

Immortalibus Bella

SL Figuhr

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DEDICATION

Thank you to all my friends, both old and new, and my family, who supported and encouraged my endeavors through countless rewrites and rant sessions.

CHAPTER ONE

“You know what I miss the most?” Colin mused. “Technology. Life was so much easier when one could book a flight online, call anywhere, and have a room ready and waiting at the end of a journey.”

“I miss grocery stores, gas stoves, hot running water, instant heat or cold air.” Eron played the game as they walked.

A derisive snort from Mica interrupted their remembrances.

The two friends lagged behind, to escape the harangues of their self-appointed leader, continuing their conversation as they walked.

“I think he’s tired of living,” Colin made excuses.

“Out of the three of us, it should be me. He just needs to suck it up.

Shit or get off the pot,” Eron grouched.

“Still, where have the remnants gone? The metal? The concrete?” Colin mused.

“Buried under the land, or hauled off to be re-used.” Eron scowled. *It wasn’t supposed to be this way. Damn mortals and their wars.*

* * *

Mica crested the stony hill to find his friend Eron resting comfortably on a large gray boulder scored with an undecipherable glyph. Why this should irritate him, he didn’t know, but like the steadily rising

temperature, so did his anger.

“Thanks for scouting ahead. Wouldn’t want to be met by any bandits.” The sarcasm slipped out.

His dark-haired friend merely drank from his canteen before shutting his eyes. “Blow it out your ass. Your forced march towards nothing leaving us too tired to fight is the problem.”

The other man clenched his jaw. He refused to be drawn into an argument. He turned his head to see how his brother was getting along. Colin walked up, dropping his pack with an audible sigh.

“This isn’t nap time.”

“I need a break, bro. This path isn’t the easiest to navigate. Besides, I think I’m getting a hole in my boot sole.” He sat down, inspecting the bottoms.

It was petty problems like this that prevented the men from catching up to Nicky and finding him. Mica walked a few more paces, the elevation giving him a clear sight line of their destination. The rocky gray mountains they were traversing curved around a valley. A middling-sized town sat below, surrounded by forests, a river cutting it in half before emptying into a harbor. He checked the hand-drawn map he had purchased off a merchant. The view seemed to match up with the map.

He re-capped his canteen, turning to the resting men. “Break time’s over, let’s go.” He received no reply, his brother now scribbling in his journal, his friend trying to fake sleep.

“I said let’s go! Now! Put that damn thing away, you can record your observations later.” Mica barely kept from snatching his brother’s pride and joy and tossing it over the precipice before them.

“You can always take over scouting duty, oh obsessed one,” Eron remarked without opening his eyes.

“I’ve had all I can take of your bitching and whining. You made a promise to me. If you have any honor left, you’ll keep your damn word, seeing this through to the end. The end which is down there.” Mica turned away from his friend to stare blindly over the landscape.

Eron huffed to himself. “It’s all the same; go here and all your questions will be answered, but they never are.”

Mica stared at him, “This is it, Eron. I know it is. I can feel it in my bones.”

He snorted, “Your bones are liars. You’ve been feeling it for a while now. Dementia setting in, Alzheimer’s maybe? The man had his head up his ass. He saw a young man, not a little boy.”

“Bickering isn’t helping,” Colin offhandedly remarked, now scanning the land through a spyglass. “It’s just the fatigue and hunger speaking. We’ll feel better once we eat and sleep.”

“This.is.it.” Mica replied forcefully. “Our quest will end here. Finally, after countless years of trials and tribulations, we will be rewarded.” he continued with enthusiasm.

Eron sneered, “And how do you explain the age problem?”

Mica gave a steely-eyed glare. “Tricks, the boy’s up to his old games. Nicky hired someone older who faintly resembles him to pretend he’s Nicky to throw us off his whereabouts.”

“He’s gone. If he wanted to be found, you’d be tripping over him,” spat Eron, standing abruptly.

Mica went rigid, turning on his friend furiously. “The king of Gemica’s women were adamant about the fact there was a little boy matching Nicky’s description with the King of Macinas when he visited.”

Eron’s hands curled into fists, wanting to plow them into his friend’s face for what he considered the man’s stupidity and ignorance. “I don’t need to figure anything out. You’re the one wanting to twist the truth because you can’t or won’t accept it. Nicky is gone. He’s been gone for decades. He’ll surface when he wants.”

Mica sneered, “Shut your filthy, lying mouth before I shut it for you.”

“I think there’s a castle hidden beyond the forest, by the far circle of the mountains, and it doesn’t look like ruins,” Colin casually remarked.

“What?” The quarreling men turned in irritation at the intrusion.

Eron’s brow furrowed. “There are two rulers? The King of Gemica didn’t mention that. Odd.” He reached for the glass, more to piss his friend off than because he cared about the anomaly.

Colin handed the piece over, began flipping pages in his journal.

“We don’t have time for you to write it down,” his brother warned.

Colin ignored him while looking for something, stopping now and

again to read bits and pieces.

“Let’s go, brother. Now! Forget whatever it is,” Mica repeated as he situated his canteen.

“No, I remember...” He flipped some more and read another section before crying out in triumph. “I knew this place sounded familiar! Remember when we met the old crone who said she could see the future?”

“Not this crap again!” Mica grouched. “She’s a fake, they all are.”

“Nope, sorry, I don’t recall, buddy. What did she say?”

Mica fumed at his friend’s egging on of his brother’s delusions as he began reading.

“She said we would have many towns yet, and miles to go before it would end. She said we would know we had found the place we seek when ‘from behind a thick forest rises the spires of a castle, hidden in the mist and embraced by mountains in a crescent moon. A town harboring evil lies before the forest, and the town holds that which you seek.’”

He looked up at them, smiling to see his brother scowling while Eron scanned the stone peaks. “Huh, what do you know? He’s right.”

Mica snatched the spyglass out of his friend’s hands, almost ramming his own eye out as he took a look. After a moment, he found what the other two men talked about, barely. A bead of sweat dripped in his eye, and he blinked, staring harder. The hidden building was now in plain view, a lighter gray than the mountains. It perched on its rock aerie, spires proudly stabbing the firmaments, pennants blowing in the breeze. Mist billowed out from twin waterfalls to either side of the castle on its perch, the sun bouncing off the cascading water and producing faint rainbows in the spume. A long causeway stretched from the rock base over the swirling maelstrom of water created by the cascades joining below. The stone road ended in pillars topped by carving. A wide dirt track led away, disappeared into the forest. Sweat obscured his vision again.

By the time he blinked it away, the castle was gone—only its towers peeked up over the forest. Mica lowered the glass a bit to rub his eyes—damn! He must be getting heat stroke or something. He set the glass back to his eye, but the scene was the same, lots of forest and the hint of something more. He handed the glass back to his brother.

“I think you’re both crazy. I saw nothing.” He paid no attention to

the protests behind him as he descended the stony track, his thoughts keeping him company.

Mica recalled with startling clarity the fantastic tale the little boy who called himself Nicky had spun, like something out of a book or a really bad movie: an evil man forcing him to be an apprentice in some cult with strange, dark rites after killing the boy's family. Nicky didn't understand why the man had done it or how his parents drew the attention of such a figure. Mica had taken the boy in, trying to get him help, and justice for his murdered family.

The man scowled, anger at how he had been tricked making him speed up into a jog, un-mindful of his brother and friend trailing behind, or of the path he followed. He had adopted the lying brat, was going to make him his heir, and the child tried to kill him. Mica's boots pounded the narrow, rutted track. The straps of his pack dug into his shoulders with each footfall, his sword slapping his leg. None of the discomfort mattered. He blocked it out, running down the twisting path. He stumbled, almost turning his ankle, and decided to slow down.

His heart pounded, sweat dripping, breath coming in gasps, as he stopped. Mica drained his canteen before realizing he was alone. He looked back the way he had come, but his traveling partners remained hidden from view. The big man slumped to his knees, head hanging down.

If I can just finish this quest, I can rest. Letting the kid escape and believing any of his bullshit was a mistake. I will not be duped by him again. If he had just been content with taking his wrath out on me, and not those I cared for, it would never have come to this.

He sat back on his haunches, realizing he needed to find a source of water. What was taking those two so long? He had just re-filled his canteen from a rushing brook when Colin and Eron appeared. Now he had to wait for them to take a rest break. He paced back and forth, inhaling the crisp air.

"Done yet? Let's go." Mica gave them no chance to reply as he turned to continue.

"What about bandits?" came from behind him.

"I think infested was Gemica's idea of a joke," Eron replied.

Mica faced them. "The forest is possibly another hour's walk away. The town is on the other side of the forest. We can be there by tonight."

“Are you mad?” his brother demanded. “Look at the light. I don’t think we should walk through an unfamiliar forest after dark.”

“Don’t be such a wuss,” Mica said. “The damn track goes right into it.”

“I’m being cautious. You do know what the word means, don’t you? It’ll be pitch black in there, perfect conditions for an ambush,” Colin worried.

“When have I ever not taken care of you, little brother?” Mica asked.

“Just because it’s near-impossible to kill us doesn’t mean we need rumors preceding us about men who won’t or can’t die,” Colin retorted. “I would rather not be met by peasants with pitchforks and torches.”

“Ah, the good old days,” Eron sighed.

“Great!” Mica enthused. “On we go.” He started off.

Colin swore at his brother’s back. The three men walked steadily onward across the Downs, last rays of the sun sinking as they came to the forest edge. The trees blocked most of the moonlight, making it difficult to see inside the forest and the road they followed. They had to slow their pace as their eyes adjusted. Eron heard a strange whistling sound.

“Down!” he yelled just as an arrow whizzed past the space he had been standing in and thunked into a tree behind him. “Damn it, Colin!”

He had made the safety of a tree, trying to peer around it. He saw Mica nip behind another one across the path while his friend dragged a leg behind him, arrow shaft protruding from his thigh.

Wild yells erupted from all around. Their attackers burst forth from the nearby trees and bushes, surrounding them. Colin was still out in the open. Eron knew the archers had to be readying another round. He slipped out of his pack, and tackled his friend. The man let out a scream of pain, drowned out in the thunking of arrows, as they landed behind a tree. Colin hissed. It would take his leg a while to heal even after yanking the arrow out. Eron drew his sword, not sure where Mica was. The bandits laughed and jeered.

“Come on out, and maybe we won’t kill you!”

“Yoo hoo! Here piggy pig, pig!”

“Oh, there are no bandits in here, it’s too close to town, he said,”

Colin grumbled, sweating and grimacing. “Where’s Mica?”

“Bastard’s hiding across the road,” Eron whispered back.

Colin nodded. “Go flank the archers. I’ll draw them out so you can get rid of them.”

“Thanks, bud, first round’s on me.” Eron checked the trees, keeping crouched down, moving into position.

“There you are,” he heard a man call as he saw one of the archers close by. “Where’s your friends? Get ‘em out here.”

Eron struck, killing two out of four archers before gaining the safety of the trees on the other side of the road. From there, it took a further ten minutes to thin the band down. The remaining handful gave up, fleeing toward the mountains. The two men walked over to Colin’s ‘corpse’, guarding it while they waited for him to re-animate. He sat up with a groan as his friend reached a hand down to help him up.

“Nice look.” Eron squeezed his friend’s shoulder, saying to Mica, “No bandits, huh?”

“You’re still alive.”

“And your brother’s the one they saw die,” Eron shot back.

Colin was leaning against a tree, resembling a porcupine. Besides the arrow sticking out of his leg, there was four in his back, another in his side, one in his upper arm, and half-a-dozen in his chest. “A little help here? I don’t fancy going into town like this.” He was trying to inspect his clothes. “Damn, I don’t think I can repair this much damage,” he muttered to himself.

Mica walked over to tend to Colin, snapping fletching off, pushing the rest of the barbs and shafts through and out of his body, so final healing could begin, unmindful of his brother’s muffled screams of pain.

“We should have gone after them.” Eron seethed inside. *I told the smug bastard to wait but no, it’s hurry, hurry, hurry. We may be impossible to kill, but it doesn’t mean you act like an idiot.* Mica ignored Eron’s mumbling, waiting for his brother to wrap his cloak tightly about himself to hide the blood stains and holes in his clothing. “Come on, brother, let’s get you into town.”

Eron and Mica supported Colin’s weight as soon as he felt able to continue on. It was slow going before Colin was able to walk unassisted. They emerged from the forest to find a big bright-yellow moon

illuminating the way. The road widened, though still rutted, passing through a long open grassy meadow. The men were close enough to the town they could see the outlines of buildings making up the outermost edges of the town. The dark hid a lot of detail. What the men could see of the town was not cheerful; it looked and smelled like many a squalid backwater teeming with poverty and disease.

“Oh joy, another shit hole,” Eron muttered under his breath.

The men guessed it was close to midnight as they trudged into the area. An overpowering stench of putrefaction saturated the air, singed their noses. Dour images seen through a haze of wood smoke did not give them much hope for decent lodgings. Most of the buildings were shuttered tight. Their fears were confirmed at the first inn they came across. A good strong wind could blow it over, but the decrepitude of the place didn't stop it from being full. The proprietor told them of a tavern where they would be guaranteed lodgings. Colin didn't like the lack of guards as they made their way through the town. Flaring torches outside the tavern showed a creaking wooden sign—a fist with bloodied knuckles—hanging overhead, proclaiming: The Bloody Knuckles. The three men shared a glance, but shrugged and entered. The ill-lit, filthy, smoky interior gave the tavern a sinister look. Men, along with a handful of women, bristling with weapons, cast looks of suspicion, hate, greed, and murderous intent toward the newcomers. The three men let their hands drop to their sword hilts, missing a small group of people turn their backs hastily away. As the travelers worked their way further inside, one of the members of the group who had noticed them, went up to a big man at the bar to whisper in his ear.

The three men gave a collective sigh of resignation, sitting down at a wobbly table, preparing to order what dubious fare the place provided. From the sounds going on above led them to believe the tavern doubled as a brothel. They returned the curious patrons' looks with blank, empty stares. After a ten-minute wait, a malnourished girl of about fourteen made her reluctant way to their table.

She had new and old bruises covering her exposed skin. Her tremulous voice was hard to hear over the noise, “May I get you something to eat or drink?”

“Both for the three of us, please. Ale will be fine, the best you have.”

The girl nodded, scurrying away. They watched her try to avoid the grasping hands of the men, while flinching at each crude remark flung

her way from the patrons.

“Wonderful. Nicky never disappoints,” Eron observed.

Mica snorted, “Oh, I have no worries he’s found someone to sucker into caring for him. It’s so much like all the other places we’ve been; I just know he’s here.”

The girl came back with the ale, temporarily stopping the conversation. Each man reached for his mug, cautiously sampled the brew, and shuddered at the sour taste. They tried to take the smallest sips possible.

“Shall I call the girl back over and ask for wine or spirits?”

“Don’t bother, Colin; they’re not likely to be much better.”

He nodded glumly, thinking back to the times when it was possible to get a decent brew even with the cheapest of spirits. After the initial sip, Colin set the mug aside, drawing out his journal and ink to record the day’s travel. He was proud of it, keeping the leather cover supple by rubbing animal fat into it and wrapping it in a bit of silk tied with a silken cord. The journal was as long as his forearm and about a foot thick.

Eron assessed the tavern. A raised platform with a large stone fireplace dominated one wall, before it men, drunkenly carousing with scantily-clad women, filled benches around a long table. The serving slaves could hardly keep their mugs filled. Directly in front, patrons rolled dice and bet. A few played with cards made from wood or tree bark. The bar itself was crowded with a boisterous group contentedly harassing the serving girls. At the far back, barely seen in the flickering light, a set of stairs led up into gloomy darkness. Thick layers of dirt and grime covered the whole scarred wooden tavern floor. Very few of the patrons appeared as well-dressed or half as clean as they were. Filthy coarse fabrics woven of wool or cotton were paired with leather and fur. It was a contrast to the three men whose clothes had a tight weave, showing not a patch or repair from skillful mending, including their dusty fur-lined cloaks. All the men seemed to carry a weapon, be it a bow, sword, club or short knife, sometimes more than one. Eron noticed some had made attempts at armor; there were a few pieces of cured leather, some wood shields, and a very few scraps of metal. He noticed the bartender eyeing them fiercely between yelling at the girls.

Turning back to his companions, Eron remarked, low-toned, “A flask of this swill says we get robbed the moment we step outside.”

The two brothers looked up, giving rueful smiles. “I say it comes in the dead of night while trying to sleep.”

The girl came back, sliding bread trenchers of food in front of them. Colin hurriedly dumped his journal in his lap before she set his meal on top of it. She moved a step away, naming the price. Mica fished out coins, which the girl scooped up before running off.

Mica pulled a face as he brought out his dagger and fork to cut into the meat. The first bite all but made him gag. The other two, seeing his reaction, did their best to choke down what they were able.

“I think we would have been better off on the outskirts and hunting. It would surely be more palatable than this...this mess,” Colin voiced the idea in Eron’s mind.

Colin shoved the remains of his meal to one side to finish writing his observations of the day’s walk and subsequent events.

Eron washed what little he had eaten down with another sip of foul brew.

“No more of this, Mica,” Eron spat, once he could talk again. “I’m sick of eating putrid meals and bad ale, of sleeping on lumpy flea-filled beds. I’m a human being, not a dog.”

“This is it! This is the town.” Mica was adamant, “What’s a little bad food and poor lodgings compared to finishing our quest?”

“You’ve said that about the last forty-some towns.”

“And I shall continue to say so, as it’s true,” Mica retorted. “Nothing matters but the quest.” As if to prove his point, he attacked the food with more vigor and chewed heartily.

“Company coming,” Colin murmured, lifting his mug to drink, as the biggest person at the bar walked toward them. The immortals couldn’t decide if he was mostly built of muscle, or fat. The floorboards trembled from his heavy tread.

His leather armor appeared new and unscratched, firelight gleaming off jewels and metal. His leather boots had hobnailed soles. Without asking, he spun a chair around, sitting down with them.

“Well, now, don’t you three look pretty,” he leered with blackened teeth and foul breath. “What ya here for?”

“Just passing through,” Mica replied.

The man raised a brow. “Oh? Some kinda wanderin’ mercenary, are ya?”

Mica replied softly, “Or something. May we know who you are, stranger, and buy you a drink?”

“Ah, a drink would be welcome now, and right nice of ya. I’m the sheriff of this town, those are me men.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the group at the bar. Turning his head, he bellowed, “Hey, Mary Elana, youse slut! Can’t you see we’s need refills.”

Luckily for the sheriff, he missed the poisoned look all three men gave at his hailing of the girl. Their faces had the same bored expression as before when he turned back.

“So who the hell are ya?”

“Mica, Colin and Eron,” replied Mica.

“Call me Jake.” The girl approached with fresh tankards. The sheriff hawked, spitting on the floor in front of her. She set down the new mugs, snatching up the old. Mary Elana was not quick enough to escape Jake’s hand snaking out to catch her around the wrist, forcing her to his side.

“Now, ya be good to these here men, ya hear me? I don’t wanna be tellin’ the lord about ya misbehavin’ to anyone here.” He leered at her in a meaningful way as a shudder went through her thin frame.

I hope you drop dead soon, you drunken sot, and leave me be, she thought, hoping he did not try fondling her.

The sheriff turned to his new acquaintances, booming, “Yousel can have ‘bout any most girl in the place ‘ceptin this one. This lazy slut here is our Little Lord’s property an’ ain’t no man ‘ceptin him and her father allowed to touch her. Just warning youse before ya do somethin’ stupid like.”

Mica had to remember to keep his temper in check. “I’m sure we’ll keep it in mind. Thank you. Perhaps the girl would like to finish going about her job now?”

The sheriff stared at him for a minute or two, as if trying to decide whether or not Mica was being sincere, before he let go of the girl’s wrist, smacking her hard on the ass. She let out a strangled scream, fleeing back behind the bar. His eyes hardened, voice no longer friendly.

“Ya better watch who ya try to give orders to around here. Could be kinda unhealthy-like to piss off the wrong person; ya might not make

youse trip outta here in one piece if ya catch me drift.”

Mica didn't trust himself to reply, remaining silent as his brother apologized for any misunderstanding.

“Are ya a pansy? One of em limp wrist ones?” Jake sneered, grabbing at Colin's journal.

Colin moved it out of reach, but the sheriff's sleeve dragged across an ink stone. He cursed at the large black spot staining the fabric.

“Damn pansy ass,” he roared. A slap of his large hand sent the offending item spinning onto the floor.

Colin swallowed his anger. Men like the sheriff did not need an excuse to try and kill him. He was about to offer to pay for cleaning as the sheriff grabbed his shirt to yank him closer.

The table wobbled, food and drinks falling off. The sheriff's other hand hauled back in a fist. Colin braced for the punch as his hands kept his journal and remaining writing implements from crashing to the floor. Mica pressed his dagger into the man's side.

“I wouldn't do it, sheriff. If you hurt my brother, you'll have me to deal with.”

Jake snarled, “We's don't like his kind here, and ya'd better let me go if ya knows what's good fer ya.”

“What kind?” When the man didn't answer, Mica pressed harder, making the sheriff mutter something which he repeated louder at another prod.

“The kind what don't like women.”

“I can assure you, my brother likes women. You will let him alone, won't you? I'd hate having to leave this place so quickly for killing you when we just got here.”

“Ya wouldn't make it out the door a'fore me men got ya.”

“Possible,” Mica replied smoothly, and after a heartbeat or two, the sheriff let go of Colin.

Colin eased back, peeling the journal from his shirtfront. The page he had just written was an unreadable, smeared mess. He risked a quick glance down; the ink blended with the blood stains on his faded brown shirt.

The sheriff looked around to see who had noticed; those closest hurriedly went back to their pursuits.

“I don’t suppose this tavern has any rooms for weary travelers?” Eron asked.

Colin took the chance to look for his stone. He didn’t see it and guessed one of the patrons had already stolen it. He added it to the growing mental list of things he needed to replace. He was rather upset with the loss of it, being the last one he had. The sheriff sat back to drink deeply before replying, “Not unless ya want to lodge wit the sailors.” His smirk said it all on the subject. “Lucky for youse there might be a room. Tom’d be able to tell ya for sure. He’s owner and bartender.”

Colin noticed Jake’s intricately designed clasp and decided to risk the man’s wrath. “That’s an interesting piece you’re wearing, not in keeping with the rest of your...outfit.”

He committed it to memory, thorny vines surrounding a grimacing face with a circle, star, and flames, to sketch out later.

Jake’s face bloomed red. “Ya sayin’ I ain’t good enough for it, or I took it from someone?”

“Not at all,” Eron smoothed over, yet his tone implied otherwise.

“It’s a gift from the king for doin’ me work so well. He don’t mind how’s I’s do it, only that it’s done. A part of me job is to tell ya that ya gots to see His Majesty tomorrow if ya wants to stay here. Other side o’ the bridge. Ya can’t miss the palace, top of the hill.” He lumbered up, making his way back to his friends at the bar.