

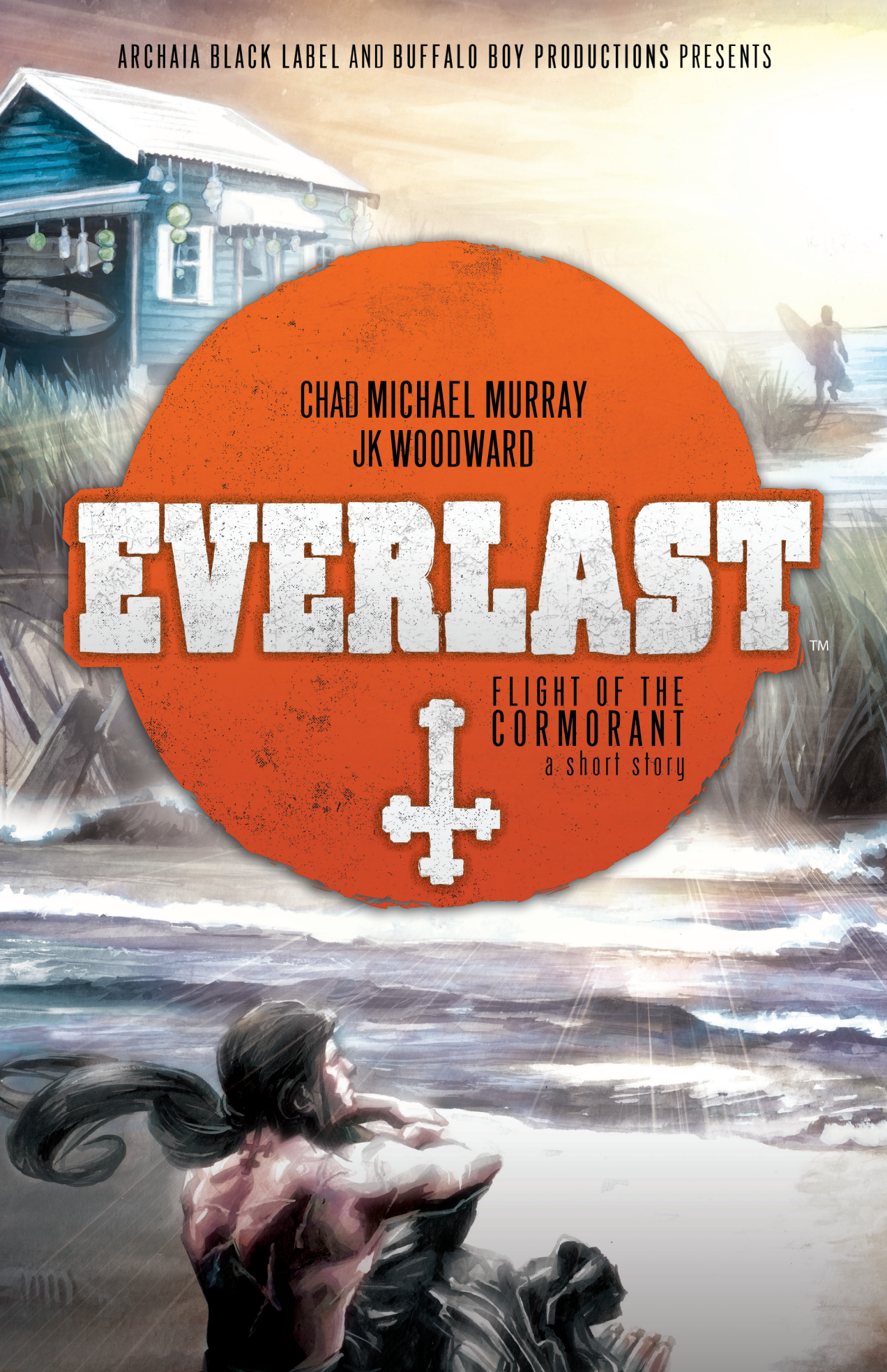
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EVERLAST

TM

FLIGHT OF THE
CORMORANT
a short story





FLIGHT OF THE CORMORANT

AN EVERLAST SHORT

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As the black ocean swelled and swayed, a plastic bottle floated through the film on the surface and washed ashore with the angry waves. It settled against the filthy sand, right at the feet of Dean Trufont, a young man with blond, shaggy hair. He bent and picked it up, tossing it into his almost full trash bag, and continued down the beach. There was always another piece of trash to pick up. There was always another part of his beach to try and save.

The beach was the only real home Dean had ever known. Strings of orphanages and foster homes had been just that—strings, tying him down, binding him. Here on the beach, he was free. The ocean was unpredictable and uncontrollable, but it was eternal. Dean felt oddly safe in knowing that it had been there

long before mankind ever left dirty footprints on its shores and would be there long after they were gone. And for all the days in between, Dean knew it would be there for him, setting the tempo of the universe with each rise and swell, each crash of breakers against the sand.

Even now, as ruined as the beach was, Dean loved it there. Old, grey factories lined most of the coastline, pumping smoke into the sky. The shoreline had eroded all the way up to the cracked bike paths that were now used as makeshift streets for the few cars that ever passed through. The car tires would kick up the dirty water and sand, leaving oil slicks in their wakes. It didn't matter to Dean, though—beauty still lived there. It didn't matter how much pollution mankind threw down, there would always be something pure about the ocean, something that spoke to the existence of forces beyond humanity that were bigger than Dean would ever understand, or ever wanted to.

His trash bag full, Dean headed for home. Though he would always be happiest out on the waves, every man needs a roof over his head, and years ago Dean had found his tucked into the greenery of one of the few lush spots left on the coastline. His small beachcomber

shack was sky blue and weathered, with slanted white shutters. The paint was chipping and the white picket fence was slightly cockeyed. Green glass orbs and conk shells hung off the gutters from white rope. His small but bountiful garden provided him with most of the food he needed. Living off the land as much as he could was just another way Dean tried to give back to the planet no one else seemed to care much about.

It was a quiet life at his little beach shack, and Dean liked it that way. This morning, like every morning, he had woken early, just as the sun began to poke its head over the horizon. He'd watched the orange glow grow over the ocean as he finished his morning coffee and checked the surf. Those quiet moments in the morning were sometimes his favorite of the day. Now, back from picking up trash for a while, he dressed in his favorite green baggies and decided on a surfboard for the day. One day, it'd be a long board, the next, a paddle board, and when the waves were just right, like today, it would be his favorite short board. He tucked the board under one arm and headed down the beach, stopping at his garden to pick a single, yellow carnation on his way out.

Not too far down the beach from his shack stood a brightly colored surf shop. It was petite, but had a personality bigger than its stature. When its white, wood awnings were opened, passersby couldn't help but come in, rent a board, and hit the waves. The walls of the shop had been graffitied so often that the street art had morphed into a mural of vibrant colors and images that welcomed everyone inside. Dean never went inside, but every morning before it opened he would pause outside the front door. Today was no different. Leaning down, he gently placed the single, yellow carnation on the doorstep and continued on down the beach toward his favorite surf spot.

As noon approached and the sun sat directly overhead, Dean looked back from where he floated on the waves towards the surf shop. A little ball formed in the pit of his stomach as the door opened and the owner of the shop stepped out into the sunshine. She was a stunning redheaded woman in her mid thirties, with a smattering of freckles across her nose. Dean had never had the courage to ask her name, but he loved her freckles. Every





summer, she'd get a few more as her skin became more sun-kissed. This morning, like every morning, she leaned down, her red hair falling over her shoulder, and picked up the yellow carnation. She looked up with her light-blue eyes, hoping once again in vain to spot her admirer waiting in the wings.

Dean smiled and paddled out farther into the waves.

* * *

Derek Everlast sat shirtless on the garbage-ridden beach, his arms resting on his knees. He watched as Dean paddled back out past the breakers. Everlast's dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, exposing the inverted cross tattoo on the back of his neck that reached from the base of his skull to just above his shoulder blades. Deep scars cut across the ink in places, battle wounds that told more tales than Everlast himself ever would. He never liked to talk about the past.

With one eye closed, Everlast peered up at the hot sun and grimaced. He gripped

the five signal flares in his right hand tighter and sighed. "I hate the beach," he said.

* * *

Dean straddled his board peacefully and breathed in the new day's gift of sunshine, ocean mist, and life. Here, he was in his element; his blond hair stiff with salt, his skin baked just the right shade of bronze. The thin layer of film collecting around his board didn't bother him, not out here. All he saw was natural beauty. It would take more than a little pollution to scare him away from the waves.

With a smile on his face, Dean looked out for his next wave. A furrowed brow quickly replaced his smile as his eyes caught a glimpse of a large shape moving under the water a few yards out. The moving shadow suddenly became two, then a whole group, and they were all headed straight towards him.

"Shit, sharks," he said to himself.

Slowly, he lifted his legs out of the water and onto his board. He looked around, hoping in a stroke of luck to see a boat out or another surfer down the beach. The only

person within eyeshot was a dark figure sitting alone on the beach. Dean tried to call out, but he was suddenly bumped roughly from underneath.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, holding onto his board to stop the rocking. Before he could steady himself, he was hit again from below, and again. It was all he could do to keep from falling off.

All of a sudden, the bumping stopped. A peace came over the moment as the rocking ceased and the shadows seemed to disappear. Dean exhaled a sigh of relief and laughed to himself. “Okay, I think that’s enough fun for one day.”

One at a time, he slipped his legs back into the water. He settled his chest against the board and took a breath, ready to paddle back to shore. Just as his hand touched the water, however, Dean was hurled violently from his board as something huge erupted from underneath. He scrambled to keep a hold of the board, but something grabbed onto his leg and dragged him down under the surface.

Dean kicked and thrashed, struggling to free himself, but he froze when he saw what had a hold of him. It wasn’t a shark. It wasn’t anything, just a dark shape, like a shadow come to life. Looking around in the gloom of the ocean, Dean could see a whole pack of them surrounding him. Out of the corner of his vision he could swear the shadows looked like humans, ones that had spent the last thousand years in dark, painful misery, but when he turned his head to look directly at them, they were nothing but formless darkness.

He could still feel them looking at him, though. The one that held his leg swam right up into his face, and Dean felt as if he were being graded for what kind of meat he was. His fear turned into adrenaline, and Dean started thrashing again, fighting to get to the surface. He could feel his air running out. Looking up at the shimmering surface, he stretched out his arms towards it, but the shadows only pulled him down farther into the depths.

All of a sudden, the shimmering

surface broke with a splash, and a streak of fire came barreling towards Dean and the shadows. As the flame came closer, the shadows scattered, scurrying to avoid its light. Dean could finally see as the flame came up right beside him, that a man carried it.

Everlast.

Without missing a beat, Everlast discarded the dying flare and grabbed another one from where they were strapped around his ankle. He cracked it and shoved it straight towards the shadow that held Dean captive. The shadow scuttled away into the murky ocean, and Everlast wasted no time in pushing the half-drowned Dean towards the surface.

Breaking into the open air, Dean gasped, almost swallowing down a mouthful of ocean water. He didn’t even have time to think about what he had just seen before Everlast was pushing him up onto his surfboard and screaming at him to get to shore. Digging out his last ounce of strength, Dean paddled for the beach.

Everlast treaded water for a moment, making sure Dean had the strength to make it back. He looked at his flare just as it fizzled out. “Oh crap,” he said.

As soon as the flame went out, Everlast was dragged back under the water, a shadow clamping down on his leg. They had doubled in numbers this time, more and more clamping onto him, dragging him down deeper and deeper into the cold ocean. The ones that didn’t have a hold of him zigged and zagged around him in a frenzied victory dance. They knew they had a soldier.

Everlast hated nothing more than seeing creatures so vile experiencing happiness. He struggled to reach the rest of his flares. With the very tips of his fingers he was able to wiggle one out of his ankle clasp. He cracked it and the fire exploded, scaring the shadows away once again just long enough for Everlast to make a break for the surface. He could feel them circling around him still, just out of the firelight, and no sooner had he gasped a breath at the surface than the flare died out and he was jerked under the water once more.

An enormous shadow, bigger than any he'd ever seen before, had its death grip on Everlast this time. It squeezed him until he dropped the weakly lit flare in his hand. He watched as the faintly glowing stick floated down to the ocean floor, and had a sudden pang of hope as it hit the sand not far below—he had made it closer to the shore than he'd

thought. He was almost close enough to stand and make this a fair fight.

As if reading his mind, the giant shadow started dragging Everlast out like a riptide. Everlast strained to reach his last and final flare, but the shadow held his arms too tightly. In desperation, Everlast brought his calf up to his mouth and bit down on his fourth



and final flare, pulling it free. With the flare in his mouth, Everlast looked deep into the dark shape before him. A reflection or a glint from the sunlight above caught the shadow just right and Everlast saw the faint outline of its hollow, black pearl eyes, and he smiled. He felt his foe release slightly in confusion, and taking the opportunity, Everlast wrenched one arm free. He reached up and cracked the flare between his teeth and his free hand. With the flare burning brightly, Everlast rammed the stick straight into one hollow eye of the shadow.

The shadow made a horrendous sound halfway between a moan and a screech and

released him. The dark shape turned murky as the firelight filled it, until it looked like a cloud of kicked up sand dispersing into the depths. The rest of the shadows followed the leader and fled into the dark, cold ocean, leaving Everlast to swim the last few meters to the shore. He dragged himself on hands and knees up onto the sand, getting as far away from the water as he could before he collapsed. After a few deep, gasping breaths, he groaned and squinted up at the bright sun above him.

“I hate the fucking beach,” he said.

Dean’s head suddenly appeared shadowed above him, haloed by the sun.

“No offense,” added Everlast. He couldn’t tell Dean’s expression with the sun in his eyes, but he assumed it was one of utter confusion and shock. He’d seen it many times before. Everlast sat up on his elbows. “Would you mind sitting down? It’s hard to gauge your level of disbelief when I can’t see your face properly.”

Dean sat down. His face registered the myriad of emotions that were churning over in his mind, but his body seemed at ease as he settled down beside Everlast. Everlast let the silence stretch as he tried to disentangle a long strand of seaweed from his leg. After a few moments, Dean finally spoke.

“Thank you,” he said. Everlast was surprised at the simplicity of the statement enough to put down the seaweed and take a long look at the man next to him. Dean had an aura of innocence and soulful realism. Everlast could see all the questions racing around behind Dean’s eyes, but there was no fear there. Maybe this one wouldn’t be so hard to convince, he thought.

“No questions?” he asked.

Dean nodded his head slowly. “Plenty. I just figured I’d let you catch your breath. You did just save my life.”

“Well, Dean, you’re very considerate for someone who was just nearly drowned by a pack of Shadows.”

“Shadows? What are—wait. How do you know my name?” he asked.

Everlast laughed. “Dean, I know more about you than you do. You think it was just a coincidence that those things attacked you when I was here? I was sent here to find you.”

“Me? Why? Who are you?”

“I think you can already feel the answers. Right there at the base of your spine. Just the same way that you can feel that you are in exactly the right place right now—exactly where you’re supposed to be. Am I right?”

Dean remained silent. Everlast looked out at the horizon.

“That’s part of it, you know,” he continued. “That feeling of being in the moment, it’s the sixth sense, knowing before

you know. And you have it.”

Dean shifted on the sand. “You said, ‘That’s part of it.’ Part of what?”

Everlast lifted himself up and started walking back to where he had left his clothes a ways up the beach. “You tell me, Dean.”

Everlast always found it was good to give guys like Dean a moment to work things out for themselves. Like he’d said, they usually knew on some level why he was there, they’d just never thought to say it out loud before. He reached his clothes and shook the sand out from his black trench coat. After a few minutes, he heard Dean get up, walk towards him, and stop. Everlast waited.

“The world shouldn’t be this bad,” said Dean finally.

Everlast turned to look at him. “No,” he said. “It shouldn’t. But it is.”

“Those things in the water?” Dean asked.

“Shadows,” said Everlast. “Pesky fuckers. Afraid of fire. Makes it difficult to fight them, seeing as how they live in the water, but once you solve that problem, they’re not so bad.”

“What are they?”

“They’re descendants of the Nephilim.”

“The what?”

“The Nephilim. They were the product of the fallen angels. The angels that were cast out of Heaven after the fall of Lucifer came down to Earth and mated with the wives of men. Their vile offspring were known as the Nephilim. They’re the real reason God flooded the Earth when Noah was around, to try and rid the world of the them. But some still survived.”

Everlast used his shirt to wipe the sand from his torso before pulling it on over his head. Dean turned to stare out at the ocean.

“So those things were once angels?”

Everlast snorted. “Five times removed, maybe. The Nephilim that survived have spent thousands of years hiding and spawning. Dust storms, hard rain, heat waves rising off of city streets, and creatures like the Shadows. They’re everywhere. They’re what we call soul stealers.”

Even though Dean wasn't looking at him, Everlast knew he was listening. He could see a pall of sadness come over the young man's face. After a while, Dean spoke again. "Who do you mean by 'we'?"

Everlast came to stand beside Dean, staring out at the crashing waves. "Soldiers. You could call us Soldiers of God, but I don't. We balance the scales, is all. Every lost child, every riptide that sucks a good swimmer out to drown—these events aren't random, Dean. They're destined. Our job is to make sure that when the end comes, there are enough chosen souls protected, who will survive, to give mankind a second chance at the peace it deserves."

Dean squinted out at the sun reflecting off the water. "So this is how you protect people? You just fight off a bunch of monsters, and then what?"

Everlast gave him a look of half amusement, half insult. "Oh, what? This wasn't enough for you? I'll have you know that was some of my very best 'monster fighting' as you so delicately put it."

"No," said Dean, looking down and blushing. "I just mean, what if they come back?"

"Well, we don't just leave innocents up here to fend for themselves if that's what you're implying," said Everlast, smiling gruffly. "We take them to Haven. It's a place where they'll always be safe."

Dean scuffed one foot across the sand. "Is that where you're going to take me?"

"No."

Dean looked up at Everlast in surprise. "But, I thought you said—"

"I said that's where we take innocents," said Everlast. "You're not an innocent, Dean."

"But—" Dean stammered. For the first time, a look of fear flitted across his face. "I know I'm not perfect, but I've always tried to live a clean life. I try and treat people right and take care of the Earth and—"

Everlast put his hands up in mock defense. "Woah, Dean. Calm down. I'm not going to smite you. I just said you're not an

innocent, not that you're bad."

"Well, if I'm not one of your innocents, then why are you here?" Dean asked.

"You're a soldier."

For a few moments the only sound between them was the crashing of the waves on the shore and the wail of gulls in the sky. Dean stood paralyzed with shock. He made a few attempts to form words, but nothing came out.

"Don't worry," said Everlast. "I know it's a lot to process. But if you're honest with yourself, you've always known that you're different. Besides, being a soldier's not that different from what you already do, except instead of saving the world one piece of trash at a time, you'll be saving it one good soul at a time."

"Still a lot to process," said Dean, snorting a laugh.

"It's why I'm here," Everlast said. "I'm supposed to take you to your Seer. He'll teach you everything you're supposed to do."

"So I won't be expected to take out Shadows with flare guns on my first day, then?" joked Dean.

"I never said that," said Everlast. With Everlast's perpetual scowl, Dean couldn't tell if he was joking or not. "Well, no time to lose, rookie," Everlast continued. "How long will it take for you to get your stuff together?"

Dean suddenly turned back to look in the direction of the surf shop. The red-haired owner was organizing boards out front. He suddenly felt the weight of an emotion he'd very rarely felt in his life. He'd felt abandonment, loneliness, freedom, but this was the first time he could really remember feeling regret. It was the eleventh hour and he had never truly shown her his heart.

Everlast followed Dean's gaze and knew immediately why Dean had suddenly looked so sad. The beautiful woman and the look on Dean's face gave Everlast a pang of his own, but now was not the time for his troubles. This was about Dean. Everlast watched as the young woman rushed to help an older man as he stumbled on a crack in the bike path that



passed in front of the shop. Everlast took note of the interaction and put a hand on Dean's shoulder.

"It's not too late to say goodbye," he said.

"How do you say goodbye without ever having said hello?" said Dean wistfully.

"If she's the kind of person I think she is, she'll know you when she sees you," replied Everlast.

* * *

The young woman was doing inventory when Dean snuck in the front door. Very focused on making notes in her ledger, she didn't notice him. When she looked up from the book, a yellow carnation lay on the counter in front of her. She froze. A breeze came in the door off the ocean, rustling the petals of the flower. She looked back and forth, not seeing anyone. Then, from behind her, a light, quiet voice surprised her.

"Hey there," said Dean. He was standing back by a row of boards. She flipped around to look at him. He spoke so quietly it was as if he was scared to ruffle the words as they came out. All the years of questions and wondering was down to this moment, this one look between their two sets of young eyes.

"I'm Dean."

She paused for a moment, still studying his face. "I'm Lily."

Dean smiled woefully and pointed at the carnation. "Guess I picked the wrong flower, then, huh?"

She picked up the flower, twirling the stem between her fingers. "Well, don't feel so bad. My parents almost named me Carnation, but it didn't quite have the same ring to it, you know?"

She smiled mischievously at Dean, who smiled back. It was moment worth waiting for, he thought.

* * *

Everlast watched the pair banter playfully inside the shop. He knew this mission was about Dean, but it was hard to not think about himself as he watched young love blossom in front of him. As much as he tried to distance himself from it, he did miss these moments of human interaction, ones that weren't about convincing others to believe in something bigger, but ones that proved that there was. Moments that weren't about anything in particular, but had that magic, that spark, that reminded him that he was capable of feeling the fabric of the universe, capable of

feeling all the good things he was trying to save from the end of the world.

He broke out of his reverie when he heard Dean coming outside.

“Don’t be a stranger, Dean Trufont!” called Lily from inside.

“I won’t,” Dean called back.

Dean waved one more time before turning towards Everlast. The two started to walk down the beach. Dean was quiet. Everlast couldn’t tell if it was sadness or just thought.

“It’s always hard to leave people behind,” he said.

Dean looked up at him with that face of peaceful innocence and smiled. “Oh, I’m not worried. I’ll see her again. I just know it. It’s just like you said, that sixth sense. I just know. She’s one of the good ones.”

Everlast looked back at Lily, standing in the doorway of the surf shop watching them go. It might have been a reflection of the sun, but a golden glow seemed to surround her for a moment. Everlast smiled. Just because today’s mission was about finding a soldier, didn’t mean there weren’t still innocents around,

Everlast thought. If Everlast knew anything about the Nudge, as soon as Dean was finished with his training, he’d be right back here making his first save.

He smiled and clapped Dean on the shoulder. “You know, I think you’re right. You will see her again.”

They walked farther on down the beach, with Everlast leading the way.

“So,” said Dean, “do they have good waves in this Haven place?”

“I don’t know,” replied Everlast. “Never been inside, myself.”

“Well, how am I supposed to know what kind of board to bring?”

Everlast sighed. “Dean, my job is to bring you back alive, not help you pack.”

Dean smiled. “That’s okay. I’ll just bring one of each. You can help carry, right?”

“I hate the beach,” said Everlast. Dean laughed, and the pair walked down the coastline in the light of the orange sun as it faded over the ocean, turning the day to night.

THE END





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CORMORANT
a short story



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