



PHOENIX

AN EVERLAST SHORT

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The city hung quietly in the blue light of early morning. This was Derek Everlast's favorite time of day. This was the time when the world was at its cleanest, its most pure. Walking the streets in the hush of dawn was like catching the world before it was properly dressed, when it was all natural and sleepy and full of hope.

With a spark of orange, the sun pierced the horizon, reflecting harshly off the glass high-rises. As the humid city air began to heat up, steam billowing out of sewer grates and the masses of morning commuters poured out onto the streets, Everlast put his head down and continued to wander through the maze of avenues and alleyways, like a cold grey ember floating on a heat wave.

All these people, Everlast thought. All

of them so caught up in their own routines, their own endless cycles of vanity and survival tactics. It was like watching eight million people greedily climb eight million stepladders straight up into the sky and knowing that they'd find only dark clouds and a sharp drop. What most people never slowed down to realize was that all the fresh, early morning promises of hope and choice and chances to rebuild were right in their grasp, if they only would hold on tightly enough.

There were only a few people left who held on that tightly, and it was Everlast's job to find them. He'd been following the Nudge since around midnight, turning this way and that. It'd started soft, a gentle brush against his consciousness, but now it was stronger, its mysterious energy tingling down to every nerve ending. Turning onto a new street, Everlast finally felt the Nudge pointing him to his new save.

He regarded the man the Nudge had led him to. He appeared to be homeless, passing out, slips of paper to passers by from his spot on the sidewalk. Disheveled, but not intimidating, he wore forest green corduroys and a brown rumpled jacket. His dark, weathered face carried a silver scruff, and there were flecks of grey in his close-cropped hair. A cardboard sign next to him read, "Poems in exchange for kindness," in a steady,

almost elegant penmanship. Slightly hunched over, he gently called out, "Today be the day. Today be your day for a gift. All you need is a smile."

One pedestrian accepted a poem and promptly crumpled it, letting it drop to the ground. The homeless man hobbled over to it painfully, showing years of harsh reality, and bent down to retrieve it. Everlast watched as a passing woman, dressed primly in a blue sundress, leaned down and picked up the poem, handing it back to the man. Their eyes met for a moment—a small smile on her face, a look of surprise on his. He extended his hand slowly, not for the poem, but to shake.

"Thank you much, m'am. I wrote that one for you. You go on and keep it. My name's Henry," he said. His accent was Southern, with a surprising lightness to it. For a flash of a second, Everlast saw a much younger man behind his brown eyes.

The woman's smile disappeared suddenly as she looked at the hand, regarding it like a masticated animal. Awkwardly, she started to shuffle through her purse. Henry slowly pulled his hand back, wiping it against his jacket. He shook his head at her emphatically.

"No money needed, m'am. Just the warmth of your smile this morning." The woman managed another small smile and headed off down the sidewalk, removing hand sanitizer from her purse as she went. As Henry sat back down at his little street shop, a man in a grey business suit kicked the cardboard sign aside. Henry's head dropped in disappointment. He returned it to its place carefully, as if it were a fragile flower arrangement.

Everlast shook his head, took a deep breath and walked purposefully across the street. He smiled at Henry, who smiled back. He of-

fered a poem, which Everlast took.

"Thank you."

"To send you on your way—a poem and a smile for the rest of your day!"

Everlast rarely smiled, but innocents like Henry made it easier. He smiled down at Henry as warmly as he knew how and said, "Henry, it's time to go."

Henry froze. "You death?" The fear quickly softened across his face, and he pointed up to Everlast. "You've got more skin than I figured you'd have."

Everlast laughed. "I'm not death, sir."

"You sure?" he questioned with one eyebrow raised. "I hear you knowing my name and saying 'It's time.' Those're the kind of things a man figures for death to say."

"I'm a soldier," replied Everlast. "I fight for a place created long, long ago for people like you."

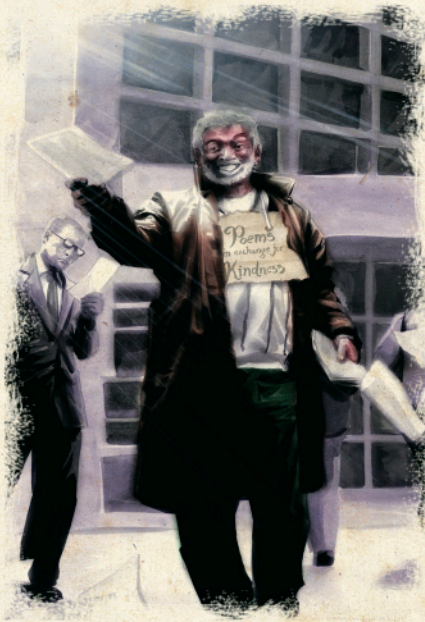
"People like me, you say? What's that mean, 'people like me?'"

"Good people." Everlast looked at Henry's skeptical eyes and smirked. "I've done this enough times to know that I sound crazy. I also know that you've probably heard a lot of crazy in your life and maybe this time there's a part of you that's saying I'm crazy. That you've been waiting for me."

Henry started to scoot backwards quietly. "I'm not going back to one of those homes. You can't make me. I haven't hurt nobody!"

Everlast took a step forward, but stopped as a shriek ripped across the sky. He turned quickly and scanned the skyline, Henry still cowering behind him. Everlast turned back. "Look, I believe you, and in about five seconds you're going to believe me, but right now I need you to just stay calm."

Everlast turned and readied himself for action as another shriek echoed off the towering buildings. Henry's eyes went wide as the sound got closer, looking back and forth at the other pedestrians, none of whom seemed to notice





anything unusual. Everlast slowly bent down and grabbed a fist full of dirt from the base of the young honeylocust tree planted along the sidewalk.

Suddenly, the approaching creature broke around a skyscraper—a massive gargoyle bird with razor sharp, stone talons and a scythe-like beak full of polished, black teeth. “Scavi,” growled Everlast.

Seeing them, the scavi dove straight down, shrieking its battle cry. Its stone wings cut through the humid morning air, hurtling it over the heads of oblivious pedestrians. Everlast shifted his feet as it dove closer, closer. Henry threw out his arms, but couldn’t look away. At the last moment, when the monster was so close they could see the sharp orange sunlight glinting off its cold, stone eyes, it shrieked, and Everlast threw his handful of soil into its open mouth.

The scavi’s scream was cut short and in a flash its stone body crumbled into soil. Everlast threw his trenchcoat over himself and Henry as

the creature exploded into a burst of gravel and dust all around them.

As the dust settled, Henry coughed and looked up at Everlast with awe and fear. Everlast casually dusted himself off and looked back at him. “Believe me now?”

Henry looked with wide eyes back and forth at the passers by. Everlast shook the last of the dust out of his collar. “All they saw was a quick dust storm. Still, we should go. Or do you still need convincing?”

Henry stared at him for a moment before shaking his head and letting out a low whistle. “No, sir,” he said finally, reaching out for a hand up. “If you have something more convincing than that, I for certain do not want to see it.”

Everlast led Henry down to the sewers, through the subterranean catacombs of the city. Henry, for one, felt respected as an equal for the first time in a long time. After a while of walking in silence, he began to talk.

"I wasn't always like this, you know?"

"Nothing wrong with it, even if you were," said Everlast.

"I was a soldier, too. Yes, sir. That's where I got this shuffle-step of mine. I used to make up them poems for the other soldiers in the hospital. They'd look to me and say, 'Hey Henry, you got one of them poems I could hear?'"

Everlast just listened, continuing on down the tunnels. Lots of innocents tried to explain themselves, as if they thought he'd take them back if he knew their life's story.

"The hospital, that's where I met my Beatrice. She was our nurse. You never saw a lovelier woman than her, inside and out. No, sir. I saw her, and the poetry, well, it just started pouring out of me, you know? Like it'd already been written somewhere and I was just the hand putting it to the paper."

Everlast nodded. "I know the feeling."

"Well," said Henry. "She was my muse, for sure. I wrote all my best ones for her."

They walked quietly for a while. The rest of the story was coming. Everlast waited.

"She was working late one night, and I wanted to surprise her. I lit candles and wrote her a new poem. She used to keep them all in a shoebox." Henry looked up, wistfully. "But I'd forgotten to get her flowers, and she loved daisies, so I rushed out. I figured I could get back before she came home. When I came back, though..."

He went quiet and Everlast turned them down an old subway tunnel. Henry kept his head down, watching his steps, caught in memory.

"They say the fire was started by a candle catching on a piece of paper on the table. My poem...can you believe that?"

"I'm sorry," replied Everlast.

Henry sighed. "I checked out after that, just went on and waited for death to bring me back to her. Then one night she came to visit me—saw her clear as day. And right then she told me to get up, to stop feeling sorry for myself, and to use what God gave me to help make this crazy world a little bit better. So that's why I pass out my poems, you see? Even if I make one person smile, well, that's when I see my Beatrice again."

Everlast took the story in as they continued down the tunnels. After a while, they came upon the old abandoned subway train with tracks leading straight to the center of the Earth.

A man with a backwards hat and holding a large gun stepped off the train. The scars on his face were weathered and purple, but his smile was warm and friendly. He yelled out to them in a gravelly voice, "Everlast! 'Bout time. You got a good one for me?"

"One of the best," Everlast called back. He looked at Henry. "Pierce here is going to take you the rest of the way. That train runs straight to the gates."

"What about you?"

Everlast smiled wearily. "Too much work still left to do up here."

Henry's forehead furrowed, and he suddenly looked very pensive. Everlast clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. It's nothing but peace from here on out. I promise. Now, come on. Don't want to the train to leave without you."

Henry nodded and extended a hand. Everlast glanced at it and then back at Henry. Shyly, Henry started to pull it back when he found himself pulled into an embrace.

"Good luck, Henry," Everlast said quietly, releasing the old man to Pierce, who took Henry by the elbow and led him gently to the train platform. Staring at the last few steps onto the train, Henry stopped and took a deep breath. Then, suddenly, he smiled, and instead of continuing forward, he turned back to Everlast.

Everlast frowned. "What's wrong? I swear to you, I'm not crazy."

Henry laughed softly. "Oh, it's not that. You were right, I can feel it; I know there's some thing out there calling me somewhere, but...well, it's like you said: there's still more for me to do upstairs. I know it's not as almighty as what you folks do, but I still think it's important. With all the filth in the world, some of us good ones have to stick around if we're going to have a fighting chance, don't you think?"

He smiled again. "Besides, up there, in those smiles, that's the only place I get to see my Beatrice. I'm sure your place down there is beautiful, but she's not there. And that thing that's calling to me, it's calling me from wherever she is. If I know one thing, I know that."

Everlast and Pierce exchanged glances. Henry stood upright, preparing himself for a fight. Finally, Pierce broke the silence. "You know, Everlast, I think you're right about this one. He is special. I ain't ever seen anybody say no to



Haven?”

Henry’s face relaxed. Pierce stepped forward and removed a rustic, silver chain from around his neck. From it hung a stone pendant that seemed to glow softly from within. He carefully placed it in Henry’s weathered palm and gripped his shoulder warmly.

“That there’s a ward stone. No scavi’s gonna see find you with that around your neck. You’ll get more use of it up there than me down here. Besides, those suckers know not to mess with me if they know what’s good for them!”

Henry grinned and put the stone around his neck. Slowly, he turned to Everlast, his posture hesitant, but the look in his eyes showing no regret. “I’m truly sorry to make you walk all the way down here for nothing. I hope you know I don’t mean to be difficult.”

Everlast smiled at him and gestured back towards the sewers. “Truth be told, it’ll be nice to have some company for the walk up.”

A few weeks later, Everlast found himself once again wandering the streets of the decayed city. Most times when he found his feet carrying him somewhere without knowing why, it was from the Nudge. This time, though, he didn’t know what it was until, upon turning

down one familiar street, he heard a light Southern accent over the noise of the crowd.

“Lemme give you a pleasant way to start your day! Pay with a smile that’ll carry you that extra mile! Poetry from the heart and for the soul!”

Everlast watched as Henry, smiling with greater brightness and purpose than ever before, tried to spread that smile of his to each person passing by his little sidewalk shop. It was food for thought, the case of Henry, thought Everlast. Haven had always taught him that the world was getting worse despite the innocents like Henry. Was it possible that it was getting worse because he and the soldiers were helping the few good people that were left jump ship? Was it possible that maybe there was something left worth saving up here?

As the day wore on, Everlast left the smiling Henry to his poems in search of more souls like him, winding himself like a cat through the back alleys of the city. Finally, just as the sun tucked itself below the horizon and left the world to the lavender light of dusk, a strong gust of wind blew across the street towards him. Leaves shivered on the trees, and Everlast looked up curiously, feeling the energy of the moment. It was a melancholy energy; his nerves tingled,

every pinprick of his skin on edge.

The wind continued on down the street, leaving behind a stale vibration in the air. Everlast started to walk faster, trying to catch up with the gust. The walk turned to a jog, then to a sprint. The same way he could feel the Nudge telling him which way to turn, he felt as if the wind was leading him to something he had to see, something he was missing.

He slowed his pace as he came upon a bridge. The gust had turned now to a gentle breeze, blowing back against his face, brushing his long hair over his shoulder. Everlast looked around and suddenly froze. Under the bridge, covered by a pile of moth-eaten blankets, lay a man. Everlast approached slowly, almost reverently. Reaching the figure, he bent down and pulled the blankets back.

Henry's weathered face looked peaceful, a content smile on his lips. Everlast checked his pulse. Nothing.

The gust of wind suddenly returned, sweeping under the bridge and rattling the dry leaves of the honeylocust tree growing near the underpass. Everlast looked up as the leaves scat-

tered. The energy that had scared him before was there, filling him up all the way from his fingertips where they wrapped around Henry's cold wrist to the back of his spine. Only this time, he wasn't afraid. Instead, it filled him with a calm he had not felt in a very long time. It was a feeling of certainty even stronger than the Nudge—a certainty that everything was going to be all right.

Everlast looked down at Henry's peaceful face in awe. "Whoever out there wanted you must have big plans for you," he said quietly. "I hope you're with her now."

Everlast pulled the tattered blankets up, tucking Henry in to his final resting place. Some way, somehow, Everlast felt as if a small part of him long forgotten had mended. If there was a power out there—a power that guided him, that had picked him—that wanted people like Henry, then that power must be good.

Everlast removed the Pierce's stone pendant from around Henry's neck, and with one last whispered prayer, stood and walked off into the night.

"Sleep well, Henry."

