,” said Merry. She put her hands on the ground and let the Fairy step onto them. As she lifted it up she could see one of its wings was limp with a great tear through it. The wing felt soft and silky against her skin.

“Are you okay?” Merry asked the Fairy.

“Yes, thank you. Do not worry about me. The wing will heal eventually. Now let us go. I can answer your questions when we are in a safe place. And you can answer mine.”

The children hurried quickly through the undergrowth as they took the quickest route out, towards the farmer’s fields and home.

Chandler Dahl sat at his desk reading a report. It told him that the striking employees at several factories across the country had held union meetings last night. They had voted to continue the strike. The union still demanded that the planned job losses be stopped and that the workers should receive a 10% pay rise as a result of their increased productivity.

He snorted contemptuously and threw the report on the desk.

What can they possibly hope to achieve, thought he. Well, let them strike. They’ll come crawling back to work after a couple of days, when their money runs out and they can’t afford to go down to the pub any more. Production’s being delayed but we can hold out.

A light beside his computer began to flash. It meant that Woe had returned to her chamber. He rose from his chair and made his way to the lift.

“What happened to you?” asked Chandler Dahl, when he caught sight of Woe’s face and hand in the weak light of her room.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You’ve lost your fingers and you’re all bleeding,” said Chandler Dahl.

A faint laugh came from the captive at the back of the room. Woe span round to face him. “*Do you want to die?*” she snapped.

“Yes,” the man whispered, and then was silent.

Woe turned back to Chandler Dahl. “*These wounds will heal.*”

He frowned, “What? Your fingers?”

“*They will regenerate, but I will have to rest.*”

“But, who did this to you?”

“*I discovered the source of the phenomenon detected by your Seers. A Fairy has travelled from its world to your own. What the Seers must have felt was a distortion of the spacetime continuum, which would have been the Fairy ripping her way into this world.*”

Chandler Dahl looked puzzled. “What do you mean, ‘Fairy?’”

“*The Fairies are a race of tiny winged creatures. They look human except...*”

“I know what a Fairy is,” interrupted Chandler Dahl, “but what are you saying? That they really exist?”

“Yes,” replied Woe. “*But how can you know what one is and yet not know they exist?*”

“We have them in myths and stories, like genies and dragons, but they’re not real.”

“*Hmmm. Well, they do exist, though not in your world. But let me warn you, Chandler, they are evil little creatures. Intelligent, yes, but that makes them dangerous. They are not to be underestimated. As you can see, one of them*

managed to wound me on its own. Can you imagine the destruction a whole swarm of them would make? I only saw one but hordes may follow it."

Chandler Dahl pondered a moment over this information, and then asked, "if these Fairies can travel between worlds I assume their technology is advanced?"

"O, it is. I left the Fairy injured in the forest with some children. If you want, you could find her and ask to play with some of her toys."

"Children? They didn't see you did they?" asked Chandler Dahl anxiously.

"We were having a pleasant chat until the Fairy came and spoiled everything. I had to defend them from the vicious thing."

"Woe! What have I told you about this kind of thing?", shouted Chandler Dahl. "How could you be so foolish. It's bad enough that you kidnap people and keep them in here. How the hell are we meant to keep your existence secret if you're just going to walk up to people in broad daylight and introduce yourself? What did you do to them? Answer me?"

"Easy, Chandler," laughed Woe, and she put her fingers to his face, as a blind person would to explore someone's features. *"You worry far too much. Who is going to believe the fantastic tales of what four children saw in the woods? Now leave me. I feel tired."*

"Very well, if you have no more information. But in future, Woe, you *interact* with people on my authorisation only. Understood?"

"Of course." Woe smiled as she nodded.

"Goodbye Woe," said Chandler Dahl, turning to leave.

"Goodbye Chandler," she replied. *"Turn the light off when you leave."*

The children were sat in a shed in Aunty Rosemary's back garden. It was cosy and quiet, and they felt safe inside with the door closed, comforted by the smell of sawdust and varnish. Their nerves were still shattered by their encounter with Woe.

Merry placed the Fairy on a dusty worktop. It stood about the height of a pencil; one that had been sharpened a few times.

Merry found a cork for the Fairy to use as a stool.

“I was gifted the name of Ayina,” said the Fairy.

“O,” said Merry, reminded that she had not introduced herself properly. “My name’s Merry. Her name’s Esme, he’s Percy and that’s Trent.”

Trent was lying back on a pile of sacks with a hand over his eyes as if he had a headache.

“Is he all right?” asked the Fairy.

Percy looked at him. “You alright, Trent?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Trent. “I just feel a bit tired.”

“Maybe you should get him some water,” the Fairy suggested to Merry.

“Yeh,” said Merry, jumping up. She left the shed and went into her Auntie’s house.

“What did she do to yer, that woman?” Percy asked Trent.

“I dun’t know,” sighed Trent. It was like trying to remember a dream. He could remember the gist of it but the details evaded him.

“I think maybe she were showing me future or something,” Trent explained. “I think it were a war or somert. A lot of people dying and stuff. Horrible things. Tha dun’t wanner know.” He looked back at Percy. “What did she do to you? Tha started crying.”

“I dun’t know, I can’t remember,” said Percy. He felt embarrassed remembering that he’d cried in front of them. He didn’t want to tell them what Woe had whispered to him; that she had told him his parents secretly hated him and that people only pretended to be his friend because they feared him. She said that he would grow up alone and worthless. The words she spoke had conjured up images in his imagination that seemed real and he’d believed her. Thinking back, he now knew that she’d been lying. But what if it *was* true?

“What about you, Esme?” said Percy. “What did that woman do to thee?”

“Nothing really. She were really frightening. I thought she were gonna kill me.” Esme trembled as she remembered the event.

She looked at the Fairy, who had been listening carefully to them, and told her, "I'm so glad you saved us."

The shed door opened and Merry walked in with a big bottle of water and some beakers. She poured the water into the beakers and handed them round. From out of her pocket she took a thimble, which she carefully filled with water and placed next to the Fairy. "I'm sorry, Ayina, but this was the smallest thing I could find for you to drink from," she told her. The thimble seemed like a bucket to the Fairy.

"I am very grateful for your effort," said Ayina, and she cupped some water in her hands and drank. When they had all quenched their thirsts, Ayina explained things as simply as she could.

"I come from a planet called Aeval. I was sent to Earth, by my people, with a great purpose." The children listened to Ayina, intrigued. "My planet has been invaded by the Jae-Mareeda, a cruel and selfish species from alternative dimensions. They came without warning.

"There had been no wars on Aeval for over four hundred years, so we have had no need of weapons and had forgotten the ways of war. We were unprepared when they came. They captured an entire continent, the continent of the Centaurs, before we built up our armies and began to resist."

"Centaurs live on your planet as well?" interrupted Merry.

"Yes," said Ayina. "On Aeval there are many sentient species. Amongst them are Goblins, Trolls, Merfolk, Dryads and Genies. We have lived in peace amongst each other for generations. A member of a land dwelling species can even live in the underwater cities of the Merfolk if they are willing to undergo several simple operations.

"It is only the Elementals that we are not allied with. They are elusive and chaotic, and we still have a lot to learn about their nature. A few years ago a group of Troll scientists tried to capture a Fire Elemental for study, they all died in the attempt. They have communicated with other species on rare occasions. They have been

known to help people on certain occasions, and on others to kill them. We do not know why.

“Now we have a new species living on Aeval, the Jae-Mareeda, and they have a continent to themselves. The Centaurs do not live in cities but roam nomadically, so the Jae-Mareeda have begun to build their own. The Centaurs could not fight back, as their hunting weapons are useless for warfare. Those not killed or captured into slavery fled to the other continents.

“I was sent to Earth because we knew of Humanity. Some Fairies lived on Earth centuries ago. Some of us believe that your species might have developed to the stage where you could be useful allies. However, if Humans have not matured then it will only be detrimental for us to initiate contact. That is why it is important that you keep your knowledge of me a secret.”

“O, you can trust us,” said Merry. “Can’t she?” she asked the other three. Trent and Esme said yes and Percy nodded.

“I thank you,” said Ayina, smiling. “Before I decide on my actions I must find a man known as the Everlaster. I wonder if you could help me locate him? All I know is that his real name is Utnapishtim and he lives in a place called Poppy Field House, Lopside.”

“I know where Lopside is,” said Esme excitedly. “It’s darn south.”

“Then maybe you could tell me the way or show me on a map,” said Ayina.

“I only know the way by train,” said Esme. “You have to get two trains. I think it takes about an hour n’ half.”

“She can’t take a train,” said Percy, “unless they have a special rate for Fairies.”

“We can take her,” said Merry, “if we hide her in somert.”

“We can’t go, it’s too far,” said Percy. “We’d probably get lost, and we’d get right done if someone fon’ out.”

“What happened to Mr Adventurer?” said Merry.

“He got left behind in ‘woods when that woman attacked us. But I forget, she didn’t do owt to you did she?”

Merry was taken aback. She looked at Trent, who was lying with a hand over his eyes and then at Esme, who looked down when their eyes met.

Merry blushed as guilt crept over her. She’d been so caught up in the excitement of finding a Fairy that she had forgotten about the trauma her friends had experienced. And Percy was right, she had not suffered from Woe the way they had.

But Merry thought about Ayina. A whole world was under threat and Merry wanted to give what help she could.

“Well, that woman’s hardly gonna be on a train or in Lopside, is she?” said Merry finally. “And Esme’s been to Lopside, so we shun’t get lost.”

“I an’t actually been there,” said Esme meekly, not liking to contradict her friend. “There’s just a train I’ve been on a lot that goes through it.”

Ayina interceded. “Percy’s caution is well considered. If Woe does find a way of tracking me down you will be in danger if you are near me. Show me a map and I can make my own way.”

“But your wing’s damaged,” said Merry. “You’d have to walk and it’d take ages and be really dangerous for someone your size, with all the roads and stuff. And you’d probably be seen.”

“If walking is perilous, then I will wait until my wing heals,” said Ayina.

“How long will that be?” asked Merry

“A week perhaps,” said Ayina.

“But if Woe does try and find you, the first place she’ll look is round this area,” argued Merry. “The best thing is to get away as soon as possible and let your wing heal at that man’s house.”

“I am fortunate to have stumbled upon such a wise and compassionate person as yourself,” said Ayina. Merry glowed inside at the complement, but she tried not to let it show. “I will accept your offer of assistance.”

“Brill,” said Merry. She turned to the others. “I’ll take her on me own if none of you want to come.”

“I’ll go with you,” piped up Esme, as she’d go anywhere with Merry.

Trent and Percy said nothing.

“So are you brave boys gonna let two girls go off on their own?” Merry asked, certain that this would work on them.

“Sure,” said Percy, “we’re feminists, aren’t we Trent.”

Trent stirred. “Aye, Femaleists. Whatever.”

Percy looked at Merry. She stood with her stern expression, as if nothing in the world could get to her. But Percy could see vulnerability in her eyes. The same vulnerability he saw when the bullies called her names. A vulnerability which she hid from everyone by pretending nothing bothered her. But Percy always saw through the bravado.

“Of course we’ll go with yer,” he sighed.

“Good,” said Merry, smiling.

“Just one question,” said Trent, who had finally decided to get involved in the conversation.

“What?” said Merry.

“What’s a femaleist?”

Chapter 5

Heart Of Darkness

*The prince receives news and then gives
some regarding his part of the Empire.
Of troubled sleep.*

The intercom on Chandler Dahl's desk buzzed. He pressed a button in response and spoke. "Yes, Clarissa?"

His secretary's voice came through. "The senior partners are ready to speak with you, sir."

"Thank you, Clarissa," said Chandler Dahl. He forced out a long breath that made his cheeks inflate. Talking to the senior partners was even more intimidating than talking to Woe. They possessed what she did not: authority.

He pressed a button on his computer and the wall to his left shuddered. A panel slid sideways revealing a large screen. When the panel stopped moving an image appeared on the screen. It was of a table, around which were sat a dozen men. Each one wore a pinstripe suit and dark blue tie, and each one looked down on Chandler Dahl. The screen seemed like a window into a room of giants.

"Good afternoon, Chandler," spoke one of the men. He had an American accent. "We believe you have some news for us."

"Yes," replied Chandler Dahl. "We have made a startling discovery. It seems that Fairies *do* exist. We've sighted one in Yorkshire." He paused, waiting for the expressions of surprise and disbelief to spring across their faces, but he caught no reaction from any of them. "It was Woe who made the discovery. So be assured, this is no fantasy."

"Where is the Fairy now?" asked a different man to the previous speaker. He had an English accent, like a public schoolmaster.

"I don't know," said Chandler. "When Woe encountered the Fairy it wounded her and forced her retreat. Woe is now recuperating."

"Find it, Chandler," spoke a third man, another Englishman.

"And quickly," came an Italian voice.

"It is better for business that other worlds, other life forms are not known to the general public," said another. This one had a Russian accent.

“It could excite them, give them hope, aspirations which they are better off without.” Though each sentence came from a different man, they flowed seamlessly, like the speech of identical twins who are so close that they know what each other is about to say.

“I thought we could capture it for study,” said Chandler. “It must have some technology on it that we can learn from.”

“Yes.” “Yes,” said two of the men impatiently.

“Of course, that goes without saying.”

“Don’t hold back in your efforts to capture it.”

“Use all resources necessary.”

Chandler Dahl was feeling dizzy, flicking his eyes back from one pair of lips to another. “Yes, Sirs,” he said. “There is another matter to discuss.”

The twelve men were silent, waiting for him to continue.

“The union has voted to extend the strike.”

“You assured us that this would be over quickly,” said one of the partners.

“I admit I may have misread the situation,” said Chandler Dahl. “But...”

A Japanese voice spoke before he could continue. “Your job is not to read situations, Chandler, but to shape them.”

“Ensure that those people realise just how useless their actions are.”

“We decide how much they are paid, not them.”

Chandler Dahl nodded. “I will tell them we sympathise with their concerns and that we’re doing the best we can. I will ensure that they return to work as soon as possible with the minimum of disruption.”

“You have had long enough, Chandler, to sort this out. It is time you deployed Woe.”

Up until this point Chandler Dahl had kept his composure well, but now he could not help but reveal his unease at this command. “I don’t think that’s necessary. Besides she’s still recovering.”

“You will deploy Woe tonight.”

“And the strike shall end tomorrow.”

“Already, the completion of the missile guidance systems at Tiverton Preedy have been delayed beyond our original deadline. Our friends need those missiles shipped on time. If this strike affects their war efforts it could mean the termination of our contract and they could take their technology back from us.”

“Yes,” said Chandler Dahl, “I understand. Woe shall be sent out. By the way, I’m curious: who are our friends at war against, or are they just fighting amongst themselves.”

Replied an Englishman, “we ask no questions of our human buyers and so it is the same with our foreign friends”.

“Understood,” said Chandler Dahl. He bowed and they said goodbye. The screen went blank and the white wall panel returned to its place.

The Sun was low in the sky as a team of one hundred men and women painstakingly searched Cradleford Forest. Looking for a Fairy.

They had been at it for three hours when a helicopter arrived. Its appearance made them all take to their task a little more eagerly.

The helicopter landed in an unusual clearing they’d found, about the size of two houses. Out of the vehicle stepped Chandler Dahl, the wind from the rotor blades messing up his hair.

He walked over to the trees, where a woman dressed in green overalls was waiting to greet him. She was the leader of the search party and wore a name label that said AUGUST LANDFILL.

“Good evening, Sir,” she shouted over the engine noise. She was in her forties and heavily built, with a voice like an army sergeant.

“Well?” asked Chandler Dahl impatiently, struggling to flatten his hair down.

“We haven’t found the object yet, Sir,” she shouted, even though the helicopter’s engine was now off.

Chandler Dahl frowned, more at the woman's volume than her words.

"But we have found something, Sir."

She led the way through the forest. After about twenty minutes of walking the woman finally stopped. "Here, Sir," she barked.

Chandler Dahl stepped over to where she gestured.

At his feet was a child's backpack, around which was strewn a small amount of litter. He picked the backpack up.

"Someone's had a picnic," he said as he emptied everything out. There was only more litter inside.

"Is it of any help, Sir?" asked the woman.

Chandler Dahl was about to throw the bag down when he spotted a label sewn onto the inside. On it was written 'Percy Lillycrop'.

"It might just be, Ms Landfill," Chandler Dahl replied. "Now take us back and call the search off. The Fairy's not here."

*

That night Ayina stayed with Merry in her bedroom. Merry's bedroom had light blue wallpaper and a few posters, including one of a tiger, one of a dolphin, one of a nebula in space, and one of ancient Egyptian art. She also had on her wall a small print of an old painting called *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, by an artist called Artemisia Gentileschi. Her Dad wasn't very keen on the picture but Auntie Rosemary had persuaded him to let her have it.

Merry spent the evening showing the Fairy the dictionary and encyclopaedia and other useful books.

It took Merry a whole half hour to rapidly turn every page of the dictionary and allow Ayina's sprites to scan all the writing. Each page needed to be viewed only for an instant in order for the sprites to get their scan. It took an hour to do the same with the encyclopaedia and Merry's arms became quite tired by the end of it. But the Fairy

now knew almost all the words in the English language, for the language had grown a lot since the Fairies left Earth. She learnt too a great deal of general knowledge and modern history, and gained some idea of how far human technology had advanced.

“Why did the Fairies leave Earth?” Merry asked Ayina.

“The answers are complex, but I’ll try to explain it as simply as I can.

“My ancestors recognised the signs indicating that your species was about to enter that period of rapid development and turmoil that all intelligent species experience eventually.

“They thought it best to leave and close those doors between our worlds. For you had entered the age of science, and because of that, had you discovered those doors you might have learnt to control them.

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Merry. “If you can travel between worlds, why shouldn’t we?”

“For your own safety. Back then you were war-like, and, from what I gleaned from the encyclopaedia, you still are. Your people would have attempted to conquer us if you discovered our world. That we know for certain. We would have warred and you humans would have lost.”

“I can’t believe you have such a low opinion of humans,” said Merry feeling a little upset.

“It is not as simple as that. For humans are just as we used to be. We know your weaknesses because we had them long ago. And so did the Goblins and Trolls and every other species that learns to speak and build things.

“Believe me when I say we have faith in humanity. Possibly more so than you do yourselves.

“Now forgive me, but I must meditate over the information the sprites have downloaded.”

Ayina meditated all the way up to bedtime, and then she went to sleep inside an open bedside drawer. The sleeve of a jumper was her mattress and a handkerchief her blanket.

*

As the Sun's warm breath gave life to Australia and Japan, our side of the world was chilled by night. That small town called Tiverton Preedy was domed by a cloudless, moonless sky.

It was 22:32 when all the lights in the town went out. It was not until 3:34 that the fault was repaired and power returned. For five hours no appliance worked, no light bulbs shone, no TVs glowed. The only thing to keep the great shadow of the Earth's night-side at bay were the flickering tears of candle flames and the orange glow of fumbled cigarettes.

Without tellies, computers, CD-players, or even lamps to read by, the residents saw little option but to go to bed and sleep through the black out. Those that weren't in bed already.

If only insomnia had struck the town's people; robbed them of their sleep: they would have emerged in the morning tired and cranky, but they would have been safe from the nightmare that stalked the pitch black streets that night.

Like a town sunk beneath the ocean, where every room is flooded, every cellar, loft, cupboard, every hollow object is filled with salt water; where street and stairway, field and bedroom, are made equal territory for roving sharks and skulking octopus: so was Tiverton Preedy drowned in darkness, and made a playground for the monster that swam through it.

Walls and fences, locks and bolts were irrelevant to a creature for whom any place smothered in shadow was only a footstep away.

She visited the homes of all those involved in the strike, seeing all and being seen by none. Snake-haired Woe touched them in their slumber. They sweated, feverish with dreams that told them they would lose the jobs they were so lucky to have, if they did not end the strike quickly. They shivered, shaking from themselves hope in precious droplets.

Realisation dawned in their sleeping minds: that they had no chance of winning the strike. They worked for the largest company in the world. What were they doing? Be grateful for what they have.

And when she had visited the home of the last employee of SkweezumGrabaal&Runne, Woe visited the other houses in Tiverton Preedy too. Just for the hell of it. She resurrected ancient griefs: memories long since laid to rest of dead mothers and lost husbands. Women relived the pain of still-births and men foresaw the cancers they were to die by.

At one point, as she was swimming the night from one house to the next, Woe felt a sudden disruption in the shadows around her. They thinned and snapped and she fell onto the cement of a driveway, landing as graceful as a cat despite the surprise of the fall.

She looked over her shoulder at the source of the light that was dousing the scenery and herself in blue.

An ambulance was speeding down the road to a house. It was one she had not been to yet.

The blue light fled from her as the ambulance moved away, and from afar she watched its paramedics bring a child out on a stretcher. With them went two adults sobbing with desperation. Even from this distance she could smell their fear, their pain, and she folded her arms with a mixture of delight and disappointment. There was a family that did not need her.

It must have been about two in the morning when his parents were awoken by his screams. They ran to his bedroom and, in the shivering torchlight, saw Trent writhing violently about his bed. His quilt and pillow were thrown upon the floor.

His parents rushed to wake him up. They assumed he was having a nightmare, which was strange because they had never known him to have one before. They held him and tried to shake him awake. His mother spoke comforting words. But he would not stop shaking and screaming.

His father even forced Trent's eyes open with his thumbs, but the boy would not wake up. "It must be some sort of fit," said his father. "I'll call an ambulance."

Trent's mother held him, with tears streaming down her face, as his father went to the phone.

Ten minutes later the ambulance came. Its driver negotiated the blackened streets with careful urgency.

His partner's attention was caught by what appeared to be a tall, thin woman floating in the air in the gap between two houses. For a fraction of a second she seemed to be walking, white as a spectre, level with the bedrooms of the houses. But as the light of the ambulance landed on her she fell to the ground and in the next instance was out of view.

They had arrived at their call now and he shook the vision from his mind. He shrugged it off as an hallucination, brought on by fatigue from his twelve hour shift. It wouldn't be the first one he'd had.

The two paramedics went in the house and up the stairs with a stretcher. They strapped Trent onto it and carried him to the ambulance.

Neighbours pushed aside net curtains and watched out of dark bedrooms as Trent was placed in the ambulance, still screaming and writhing against the restraints.

With Trent and his frightened parents inside, the ambulance drove to the nearest hospital, some miles away in Barnsley.

Whatever was happening to Trent, it had not stopped when they reached Northern General Hospital. After ten minutes of screaming on a hospital bed he finally stopped when the doctors gave him a large dose of sedatives.

He slept soundly.

The doctors were unable to tell Trent's parents what was wrong with him. Maybe they would find out more when he woke up. Now it was best that they get some rest, for Trent would be asleep for hours.

*

Many miles away, in London, at the same complex of buildings that surrounded the Emerald Tower, a woman ran through labyrinthine corridors, hastily putting on the white coat that denotes Scientist. She clipped on her identity badge, which bore the name CHRISTAL WHITELAW.

She sped round a corner and was met by the sound of humans voices wailing. Two anxious security guards were waiting for her by a thick metal door.

“What’s going on?” panted Christal.

“Don’t know,” said one of the guards looking at the door behind them, from which the muffled wailing came. “They’ve been at it for half an hour now.”

Beside the door was a retinal scanner and the scientist looked into it. A small green light came on and she typed a code on a keypad.

The door wheezed open and the wailing now reached her ears unimpeded: the dismal sound of creatures in pain.

As the scientist entered the lights came on, gently illuminating the contents of the room. There was a strong reek of body odour on the hot and stuffy air.

It was a large spherical chamber. Large pipes ran horizontally around the walls. They emitted a rhythmic throb that usually closed in and smothered those who entered, but at this moment that sound was drowned by the terrible cries coming from the Seers’ throats.

Around the sides of the chamber stood six large rectangular monoliths. Constructs of stone and metal, their surfaces consisted of wires and pipes and mechanical components that were in constant flux, like a roadmap redrawing itself.

Each monolith had, on the side that faced the centre of the chamber, a human being. The front of their bodies emerged from the surface, as if a sculptor had carved them from the monolith but given up halfway through. Their arms and legs were outstretched as though they had been frozen while doing a cartwheel. Their thin bodies were

naked, except for a piece of apparatus that took the waste from those parts that supply it.

Three men and three women. Despite their noise they were as still as statues. Only their faces were free to move, and they contorted now with the same expressions that were flashing across Trent's face at that moment.

"What is it? What's wrong?" the scientist ran between them shouting.

One of the male Seers spoke through gritted teeth. "Stop it. Stop it!"

"Stop what? What's happening to you?" asked Christal Whitelaw anxiously.

"End it. Turn us off. Do something."

"I can't turn you off. You know that. It would kill you." The scientist looked helpless. "What's happening? Try to tell me what you're feeling."

"It's coming!" said one of the females.

"What's coming?" asked Christal, perplexed.

The Seer seemed not to hear and just repeated, "it's coming!"

"No," argued one of the others, "it's already here."

"What is?" asked the scientist frantically. "Do you mean here in the complex?"

"No," said another Seer, "it's here, everywhere?"

Christal Whitelaw wiped her lips. "Can you see this thing? Describe it."

"It's huge, bigger than us all," said one Seer.

"No," said another, disagreeing, "it's not a 'thing'. It has no size. It is power, immense power."

The scientist's professionalism took control and she began scribbling notes in a pad from her pocket. "A weapon?" she asked.

The Seer would have shaken his head if he could. "No, but we are all at it's mercy. All life."

"It's coming," said a male Seer who had not yet spoken.

"Terror is coming."

“Yes,” agreed another, “Terror is coming.”

“That is what it is,” said another, “Terror is how we know it. Terror is alive.”

Then all the Seers were silent. The only sound was the throbbing of the pipes.

Christal examined all of the Seers. They were all unconscious, but stable. She checked the technology of the monoliths, ensuring that everything was in working order.

In the centre of the chamber was the elementary sextant. Above the head of anyone standing beneath, it hung in the air, without apparent support, at the exact centre of the globe that was the Seers’ chamber, like the nucleus of an atom. A large spherical construct of some dull black metal, it was made up of circles, curves and geometric shapes, somewhat reminiscent of the innards of a pocket watch.

From its lowermost point there had been spat thin reams of paper that now lay in a heap on the floor. The scientist sifted through it for some time but could glean no meaning from the information.

With the help of a step ladder Christal cleaned each of the Seers’ stinking bodies. As they slept she gently wiped the sweat from their nakedness, using flannels and soapy water, then dried them with towels.

When she eventually got back to bed Christal did not sleep. She could only lie awake, trying to work out what had taken place this night.

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.”

*

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 its 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.

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 Aunty’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 Aunt 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, Aunt 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 Aunt 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.”

*

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.

*

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.

Chapter 8 **On Leaving**

How, before embarking on their great quest, Merry makes a discovery, and Percy a disturbance.

When Merry woke up on Monday morning she went downstairs and found a living room lamp was still on and her Dad was asleep in his armchair.

The sight of empty beer cans strewn around him gave her a sinking feeling in the stomach. It wasn't like him to drink so much. 'This is cos of Woe', she thought, angrily.

Merry was wondering whether to wake him up when she noticed some photos lying on his lap, and by his side lay a newspaper cutting.

She approached quietly for a closer look and recognised her Mother was in each of the photos. Merry was in some of them, while others were taken before she was born. In all of them her Mother looked happy. One was taken in Blackpool when Merry was four years old. She was sat on a donkey, wearing a pink and white sunhat; her Mother standing beside her. Merry's memories of that time were misty but she now remembered the happiness.

The headline on the newspaper cutting caught Merry's attention: Suicide Verdict on Death of Local Woman. The paper was dated the year her Mum died.

She read the article:

Deputy coroner, Adrian Hade, recorded a verdict of suicide over the death of Jennifer O'Connell, who died when her car drove through crash barriers and fell down a 50ft drop by Friars Pass.

Mrs O'Connell, aged 29 from Tiverton Preedy, had taken a mix of alcohol and antidepressants before driving her car off the road.

Mrs O'Connell was married with a five year old daughter. Friends and family regarded her as a happy and sociable person until one year ago, when she began to suffer from depression.

For the past two years Mrs O'Connell had worked as a junior scientist at the SkweezumGrabaal&Runne science labs in Tiverton Preedy.

My Mum didn't die in an accident, thought Merry. She killed herself... Why... What was wrong... and how come I an't been told yet... I din't know she worked in those labs either... I'd never kill myself there's no point "happy and sociable until one year ago" and she looks happy in the photos maybe she weren't always like I remember I remember... remember shouting and drinking why couldn't she have stayed normal like Esme's mum...

Memories and images swilled around her mind but were eventually broken off when she realised she had to get breakfast and prepare to leave for the train. She left her Dad asleep.

Twenty minutes later she entered the living room again, this time ready to go and with Ayina in her bag. She left a note on the table saying she'd be out all day. She kissed her Dad on his sleeping face and left.

Merry and Esme stood in front of a sign that said Tiverton Preedy, waiting for their train.

The two girls talked barely above a whisper. Doing so because the fifteen adults waiting on the platform stood in total silence and it seemed disrespectful to make a sound. Each person faced the front, many in suits and ties. The expressions on their faces, thought Merry, were like those of school children standing outside the headmaster's office waiting to get done.

The scene on the opposite platform was like a mirror image of this one, with besuited men and women trying to avoid eye contact with the people on Merry's platform. The sky was clear as glass and the air was still. Though low in the sky the Sun was already warm, and from the forehead of the man standing next to Esme it teased gently forth a sparkling bead of sweat.

Esme looked at her watch. “Where’s Percy? Train’s due in five minutes.”

Merry had absolutely no idea.

Percy was half a mile away. He’d been looking out for the men. For the men in their car. Can’t let ‘em see him go to the train station. They’ll know he’s leaving town if they do.

So he’d stop at corners and peek round. Take a good look up and down the roads before crossing.

Any car he saw could have them inside. Anyone on the streets he didn’t recognise could be working for them.

And all the while he never noticed the butterfly that was always close behind, flying from bush to bush and landing on fences.

By the monitor in their car the men could see Percy was up to something. So Driver turned the key in the ignition and set off to intercept.

The words ‘O no’ puffed into Percy’s brain like a genie. Down the road he could see a moss green car coming towards him. Is it them? O God it is.

There was only one thing for it. He was going to have to leg it. And there was only one way to the railway station where a car couldn’t follow. It meant going through people’s back yards.

Casually he opened a garden gate and walked down the side of a house. He knew the car was bearing down on him but didn’t look back. He wanted them to think he was visiting the people who lived here. But instead of knocking on the door he strolled into the back garden. The clockwork butterfly kept him in sight.

Before him was a long row of gardens heading in the direction of the railway station. The line of houses shielded him from the road. Percy glanced at the windows of the homes around him, to see if he was being watched, then jumped over the first fence.

He landed well. Right on top of some pansies. Looking up at the kitchen window he saw the flowers' owner, whose expression was slowly changing from surprise to anger.

Percy walked across the garden as the face at the window leaned out and shouted. "What do you think you're doing?"

Percy looked behind him and shouted back, "I'm going for a jog, missus, what's it look like?"

"Why, you cheeky little slug-spit! Get out o' my garden!"

"I were about to 'til you interrupted me!"

Percy hopped over the fence and ran across the next garden. The clockwork butterfly kept up constantly, flying circles around him as he ran.

Percy ignored the woman's continuing oaths, but they were attracting the attention of the rest of the street.

He legged it across another garden and vaulted the next fence. As he landed in a new garden its owner emerged from the house: a tall thin man in a black suit. At the same time, another man, short and podgy with long blonde hair, emerged from the door of the next house along.

As the tall man stepped outside, shouting, "stop right there!" Percy reached the fence that divided the two gardens. It was a rickety wooden thing that came almost to Percy's neck, so he could not simply vault over it.

Percy put both hands on the fence and tried to heave himself over, but instead of his body going upwards the fence went downwards. Percy and the fence toppled into the next garden.

"MmYy F/EeNnCcEe!" shouted the two men in unison.

"My strawberries!" shouted the blonde man's wife, who had just popped her head over his shoulder.

Whoops. Boy and fence had indeed landed in a patch of strawberries. She could do with some strawberry jam, I bet, thought Percy.

"You wicked boy!" shouted the woman. "Get him, Dad," she shrieked in her husbands ear.

Both men walked towards Percy, their fingers flexing, ready to wring the boy's neck.

As he got to his feet he saw them coming. "O God." He ran across the garden and jumped the next fence successfully. The men followed him over it.

He didn't look behind him, he just heard the woman egging her husband on. "Don't let him get away, Dad!"

There was one garden left after this and then a very tall wall. He had to clamber and roll over a hedge to get into this final garden. One of the men almost caught Percy's foot as he disappeared over the top.

Percy flopped to the ground, landing awkwardly. When he got to his feet again he looked at the final obstacle in dismay. The wall was too high for him. He moved to the centre of the garden and looked up and down it for an escape route. But there was none. He was trapped.

He turned around just in time to see the triumphant grin of the tall man, right as he tackled the boy to the ground.

Percy landed on his back and was pinned down. The blonde man's face slotted into view beside his neighbour's. "Now, you're gonna tell us where you live so we can talk to your parents," he said, with spit going everywhere. "I'm gonna give thi a right clout," said the tall man, "and if tha tell's thi dad I'll clout him too."

They smirked with pleasure that Percy looked so scared of their threat. But it wasn't the men that made Percy's face go white. His whirling eyeball had locked onto something in the periphery of his vision. Galloping from the side of the house came a huge dog: a snarling and slathering Rottweiler.

The men looked round and their faces went white too.

The dog pounced, toppling both men away from Percy. It started tearing at the tall man's suit, while the other made screeching sounds and tried desperately to scramble back over the hedge.

“Oi! Gladiator! Get back ‘ere!” came a shout from the house. A big man with tattooed arms stood commandingly at the back door. The dog ignored him.

Percy scrambled away from the dog and its victim, to a tree with branches that stretched over the final wall.

He grabbed a low branch and began to haul himself up.

“Get off my tree!” shouted the tattooed man. At the sound of his master’s voice the dog finally stopped mauling the man beneath him and saw Percy at the tree. With three barks as loud as any by that dog Cerberus, and which trembled the soul of every person within half a mile, the dog bounded towards Percy.

At the sound of the barks Percy made the mistake of turning to look, and lost his grip. He fell on the ground, to lay at the mercy of the Rottweiler. At a metre away the Rottweiler pounced with its jaws wide open. But as the dog leapt through the air its attention was distracted by the clockwork butterfly, which was flying over Percy at that very moment. It caught the butterfly and continued its leap, right over Percy’s head.

Instead of landing on its paws the dog collapsed to the ground, yelping and whining. The animal had bitten and crunched the clockwork butterfly in its mouth, smashing it into sharp jagged pieces of metal that cut into the dog’s gums and tongue.

Seeing the dog rolling in agony Percy got straight to his feet and started to climb the tree again.

The dog’s owner came running over and knelt down beside his pet, which was now whining in agony. “Gladiator? Gladiator?” Through teary eyes he looked up at Percy, now high in the tree, and cried, “what have you done to my Gladiator?”

Percy ignored him and crawled along a thick branch that hung over the wall. He hung off and dropped down onto the wasteland that lay beyond.

Percy then ran, leaving behind the street with its moaning, crying, bleeding, writhing residents.

Just as the train pulled in Percy arrived beside Esme and Merry.

“I’m glad you could join us,” Merry said to him. Percy was too busy panting for breath to reply.

So Ends Part I

Interlude

20 hours earlier...

Books surrounded Manutius Fluke like bricks around a prisoner. And in fact he *was* a captive, but only to his imagination.

The Sun rose and fell, families were made and marriages crumbled in the crescents and cul-de-sacs around his home; but for this old man, whether war or famine outside, each day meant only another new chapter in another old book.

By now his only contact with reality came through his wife: an ex-genie. Yahinni stood by his side now, a lilac hand upon his shoulder.

She helped him find new books, or rather, old ones. For he was always in search of old and rare items. His immense collection included the boyhood scrapbook of Leonardo Da Vinci; a first century manuscript alleged to be *the Book of Judas*; a first edition of the Encyclopaedia of Uqbar; Visvarkarman's blueprint for a new universe (aborted), and a love note written by Romeo to Juliet.

Upon his desk lay a parchment written in Latin by a 12th century monk. Manutius Fluke had translated it and he read a passage now, as he had done so many times before:

*Just as the Saracens looked as if to
fall and the Knights Templar make
their breakthrough he would
appear, walking as calm as an abbot
at mass, fearing no man or engine of
war. Our knights would fall
beneath his black blade like wheat
before the sickle-man at harvest*

[...]

I hēard ā cāptūrēd Sārācēn oncē
ēxplāin to his intērrogātors who
this mán wās. hē sáid “hē is oldēr
thán Christ, oldēr ēvén thán
Bábylon. hē hás comē to expél evil
from thē holy lānd. hē sáid, “thát
thē fverlāstēr fights with thē
Múslims provēs thát thēy āre right
for thē fverlāstēr shall only hēlp
thē good.”

I bēliēve thát this fverlāstēr wās
Lúcifēr, who in his dēspērātion hás
comē to ēārth to stānd in his lāst
bāttlē āgāinst God ānd his childrēn,
ānd so ōur crúsādē to sāvē
Jérúsālēm from thē hēāthēns is
súrēly rightēous.

Manutius Fluke had come across two other separate eyewitness accounts from the Third Crusade that mentioned the Everlaster. On first reading these he had regarded this ‘Everlaster’ as an interesting legend; a myth created by the Saracens to boost their morale. One day, however, his opinion was changed when he came across a 16th century book called *The Republic of the Faeries, the Trolls and other Fantastic Races*, by Henry Beckett.

In it Beckett tells of being taken by three Goblins to a world called Aeval. There he sees wondrous cities. Creatures, who people would regard as monsters, living civilised with governments based on reason, and with fabulous technologies that seem magical.

There is a brief account of Aeval's long history and in it the following sentence:

The Forty-Ninth Gloriana, Queen of Faery, was stolen and eventually killed by an Earth man calling himself Tyrius D'Avernon but whom the Faeries discovered to be the Everlaster; so did end the reign of the last monarch upon Aeval.

This book is regarded by scholars as a work of fiction but it seemed a strange coincidence to Manutius Fluke that such a strange term as 'the Everlaster' should be used in two different times and places and both referring to an extraordinary human being.

From then on Fluke devoted all his time and energies to searching for more references to the Everlaster. He scoured the globe, accumulating books, folktales, and ancient artefacts. It was on this journey that he found proof, not only of the Everlaster's existence, but also that the world of Aeval is real.

That proof was Yahinni and she owned a curiosity shop in Hong Kong.

As a Genie Yahinni came to Earth from Aeval to torment men and women for sport. A jury of fellow Genii found her guilty of crimes against humanity (this was at a time when human beings were newly regarded as having rights, after many centuries of being considered animals). As punishment she was made corporeal, that is, made flesh like a human woman. So she lived on Earth, vulnerable to disease, injury and death, but aging far slower than we do.

Over the centuries she had amassed a great collection of fantastical objects and artistic curiosities. These included Robin Hood's own bow and quiver (that Yahinni had, herself, stolen from the Prince of Thieves); a bottle of black dust taken from the Horsehead Nebula (a god only knows how this came to Earth); an

entire set of teeth from one head of a seven headed hydra; and a small glass globe containing the complete dreams of a long dead child.

Manutius & Yahinni found a mutual attraction through their passions for collecting. They married and combined their expertise in the search for the Everlaster.

The Everlaster had lived under many names which made their search all the more difficult as they slowly followed a trail of clues and leads, visiting places the immortal had been and the people he had met.

Their search took them slowly round the world until eventually they came to an old town in England called Lopside, but there the trail of clues dried up. They knew the Everlaster had been here but when and where he had gone next they had no idea.

It was round about this time that Manutius began to develop symptoms of a disease he has not yet been able to diagnose. It took a toll on his body, making travel a struggle. The couple decided to settle down in Lopside, though they never fully abandoned their search for the Everlaster.

They had lived there now 15 years.

Since making their home here Yahinni's hobby had taken on a new form. No longer obsessed with seeking objects, she instead sought information. Not scientific or philosophical knowledge. She already knew more about those than any single human being.

What she sought was knowledge of the world and those who ruled it. Knowledge that could not be found in the dusty old tomes that Manutius now fingered.

Yahinni left her husband in his mire of words and entered a door that led into the heart of her own mania. She walked down steps into the basement.

A jungle of technology.

Like a snake pit, cords and wires spilled across the floor. Yahinni reflected brown ten times over in dusty monitors huddled like the eyes of a spider. Ten Yahinnis crossed that room, stepping

tentatively over and ducking through the overgrowth of metal, plastic and rubber.

Tiny lights blinked red and green, computer fans hummed and CPUs hubble-bubbled electronic magic.

With this great collection of computer parts Yahinni hacked. She could gain access to virtually any system in the world that was connected directly or indirectly to the global network.

The findings of groundbreaking and top secret research were at her fingertips. She read the reports that newspapers refused to print. She knew the true thoughts of prime ministers and the ambitions of generals.

With the technology of the humans and her own intellect she was finally beginning to compensate for the powers she had lost so many years ago.

In the search for the Everlaster she had developed artificial intelligence programs she called drones. These drones travelled the global network, bypassing security systems and infiltrating databases, sifting through everything from university research to military communications. They searched for any reference or mention of the Everlaster.

Yahinni sat in her chair and turned her monitors on and one screen immediately caught her notice. A blinking alert box told her that something had been found.

There spans across our planet a top secret surveillance system, created by the governments of the English speaking countries. It is called Echelon 2.0, and it monitors every email, fax, text message and phone call made, across the entire world. The information captured by Echelon 2.0 is available to those organisations wealthy enough to purchase access and who are friendly with the US or UK secret services. One such privileged organisation is SkweezumGabaal&Runne.

Yahinni did not need wealth or government contacts. Her drones attached themselves like parasites to the massive Echelon 2.0 database, entirely undetected.

Echelon 2.0 monitors us. Yahinni monitors Echelon 2.0.

With it the ex-genie discovered the following:

That morning, at 09:23, a phone conversation was held in which the term 'the Everlaster' had been used once and, interestingly to Yahinni (though ignored by the Echelon 2.0 software), so too had the word 'Fairy'.

Both phones involved were located in a place called Tiverton Preedy. One phone was billed to a Mr Glendenning and the other to a Mr O'Connell. Voice pattern analysis suggested both speakers were female children.

Part II

Cry Havoc
And Let Slip The Dogs of War

Chapter 9

Train of Thought

*In which a series of revelations,
confessions and explanations occur as the
heroes ride to Lopside.*

The children sat at a table on the train, bored and with their chins on their folded arms. They had just crossed the border out of Yorkshire. They wanted to talk about their quest but felt they'd better not with all the people around them. Beyond the window England sped past in a panorama of fields, woods and towns. Sometimes the scenery came up close and it would go all blurry like the background of a cartoon when the characters are running.

The train was filled with a variety of people. There were business people; families going on holiday; and, sitting at the table opposite, a group of Drojies. Droj was a fashion amongst some teenagers and young people, and a small number of older people though it was frowned upon by many adults. The boys wore skirts and makeup and grew their hair long. The girls had short hair, wore trousers and shorts and other boy's clothes. Though these weren't hard and fast rules as most Drojies wore a mixture of male and female clothing.

Merry liked the Drojies because they didn't care what other people thought of them. Percy was always amused at how adults and non-Drojies gave Drojies funny looks, as though they were seeing aliens from outer space. Esme thought they looked silly, especially the boys (when she could tell they were boys).

"I want to go to the toilet," said Esme.

"OK," said Merry and she gave Esme her bag. They had agreed that they would take it in turns to go to the toilet at half hour intervals. This was because Ayina was inside Merry's bag and they thought it best that she should have a break from it every half hour. The only safe place to take her out was in the toilet, and by each going separately they avoided suspicion.

In the toilet Esme took out the box that held Ayina and lifted the lid.

"Are you OK," asked Esme.

"Yes. Are you?" asked Ayina in return.

"Yes, thankyou" said Esme as she placed Ayina on her lap.

"You are not worried about this journey."

“I am a little scared, but I’m sure we’ll be OK.”

“Do not feel that you owe me anything. If we come across any sign of danger you should go home. I can take care of myself, especially if I find the Everlaster.”

Ayina changed the subject and asked Esme to hold her up near the crack in the window so she could look out onto the world.

Ayina opened her pouch and out came the sprites, to record the sights of the town they were passing through.

“Are all towns in your world like this?”

“Yes. In this country, I think. But in some places there are big cities with tall skyscrapers. London has a few, like the Emerald tower. But Japan... we did about Japan at school.. they have lots of skyscrapers with millions of people all living together.”

“That is how Goblins like to live,” said Ayina. “All bunched up.”

“What are Fairy cities like,” asked Esme.

“I can show you,” said Ayina. The sprites moved from the window and arranged themselves into a square the size of a small telly. Ayina closed her eyes and a glowing image was projected between the sprites.

The image showed a forest of huge old trees. In the branches of the trees and carved into their trunks were thousands of tiny houses. Many houses were of wood though some seemed to be made like wasp nests. They were of all different shapes and colours.

The image moved, like a film, and Fairies could be seen flying about.

“Many Fairy towns and cities are like this, each with shops and schools...” As Ayina spoke the image changed to show the interiors of some buildings. Fairy’s could be seen going about many of the activities human beings would do. “...canteens, hospitals, workshops, clubs and meeting halls”.

In one scene large beetles carried piles of goods on their backs. Esme spotted some beings that looked neither Fairy or insect and appeared to be made of metal.

“What are those metal creatures,” she asked.

“Those are, what you would call, robots. They do the work that is boring and repetitive, work that no one wants to do.”

The sprites conjured up images of robots, of many interesting and elaborate designs, doing jobs. Some could be seen cleaning, waiting tables, giving out goods in shops. Some were shaped like insects, some like humanoids, and others like nothing Esme had ever seen before.

The image vanished.

“But come,” said Ayina. “We must return to the others.”

The sprites flew back into their pouch and Esme returned Ayina to the box and the bag.

Shortly after Esme had returned to the others the train passed through a long tunnel. The train’s horn blew as they sped into the throat of darkness. Outside the window lay pitch blackness; all that the kids could see was the reflection of the train’s interior. It rode alongside them like some phantom train, in which sat the faded double of every passenger.

For several minutes the train journeyed through that long shadow.

“You’re not so strong are you?”

“What is this? My little creature speaks.”

“I heard you tell him. I heard you tell him you got injured by a Fairy. A little Fairy from a children’s story.”

“She ambushed me. I was unarmed and garbed not for battle. As we speak my wounded flesh knits together and my strength returns. The next time, my vermin, I will decide when and where to fight. I will have the first move and one move is all I need to kill her.”

“I remember, he said catch her.”

“I remember very well what Chandler said, maggot. I will do as I please.”

“I hope you fail. I hope the Fairy kills you and rips your guts out.”

Laughter

“Like I did to your wife, my wretched rag of flesh.”

“No! No! You’re lying.”

“You still want to see them again. Even as you lie starving in the arms of Woe you dream of being with your family.”

“Why? Why do you keep me here?”

“Because you are a symbol. And you should find joy in that. While you are here with me you are like a god. You are experiencing personally what your entire species shall endure collectively. You are the first of the last humans. You are the beginning of the end of this world. And the start of a new one.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your leaders, those whom you admire so much and allow to run your planet, have sold the soul of humanity to my people. But it is for your own benefit. We can look after you far better than you can look after yourselves. My people and I see potential in human beings; that we can work together in perfect efficiency.”

“How come you take orders from a human, then?”

“I do not take my orders from him. Though Chandler likes to think I do. I take my orders from the Lamia. In reality Chandler is as vulnerable to me as you are, he just does not know it yet. For you are the most powerful human on Earth, you sit at the centre and see everything.”

“The next time he comes I’ll tell him what you’ve just said.”

“No, I don’t think you will.” And Woe kissed her prisoner on the mouth.

The train emerged from the tunnel and its passengers met the sunlight with relief.

Soon it was Merry’s turn to go to the lavatory.

Merry stood in the toilet silent with a pained look on her face. She looked at Ayina. “Do Fairies ever commit suicide.”

For a short moment Ayina looked confused, but then thoughts seemed to flutter across her face and she understood. She thought a

moment and then spoke. “I’ve never heard of a Fairy ever killing themselves, even in olden times. We only live thirteen years so we have little time to think of death. But today, even amongst the long lasting races like the Trolls and Genies, there are no suicides anymore.”

“So once people did kill themselves on your world.”

“Yes. There was a time when no one knew their true place in the world. A person could not see the connections between themselves and everybody else. They lacked trust and would not admit that they’re own prosperousness and happiness depended on the millions of strangers they would never meet. They believed that everything good about their lives was a result only of their own individual endeavour and everything bad was down to other people. They only looked after themselves and their own immediate family.

“You see the ancients on Aeval used money. People did their work and got paid wages for it, with which they bought the things they needed to survive and find satisfaction. And so the strangest thing happened. People began to believe that money created things, when of course, only people can make things. If a person wanted a dress they would think how twenty sovereigns would get them a dress, but not for one moment did they consider the person who would make that dress. Whether the dressmaker received a fair share of those twenty sovereigns was of no concern to the buyer. But do you see? If you have no knowledge or concern for the dressmaker, the dressmaker will also care nothing for you if they ever buy something you make. What will they care if you are paid a pittance for cooking in a restaurant they eat at or for making their computer.”

Merry found this very interesting; “but what’s this to do wi’ suicide?”

“Well, when people think money produces goods and buildings and services, and forget the people involved in bringing such things into existence, they will care about money but not people; they will protect money but neglect people; they will save money but let people go to waste. Eventually they will love money and despise other

people, because they will see other people as opponents in their quest for wealth.

“Money blinded my ancestors to the true value of things, and it amazes us today to hear that people who did the jobs most vital to civilisation (like waste collectors, egg carers, farm labourers, nurses, insect handlers) were valued and paid the least. And people who are paid little may well believe society does not care about them. They feel ignored and unwanted.

“Paper and coins blinded the people of Aeval to the most important truth, which is that everybody depends on each other, and not themselves. That was always a true and constant fact, despite it being hidden for centuries. And the age in which people forgot that fact was the age of despair, of loneliness, of hatred and suspicion, when wars and murders were rife. Neighbour fought neighbour, never realising that they fought themselves.

“And in that age, when life was treated like some competition in which to be rich and successful, there were those who felt like giving up. And they committed suicide.

“Imagine you are in a family that loves you. On our world, society is that family. Now imagine that family, society, turns its back on you. How would you feel?”

Merry was silent a while, thinking. “But me and Dad didn’t turn our backs on Mum.”

“She was born into a broken family, as all humans are. You treat your fellow men and women as aliens, to be at best mistrusted, at worst despised. As long as your people remain broken in this way there will always be the pressures of uncertainty, of hopelessness, and of fear, pressing down on every individual. Suicide does not begin inside a person, it seeps into them like radiation from a society that is contaminated.”

“But why is it only some people kill themselves.”

“Why is it only some get cancer? There are various factors, but the individuals and their loved ones are not to blame. If you want to know the precise thoughts of your Mum that lead her to suicide, I

can not tell you. Though we share much in common I do not know what it is truly like to live as a human. The Everlaster, however, he has lived all lives. He will know far more than I what suicide is.”

Percy’s eyes followed phone lines that ran along the side of the railway line. It looked like a black line flying alongside the train, bobbing up and down like a magic carpet.

Hundreds of voices moved through that phone line at the speed of light. Amongst those voices two were having the following conversation:

“There was huge activity last night, Mr Dahl.”

“What do you mean, activity?”

“One of our Seers sensed a great intelligence. In Barnsley. Whatever it was it was the same thing they sensed the previous night and on the day the Fairy arrived.”

“You mean that thing they called ‘Terror’?”

“Yes, and more importantly, it turns out that there was a storm over the area where the Seer sensed the intelligence. A storm that the Met office say shouldn’t have happened. They said the conditions weren’t right for a storm. It just came out of nowhere.”

“Yes, well, the weathermen have been known to get these things wrong.”

“I know that, sir. The storm damaged a hospital. But apart from that no other damage was caused.”

“Send me a report of all the stuff the Seers have come up with. And do try to figure out what all of this means. That is what you are paid for, after all.”

“Yes, Mr Dahl.”

“If that’s all then goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Sir.”

As soon as Chandler Dahl put the phone down it started ringing again.

“Yes,”

“Hello, Mr Dahl. It’s Doctor Caliper. About that boy you asked me to keep an eye on.”

“What about him,”

“There was a storm last night and it seems a tree fell through the window of the room he was in. For some reason he ran out the window and he hasn’t been found. But that’s not the only thing. The brain scan we did has shown up something very strange. There are a number of shadows on his brain that we can’t explain the reason for. They could be some kind of tumours, but they are in such unnatural shapes. It’s very likely that these have caused his strange behaviour and his running away. He could be paranoid, hallucinating or anything.”

“Were any other people involved in his escape?”

“No. There were several witnesses. He just ran off on his own.”

“Thank you, doctor. Send me a report as soon as possible. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

He put the phone down and leant back in his chair, pondering for a few moments over the information he had received.

Percy was talking to Ayina, who he had placed in the sink while he tried desperately to pee in the toilet without getting it everywhere. The train’s rocking made it difficult to aim.

“Could you look the other way please,” said Percy. “It’s hard enough as it is.”

“Sorry,” said Ayina, and she averted her eyes.

“Thank you. What will happen if you don’t find this Everlaster guy, or if you don’t make it back to your world?”

“The war will continue and it will be very difficult. Very devastating. It is vital that I return to my people to tell them of the Jae-Mareeda’s presence on Earth, for it must have great bearing on the

war. The Jae-Mareeda would not expend resources on Earth while they are fighting us unless they believe it can benefit them greatly”.

“There’s something I’ve got to tell yer,” said Percy, zipping up his fly. “But you’ve got to promise not to mention it to anyone else.”

“I promise,” said Ayina.

“These men came to me yesterday. They knew about you. I mean, they knew a Fairy’d appeared in forest. They wanted me to hand you over to em. If I din’t they said they’d do something to me family.”

“You didn’t hand me over.”

“No. But I’ve got till 3 o’clock this afternoon to decide. But I’ve definitely decided now that I’m not going to.”

“Do you know who the men were?”

“No. But they did say something about being in a powerful organisation. They had loads of information about me, and they pretended to be police.”

“This is terrible,” said Ayina, and she put her face in her hands.

“What’s wrong?” asked Percy.

Ayina felt like crying. “It can mean only one thing.”

“What?”

“They could only have known about you and me through Woe. My sprites scanned that forest and there was nobody else present, nor was there any surveillance equipment.

“The Jae-Mareeda must be working with some of your people. And if, as you say, these people are powerful your world is at great risk. As long as there are humans with power over others, as long as there are power hungry men and women, your species will be vulnerable to the lure of the Jae-Mareeda.

“Your world is at great risk, not only from the Jae-Mareeda, but also from your own people. If humanity allies with them then my world is surely doomed. And your world too.”

Once again Percy didn’t feel too good. “You know,” he said, “I think I’ll have a poo now.”

Chapter 10

Fractured Lands

*In which our adventurers are welcomed to
Lopside by the town guard, before meeting
two of its inhabitants, one of whom is a
native to Earth.*

The town of Lopside was built on five hills of varying size and gradient. It was possibly the most uneven town in Britain. Instead of finding a place more suitable, the town's founders, twelve centuries ago, saw the challenge of building a town on such unforgiving terrain and accepted it. They chose the steepest and most irregular hill, or rather crag, on which to found their settlement. Over the centuries, buildings tumbled out over the landscape as if the gods had dropped a bucket of toys from the sky.

Most of the buildings today looked like they were built in Victorian times or maybe earlier, though there was a fair share of modern architecture. Compared to the strength and beauty of the old structures, the new houses looked like hastily built dog kennels. The older buildings looked down on their scrawny young siblings as if they had no right to be there. Those buildings that had the privilege of standing on the tops of the five hills did so like medal winners on podiums. The rest clung to the hillsides, trying desperately to stay upright.

The entire town shone in the sunlight; radiant as a happy memory.

Through Lopside's cobbled streets there echoed the song of children, as it echoed through all of England's towns; for it was the first weekday of the summer holidays. While the adults worked, the streets, fields and parks of Britain were claimed by its children. Sometimes a grey-haired couple might venture forth in order to enjoy the sunshine and birdsong, braving the crossfire of footballs and Frisbees, and evading the squadrons of skateboarders and bicyclists. But such sightings were rare: for now was the season of youth.

Though the young appear to rule, that rule is an illusion.

From every street corner adult eyes survey through the silent hidden cameras they have let spread throughout the land. Wrapped for protection in cloaks of power, men watch from windowless rooms,

content to allow the youth of the nation to play delirious in the Sun, but waiting, always waiting, in case the young get any ideas.

For if the young organised themselves, challenged the complacent notions of their parents, they would have to be stopped; and the monstrous machinery of the state is poised in a constant posture of readiness for any such occurrence.

That machinery waited now, trembling with anticipation like a stalking lioness, as it watched three children descend the steps from Lopside station. Three children not where they should be. Three children who had with them the greatest threat to the Old Order since the beginning of the 20th Century; something that could bring tumbling down all the rusted and wheezing traditions of adult society. These three children had with them a Fairy.

Cruising down Chiron Road in a blue Cavalier, a plain clothes policeman and policewoman (whose names were Cook and Butler respectively) received a message over the radio. They were given the descriptions of Meredith O'Connell, Percy Lillycrop, and Esme Glendenning, and received instructions to bring them into custody.

Rounding a corner they spotted three children matching those descriptions. They pulled up beside the children and Butler got out and she stood before Merry.

"I'm a police officer." Officer Butler showed her badge. "Are you Meredith O'Connell?"

"Yes," Merry replied. Percy resisted the urge to slap his forehead.

"All three of you must accompany us to the police station. You're wanted for questioning."

"What about?" asked Percy. "We haven't done anything." After his last encounter with those who flash police badges his first instinct was to run, but the woman already had Merry's arm in a tight grip and he would not leave her and Esme to face these people without him.

“A detective at the station will tell you. Now get in.”

Merry was pushed into the back of the car followed by Percy and Esme.

The door slammed shut, the woman got in and the car began its slow drive through the streets. Merry insisted on keeping a look of calm on her face in all situations, and she did so now, but inside her panic was blossoming. What kind of trouble were they in? If the police searched her bag what would happen to Ayina?

As the children pondered their fate, a few blocks away another police car was travelling the streets of Lopside. This car had typical police markings in blue and yellow. Inside it rode a uniformed policeman and woman (whose names were PC Fisher and PC Shepherd respectively).

PCs Fisher and Shepherd hated summer holidays. Their days were spent chasing up complaints about kids spray-painting walls, climbing into places they shouldn't, throwing over-ripe fruit at traffic, potting windows with cricket balls and turning streets into assault courses for bikes and skateboards.

This moment they were heading to investigate a series of complaints regarding stolen washing lines when a message came over the radio.

“Car 16-9-7, come in.”

PC Shepherd answered.

“Car 16-9-7 here, over.”

“Car 16-9-7, we have an emergency situation. We have a reported kidnapping nearby. Suspects: one woman, one male, driving a blue Cavalier. They have three children, allegedly kidnapped, in the back. We have them on the street cameras, heading south down Tamora Street. Take caution when intercepting, they are armed, dangerous and carry fake police badges.”

The police car turned on its siren and sped to intercept.

With a grin of satisfaction widening across her face, lilac skinned Yahinni leant back in her chair and watched on her monitors,

which were hacked into Lopside's CCTV network, as car 16-9-7 carried out the fake orders she had just given it.

But now was not the time for celebrations, thought Yahinni. There was still much to do.

"Let's get these kids dropped off fast, so we can get on with our proper assignment," said Cook, the plain clothed policeman, to Butler, just as the sound of sirens met their ears.

"I wonder what's going on," said Butler, "that sounds close." And the next sound she heard was that of their car tyres screeching. Her partner had slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the police car that had appeared suddenly in front of them.

They mounted the pavement while the police car came to a halt across their front.

"What the hell's going on?" shouted Cook, as the two uniformed police stormed out of their car, pointing guns at him and Butler.

"Get out of the car! Put your hands on your heads!"

Merry and Esme sat frozen with shock and confusion. "I knew they weren't really coppers," blurted Percy.

As Cook and Butler opened their doors and got slowly out, trying frantically to convince the other police that this was some mistake, a new message came in over their radio, but they were far too distracted to hear it.

"Meredith," said the voice on the radio.

Merry's ears pricked. "Listen," she whispered to the other two.

"Meredith, Percy, Esme. To your left you will see a path going through the houses."

They looked. And there was the path.

"Follow the path. At the end is a road with a park on the other side. Cross the park and find a man in a wheelchair. He will help you. Go now! Unless you want the police to take you and the Fairy."

Not seeing any other course of action open to them, “lets go,” Merry told the others. She opened the car door and ran out with Percy quick at her heels.

Esme was slower getting out. She opened the door on her side, the side where the police with guns were.

“It’s OK little girl,” PC Shepherd told her. “Get out of the car and step away,”

“But those children are wanted for questioning,” pleaded Cook and Butler.

Esme backed slowly away, frightened by the guns. Then she bolted after Merry and Percy. The one thought racing through her mind as she ran was ‘I’m not a little girl’.

“Come back,” shouted both pairs of police.

“Shut up,” shouted Fisher and Shepherd and, with their handcuffs ready, moved in on Cook and Butler.

Merry and Percy reached the park together, Merry with her bag held carefully to her chest, trying not to shake Ayina around. The Sun was hot on their faces.

In the park children swarmed over swings and slides, filling the air with shouts and screams, while teenagers lounged about on the grass or played football. Merry and Percy walked through the throng scanning hard for a man in a wheelchair.

“Over there, at the other side,” Percy pointed.

A man in his sixties sat alone in a wheelchair, as if waiting for someone.

“Come on,” said Percy, grabbing Merry’s hand.

“Wait, where’s Esme?” But Percy couldn’t wait and he dragged Merry through the park, to the old man.

“You seek the Everlaster?” the old man asked urgently when they reached him.

“Yes,” replied Percy.

“Then you must come with me, and quickly! The police will be looking for you, and other men. My wife has turned the cameras off but they could come back on at any moment, and then they will see us. I thought there were three of you?”

“There are,” said Merry. “Thez’ Esme. But we’ve lost her.”

“Its too dangerous to wait,” insisted the old man. “Come now.” With a touch of the stick on his hand-rest the wheelchair sped forward and Percy and Merry walked quickly in his wake.

Esme’s stomach did flips and twists when she reached the park and saw, not Percy and Merry, but instead one hundred other kids, half a dozen mothers, and not one wheelchair.

“I’ve lost ‘em,” thought Esme frantically. She looked round and around, running through the horde of strangers. “They’ve gone off without me.” The accents of the children around her, strange and southern, unnerved her even more.

She clenched her fists and gathered her thoughts. Calmed herself down. Finally she looked up at the bright blue sky. “All right then,” she said. “I’ll find the Everlaster on me own.”

Merry and Percy were led to one of the older buildings in Lopside; a large three story house with a small tower in one corner topped by a dark blue cone. The surrounding modern houses seemed to cower beneath it and were grateful of the large trees that stood in its grounds, shielding them from its stare.

Walking down the shaded path to the rear of the house Merry asked the old man, “is this where the Everlaster is?”

“No,” said Manutius.

“Then where is he?”

“I was hoping you were going to tell me that. Now in you go.”

On entering the house Percy and Merry's senses were deluged. Every room and corridor was filled with objects; from the everyday to the unfathomable, from the miniscule to the massive.

Amongst one thousand other things there were skulls, stuffed insects, saintly relics, paintings, Petri dishes, tiny dancing dolls, diagrams, a gramophone, phials of mysterious compounds, computer parts, a compendium of goblin games, gruesome masks, a mastodon's tusk, a Turing machine, talismans, Olmec jewellery, orreries, a feather from the wing of Archangel Gabriel, an Aeolian harp (which produced music by itself as Merry and Percy walked past), a pirate's treasure, a trident, Japanese embroidery and a deactivated energy shield.

Such a collection of objects brought with it an equal clutter of smells. One moment sweet scents soaked the children's nostrils and tickled their taste buds, and the next stinging chemical odours made them hold their noses. One second they smelled chocolate, the next leather. Machine oil mingled with mustard; death with flowers.

And the sounds.

Mechanical birds warbled, clocks tocked, wood creaked, crystals sang, energy crackled, metal squealed, bubbles popped, devices buzzed, and all accompanied by the Aeolian harp.

In this grand collection of possible things no object on Earth was represented more abundantly than books. Every wall had its book shelf and the largest room in the house was the library. So many books there were, in fact, that they threatened to outnumber the dust motes that spread thinly over every surface. Tidiness and cleanliness were evidently not foremost concerns in the minds of the inhabitants.

It was into the library that Manutius Fluke took Merry and Percy. Every conceivable human interest was represented within the towering bookshelves and one or two beyond human comprehension.

In the centre was a round table littered with books, scrolls and a laptop. As they gathered near it Yahinni entered the room. Merry gasped at the sight of her lilac skin, draped beneath a dress of glistening amber. She was tall, slim and appeared to be about forty years old. Her head was bold but for a small circle of black hair at the

back, which was tied up by white straps into an inch-thick pony tail arching a hands length behind her.

“I believe,” said Manutius Fluke, “that the Fairy in your bag would be grateful for some fresh air.”

“How does tha know who we are?” demanded Percy as Merry opened her bag up.

“We are, what you could call, experts on the Everlaster. We know much that there is to know about him, so naturally, we know you search for him.”

“Then you need to take us to him?”

“Sadly, his location is one of the few things we have yet to learn.”

Merry placed the box that held Ayina onto the desk and the Fairy jumped out.

Seeing the strange old man before her Ayina took her halberd in her hand. “Who are you?”

It was Yahinni who responded. “*Iyesres laseff*,” she said, in the high language of the Fairies. In English it meant ‘we are friends’.

Ayina turned to her:

“The speech of Fairy kings I hear you say
A dialect long since withered away.”

“I have been gone from Aeval a long time. When I left, that ‘dialect’ was spoken across half of Aeval.” A touch of bitterness and regret crept into her voice.

“Then you are an exile? And a genie?”

“I am human now. My skin is the only remnant of my former life.”

“As for me, I am Manutius Fluke, and I have always had the pleasure of being human. This is Yahinni, my wife.”

Percy’s eyes narrowed. He thought Manutius Fluke looked too old to be Yahinni’s husband, but then his mind began to get round the things that had just been said. There was no telling how old Yahinni really was.

“And what is your name, honoured guest?” asked Manutius Fluke.

“My name is Ayina. You are bleeding.”

“What?” said Manutius, and then he felt the blood trickling from his nose. He quickly plucked a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to his face. He felt faint. Yahinni went to him, concerned.

“Have you taken your tablets today?” she asked.

“Yes, but they have less effect lately. Never mind, it will pass soon.” And he changed his attention to the guests. “You all must be parched after your long journey, is the tea ready, Yahinni?”

“I think so,” and she left the room.

“You all drink tea, I hope. Here, help yourself to biscuits. We have sandwiches too. My wife will bring them.”

Before them were two wide plates of delicious looking biscuits. Merry took some. They were much nicer than the digestives and bourbons her Dad got from the cheap shop.

‘Esme’d love these posh biscuits’, thought Merry, as Esme had a real sweet tooth. ‘I suppose its coz she dun’t eat meat. She needs the energy’.

Merry felt a moment’s guilt over Esme’s absence. I should’ve med the old man wait for her.

“Mister, about our friend,” she said anxiously. “We’ve got to find her.”

“I’m sure Yahinni will be able to locate her again. They search for three children. Alone she will go unnoticed. But now we have very important things to discuss.”

I hope she’s OK, thought Merry, she won’t know what to do on her own.

As soon as she’d resolved to find the Everlaster by herself Esme began asking people if they knew where Poppy Field House was. It seemed no one knew so she decided on another course of

action. She asked people where the library was, and to that she quickly got an answer.

At the library it took only moments for an assistant to find out for Esme where Poppy Field house was and provide her with directions.

Fifteen minutes later she was stood by a driveway in front of a sign that read POPPY FIELD HOUSE, LOPSIDE. She hesitated for only a moment before marching up the long driveway, at the end of which there stood a huge Victorian mansion flanked on its left by a small car park.

Esme followed another sign that said VISITORS ENTRANCE, which led her to a pair of double doors atop marble steps.

She took a deep breath and entered... Into a lobby.

Its floor was chequered black and white and plants grew in large urns by the wall. Despite the obvious age of the place everything was clean, fresh and bright. A wide flight of steps lay at the lobby's end twisting upwards to the next floor.

To Esme's right a woman in a white uniform stood behind a dark-wood reception desk.

"Can I help you, duckie?" she asked with a welcoming but concerned smile.

"Erm, I'm looking for someone. Err... the Everlas..."

"You'll have to speak up, dear. I can hardly hear you."

Another woman in white came in through a door on the left. She walked arm in arm with a tired-looking woman in a dressing gown and led her through the door opposite.

"I'm looking for the Everlaster," said Esme a little louder.

"What you talking about, duckie? Are you lost?"

"No. There's a man here I need to see." She racked her brain trying to think of his name. "Utnapishtim. That's his name."

"A Mr Utnapishtim?" said the woman to herself. She thought it over and looked through a book on the desk. "Mr Utnapishtim? What's that? Is that an Indian name?" She looked at Esme.

“I dun’t know.”

The woman finished looking through her book. “No I’m sorry. I didn’t think there was anyone called that here.”

“But he has to be. I have to find him.” Esme was getting anxious.

A man in a long white coat came down the steps.

“He’s gotta be here,” said Esme loudly. “I’ve been told he is.”

“Calm down, duckie,” said the nurse and she came round from behind the desk. “Calm yourself.”

“What’s wrong,” asked the man. He was tall, slim and his coat bore a label with the words ‘Dr Abel Gilpatric’.

“She’s looking for someone, but I’ve told her he’s not here.”

“Who are you looking for?” the doctor asked Esme.

“I’m looking for the Everlaster, but I know he has different names.”

“Hmmm, well, some of the people we get here have sometimes had name changes, for different reasons. Some don’t even know who they are.”

Esme tried to think of some of the other names Ayina had called the Everlaster. “He’s called Utnapishtim and... ohh... something beginning with A. And... the in... the infamous. No! The Infinite Story.”

Dr Gilpatric raised an eyebrow. “Odd. We’ve a patient here who we nicknamed the Infinite Story because he’s always telling stories to the other patients. It’s a very unusual thing to call a person. So it’s possible you mean him.”

“Yeah,” said Esme, bobbing up and down. “I bet it’s him.”

“How do you know him?” asked the doctor.

“Err, he’s a friend of me Dad’s.”

The doctor gave Esme a suspicious look. “He’s been here fifteen years and never had a visitor before.”

“Can I see him?”

“Well, I don’t see why not. He’s not harmful or anything. Come on, I’ll take you to him.”

Chapter 11

Tea and Sandwiches

In which the adventurers learn the true extent of the power of the Empire. What Esme found in Poppy Field House.

Yahinni entered the library with a tray of tea.

“So how long have the people of Aeval started coming to Earth again,” Yahinni asked Ayina as she set out the cups and poured the tea. All three guests privately observed the myriad scars that cross-hatched her lilac forearms.

“I am the first and only one, since the period connections were severed.”

Yahinni put a smaller tray before Ayina. On it was set a tiny chair and a table, upon which there had been placed an equally tiny tea set.

“Luckily,” explained Manutius, “we had some old Fairy furniture and utensils lying around.”

“The table and chair are part of a set I bought from a Scotsman who believed it to be dolls furniture,” added Yahinni. “Sometime in the early nineteenth century, I think. Exquisite condition, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” agreed Ayina, sitting down on the chair.

Yahinni explained to the children: “you can tell the difference between a doll’s chair and a Fairy’s, not only by the quality, but also by the unusual shape of the Fairy backrest, which is designed like that to accommodate the wings.” As she said that her attention was drawn to Ayina’s wings.

“What has happened to yours?”

“It was torn in a fight.” Ayina gulped dry the Fairy sized cup, and poured herself some more tea.”

“I’m sure there must be something in the house to help heal it.”

“We’ll find something later, my dear,” Manutius told her. He directed a question at Ayina: “so is it true that you search for the Everlaster?”

Percy rose to his feet angrily. “How do you know so much?” he demanded, his voice tainted slightly with panic. “I don’t think we should tell you owt till you tell us what you’re up to.”

Yahinni nodded in acquiescence. “Very well, young man. You are aware, I am sure, of the cameras that spy from every corner, of ID cards and the powers of the police to hold and interrogate anyone without charge, as they were about to do to you and your friend.

“Less known about is the surveillance, by secret agencies, of every telephone call, text message and email on the planet. This system of information gathering is called Echelon 2.0.

“The vast majority of the information gathered is useless, but the point is, if those humans with power wanted, they could know who your friends are, where you like going, what you read, who or what you hate and love, while you don’t even know they exist.

“And today the most powerful and wealthy organization on Earth is SkweezumGrabaal&Runne, and it is they who make best use of Echelon 2.0.

“And they know the Fairy has come to Earth. They know she is in the hands of Meredith O’Connell of 1 Tamber Lane, Tiverton Preedy.” Merry’s face contorted with shock but Percy’s barely registered surprise.

“They know Meredith has come to Lopside with Percy Lillycrop and Esme Glendenning in order to find the Everlaster. They know their friend Trent Tufnell was with them when they first found the Fairy. They know that he was submitted to hospital Saturday night, was diagnosed with an unusual brain tumour and that on Sunday night he escaped and has vanished, beyond all their surveillance.”

Percy was as equally astonished as Merry at this last detail.

“What they don’t know about,” continued Yahinni, “is me. I have observed the rich and powerful of this world, originally because of my interest in collecting. My collection you will have seen around the house. The only objects worth having that I do not already own sit behind bars and infrared beams in private mansions and corporate labs.

“When the internet age arrived I mastered its secrets, used it to make deeper my connections in the black market. I used my

computer knowledge to infiltrate private systems, take down security and take that which interested me.”

“You’re a thief,” Merry accused her.

“I hear judgement in your voice. Yet is it immoral to steal loose change from the pockets of gangsters?”

“In recent years the only thing I’ve stolen is information, since Manutius became ill and needed me constantly by his side.

“Some of the secrets I have discovered during these years have been puzzling, their implications disturbing. The activities of SGR have held most of my attention.

“At first I could follow their activities like everybody else’s but about seven years ago they began using a form of encryption for their internal communications and documents that I have, to this day, been unable to comprehend. It is so different to the ciphers and codes developed by humanity that I can only conclude, and Manutius agrees with me on this, that their encryption method does not originate from Earth.”

“Do you have any examples of this encryption?” asked Ayina.

“Here.” It was Manutius Fluke who answered. He placed a print out on the table in front of Ayina.

“That is part of an intercepted file.” It was a page of random squiggles and blobs, like the fall out from a sneeze.

Ayina recognized it immediately. “That is the language of the Jae-Mareeda.”

And so Ayina told Yahinni of the invasion of her home world and who the Jae-Mareeda were.

When Ayina had finished her story, she said, “if SGR is working with the Jae-Mareeda then it will be very useful if I can gain access to their databases. There might be information about the Jae-Mareeda’s activities that could help our war efforts.”

“But how will you get that information back to Aeval,” asked Yahinni.

Ayina revealed her sprites. “These are the latest we’ve developed in computer technology. They can read and copy

information on any type of database in existence except organic brains. The amount of information each one can hold is more than sufficient.”

“Can you interpret the Jae-Mareeda language?”

“No, but the sprites can. If I want to access the Jae-Mareeda information they hold, they would translate the relevant pieces as they transmit them to my cerebral implant.”

“I see. So you have a neural interface hooked up to your brain. Well, I have lots of SGR information on my computers. You might as well download the files to your sprites. My computers are in the basement.”

“Then I will send them now.” Two of the sprites flew out of the room, heading for the basement. “If they have any difficulties I will know of it.”

Manutius showed Merry and Percy around some of the rooms, describing a few of the objects that filled them. “You may take a souvenir if you wish. After all, you helped the Fairy in her mission. And we have so much, we’ve forgotten what half of it is. Feel free to look around and come to me with your chosen item. I will check your pockets before you leave, in case you take something dangerous.”

“Do you have anything that can cure woe?” Merry asked him.

“Would that be your own woe or all the world’s woes? The second one I certainly can’t help you with.”

She told him about Woe’s curse on the adults of Tiverton Preedy.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what such a cure would be”, said Manutius afterwards. “But, you know, the Everlaster knows many things about life and death. Once Yahinni has repaired the Fairy’s wing we will go and find him and hopefully he will answer all our questions. Now I will leave you to look around.”

“Wow,” said Percy when Manutius was out of sight. “Look at all this cool stuff.”

“This is the best house ever,” said Merry quaking with excitement.

“Listen,” said Percy, drawing close to Merry. “How can we trust these people? We don’t know what they’re up to.”

“I don’t know,” Merry replied, “but Yahinni’s from Aeval and Ayina seems OK with her.”

“What I mean is, we don’t know why they’re looking for the Everlaster. Perhaps they want to add him to their collection.” His hand swept the room.

Merry’s expression told Percy he was being silly. “What they going to do?” she said, picking up a dead lizard, “stuff him?”

“I suppose your right.” He picked up a high spiked crown cut entirely from some blue gemstone. “How does this look on me?”

“Like a handsome prince,” laughed Merry. But laughter gave way to concern when she saw the trance-like expression on his face. “Percy?” She waved her hand before his eyes but no response came. Almost panicking she pulled the crown from his head and put it down.

“Merry!” Percy grabbed her by the wrists, laughing. “The birds outside, in the trees and on the roof. I could feel ‘em. And see what they saw. I felt ones flying through the sky, eating flies. And the pigeons in the square, all thinking about food.”

Merry laughed at his giddiness, and the joy on his face. Something she’d not seen on him since leaving Cradleford forest.

She browsed the objects and her eyes were caught by a large gold ornament in the shape of a Mayan pyramid. When she touched it the pyramid opened up like a flower with four petals and inside there was a tiny detailed city scene. Beneath a golden Sun golden men and women danced to a fragile tune that emanated from within the base. The music was the most beautiful Merry had ever heard, and to it the movement of the figures seemed to tell a long lost story.

Merry wanted to take it home so she could listen to it everyday.

*

“What did you call him, again?”

“Urm... Utnapishtim,” replied Esme, trying to stay as close as possible to the doctor as he led her down wide corridors peopled by the inhabitants of this huge house: men and women of all ages, some sitting or standing on their own, some still and staring, others rocking back and forth. Some greeted the doctor as he passed while others did not notice him though he passed right before their noses.

It’s some kind of hospital, thought Esme, but what would the Everlaster be doing in hospital if he’s supposed to be immortal.

“Utnapishtim, ay? Well that’s very interesting to learn his real name, if this is the man you’re looking for. You see, we never knew his real name because he never talks to anyone except to tell stories. But when he first arrived, because he had no name the nurses called him Ali, after Ali Baba. Because, well,” the doctor shrugged his shoulders as if embarrassed, “he looks Arabian you see. So we call him Ali usually. The Infinite Story is just a joke name another doctor came up with.”

“In all the time he’s been here he’s been very well liked by the other patients. He tells them adventures and fairy stories. And he never tells the same story twice. That’s why he got called the Infinite Story. And the stories always involve him, like’s he’s telling you something from his own past. And you half believe him too except for the fact that he’s talking about the Aztecs or medieval times or something. He’s very good.”

He opened the door onto a room scattered with chairs and tables, sat at which were people doing jigsaws and playing board games. At one corner was a telly semi-circled by comfy chairs.

“There he is,” said the doctor, pointing.

By the window sat a man who looked to be thirty-five years old. He seemed middle eastern in appearance, with long straight black in a pony tail. He looked out the window as he talked, which gave the impression that he was talking to the world. Around him sat half a dozen people, each one visibly engrossed by what the man was saying.

A young woman with blonde hair sat on the floor by his side with her head resting on his knee. He didn't seem to know she was there.

"He looks quite young for his age you know," the doctor told Esme, "not that we know his date of birth. But he hardly seems to have aged since he first arrived here."

The doctor stood with Esme behind those listening to the Infinite Story speaking in an unfamiliar accent that seemed to alter subtly.

"Their trireme rammed our sides, its bronze tipped bow ripping through our hull like a lance through flesh. Our boat quickly began to sink and those of the men who did not drown made for the shore. But I did not follow them. Instead I clung to the underside of the enemy's hull and held on as they rejoined their fleet..."

As he told his tale emotion played upon his face like actors on a stage: hope and despair danced across his features, battles were fought across his brow, and the dead were resurrected in the sparkling of his eyes. His lips drew dreams, but his face made them real.

"Sorry to interrupt," said the doctor, and as soon as he did, emotion abandoned Ali, leaving his face as still as a corpse. But some scattered remnants of emotion did remain. Like wounded soldiers, boredom and sadness, with the faintest hint of disgust, crawled across his features.

In his silence Ali did not shift his gaze from beyond the window.

"There's a visitor here to see you, Ali."

His audience all looked at Esme with great curiosity. A young man nibbling his nails shook his head and said, "Ali never, never gets visitors. Hello." He smiled shyly at Esme who smiled shyly back.

"He won't say anything to you," one old man said, rising to his feet. "So if you get bored you can come over with us and play monopoly," and he shuffled over to one of the tables.

"Can we have a moment with Ali alone please," the doctor told the others. They all got up and left them alone, except for the blonde girl.

“You too, Abigail,” the doctor told her. “Go on.” She got to her feet reluctantly and walked off on her own looking quite upset.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to your visitor, Ali,” said the doctor, though he knew full well he’d get no response. And he was right, Ali didn’t even look at Esme.

Esme plucked up her courage and very shyly asked Ali, “are you Utnapishtim?”

He turned his head further round so Esme and the doctor could not see his face.

The doctor gave Esme an apologetic look and was about to suggest they leave when suddenly Ali shouted loudly, “the air is filled with hungry things! Look!” A plump and red-faced woman pointed at the empty air and began to wail. Others joined her in a chorus of shouting and crying. They each looked terrified, as if something was coming for them. Those patients not effected by this sudden hysteria were becoming upset by the noise. The doctor joined the nurses in their attempt to calm everyone down.

As Esme looked uneasily upon this disturbing scene Ali spun round and grabbed her wrist. Within seconds he was dragging her out of the door of the ward and into the corridor. “Quickly, come with me,” he ordered, not that she had much choice, and briskly they left the scene.

Chapter 12

Corporeal Punishment

In which Ali makes a confession. How, the night before, Trent met the twilight people. What the Genie said to the Fairy. How Merry discovered the Obsidian Staff; or the Obsidian Staff discovered Merry.

Esme and Ali entered a small bedroom. Ali closed the door and spoke. “Utnapishtim...? Utnapishtim? I see a mere girl before me, young in this world, yet she speaks of things far older than her language. Utnapishtim, he who survived the flood and lived everlasting.

“So tha really are the Everlaster?” asked Esme in wonder.

“I am an inmate in an asylum. Why would’st thou think I was someone from a story that has long since ceased to be told.”

“A Fairy called Ayina is looking for yer,” said Esme. “She said tha’d be here.”

“The Fairies have returned to Earth?” He gave a laugh, though it seemed tinged with sadness. “I’m sure they’ll take one look around and fly themselves back again.” He laid down on the bed and crossed his arms and stared at the ceiling. He sighed. “Yes. I’m the Everlaster.”

Esme looked closely at the man in front of her and felt a distinct sense of disappointment. She was expecting someone old and wise looking, but instead, what lay in front of her was a slim and rather jaded looking man. And he wasn’t even tall. She been sure he’d be tall. His clothes didn’t look like much either: just a shabby grey T-shirt and fading black jeans.

“So, explain thysen. How does a little Yorkshire lass know who I am, let alone that there’s a Fairy looking for me? I know the Fairies aren’t talking to us yet cos it’d be on the news if they were.”

“Me and me friends were rescued by her, from this like alien thing, but she got injured and so we had to help bring her to Lopside.”

“How did she know I was here?”

“She never told us that.”

He sat up and looked out the window giving a suspicious look at the trees. “I can imagine who told her. There aren’t many alive today who would know the face of the Everlaster, let alone pick it out from a crowd of six billion.”

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“What’s happening to me?” Trent asked himself earlier that day, in the hour before sunrise. He sat holding his head beneath a tree that overlooked the reservoir just east of Tiverton Preedy. It was no longer dark but the landscape was grey. In the sky pink leaked upwards from the horizon like banners unfurling to announce the coming Sun.

The reservoir’s water looked tranquil but Trent could sense the drama beneath its surface, and above it: hundreds of fish, thousands of insects and millions of microbes living and dying, eating and being eaten.

Though the tree against his back seemed still he knew it was teeming with bacteria and other microscopic life.

“YOU MUST MAKE FRIENDS,” came Earth’s voice in his mind.

“I already have friends.”

“THEY HELP THE FAIRY NOW AND WILL BE NO USE TO ME.”

“Who, then?”

But Earth did not reply, and he was alone.

Eventually Trent got up and walked into the parkland beside the reservoir. He passed the rusted bandstand and the disused paddling pool; its blue floor spoiled with dirt and fallen blossom.

As he walked worn flagstones bursting with weeds, he became aware of human voices. Stealthily he approached the source of the voices and from behind a bush he saw six youths. They looked scruffy and unhealthy and their words were slow. They’re druggies, thought Trent with some disgust and fear.

Amongst them, lying on the path, was an old man. By his side was his fishing rod and tackle box. His palms were pressed against his ears and his whole body shivered violently, as though with extreme cold. Or perhaps, thought Trent, he was having a fit.

“Are thy alright, mate?” said one of the youths, a boy of about 19. He bent over and shook the old man’s shoulder. “Mate? Mate?!” he said, raising his voice in concern and confusion.

“What’s wrong with him, Rob?” a girl asked.

“I dun’t know. Can you hear me, mate? Shall we call an ambulance?”

Soon, one of them was over his mobile to the emergency services. “We’re in the park near the reservoir... ..In Tiverton Preedy... ..Where’s Tiverton Preedy!”

“Hey kid, what yer doing in yer pyjamas?” asked the girl in concerned tones as Trent approached them.

Her hair was brown and matted. Her skin was pale and blotchy with many spots and sores. There was red bags around her dulled eyes. She looked ill, but Trent knew it was drugs that made her look so bad. His Dad had taught him what drugs did to people and how stupid they were to take them.

“Put him on the grass,” Trent told them.

“Why?”

“Perhaps he knows first aid?” suggested the girl. “Do you know first aid?”

Despite their doubts the youths lifted the old man onto the grass, and there he lay, silent and trembling in his new position.

Trent kneeled beside him and placed a hand on his forehead.

“Whoa, what’s going on?” said one of the boys behind him. The whole field seemed to ripple, like a pond after a stone’s thrown in. But the ripples travelled inwards, not outwards, converging beneath Trent, the old man and the group gathered around.

Trent had sensed the sickness in the old man when he first approached and now sensed it going. The Earth was channelling her life force through Trent; just one drop in the ocean of her being.

The old man stopped his trembling and Trent knew he was well. Now Trent could feel the sickness in the young woman beside him and he took her hand.

She doubled over in pain, and vomit spewed from her mouth, yellow and brown and streaked with white foam, while her friends looked on in concern. Trent never let go of her hand and as quickly as her pain had started it was over.

When she stood up her eyes were no longer dull but bright, the irises conker brown. The redness was gone from around them and so too had the spots and sores. When before her cheeks had been gaunt they were now fleshy and warm with health. And she was pretty, as she had once been as a child.

She looked at Trent, not knowing how or why he had cured her addiction. She felt eternally grateful, but knew no words to express herself. “Save Rob too,” she pleaded. And Trent did. He saved them all. One at a time he took each of them by the hand.

As they vomited away the drugs that had consumed them, the emptiness and hopelessness that had steered them down that path was replaced with peace and purpose.

“My name’s Jenny,” said the girl. “What’s your name?”

“Trent,” he replied.

“Like the river,” said the old man, who was now back on his feet and as grateful as anyone there.

With Ayina sat on Yahinni’s hand, the lilac woman climbed the steps to the second floor. “So why are you searching for the Everlaster?”

“He holds information that will be of strategic value to our war effort. I cannot divulge the specifics. And some back on Aeval wondered whether humankind would prove to be an ally against the Jae-Mareeda.”

The ex-genie responded with an imperious snort. “I’d say you have a fifty-fifty chance of the humans siding with you. Whether they’ll fight a war is not the question. Those vermin only feel alive during wars and revolutions. The thought of a war over three worlds will have them frenzied like spawning frogs. The real question is which side of the coin they join. Heads or Tails? They have not the wit to tell the difference between the two.”

“You obviously have no respect for the human race?”

“They love inventing gods and how lucky they were when I arrived to play the part. I quenched their thirst for miracles and tragedies. I brought drama to their drab lives; and yet I was deemed a criminal by my own kind. I was destroyed by the Commune and reconstituted into the feeble form you see now.”

In a room that was once a bedroom but was now nothing less than a science lab Yahinni hoped to find what she was looking for. She placed Ayina down on a worktop while she looked.

“And yet you live with a human,” the Fairy pointed out.

“Manutius is not like the others. He’s intelligent, for a man. He rarely interacts with other humans unless he has to.” Yahinni opened a jar and poured out a yellow blob into her hand.

“What is that?” Ayina asked.

“What *are they*,” Yahinni corrected her. “They are millions of micro-organisms, genetically engineered by the Merfolk a thousand years ago, to heal wounds. No doubt these things are no longer used on Aeval, but they are more effective than the prehistoric mockery that humans call medical knowledge. At least, that is, when they use their medical knowledge. For you wouldn’t believe, Ayina,” and Yahinni chuckled, “the pseudoscientific claptrap and daydreams that inundate this civilization. Even their so called advanced nations crawl with charlatan’s and mountebanks and faith healers. Instead of human knowledge increasing it is actually regressing. For example, millions of them believe that all manner of pains and ailments can be cured with a simple crystal or a magnet.”

“A magnet?!” Ayina giggled, then composed herself. “You can’t blame the human race for their follies any more than you can for their plagues. They live under a system where wealth matters more than sense. It’s your derisive attitude that got you exiled in the first place.”

“Well, as I was saying, Manutius, he wants more than the life he was born into. He looks for it in the dreams of others, as they have been bound by words into books.” Yahinni’s voice softened. “When they share their dreams they are, by a tiny fraction, like us.”

“Those scars on your arms. Unlike other Genie you know what pain is.”

“These wounds were my own doing, to help null the pain. But after I met Manutius I no longer had to. Which is why I have to save him.”

Yahinni instructed Ayina to lay face down with her wings outstretched. She plucked a section of the blob away; about the size of a strawberry. She squashed it flat, then laid it over the torn wing.

“Save him? From what?”

“From the disease that is eating him away. The disease I can not cure.”

“Then how do you intend to save him.”

“By taking him to Aeval with me.”

A heaviness came across Ayina’s limbs. “I can not move.”

“The organisms anaesthetize a body they work on: the accelerated re-knitting of nerves and tissue would otherwise be exquisitely painful. The paralysis is a safety function: to move around when your entire body is numb would be dangerous. Your face is unaffected.”

The yellow glob turned orange as the organisms went to work on Ayina’s wound.

“If you wish,” said Ayina, “when I return to Aeval I can forward your request to the Genie Commune and they might reassess your punishment. Accept you back.”

“They would refuse and ensure I never return.”

A few minutes passed and then the glob became yellow again.

“It’s worked,” said Yahinni, who peeled the glob aside and showed Ayina in a mirror. “Your wing is repaired.”

“When does the paralysis wear off.”

“That’s up to you,” Yahinni almost whispered. She bent over Ayina and looked her in the face. “I need you to get Manutius and I to Aeval. Once there we are bound to find a cure.”

“No! Let me go. I must find the Everlaster.”

There was no malice in Yahinni's voice, just desperation. "I'll let you go, Ayina, when you help us. If you don't I'll jack into the cerebral implant you use to communicate with your sprites. I'll shutdown your free will, tweak your ethics centres so that you'll want to help me."

"You must not. Aeval is in peril. I must be on my way!"

The door opened and Manutius Fluke entered. "What is this?" He looked in confusion at the panicking Fairy.

"She's going to help us," Yahinni explained. "She can get us to Aeval. And there you'll be cured. Their technology is so much better than humanity's."

"Please let me go," pleaded Ayina, "time is wasting. I can not help you."

Manutius noticed then that the Fairy was paralysed.

"What have you done?" he cried in dismay.

"I'm saving your life." Yahinni clutched her husband's arm.

"On Aeval we'll find out what's killing you."

Manutius put his head in his hands. "Oh, my poor wife."

"What is wrong?"

"I already know what's killing me."

"What?" she said, confused as to why he had not mentioned this before. "When did you find out? We can work to a cure."

Tears dripped from between the man's fingers. "It is you." He put his arms around her. "My darling wife, you are the cause of my disease." The words broke in his throat and his heart broke to say them as he held Yahinni tight.

For a moment Yahinni was silent, not fully understanding what she had just heard. Then the truth dawned on her. She withdrew from his embrace, shaking her head with desperation. "No! No!" she wailed. But it made sense. It fitted with the facts.

Falling to her knees, through tears she asked, "how long have you known."

"five... six years."

“And you stayed with me,” she said angrily, “while my presence killed you.”

“Because I love you too much to ever leave you. I will die by your side.”

Yahinni was silent for many moments before her shock and grief gave way to anger. Anger, not at one person, but at existence. “Is this some new curse inflicted by my sisters; that, should I ever be close to a human being I would unwittingly hurt them; that I should kill the one I love?!”

With both hands Percy picked up an oval mirror, a little bigger than a dinner plate. At the bottom of its simple wooden frame an inscription read: *The Windowe Into Paradise*. He looked into it and saw himself, the room behind him and the window.

Expecting some kind of magic or gimmick Percy turned the mirror over, looking for a switch or something.

The back of the mirror was not bare but was reflective too. Upon this side an inscription read: *The Windowe Into Hel*.

Percy looked into the mirror and this time saw himself and the room behind him and the window. Percy pulled a face.

Merry, meanwhile, was incredibly curious about an old, long and slim case that was resting against the wall behind some statues.

“Percy, can you hold my bag a minute?” He took it from her back. “Your back’s all sweaty,” he told her.

“I know,” she said shaking her damp top. She lifted her hair away as she aired her back.

“Tha’ must have a million freckles on your back.”

“So what?” said Merry, embarrassed over them.

“So, I like ‘em.”

There was silence for a moment. “I’d give thee ‘em, except they’re glued to me.” She looked at him, then smiled.

“I’ll carry your bag a bit if you want.”

“T’a.”

Merry squeezed between the statues and grabbed the long case.

It was made from yew wood and inlaid with ebony. A small golden plate was pressed into the wood with words written on it: *The Obsidian Staff*. She opened it, and inside, resting on a bed of crumpled red silk, was a black staff. Merry took the object in her hands. It felt like glass, or crystal, and it was slightly brown and translucent at its edges, reminding Merry of frozen cola. At its top was a large ornamental eye, and Merry was reminded of the eyes in Egyptian hieroglyphs and art.

The pair's perusals came to a halt when they heard raised voices upstairs. Merry gave Percy a quizzical look. "Let's check it out," he said.

They tiptoed their way up the stairs.

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"We're close now, slow down."

"Mind that dog!"

"I've got eyes, thank you."

On the road by Fluke's driveway a moss-green car pulled up.

"According to this, they're in that house."

"Who do you think lives there?"

"Perhaps this Everlaster guy. It's better to be careful. You two go in with me and you stay in the car."

"Now's our chance to test these dread guns out." The speaker referred to objects they all held, that looked roughly like guns but seemed organic; though they could have been made from some synthetic material designed to look that way. They were very pale grey and transparent in places, much like deep sea fish.

Three car doors opened and out stepped three men: one with a thin moustache, one with excess fat and one with a sinus problem.

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.”

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.”

*

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.

Chapter 15

War and Order

*How Yahinni disposed of the mercenaries,
while a skirmish erupted on the streets of
Lopside: a fight that history will remember
as the first between human, Fairy and
their sympathisers in the era of The Three
Worlds War*

The squad in the leading van had witnessed the other crash behind them. Their squad leader instructed the driver to keep going while he communicated the incident to those above him.

When they reached the other side of town the tracking signal led them down a dirt track and into a small wood. An assortment of dumped items flanked the track, including a fridge, a mattress and some bags of cement that had long since turned solid.

Seeing a parked car ahead, the driver slowed the van down. The car met the description of the one the SGR operatives were reported to drive. He told his squad leader and brought the van to a halt.

Some distance away, hiding in the trees and keeping an eye on the scene, was Yahinni.

A few minutes earlier, having driven the four men here, she had broken the handles on the inside of the car in such a way that once the doors were locked they could not be opened from within. She loosened the men's bindings enough so that with a few moments struggle they could free themselves, though she warned them not to attempt such a thing while she was still there. The final part of her operation was to shoot the three living men with a dread gun.

Having slammed the door on their frenzied writhings she ran into the trees, only a moment before the van arrived.

The employees of EmSec jumped from the van into a pile of rusty paint cans. The wood was humid and smelly. Shouting and screaming came from the car. A gun was fired several times; one of the shots bursting a window.

The squad readied their weapons and moved carefully towards the vehicle.

A man leaned from the broken window as if about to climb out, but he spied the armed men approaching and screamed in terror. His arm quaked as he pointed his gun at the figures and fired.

The squad members crouched for cover and shot back. "The Fairy may be in there," shouted the squad leader, "and we can't let it get hurt."

Now a second man was firing at them from the car. A squad member yelled and fell to the ground with a bullet in him. On seeing this the rest of the squad fired upon the car without mercy. Its tires and windows exploded and its body, and those of its human occupants, were perforated by the relentless volley.

From behind her tree, Yahinni witnessed it all with a smug grin. Some of the mischievous glee of olden times returned to her. Humans were so easy to manipulate. She did not hear the figure that appeared so stealthily behind her.

Two cold, hard arms embraced her, lifting her kicking from the ground. The arms were cold and hard because they were made of gold.

When the gunfight was over Yahinni was carried out of the trees, past the wrecked car with its four dead bodies, past the open-mouthed EmSec squad, and to its leader beside the van.

"This one was watching you from the trees," spoke the snatcher, in a very strange but female voice: a voice that seemed to emerge, not only from behind a golden mask, but also from the quivering of the grass and the creaking of the branches.

Only their leader recognised the figure, and he was surprised to see her. "Thank you," he said, and he found himself bowing with respect and fear. "Take this woman off her," he ordered two of his men. Warily, but firmly they took Yahinni, marvelling dumbfounded at her lilac skin.

Silently the golden figure strode back into the trees and disappeared from view. Being unable to recognise colours she had noticed nothing odd about the woman she had just handed over. If she knew her skin was lilac she might have had a few questions of her own to ask Yahinni.

For a moment Merry stood stiff with shock, staff clasped tight to her breast. Beneath her feet lay a small circle of clean road and

beyond it the tarmac sprinkled with glass and plastic. Then erupted a dizzying chorus of car alarms.

Merry's fingers and arms tingled with the aftershock and it was a few moments before she realised that the staff had saved her life.

The injured men and women of EmSec were crawling out of the van, getting their senses together. There were one or two broken bones and a lot of bruises. One of them took off his helmet, revealing a young man with a shaven head. He sat down shakily on the part of the garden wall that was still intact. This young man wore the number 1P218.

Meanwhile residents were emerging from their doors to discover the source of the noise.

"Go back inside," August Landfill told them all. "This is EmSec business."

The people obeyed. Emerald Securities were not an organisation to mess with. One by one the car alarms went silent. Front doors were closed and locked.

The new silence was quickly replaced with the wail of approaching police cars.

1P218 put his head in his hands and, while peering through his fingers at his surroundings, noticed a boy sitting on the floor just a few feet away. The boy was sweating from more than just the heat and he wore a dazed expression. The boy's hands were cupped close to his stomach, as if holding a baby chick.

But in fact, what he saw in the boy's hands was a tiny woman. 1P218 squinted because he thought it was a toy, but it looked so real, and he saw it move and swore it was looking right back at him. It was shaking the boy's thumb and saying something to him; this tiny black woman with blue hair and wings; wings like a fairy...

1P218's breath caught in his throat and he gesticulated to his squad-mates, trying to grab their attention.

Meanwhile, Ayina saw she had been spotted and was desperately trying to rouse Percy into activity. Her sprites were spinning around her frantically. Something about the people from

that van worried her and she was so anxious that she could not restrain her natural mode of speech:

“O Percy, on this path we can not stay,
For green garbed peril looms, scenting its prey.”

August Landfill came to 1P218 and saw what he was looking at. She returned quickly to the van while the remaining Emsec gathered and noticed the Fairy too.

“Again, logic burns in your eyes I see,
So on your feet! And with Merry now flee!”

Finally Percy responded; recognising reality and the situation they were in. Thanks to Ayina he saw the people of EmSec creeping towards them, panther-like.

Percy got to his feet, his legs wobbling as he backed slowly away.

“Stay where you are, lad, and give us the Fairy. We’ll look after her and find out what she wants.”

And suddenly they sprang forward, rushing at Percy before he could react. But not before Ayina, whose reactions were as swift as a dragonfly’s. She leapt from Percy’s hands and, with her healed wing still stiff and aching, flew at them like a drunken bee, treading the ground at one point.

When she reached 1P218 all Percy saw was a thin streak of rainbow and an instant later a thin mist of crimson filled the air on the man’s right side. He fell over, having lost the use of one leg, and lay clutching his right arm in pain.

Before the squad knew the Fairy was amongst them a second person lay useless on the ground.

The two remaining humans by the wall had just enough time to defend themselves from Ayina’s attack, which they did using the special weapons given to them that morning: long batons whose lengths fizzled with blue energy that would stun a Fairy if it flew too near.

Ayina had seen weapons like these before; used by the Jae-Mareeda when they fought the Fairies on Aeval. With these she

would be more cautious and so waited for them to make their move. Sunlight reflecting off her shiny wings, surrounding her like a halo.

August Landfill returned, holding in both arms a large, heavy gun with a wide barrel. It was like a large version of the dread guns; seemingly organic, its barrel mouth shaped like a fly's proboscis. Landfill aimed the weapon at the Fairy, almost dazzled by her radiant splendour, and fired.

What came from inside the gun moved too fast for human eyes to discern its shape, but to the Fairy it was like a ball of black tentacles. It was a shadow-urchin and it raced; a black whirlwind; to drown Ayina in its darkness.

Ayina dodged to one side, but she was not prepared for the long thin tendril that reached out of the thing as it passed. It wrapped round her waist and dragged her through the air, carrying her in a large loop back towards August Landfill.

Ayina resisted, beating her wings furiously. The two opposing forces sent the Fairy and the shadow-urchin spinning around each other. Cars and houses blurred around them as it sent more tendrils towards her. Ayina's halberd twirled and flashed; crystal sang and air whistled, as she cut each tendril clean away.

All that the onlookers could now see was a spinning mass of blue, purple, gold and black, riddled with rainbow flashes and shedding black strips in all directions.

Ayina might have reduced the shadow-urchin to nothing, had not August Landfill shot a second one at her. This one circled round the melee till it matched the orbit of Ayina. With the Fairy occupied it directed a mass of tendrils around her arm that held the halberd.

Unable to wield her weapon, Ayina was defenceless and could do nothing to stop the many tendrils that licked hungrily about her limbs. They furled her legs, wrapped her shoulders and bound her chest. She yelled and struggled to escape.

Her wings became obstructed. She faltered in mid-air and fell to the ground. The shadow-urchins fell with her, continuing to ravel themselves around her until Ayina was nothing but a ball of black.

August Landfill bounded over to where the Fairy had fallen.

In awe Merry had watched Ayina fight, but now, seeing her overcome and the smirking August Landfill running to get her, she filled with rage.

The world became silent, all sounds blocked by the pounding of blood past her ears. She felt her blood pump through her wrists and into the fist that clenched the staff.

Her arm jerked up straight like a robot's to point at August Landfill.

The staff winked at the woman and an invisible force punched her horizontally through the air. She flew backwards through a garden, coming to a stop inside a thick hedge.

Merry did not know if Ayina was alive or dead. She only knew that terrible bullies were trying to catch her or kill her. They thought they could just do what they liked, take her away without even asking. These brutes could not be more different from the beautiful and kind Fairy. And these people, she thought, these people caused misery in my town; did something to Dad and Aunty Rosemary.

"Put down whatever that is and come with us," called the voice of the police sergeant behind her. There were three police cars. How long had they been there?

"The creature belongs with responsible adults," continued the police voice. When Merry turned round to look at him he took a step back. The possessed look on her face, a look of great hatred and rage, was made the more terrible by belonging to such a young girl.

Merry's angry reply rang down the street, bouncing off the walls of the houses. "How do you know about Ayina, unless you work for THEM!?"

It was like a bomb going off, whose invisible blast travelled only in one direction, as the staff channelled all of Merry's emotions through it. If an eye could smile then that eye was surely smiling.

The policemen and their cars were flung back with the strength of a tornado.

Every object and living creature on that side of the road was thrown aside. Everything except one man, who had his back to Merry and seemed to be holding something protectively in his arms. He stood, legs bent, resisting the blast.

The eyes of every onlooker, which were now peeled wide with horror, came to rest on that man. His presence was unsettling, like that of an intruder wandering onto the set of a play.

The man turned around, placing the one he protected safely on the ground. And when Merry recognised Esme's face she became awash with gladness, but also shame as the apprehension on her best friend's face told Merry she'd nearly hurt her.

But when Merry smiled all fear and confusion was dispelled from Esme's mind and she ran to her.

"I've found the Everlaster," said Esme as she threw her arms around her friend.

"Really?" gasped Merry in disbelief, and then she felt the staff being pulled from her hand.

"I'll take this before someone gets hurt," said the Everlaster.

"No," Merry protested.

"The true damage this causes is hidden from the eye."

"Where's Ayina?" asked Esme.

Percy joined them, carrying a hard black sphere. "She's inside this."

"Who are you?" Merry asked the Everlaster.

"My name's Utnapishtim."

"Is she dead?" asked Esme, solemnly.

"No," replied the Everlaster, taking the sphere from Percy's hands and examining it, and for the first time Esme saw the look of boredom lift from his face, replaced by mild curiosity. "Who did this to the Fairy?"

"A woman with a weird weapon," Percy was saying till Merry interrupted with an angry exclamation. "Her!" She pointed past Percy to where August Landfill was now re-emerging onto the street.

The Everlaster saw the weapon she held, saw her EmSec uniform. He reflected on what Esme had told him about the encounter with Woe in the woods; the Fairy's mission; and what had happened to the adults of Tiverton Preedy. All this he considered in the space of one second, at the end of which he was sure he knew precisely what was going on. During the following second he formulated a plan and in the third second he described it to the children.

"Okay," he said. "Run!"

August Landfill ran across the road to the pavement down which the Everlaster and the children were running, too fast for her to catch up. She aimed her gun at them and fired.

A shadow-urchin hurtled towards them as Merry and the Everlaster disappeared round a corner. The shadow-urchin hit Esme in the leg, latching onto her calf. She fell as the thing pulled her leg back. Hearing her cry, Percy stopped and turned.

There was Esme sat on the floor, looking fearfully at the thing around her leg, too scared to touch it. He saw August Landfill down the path, coming towards them, and knew that if he ran he would get away. But he would not leave Esme alone a second time.

He fell to his knees and began to yank the black creature off of his friend. It felt rough and wet as he began to squeeze it between his hands. It gave up its grip on Esme's to place all its efforts into wrestling with Percy's hands. It yanked his arms left and right as he tried to crush the life out of it. Like squashed play-doe it leaked out between his fingers, and then began to reform itself on the outside of his hands.

At the moment it pulled clear of Percy's grip there was a cracking sound. The shadow-urchin dropped to the pavement, stunned by a sizzling blue stick in the hands of an EmSec guard. And then both Percy and Esme found themselves being dragged to their

feet by strong hands. They were taken by the guards into the custody of the police.

At least, thought Percy, Merry and the Everlaster have got away.

Back in Tiverton Preedy, a few moments earlier Trent was sitting in the old man's bungalow. After receiving Earth's instructions they had all thought long and hard about what exactly they should do.

It occurred to Trent that Earth would have been better off taking over Merry, as she'd probably figure stuff out better.

Someone suggested going to the library and using books and the internet to find out information about the environment. If they were going to stop environmental destruction they were going to have to know something about it.

While the others were conducting this research Trent came to wondering how Percy, Merry and Esme were getting on finding the Everlaster. And so he asked Earth.

"I want to see me friends."

"Then picture them in your mind and if they are in view I might recognise them."

"The Fairy's with 'em."

"Then I know where they are. I can sense all those from Aeval..." As she said these words Trent caught glimpses of far away places: a land of mountains where the air was thin; a city at night time. "...just as I can sense those from the third place."

"The third place?"

"There are four thinking beings and numerous dumb organisms that originate from my brain dead brother, Omaura."

"Brain dead brother?"

"I use such words to help you understand otherwise unknowable things. My brother has stopped thinking and approaches death. Assuming he is not dead already. It has been long since he spoke. But some of his are near the Fairy now."

Now a scene unfolded before Trent.
He looked down on a street from the viewpoint of a roof top.
Immediately he saw Percy and Esme being set upon by EmSec
men. Instinctively Trent tried to move but found himself frozen.
“You can only see,” said Earth.
The view changed as Earth showed from a different angle. He
saw Merry running with a man.
“The Fairy is there,” Earth informed him.
“What about the creatures you said?”
“There is one thinking-being nearby who comes from my
brother. But you will not see her. She is where the shadows are.”

Chapter 16

Ruin

*How Merry and the Everlaster took refuge
in the shadows, and why they came to
regret it.*

Now long clear of the police and EmSec, Merry and the Everlaster slowed to a trot to avoid attracting attention. “We must find somewhere to hide as quickly as possible,” said the Everlaster. “Anywhere out in the open is dangerous.”

And so, when they came to an overgrown graveyard they entered it, to escape the gaze of the streets. It was tough treading through the tall grass and brambles that half drowned the worn and crooked gravestones. They found the disused church these grounds belonged to, guarded by ancient yew trees; its front facing a road on the other side.

Where they were, at the rear, there stood a doorway blocked up with thick planks.

The sound of a helicopter met their ears again but they could not yet see it. “These days even the sky has eyes” said the Everlaster. “This church should give sanctuary from its impolite stare.” With one kick he smashed a plank in half then pulled its two halves from the doorway. Two more kicks and two more planks were removed, making a wide enough gap for Merry and himself to get through.

In they rushed as the sound of the helicopter grew nearer. Into cold darkness.

All Merry sensed was the smell of mouldy stonewalls and rotting wood. They walked a few steps through the blackness until they emerged around a pillar and their eyes met with light. Merry’s eyes adjusted and pews and pillars came into being.

The light came through five stained glass windows. There were many other windows, but they afforded no light having been boarded up.

The lightest part of the church was near the front wall, which contained the highest and largest of the stained glass windows. The sunlight, fractured by the glass into many colours, spilled over an altar thick with dust. On the altar stood a large crucifix, covered in thick cobwebs like ships’ rigging.

Merry kept close to the Everlaster as he walked down the middle of the church to stand in this light, where he could examine Ayina's prison. When they were halfway across, a faint whizzing sound came from the air above. They looked up to see a three-fingered metal claw rushing down at them. It clamped onto the black sphere. The claw was on the end of a black wire that led high up into the shadows of the church ceiling.

Utnapishtim tried to pull the claw off but its clutch was strong. Quickly the rope retracted, and claw and sphere sped up into the shadows. Refusing to relinquish his grip on Ayina, the Everlaster went flying too into the darkness above.

It seemed to Merry as if the darkness had swallowed him, her eyes could make nothing out. She was distracted then by a clattering on the ground a few metres away. It was the obsidian staff, and it ricocheted into the darkness.

Strong hands clutched the Everlaster and the shadows spoke to him with a female voice. "*Why can't I feel your fear?*" The sound came from all directions and the ceiling vibrated like skin at the back of a titanic throat.

The Everlaster was swung upward, so hard that great chunks of ceiling fell downwards to rain around Merry. Merry ran for cover to the side of the church.

As Utnapishtim was pressed against the ceiling he replied to his attacker's question. "Perhaps because I've nothing to be afraid of."

He was swung a second time in the other direction and smashed into the ceiling even harder, freeing more chunks of masonry. "*Do you think you are impervious to pain?*" He felt hands trying desperately to crush his arms. "*It may take longer than usual, but that will make the challenge of breaking you even sweeter.*"

"That's one challenge that will occupy thee for eternity, for I am invincible".

"O, I do not mean to break you physically," said the voice. "*It will be your mind I shatter*".

“Before you grant me such a privilege you should at least introduce yourself.”

And the hands and claw released their grip.

He plummeted to the ground; landing on his face and stomach amidst the rubble from the ceiling, still clutching the black sphere above his head.

A metre in front of him the stone floor cracked under the feet of his attacker. The Everlaster craned his neck to view her.

“I am Woe.”

She stood bathed in the coloured light that exploded from the stained-glass window. She glowed within it, for she was dressed head-to-toe in golden plate armour. Armour that was like no other in existence. It had been made many millennia ago by an engineer on her home planet. No one living there today could have made it, as the Jae-Mareeda had long since abolished imagination. O, this armour was a work of art. The surface of Woe’s body seemed to writhe with hundreds of crying, wailing, naked people. Her back was a mass of tiny bodies, heaped upon one another like a vision from the Holocaust. A man and a woman, holding their heads in their hands and pointing their weeping eyes skyward, protected the length of her right shin. Her left shoulder-guard was fashioned like the face of a screaming baby. The smallest figures were detailed into Woe’s boots: a host of toiling workers.

Behind her left shoulder, looking like the bone of a giant wing, hung the head of a huge battle-scythe, its handle strapped to her back. The great blade was blood red, with exquisite writing engraved upon it, curling like waves over its surface.

A weapon with the appearance of a very small and ornate rocket launcher was mounted on her right shoulder.

Woe’s face could not be seen, for she wore a helmet, gold like her armour. The helmet was an horrific crown of children’s arms reaching at the sky in lamentation. Which ever side you viewed her head from, a face looked back; six different faces, representing the six

aspects of sorrow: Grief, Anguish, Heartache, Melancholy, Loneliness and Despair.

Merry peered at Woe from behind a pillar. As she looked at the reason for her father's and all of Tiverton Preedy's misery, she felt a swell of hate and anger. But the great shining apparition standing over the Everlaster was a terrifying sight to behold, and she dared not move or breathe in case she attracted its attention.

"You say you are invincible, yet you wriggle in the dirt like an insect. You are pathetic. You are only human after all."

"Why get up," said the Everlaster, "when I can beat you lying down."

Woe laughed, a genuine laugh, not her usual mock. *"I might just take you as my pet. I need a new one since the other stopped talking."*

"Obviously, thou art the talking type. Are you going to take this Fairy from me, or do you mean to torture me with your prattle?"

In one quick motion Woe released the scythe from behind her back and swung it at the Everlaster. Any other person would have been cleaved in two by the huge and heavy blade, but it could not pierce his flesh and instead he was flung over a row of pews to land smashing into a bench by the wall.

"Touchy," came the Everlaster's voice, as he stood up amongst the broken wood with Ayina's prison peaking out from between his forearms like a big black eyeball. He looked over to where Woe was standing but she was no longer there.

She emerged unseen from the shadows behind him, wrapped her arms around his chest. Woe attempted to wrench his hands apart, to force him to drop the sphere. With all his might the Everlaster ducked forward, flipping the woman over his shoulder. She slammed into the ground. Flagstones split and blue energy crackled across her armour.

Before Woe could get up the Everlaster pinned her to the ground. He restrained her body with his own and grabbed her wrists, after having placed the sphere on the dusty ground, a foot above her head, as if to taunt her.

“Show me your face, let me see what you are.”

“*I’m many things,*” replied Woe. “*I’ve lead armies against Fairykind...*”

“So have I,” interrupted the Everlaster.

“*I’ve killed thousands and terrorised many more...*”

“Me too.”

“*Then why do you protect this Fairy?*” asked Woe, perplexed.

“I like a change,” was his only reply. “Now answer me this thou shimmering slayer, thou glimmering thug thou. You wish to destroy the Fairies and their allies, correct?”

“*O, we will.*”

“Is that what you plan for humankind?”

Woe felt compelled to answer the Everlaster’s questions, though she did not know why. She felt he *deserved* to be answered.

“*The Fairies and all the races of that world are savages. They can not be taught what is right or good for them. They are chaotic and disgusting and must be destroyed. If we don’t kill them first they will surely, given the first chance, destroy us. But mankind is different. It is obvious you have potential. Though you are at the moment savage, we can civilise you*”.

Suddenly her shoulder weapon fired. A small missile flew out, brushing the Everlaster’s ear. It pulled a thin rope behind it, which was being fed out of the weapon on Woe’s shoulder. The missile flew past a pillar, changed course around it, then flew back at Woe and the Everlaster. It opened up into the metal claw that had held the black sphere earlier. It clamped around the back of the Everlaster skull and immediately the rope pulled his head back. He grabbed the sphere the instant before the rope hauled him away.

He was pulled off his feet to the pillar the rope wound round. Holding the sphere beneath one arm he gripped the thick pillar with his other, resisting the pull of the rope. The claw wrenched his head at a cruel angle. Electric blue light flashed and bounced off the surfaces of the church: Woe’s arms were crackling with energy as she tugged at the rope.

Chunks of pillar broke off under the Everlaster's fingernails. He lost grip and found himself yanked off his feet.

Like a hammer thrower Woe swung the Everlaster over the pews. He gained momentum as he swept in a great circle like a falconer's lure.

Behind her pillar, Merry was entranced by the horrifying sight of the Everlaster flying in a circle. Then she was fleeing as the Everlaster's body came flying towards her pillar. She instinctively dove at an explosive sound and she felt bits of rubble showering her body. Looking up she saw the obsidian staff lying on the floor a few metres ahead of her.

The pillar the Everlaster hit had smashed apart as though made from cake and not stone. The shock of that impact finally loosened the Everlaster's grip on Ayina and as the pillar fell to the ground so too did the sphere, to go rolling like a bowling ball across the church floor.

Immediately Woe released the Everlaster's head from the claws and retracted the rope back into her weapon. As soon as she did this he stood up amongst the rubble of the pillar and ran towards where the sphere had rolled. Instead of chasing for it herself, Woe stayed where she was. She heaved off the ground one of the pews. The thing was three metres long yet she lifted it with ease. She tossed it like a caber into the air; the arms of her armour crackling blue. The instant before the pew left the tips of her fingers the part of the wood she was touching turned grey. The grey spread throughout the pew as it flew through the air in a great arc.

With only a few more steps to go before he reached Ayina's sphere, one and a half tonnes of solid stone crashed down upon the Everlaster's back. He fell down amongst pews that shattered under the impact of the stone, and was pinned facedown amongst the broken wood.

Woe strode confidently to where Ayina lay, the Everlaster helpless to stop her.

Merry emerged from hiding to stand in the centre of the aisle. And Woe, general and ambassador of the Jae-Mareeda, turned to face her: a grim silhouette before the church altar.

Woe recognised Merry's smell.

"So you have sought me out again," spoke the shadows. *"Have you acquired a taste for Woe? My face is covered now, unhappy cannibal. Shall I expose a foot so you might nibble my toe?"*

"You *hope* that's all I do," said Merry.

Woe tilted her head. *"Hope? What is that word?"*

It seemed to Merry that Woe was genuinely perplexed. "A 'hope' is what you dun't have," said Merry, and she unleashed the power of the staff.

Woe shot up through the air, screeching as she went. Backwards she flew, through the stained glass window, for her screech to be joined by the sound of shattering glass.

For one brief moment there was silence. Woe plummeted towards the road outside like a falling star trailing rainbow droplets of stained glass. But before she impacted with the ground a speeding truck slammed into her. It punched her sideways. The truck's front crunched and its windscreen cracked and its driver nearly had a heart attack. He slammed the brakes on. A cacophony of screeching erupted as the traffic behind broke sharply too. Vehicles swerved and struck one another.

Woe's body somersaulted to the other side of the road and beneath the wheels of an oncoming bus. As the bus braked it dragged Woe along with massive sparks and a piercing squeal of metal on asphalt. The force of the vehicle buckled and cracked the golden bracer covering Woe's left arm, ripping it off.

When the bus stopped Woe's body rolled forward, clattering as it went, and came to rest in the middle of the road.

All was still for a moment, with the smell of burnt rubber on the air. Then drivers emerged from their vehicles and passengers stepped from the bus, for a look at the golden thing lying in the road.

But so strange a sight was Woe, with blue sparks crackling randomly around her, that no one dared approach.

Inside the church the Everlaster's voice squeezed out from where he lay trapped. "I told you not to use that staff."

"Why not? It got rid of her."

"I'll explain later. Now help me out from under here. Use the staff as a lever."

"You've told me not to use it."

"This is different. You're going to use your own force and not the staff's."

Merry poked the bottom of the staff beneath the pew. With all her might, and some help from the Everlaster's free arm, she raised the stone an inch, enough for him to slide out from underneath.

Outside, questions buzzed like flies from person to person. "What is it?" "It's a gold statue." The lorry driver cautiously approached, but halted as Woe stirred. She rose slowly to her feet.

Woe stood taller than any man present, and as she looked about her the people could sense the malevolence and fury concealed behind the grotesque helmet. They all stepped back in fear when Woe raised her great scythe and hissed: a sound that set all their nerves tingling.

The golden woman strode back down the road, picking up her lost bracer as she went. Facing the church, she squatted. Her legs flickered with blue energy that intensified until, suddenly, she jumped through the air with the speed of a grasshopper and flew towards the broken window. She cleared the curved sill like a high jumper clearing the beam.

As she entered the body of the church she twisted in the air and, seeing Merry and the Everlaster searching the ground beneath, she flung her scythe. Unseen by either of them, the weapon somersaulted through the air at an intense speed.

The point of the massive blade ripped through Merry's back and burst from her chest.

She felt no pain. She felt nothing at all, but saw the floor suddenly in her face. Then the darkness.

Merry felt a tiredness stronger than any she had felt before. A sleep she knew she would never awaken from. This new blackness. Like her mind was sinking down the deepest, darkest ocean. And she knew she was dying. “O...” she heard herself say from far away, “...well.”

The Everlaster was surprised by the pity he felt for the girl as she collapsed beneath the scythe. “I warned you not to use the staff,” he sighed.

Woe landed on the altar and then ran towards the Everlaster. The Everlaster knew he would lose this battle so, with one arm, he pulled the scythe out of Merry’s dying body before Woe reached them.

Immediately, black threads poured out from invisible holes on the scythe’s handle and smothered his arm.

He knew he had time for one blow before he was engulfed entirely. Only a blow to her head or neck had the potential to kill her, but there was a chance her armour would deflect the blade. Only one action could have certain results. In a tenth of a second his plan was formed.

As the threads touched his T-shirt it began to turn to stone. He pretended to be surprised and struggling, thinking only of this. Seeing him this way, Woe strode confidently towards him, an amused smirk hidden behind the sombre face of Loneliness. The Everlaster made a sudden sweep at her bare forearm, cutting a long and deep gash and severing her artery.

Woe was stunned with shock and pain. In that precious moment the Everlaster used his free hand to pull Woe’s bloodied arm to his face. He began to drink the pouring blood. Woe tried to wrestle the Everlaster away. He remained, face clamped to her arm, as she lifted him off the ground and shook him.

But the scythes’ tendrils continued to crawl across his body and, when they finally smothered his neck and head, Woe escaped his grip.

When every surface of the Everlaster's body was covered the black threads melted together into a single membrane, which then turned grey and hardened into rock. He looked now like some badly carved statue.

Woe pulled the scythe from the Everlaster's stony grip and placed it in its hold on her back. Her purple blood streaked down the golden armour of her leg and collected in a big puddle beneath her feet. She was losing so much she needed to return to the shadows as quickly as possible.

Her eyes immediately located Ayina's globe in the dark and she launched her claw at it. The claw pulled the globe to Woe's shoulder and held it there, leaving Woe's good arm free to pick up the staff Merry had used against her.

Into the shadows Woe strode away.

So Ends Part II

Part III

Weapons Of Mass Creation

Chapter 17
The Gift Of The Bright Blood

*In which the Everlaster has a lot of
thinking to do.*

The dark and dilapidated church was soundless. The girl lay still, her hair like a puddle of liquid copper on the ground around her head. Around her body was a puddle of crimson. Fractured sunbeams fell on her and the statue that stood by her side.

The cheeks of this statue bulged, like a cupid's might on a fountain. But no water squirted forth. The fingers of one hand were bent like claws, as though they should have held something. The other hand was open, as if it had just let something go. Across the palm of this hand fine cracks suddenly appeared, as if being drawn by an invisible pencil. Along the inside of the fingers they spread. Then palm and fingers burst into dust and flakes, and a living fist met the air; a fist purple with blood.

Fissures travelled the arm of the statue, forked out across the body, until, in one instant, the air became filled with stone shards as the statue exploded.

The Everlaster stood in a cloud of dust, dust that settled on the floor and on Merry's unseeing eyes.

He moved straight to her, his cheeks still bloated with the blood of Woe. Merry's heart and breath had stopped, and not hesitating in his movements, he pulled her top up to fully reveal the terrible wound in her chest. He pulled her body out of the pool of blood and placed it down again in the purple puddle Woe had left.

As Merry's naked back lay in the wetness, the Everlaster lowered his face over her wound and slowly let the blood in his mouth fall into it.

As he dribbled Woe's blood to cover all parts of the wound, her flesh began to move. Split bone reconnected, the divided tissue of organs and muscle wove back together and broken nerves and veins realigned.

He poured more blood from the floor to her wound with his hands. Eventually Merry's chest could not be seen for the purple that lay over it. With a hand the Everlaster wiped it away and revealed her flawless white skin.

But her body still lacked breath or beat, and her warmth still fled into the stones beneath.

The Everlaster held her head and kissed her mouth and poured into it the small amount of Woe's blood that he had let remain. And before he even removed his lips he felt the warmth flow through her.

Just as the final ray of light was seeping from her universe, Merry saw an explosion of blue. It felt to her like an electric shock. She was pulled from the bottom of that darkness, pulled at the speed of light, toward sound and touch again.

Her spine arched as her empty lungs filled with air, her eyes and mouth wide open and gasping.

The Everlaster helped her sit up and gather her wits till he saw she was okay. Then he hugged her. It seemed the best thing to do.

When she had regained her senses, Merry realised the Everlaster was naked. "Where are your clothes?" Her words were slow and quiet.

"They got turned to stone. My invincibility does not extend to my apparel."

Merry felt about her body nervously when she saw she was covered in blood.

"Don't worry," the Everlaster assured her, "that's not your blood."

"Oh," she said, relieved.

"That is," and the Everlaster pointed at the big dark puddle a little way down the aisle.

Merry gasped. "I felt like I was dying."

“You were stabbed through the chest but I helped you with Woe’s blood.”

“Woe’s blood heals people?!”

“Only the blood from her left side. The blood from her right side destroys. You were very lucky.”

“Lucky?! How’s getting stabbed in the chest lucky?”

The Everlaster wanted to smile, but instead put on a stern expression. “I told you not to use the staff. It’s cursed. Bad things happen to those who use it, and the more you use it the badder the thing.”

“Where’s Ayina?” Merry suddenly wondered, looking around her.

“Woe’s taken her.”

“O no,” Merry covered her face, in sadness.

“I know,” he said, “but come. Woe might tell someone we’re here. We should get away. There are woods by the graveyard we should be safe in for a while.”

The Everlaster helped Merry slowly to her feet. She teetered with dizziness then recovered. “How did you know Woe’s blood would heal me?”

“I met some of her ancestors many, many years ago.” He stilled Merry’s enquiries with a gesture of his hand. “It is a very long story, and would take three days to tell. And festivities should accompany the telling. We don’t have time for all that.”

The Everlaster walked her out of the church with an arm around her shoulder.

It felt good to be amongst trees again and to hear only the birds. All the scenes she had witnessed still raced through Merry’s mind but the peacefulness of nature brought some calm to her tumultuous thoughts.

“I’ll make sure you get home okay,” said the Everlaster, pacing through the trees, “then I’m sure you’ll be reunited with your friends. The police will most likely be taking them home.”

“Home!? We’ve got to save Ayina.”

He laughed weakly. “How?”

“What?”

“How?”

“You’re the Everlaster, you should know. Tha’ meant to be super smart.”

“Am I?” he puffed air through his lips in wonder. “Wow.”

“Stop a minute, will yer?” Merry grabbed the man’s arm and he stopped walking and turned to look at her. Merry looked away in embarrassment at his nakedness. “I know you’re probably really busy,” pleaded Merry, “doing important stuff. What ever it is tha does” He played with a dock leaf as Merry talked, stripping off bits and rolling them up. “But you’ve got to try and help Ayina, cos her world’s in danger.”

The Everlaster looked at her with wet eyes, his long hair obscuring half his face. “There’s nothing I can do,” he said through pouting lips.

“But Ayina only came here to find you? She must’ve had a good reason to. She said you’d help ‘em in their war.”

“They’re silly to think I could still have an impact in this day and age.”

“Tha’re one whose silly,” said Merry, with anger and desperation bubbling up.

“Thou art far too young to understand the subtleties of the universe.”

“O, yeah, I bet I’m smarter than thee.” And she punched him in the stomach.

“Fie!” The Everlaster grabbed her wrist. “Look at you. Always resorting to force. Sometimes the best action is to take no action. I told you not to use that staff and look what you did.”

“I had to stop Woe, didn’t I.” All of a sudden, Merry was feeling hurt and unsure of herself.

“No! Not if it meant doing something when you had no idea of its effects. I said the staff did bad things you couldn’t see, but you ignored me. You could have killed anyone with that thing, and what did it achieve in the end? Woe has Ayina, and that evil staff, and you got killed. If you’d done nothing, Woe would have Ayina but she would not have killed you or have taken possession of the staff.”

Merry was sobbing. “But you’ve got to do somert. I meant to help.”

A torrent of tears and emotion fled out of her and the Everlaster held the girl to him. “I know,” he said, softly and soothing, “you’re a good person.” As he held her tight, he squeezed his own eyes shut to stop the tears, and said too quietly for her to hear, “please don’t make me care again... please.”

When Merry finally composed herself she looked up at him, her eyes blue and sparkling like the Mediterranean sea; her eyelashes red-golden rays like the dawn. “You’ve got to try, right? My Aunty Rosemary says if you can help someone in need it’s a crime not to. She says she hates rich people who spend money on mansions and posh cars when they could be saving starving and ill people. She says if it takes a million pounds to let a child live happily for just one day, then you should give that million. If you save one life then its worth it.”

“Its worth a lifetime of struggle,” the Everlaster nodded. “You’re Aunty sounds like a very wise woman. From her words reach steps to heaven, but most people here don’t believe in heaven.”

“Heaven? You mean where people go when they die.”

“No. When people die they die. Heaven is where people go when they live. Unfortunately we Earthling’s haven’t arrived there yet and at this rate never will. Each century sees more evil not less.”

“I don’t know what your job is as Everlaster but if I was immortal I’d keep trying forever and ever to make things better.”

“You have such enthusiasm, because you are so young. But for millennia I have witnessed masters beating slaves, fathers killing sons, rich men robbing beggars, and I have wondered how can it ever be stopped. And today things are worse than ever. But I can’t even help the Fairy, never mind humanity, when I don’t know where she has been taken.”

At those last words four shining dots emerged from Merry’s hair. They took to the air and hovered in front of Utnapishtim and Merry, performing a number of twirls and loops before aligning themselves into a square and projecting an image of writing between each other.

The writing said: WE KNOW AYINA’S EXACT POSITION. SHE IS NORTH 47.34 MILES TRAVELLING APPROXIMATELY 107 MPH

“What are they,” asked Utnapishtim.

“They’re Ayina’s sprites,” said Merry, suddenly brightening. “She said they connect with her brain so that she senses what they do, and they store information.”

“They never had them the last time I saw the Fairies.” The Everlaster noted. As he watched the four particles dancing before him he realised things were different now. And even if they weren’t he knew he had to do something, even if all it did was make this girl happy for a day. “I thought I could do nothing so nothing is what I did. I turned my face from the ugliness of the world when I should have worked to make it beautiful, no matter how small my effort may have been, no matter how small the influence I may have had. I will help you rescue the Fairy, and we shall succeed, whatever it takes.”

Having resolved to rescue Ayina, Merry and Utnapishtim’s first obstacle was his nakedness. They had to find him some clothes before he got arrested for indecent exposure.

They walked for a while until they came to a row of houses whose back-gardens looked onto the woods. One of the gardens had

clothes drying on the line. They crept up close behind the cover of the trees.

“They’re ladies’ garments,” said Utnapishtim.

“That dun’t matter. People’ll just think you’re a drojje. It’s better than being naked. Yer can’t get arrested for it.”

“No. I’ll just get arrested for stealing.”

“Yer not stealing if yer send ‘em back when yer done.”

So Utnapishtim vaulted silently over the fence. He stopped before the washing line and, to Merry’s alarm, stood for ages looking at the clothes. What are you waiting for, thought Merry. Utnapishtim was moving to take a black skirt when he spotted a red summer dress further down the line.

What a lovely shade, thought the Everlaster as Merry chewed her nails, like the sunsets after Vesuvius exploded. He snatched the dress from the line and was back beside Merry in a second.

They ran a few yards into the woods before Utnapishtim put the dress on. It stopped just above the knee. Merry was pleased at the fit, “it’s a good job yer a bit small for a man.”

“Now we should get away from this town,” said the Everlaster. “I know a place where we can go while we send two of these sprites to find out where the Fairy’s been taken. You can do that, can’t you?” he asked the four lights bobbing beside Merry. Between them they projected the word YES.

“The other two will stay with us so we can see what the sprites find. You’ll keep one and I the other, just in case we’re separated. That way we can find each other again.”

With their instructions received two of the sprites vanished into the sky. How long it would take them to find the Fairy, Utnapishtim did not know

Chandler Dahl was walking down the corridors of SGR’s British headquarters deep in thought. He felt very smug. Not only had he just received confirmation that the Fairy was in SGR hands,

but this morning all the workers of Tiverton Preedy had returned back to work and the finishing touches were being made to the missiles there.

I can't believe how effective Woe has been on those workers, Chandler thought to himself, and the manager up there even says they concentrate on their work harder than ever before I wonder how many employees Woe can effect like this in say six months our turnover will be spectacular it's a shame Woe didn't have the same effect on those kids they still tried to protect the Fairy but children are irrelevant they'll grow up just like their parents with power like this soon there'll be no strikes or back-chat from any of them and they'll give us the respect we deserve the thanks we deserve for the jobs and money we give them without us they couldn't exist.

Chandler Dahl had arrived at the door to the Seer's chamber, deep in the heart of their London complex. He was hardly aware of the security guards letting him inside. He stepped in, mind still racing:

Evolution the strongest survive that is the rule of Capitalism of this world we have the Seers and Woe and we are the strongest which means we are the best people to lead mankind into a great new era we will deliver man from evil there are those who want to stop us Anarchists and Socialists and other misled fools but they know not what they do when we have finished the workers of this country and the world will unite take to the streets not to strike or to demonstrate against us but in celebration to thank us thank *me* for bringing them prosperity I do all the work around here...

Chandler Dahl was handed a steaming cup of coffee when he entered the chamber. He did not acknowledge the underling who had brought him it.

The chamber looked quite different to the previous two occasions, because today was a weekday, a trading day.

Apart from the Seers there were eight people present, only three of whom were scientists. A lot of equipment and computers had been moved in around the elementary sextant. Projected in mid-air were three large, semi-transparent holographic displays. On the

displays were lists of numbers and words that kept steadily changing. They showed the stock exchange and the currency markets.

All six Seers were combining their powers to see into the future. They could only see a few hours ahead, and even then it was slightly vague, but that was enough for the markets. The Seers could tell if a company's share price was about to rise or fall, and the other men in the chamber were in constant contact with SGR stockbrokers at the stock exchange to tell them what to buy and sell.

Chandler gazed at the numbers as a lover would gaze upon the object of his affection. He saw in the churning randomness a pattern, and that pattern was wealth. The increasing wealth of SGR and his own little chunk of it. SGR had more wealth than the worlds poorest 3 billion people combined. They were as rich as the poorest 94 countries all put together. Some of those countries, in fact, were virtually owned by SGR. They owned and controlled banks, transport systems, schools. They owned the houses, factories and offices of entire states. The people of those countries would vote for politicians believing themselves to be influencing the destiny of their own country. But all the decisions that mattered, that affected the lives of billions, were taken in the boardrooms of SGR and, thought Chandler his eyes narrowing, those of SGR's rival firms.

The vast majority of planet Earth and all that stood upon it was now owned; owned and therefore controlled; by five ultra-companies, of which SkweezumGrabaal&Runne was the largest.

"You wanted to see me?" Chandler Dahl asked Emmett Liptrot.

"We're having a problem, Mr Dahl," he said. "The Seers are having great trouble seeing. They've been unable to advise our stockbrokers."

"Are they ill? Is there a malfunction?"

"No, they're operating perfectly. We've been talking to the Seers, studying the data, and we've come up with a theory."

"What?"

“We believe it may be to do with the Fairy. You see, the Seers work by observing the movement of every particle of matter and energy in the world and surrounding space. That’s a phenomenal amount of information, which is why they can only see very short term. They can concentrate on a small aspect of reality, such as the stock market, and see where everything’s heading at that moment. Our computers, and the elementary sextant, take that information and calculate where everything will be in a few moments time.

“So now, the problem. The Fairy arrived two days ago from the alternative dimensions. She is trillions of bits of information that have suddenly been thrust into our own dimensions. It’s sent ripples through our world that are sending our predictions awry. The Fairy is an alien; unpredictable uncertainty. Until the ripples she has caused die down I don’t think the Seers can do any predicting.”

Chapter 18

Glad The Impaler

In which The Everlaster meets an old friend.

The red ant ran across dry soil zigzagging between trunks of grass that rose from the ground like the pillars of a roman palace. In his mandibles he held a biscuit crumb half his body size. Close behind him ran two other red ants. One had a piece of chocolate and the other a crumb of ginger bread.

They ran quickly for they were on the territory of an enemy ant tribe. The enemy were a different colour: they were scarlet.

The leading ant did not look back when he heard one of his comrades cry out. They had been ambushed. The ant with the chocolate was thrown to the ground by two enemy scarlet ants. More scarlet ants poured into view, so the remaining two red ants altered course. The pair were pursued by thirty or more of the enemy. While the food they carried slowed them down perilously they did not let go of it.

The ant with the ginger bread was too slow and was pounced upon by a dozen of the scarlet pursuers. The remaining red ant did not turn round to watch the enemy take the food from his comrade, and then take his legs from him too. The scarlet ants tore the fallen body apart and devoured him.

Constantly smelling the air with his antennae, the ant with the biscuit crumb kept running. He could sense the enemy right behind him, but he was close now. They had passed between two vast planks of wood that rose diagonally to the sky like broken highways. Finally the red ant came to a halt and dropped the crumb.

He turned to face the enemy and took a few steps backwards. His pursuers stopped and gathered in a crowd. As the red ant walked slowly backwards expecting the enemy to pounce and devour him, one of the scarlet foe walked slowly forward and picked up the crumb. As soon as he did the grass surrounding them burst with activity.

The scarlet ants had been led into a trap. Hundreds of the red ant's comrades descended on the enemy with the same brutality acted against their fallen.

Despite the ferocity of the ambush a handful of the scarlet ants escaped to send chemical signals to their brothers. In a short

time hundreds of scarlet ants arrived and soon the great battle was sprawling for metres across the... well, this is the curious thing. For it is not the ants' war that interests us, but the place which they had chosen as their battlefield.

The ants fought amongst the usual obstacles of a garden: grass, stones, earth, flowers, the odd crisp packet or dog poo. As always they took no notice of the objects they happened to be running over; everything was the same to them... Big! But this garden was different, for the ants also fought around and crawled up and down giant columns of wood. To a human these pieces of wood were nothing more than wooden stakes ranging from the size of a pencil to the size of a ruler. Upon each stake was pierced the head, and sometimes the torso or limb, of a doll.

For this was a front garden like any other on a street of semi-detached houses. Normal, except for the disturbing sight of over a hundred severed doll's heads staked to the lawn.

Dolls of all kinds were present, their hair often torn out in places, their clothes turned to rags and their features sometimes missing or worn away; burn marks here and there. They were battered and dirty with years of exposure to the weather. Those that still had eyes stared vacantly. Some bore the smiles that they had had when some child held them many years ago. Others just had that startled look some dolls possess. Most looked like babies.

Across the plastic scalps and lifeless eyes the ants battled, scrambling over cheek hills and tumbling into eye-socket caves.

And across this carnage strode two colossi, whose heads and shoulders vanished high into the atmosphere, each stride measuring one ant mile. The ants ignored them as such giants were not uncommon.

Merry shivered at the sight of all the staked heads around her feet, a queasy feeling coming over her. "Someone dun't like dolls," she said.

The Everlaster walked her along the garden path and to a dirty black door. The windows of the house were covered in dirt, through which only heavy black curtains could be seen.

The Everlaster knocked on the door hard. It took a while for anyone inside to respond. The letter box flicked open at waist height and a pair of eyes peeked through.

“I’m sorry, darling, but I think yow’ve got the wrong ‘ouse,” came a male Brummie voice.

“Who are you?” demanded the Everlaster, “and where is Gladabayu?”

“You know Glad!?”

“Yes, now tell her Immanuel Balthazar is here.”

“You’re Immanuel Balthazar!?”

“So, she’s spoken of me?”

“Erm, yer could say that. Yow’d better come in.”

The letter box closed and, after the sound of many sliding bolts, chains and locks, the door was opened and Merry and the Everlaster were ushered quickly inside.

The only sunlight that reached the interior of this house were the few rays that sneaked in while the front door was briefly open. The place was lit by a few lamps with red shades.

The man who had let them in stood before them tall and thin. He led them through the house. Merry was surprised to find the interior of the house relatively normal compared to the garden. Patterns of circles and wavy lines made up of coloured dots were painted on parts of the walls. There were a few ruined dolls here and there, but nothing like the traumatic scene outside.

As they walked into the living room they could see many shelves of books; paintings on the walls; and more of those dot patterns.

“Glad’ll be deloyted to see yer. I’ll go wake her up”.

“No. We will wait,” said the Everlaster. “Who are you?”

“I’m Peter, her friend.” He held out his hand for Immanuel Balthazar to shake. The Everlaster took it. “A friend, aye?” said

Immanuel suspiciously and he turned Peter's hand over and pulled up his sleeve to reveal two small puncture wounds on the man's wrist. "You're Gladabayu's thrall."

"Naw, I'm not" said Peter. "I choose to 'elp her. She down't controwl moy. Would you loyke something to eat? I've just got this pizza out the oven."

"I'll have some, please," said Merry.

"And I," said Immanuel.

"I'll just get some drink from the kitchen. I 'ope you loyke milk." He waved his hands about. "Well, get yerselves sat down then."

Merry sat on a sofa and Immanuel slouched back in an armchair with his legs outstretched.

Peter came back in with a tray of milk. "Bleedin 'ell, mate! Will yer cross yer legs, please? I can't enjoy me meat feast pizza wi that in me pe-riph-er-owl vision.

"Sorry," said the Everlaster, crossing his legs. It had been centuries since he'd worn a skirt.

"It's a nice colour that dress, actualloy" said Peter.

"Isn't it," said Immanuel, nodding heartily.

Merry frowned at him, "are you sure you're the Everlaster?"

"What's the Everlaster?" asked Peter.

"Just a nickname," said Immanuel.

"Why are you wearing a dress, anyways?" asked Peter.

"It's a long story."

"Talking about stories, ay? ...ay?" Peter nodded his head and wagged his elbow as if sharing some private joke with Immanuel Balthazar.

Immanuel narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What? Ay what?"

"You, in Gladie's stories"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't yer know? You've 'eard o' Gladice Gulchenrouz, the famous writer?"

"No," said Immanuel.

“I ‘ave,” said Merry. “She writes adult books.”

“Yes,” said Peter. From a shelf he took down some books and handed them to Immanuel. It said Gladice Gulchenrouz on all the covers. One was titled ‘Nemesis’. He read out a description on the back: “on the eve of revolution the great vampire hunter, Immanuel Balthazar pursues his old adversary across France, but old ghosts and dark secrets from his past threaten to destroy him.”

The Everlaster seemed amused, “she wasn’t with me in France, so it would be interesting to read what I did there.”

He read the back of another novel: “the eighth book chronicling the life of the vampire hunter Immanuel Balthazar takes him to Japan. A mysterious and powerful force in a small village threatens the one he loves.”

Immanuel raised his eyebrows, “the one I love?”

“Glad wroytes the books”, said Peter, “but I pretend to be the author when dealing with the publishers. Yer know you’re a little different to how she describes you. I thought yow’d be taller.”

After getting some much needed food and drink in her Merry began to doze off. Her last waking thoughts were for Esme and Percy as she wondered where they were.

Percy was glad he had stayed with Esme because she had been very frightened when they were taken and then handed over to police. In fact he was frightened too, and they were both incredibly relieved when they were told that they would be taken home. They dared not talk about anything that had happened while in the police car and, to Percy’s surprise, they were asked no questions.

When they reached the edge of Tiverton Preedy the policemen let them out. “We’d normally take you to your parents, but we don’t want to cause a fuss,” they were told, and Percy and Esme were left to walk home. Before the police drove off Percy asked them, “do you know anything about what’s happened to Merry?”

“I don’t know anything about that I’m afraid.”

Percy didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

While the afternoon was growing old, Merry woke up on the sofa in time to see a little girl, maybe five years old, peeping around the door at them.

"Look who's woken up," said the Everlaster, a smile brightening his face. Merry thought it was the first time she'd seen him smile.

"Immanuel," cried the child, running to him. Immanuel stood up, lifting the girl in his arms.

"What a beautiful surprise," said the girl, putting her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. Her skin was remarkably pale and her irises were bright red. Her black hair was short and very curly. Something about her facial structure struck Merry as odd, but she couldn't explain why.

"It's good to see you too, Gladabayu."

"Oh Immanuel, just call me Glad."

"You're Gladice Gulchenrouz?!" exclaimed Merry in disbelief.

"Why, yes. And you are?"

"Ah," said Immanuel. "Glad, this is Merry. Merry, this is Glad".

"Merry and Glad," said Peter. "We're a royt happy bunch us aren't we." And he laughed at his own joke, making him the only one to do so.

"What have you been up to all this time, Immanuel?"

"We've both been doing similar, you and I," he replied, "telling stories."

"Why haven't you visited me in so long?"

"I've been away," and he smiled sadly at her. Then he went on to tell her why he and Merry had come: all about the Fairy's capture and his need to rescue it. "...So we are waiting here until we hear word from the sprites, and then we will know where to go and what preparations we should make."

“While we wait,” said Glad, “why don’t you play us some music, Immanuel. You were always so good on the didgeridoo, even by my people’s standards.” As she said this she got out a long wooden pipe, painted with bright patterns. It was a didgeridoo and was at least twice as tall as she was, taller even than Immanuel.

It was then that Merry realised what was so peculiar about Gladice. The didgeridoo and the paintings on the wall: Merry looked harder at Gladice’s face and realised she was an Australian Aborigine.

“You’re an Aborigine,” said Merry.

“That’s right,” said Glad.

“But your skin’s so white.”

“Didn’t Immanuel tell you? I’m a vampire.”

Merry was flabbergasted, not to mention quite frightened.

“Why...? How...?”

“Oh, read my books if you want explanations,” said Glad.

“It’s okay, Merry,” said Immanuel. “Gladabayu hasn’t eaten anyone in a very long time.” He said this half jokingly, half deadly serious.

Immanuel took the didgeridoo and began to play. He also had a clapstick, which he would hit out rhythms with on the didgeridoo as he blew through it.

Merry was not prepared for just how beautiful the sound of the didgeridoo was. Such a variety of sound she had not imagined could come from a simple piece of wood. The entire house pulsed with the music, she could feel it in the air. Merry’s body was caressed by the rippling sound, which would one moment be as deep and penetrating as the rumbling of the Earth and the next be as light as a soaring bird. The hair on her neck stood on end and her heart tightened as if a ghost held it in its tender grip. Now she could believe. Now she could believe that the man who made this music had walked the Earth thousands of years ago; that he had seen the lives of millions go by. If anyone knew of magic it was he.

It seemed to Merry as if he’d been playing forever. She could no longer comprehend time. In the music she could feel something of

the loneliness of the Everlaster's existence and the reason for his sadness.

When he finished Merry awoke as if from a dream to see Glad crying. The little vampire girl rushed into the Everlaster's arms and he held her tight and soothed her.

Chapter 19

The Worlds Ouroboros

*In which Merry and the Everlaster learn
where Ayina is imprisoned, leading to
Merry seeing the world from a totally new
perspective.*

“We have caught the Fairy”, announced Chandler Dahl to the Senior Partners displayed on his screen. “It is at our labs where we have the equipment to deal with it”.

“Good,” drawled an American accent.

“You must oversee its interrogation,” insisted a Japanese voice.

A German explained: “Our friends desire certain knowledge that the Fairy should hold. Woe will give you a list of the questions they need answering. When the interrogation is over have our scientists see what they can learn from it. We have only one at the moment, so don’t pull it to pieces too quickly.”

“There is, however, a problem,” said Chandler Dahl. “We’re having trouble with the Seers. Their abilities are being hampered by the presence of the Fairy. As you will see in the scientists’ report I’ve sent you, their ability to read the stock exchange is virtually nullified by the Fairy’s existence in our world.” The senior partners fidgeted uncomfortably at this news. “The scientists can’t see anyway of remedying the problem but are hoping the effects will eventually dissipate as space adjusts to her existence.”

It was the old Englishman who replied, “SkweezumGabaal&Runne was a successful business long before we acquired that technology. We will continue quite alright without the Seer’s help on the stock market.

“Nevertheless,” said the American, “the Seers warned us of the big crash a few years ago. A lot of our competitors were hit hard by that, but we were left relatively unscathed. We’ll have no idea when the next crash will be without the Seers predictions.”

“Therefore,” came an Italian voice, “when the Fairy has exhausted all its usefulness we shall give it to our friends to take to their world.”

Chandler Dahl nodded in understanding. “You’ll be pleased to know that the Tiverton Preedy workforce is working harder than ever before thanks to Woe. We should be able to meet the transport schedule for the missiles early tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, Chandler,” said a Russian.
Chandler Dahl bowed and they said goodbye.

It was late evening when the sprites hidden in Merry and the Everlaster’s hair emerged and began to glow. One’s glow was particularly intense; it flew over a pizza box that sat on the coffee table in such a way that words were scorched onto the cardboard. It wrote three words: ‘make it dark’.

“I think it wants us to turn off the light,” said Glad, and she did so.

The other sprite then hovered still, about eight feet from the window, and projected a large rectangle of light onto the black curtains.

It was a picture of Ayina, restrained on a metal table. She shrank as the picture panned out to reveal the room in which she lay.

There were two scientists and lots of complex equipment arranged around the Fairy.

“It looks like they’re examining her,” said the Everlaster.

Merry became worried. “Are they hurting her?”

“I don’t know. But she is much more useful to them alive, so I wouldn’t worry too much just yet.”

The image continued to pull out, revealing the tightly secured laboratory in which the scientists worked. Out in the corridor an EmSec guard stood checking the ID of anyone entering the lab.

Down more corridors and the sprite showed four security guards in view standing around a metal detector and X-ray machine. The sprite was then outside and the exterior of the building could be seen. It was a long building, two storeys high, surrounded by others revealing it to be at the centre of a large complex, with many people coming and going. As the sprite rose higher showing the entire grounds, tall razor wire fences could be seen and many CCTV cameras.

From this viewpoint Merry realised they were looking at the place her father works at.

“I know where that place is. Me Dad works theer!”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a security guard.”

“For EmSec?”

“No. He’s just an ordinary guard. But does this mean he knows about Woe and everything. He never told me.”

“It’s highly unlikely he’d know,” said the Everlaster. “Only those at the very heart of the organisation will know any of the secrets that go on in there. That place looks like hundreds work there...”

“They do,” nodded Merry.

“The vast majority will be ignorant of Woe and the Fairy and such goings on.”

“My Dad always said they kept things really secret in certain areas.”

The Everlaster spoke to the sprites. “Tell that sprite to show us the inside of the other buildings.”

The image zoomed towards the largest of the buildings until they were seeing inside it.

It was a large factory with a high roof. Though it was nearly night a lot of people were still working here. There seemed to be many sections and many people working on different jobs, building things that looked very expensive and highly technical. The sprite flew above the area where most of the activity was concentrated. Here were large cylindrical objects onto which people were welding metal casings.

With no prompting, the sprite flew down to one of these objects and then the image went black.

“What’s it done?” asked the Everlaster.

On the blank image words came up: **SPRITE IS SCANNING.** And then the words were replaced by a three-dimensional schematic and a stream of technical information.

“What is all this?” the Everlaster pondered aloud.

“It looks loyke a missile?” suggested Peter.

CORRECT. The word replaced the visuals. MISSILE CONTAINING THERMONUCLEAR WARHEAD, AI COMPUTER GUIDANCE SYSTEM, AND JET PROPULSION DEVICE.

“A nuclear missile?” gasped Peter.

“They make nuclear bombs in Tiverton Preedy?” Merry leapt to her feet at the shock of it.

“There aren’t the facilities there to make nuclear bombs,” the Everlaster corrected her. “I’m guessing the actual nuclear devices are made elsewhere and then transported to Tiverton Preedy. Some other aspect of the missiles construction is worked on here. Perhaps the scientists develop the guidance systems while the workers build the propulsion device or the body. They might not even know these missiles are built to carry nuclear material.”

“They should pay more attention to what they work on,” said Merry. “I don’t want nuclear weapons near where I live.”

“Why would they choose a place like Tiverton Preedy to build nuclear missiles?” asked Peter.

“That’s a good question,” said the Everlaster. “Tell that sprite to explore any parts of that place we’ve not yet seen.” As the sprite flew out of the factory he added. “I can see why SkweezumGrabaal&Runne got Woe to affect the workers there, with such important merchandise to work on.”

Soon the sprite found what appeared to be a warehouse, as heavily secured as any part of this complex. Inside the sprite found it almost empty except for a twenty metre wide circle of crooked black spires. There were fifteen of them, each five metres tall. Tending to these structures were six scientists and engineers. Overseeing these people, and wearing her resplendent armour, stood Woe.

“She’s there!” Merry pointed.

“Yes,” said the Everlaster, “and if those things are what I think they are for. We now know why there are nuclear missiles in Tiverton Preedy.”

“Why?”

“Get me a piece of paper and a pencil,” the Everlaster told Peter. “This gets a little complicated.”

When Pete had given the Everlaster the materials the immortal began. He drew a straight line. “This line is one dimensional: it extends in one direction only.”

He drew a square. “This square is two dimensional: it exists in the first and second dimensions because it has width and height. But this pizza box has width, height and breadth: it extends in three directions, so it exists in three dimensions. This box can travel through the three dimensions; in other words it can go up and down, or left and right, or backwards and forwards through space. But there is a fourth dimension that it can travel through. It is travelling through that dimension right now as we speak, and we travel with it. That fourth dimension is called Time. Have you heard of the spacetime continuum?”

“Only on Doctor Who?” said Merry.

“Yes,” said the Everlaster. “Spacetime is the word used to describe those four dimensions, because time and space are not separable. The Doctor can travel in his TARDIS sideways through space but also through time, because he knows space and time are the same thing: just dimensions of the space time continuum. However Doctor Who is just fiction and time travel is a practical impossibility. And it is actually wrong to call time the fourth dimension, because in fact there are ten dimensions and time is the tenth dimension.

“The other six dimensions. Lets number them 4 to 9. They exist, but we can’t see them because our brains evolved to detect only four dimensions. However those six dimensions run throughout the spacetime continuum; throughout the Earth. We can’t detect them because they are so very tiny and they curl up on themselves.

“Now this is the interesting part. Forget about time, the tenth dimension for a moment, Earth exists in dimensions 1, 2 and 3. Well the planet Aeval exists in dimensions 4, 5 and 6. Aeval is here, in our universe, existing on this very spot, but it is curled up in those three

dimensions that we can not detect or look into. And they can't detect or see us either. And in dimensions 7, 8 and 9 lies Omaur: Woe's planet. Our three planets lie in separate dimensions, except for the tenth dimension. We all share that dimension and we all travel through time at the same speed.

"Now, I've said that planet Aeval is all curled up and tiny in the fourth, fifth and sixth dimensions. However Aeval, and its dimensions are only curled up and tiny from our point of view. From Aeval's point of view, their dimensions are huge and straight. From their perspective it is Earth and dimensions 1, 2 and 3, that are incredibly curled up and tiny. It's just like when we see objects on the horizon, they are very small. But for people on that horizon, they are normal size and it is us who are very small.

"And what goes for Aeval goes for Omaur. According to their perspective, Earth and Aeval are tiny and curled up and unknowable in their dimensions, and it is dimensions 7, 8 and 9 that are spread out in a massive vista of stars and galaxies.

"So you see, the dimensions could be compared to a colossal ball of string, all bunched and mixed up and it depends where you are standing as to which dimensions appear straight and which are curled up and invisible. And in this massive ball of string there lies knots, where the nine dimensions are all caught up together into a single point. Tiverton Preedy must lie over one of these knots, which is why the Fairy arrived there and why SkweezumGrabaal&Runne have those spires there."

Merry had managed to follow pretty much everything the Everlaster said, and so she noticed a flaw in his description. "If our dimensions are tiny and undetectable to people on Aeval how did they detect our planet and even send people here?"

"Aeval's scientists are millennia ahead of our own. Long ago they devised technology that could detect and describe all ten dimensions. When they did that they discovered Earth. But it took them many centuries more to devise a method of travelling into those dimensions. There is only one way to enter the other six dimensions,

and it requires incredible technology. As they say, 'If Mohamed can not go to the mountain, then the mountain must come to Mohamed'. The only way to get to Aeval from Earth, is to bring Aeval to you... by rearranging the spacetime continuum. An object in a reconfigured part of spacetime will perceive the alternative dimensions and travel among them, but lose sight of its home dimensions as its perspective alters.

"Now reconfiguring space is obviously a gargantuan task and it uses great amounts of energy. However the job can be made relatively simple if you are only wanting to transport a tiny speck of matter. Rearranging the spacetime around this house is, for example, trillions of times harder than rearranging it around a single atom. And so the Aevalians decided that, if they wanted to travel to Earth they had to first shrink themselves down to a single point, to a size smaller than an atom. Rearranging such a tiny part of space makes things much easier. So they had to devise a way to shrink people down to the smallest size without killing them, and to allow them to be returned to their original size. Needless to say this took them a long time, but, as you know, they succeeded."

"But how can SGR have the technology," said Merry, "if it takes centuries to develop."

"They stole it," answered the Everlaster. "Those spires look to me like early Troll transphere technology. How SGR got them is an entirely different matter and I don't know the answer. But, getting back to the matter at hand, it looks like SGR is sending those nuclear missiles to Woe's world. The spires will shrink them to a point, then twist the spacetime around them until they exist in Omaur's dimensions."

"I bet they want to use them against the Fairies and that," said Merry.

"Indeed," said The Everlaster. "I assume they don't have the natural resources for making nuclear weapons on Woe's planet. This would explain why they would want to cooperate with human beings.

By the look of things those missiles are nearly ready and it won't be long before they are sent through."

"We we're going to go to rescue the Fairy," said Glad. "It seems now we should stop those missiles being sent too."

"We?" said the Everlaster.

"I think you're going to need my help for this, Immanuel."

It was late in the night, as Merry, Gladice, Pete and the Everlaster, drove up the motorway in Pete's car, when a message came in via the two sprites they had. Ayina was communicating something to them. It was writing, and it was addressed to Merry:

For the past few hours the sprites have been translating the many SGR files they uploaded from Yahinni's computer. Amongst them they have found several files with reference to your mother. I think you should read these files I send you:

[...]

sgr:\diety\empsurv\9332.85506?access\joc3128.7610

The Journal of Jennifer O'Connell. Retrieved by agent: The Quiet One...

Extract#48

We had a really great day today, Joseph, Merry and me. We drove out to the country and had a picnic. I can't believe how happy I am right now. Joseph is such a wonderful husband and father. With my new job we don't need to worry about money any more, and SGR are a very respectable and successful firm, so I see no problems for the future...

...Merry is such a beautiful little girl. I see a lot of Joseph in her. But he says he sees me in her, but she does have my eyes. And Joseph says Merry has my intelligence. She's very bright for a three year old.

[...]
sgr:\doom\commvault\06713.87369?access\CDahl56240713

To: CDahl
From: emmett.liptrot

I have selected the personnel who are suitable to work on the Pandora Project at Tiverton Preedy:

Prof. Malcolm Redloch
Prof. Katsuhiko Sato
Prof. Leonard Abrahams
Ahmed Ahkrar MD.
Jennifer O'Connell
Simon Reikes
Rachel Parsons

O'Connell and Reikes have both only level/Grace clearance, but both their expertise will be great assets to this project and Redloch will vouch for both of them. I suggest you fast-track them through the required tests to advance them to level/Fate.

[...]
sgr:\diety\empsurv\9332.85506?access\joc28.7610

The Journal of Jennifer O'Connell.
Extract#124

This morning I was briefed on Project Pandora. SGR have made a discovery that overshadows all previous discoveries put together. They keep it a secret from the world. And I must too or I'd surely be killed. I'm taking a great risk just writing about it in this journal, but I must.

SGR have made contact with an alien species they call The Friends. This species apparently came to Earth a year ago... Their world sits on dimensional branes different to Earth...

...SGR are keeping knowledge of this new world secret so they can benefit exclusively from the trade in knowledge and goods. Why the aliens want to deal only with SGR and no one else I do not know...

The purpose of Project Pandora is to study one of these aliens: a live volunteer. We are to do a number of harmless tests on the alien, whose name is Woe...

Apparently this Woe has certain qualities that defy our scientific knowledge. I have even been told that Woe and some others like her on their world are puzzling even to their own people. According to Redloch, Woe is member to a social class called exarch. All exarchs were created (perhaps using genetic engineering with other methods) by the Friends long ago. The methods of their creation have long been forgotten. The Friends are just as curious as us to know how Woe can do the things she does. Whatever they are? Redloch says I will meet this Woe tomorrow and see for myself what is special about it.

“What’s a matter?” the Everlaster asked Merry, noticing she didn’t look too good. “My mum was a scientist for SGR and she worked with Woe.” Merry’s voice choked with disgust and shame and other things.

“And that upsets you.”

“Well Woe’s evil!”

“Fire destroys, but watching a bonfire doesn’t make you destructive. Don’t judge, keep reading.”

“But Woe’s evil.”

“Keep reading!” he said, like a snappy teacher.

The Journal of Jennifer O’Connell.
Extract125#

Woe is a woman. I don’t know how representative she is of her species, considering her possible engineered origins. She is

vile and terrifying. She looks down on us with utter contempt, but also with lust: a mix of cannibalistic hunger and emotional longing.

She does not speak English but one of our people has learnt her language and interprets. She comes from a world with very little light. Their planet has no sun. Because of this her skin is almost transparent, like a deep sea creature. She has a human-like face, her eyes detect not light but other wavelengths on the electromagnetic spectrum. Which wavelengths these are and how the world looks to her we must determine.

The most amazing property she exhibits is the ability to evaporate at will and re-solidify in a different spot. She can only do this, though, in low light levels. She can walk through walls, darkness permitting. However this effect is achieved it is obviously hindered or disrupted by the presence of photons. But can other, less obvious types of radiation also inhibit her?...

Extract#139

I saw scenes of a funeral on the news today. Families had been killed by an airstrike. An entire community overwhelmed with mourning. But there was anger on some of the faces. Faces hard with desire for revenge. The makers of Woe had a sense of poetry: they gave her the power to turn things to stone.

Extract#141

Woe is a general or warrior on her planet and today we saw her battle armour. Its golden, which instantly struck us as strange: why should gold appeal on a planet without colour or shine. Gold is also a soft metal and not effective for armour. But it was pointed out to us that the strength of the gold is irrelevant; the armour's protectiveness comes from a force-field generator hidden in the back of the armour. This generator projects a skin of energy across the entire surface of the gold and deflects incoming blows and bullets. The softness of the gold allowed the maker of the armour to shape grand and horrific scenes all over it...

Extract#145

I think The Friends, as a species, must be insane. I hesitate to use such an unscientific word as 'evil'. Today we witnessed Woe's most horrible power. We had a 'volunteer' - a student, thoroughly profiled as a balanced and happy individual - that's important. In order that the student would remain ignorant of Woe's existence he was told he was taking part in a study on sleep and Woe was to perform her tricks while he slept. We had a room with a bed, monitoring equipment and a large mirror across one wall. Behind that mirror men were watching, who I did not have the privilege to meet. Whoever they were they watched Woe destroy a young man.

I wish I'd never joined SGR. I had no idea of the depravity riddling their core. If I left now they'd kill me for sure - with what I now know.

But that's a reason to stay. With this journal I can record their crimes.

Extract#158

Because our attempts to study the nature of Woe's psychic ability has not born much fruit, Sato had the idea to build a containment and observation unit so we can directly analyse what happens when Woe makes an attack. His idea was approved and it should take a fortnight for the engineers to design and build the containment chamber and install the equipment.

Extract#187

There's been an accident. It was the lights. They spent so much time reinforcing the doors and walls, layers of lead and granite and god knows what else. They forgot about the lights. Just a quick wiring job, corners cut to meet the deadline. Halfway through the experiment they went off. Woe was producing a burst of her psychic attack, rather than directing it onto one thing. The chamber has no windows but it was lit inside nonetheless so we

could watch Woe on an ordinary camera monitor. Halfway through, the lights went off. It was only for a few seconds, I was later told. Loose wiring. Its as though the light, not the lead and stone, was what had been shielding us. With it gone, Woe's power leaked from the chamber and I was closest. I was overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness and grief, awful and painful. It's hard to think about.

Extract#194

I was so naïve before. Thinking that there was hope for humanity. I thought the world could be improved - we would solve our problems through rational thought. But everywhere is stupidity. People are proud of their ignorance. One day SGR or people like them will control all the world. It's inevitable. But people don't deserve any better. Look at them.

Extract#231

I'm sure he hates me, and even Merry looks at me coldly. Why? What did I ever do? What's the point of life if my own family don't love me...

I think SGR have someone watching me... what do they think I'm up to...

[...]

This is all I will transmit to you.

"It wasn't mum's fault," said Merry, her face rigid.

"What wasn't?"

"Everything. The drinking. The suicide. Woe did it to her."

"Oh."

"Woe killed my mum." And then she was overcome with tears. The Everlaster put her arms around her while she sobbed into his chest.

Eventually Merry calmed. “We’re going to have to kill Woe aren’t we. If we’re going to save Ayina.”

“Yes,” said the Everlaster, solemnly. “One way or another.”

“How hard can it be?” said Gladice.

In chain’s like necklaces Ayina’s tiny ankles and wrists were shackled to a metal table. Monitors linked to scanning devices showed continuous displays of the Fairy’s physical status. A community of scientists stood about her. Amongst the scientists stood Chandler Dahl.

When Ayina looked into Chandler Dahl’s eyes he was surprised to see, not anger or fear, but pity.

“Shall we sing a song?” asked the Fairy.

“What?”

“Perhaps I’ll sing an Aevalian dirge in English. Or you can sing an Earth song.”

A scientist spoke. “Perhaps the shadow-urchin damaged her brain. She may be delusional.”

A second scientist disagreed. “I think she’s mocking us.”

“Yes,” said a third. “Some form of sarcasm perhaps.”

“I am not mocking you,” said the Fairy. “The betrayal of your planet is not something you should do lightly. You should mark it with a performance, something beautiful to offset the cruelty and degradation that is to follow.”

Chandler Dahl sneered. “You say betrayal. You are mistaken.”

“I know you work for Woe.”

“We are working in partnership with her people for mankind’s benefit, that is indeed correct, but no one is being betrayed.”

“You can not be partners with those who know only the thirst of greed and the pangs of power-lust.”

“Oh, there’s much more to Woe’s people than that.”

“I was not describing Woe’s people.”

Chandler Dahl's eyes flared. "Why... Now. You are the one being interrogated. You will answer our questions only. You are going to tell us the precise location of the dimensional knot you used to reach our world, and of any other knots you know about."

"So the Jae-Mareeda can make a surprise attack behind our lines," said Ayina in disgust. "I can answer no questions."

Chandler Dahl ignored her. "You will tell us all you know of any planned counter strikes against Woe's people. You will describe to us the nature of the force shields that protect your cities."

"I cannot," said Ayina, as if it was a fact and not simply defiance.

Chandler Dahl nodded at the scientists. With delicate equipment they administered an injection into Ayina.

Chapter 20

Genesis

*In which there undergoes an
attraction of bodies, and certain
forces are set in motion.*

Despite all the trauma of the day Percy fell asleep almost as soon as he'd got into bed. Or perhaps it was because of it.

What happens when our minds turn off? Hours pass, the Earth revolves and we wake to face the Sun again, knowing nothing of the time that passed. During that time, in the spaces between the dreams, are our minds frozen like some game on pause? Or do we experience things too fantastic and terrible for dreams and waking days?

In the name of science there have been men who have gone for days without sleep in order to see what would happen. And on every single occasion they went mad. As if the visions that occupy the sleeping mind had spilled out into their waking thoughts and taken over.

Percy had already experienced such an episode, induced by the dread gun, and so now his sleep was empty; his store of nightmares spent. No dreams came near him as his mind drifted in the black abyss like a dead planet floating far from any star.

But a star appeared: a pinprick in the night. It hovered at his open window for one brief moment before entering his room. It shone its tiny white light on his face as if studying his features. Then it flew right up against the skin of his neck and... a flash. Percy shot upright in bed, his eyes wide open.

"Ow," he gasped in confusion, putting a hand to his neck. His attention was quickly caught by the glowing sprite dancing in the air above his legs. He recognised the glowing spot as one of Ayina's sprites and immediately he became alert.

The sprite emitted a light that shone on the wall by his bed. Percy realised it was projecting an image.

To his intense delight Merry's face appeared, wearing an expression of amusement. Her mouth moved as though she spoke, but there was no sound. Then written words appeared beneath her:

"Having a nice dream, sleepy chops?"

"Is that you now, Merry?" he asked quietly.

“Of course,” said the writing. Merry gave a smug grin. Then she turned serious. “Listen, Ayina’s been caught by Woe and they’re keeping her where my Dad works in Tiverton Preedy.”

“What?” It was all Percy could do to keep his voice down.

“Exactly,” said Merry.

“Ayina’s where my Mum works? Right now?”

“Yes, in the science labs. I’m with the Everlaster and two other people and we’re driving up to Tiverton Preedy to rescue her.”

“Won’t she be tightly guarded?”

“Yes, but I think the Everlaster has a plan and Gladice Gulchenrouz says she’s good at getting into places.”

“Gladice Gulchenrouz? Isn’t she that writer?”

“Yes. Its pretty complicated. But I wanted you to know I was safe and what’s going on.”

“You’re going to need help, especially if Woe’s there. I’m going to help you.”

“I’d like you to be with me.”

“What time will you get here?”

Merry could be seen talking with someone outside the image.

“The Everlaster says we’ll reach Tiverton Preedy at 3am.”

“I’ll see you near the gate’s of my Mum’s works then, OK.”

“Good,” said Merry. She smiled and then she was gone.

It was 1am now. Very quietly Percy got out of bed and began to dress.

As Peter drove them up a dual carriageway, the Everlaster saw some lorries parked up in a lay by and had an idea. “Stop somewhere near here.”

“What’s wrong, Immanuel?” asked Glad, as Peter slowed the car and parked in the roadside.

“Nothing. But I’m going to need your assistance, Gladabayu.”

*

Inside the cabin of an articulated lorry, its driver sat resting and drinking tea from a flask. He suddenly noticed on the road a little girl, standing in the light cast from the cabin windows. He strained to see into the darkness beyond, but he saw no one else around. He opened his door and climbed out.

“What you doing here, little girl?”

She didn’t reply, so he walked up to her. “Are you alright? Where’s your Mummy and Daddy?”

“They’re dead,” came the child’s small voice.

“What?” he knelt before her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Tell me what’s happened?”

The girl looked up at him with large eyes, whose irises were red like blood.

“They were murdered 200 years ago by people from these lands.”

There was no decent response to that. Which was just as well, as now the man was transfixed by the raging patterns of her irises.

“You’ve got an idea,” said Gladabayu smoothly.

“I’ve got an idea,” said the man.

“You’re sick of the lorry and want to go to sleep behind those bushes.”

“I’m sick of the lorry and want to go to sleep behind those bushes.”

He walked where she had pointed, stood for a second and then slumped to the ground.

Moments later the Everlaster appeared beside Glad. “Follow me in the car,” he told her. “But Glad.”

“What?”

“Take care. If you see Woe in there, run. She’s too strong for you.”

“Okay, Immanuel.”

The Everlaster climbed into the cabin. The keys were in the ignition. He drank the tea resting on the dashboard and without further ado took control of the lorry and pulled away.

*

Esme woke up and put a hand to her forehead, feeling as though she'd been stung. She opened her eyes and saw a sprite spiralling over her. It zoomed towards the window, which was open due to the heat, and danced about there.

By its movements Esme realised the sprite wanted her to go to the window, which was fine except she lay in a double bed between her two younger sisters: Chadna and Daya. And near them was a bunk bed in which slept two of her brothers. So she gently wriggled her way beneath the sheet, down to the bottom of the bed and climbed out.

She leaned out the window and saw Percy down below. He whispered up to her, "I... know... what's... happened... to Merry... and... Ayina. We... need... to... talk," and he gestured to her back door. "Get... dressed... and come... down."

"Ok," nodded Esme.

She turned away from the window to see her twelve year old brother Mark stood looking at her. "Who you talking to?"

"Erm... none of your business."

"I think it is," insisted Mark. "What you getting dressed for. If you don't tell me I'll wake up Mum and Dad."

By now everyone else in the room was awake or stirring.

"I'm just going to talk to Percy Lillycrop, downstairs."

"Percy Lillycrop? At this time o' night? You don't go out wi' him do yer?"

"Have you got a boyfriend, Esme?" asked Daya.

"Ssshhh!" said Esme. "He's not my boyfriend." She thought fast about how best to quickly calm her curious siblings and talk to Percy. "You can come downstairs with me if you're super quiet and please, please, please don't wake Mum and Dad."

So very quietly Esme, two of her brothers and two of her sisters got dressed and crept slowly downstairs.

Carefully Esme unlocked the back door and let Percy in.

“We’re meant to be secret?” he whispered to her, in wide-eyed alarm at the sight of her siblings. “Merry’s coming back to Tiverton Preedy with the Everlaster cos SGR are holding Ayina prisoner. They’re going to arrive at about 3am and they’ll need our help.”

“What yer whispering about,” asked Mark.

“You wouldn’t believe us,” said Percy.

“But if they did believe us, they could help too,” said Esme. And before Percy could object Esme was talking to her sisters and brothers: “do you know how Mum and Dad and Meena have been acting all grumpy lately?”

They nodded. “They’ve been horrible,” said Chadna, the youngest. “They wun’t read me a bed time story.”

“Well, we know why, don’t we, Percy?”

“Yes,” he said. “My parents are like it too, and all ‘other adults in Tiverton Preedy.”

“I’ve heard friends say stuff about their parents,” said Mark.

“Well,” said Percy, “somebody did something to ‘em that’s made ‘em this way.”

“Who?”

“Look at this,” said Percy, opening his hand to reveal the sprite, which shone in the darkness and floated above his palm.

“What’s that??” asked Daya.

“It belongs to a Fairy,” whispered Percy.

“!!A Fai...” Esme clasped a hand over Chadna’s mouth before she woke the street up.

“We can prove it,” said Percy. “Show us Ayina.” Onto the wall the sprite projected the image of Ayina captured. As briefly as possible Percy explained how they found, and lost, the Fairy. “Can you show a picture of Woe?”

The sprite projected a still image of Woe, as they had seen her in Cradleford Forest, dressed in white. “She’s Woe. She caught Ayina and she’s made all the adults unhappy. Meredith O’Connell and this man we met are on their way to free the Fairy.”

“And will there be a cure for our Mum and Dads?”

“We hope so. Either way, me and Esme’s gonna help in the rescue.”

“We want to help too.” They all looked at Percy and Esme with hope and determination.

“I have a feeling there might be fighting,” said Percy, with a grim expression. He’d had enough of being roughed about by adults and was no longer going to be pushed about so easily.

“We can fight,” said the boys.

“We want to help, but won’t it be dangerous?” asked Daya.

“We’ll take care,” Esme assured her.

“I bet John and Graham Whyke will help us,” said Mark.

“They’re in year 10 and hard as nails the pair of ‘em. They only live five doors up.”

“I don’t know,” said Percy, rubbing his chin. But then he had an idea, his eyes rolled round like when he was thinking up fantasies. He told them his idea.

Using Mark’s mobile phone they called John and Graham. And then they phoned every other friend they knew the number of, told each one a very special and very secret thing was happening and that to be a part of it they had to meet at 2:30am at a meeting point. Some were made curious by talk of a Fairy; and others by talk of the strangeness of the adults; which until now they thought they had only imagined; and others were attracted by the secrecy and naughtiness.

Some of the friends Percy and Mark contacted, in turn contacted their friends. Some children were recruited by text message and phone calls and others by brave boys and girls willing to climb drain pipes and sneak into windows. And all the time the importance of not letting any adults aware of what was happening remained paramount in every mind. But luckily all adult minds, being miserable, found comfort in sleep, and so were reluctant to wake even if a sudden sound disturbed the quiet of night.

*

Percy had arranged a meeting point about half a mile from the SGR site; beneath a railway bridge spanning the canal. There were no lights here and the nearest houses were beyond earshot. While they waited, hoping for the others to turn up, Percy showed Esme the jar of yellow goo he and Merry had stolen from Manutius Fluke's house. "This stuff healed Ayina's wing," he told her. "I tested it on myself earlier. I made a little cut on my arm then put a little bit of this on. It healed it pretty quick. So you take it now in case someone gets hurt."

"Okay, Percy," she said, taking the jar off him.

"Someone's coming," said Mark.

The first of the recruits appeared and Percy could hardly believe it, less so when more kept arriving.

All these brave children should have their names remembered for the deeds they did that night. For who will remember them if not us.

First came John and Graham Whyke, sons of Peter Whyke, the fitter; and with them Phil Cross, whose parents owned the chip shop.

Next came Sally Jeffels; Paul and Jackie Chambers; and Colin Swift, from the land where the coal mine once lay; now a crowded maze of houses.

After them came Harry Glover: player of the trumpet; Tom Yates: doer of Jigsaws and logic solver; and Patrick Owen: trading-card champion.

Now stood the twins, Alice and Eve Robledo, clad in their purple and black, only girls yet almost women. And their friends Gemma Beaumont: poet; Matthew Turner: painter of watercolours; and Eric McCarthy, who enjoyed science so much.

Then the sons of Mr Winstanley, the geography teacher, whose names were Charlie, Roger and Terrence: ready for a fight and armed with rake and hoe and spade.

And the girls from above the charity shop: yellow haired Kristy Scattergood and her sisters, Megan and Rachel. With them Jack and Bonnie Harston, who helped out at the weekends.

Tony Cunningham followed: the son of a refugee, and Todd Blanchflower, and Tracy Hudson, who all three lived by the woods to the south, with its carpet of bluebells.

Then came Richard and Anne Otulakowski armed now with cricket bats, whose parents too worked for SGR. And Janet Murphy, who loved to skateboard; Sarah Lunn who cared for animals; and Sally and Lucy, the daughters of Will Normanton: cleaner of windows.

And last, Melody Salt and her young brother Georgie, born of Katherine Salt, the dinner lady, and both renowned in the fields of sport.

“So what’s going on?” called Eric McCarthy, a sceptical look on his face.

With the help of the sprite and its projections on the underside of the bridge, Percy summed up why they were here as best he could. And as he spoke he gestured and strode about like a Shakespearean actor:

“That is Woe and she works for SkweezumGrabaal&Runne and she’s made all our parents go funny. It was her who put Trent Tufnell in hospital, and I’ll tell thi, she made Todd Blanchflower’s cousin commit suicide.”

A ripple of shock and murmur travelled along the audience.

“Those SGR people made our Mums and Dads upset and afraid so they’d do as they were told. That’s how they work. By bullying. They tried it wi’ me.

“My Mum wouldn’t go back to work unless they paid more, so they put a spell on her and she went straight back to work with everyone else. She was so miserable Saturday morning, for no reason.

“But me and Esme met this Fairy from another world. Look! And she said Woe had done this to people. So me, Esme and Merry tried to help the Fairy and find a cure for *all* the adults.

“But now SGR have caught the Fairy. And that’s why we’re all here now, cos we gonna free her.

“And if I have to fight ‘em, I’ll fight em, adult’s or not. I don’t care if I get hurt. It’s better than staying at home and letting our parents be cursed and working for those people forever, and then when we grow up we’d have to work for ‘em, even though we know they do evil things.

“So we’ve got to go in their now, this minute, and get that Fairy out. Cos if we dun’t then that means we *are* working for ‘em, and wi’ out getting paid *owt*.

“So are you all coming wi’ me?”

And there were cheers and calls of “Yeah!”, “Come on!”, “Let’s kick some ass!” and “We’re gonna see a Fairy from another world, woohooo!”

At 2:50am they marched up the road that led to SkweezumGrabaal&Runne, Tiverton Preedy. The road was dark and straight. Fields of wilderness rolled out to their left and right and a field of stars hung over their heads.

Before they were halfway there Esme saw eight figures in a field, silhouetted against the sky. “Look,” she said to Percy, as the figures approached.

Percy and Esme stopped walking and the procession behind them stopped too, to watch these strangers with apprehension. As the strangers neared, the children saw they were five young men, a young woman, an old man and a boy.

“Trent!” said Esme.

“Where have you been?” Percy asked him. “We heard you ran away from hospital.”

“It’s too hard to explain. But I’ve come to help yer rescue the Fairy.”

“Who are they?” asked Percy, gesturing towards Trent’s companions.

“They’ve been looking after me.” Percy noticed they carried bars and knives, and the old man even had a sickle.

“I thought we couldn’t trust adults?” said Mark Glendenning.

“They’re loyal to me,” said Trent.

“And who are *you* meant to be, Trent Tufnell, running away when tha meant to be ill?” said Mark, who’d got into a fight with Trent at school a long time ago.

“He’s a mate o’ mine,” Percy interjected, “and he’s already met the woman who stole the Fairy. She’s what made him ill. So if he sez we can trust these people, we’ll trust ‘em. Nar come on. Merry’ll be turning up any minute nar.”

They walked onwards. Moments later there came into view the road’s end and the high, chain-link gates of SGR, and beyond them the factory and other buildings that made up the site.

As the children gathered at the gates they were watched by three bemused security guards standing on the other side. “What you lot doing here?” shouted one.

“What now?” Esme asked Percy.

“We have to wait for Merry and the Everlaster,” he replied.

“Tha’d better be reight about this, Percy,” came a voice from amongst the gathering.

And then they heard a car coming up the road and everyone turned around to look, hearts frozen with anticipation as two bright lights approached.

The car pulled up on the grass to the side and out came Merry.

“Yes!” went Percy and the crowd buzzed with excitement once again.

Merry ran to Percy and Esme and looked in wonder at all the kids amassed, some of whom were her friends at school.

“They’ve all come to help get Ayina out,” Esme answered her quizzical expression.

“The Everlaster’s coming behind us,” Merry informed them.

Pete got out of the car, as did a yellow dog with red eyes, though few noticed, and it scurried away alongside the fence. In fact, it wasn’t just a dog, it was a dingo. Unseen in the darkness it squeezed beneath the fence and ran across the grounds towards the science labs.

The dingo was following a dimly glowing sprite. As it neared the building the sprite flew upwards and the dingo jumped after it. In mid air the dingo shrank. Its yellow fur turned dark brown and its forelegs became wings as the dingo became a bat.

The bat chased the sprite over the roof and down a silver chimney.

Beneath the science labs, inside a dark basement, was a boiler, cold and unused in the summer. A shuffling sound came from within it. Suddenly the boiler’s hatch flew open, having been kicked by two, size six girls’ shoes: red.

Never hesitating in her movements Gladice Gulchenrouz dropped out of the boiler and onto the floor, silent as a cat. With the sprite guiding the way she opened a door and climbed concrete steps before entering a bright corridor.

She entered a door a few metres down then closed it behind her. It was almost pitch black inside but Glad didn’t have to wait for her eyes to adjust like we do. She could see quite clearly that this was a small computer room with everything turned off for the night.

Never stopping to think or catch her breath, she leapt onto a desk then ran up the wall, as naturally as a spider, till she reached the grill of an air vent. She crouched down (or rather sideways, stood as she was horizontal on the wall) and pulled the grill away, before crawling into the ventilation shaft.

The vent space was tight even for someone with the body of a five year old and she could barely move. So immediately her body

collapsed into a swarm of young rats, and in that form she scurried along the ventilation shafts, in pursuit of the sprite.

Moments later her many rat faces were pushing against another metal grill. The grill gave way under the weight of the swarm.

As she fell into a brightly lit room she could hear two human hearts beating, and a third heart, far smaller and beating far quicker.

The human hearts accelerated and there were shouts: “Urgh, rats! What the hell?!”

When Gladice landed on the ground it was with two human feet. Immediately she pounced at the nearest of the two scientists, twisting in the air like a spit-fire. Her fist landed between the man’s eyes and he fell backwards, unconscious.

She landed on the workbench behind him. Items on the bench rattled as she ran along it towards the other scientist. This one had quick enough wits to arm himself with a scalpel. He swung it at the little vampire but she dodged aside into the path of his forearm and grabbed his wrist. His momentum pushed Gladice off the bench, but as she fell she pulled his hand down with her, guiding the scalpel into his thigh. She then kicked his legs from under him and punched him unconscious too.

Everything was still. The heartbeats of the human’s had slowed back down, and their breathing has slowed too.

“Hello Gladabayu,” came Ayina’s voice from the middle of the room.

“How’d you know my name?” asked Glad.

“I know everything my sprites do.”

Chapter 21

Let There Be Light

In which Woe and Ayina fight to the death.

August Landfill had received an alert from a guard at the gates that something funny was going on. Leading an Emsec squad, she emerged from the lab section.

While the squad began their walk to the gates the faint growl of a lorry drifted across the grounds.

“He’s here!” shouted Merry, pointing triumphantly down the road as a juggernaut approached. Its lights were like four blazing flames, dazzling the eyes.

“Everybody, get out the way,” shouted Merry, and the mass of children parted to both sides of the gates. The guards on the other side scattered when they realised the lorry had no intention of slowing down.

Some of the children held their breath as the lorry ripped the gates apart, as if they were made from paper. Unhampered by the collision the lorry drove onwards, picking up even more speed.

As the Emsec guards scattered from the path of the lorry the children cheered: something special really was going off at this place tonight. Percy had been right.

“Come on, everyone,” Percy shouted, with a great sweep of his arm. “The Fairy’s in that building! Let’s go!”

And Percy, Merry, Esme and Trent led them all charging across the grounds, pushing the overwhelmed gatemen aside.

Once Gladice had Ayina free the first thing the Fairy had to do was find her halberd. With a thought she set her sprite scanning for the crystal blade, and within seconds it was located, lying beneath the lens of a microscope.

As she retrieved the halberd she told Gladice, “They’re about to send weapons to the Jae-Mareeda to use against the cities of Aeval. We’ve got to stop them.”

“Okay,” said Gladice. “Shall we get out the way I came in.”

“No,” said Ayina. “Stay out of the dark places. *She* is here.”

“Who’s she?”

Suddenly the door opened and a guard stepped in. He saw the scientist slumped on the ground and the Fairy free and spoke into his radio.

Inside the warehouse, everything was in place to begin the transportation of the nuclear missiles.

Along with engineers, scientists and more Emsec guards Chandler Dahl was also present. He sat overseeing proceedings.

Woe was there too, in her golden armour. She was using an alien keyboard to enter information into a large machine. The keyboard was spherical, with each key a different shape, and the machine was constructed with the same materials as the Seers' monoliths. The machine was connected by thick cables to each of the spires.

Woe was helping the machine to detect her home dimensions when the message came in over Chandler Dahl's radio: "...Sir!...the Fairy's broke freaarghhh!!!..."

Chandler Dahl leapt to his feet. "Woe, the Fairy's escaping!"

Immediately she turned and ran to the nearest shadow. No sooner had she vanished than a second message came over the radio. "Mr Dahl, a large group of people have broken into the grounds with an articulated lorry."

With those words the whole building shook, as though from a bomb blast, and a cacophonous roar of broken brick and mauled metal met their ears. This sound was then accompanied by the vision of bricks tumbling into the warehouse as a section of wall imploded.

The people near that end scattered as from the wall there burst the battered face of a lorry, along with the mangled wreck of a photocopier, a filing cabinet and the blown guts of the warehouse office.

The lorry did not fully enter as its wheels span on the rubble. It reversed back a little then went silent.

Warily the guards circled the lorry cabin with guns ready. The door opened and down stepped a man wearing a red summer dress.

At the same moment as the Everlaster thundered into the warehouse building, Gladice was running and Ayina was flying down the bright corridors of the lab block.

As the wall of the warehouse burst open so too did the wall beside Ayina. Like a mouth opening, it vomited plaster and wood and a large golden glob that was Woe.

Ayina was caught by Woe's leaping form and she was forced with the seven foot woman through the wall on the opposite side.

Woe landed on top of Ayina on the floor of a darkened laboratory, in a heap of wood, plaster, glass and preserved biological specimens.

Everything in the room was still, except for the preserving liquids leaking out across the floor beneath them, and the blue crackles of energy that died down around Woe's armour.

Finally Woe's arm moved, feeling for the scythe handle on her back.

Woe's body rose from the ground, not by her own will, but lifted by Ayina. They accelerated rapidly upwards until Woe was forced flying through the ceiling.

Ayina fluttered down to the middle of the lab, where she switched on a lamp and stood in a puddle of white light. Waiting.

The laboratory was a land of shadows over shadows. The only light beyond the lamp fell faintly through the windows of one wall, sliced by blinds, or slopped in from the corridor through the new hole.

Ayina could hear the faint sound of shouting coming from outside and the hum of a refrigerator unit in one corner. Her senses were heightened by the presence of her sprite as it constantly scanned the darkness.

The Fairy sensed Woe, a few metres away, form in the darkness but then vanish again. She could detect Woe's life patterns at

several points at once, as if Woe was nothing more than a breath of cold air fanning about the room.

Ayina flexed her fingers around her halberd. She could feel the heat from the lamp's bulb and her palms threatened to get sweaty. She stood still, her tiny eyes searching the shadows for a tell-tale thickening of the darkness.

And the test tubes shivered in their racks as Woe's voice began: "*you intend to fight me? Can a candle fight a storm? Would you threaten the wind with a bubble?*"

Like the centre of a galaxy, where all the stars are so densely packed that only a mass of white light can be seen, so did the darkness coalesce around a centre, becoming pure black in one expanding spot. In the beat of a heart this vortex of dark sped towards the lamp light and, where it met the white beam, it solidified into matter, becoming the red tip of a scythe blade thrusting at Ayina.

And though the Fairy's blade was 100 times smaller than Woe's she parried the blow while simultaneously flipping over it.

The clash of alien edges created a bright white flash that momentarily flooded the lab and, for a second, solidified Woe's entire body as she swept past. In that second Ayina slashed at Woe's golden arm.

The room went dark again and the blackness that was Woe dissipated once more.

Ayina's nose wrinkled at a stink on the air. She heard a drip and looked down to see Woe's blood falling from her blade, and turning a tiny circle of the wooden workbench black and rotten.

Like black storm clouds circling around the eye of a hurricane, Woe's incorporeal form surrounded the tiny island of light and its sole inhabitant.

In a sudden rush the dark converged again, in an area to one side, and Ayina turned to face the attack. But the blackness pulled away and then instantly thickened now behind the Fairy.

Ayina heard the almost inaudible whisper of Woe's scythe slicing through the air at her back. She twisted round then arched

back as the blade edge hurtled past like a train, millimetres from her face and neck. She pushed her own blade against the scythe creating a high-pitched screech and a second flash of light.

The Fairy made another attempt to strike at Woe, but only scratched her armour. When the flash died down and Woe had evaporated again, thin shavings of metal fell around Ayina like gold leaves. And there fell also two of Ayina's dreadlocks, tumbling like dead blue worms and shedding tiny metallic petals.

As soon as the lorry passed them, August Landfill and her squad ran to contain the invading crowd of youth. They formed a line between the children and the labs.

Immediately Trent and his companions charged towards them along with Percy, Merry and the biggest of the children. The rest followed close behind.

The guards could not believe what was happening or why such a large group of kids and teenagers were invading the grounds. What were these kids going to do?

But in the cold light of the car park August Landfill recognised red-haired Merry and realised what must be happening. "Take out the ringleaders," she shouted at her people.

The guards charged forward brandishing electrified batons and round Perspex shields. There was a clatter of boots and metal bars on shields as the two groups piled into one another.

Almost before Ayina had time to ready herself Woe attacked again.

The Fairy parried the rematerialised blade just in time, but the scythe swung so hard and fast that, as light from the contact forced Woe's body to flesh, Ayina was forced too, away from the sanctuary of the lamp.

When the light collapsed, all that protected Ayina from the dark was the shine of her sprite. The blackness surrounded her, threatening to squeeze and crush the weak light.

The blade materialised once more, but this time much closer to Ayina's body, giving her hardly any time to react at all.

To prevent being sliced in two she had to block the scythe with the halberd handle, and so there was no bright flash. Woe's blade returned in rapid succession, causing Ayina to dodge and contort herself furiously to stay alive, with no option of striking back.

But now Ayina's three remaining sprites appeared, having flown as quickly as they could after sensing her peril. They projected their lights as brightly as possible at the total darkness surrounding Ayina, and Woe materialised, cursing with annoyance.

The sprites' beams twirled and panned about Woe and the Fairy like disco lights.

And now, Fairy and Jae-Mareeda became like wind and leaves in autumn. Though which was the wind and which was the leaves it could not be told. They swirled and looped around each other, rose and fell, their blades clashing like waves in a storm.

Ayina twirled. Woe feigned. Ayina slashed. Woe ducked. Stools flew. Glass smashed. Woe hissed. The Fairy dived. Light and dark wrestled. Swinging. Spilling. Thrusting. Throwing. Cracking. Charging. Blocking. Bleeding and Breathing. Hating and Hoping.

The guards were shocked by the ferocity of Trent's companions and thanked the protection given by their shields against the bars and blades. They struck back with their shock-sticks.

Cracks of electricity and cries of pain joined the clatter of weapons on Perspex, filling the brave young fighters with adrenalin. But now the enormity of the situation was fully realised in the minds of all the children.

The punching and the kicking and the electric shocks were part of no game and most of the children, especially the youngest,

became terrified. They held back, watching their older brother, sisters and cousins fight.

One youth fell to the ground and was subdued with electric shocks from the guards. He couldn't catch his breath to scream. Another had his nose broken with a shield. A guard fell to the floor in agony as the old man's sickle swung into the back of his knee cutting into tendon and bone.

Chadna Glendenning kept anxious watch on Mark and Iain who, with sticks, took opportunistic swings at the guards. Daya ran in and threw stones at point blank range whenever she saw an opening.

Percy was fuelled by adrenalin. This was a far more intense experience than any fight he'd had at school. The honourable limits of violence respected in the playground were irrelevant here.

Paul Chambers was pulled away from the fighting. Blood ran from a cut to his scalp. Esme let go of Chadna's hand to go help him.

Percy pushed his way in alongside the older fighters and jumped onto the back of a guard. The guard was blinded as Percy tried yanking off his helmet and two of Trent's followers took advantage. One stabbed the guard in the arm forcing him to drop his shock-stick. The other yanked him to the ground and into the throng of children.

The kids pulled the man's shield away and kicked at him.

Esme took the little jar of Merfolk gunge from her pocket and plucked out a dollop. She pressed it onto the wound on Paul's head. Within moments the bleeding stopped and he told her it stopped hurting.

"Wait!" shouted the Everlaster, as the guards aimed their guns at him. Looking past them he pointed, "you're about to make a massive mistake, Dahl."

"Who the hell are you? And how do you know my name?"

Ignoring Dahl's questions the Everlaster gestured towards the missiles. "You're about to transport the end of a world. Have you at all considered the consequences of all this?"

Without wanting to, Chandler answered. "Of course. This is business. I know the profit and loss and we will gain very nicely." He shook his head and blinked. "What are you, some corporate spy? You look Arab. Did the Saudis send you?"

"I work for everyone," replied the Everlaster, "including you. Now turn that machine off."

"The man's insane," said Dahl to his guards. "Get him out of here."

The guards closed in to take the Everlaster away and, with an expression of total weariness, he kicked one of them in the head and took his gun.

A roar of gunfire ricochet around the warehouse. Like loose change, the compacted remains of bullets rang on the floor around the Everlaster's feet.

The shooting quickly stopped as astonishment stunned the guards. They gaped at the unharmed, unflinching man in a dress. Gesturing with the gun he'd taken, "put your weapons down," he told them. And when they didn't respond he shot one in the leg.

It's debatable whether that act of violence was necessary, but at this time in his existence the Everlaster had quite lost patience with humankind.

As crimson bloomed from the fallen guard's leg, his colleagues dropped their guns.

With his bare feet the Everlaster stamped on each gun, crunching them like cans. "Get in that corner and stay there." They obeyed him, dragging with them the injured man.

The Everlaster marched towards the transportation array. "Turn off that machine," he shouted at the engineers.

He halted and frowned. He felt as if a giant invisible fist was squeezing him, trying, but failing, to crush him. In the corner of his eye he saw Chandler Dahl holding the obsidian staff. At that moment

he flew backwards through the air, at a great speed, bursting through the breeze block wall and out into the night.

Chapter 22

Action and Reaction

*How the battle went between the youth of
Tiverton Preedy and the soldiers of the
Empire.*

After the disastrous results the dread guns had in Lopside, with four SGR agents killed, the use of the guns was banned until further review. August Landfill, however, was not going to let some pen-pusher in London headquarters limit her options.

She took out her dread gun and shot three slugs at the nearest fighters. She would have shot more had not the jaws of some yellow dog suddenly clamped around her hand. Landfill screamed and dropped the gun as the dog's fangs bit deeper.

The guards beside her zapped the dog with their sticks and it let go to vanish into the crowd.

Merry was attacking the guards with a rake that Roger Winstanley had handed her. She was trying just as much to avoid hurting herself or any other kid as she was hitting the henchmen of SGR. She felt no pity, only contempt and anger for the Emerald Security men: guardians of a firm who did business in misery and death.

By Merry's side appeared Gladice Gulchenrouz. "Merry, Ayina is free but she's fighting Woe. She told me they're on the verge of transporting the missiles. We have to stop them now."

In response Merry pulled Percy from the fray. "We've got to get in that warehouse right now."

"Then," said Percy, "some have to keep these guards occupied while the rest of us charge in there."

Gladice spoke. "I'll take care of these guards with the bigger kids. You two take all the rest," and the vampire ran off to Peter.

"Right," shouted Percy to the mass of children, "those not fighting come with us. Now."

"Come on to the warehouse," shouted Merry. She took a pair of younger children by the hands. Esme did too. They shouted some more to get the attention of all those not directly fighting the guards. Then they ran and the kids followed them. Pete and Gladice made sure enough stayed to keep the guards busy.

*

“Is it ready yet,” Dahl asked the engineers in irritation.

“Everything’s in place,” replied one working by the input device. “We’ve almost locked on to dimensions eta and theta, but I’m having trouble with dimension iota. Woe’s much better than me at controlling the cosmic loom. The threads of iota are very tangled.”

Chandler Dahl shook his head at the techno-babble. “Once its ready start the shrinking immediately. Don’t wait for me.” And he strode to the exit.

Percy, Merry, Esme, Trent, and the children they led, were halfway across the grass to the warehouse the moment when, near its roof, part of the wall exploded and the Everlaster came flying out. He arced high over their heads, disappearing into the darkness beyond the grounds.

Everybody hesitated at this bizarre sight.

From the hole with the lorry in it emerged Chandler Dahl. Merry saw the obsidian staff in his hands and the sight filled her with fear.

Esme noticed it too, but Percy was not intimidated and the others followed him onwards. Hesitantly, Merry and Esme followed too.

‘What do they do with them at these schools’, thought Chandler Dahl in disgust when he saw the fighting and the small crowd of children coming towards him. His disgust turned quickly to anger and indignation, that all these brats and yobs were trespassing and disrupting such an important night.

He swung the obsidian staff, which unleashed a wave of energy at the children. Each child was carried off his or her feet as if a hurricane was blowing.

Esme got an eyeful of dust. She fell on her back and someone fell on top of her, crushing the wind out of her. Her stung eyes

streamed with tears as she pushed the person off and struggled to gain her breath back.

Esme heard moaning and crying all around. Some voices were inquiring and comforting others.

“We’ll never get past him,” she heard Percy say. In response came an anguished cry of “no!” and Esme recognised it as Merry, her voice distorted with desperation.

Esme crawled towards the sound of her friend, the dew making her hands and knees wet.

“Trent, no!” she heard Percy shout. “That thing can kill yer.”

“Get him, Trent,” cried Merry.

Esme found Merry with her hands and began to blink the dirt away.

Through a veil of tears Esme made out the orange fire of Merry’s hair, and then came the howling of police sirens.

Chandler recognised the boy from the photos in the report he’d received on the one who escaped from hospital: the boy with shadows on his brain.

And the boy stared at Dahl now, with eyes the colour of burning coals.

Via the psychical feelers left in his head by Woe in the woods, Earth was now speaking in Trent’s mind: “beware the staff he holds. It is a shard of the void.”

He looked at the staff and noticed a living eye at its top. The eye looked into his own and seemed to quiver with apprehension.

Images flashed through Trent’s mind, so strange he could hardly comprehend them. But they seemed of a time when Earth, and even the Sun, was very young: before the sky was blue.

He saw Earth in the form of a giant bird. And the only light came from her burning wings. Silently (for this was before the creation of sound) she fought the obsidian colossus and she slew him.

Suddenly Chandler Dahl thrust the staff forward. Or rather, the staff pulled his arm.

The eye blinked and such sound and sensation filled Trent's head that it seemed as if all reality itself was struck with a migraine.

Trent fell to his knees, crying in pain through gritted teeth. Blood trickled from his nose and gums. He could not look up. On all fours he resisted. Knowing that he would die if he let go of the ground.

As the police piled out of their cars and vans, dressed in full riot gear, the young stopped fighting and stepped back. The EmSec guards, believing that the situation was now subdued, stopped their attacks and waited for the police to take control

Three guards lay wounded on the floor, barely moving. Tracy Hudson and Todd Blanchflower sat with Tony Cunningham who lay unconscious, along with one of Trent's followers. Two more of Trent's were badly wounded and several more of the children sported cuts and bruises.

The two groups of children fell back into one mass as the police circled round.

There were thirty policemen, armed mostly with batons and shields but some wielded guns.

The children all huddled together for protection and waited. The police held their ground as a sergeant walked over to August Landfill, her hand bleeding from the dog bite. The two conferred.

Chadna began to sob from fear and from the aches the obsidian staff had caused her. "What's going to happen?" she murmured to Esme.

The sergeant yelled a command.

The children looked up as they heard a hissing sound above. A canister the size of a drink can arced beneath the stars to land amongst the children. The canister squirted white gas into the air, and people started to scream and choke.

“Tear gas!” someone shouted. The canister was thrown back but two more bounced in to replace it.

Children ran from the stinging chemicals, shouting each other’s names. They ran into the stoney arms of the police closing in. Some children fought and kicked, hoping to escape. Others pleaded not to be hurt.

Merry ran from the gas into the stomach of a security guard. The guard grabbed her by the shoulders and she wriggled and kicked to escape.

“Meredith, what the hell’s going on?!”

Merry looked up into the face of her father.

She threw her arms around him, weeping with relief; that everything would be alright now. But her father’s strong hands did not embrace her. They pushed Merry to arms length as he demanded to know why she and all these other kids were here causing such massive trouble.

As the tears and blood and gas mingled, fuel for the chaos, Merry told her Dad the truth of what was happening. He listened because she mentioned the suicide of her Mum. Her words were a kaleidoscope of nonsense and unspeakable truths. Of car crashes and Fairies, science experiments and nuclear weapons, alien women and alcohol.

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A few minutes earlier, from the force of the obsidian staff, the Everlaster landed in a field of oilseed rape .

“So much for my help,” he thought, standing up.

He heard police sirens heading towards the complex.

“I assume they’re not rushing to arrest the real criminals.” He looked up at the stars that hung over him. “O why should I bother?”

For a brief moment dark thoughts crossed his mind.

Thoughts that had occupied him for much longer at certain periods in the distant past. Like why should this keep going on, always the

powerful committing stupid acts, destroying and killing, yet never being any happier than those who don't.

Chandler Dahl thinks he's so modern, yet he's no different to Julius Caesar or Hernando Cortez.

The same crimes are committed time and time again. The world broken down by senselessness. He'd seen it all before so often.

But he remembered Merry's conversation amongst the trees. She has not seen all the things he has. The world is new to her.

And wasn't that the point?

Those children are fighting for the future, for lives they have yet to live. The mere promise of seeing a Fairy gives them hope.

The Everlaster pictured children in other parts of the world who were, right now, fighting adults. He saw children throwing stones at tanks. Children who believed a different world was possible; a world that was fair and where cruelty could be conquered.

A man like Chandler Dahl did not believe such worlds were possible, and he would send the soldiers in to crush the hopeful so he may never suffer the embarrassment of being proved wrong.

The Everlaster ran.

When the gates of SGR came back into view he was very surprised to see a hundred or more adults, who were not police or SGR, entering the grounds.

"That's interesting," he thought.

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When the children had been gathering earlier in Tiverton Preedy they had tried their best to be discreet. However, their tip-toed activity did not go entirely unnoticed.

Their efforts were betrayed by a gate left to slam or a ring tone too loud. The children's restrained commotion rocked sleeping Tiverton Preedy just enough to tip one or two adults into waking.

A curtain peeled back and eyes spied a group of six kids heading towards the canal. The peerer thought she recognised one of those children.

After a browse of the phonebook the parents of Janet Murphy were contacted. They discovered her bed empty.

Anxious enquiries to her friends' houses were made and more empty beds were found. Slowly the scale of the conspiracy was recognised. More and more adults were sucked into solving the mystery of why so many children were missing. They roamed the streets looking for them, waking even more people up.

At last they learnt the truth from one of those kids left behind. The brother of Patrick Owen had been left behind because of his broken leg. Hobbling on his crutch he told the adults their children had gone to SkweezumGabaal&Runne.

*

To the gates of SkweezumGabaal&Runne came the gaggle of parents. And there were other adults; family and friends caught up in the drama. They brandished stern looks and seethed with indignation over the absent kids.

But the sight that met their eyes disarmed them.

Through a thinning white mist that stung the eyes they saw their children, 40 or more. And almost as many cops. The police were roughly grabbing boys and girls, putting handcuffs on the cut and crying.

But some kids were resisting. While some were being bundled into the back of a van, others were fighting furiously. Pockets of resistance were scattered across the car park.

Any respect or fear the mums and dads may have felt for the police evaporated at the sight of them man-handling the terrified children. And so they rushed in to defend them.

The adults pulled their children free of the police, crowded the van, and hauled the prisoners out. For this the parents and friends

became new targets for the coppers' head cracking, boot stomping, arm breaking lust for preserving order.

Across the car park a mass brawl spread. A chaotic swirl of blood and violence that consumed everyone. Those who knew why they were fighting were rendered forgetful by the passion of battle.

Amongst them came the Everlaster. The shouting and screaming echoed through his mind activating memories.

It was over thirty years since he'd witnessed such a scene. Then too he had seen police fighting workers. It was an event called the miner's strike. It had been on the news all over the world and he had seen the pictures. Even if he had not seen a television or read a newspaper he would still have come to Britain. For the Story was strong here, then. He could feel it drawing him from across the continents.

He felt that feeling now. He was in the centre of a vortex. A crucible of destiny. He had felt it in the trenches of world war one, the factories of Petrograd in 1917, and the streets and Parliament of London during the English Civil War.

Now fate was here in Tiverton Preedy, in all her glory, about to spread her threads across the world. A new tapestry taking shape. For better or for worse.

Amongst the skirmishers the Everlaster found Gladice Gulchenrouz. "Come on, Gladabayu. We're going in there now."

"OK, Immanuel Balthazar."

The Arab and the albino escaped the writhing throng. They could see Chandler Dahl wielding the obsidian staff against Trent.

The boy was in serious trouble. Yet, to the Everlaster's amazement, he was some how resisting. The Everlaster could feel the waves of force the staff was channelling onto Trent. Yet the child was surviving it. The boy was struggling on all fours, but by now he should have been nothing but a tiny ball of gristle.

"Some force protects him."

“He certainly smells human,” said Gladice.

“O this is novel,” said the Everlaster, intrigued. “But we’ve got to get that staff.”

“Come on then,” said Glad. She jumped into the air and turned into a bat. She approached Chandler Dahl from above and behind, out of his line of sight, then dove towards his head. Just before reaching him she turned back into a girl and landed on his head and shoulders.

Before Dahl had a chance to throw her off Gladice sank her teeth into his neck.

“Aaargh!” screamed Chandler, instinctively whacking Gladice with the obsidian staff.

The power that was oppressing Trent lifted.

As the Everlaster rushed in to help Gladice wrestle the staff from Chandler Dahl, the eye of the staff caught Gladice in its sight.

The staff blasted her from Chandler’s back.

Chandler Dahl immediately twisted to point the staff’s eye at the Everlaster. The Everlaster felt the staff begin to assault him. But the blast of energy never came. Trent had placed his hand over the staff’s eye. In Trent’s hand was a dollop of soil. The eye was blinded.

Before Chandler realised that the staff was now powerless he felt the Everlaster’s fist crash into his face. The staff slipped from his hand and he fell on his back, unconscious.

The Everlaster picked up the staff.

“Give that to me, Utnapishtim,” said Trent.

The Everlaster looked at him, saw the red glow of his eyes. “Who wants it?”

“Earth. She can destroy it.”

“Earth? Is that what happened to you, Trent, in the hospital?”

“How do you know about that?” the red glow died down at Trent’s surprise.

“We haven’t time now for stories. Here.” The Everlaster gave Trent the staff and then headed into the warehouse. Gladice followed him.

Meanwhile, Trent, his eyes glowing brightly, plunged the obsidian staff eye-first into the ground.

Chapter 23

The Big Bang

*In which the struggle between Woe and
Ayina is continued, and the outcome
decided.*

Both Gladice and the Everlaster picked up shards of broken glass as they climbed past the lorry into the warehouse.

The building was now occupied by a huge sphere, the surface of which touched the tips of the fifteen spires. The surface of the sphere was perfectly reflective.

The Everlaster's voice echoed strangely as he shouted. "Let's try this again!" The engineers and disarmed guards looked at him nervously, and wondered where Mr Dahl was. "You've 10 seconds to deactivate that," he pointed at the sphere, "or I'll make this cold floor your final bed."

The engineers did nothing.

"8 seconds. If you're going to deal in weapons, then you should be prepared to die. 4 seconds."

Still the engineers ignored his instruction.

"Then you have decided."

Both he and Gladice charged forward.

The last sight the nearest engineer saw was a five year old girl running at him. The last thing he felt was his blood rushing over his hands from a gash in his neck. The last sound he heard were the screams of his colleagues. And the last thing he thought about was the holiday he had planned for his family.

He died before he could hear the last of the engineers begging for mercy and promising to stop the transport.

"Do it, quickly," ordered the Everlaster.

The engineer fumbled with the control panel.

Merry and her Dad had only her mother on their minds as the fighters churned around them. Merry told how the experiments of SGR had caused the depression and suicide of her Mum. Her father's thoughts and emotions boiled like the crowd around him. What he heard was unbelievable, yet he recalled his wife's depression had seemed to come out of nowhere. What Merry said made some sense. But if true the implications were almost unfathomable. He became

aware now of the chaos around them. It seemed as if all reality was shattering.

And then there was

A

Big

Bang

An entire wall of windows in the lab block exploded. Out with the flames and shards flew Woe and Ayina.

Fighting as they fell.

But for that plummeting second the Fairy had the advantage, for, unlike Woe, she did not have to obey gravity's commands. Ayina flew around Woe as she fell, making three attacks that Woe could not defend against.

Only the golden armour prevented Woe from being mortally wounded. Ayina's powerful attacks did, however, cause damage. The small power plant hidden in the pile of corpses on Woe's back was straining to produce enough force to deflect the Fairy's halberd. Ayina cut deep scratches into the gold.

The protective energy of Woe's suit of armour could not last forever, but neither could Ayina's physical endurance. Both fighters were now tiring.

With Woe's feet back on the ground she could move and spin her body to parry Ayina's attacks and strike back.

As those two struggled in mortal feud, falling ever deeper into a delirium of combat, they were entirely unaware of the effect they were producing. Their furious energies were, in fact, stilling the world around them.

Children and police, parents and security guards; all halted what they were doing as the extraordinary sight of Woe and Ayina met their eyes. A whirlwind of shining gold and rainbow colours. Even Merry and her Dad had their attentions captured.

But Ayina moved so fast the onlookers could not discern her shape, even as the fighters edged closer and closer.

Ayina flew beneath Woe at a moment the woman became unbalanced. As the Fairy had done first in the science lab, she lifted Woe from the floor.

But there was no ceiling in the way now and Ayina pushed Woe higher and higher, lungs burning and back throbbing as she gambled her final reserves of energy on this last move.

The humans' sense of marvel only increased as the golden figure shot up into the sky, reaching so high that she joined the stars as a speck of light.

Finally Ayina stopped.

For a moment Woe hung as if weightless. Beneath her spread the hills and valleys of Tiverton Preedy and beyond. The land was a galaxy of yellow lights, with the bright white stain of floodlight in the middle: the grounds of SGR.

Woe plummeted.

Ayina took two gulps of breath to cool her burning lungs. Then she dove, streaking down to catch up with Woe.

Ayina bore through the cold sky, towards the Earth, to come in beside tumbling Woe.

Woe twisted, attempting to defend herself, as the six inch fury swirled around her, attacking from all angles. But, without wings, there was little she could do.

An industrial cacophony of screaming metal, crystal ringing and cracking energy echoed through the sky to be heard by the people on the ground. Explosions of light reached the crowd a second before the sound. It was like some tiny electrical storm. And it was coming. Speeding straight towards them.

People screamed. Turned and ran. Of those injured the lucky ones were dragged and carried. The unlucky ones were left to move in panic crawls, like tortured insects. And some didn't move at all.

But the most able bodied got only metres before the ear splitting crash drew them to a halt and, as if large invisible hands had

grabbed each person by the top of the head, swivelled them round to look.

They saw the golden figure, prostrate on the tarmac and burbling worms of blue lightning, an instant before the shard of rainbow struck.

Ayina dove so quick she was a spear of colour. And she plunged head first into Woe's chest.

Every onlooker raised their hands to their eyes as a flare brighter than fifty fireworks erupted from the point where Ayina's blade pierced Woe's armour.

When their optic nerves recovered long moments later all light had left the scene except that thrown down by the floodlights.

No sound or movement came from the golden figure for many moments. Every onlooker had forgotten themselves in wonder, curiosity and apprehension. And then a tiny bedraggled woman emerged from the creature's chest and jumped down. From different directions Merry, Esme and Percy ran to her.

Ayina fluttered into Percy's hands. "I need food," she said, as other children came closer for a look. Georgie Salt dug a Yorkshire Mixture from his pocket. "That smells good," said Ayina. Merry took it and placed it on Percy's palm.

Ayina took the sticky sweet in both hands and began to lick and suck it rather messily.

People crowded round to look at the Fairy.

Those who could not see crowded around Woe instead. "It's a person," someone gasped. They saw skin paler than paper through the cracks of the armour. In the chest plate was a gaping hole exposing a huge wound.

Behind burst ribs could be seen two stilled hearts. The right heart was black and the left was purple.

More people huddled round for a close look. As they leant forward, their shadows slid over Woe's form like black silk scarves, merging into a single shroud of darkness.

Woe's right heart spasmed.

“Something moved,” thought one of the curious, aloud.

They leant closer.

Woe’s heart began to pump.

“Wuurgghh, look at that,” someone murmured as the ribs grew back, like claws slowly closing.

Suddenly Ayina’s voice poked through the hush. “Don’t crowd round her like that! You’re blocking the light!”

Woe’s lungs inflated as her flesh closed like curtains. The rush of air created a metallic wheeze. The wheeze morphed into a cry of rage.

The gathered backed away, but not before Woe had sunk and vanished into the shadows they had kindly lent her.

A few moments after the engineer began to manipulate the control panel, the sphere stopped shrinking at two thirds its original size. The bottom of the sphere now cleared the ground.

“Now I can,” began the engineer, but he silenced when a scythe blade erupted from his side. He was lifted off his feet, hanging from the scythe like a morsel of food.

Woe limped out from behind the apparatus and flicked the engineer across the floor to join the other corpses.

She pressed a switch and the sphere began to shrink again, then she smashed the controls with her scythe..

“No,” shouted the Everlaster, and he lunged at Woe. “Let me see your face,” and he tore off Woe’s broken helmet. She pushed him away and grinned as he looked upon her for the first time.

As he saw the freed tendrils on her scalp, writhing like snakes, and looked into her burning green eyes ancient memories stirred in his mind.

“This world is not for you,” he screamed. He heaved Woe off her feet and ran with her at the sphere. The pair struck its surface and bounced off. The sphere, now half its original size continued to shrink.

The Everlaster picked himself up and desperately flung himself at one of the spires, punching and kicking it. The object was too hard and heavy for him to damage it.

“We need the staff,” he shouted at Gladice. As she turned into a bat and flew out the door Woe grabbed the Everlaster in a tight hold. “*I’ve had enough of you,*” she said holding him off the ground.

Woe carried the wriggling man over to the lorry. With one arm she tilted the lorry cabin up off one wheel. Some of her wounds split open again as she strained her entire body. Woe flung the Everlaster underneath and dropped the lorry on top of him. The wheel pinned him to the ground by his stomach.

“*Now watch,*” said Woe stepping beside the array, “*the sending of this sphere; this cask of lamentation.*”

Gladice landed beside Trent. “We need the obsidian staff, quick.”

“I’ve destroyed it,” said Trent.

Gladice gasped. “Then what can we do?” she asked, raising her eyes and palms to the sky.

“Your answers are not up there,” said Trent. Except it wasn’t Trent, it was Earth speaking through him.

Where he’d plunged the staff into the ground he now withdrew a new object. It was the same length as the obsidian staff and it was black. But it was a different kind of black, dull not shiny. This staff was wooden and hard as stone.

With it Trent ran into the warehouse.

The transport sphere had shrunk to the size of a small car. When the Everlaster saw Trent he called. “We need to destroy the machines.”

“I do not destroy. I create,” Trent called back.

Woe recognised Trent from their encounter in the woods. “*Abhh. You have something of mine,*” she said, tapping her temple with a golden finger.

Earth had told Trent to plunge the staff into Woe's chest, but now he was stood before her it seemed an almost impossible task. Even though she had shed half her armour and she still bled from multiple wounds she was a terrifying sight. And with that giant, deadly blade.

Trent ran at Woe, his bare feet thudding on the hard ground. "She'll cleave you in two," cried Gladice behind him.

With the staff above his head Trent lunged for Woe's chest. The scythe swept towards him. Gladice leapt in front. The little girl slid across the ground, leaving a smear of blood. The Everlaster called her name. Trent felt Woe's boot strike him in the face. Pain exploded. He fell backwards several feet. The staff clattered across the floor.

With blurred vision Trent saw Woe tower over him. He strained to breath as her foot pressed down on his chest.

Woe raised the scythe over her head, and brought it down towards Trent's.

Bang!

Woe staggered backwards.

Bang! Bang!

She staggered back further, lost grip of the scythe and it fell.

With his gun aimed firmly at Woe, Merry's Dad stepped towards her. "This is for my wife." He emptied his gun at her. The bullets punctured her now useless armour, obliterating her right heart in an explosion of black blood; the blood that destroys. Stalactites of stone dripped from her back.

Woe sank to her knees. Her mouth hung open in pain and shock.

Merry came in behind her Dad, followed by Percy and Esme (who now held Ayina) and a load of other kids. Peter entered and saw Gladice bleeding heavily on the ground. He ran to her and picked her up. "I'll get you to your coffin," he told her and carried her out.

"Don't let Woe reach the shadows," cried the Everlaster as Woe began crawling towards the darkness behind the control panels.

Percy ran between Woe and the darkness, blocking her way. Merry joined him and then the other children, creating a circle around her. Except Esme who didn't want to put Ayina in any more danger.

As Woe crawled desperately onwards, Percy stepped forwards and kicked her in the face. She rolled over onto her back.

The children closed in.

"Is that hate I smell?" said Woe, smiling weakly. Then the kids all started kicking her. Woe made sounds that could have been crying or laughing or screaming, until Trent pushed between the kids.

"Don't kill her!" he shouted. The kids stopped their assault.

Trent plunged his staff into her remaining heart.

Woe screamed and Trent stood back, the staff protruding from Woe's chest.

All of Woe's body from beneath her neck began to throb grotesquely. Her torso grew like a giant boil. The children stepped backwards. Woe's fingers split open and shoots of growth burst out. Toadstools popped like blisters from her palms. The remains of her armour cracked apart.

The children continued to step back as Woe got bigger and bigger. Her body was the size of a young elephant's when it burst open, dousing those nearby with fungus spores, pollen, perfumes and filth. Like a squid forced through a keyhole, five huge tentacles poured out of her.

One tentacle was green and much like a giant beanstalk. Thorns and flowers erupted across its skin and smaller vines with leaves grew from it.

The second tentacle was red, covered with scales in parts and plates of chitin (like scorpions have) in others. The tentacle was studded with giant flies eyes, and spiders legs grew like hairs.

The third tentacle was blue but translucent like a jelly fish. It oozed slime and inside it swam indistinct shapes.

The fourth tentacle was covered in white fur. Great teeth jutted from it. Here and there waggled bright pink tongues. Giant nipples leaked milk across the floor.

The final tentacle was covered in feathers of every colour and description. Beaks jutted from it like thorns.

Most people didn't notice these details, though. They were too busy screaming and running for the door.

The tentacles pushed out in all directions, growing on and on like silk from a magician's sleeve.

That which had been Woe was now the size of a house. Only Woe's head remained unchanged, poking from the heaving, churning mass amidst countless other growths. Her screaming was drowned out by the many belches, squelches, hisses, spurts, squawks, moans, groans, gurgles, squeaks, barks and farts produced by this mess of life.

As people squeezed out through the doors the glob grew to the size of two houses, now four. The edge of the mass touched Woe's scythe. The scythe released its black tendrils and an area of the mutation began to petrify. But quickly the tendrils ran out. The parts of the growth turned to stone broke up and were absorbed. The scythe was swallowed.

The tentacles, thick as cars, thrashed about and heaved against the walls and ceiling. The blue tentacle smashed into the transport array, where the sphere had now shrunk to the size of a golf ball. Several spires were shattered and the tentacle burst, spilling tonnes of jelly fish, frog spawn, corals, sponges, blubber and water. The marble sized sphere dropped out of the air, landing in the mush.

The red tentacle swung into the lorry, tossing it on its side.

Finally free, the Everlaster ran to the side of the expanding creation and thrust his hands into a bramble bush growing from it. He staggered backwards before the thing could consume him, with Woe's scythe in his hands.

As the thing nearly filled the warehouse the Everlaster began to climb it. He scrambled up a shifting mound of tree trunks, spinal columns, fins, proboscises, humps, mushrooms, limbs, tusks, cacti, gills, eyes and orifices of every kind. His hands and feet felt sticky sap, soft skin, prickly fish, rubbery leaves, thick fleeces, petals, webs and

slime. He smelt honey, salt, camels, orange, lavender, grass, cinnamon, eggs, myrrh and skunks.

He was two thirds the way up when he felt the wall against his back. He was pressed and smothered and then the wall cracked. It burst apart and now the Everlaster felt the outside air. He was oblivious to the terrified but transfixed crowd beneath. The crowd ran clear then stopped to watch the whole warehouse collapse open to reveal the entire mountain of mutation.

Only one individual ran towards the thing. She was August Landfill, who had spotted Chandler Dahl lying unconscious in the path of the ever growing glob.

August knelt beside her boss, with the wall of living matter only three metres away. "Wake up, Sir!" She shook him. He didn't respond. She felt the hot stinking breath of countless animals behind her.

She jabbed Chandler Dahl with a shock stick. He bolted upright and opened his eyes. He screamed. He scrambled backwards as eight giant mandibles lifted August off the ground. She drowned in a thousand fluttering butterfly tongues before a landslide of flesh fell over her. The flesh tumbled towards Chandler Dahl.

Having climbed the back of a crocodile the Everlaster reached the top of the mountain. From the middle of a field of mould grew a flamingo neck, on top of which was Woe's head.

He grabbed a handful of her snake-like hair and, with the scythe, reaped her head free.

Instantly every biting jaw, every writhing tentacle, swirling eye, fluttering feather, rippling muscle, every limb and wing stopped moving. All barking, clicking, warbling and mooing ceased.

The mass beneath the Everlaster's feet began to sink like a deflating bouncy castle.

The collapse became more rapid and Chandler Dahl had to outrun a wave of collapsing everything. The stew of rotting matter washed over him. By the time he crawled clear, helped by two EmSec guards, the mutation had become a gargantuan compost heap.

It was a hill of rich fertiliser when the Everlaster emerged from it. He carried Woe's scythe in one hand and her head in the other. Woe's head had turned to stone; her face forever trapped in a scream of rage.

Chapter 24
“Let Us Gather, And Tomorrow...”

*In which the children get praised
and the adults get done.*

“Put your hands up if you work at this place,” said the Everlaster. About 80 adults put up their hands.

“You’ve been working for her.” And he held Woe’s head up for everyone to see. “Which is awfully generous of you, considering she’s the reason you’ve all been feeling very bad lately.

“But you have good reason to feel bad. What has that Fairy, or her people, done to you that you would have them killed? You’ve been making missiles to be used against a world you didn’t even know existed.

“You are each a link in a chain of evil that stretches out of sight. But ignorance of what is at the end of that chain does not absolve you of guilt. You did not ask questions about the weapons you worked on as long as you were paid properly.

“If it wasn’t for the courage and imagination of your children, humanity itself might already be doomed.

“You must ask yourselves, do you want to make weapons for people who would destroy another world; for the people who develop secret ways to control your minds.

“The missiles weren’t the only weapons made here. In those science labs psychological weapons are forged. You and every adult in Tiverton Preedy were the guinea pigs for an experiment. An experiment that worked, because the day after Woe made you all unhappy you stopped your strike and went back to work. You must recognise now the changes that occurred to all your personalities. Your children noticed from the start.

“But now,” and he pointed at Ayina for emphasis, “you are no longer ignorant of the truth. Your children came here tonight to commit a great act of kindness and bravery. The same people who abused you had kidnapped that Fairy. Your children learned of this and of what Woe did to you. And risking their own safety they came to fight for that creature’s freedom. And to fight for you.

“Without their quick actions you’d be waking up this morning and every morning miserable and selfish, but good little employees who do everything SGR tell them.”

Merry's Dad interrupted, "my daughter says this Woe killed my wife. Are you saying SkweezumGrabaal&Runne are responsible? And those two suicides on Sunday?"

"If not for SkweezumGrabaal&Runne those people might still be alive."

Merry's Dad and the adults looked towards Chandler Dahl, hiding behind the guards, hiding behind the police.

Chandler Dahl shouted. "Why are we listening to this nonsense. All these people are trespassers, get them out of here or shoot them." The police obeyed Dahl's wishes. They readied their weapons, forming a line between Dahl and the angry crowd.

The police sergeant spoke. "There will be an investigation into what happened here. Any evidence of criminal acts will lead to prosecutions, but at this minute none of you should be here, and certainly not now that this is the scene of a criminal investigation. If you go now, and peacefully, no arrests will be made against you."

There were angry mutterings.

"Let us go," said the Everlaster to the townsfolk. "Take the Fairy to a safe place. There's nothing more to be done here."

Rather reluctantly everybody left the grounds. As the Everlaster led the crowd away Esme ran to him with Ayina. Children and adults closely followed her, crowding round for a close look at the Fairy.

"Everlaster," whispered Ayina, after she had leapt from Esme and landed on his shoulder, "the important question I need to ask: do you think the human race will help Aeval in our war?"

"You can ask them yourself, they are here around you. But before you do we should find a place more befitting than a road." The Everlaster shouted for others to hear. "Is there a place nearby where many can gather and hear what the Fairy has to say?"

"The parish hall?" someone suggested.

"Then people," shouted the Everlaster, "at 7.00am the Fairy will be speaking at the parish hall. I'm sure your curious to hear what she has to say. Go tell your friends and relatives who aren't here now

about it. But if some of you would be kind enough to stay with us for now and offer us some protection. Just in case.”

The Sun rose on the procession marching back to Tiverton Preedy, accompanied by a melody of birdsong.

Some of the people raced ahead to spread the news.

Trent approached the Everlaster. “Utnapishtim, you are the answerer of questions. I have some to ask you.”

“Hmm,” said the Everlaster. “We will speak soon. First there is something I must do. Has anybody got a phone on them?” he asked looking around.

“Yes,” someone replied.

“Can I borrow it a moment, please?”

“Who are you phoning?” asked Merry.

“The BBC.”

*

The parish hall was crammed with people of all ages: mothers with babies, pensioners and students. Children perched on windowsills as every inch of space was filled. Faces crammed at the window and a crowd spilled out from the open doors and spread across the road.

The Fairy stood on a desk in the centre of a small stage. A microphone was at her feet so everyone could hear her.

Through the bodies at the doors squeezed a BBC journalist and cameraman, just as the Fairy began to speak.

“I am Ayina. I am a Fairy from a world called Aeval, which exists in alternative dimensions. I am the first of my kind to come to Earth for over 500 years.”

The cameraman zoomed in on Ayina and her speech was now being broadcast live across the country on every BBC channel. Millions of people waking up for breakfast and getting ready for work stopped everything they were doing as they saw Ayina on their TVs

with the message running across the bottom of the screen: Exclusive! 'Fairy' discovered in Yorkshire.

"I have been chosen to come to Earth and initiate contact with human beings. To make you aware of our existence.

"It is not only Fairy's that I represent, but also Trolls, Goblins, Dryads, Merfolk, Centaurs and Genies. I come on a mission of peace and friendship. Any preconceptions you may have about our people in your myths and stories should be forgotten.

"Having witnessed your internet I will be able to construct for you a special website for all on Earth to access which will give you basic information about my world and its many cultures. For now let it be known that our civilisations are far older than humanity's, our technology more advanced, our air cleaner and our habitats healthier.

"We hope you will prove to us a genuine desire for friendship and cooperation, in which case we will be happy to offer you advice and help in solving the problems your world may be facing. It is up to you whether you wish to take it. Even in ancient times, when the rulers of Aeval were sometimes tyrants, we only ever came to Earth as visitors, never as conquerors.

"You may be wondering why we have chosen now to make open contact with you. Circumstances have forced us. Our world has been invaded by alien creatures from a dying planet. Having carelessly wasted their own, they wish to take over ours. Having had no war on our world for centuries we were entirely unprepared for the attack. And so we suffered heavy losses before we could build up a resistance.

"So I was sent here to find out if humankind was prepared to help us. We know that if the Jae-Mareeda defeat us then they will eventually attack Earth.

"So, sons and daughters of Earth, I implore you to trust the news I bring. Believe that we Fairies are your friends. Great kindness has already been shown to me by these children. They met the monster Woe, who was from the Jae-Mareeda world, and they have witnessed for themselves the evil that these creatures represent. They and others among you saw what was happening amongst those you

call SkweezumGabaal&Runne. They know SkweezumGabaal&Runne have become involved with the Jae-Mareeda. The invaders of my own world are already amongst you.

“These children here saved my life and for that myself and my world are deeply grateful.”

This particularly pleased and excited the children.

“The masters of SkweezumGabaal&Runne want power and wealth. I know this because I have met one of them. But human beings are destined for more than that. Be our friends and you will know another world. A world without poverty, or jealousy, or superstition.

“You may think these are just dreams, but you have the science to make dreams come true. All you need is the will; the desire.

“My people must fight a war against others. For you, the battle is with yourselves.”

There was silence for a moment. “We should help the Fairies all we can,” Merry whispered to her Dad. Her Dad thought silently for a moment. He stood and addressed to the crowd:

“Five years ago my wife died of suicide. Her depression nearly destroyed my family... did destroy her. Today I found out that that creature, Woe, made my wife like that. And that that creature was working for SkweezumGabaal&Runne. Well, I'd rather be unemployed than work for them any more. They toy with people's lives. They wanted to use us all.

“If SGR are enemies of the Fairies, than I want to help the Fairies.

“With my own eyes I saw that Fairy kill my wife's murderer. If the Fairies ask us to be friends then I for one say 'aye', and any man or woman here would be a fool not to say 'aye' with me.” The children cheered their support and determination.

All the adults who witnessed Ayina fight Woe and who had heard the Everlaster speak shouted their agreement to Merry's Dad.

The enthusiasm spread to those who were seeing the Fairy for the first time.

Ernest Steer was present and he addressed the crowd. “The Fairy is asking us to be her allies. We must do this democratically and put the question to the vote. But first, does anybody offer an objection for us offering our solidarity to the peoples of Fairyland?”

“What if doing that provokes these aliens to attack Earth?”

“They’ve already attacked us,” implored Merry’s Dad. “Has tha not been listening. If the Fairy hadn’t come to Tiverton Preedy, we wouldn’t know about Woe and her race. They could be all over the place.”

“Any other objections?” asked Ernest Steer. There was a heavy silence. “Then we shall vote. Those who agree that the people of Tiverton Preedy, as representatives of humanity, should pledge their friendship and solidarity to the Fairy and her people; those who agree raise your hands.”

Every child instantly raised an arm, even those who had not gone to SGR last night. From them radiated a rising of adult hands. Everybody in the room raised their hands and even people outside.

“Then it is unanimous,” announced Steer. He turned to Ayina. “Ayina of the Fairies, we, the human race, extend our hand of friendship to you and your people. We offer you our support and solidarity.”

As Ayina thanked them all the hall filled with a great cheering and merriment.

Epilogue

Cheering echoed from TV sets around the world, ousting the silence that had held it. No person listened to the Fairy's broadcast more keenly than the Prime Minister of Great Britain. As his breakfast toast stuck in his throat the phone rang. On TV the reporter at Tiverton Preedy was talking into the camera, describing what we had all just seen for ourselves.

"Hello," said the Prime Minister into the phone. "Yes, I'm watching it... I know... it's very awkward yes... I'll see you once you're back in London, Mr Dahl. Just come on over."

The Prime Minister finished getting ready and did not see the Arab man on TV being asked questions by the reporter.

"You are the man that discovered the Fairy. Is that right?"

"No, she discovered us. And the first people to meet her were four children. They're around here somewhere. But I played a part in freeing the Fairy from her kidnappers."

"The Fairy was kidnapped?"

"Yes. By SkweezumGrabaal&Runne. You'll have to ask them for their reasons why. But the rescue resulted in the destruction of their facility just north of here. I suggest you send someone up to take a look."

"Oh. Umm, we will."

"Look," said the Everlaster, "I suggest you go ask Ayina herself a few questions while you still have the chance."

The Reporter pushed her way to the front and approached Ayina at the table. Now up close to the Fairy the reporter was overcome by the import of the moment. She held the microphone tightly in both hands, as if it was a lightsaber, and pushed it tentatively towards Ayina.

"So you *are* a Fairy?"

"That's right."

“And you’ve come to Earth from another world to make contact with us, erm, humans. Is that right?”

“Yes, to establish communications between humans and the people of Aeval.”

“Will you be meeting the Prime Minister, or any other world leaders?”

“Why would I want to meet them?”

“Well... to arrange diplomatic relations between our government and yours.”

“But I’ve already spoken to the human’s assembled here and to people around the world. You have been broadcasting this around Earth, haven’t you?”

“O yes,” said the reporter proudly.

“Then such a meeting can serve no purpose. In fact, I would find it personally distasteful. Perhaps you think that such a meeting would make proceedings ‘official’, but in my language there is no word for ‘official’. No word for politician either. Our governments died out centuries ago, our bureaucracies withered or were hacked away. And there are words in my language that you have no equivalent of, to describe how *we* do things. I must go soon. But when others of my kind come here, it will be to talk to the *people* of Earth, not their masters.”

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“I would ask you not to do anything rash. There is still time for change.”

“Is there, Everlaster? After all you’ve just said to me?”

Trent and the Everlaster were alone in a small room in the parish hall. They had been talking for half an hour. Trent’s eyes glowed red as he spoke.

“I will not become like my brother. I can see humanity now, through human eyes, and I will know what to do soon. You are beasts like any other, though you lay the fields with tar and rake the sky with planes. Before my power your civilisations are but saplings before a glacier. If I find the only way to preserve myself is by destroying humanity, then I shall not hesitate to plough you all back into the ground – to become food for the next cycle of life.”

The Everlaster pleaded. “I know we have... we *are* causing a lot of damage. Yes, with our technology we reap destruction, but with it we can sow creation. We can be your carers.”

“You would care for me? You do not even care for yourselves. I have touched the ones this child called ‘druggies’. Your species have fought wars since your infancy, and you are the only organisms to commit suicide for reasons other than the good of the species.”

“The races of Aeval had those faults too, long ago. We can change. We just need more time.”

“Time is what *you* no longer have, Everlaster. Why does that surprise you? After all these millennia have you still not learnt your true nature? O Infinite Story, yours will have an ending. By my permission you were created, and by my grace you last. You are not here by chance. If anything in this universe has purpose it is you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It is time to stop hiding from destiny. You, and the species you champion, have woven an epic tale, but some masterworks remain, forever, unfinished. The end to your story is approaching. How it shall be written is down to you and each of the billions you represent.”

“Trent!”

The colour drained from the boys eyes and he turned towards the source of the voice. His expression softened completely.

“Mum!?... Dad!?”

Trent’s parents ran to him. “Oh, where have you been?” asked his mother, sobbing as she hugged him.

He hugged her back, and when he looked at her face he felt as though he was waking from a dream; that everything he had experienced in the past three days was unreal. Her smell and the sound of her voice brought tears to his eyes. “Mum?...” Only now did he realise what he had been on the verge of turning his back on.

“Where have you been?” his Mum asked again.

“I can’t remember,” he lied.

“We should get you back to hospital.”

“No! I’m okay. I just wanna go home.”

“Okay,” she replied. She looked up at the Everlaster for the first time, and recognised him from the TV report. He had been on the TV when she spotted Trent in the crowd. Without knowing why she smiled at him. The Everlaster nodded and then Trent and his parents left the room.

Deep in Cradleford forest stood Trent, his parents, Percy, Merry and her father, Aunty Rosemary, Esme, her brothers and sisters, the Everlaster, and dozens of others, child and adult. Pete was there too, though not Gladabayu, because the Sun was shining. She slept now in her child’s coffin, in the boot of Pete’s car filled with red earth. They had all come to see Ayina off, as she returned to her homeworld.

“That bunch had a load of machinery,” said Merry, “to open a way into their world. How are you going to get back, without any of your own?”

“I’m tiny compared to all those missiles, so it takes much less effort to shrink and transport me. But you are right, I do need machinery. That machinery is all around you, though it is camouflaged at the moment.”

Everyone looked around, trying to spot it.

Ayina flew into the air and turned to face them all, hovering in one precise spot:

“In minutes I return to Aeval’s care.
Space and time will twist till I stand there.
Dimensions turned; your point of view I’ll leave.
With naught but frail mem’ries, should you believe
That I was no more than a dream, well think
But this and all is mended. Our worlds link:
Like lover’s hearts that never touch yet feel,
Like social bonds that selfish thoughts conceal.
We thrive and rave in the shadows of your blood
Midst cities furled in Earth’s smallest flower bud.
If you could peer within yourselves you’d see
The poet, the lover, the refugee.
Your tales of Aeval doubters will claim dreams,
But truth, like jewels, in just sunlight gleams.
When you sleep, should fear come and doubt renew,
Have hope, for we, your dreams, do fight for you.”

And even before her words were finished the colours returned, stripping like blistered paint from trees and stones and even the sky, where they had waited, camouflaged as Ayina said, for nearly four days. They came towards her, flowing like the water round a plug hole.

The spinning rainbow torrent engulfed Ayina. Like clay on a potter’s wheel being shaped by invisible hands, it formed the perfect sphere. The colours, now one, became white.

And then the shrinking process began.

While the sphere shrank down to a subatomic point, small enough to slip between the dimensions, Merry’s Dad said:

“I didn’t catch half o’ what she just said.”

“Dad!” cried Merry in embarrassment.

“One day,” said the Everlaster, “we will *all* understand.”