

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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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