

# The Everlaster

A Novel by Michael Horne

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## **Chapter 18**

### **Glad The Impaler**

*In which The Everlaster meets an old friend.*

The red ant ran across dry soil zigzagging between trunks of grass that rose from the ground like the pillars of a roman palace. In his mandibles he held a biscuit crumb half his body size. Close behind him ran two other red ants. One had a piece of chocolate and the other a crumb of ginger bread.

They ran quickly for they were on the territory of an enemy ant tribe. The enemy were a different colour: they were scarlet.

The leading ant did not look back when he heard one of his comrades cry out. They had been ambushed. The ant with the chocolate was thrown to the ground by two enemy scarlet ants. More scarlet ants poured into view, so the remaining two red ants altered course. The pair were pursued by thirty or more of the enemy. While the food they carried slowed them down perilously they did not let go of it.

The ant with the ginger bread was too slow and was pounced upon by a dozen of the scarlet pursuers. The remaining red ant did not turn round to watch the enemy take the food from his comrade, and then take his legs from him too. The scarlet ants tore the fallen body apart and devoured him.

Constantly smelling the air with his antennae, the ant with the biscuit crumb kept running. He could sense the enemy right behind him, but he was close now. They had passed between two vast planks of wood that rose diagonally to the sky like broken highways. Finally the red ant came to a halt and dropped the crumb.

He turned to face the enemy and took a few steps backwards. His pursuers stopped and gathered in a crowd. As the red ant walked slowly backwards expecting the enemy to pounce and devour him, one of the scarlet foe walked slowly forward and picked up the crumb. As soon as he did the grass surrounding them burst with activity.

The scarlet ants had been led into a trap. Hundreds of the red ant's comrades descended on the enemy with the same brutality acted against their fallen.

Despite the ferocity of the ambush a handful of the scarlet ants escaped to send chemical signals to their brothers. In a short

time hundreds of scarlet ants arrived and soon the great battle was sprawling for metres across the... well, this is the curious thing. For it is not the ants' war that interests us, but the place which they had chosen as their battlefield.

The ants fought amongst the usual obstacles of a garden: grass, stones, earth, flowers, the odd crisp packet or dog poo. As always they took no notice of the objects they happened to be running over; everything was the same to them... Big! But this garden was different, for the ants also fought around and crawled up and down giant columns of wood. To a human these pieces of wood were nothing more than wooden stakes ranging from the size of a pencil to the size of a ruler. Upon each stake was pierced the head, and sometimes the torso or limb, of a doll.

For this was a front garden like any other on a street of semi-detached houses. Normal, except for the disturbing sight of over a hundred severed doll's heads staked to the lawn.

Dolls of all kinds were present, their hair often torn out in places, their clothes turned to rags and their features sometimes missing or worn away; burn marks here and there. They were battered and dirty with years of exposure to the weather. Those that still had eyes stared vacantly. Some bore the smiles that they had had when some child held them many years ago. Others just had that startled look some dolls possess. Most looked like babies.

Across the plastic scalps and lifeless eyes the ants battled, scrambling over cheek hills and tumbling into eye-socket caves.

And across this carnage strode two colossi, whose heads and shoulders vanished high into the atmosphere, each stride measuring one ant mile. The ants ignored them as such giants were not uncommon.

Merry shivered at the sight of all the staked heads around her feet, a queasy feeling coming over her. "Someone dun't like dolls," she said.

The Everlaster walked her along the garden path and to a dirty black door. The windows of the house were covered in dirt, through which only heavy black curtains could be seen.

The Everlaster knocked on the door hard. It took a while for anyone inside to respond. The letter box flicked open at waist height and a pair of eyes peeked through.

“I’m sorry, darling, but I think yow’ve got the wrong ‘ouse,” came a male Brummie voice.

“Who are you?” demanded the Everlaster, “and where is Gladabayu?”

“You know Glad!?”

“Yes, now tell her Immanuel Balthazar is here.”

“You’re Immanuel Balthazar!?”

“So, she’s spoken of me?”

“Erm, yer could say that. Yow’d better come in.”

The letter box closed and, after the sound of many sliding bolts, chains and locks, the door was opened and Merry and the Everlaster were ushered quickly inside.

The only sunlight that reached the interior of this house were the few rays that sneaked in while the front door was briefly open. The place was lit by a few lamps with red shades.

The man who had let them in stood before them tall and thin. He led them through the house. Merry was surprised to find the interior of the house relatively normal compared to the garden. Patterns of circles and wavy lines made up of coloured dots were painted on parts of the walls. There were a few ruined dolls here and there, but nothing like the traumatic scene outside.

As they walked into the living room they could see many shelves of books; paintings on the walls; and more of those dot patterns.

“Glad’ll be deloyted to see yer. I’ll go wake her up”.

“No. We will wait,” said the Everlaster. “Who are you?”

“I’m Peter, her friend.” He held out his hand for Immanuel Balthazar to shake. The Everlaster took it. “A friend, aye?” said

Immanuel suspiciously and he turned Peter's hand over and pulled up his sleeve to reveal two small puncture wounds on the man's wrist. "You're Gladabayu's thrall."

"Naw, I'm not" said Peter. "I choose to 'elp her. She down't controwl moy. Would you loyke something to eat? I've just got this pizza out the oven."

"I'll have some, please," said Merry.

"And I," said Immanuel.

"I'll just get some drink from the kitchen. I 'ope you loyke milk." He waved his hands about. "Well, get yerselves sat down then."

Merry sat on a sofa and Immanuel slouched back in an armchair with his legs outstretched.

Peter came back in with a tray of milk. "Bleedin 'ell, mate! Will yer cross yer legs, please? I can't enjoy me meat feast pizza wi that in me pe-riph-er-owl vision.

"Sorry," said the Everlaster, crossing his legs. It had been centuries since he'd worn a skirt.

"It's a nice colour that dress, actualloy" said Peter.

"Isn't it," said Immanuel, nodding heartily.

Merry frowned at him, "are you sure you're the Everlaster?"

"What's the Everlaster?" asked Peter.

"Just a nickname," said Immanuel.

"Why are you wearing a dress, anyways?" asked Peter.

"It's a long story."

"Talking about stories, ay? ...ay?" Peter nodded his head and wagged his elbow as if sharing some private joke with Immanuel Balthazar.

Immanuel narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What? Ay what?"

"You, in Gladie's stories"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't yer know? You've 'eard o' Gladice Gulchenrouz, the famous writer?"

"No," said Immanuel.

“I ‘ave,” said Merry. “She writes adult books.”

“Yes,” said Peter. From a shelf he took down some books and handed them to Immanuel. It said Gladice Gulchenrouz on all the covers. One was titled ‘Nemesis’. He read out a description on the back: “on the eve of revolution the great vampire hunter, Immanuel Balthazar pursues his old adversary across France, but old ghosts and dark secrets from his past threaten to destroy him.”

The Everlaster seemed amused, “she wasn’t with me in France, so it would be interesting to read what I did there.”

He read the back of another novel: “the eighth book chronicling the life of the vampire hunter Immanuel Balthazar takes him to Japan. A mysterious and powerful force in a small village threatens the one he loves.”

Immanuel raised his eyebrows, “the one I love?”

“Glad wroytes the books”, said Peter, “but I pretend to be the author when dealing with the publishers. Yer know you’re a little different to how she describes you. I thought yow’d be taller.”

After getting some much needed food and drink in her Merry began to doze off. Her last waking thoughts were for Esme and Percy as she wondered where they were.

Percy was glad he had stayed with Esme because she had been very frightened when they were taken and then handed over to police. In fact he was frightened too, and they were both incredibly relieved when they were told that they would be taken home. They dared not talk about anything that had happened while in the police car and, to Percy’s surprise, they were asked no questions.

When they reached the edge of Tiverton Preedy the policemen let them out. “We’d normally take you to your parents, but we don’t want to cause a fuss,” they were told, and Percy and Esme were left to walk home. Before the police drove off Percy asked them, “do you know anything about what’s happened to Merry?”

“I don’t know anything about that I’m afraid.”

Percy didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

While the afternoon was growing old, Merry woke up on the sofa in time to see a little girl, maybe five years old, peeping around the door at them.

"Look who's woken up," said the Everlaster, a smile brightening his face. Merry thought it was the first time she'd seen him smile.

"Immanuel," cried the child, running to him. Immanuel stood up, lifting the girl in his arms.

"What a beautiful surprise," said the girl, putting her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. Her skin was remarkably pale and her irises were bright red. Her black hair was short and very curly. Something about her facial structure struck Merry as odd, but she couldn't explain why.

"It's good to see you too, Gladabayu."

"Oh Immanuel, just call me Glad."

"You're Gladice Gulchenrouz?!" exclaimed Merry in disbelief.

"Why, yes. And you are?"

"Ah," said Immanuel. "Glad, this is Merry. Merry, this is Glad".

"Merry and Glad," said Peter. "We're a royt happy bunch us aren't we." And he laughed at his own joke, making him the only one to do so.

"What have you been up to all this time, Immanuel?"

"We've both been doing similar, you and I," he replied, "telling stories."

"Why haven't you visited me in so long?"

"I've been away," and he smiled sadly at her. Then he went on to tell her why he and Merry had come: all about the Fairy's capture and his need to rescue it. "...So we are waiting here until we hear word from the sprites, and then we will know where to go and what preparations we should make."



“While we wait,” said Glad, “why don’t you play us some music, Immanuel. You were always so good on the didgeridoo, even by my people’s standards.” As she said this she got out a long wooden pipe, painted with bright patterns. It was a didgeridoo and was at least twice as tall as she was, taller even than Immanuel.

It was then that Merry realised what was so peculiar about Gladice. The didgeridoo and the paintings on the wall: Merry looked harder at Gladice’s face and realised she was an Australian Aborigine.

“You’re an Aborigine,” said Merry.

“That’s right,” said Glad.

“But your skin’s so white.”

“Didn’t Immanuel tell you? I’m a vampire.”

Merry was flabbergasted, not to mention quite frightened.

“Why...? How...?”

“Oh, read my books if you want explanations,” said Glad.

“It’s okay, Merry,” said Immanuel. “Gladabayu hasn’t eaten anyone in a very long time.” He said this half jokingly, half deadly serious.

Immanuel took the didgeridoo and began to play. He also had a clapstick, which he would hit out rhythms with on the didgeridoo as he blew through it.

Merry was not prepared for just how beautiful the sound of the didgeridoo was. Such a variety of sound she had not imagined could come from a simple piece of wood. The entire house pulsed with the music, she could feel it in the air. Merry’s body was caressed by the rippling sound, which would one moment be as deep and penetrating as the rumbling of the Earth and the next be as light as a soaring bird. The hair on her neck stood on end and her heart tightened as if a ghost held it in its tender grip. Now she could believe. Now she could believe that the man who made this music had walked the Earth thousands of years ago; that he had seen the lives of millions go by. If anyone knew of magic it was he.

It seemed to Merry as if he’d been playing forever. She could no longer comprehend time. In the music she could feel something of

the loneliness of the Everlaster's existence and the reason for his sadness.

When he finished Merry awoke as if from a dream to see Glad crying. The little vampire girl rushed into the Everlaster's arms and he held her tight and soothed her.