

The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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Chapter 3

A Drawing of Blood

*Of our heroes' journey into the forest and
what befell them therein.*

The children had been in the forest a couple of hours; following paths beaten by past explorers; though they did not see or hear any other humans. Often they were made alert by the sounds of rustling in the undergrowth. The creatures of the forest mostly avoided the children's curious eyes; but once or twice they saw a squirrel leaping through the treetops, or a mouse scampering over wormy roots. Sometimes the children were inspected by ladybirds or brightly coloured butterflies.

They hadn't yet found the vampire or his treasure, but that did not matter. Where silver birches grew amongst mossy boulders, they had fought imaginary goblins and skeletons; Trent had become wounded and Esme healed him with her magic. One dead tree; a lightning blasted hulk with twisted black arms; became a giant in their minds. Merry saved Percy from being eaten by blasting the giant with a mega-fireball spell.

After their long battles they rested now. They sat on grass that grew like thick fur, where sunlight shone through the canopy like laser beams from a fleet of tiny spaceships. Nearby lay an ancient fallen tree; semi-circles of fungus clung to its carcass like barnacles.

Merry took the sandwiches out of the backpack.

"This un's thine," she told Trent as she threw him a ham and mustard sandwich.

"Eurghh," said Esme, wrinkling her nose at the sight of it: she didn't like mustard and she didn't eat meat.

"Mine's the egg and here's your salad un," said Merry giving Esme her sandwich, "and here's thine, Percy." She gave Percy a sandwich with cheese and pickle. They ate quietly as they rested and shared a big bottle of traditional lemonade between them. The birds in the trees sang calmly and the children became lost in the world of their own thoughts.

Esme was looking at the others with their ham and cheese and eggs, and was wondering how they could bring themselves to eat that stuff. Those little pigs getting killed just for someone's sarnie, she thought, it's not right for all those animals to be locked up waiting to

die just to feed people who can eat other food anyway poor little things I couldn't bear hurting anything shouldn't be allowed it's wrong barbarians mum says barbarians all those tiny cages and lambs snatched from their mums just so people can eat them...

Esme often worked herself up into a state when she thought about this. She ate her sandwich very slowly.

Her mind was distracted from such thoughts when she spotted a tiny shrew a few metres away, snuffling its way through the undergrowth. She watched with delight, not daring to move or make a sound in case she frightened it away.

As Esme watched the shrew Merry finished her sandwich. This is nice umm this is nice it's so peaceful I like this grass what's Esme staring at she in some sort o' trance it'd be nice to live in 'forest with all animals and stuff its so quiet and peaceful it wouldn't be no cop in winter though and when it rained I suppose and then there's no electricity maybe it won't be so good after all but living in some sort o' tree house wi electricity could be fun as long as its warm anyway brick houses are boring I wonder why they're all so same but at least I live in an house there's those people who are homeless must be hard to survive I wonder why they don't stick some in one o' empty houses on our road there's three boarded up I'm sure no one 'ud mind I know I wouldn't...

Hmmm nice, thought Trent, when I get in I've got to beat that stupid boss on Deathkill 3 I'm sure thy has to shoot it in its eye but it dun't work maybe thy has to use rockets but its rock hard dodging its lightning un all dun't know why they put it in ruins bleedin' game but I'm not using no cheat they're for saps now where's that sherbet err ahh here it is careful lolly's nice mmm delish O God always get some darn me never fails look bloody ell...

As Trent brushed sherbet off his T-shirt, Percy lay on his back staring at the leaves above and the sky and sunlight poking through the hundreds of tiny gaps. This is cool exploring the forest it's like a real adventure I wonder what's up ahead there could be a witch's cottage or a cave or pond or anything and there's no one for miles we

can do owt we can make a den make it right big put food and stuff in it we could come back on other days there's no one else about it's like ours...

“Come on, let's make a den,” said Percy.

“We don't have any good materials,” said Merry, dismissing the notion.

“We can use branches and stuff,” he pleaded, “we can have passwords.”

“Sounds boring,” said Esme. “I'm going over there to look at those flowers.” She walked off towards a glade that was covered in blue and yellow flowers. The colours of the flowers were particularly vibrant: it looked as if monkeys had thrown paint all over the grass. She decided to pick some to take back to her Mum. As she did this she became aware of the sound of running water. She looked up and could just see a little stream a short distance away. She glanced back in the direction of her friends before trotting off to it.

The stream slid its way between moss-covered rocks and the air above it buzzed with insects. The water was shallow and crystal clear. Through it could be seen many rocks and stones of different colours. The stones glimmered like the contents of a treasure chest: there were sparkles of sapphire and ruby amidst gleams of silver and gold. This could be the vampire's treasure, thought Esme.

Esme crouched, peering into the water that trickled with the sound of tiny bells. A few metres behind her a great oak tree stood; an ancient of the forest. The shadows that it spilled were like a pool of black ink. And from that pool emerged a shape as an object emerges from water. First the top of a head broke the surface of the shadow, rising slowly 'til a pair of eyes peered over the short grass.

Those eyes, with their strange green glow deep within, saw and observed Esme. They did not see the world in the same way human eyes do. They did not see colours and shades. Instead, they distinguished objects by their different temperatures.

The eyes watched the warm body of Esme remove her sandals and step into the stream.

More of the head seeped from the shadow. Its nose emerged and the figure could now smell Esme and confirmed that she was a human child. Its sensitive ears heard Esme's sharp intake of breath at the touch of the cold water, heard her beating heart over the din of the stream.

Now all the head and neck had emerged and hundreds of purple veins throbbed with anticipation. Woe had become bored of searching the forest. She had found no evidence of what the Seers had detected; but now, here was a child for her to play with.

Woe's entire body poured up from the shadows, coming to a halt when the soles of her feet had emerged. She stood on the grass as though she had stood there all along. She stood in a world without colour, where light was merely the absence of shadow. She knew there were flowers all around her because she could smell their many scents; she could hear the noise their petals made as they scratched together in the breeze. But apart from that, as far as she was concerned, there was no difference between a bluebell and a blade of grass: they were both something you trod on.

And that she did, as she strode silently into the light of day and towards unknowing Esme.

Esme's scream shot through the forest like an arrow for almost a mile. Through leaf and bush it flew, poking birds off their perches and wasps from their nests, until, just as it was about to run out of energy and disintegrate, it pierced the sensitive eardrum of the Fairy.

The little creature was sitting astride the tip of a branch, legs dangling in the air. She had been thinking about how to begin her search for the Everlaster when her mind began to wander. She was daydreaming and singing to herself in her own language. The singing was accompanied with hand movements so that her wings had to flutter periodically in order for her to remain balanced on the branch.

But now, pricked by Esme's yell, the Fairy looked round with a start. Recognising that the sound was made by a human, she tried to pinpoint where it had come from. Maybe she could find a human being willing to help her in her search for the Everlaster, for she did not know the ways of modern Earth. But she knew she would have to be cautious: she had been warned that human beings were not always friendly.

Percy and Trent were climbing a tree and Merry was putting their rubbish into the backpack when Esme's scream hit them. It wasn't the sort of scream made like when a girl finds a spider, or has an earthworm dangled in her face. This was a real scream: Esme's terror burst into the minds of her friends as though they experienced it with her.

Trent and Percy leapt from the tree, ignoring the height, and ran with Merry, their bodies surging with adrenaline. They arrived at the stream to find Esme struggling in the water with the tallest and strangest looking woman they had ever seen.

The woman had hold of Esme and was trying to restrain the girl's flailing limbs.

"Get off her," shouted Percy. Woe turned around and looked at them with large terrible eyes. Never had the children known such menace as they now saw in those eyes: the spite of a thousand bullies burning in their green fires.

Esme was held tight and tears ran down her cheeks.

"*Abh, more children come running to be my friend,*" said Woe. Her voice seemed to be formed, not just by her throat, but by the sighing of the leaves, the droning of the insects, the babbling of the brook. "*This girl and I are having a wonderful time. Look, she is just weeping with joy.*"

Merry replied. "You'll be the one crying when the police throw you in jail for kidnapping."

"*O, you are mistaken,*" said Woe. "*Stealing this child was never my intention.*"

“I don’t believe you,” said Merry.

“Neither do I”, said Percy. He picked up a stick and shouted, “now let her go!” He ran at Woe and swung the stick at her back but she twisted around and caught it in her hand. She let go of Esme, who fell to the ground sobbing, and grabbed Percy’s head between both hands.

“You like violence do you?” she asked him. “I must say, I understand your appreciation of it but I do find it a little dull at times.”

Percy struggled, hitting Woe in the arms and chest. She stared into his eyes and he soon stopped that. *“You see, there are more amusing ways to hurt a person than through physical violence.”*

Percy squeezed his eye’s shut, but Woe put her mouth up to his ear and began to whisper. First his breathing quickened and then came his tears. She stroked his hair and face until he dropped to the ground, weeping.

Woe turned her attention to Merry and Trent. She walked towards them, leaving Esme and Percy lying on the ground.

“You should consider yourselves honoured,” spoke Woe as she walked, “you and your two friends. Honoured that you have been given a chance few humans ever have. The chance to look into the face of Woe. It is a pity, though, that you will not be able to boast about your accomplishment. For who would believe you, children and all?”

At that moment, Merry’s concern for her friend overrode her fear and she sped past Woe to kneel beside Esme and help her. While Woe was paying attention to Merry, Trent made a run for it.

He ran as fast as he could, ignoring the ferns and branches that whipped against him.

When Woe saw him running she ran also, but not in Trent’s direction. Instead she ran towards a thick tree, whose dense and heavy branches shrouded its trunk in shadow.

Merry watched puzzled as Woe ran head first into the tree trunk. To her surprise, instead of breaking her head open and falling to the floor, Woe disappeared into the dark trunk like a ghost walking

through a wall. No sooner had Woe's heel disappeared into the tree than Trent cried out and Merry looked in his direction.

Trent was pressed to the ground by Woe, where a second ago she had leapt from an adjacent shadow. He was dragged back to the other three before he even knew what had happened.

Woe threw Trent to the ground alongside Esme.

Merry got to her feet and looked Woe in her fearsome eyes. "I dun't know what thy are, but tha dun't scare me! If you do owt to us tha'll be hunted darn and killed!" Merry wasn't so certain this would happen but she hoped it would make Woe think twice.

Woe's only response was to smile and move to grab Merry.

Merry knew she couldn't run away; so, in her desperation she did something slightly crazy. Merry jumped up and flung her arms around Woe's neck to give her a big hug. At least it looked like she was giving Woe a hug. With her legs dangling in the air Merry clamped her teeth around Woe's nose.

All Merry's anger and strength collected in her jaw muscles. Her teeth pierced Woe's skin and blood gushed into her mouth.

Woe screeched in pain as Merry's teeth cut deeper and deeper: a monstrous screech that sent every bird in the forest flying frightened to the sky. Just as it seemed she would bite Woe's nose clean off Merry let go, for the taste was so vile.

Woe threw Merry from her with such strength that the girl flew eight metres through the air.

Landing safely amongst thick ferns Merry looked back at Woe. The woman was standing with her hands covering her bloodied face. For a very long moment there was silence as the children watched and waited.

Woe's shoulder's shuddered and a muffled sobbing came from behind her hands. All of Woe's body shook as she began to cry. But when she finally removed her hands from her face the children saw that she was not crying. The giant grin upon her face showed that she was laughing.

As blood poured from the ruined thing that was once her nose, running down her mouth and neck, Woe spoke. *“Good. I see we can be friends after all. Because tell me, little girl, did you not just enjoy making me hurt?”*

Merry could find no words to respond with.

Looking at Merry Woe clutched Trent by the neck with one hand and lifted him from the ground. *“If, as you say, I do not scare you, let me give you a lesson in fear through your friend here.”*

She turned her face towards Trent’s and her head-dress began to move. The fingers of the white material flexed and groped towards his head. The tips of the fingers split open: hundreds of thin black threads shot out. Trent could neither see nor breathe as the strands engulfed him.

Despair pulsed through the threads like blood, indulging Trent’s mind with a hundred terrible images. An evil cabaret performed on the stage of his imagination; the acts showed his future, the future of his friends and the future of the world; its main performers were greed, spite, death and grief. Trent saw a curtain of shadow come down upon the Earth. He thought he would remain in the darkness forever, but then an image flashed before him. It seemed to be a butterfly, and no sooner had it appeared than light returned and he could see and breathe again.

Woe dropped Trent and stumbled backwards. *“No!”* she screamed. *“No! What is this?”*

The black threads had been severed from her head and were now laying on the ground around Trent: it looked as if someone had sliced them with a big pair of scissors.

A new voice spoke:

*“What dark schemes forged with hatred and fear
Bring this foul pollution to Earth’s blue sphere?”*

Woe looked around puzzled before finding the source of the voice. Merry followed her gaze and saw, floating above them, a tiny woman. Around her flew four shining dots.

The woman had wings that fluttered so quickly they were a blaze of gold and red. Merry couldn't believe what she was seeing. But then again, everything that had happened in the last few minutes was unbelievable. She had stopped believing in the tooth Fairy when she was six, but now she was seeing something that looked just like it, though she didn't know that Fairies were brown; or had dreadlocks; and it's wings didn't look like a butterfly's. But Merry was sure it had to be a Fairy.

As for Woe, on seeing the Fairy, she was instantly filled with such a powerful feeling of disgust and loathing that she bent over and vomited.

She spat the remaining bile from her mouth and looked up at the Fairy again. Filthy liquid dripped from where the fingers had been cut from her head. It ran down her face and dripped from her cheeks and chin, staining her white garments.

Woe grinned. Through the spit and filth and vomit, Woe grinned.

So my journey here was not in vain, she thought. This is what the humans' Seers have sensed.

The Fairy spoke again:

“Unless you desire to die by my hand,
Tell me, what is your purpose on this land?”

The woman laughed, *“I am Woe, and it will take far more than an arrogant insect to destroy me. Now, what are you doing here? You seem to be a long way from home.”*

“Across my world there has fell a shadow
And I find now to Earth its margins grow.
But as darkness dissolves always to light
So you shall fall before great Aeval's might.”

As soon as she said this, the Fairy flew at Woe, spinning and twisting like a high diver. She struck Woe in the stomach and pushed her flying backwards until they crashed into a tree trunk, several feet above the ground.

The Fairy remained hovering as Woe dropped to the grass and rolled.

Woe immediately sprang to her feet and jumped to grab the Fairy, but it avoided her and flew high amongst the branches.

The Fairy hovered still, holding her halberd in one hand with the blade pointed at Woe:

“How long has your presence darkened this land ?

What nefarious schemes have your kind planned?

Answer me and I'll send you home breathing,

And Earth can sleep soundly on your leaving.”

Woe fell to her knees and bowed her dripping head. *“I knew you would show mercy. You Fairies are good folk. I try to tell my people that, but they do not listen. I will tell you everything you want. I only want peace between our worlds.”*

As she said these words she tore a handful of grass from the ground behind her back. As each blade left the ground they turned to stone in her hand.

Merry saw this and she shouted to the Fairy, “look out,” just as Woe whipped her arm round and threw the blades of grass. They sped towards the Fairy like a cloud of darts.

Unable to dodge them all the Fairy cried out in pain and fell out of the air.

Woe walked to where the Fairy lay wounded in the grass, and crouched down. *“A Fairy will make a wonderful trophy,”* she said as she reached out a hand to pick it up.

In a motion quicker than the eye could see the Fairy swung her halberd in a rainbow arc and Woe's fingers went somersaulting through the air.

“Arghh,” Woe cried as she stumbled backwards, clutching her ruined hand. She spoke through clenched teeth, *“I look forward to meeting you again, Fairy filth. When your screams will echo all the way back to your world.”*

Woe walked over to the shadows of the oak from which she had first appeared. As though a trap door had opened beneath her, she dropped into the dark ground and was gone.