BLOODBOUND

BY JADE C. LEE

CHAPTER ONE

Sylis had plunged headfirst into wine when the moon turned to blood.

"Out, you fool!" a voice roared, rough hands clasping his collar. "Drunkards, good for nothing but coin! What is gold and booze when the world ends?"

Yanked from the wet cocoon of his barrel, Sylis sputtered, a wheeze escaping him. His sopping body rolled onto the tavern floor, gliding toward a stampede of feet. Curses and screams rang in his eardrums, a sharp sting pairing with a choked throat. "I planned on dying a happy man," he coughed, rubbing over his pale skin.

"Away with you, half-hell!" The barkeep pushed him into the crowd.

Following the horde out to the streets, Sylis staggered as people rushed to and fro. The starry sky held a large ruby, a scarlet light cascading on the city folk of Valmorra. Once he regained his footing and rounded a corner, he flexed a hand over his sword. Mobs, uncommon to the upper ring, flooded past the gates, carrying children and any items worth bringing. Chests of treasure spilled beneath their feet, but none reached for it. Horses squealed in their tethers.

"How can you flee the heavens?" he asked a passerby, who lugged an open satchel of bread and clothes. "An event like this will pass come morning, will it not?"

The wide-eyed woman gave no response. Knights marched in uniform, their presence demanding law and order. Fires blazed, orphans cried, and thieves prowled. Sylis moved upstream—a brother should protect his brother, even for a bastard.

Shoulders rammed into his lanky figure as he traveled against the rabble. *Over the bridge*, he told himself. *Over the bridge and I'll be home*. Throngs of men hollered from a distance, the noise overtaking the shrieks of women as they ran from pursuers. Beyond the lane of higher society housing, a barricade came into his line of sight.

"No entry!" Guards clad in full armor shouted, a crest of a blazing phoenix on their wooden shields. "Get back! All of you!"

Clouds gathered overhead, casting the furor in shadows. Sylis moved in, crouching low to slip past their formation. He broke into a sprint as a paladin gave chase. They leapt over stray crates and abandoned wheelbarrows, black puddles spraying them with each stride.

"I'm a snowblood! Von Argenthau!" the noble called out. He raised an embroidered patch of a silver hawk, illuminated by a lamppost. "You should be guarding the likes of me!"

The paladin circled back, a raspy huff echoing in the otherwise empty road. The bridge forward laid a path straight to the Verren Stretch. Rats and crows moved opposite of Sylis, avoiding the pools of muck. Iron and rust wafted in the air, bitter and pungent.

Gleams of candlelight faded as Sylis passed through the neighborhood, curtains drawn and windows haphazardly boarded. At his arrival, the Argenthau doors hung open.

Like him, the earth stilled with bated breath.

"Father? Father, are you there? Where's Rylon?"

Silence.

With a scowl, Sylis stalked inside, drawing his blade. The entry hall, sacked and lit by dying embers, held no life; not one servant in sight, nor the hounds that once ran amok the manor. White-hot blood shot through his veins as his eyes landed on the stairs. A pillowy form lay draped across the steps, black sludge dripping down its well-groomed white beard.

Sylis soared past his father up the long flight. "Rylon, answer me!"

"In here," his brother croaked from across the corridor. A few chairs and end tables fell from the doors, the barricade as weak as its builder.

Sylis shoved the debris aside, his gaze settling. Rylon sputtered the same dark liquid from his lips, half-curled on a plush bed. Vials of blood littered the wooden floors, most capped, while others seeped open. The moon, in its crimson sheen, watched them.

"The peerage is gone," Rylon managed to say. "At midnight, everyone—in the blink of an eye. And father, did you see him?"

“Dead.” Sylis kneeled at the foot of the bed. “You’ve got it too? The sickness?”

“I’ve always been ill, you know,” he replied, his smirk interrupted by coughing.

“Don’t joke. This is different,” Sylis hissed. “Valmorra is collapsing as we speak.”

“And yet here we are, still alive, the manor intact. Father should be proud, no?”

A gust of cool wind billowed past the curtains, rustling their silver hair. Sylis let out a low sigh, sheathing his weapon once gripped iron tight.

“I’ll pass soon, brother,” the older one murmured, an heirloom ring dropping from his bony finger. “The blood in my heart is boiling. Ha, I haven’t felt this warm in years.”

“If what you say is true, so will the rest of society. Leastways, noble-borns.”

“Not you. We both know why.”

Sylis’ green gaze snapped back to him, brows furrowing. “Whichever god has cursed this land, everything will crumble within the hour. No one can escape that,” he retorted, gesturing to the sky with a flick of his wrist. “Look at you—the state you’re in.”

“You really are one lucky bastard, aren’t you?” Rylon rasped, a laugh leaving his stained lips. “No responsibility; the freedom to live even after all of us are dead.”

Heat rose to Sylis’ cheeks as he shied away from the scrutiny.

"Go find your mother while you still can," Rylon muttered before another coughing fit took over. He laid an arm over his eyes, each breath shorter than the last. "She must be the reason you're not keeling over. Half-hell or not, you have it good."

Sylis paused, his hand reaching out to hold his brother's. Their fingers interlaced, the grip so loose that Rylon almost slipped away. "Don't go yet. Please."

"With all this blood taken... mine was never quite pure. Unclean and unseemly. That's what my mother said before father put her in the grave." Rylon heaved, eyes peeling open to view the red orb among the stars. "Maybe yours could've cured my affliction."

"I would've let you have it, brother. I—I'll try right now," Sylis sputtered. "Wait—just hold on." He pulled out his sword, brought it to his wrist, then stopped midair.

The spirit of the night came and went, taking another soul with it. A heavy hush fell over the room, strangling and taunting. "Is that all you've left me, brother?" Pale fingers lulled Rylon's eyes to a final slumber. "One godforsaken dying wish?"

A crow flew in, perching on the windowsill, wings battered. It cawed, beak parted, a hunger swirling in its black eyes. Sylis stood, looming over the carcass before him.

"So be it."

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