

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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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.