

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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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.