

# The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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## **Chapter 5**

### **Heart Of Darkness**

*The prince receives news and then gives  
some regarding his part of the Empire.  
Of troubled sleep.*

The intercom on Chandler Dahl's desk buzzed. He pressed a button in response and spoke. "Yes, Clarissa?"

His secretary's voice came through. "The senior partners are ready to speak with you, sir."

"Thank you, Clarissa," said Chandler Dahl. He forced out a long breath that made his cheeks inflate. Talking to the senior partners was even more intimidating than talking to Woe. They possessed what she did not: authority.

He pressed a button on his computer and the wall to his left shuddered. A panel slid sideways revealing a large screen. When the panel stopped moving an image appeared on the screen. It was of a table, around which were sat a dozen men. Each one wore a pinstripe suit and dark blue tie, and each one looked down on Chandler Dahl. The screen seemed like a window into a room of giants.

"Good afternoon, Chandler," spoke one of the men. He had an American accent. "We believe you have some news for us."

"Yes," replied Chandler Dahl. "We have made a startling discovery. It seems that Fairies *do* exist. We've sighted one in Yorkshire." He paused, waiting for the expressions of surprise and disbelief to spring across their faces, but he caught no reaction from any of them. "It was Woe who made the discovery. So be assured, this is no fantasy."

"Where is the Fairy now?" asked a different man to the previous speaker. He had an English accent, like a public schoolmaster.

"I don't know," said Chandler. "When Woe encountered the Fairy it wounded her and forced her retreat. Woe is now recuperating."

"Find it, Chandler," spoke a third man, another Englishman.

"And quickly," came an Italian voice.

"It is better for business that other worlds, other life forms are not known to the general public," said another. This one had a Russian accent.

“It could excite them, give them hope, aspirations which they are better off without.” Though each sentence came from a different man, they flowed seamlessly, like the speech of identical twins who are so close that they know what each other is about to say.

“I thought we could capture it for study,” said Chandler. “It must have some technology on it that we can learn from.”

“Yes.” “Yes,” said two of the men impatiently.

“Of course, that goes without saying.”

“Don’t hold back in your efforts to capture it.”

“Use all resources necessary.”

Chandler Dahl was feeling dizzy, flicking his eyes back from one pair of lips to another. “Yes, Sirs,” he said. “There is another matter to discuss.”

The twelve men were silent, waiting for him to continue.

“The union has voted to extend the strike.”

“You assured us that this would be over quickly,” said one of the partners.

“I admit I may have misread the situation,” said Chandler Dahl. “But...”

A Japanese voice spoke before he could continue. “Your job is not to read situations, Chandler, but to shape them.”

“Ensure that those people realise just how useless their actions are.”

“We decide how much they are paid, not them.”

Chandler Dahl nodded. “I will tell them we sympathise with their concerns and that we’re doing the best we can. I will ensure that they return to work as soon as possible with the minimum of disruption.”

“You have had long enough, Chandler, to sort this out. It is time you deployed Woe.”

Up until this point Chandler Dahl had kept his composure well, but now he could not help but reveal his unease at this command. “I don’t think that’s necessary. Besides she’s still recovering.”

“You will deploy Woe tonight.”

“And the strike shall end tomorrow.”

“Already, the completion of the missile guidance systems at Tiverton Preedy have been delayed beyond our original deadline. Our friends need those missiles shipped on time. If this strike affects their war efforts it could mean the termination of our contract and they could take their technology back from us.”

“Yes,” said Chandler Dahl, “I understand. Woe shall be sent out. By the way, I’m curious: who are our friends at war against, or are they just fighting amongst themselves.”

Replied an Englishman, “we ask no questions of our human buyers and so it is the same with our foreign friends”.

“Understood,” said Chandler Dahl. He bowed and they said goodbye. The screen went blank and the white wall panel returned to its place.

The Sun was low in the sky as a team of one hundred men and women painstakingly searched Cradleford Forest. Looking for a Fairy.

They had been at it for three hours when a helicopter arrived. Its appearance made them all take to their task a little more eagerly.

The helicopter landed in an unusual clearing they’d found, about the size of two houses. Out of the vehicle stepped Chandler Dahl, the wind from the rotor blades messing up his hair.

He walked over to the trees, where a woman dressed in green overalls was waiting to greet him. She was the leader of the search party and wore a name label that said AUGUST LANDFILL.

“Good evening, Sir,” she shouted over the engine noise. She was in her forties and heavily built, with a voice like an army sergeant.

“Well?” asked Chandler Dahl impatiently, struggling to flatten his hair down.

“We haven’t found the object yet, Sir,” she shouted, even though the helicopter’s engine was now off.

Chandler Dahl frowned, more at the woman's volume than her words.

"But we have found something, Sir."

She led the way through the forest. After about twenty minutes of walking the woman finally stopped. "Here, Sir," she barked.

Chandler Dahl stepped over to where she gestured.

At his feet was a child's backpack, around which was strewn a small amount of litter. He picked the backpack up.

"Someone's had a picnic," he said as he emptied everything out. There was only more litter inside.

"Is it of any help, Sir?" asked the woman.

Chandler Dahl was about to throw the bag down when he spotted a label sewn onto the inside. On it was written 'Percy Lillycrop'.

"It might just be, Ms Landfill," Chandler Dahl replied. "Now take us back and call the search off. The Fairy's not here."

\*

That night Ayina stayed with Merry in her bedroom. Merry's bedroom had light blue wallpaper and a few posters, including one of a tiger, one of a dolphin, one of a nebula in space, and one of ancient Egyptian art. She also had on her wall a small print of an old painting called *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, by an artist called Artemisia Gentileschi. Her Dad wasn't very keen on the picture but Auntie Rosemary had persuaded him to let her have it.

Merry spent the evening showing the Fairy the dictionary and encyclopaedia and other useful books.

It took Merry a whole half hour to rapidly turn every page of the dictionary and allow Ayina's sprites to scan all the writing. Each page needed to be viewed only for an instant in order for the sprites to get their scan. It took an hour to do the same with the encyclopaedia and Merry's arms became quite tired by the end of it. But the Fairy

now knew almost all the words in the English language, for the language had grown a lot since the Fairies left Earth. She learnt too a great deal of general knowledge and modern history, and gained some idea of how far human technology had advanced.

“Why did the Fairies leave Earth?” Merry asked Ayina.

“The answers are complex, but I’ll try to explain it as simply as I can.

“My ancestors recognised the signs indicating that your species was about to enter that period of rapid development and turmoil that all intelligent species experience eventually.

“They thought it best to leave and close those doors between our worlds. For you had entered the age of science, and because of that, had you discovered those doors you might have learnt to control them.

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Merry. “If you can travel between worlds, why shouldn’t we?”

“For your own safety. Back then you were war-like, and, from what I gleaned from the encyclopaedia, you still are. Your people would have attempted to conquer us if you discovered our world. That we know for certain. We would have warred and you humans would have lost.”

“I can’t believe you have such a low opinion of humans,” said Merry feeling a little upset.

“It is not as simple as that. For humans are just as we used to be. We know your weaknesses because we had them long ago. And so did the Goblins and Trolls and every other species that learns to speak and build things.

“Believe me when I say we have faith in humanity. Possibly more so than you do yourselves.

“Now forgive me, but I must meditate over the information the sprites have downloaded.”

Ayina meditated all the way up to bedtime, and then she went to sleep inside an open bedside drawer. The sleeve of a jumper was her mattress and a handkerchief her blanket.

\*

As the Sun's warm breath gave life to Australia and Japan, our side of the world was chilled by night. That small town called Tiverton Preedy was domed by a cloudless, moonless sky.

It was 22:32 when all the lights in the town went out. It was not until 3:34 that the fault was repaired and power returned. For five hours no appliance worked, no light bulbs shone, no TVs glowed. The only thing to keep the great shadow of the Earth's night-side at bay were the flickering tears of candle flames and the orange glow of fumbled cigarettes.

Without tellies, computers, CD-players, or even lamps to read by, the residents saw little option but to go to bed and sleep through the black out. Those that weren't in bed already.

If only insomnia had struck the town's people; robbed them of their sleep: they would have emerged in the morning tired and cranky, but they would have been safe from the nightmare that stalked the pitch black streets that night.

Like a town sunk beneath the ocean, where every room is flooded, every cellar, loft, cupboard, every hollow object is filled with salt water; where street and stairway, field and bedroom, are made equal territory for roving sharks and skulking octopus: so was Tiverton Preedy drowned in darkness, and made a playground for the monster that swam through it.

Walls and fences, locks and bolts were irrelevant to a creature for whom any place smothered in shadow was only a footstep away.

She visited the homes of all those involved in the strike, seeing all and being seen by none. Snake-haired Woe touched them in their slumber. They sweated, feverish with dreams that told them they would lose the jobs they were so lucky to have, if they did not end the strike quickly. They shivered, shaking from themselves hope in precious droplets.



Realisation dawned in their sleeping minds: that they had no chance of winning the strike. They worked for the largest company in the world. What were they doing? Be grateful for what they have.

And when she had visited the home of the last employee of SkweezumGrabaal&Runne, Woe visited the other houses in Tiverton Preedy too. Just for the hell of it. She resurrected ancient griefs: memories long since laid to rest of dead mothers and lost husbands. Women relived the pain of still-births and men foresaw the cancers they were to die by.

At one point, as she was swimming the night from one house to the next, Woe felt a sudden disruption in the shadows around her. They thinned and snapped and she fell onto the cement of a driveway, landing as graceful as a cat despite the surprise of the fall.

She looked over her shoulder at the source of the light that was dousing the scenery and herself in blue.

An ambulance was speeding down the road to a house. It was one she had not been to yet.

The blue light fled from her as the ambulance moved away, and from afar she watched its paramedics bring a child out on a stretcher. With them went two adults sobbing with desperation. Even from this distance she could smell their fear, their pain, and she folded her arms with a mixture of delight and disappointment. There was a family that did not need her.

It must have been about two in the morning when his parents were awoken by his screams. They ran to his bedroom and, in the shivering torchlight, saw Trent writhing violently about his bed. His quilt and pillow were thrown upon the floor.

His parents rushed to wake him up. They assumed he was having a nightmare, which was strange because they had never known him to have one before. They held him and tried to shake him awake. His mother spoke comforting words. But he would not stop shaking and screaming.

His father even forced Trent's eyes open with his thumbs, but the boy would not wake up. "It must be some sort of fit," said his father. "I'll call an ambulance."

Trent's mother held him, with tears streaming down her face, as his father went to the phone.

Ten minutes later the ambulance came. Its driver negotiated the blackened streets with careful urgency.

His partner's attention was caught by what appeared to be a tall, thin woman floating in the air in the gap between two houses. For a fraction of a second she seemed to be walking, white as a spectre, level with the bedrooms of the houses. But as the light of the ambulance landed on her she fell to the ground and in the next instance was out of view.

They had arrived at their call now and he shook the vision from his mind. He shrugged it off as an hallucination, brought on by fatigue from his twelve hour shift. It wouldn't be the first one he'd had.

The two paramedics went in the house and up the stairs with a stretcher. They strapped Trent onto it and carried him to the ambulance.

Neighbours pushed aside net curtains and watched out of dark bedrooms as Trent was placed in the ambulance, still screaming and writhing against the restraints.

With Trent and his frightened parents inside, the ambulance drove to the nearest hospital, some miles away in Barnsley.

Whatever was happening to Trent, it had not stopped when they reached Northern General Hospital. After ten minutes of screaming on a hospital bed he finally stopped when the doctors gave him a large dose of sedatives.

He slept soundly.

The doctors were unable to tell Trent's parents what was wrong with him. Maybe they would find out more when he woke up. Now it was best that they get some rest, for Trent would be asleep for hours.

\*

Many miles away, in London, at the same complex of buildings that surrounded the Emerald Tower, a woman ran through labyrinthine corridors, hastily putting on the white coat that denotes Scientist. She clipped on her identity badge, which bore the name CHRISTAL WHITELOW.

She sped round a corner and was met by the sound of humans voices wailing. Two anxious security guards were waiting for her by a thick metal door.

“What’s going on?” panted Christal.

“Don’t know,” said one of the guards looking at the door behind them, from which the muffled wailing came. “They’ve been at it for half an hour now.”

Beside the door was a retinal scanner and the scientist looked into it. A small green light came on and she typed a code on a keypad.

The door wheezed open and the wailing now reached her ears unimpeded: the dismal sound of creatures in pain.

As the scientist entered the lights came on, gently illuminating the contents of the room. There was a strong reek of body odour on the hot and stuffy air.

It was a large spherical chamber. Large pipes ran horizontally around the walls. They emitted a rhythmic throb that usually closed in and smothered those who entered, but at this moment that sound was drowned by the terrible cries coming from the Seers’ throats.

Around the sides of the chamber stood six large rectangular monoliths. Constructs of stone and metal, their surfaces consisted of wires and pipes and mechanical components that were in constant flux, like a roadmap redrawing itself.

Each monolith had, on the side that faced the centre of the chamber, a human being. The front of their bodies emerged from the surface, as if a sculptor had carved them from the monolith but given up halfway through. Their arms and legs were outstretched as though they had been frozen while doing a cartwheel. Their thin bodies were

naked, except for a piece of apparatus that took the waste from those parts that supply it.

Three men and three women. Despite their noise they were as still as statues. Only their faces were free to move, and they contorted now with the same expressions that were flashing across Trent's face at that moment.

"What is it? What's wrong?" the scientist ran between them shouting.

One of the male Seers spoke through gritted teeth. "Stop it. Stop it!"

"Stop what? What's happening to you?" asked Christal Whitelaw anxiously.

"End it. Turn us off. Do something."

"I can't turn you off. You know that. It would kill you." The scientist looked helpless. "What's happening? Try to tell me what you're feeling."

"It's coming!" said one of the females.

"What's coming?" asked Christal, perplexed.

The Seer seemed not to hear and just repeated, "it's coming!"

"No," argued one of the others, "it's already here."

"What is?" asked the scientist frantically. "Do you mean here in the complex?"

"No," said another Seer, "it's here, everywhere?"

Christal Whitelaw wiped her lips. "Can you see this thing? Describe it."

"It's huge, bigger than us all," said one Seer.

"No," said another, disagreeing, "it's not a 'thing'. It has no size. It is power, immense power."

The scientist's professionalism took control and she began scribbling notes in a pad from her pocket. "A weapon?" she asked.

The Seer would have shaken his head if he could. "No, but we are all at it's mercy. All life."

"It's coming," said a male Seer who had not yet spoken.

"Terror is coming."

“Yes,” agreed another, “Terror is coming.”

“That is what it is,” said another, “Terror is how we know it. Terror is alive.”

Then all the Seers were silent. The only sound was the throbbing of the pipes.

Christal examined all of the Seers. They were all unconscious, but stable. She checked the technology of the monoliths, ensuring that everything was in working order.

In the centre of the chamber was the elementary sextant. Above the head of anyone standing beneath, it hung in the air, without apparent support, at the exact centre of the globe that was the Seers’ chamber, like the nucleus of an atom. A large spherical construct of some dull black metal, it was made up of circles, curves and geometric shapes, somewhat reminiscent of the innards of a pocket watch.

From its lowermost point there had been spat thin reams of paper that now lay in a heap on the floor. The scientist sifted through it for some time but could glean no meaning from the information.

With the help of a step ladder Christal cleaned each of the Seers’ stinking bodies. As they slept she gently wiped the sweat from their nakedness, using flannels and soapy water, then dried them with towels.

When she eventually got back to bed Christal did not sleep. She could only lie awake, trying to work out what had taken place this night.