

THE BLOOD OF OUTCASTS

(THE BANE SWORD TRILOGY, #1)

Chapter 1

My wounds throb as I'm battered by the ferocity of the Kirisam's waters. Crying out in pain is futile. I gasp for air, swallowing more of the murk. Honour won't allow me to surrender to my wounds, not when I've got more blood to spill. My katana has not tasted its last.

The curs' souls will not climb to the heavens in smoke and ash, I'll send them to the mountains where the demons eat.

Agony.

Trying to grab anything, I spin through the waters. A spindly root reaches back. I clutch it. Softened by the waters but strong because that's the way it was made, it does not hold me back. I cling to it with the rest of the life that spills from my belly, that pours from my neck into the rush. I fight, like I always have, and force my other hand through the water, clutching the gnarled root hard. I pull. Gods, I pull. A fire burns in both my lungs now. Not the kind that warms me, but the kind of fire that ignites the cool flames of the death god's servants around me. The flames of reckoning, of finality. But I pull once more and a bright light pierces through my eyes, the rush of the water louder now, I splutter. The dead flames recede and life, by its own small measure, floods back into me.

A gargle, air escaping through the gash in my neck, I'm not able to satisfy my bodily need. If only for the pain itself, I want to die. A tuft of grass between my fingers. Long grasses that Master loved, the reeds that sway as the gentle breeze caresses them.

He's gone.

I scramble up the bank, a pitiful beast. My stomach wound, and the unravelling organs, pull and tug. If I could, I'd scream like a horse-headed demon but I gargle again. Gnawing a hole in my cheek, I try to redirect my focus but it's useless.

I'm resolved to it. I must live. My blood spilling around me will be my salvation. With my last breaths, words on my tongue that I've somehow always known, I deny everything Master has taught me. What are the teachings of a dead man worth, anyway?

I slide my hand between the earth and me. I wince, but what is pain now? Freeing my hand, I chant the strange chant. Arm outstretched, my bloody palm imprinted into the ground eternal, I say, "Heangghnn. Ognh." My approximation of speech is but a garbled mess, I wish they'd know me now. The gods, anything. What use is my accursed blo...

Impossible.

Something responds. I feel its wickedness through a gulf of distance. Worlds? Heavens? – stand between us. Damn it all. Come, take my life, drink it, I beseech thee. By the power of my accursed blood, pass into this realm, or end it all, I do not care.

No lightning strike, no great power, no burst of energy, nothing the Heavenists would have you believe. My skin crawls as if something walks over my grave. Stomach cramping, I retch, but that might be the gaping hole sending a cascade of daggers throughout my body with every breath. A white blast. A pit of the worst black.

Something has come. Something does tread my resting place.

Are you...your senses, can you hear me? A chuckle, then a cacophony of familiar, animalistic screeches overlaid into a voice crisp like the first frost, deep like the thunders. **Near death, but you opened this gate...though not as grand as you think, mortal. Not nearly.** It pauses, spits. **Stubborn. Trouble. A malleable puppet perhaps? Why should I not just let the life leak out of you? You've broken the first treaty...so you have my than–**

"L...lnghhh." I interrupt. "Hngh." What I want to say is lost to hacks and splutters. Yet, it is amused. I have its attention. It begins again, its voice raking through my mind. It knows what I cling to life for.

Funny creature. Let me help. Intriguing creature. Easily done, yes. But why?

“Mmggh.” My throat warms; the scratchy grating subsides. I gulp. “Let me avenge mine. My honour. The peoples beneath the dragons...Hngh. Gods, the pain!” I stop as lights dance in my vision. My throat is the least of my worries. Not that I see anything, not that I even know this creature’s form. But I feel it. Like an oni packed tightly into a cage, its presence is too much, too overbearing. A godsborne, it has to be. But one far beyond anything I’ve known. What have I done?

“The dogs scurry under the dragons’ watch. They yap and bark to their own tune. They forsake the gods and worship one man, but he is not a man of the gods. Let me at least strangle the cur an—”

SILENCE. Very well. But, human, you will be bound by that wish. You will not live a minute after you’re done with this petty task. It chuckles and screeches. Excitement wells around me, pins pricking every pore. *Thump, thump*, it parades around. A foot grasps my face, picks me up by my head, peeling me off the ground in agony. It brings me up to face it. Blurry, I can’t focus, can’t take in its form. Its breath hot against my skin, its presence peeling away at my sanity.

I have but one other condition. You will not leave these lands without a leader. Do not presume to think you can do this in haste, mortal. You will shatter the lands and rebuild them in my stead. You will break apart the godless and depose their man. You will bring the crown of the gods back to this land, and as an apostle of the heavens, prepare the throne in my name. A godlord? No, that will be crushed. It will be an emperor that unites Basho’s lands. You are the instrument who will bring the unity I need – rend it apart, open the gates once more.

“But...”

Die here and be done with it. But if you want to live, want to regain your foolish honour, you do it under my rule. The words wash the pain away, igniting the fire within me, burning death's grip away. **Entertain me, if you will. I'm bored waiting for my own to come back.**

The brightest light splits my vision, the blackest dark sucks me into its depths, and I fall, with nothing to hold, into the void of madness.

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I open my eyes, dazed. Each finger, I flex in turn. The patter of some animal joins the rush of the waters behind me, but it is gentle now, more soothing than before. I open my eyes again; bright light floods my vision like a flash of the life I clung to. I am reborn, but into what? Into a world without anything I love. Into a world where only the anger Master tried to curb will reign supreme.

Did anger bring this upon us, Master? Did you blame me in the end? Did you wish that knife would cut me deep, deeper than I could survive? Those foolish words were not yours in the end, no. You were scared. You wouldn't wish that upon me, but I will live it nonetheless.

My eyes focus. I scan the area and see that I barely made it out of the reeds. Ahead of me, the earth is imprinted with the only evidence things are out of my control. The treaty was there to balance, was there to give humanity its due after the Victory, but now I've rent that asunder. I shiver wildly, shaking to the very core at the thought of a godsborne that could restore life. What have I wrought?

My accursed blood should never be drawn.

I squint as the sun sends its first tendrils through the land, lances of deep yellow split through the forest that looms further up the bank. Evergreen sentries guard my way forward. I rise, stagger, but pull through the haze as I right myself. Looking down at my body, my heart

flutters and I stupidly grab at the tattered, white robes now dyed crimson; death was meant for me – maybe I will never truly live again.

The blood staining them is now the only evidence I have that Master existed.

Fingers run the rivets of my scars, across the line where my stomach was slashed open. Nothing. I follow it all the way from one side to another, it was as mortal as the katana stroke that tore open my neck, but that is no more. Gone, as if last night never happened. Fingers twitching over the thick, black, ungodly line. It shimmers with something not of this world. A sulphurous bite that snaps at me; magic beyond mortals – a godly bind. I throw myself back down the bank, struggling to get my breathing under control, stumbling into the water. It engulfs me once more, sinking to the bottom. The yearning for air is painful but liberating. The *thump, thump* of my heart in my ears. Terrifying. I am alone now.

I have my honour. No, I need to regain my honour.

I am a warrior of the Dattori.

You will pay, Fox.

You will all pay.

Emerging from the waters, the droplets drip off me and so does the pity, the sadness I feel for myself, because now it is only anger. A wildness that won't give in until they are all gone.

Godsborne, whoever you were, I will do it. I am resolved to the war you wish to bring. But don't expect subservience. A leashed tiger is ferocious still, even with its reach shortened. Yet, it would have no trouble turning and devouring its captor. The leash only works one way.

As I drag myself from the waters, I turn back to look at my reflection, trying to piece itself together in the shimmering surface. Skin taut, unyielding on my neck in an ugly black scar – I flinch away. The same ethereal quality to it as the others, hair slicked around it

blending in. Wishful thinking that I was named the Hawk for decisive, sharp, and ruthless command. I purse my lips, then spit at the reflection, laughing to myself. If my lips were thicker, fuller, maybe I would have been able to make my living as those that Aibo loves. A simpler life. I hack and wheeze as the laughter takes hold. A tear streaks down my face. Master always said he was glad he didn't have to chase the men away...no great family would waste a son on a hawkish woman who doesn't recognise that she is such herself. A warrior first, whose thighs were built for squeezing the life out of men, not for inviting them in. He was a son of a whore if I ever knew one. A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. It'll be my last.

Tearing a strip from the ragged edges of the robe, I tie them close to me. For my honour may yet be hard won but I can at least have my dignity intact. I go to my side, grabbing desperately for a hilt, out of habit. It's second nature and I recoil when I don't find it there. The scar on my chest pulses and I grasp at it, sucking on my teeth as I fight back a sob. My head is a mess as I try to grasp the images of my death. I'm only here now because of this scar, the wound that Master gave me in his final moments. The path that he carved for me in my own blood.

Striding forward, the grasses rustle as if the wind is caressing them. I gust through with all the elegance of the elements. I have one job now. One measly job before I can rest. I'll cut them, the lords and their women, I'll crush the Lord Council piece by piece, and I'll break him, the godlord, the dog who started this. That greedy whoreson.

But first, those who were happy to be the impetus behind his wrath will know I live. The fieldclans thought my ire would end in a river? No. They will know I still walk this land. My body aches and it's because it's missing a limb. A vital organ. CrowKiller and HighWolf, my pair, my loves, my swords. I'm coming to get you; mother is coming home.