

The Reaping

Immortalibus Bella 2

SL Figuhr

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Published by SL Figuhr Publishing

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ISBN-13: 978-0-9911498-3-4 (SL Figuhr Publishing)

ISBN-10: 0991149831

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013919780

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Book / E-book cover design:

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

Edited by:
Josephine Henke

Design by Celairen, using stock from [YorkBerlin/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/YorkBerlin/) [conrado/Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com/user/conrado/).

DEDICATION

To everyone who takes a chance on Indie Authors.
Thank you for reading and making it to the second book in the series.

CHAPTER ONE

The little hut lay in darkness; out of the night came the snorts of the pigs and the grunts and moans of his mother and father. Nicky could hear the soft puffing breaths of his brothers and sisters as they slept beside him. He, however, lay wide awake. He waited for his parents to finish, and soon was rewarded by the snores of his father.

Nicky eased up, so as not to disturb those beside him. He scrambled into his clothes and peered over the edge of the loft to where his parents slept in their corner of the hut. Gradually, the boy eased himself down the ladder onto the dirt floor. The night was dark, the moon barely a sliver in the sky. Fine with him, he didn't have far to go.

The boy, absorbed in his work, didn't see the darker shadow slide across the entrance to hide in the blackest area in the back of the cave. Why couldn't he keep the bunnies alive long enough to discover the spark which brought them life? He had found a way to keep them calm, but they always died after he skinned them alive.

He threw the body out of the cave in frustration. Was it his choice of animal? Rabbits were jumpy, nervous creatures. He needed something bigger, a fox perhaps? It took him until nearly daybreak to complete his preparations.

Even though he was tired, Nicky raced back home. He slipped inside the hut and began his daily chores by the time the sun peeked over the horizon. His father was the first to stir, and as always was impressed with his little boy.

"You'll be a fine farmer one day, son." He ruffled the boy's hair, missing the hateful glower.

* * *

The little boy moved restlessly, his eyeballs pinging back and

forth beneath his closed lids. He barely remembered the early years of his life, and this was not a memory he cared to revisit. Why should he dream of those times now? Why was he dreaming at all? He had been in the middle of something. What was it? He moved again, dream memories jumping ahead a year.

“You little freak!” His older brother burst from the bushes to grab him by the arm. “You wait’ll Da hears of this! His perfect younger son!”

Terror gripped Nicky. All his plans would be messed up! They would call the village priest in to pray over him, perhaps force him to become a part of the church. “Let go!” Nicky hollered.

“Move it, freak! I knew your good-little-boy bit was fake!” His brother wrestled Nicky to the ground and tied him up with vines. “Get up!” He demanded of his little brother.

Nicky sat on the ground, winded, aching from the beating, “No. You’ll be sorry! I’ll make you sorry! You better let me go!”

“The only one’ll be sorry is you. I knew you been hanging in the forest too much. It be forbidden for a reason; you had your head turned by the evil spirits in here. I know what to do to help.”

Nicky clung to the ground, but his brother was older, bigger, and stronger. He picked the little boy up and slung him over his shoulders until Nicky tried to bite him. Then he dropped his little brother on the ground and dragged him, not caring if the little boy banged off rocks, roots, or bushes. The little boy was a scratched, filthy mess when he was hauled into the farm yard. His Ma collapsed, wailing she always knew something was wrong with her youngest. His Da refused to believe his perfect son was capable of such unspeakable things. Nicky gloated inwardly, and began to cry.

“He’s always hated me, Da! He hates me ‘cause I get up earlier than he do and do me chores so well.” He fanned the flames, listing all the things he did so much better than his siblings. How his traps caught more game, how he tickled fish out of the creeks and ponds when others couldn’t.

“He’s bewitched is why, Da! The evil tempter in the forest put a spell on him! Remember just last week Widow May was found wandering around with her wits addled, talking about her lover the forest demon!”

Nicky’s Ma continued to cry and yell, on her knees in the dust, rocking back and forth and pouring dirt over her hair in shame.

“For the love of the creator, woman! Cease your wailing! I need to think!” Nicky’s father shouted. “We’ll take him to the village priest. Will, pick out one of the shoats to give in payment, and tell Marcus he be in charge until we get back.”

“No!” Nicky shrieked, “I don’t need a priest! Will lies! He just wants to get rid of me!” He struggled futilely against his bonds.

It took half a day of walking to reach the outskirts of the village, and the priest’s house. Nicky was a silent, seething mass by the time the three arrived. The priest listened gravely to the father’s and brother’s tale, and then asked the boy be stripped to search for demon marks. Will had to wrestle Nicky’s clothes off as his Da was too shocked to be of much help.

He endured the priest’s inspection, humiliated beyond words, vowing he would have revenge on them all. Nicky tugged his clothes back on under the all too watchful eyes of his brother

“I could find no demon mark on him,” the priest said. “It is possible you have intervened in time. Still, it is a grave matter, grave indeed. Just the other week, the Widow May, was found addled in the woods, praising the dark lord, under similar circumstances.”

“But can nothing be done?” Nicky’s father groaned out in despair. “His Ma is beside herself with grief and worry.”

“Leave him here with me. I will pray over him as I do for all those who have been brought in with this affliction. The arch-bishop is coming down to inquire into the matter. It affects more than just us; I have heard this unknown evil has spread to all the towns ringing the forest.”

“How long will it be? How will we survive the coming winter if we can’t harvest wood and nuts?” his Da asked.

The priest stroked his chin. “I will send word if I can when the arch-bishop comes. In the meantime, I shall give you these blessed crosses to wear when you must venture into the forest. Mind me now, do not go in too far; everything I have heard says the evil lurks in the very heart of the forest, extending its influence as the darkness spreads and retreating in the brightness of the dawn. The fringes are safe only when the sun is high.”

The farmer nodded wearily, as beside him, his other son, Will, snorted in annoyance. They hung the crosses around their necks. Nicky’s father’s face seemed to have aged. He laid a work-rough hand on the boy’s head and flinched when his son jerked his head out from underneath the touch. “May God have mercy on you, and restore you to the loving, bright boy I remember you as.”

Will spat on the ground, just missing his brother’s bare toes. “You little freak, I hope they beat it out of you.”

It was the last Nicky saw of his family for a long time.

* * *

Betrayal floated through the mind of the dreamer. That was all people had ever done to him. But who had done it this time? Why could he not see or think?

* * *

Blackness and a searing pain, Nicky could barely open his eyes. The archbishop had been zealous in his search for any sign the little boy was infected with evil.

He had been stripped again, and even more thoroughly examined. When the second search proved futile, the older man said there were other signs, but first he had to prepare.

The archbishop stretched the little boy's arms and legs wide and chained him between two posts. He lit incense, and praying, walked around the boy. He took oils, anointed the boy all over.

"Get off me, you old goat!" Nicky cursed the man. "I told you I'm innocent! My brother hates me! He lied! He's the evil one!"

The priest only kept up his chanting and praying; it seemed to go on for endless hours. The little boy fell asleep in his chains and woke slowly to realize he barely could feel his hands or feet. Pain shot through all four of his limbs when he tried to move. Nicky gritted his teeth and moved each arm and leg at a time. They were burning now from strain and fatigue, and sweat poured off him from the effort. He passed out.

When next the boy woke, he was laying on a hard wooden bed, covered by a frayed blanket that smelled of mouse and moth and mold. Moving his limbs caused lancing bolts of needle-like pain. He was starving, and his mouth felt like desert sand in dry season.

It took the boy a long time before he could roll over and slip off the bed onto the rough stone floor. It took an equal amount of time for him to half-crawl, half-slither to the stool. The porridge was cold: a lumpy, gray congealed mess. Nicky didn't care, he scooped it up with his fingers and crammed it into his mouth. The mug of well-water helped to get the food down.

After eating, the little boy drooped to the floor, still exhausted enough to sleep. He fought against the sensation, instead trying to work his arms and legs. He managed to make them stop hurting when he heard a key in the lock. The door swung open, and the archbishop entered.

"Ah, you have eaten. We mustn't let you lose too much strength, not until I have decided whether you are pure."

"I told you my brother lies!" Nicky shouted, struggling to sit.

He yelped as a burning pain scoured his right side, dimly aware the man had struck him with a whip.

“Children must not talk unless they are answering questions! I see your parents never taught you manners. Maybe we should learn that lesson before moving forward?” The voice held cold anger.

I hate you! Nicky thought, but didn't want to know what the whip could do, so he bowed his head, shaking it.

“Excellent. I would hate to have to interrupt my search.” The archbishop hauled the boy up.

Nicky struggled, trying to punch and kick but the bishop was too strong despite being an older man. Soon the boy was chained back up between the same pillars. The priest brought a stool over and placed it before the boy, arranged his robes before sitting down. The little boy felt an itch between his shoulder blades; he didn't like the man's head so close to his waist.

“I have had reports you are considered intelligent, more than others your age. I must determine to which areas this extends, for often those born of demons or demon-marked show urges beyond their years.” The archbishop ignored Nicky's squalls and continued his explorations. When he was done, he dumped the little boy back in his cell.

There the boy vomited repeatedly, his whole body shaking with the pain and humiliation of being so intimately violated. He curled up into a fetal ball, vowing to find a way to kill the man. He refused to sob, though the tears leaked out all the same. He tried to stay awake so he wouldn't be surprised by the arch-bishop coming into his cell. Eventually his eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep.

* * *

Lord Nicky woke suddenly. How long had he been out? He could hear screams, shouting and pounding from behind him, so it couldn't have been long. He sat up in a rage. *They will all pay for this! Especially Rablias! Damn him!*

Where had he received the knowledge to set off something of that nature? Not from him, the boy knew; he looked down at himself and felt a cold terror. His clothes hung off his frame, his boots too big for his feet. He was a little boy again!

No, no, no! He should have had months left on the spell! Damn his acolyte! Nicky couldn't let anyone see him in this state or risk all his carefully created plans. The Advisor cast a look behind him as the door to the garden shuddered under the blows from outside. The young man who was now a little boy scrambled up, hampered by his garments. Quickly he took off the boots, rolled the pant legs and shirt sleeves up so he could move.

How dare DiJinn teach Rablias the spell...NO! Don't think it. That kind of betrayal could not be borne. If his slave had turned against his master, he wouldn't have left the little boy lying there. But when he tried to call his pet to him, there was no answer. Nicky didn't realize he was panting, gasping, feeling a compound of fear and terror, so long had it been since he experienced either.

“Get ahold of yourself! Get the hell out of here, get to the grove and become big again. There is still the army, when they get here, you can take the throne. You can't be found here like this, they'll imprison you.”

He hated to be chained for any length of time. It was too forceful a reminder of the damn archbishop. He had been held for months by the religious man, forced to perform shameful acts. The man became too complaisant, and Nicky was able to free himself; he knocked the man out with a thick piece of wood, then slaughtered him. When he left, the archbishop was scattered throughout his own dungeons in unrecognizable shreds. No servants were about, having been given the night off.

The little boy stole what jewels and coins he could find, stuffing them into a sack. He found some clothes belonging to a page and yanked them on, then finished filling the sack with food and whatever else caught his fancy. Nicky thought better of taking the arch-bishop's horse. Instead, he riled the remaining mounts up to cover his escape on a mule into the forest surrounding his home.

Nicky's bare feet slapped against the cold stone as he ran toward his chambers and the passageways that let him move about unseen. His thigh was charred where his protection from the demon was tattooed, but the protection was still there. Who had tried to remove it? Surely not DiJinn, he couldn't. It had to be Rablias, damn the man! Nicky would teach the cur the meaning of revenge. Nicky's head ached abominably, and flashbacks kept popping up and engulfing him.

* * *

The little boy shivered in his cave. At winter's onset, he'd had to sell the mule he'd stolen months ago from the arch-bishop. He had tried to eavesdrop to rumors about his former jailer while in the market, but the news was all about how the forest was becoming increasingly hazardous. There was even talk of asking the king to send troops to deal with the problem.

A draft of icy wind swirled outside the cave, making the boy's feeble fire flicker and shrink. He hissed in annoyance and laid another branch in the flames. Though he had an ax, he wasn't big or strong

enough to do more than chop small limbs; deadfall proved the majority of his firewood.

Nicky crawled into the back of the cave and inspected his dwindling store of food. A few vegetables remained, and a hard heel of bread but that was all until he stole more. Even his traps hadn't netted him much game.

The next morning dawned cold and bright. It had stormed overnight, so the world looked coated in glass. Nicky was shivering uncontrollably by now. His small fire had gone out, and his fingers were so stiff and frozen he barely was able to move them. He realized dimly he was close to dying out here, but he refused to return to town.

Slowly, painfully, the boy put on every piece of clothing he had, becoming aware of steady movement in the forest outside his cave. He crawled to the entrance, glad his fire was out, so the smoke would not betray him. Nicky heard singing; he didn't understand the words, but guessed it to be Latin as it sounded churchy.

In a moment, a lean man in a woolen robe and cowl, his feet and legs wrapped in cloth, slogged through the snow mere feet from the little boy's hiding place. The man had a staff, and a rope over his shoulder tied to a deer he dragged behind him. Nicky didn't know of any monks nearby, for that's what the man reminded him of. But the man or monk had food and was therefore worth following, if only to see if he led to a better spot to hide. Nicky crept out of the cave, his sack with what remained of the archbishop's treasures over his shoulder. The monk walked for quite a while, further into the forest itself, until he came to a clearing. The monk's abode, hard to see, was built into the hillside, as was a small stable. Smoke rose from the top of the hill, and a stream ran through the clearing. Crude boards bridged the icy though unfrozen rivulet.

Nicky watched the man go about his work all morning and partially into the afternoon. He appeared to be alone as no other monks showed themselves. When it grew dark, the man disappeared inside. Nicky waited, to be sure he would not emerge. He crept closer to the hut, staying on the edges of the forest.

There was a small chicken coop; eggs, even raw, tasted like ambrosia to him now after so prolonged a span of scant rations. A goat ate hay in the stable, and though she bleated grumpily, the boy extracted a little milk from the doe. The boy stole an armful of wood from the wood pile and scurried back to his cave. In the morning, the boy returned to hide in the forest by the hut, and again he shadowed the lone monk about his daily chores. At night, Nicky crept out and stole milk and eggs.

The following day, however, the monk straightened up and called

out, “There's no need to keep hiding. You're welcome to come in out of the cold. I won't hurt you.”

Nicky stayed away for several days until cold and hunger drove him back. He was half-starved, but still ready to bash the monk's head in with a thick branch if he tried anything funny. Instead, he found in the stable a wooden bowl holding fresh bread, dried meat, and a few shriveled apples. Next to it was a mug full of goats' milk. The boy fell on the meal ravenously. He suffered for it too; his stomach, unused to so much food, cramped and he threw it all up.

It was while the boy was bent over, sick, that the monk found him. Nicky was too weak to fight, and the man had no problem hauling the boy and his sack into his hut. When Nicky got better, he decided to stay as, unlike the others, the monk neither hurt him nor tried to convert him. He left the boy in peace, asking only that he do a few chores in return for food and lodging.

* * *

The little boy nearly slammed face-first on the floor as the memories retreated. Damn it! He had to get to his hunting lodge; there was no telling how long it would take before the king sent men for him. Nicky couldn't afford to let anyone else take over his position. He needed to find out why he couldn't call DiJinn to him, and fix the problem. He needed his servant to bring him the proper sacrifice so he could make himself big again.

As he contemplated events in the hall, it seemed more and more likely Rablias had tried to steal DiJinn from him. What had the asshole promised his demon? He would free him from Nicky's bondage if he taught the Head Questioner how to do magic? Laughable, but at least he could rest assured the damn duchess hadn't been a part of it. He should have stopped to see if she were still alive. Oh well, if she lived, perhaps she would come to fear him as she ought.

* * *

Nicky lay on the ground, bruised, bloody and bound with rope. He was able to turn his head and see the monk, tied to a beam of the stable. Both had been beaten badly. Their attacker was inside the hut, ransacking it. Nicky concentrated; he had not used his unique gift since the day his Da turned him over to the priest.

He was not about to become a slave again to some twisted freak of a man, and used as the archbishop had done, but he was hog-tied. The boy

closed his eyes and rested the side of his face against the ground. He envisioned how the knots on the rope would have to undo for him to be able to slip out.

Nicky felt them loosen, and after a few more minutes of work, was able to free his hands. He rolled over and worked on the knots around his ankles. So engrossed was he, he forgot to keep watch on the hut. He felt a sharp pain. The world blacked out.

The boy awoke, once more in a cell, but unchained. A pallet of linen-covered straw made a bed of sorts in a corner. A stool and a small table. A chamber pot. The cell was dimly lit, with smooth glowing orbs. He had never seen anything like them. The boy rose, making his painful way to stand underneath, staring up and concentrating. The orbs seemed to sing, or hum.

It was a haunting melody, something he felt he should know. He hummed under his breath, trying to match the tune coming from the orbs. He managed to make them brighter, then duller, but couldn't extinguish them.

Nicky was bored. He was left alone in his cell; no one came to threaten him, or even speak to him. But someone entered when he slept. Every day when he woke, there was food, and water to wash with, and the chamber pot emptied. He had figured out how to make the globes go on and off. It seemed with that little victory, a whole new world opened.

Everything hummed with the energy; it all wanted to speak with him. Sometimes taunting, sometimes tantalizing, but Nicky was determined to master the songs, as he had nothing better to do. Eventually, the boy undid the locks on his cell, and could wander around the larger room at will.

Nicky didn't know how long he took to work his way out of the room, much less if he had done it of his own volition or been released by his captor. One night, the boy found himself walking up a long staircase, free of the dungeon. At the top was a single door, which opened to the boy's touch. He came face to face with the man who had captured him. The man he was soon to call master.

* * *

The boy stumbled into his suite, glad once again he had cut out the tongues of his slaves so they couldn't betray him by speaking of what they saw. The one slave left able to speak was blind.

"Lord Nicky?" the blind slave inquired at the sound of the door slamming shut.

"Rainton, should the king send slaves looking for me, you will make

them understand I am hunting down those who created the disturbance tonight. I will send word to him when I can, and I was only nominally injured.”

“Yes my lord. Was it assassins?”

“Yes, if he wishes to know.” He could feel the memories overtaking him as he stumbled to his bed chamber. He tried to force the images away as he gave a few more orders, before being swamped by exhaustion.

* * *

“Why are you doing this to me?” Selene begged, “I cared for you, loved you, protected you!”

“You betrayed me! You told Mica about me! Now he wants to kill me!”

“I didn’t know he hated you! Please don’t do this! I can make it up!”

“Your death will serve a greater purpose. You think I like the life I live? That I enjoy being stuck a child?! The pitying looks I get? Or the ones who think just because I look like a kid, I can be used however they want?” Nicky yelled at her.

Selene was crying, curled up on the dirty brick floor, “I never, never...”

“You never do!” he screamed in rage. “No one ever does! You just look at me and think *Oh, what a cute, poor little boy! Let me mother him, let him be the child I lost, or never had!*”

The boy’s chest heaved as he sucked in air. “You never treat me like an adult!”

The woman looked up, tears streaming down her face, eyes red. The boy darted in to punch her. Chains clanked as she flinched back, one hand going to her cheek, the other held up in an effort to ward off any more blows.

“I’m sorry. Please, I’ll do better, I can do better. Just let me go, and I promise, I’ll treat you like an adult.”

Nicky sneered at her, “Would you?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, crawling as far as her chains would allow toward the boy’s feet. “What would you like to do first? Get a place of your own? Have a bank account?”

He savored the look of hope and eager anticipation; it would be so much sweeter when she was crushed by learning what he wanted. “So you can use it against me later? Take it away when I do something you don’t like?”

Confusion briefly clouded her face. “No, no, never. We can... We can

put it all under your name.” She sat like a puppy looking for its master’s approval.

“A good start, but not what I really, truly want.” He played it out.

“I, I don’t know what else I can give, what I can do. What do you truly want? Tell me, I’ll do anything I can to help you get it.”

“Anything? Would you really?”

“Yes!” Her face creased in a frown, “It’s not illegal, is it? I mean, I haven’t led a clean life but, I won’t murder anyone,” she added, fearfully yet defiantly.

“I want someone to love me,” Nicky said.

“But, but I did. Do,” she hastily corrected. “I’ve loved you since I saw you.”

Nicky looked at her in contempt, knowing she still thought of him as nothing more than a child. “Prove it.”

“But I just...”

“Prove it by kissing me,” Nicky interrupted her.

Selene hesitated a moment, rose up onto her knees and kissed him on the cheek. She sat back onto her haunches, looking at him for approval, surprised when his face crumpled in rage.

“I knew you still think of me as a child!” Nicky screamed, his hands balling into fists.

The bewilderment on her face at this outburst changed to one of horror as she realized what he meant. “I...”

The rejection was too much for the little boy; he wasn’t waiting for the look of disgust soon to follow. He struck her with a fist, and danced back out of her lunge. She was no longer so compliant, or eager to treat him as an adult.

“I knew it!” Nicky screamed in rage and picking up a loose brick, darted behind her and smashed it against her head.

She gave a brief cry of pain, toppling over, fighting to stay awake. The back of her head bled. “I...” she began weakly. “I’m sorry, but I, I just can’t. Not, not that.”

Nicky bashed her again until her head was a caved-in mess, brains and blood leaking out onto the floor. He let the brick drop and walked away, shaking in anger. She would join all the other women who had refused to love him.