



BLOOD
— & —
FAITH

BOUND BY BROTHERHOOD
TORN BY ADDICTION

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Blood & Faith

Death may have been the only escape. Billy almost craved it as the militiaman's boot pounded into his ribs yet again. He gasped for air. Air that wouldn't come. The militiaman kicked him again, the pain reverberating through every bone and rattling in his skull with pulsating agony. Death wouldn't come either. Billy's blurry vision caught the rusty sword on the table. The militiaman went to it. Billy curled into a ball, trembling from pain and withdrawal, and failing to find the energy to spit the streams of metallic blood from his lips. The militiaman grabbed his sword, the steel scraping against the table. Billy cried. He didn't want death. In that moment, all he wanted, was his brother.

* * *

The choirboy pulled Teacher Jacob from his flock to tell him, "The Sacred Militia has your brother, and they're threatening to kill him."

Jacob huffed. "Not this again."

"The doctor says it's serious this time."

The boy's eyes welled, even though he didn't know Teacher Jacob's brother, Billy. Not *this* Billy anyway. Not the drug-abusing liability Jacob knew him as. The teacher released a long breath. "Fine. Where is he?"

"Near the Glimmering Pastures."

Jacob's spine stiffened and he cocked his neck. "What is he doing...?"

Oh, I *knew* he would end up there! That fool.” The teacher turned to his murmuring congregation of near fifty. “I must apologise; something urgent has come up. That will have to be all for today.” Jacob couldn’t conceal the bristly frustration in his tone. It must have been the tenth time he’d done this for Billy. Jacob had overcome so much in his life — recovering from a supposed incurable illness, becoming a well-respected teacher who could share the word of The Maker, and yet it was his younger brother that proved impossible to master. A man who couldn’t even control his own temptation with narcotics. And he continued to drag Jacob down with him.

The teacher marched across the open fields. He passed a handful of capital soldiers adorned in golden plate, hefty swords at their hips. If anybody else were in trouble, he’d seek their help, but not Billy. As soon as they knew what he was, they’d either arrest him or leave him to the wolves. It was the thought of these ‘wolves’ that riddled Jacob’s white and gold gown with even more sweat than the sun’s scorching rays. The Sacred Militia had Billy, according to the choirboy. They were not to be trifled with. Despite sharing the teacher’s beliefs in The Maker and viewing the Isle as a gift, they harboured violent tendencies towards those of different faiths. Whatever Billy had become, he was still Jacob’s brother. They’d still shared an orphaned childhood, with only each other to rely on. And even as adults, they remained so close. But then came Jacob’s illness, then Billy’s addiction, and now *this*. Jacob grated his teeth, groaning to himself.

He squinted through the sunshine, discerning a figure sprinting towards him. It was Doctor Christoff — the man who’d nursed Jacob to recovery from his life-threatening illness, and in doing so, forged a bond with the brothers. A wet redness speckled Christoff’s tunic. The flames of anger within Jacob extinguished in a heartbeat, replaced by an icy chill slithering down his neck.

“Jacob! Quick! I think they’ll kill him.” The shaking panic in the

doctor's voice made Jacob swallow dryly.

The teacher stumbled into a run alongside Christoff. "Is that Billy's blood?" Jacob asked, an acidic burn plaguing his throat.

"Yes. They won't listen to me. Perhaps they will to a teacher. But... it's Reda who has him."

Jacob's legs buckled — Reda was well-known for his savagery. The teacher struggled up the field's increasing gradient, his mind flashing with images of a younger, healthier Billy. The man who'd do anything for him. The one who worked the mines alongside him before Jacob's sickness. And the brother who sat by his bed during those torturous months that followed. A tight cramp knotted Jacob's insides. He'd already lost *that* Billy. His squirming gut wasn't in response to that, but rather the thought that if Billy died today, maybe it would be for the best. He felt sick to even contemplate it, but considering he still dashed towards his brother, he convinced himself it was merely a passing notion. Yet the harrowing thoughts and endless nausea were a cruel reminder of how often Billy made him go through this.

"How does this keep happening?!" Jacob asked, clenching his fists. "Always needing me to bail him out!"

"You're not the only one making sacrifices. Your brother needs you — that's all you have to know."

They approached the hilltop. Smoky yellow wisps twisted and sparkled in the air, signalling their proximity to the Glimmering Pastures. The musky yet sickly sweet scents infiltrated Jacob's nostrils, making his head feel lighter than it already was. He slowed down, struggling to inhale enough air and noticing the rapid thumps from his chest. The fumes from the pastures' vegetation offered a strange euphoria — he could understand why it tempted drug-users. Just a whiff of the vapours would ensnare weak-willed individuals, like Billy. But in the baking summer heat, the pastures became highly toxic.

At the hill's summit, an empty husk of a house loomed. The nearby

fumes had forced its owners to flee long ago. Weeds had sprung from the soil, tangling themselves throughout the stonework like tentacles from a verdant monster trying to drag the home into its dark depths.

A movement behind a broken window jolted Jacob's heart. The false ecstasy from the pastures congealed with his panic into a disconcerting queasiness. He wiped his clammy palms against his gown, then entered the house.

On the floor, a huddled figure seized Jacob's attention. Billy. Grey-skinned, yellowed-eyed, and trembling like a bird in a storm. He lay on a blood-soaked rug, skinnier than Jacob ever remembered him. A surge of tears threatened behind Jacob's eyes, but he resisted. He had to. Because the colossus standing over Billy would feed off weakness.

"You the brother?" growled the Sacred Militia behemoth, Reda. His broad shoulders and muscular frame filled the house, dwarfing even the other two thugs. "I told the doc — Billy ain't going nowhere. He belongs to me."

Jacob raised his palms, his mouth constricting through desiccation as he searched for words. He'd preached to massive congregations, yet Reda's mere presence blanked his mind to everything but fear. "There must be something I can do." His voice quivered, but at least he got the words out. "Please. He's not well."

"He has only himself to blame for that." Reda stomped forward. His chainmail rattled against the chaotic assembly of his plate armour in a chorus of skin-tingling jingles. "A thousand coins. That's what Billy owes. For all the amberium he's bought from us to make his drugs." He kicked Billy, whose pained jolt rippled through Jacob's heart. "We were happy letting him work it off until we caught him trading with sea sinners for their herbs."

Jacob's mind raced for a solution. "I don't have that much coin," he said, a salty droplet of sweat leaking onto his lips.

"Then we throw him into the Glimmering Pastures and let him enjoy

an addict's death."

Jacob couldn't fight the tears anymore. They blurred his vision, which lay solely upon his crumpled brother. That wasn't the Billy he knew and loved. *He's already gone*, he told himself, his entire body feeling empty.

"Come now," said Reda, with a grin of blackened teeth. "You're a teacher." He toyed with the collar of Jacob's gown. His musk, an unholy marriage of decaying vegetation and metallic blood, summoned sour bile up Jacob's throat. "You preach the word of our Maker. You must realise Billy has committed blasphemy by dealing with sea sinners. The very people denouncing The Maker's gift. Those wishing to leave this isle for the fallacy of other worlds. Even *you* must know he needs to die."

Jacob kept his watery gaze on the militiaman, unable to look at Billy for fear of his quivering chin giving out and unleashing a wail to bring the house down.

"Tell me," Reda said, his calloused fingers scratching against the gold lacing of Jacob's gown. "How does somebody become a teacher?"

"We... We select our successor."

Reda's smile stretched. "Well then, Teacher. Stand down from your position. Make me your successor. And Billy shall live."

Jacob's jaw fell. "Being a teacher is who I am. It's everything to me."

The militiaman lost his grin. His fist clenched Jacob's gown at the sternum, and he leaned in closer, a rotting stench pouring from his mouth. "His life... in exchange for 'who you are'."

Jacob froze, but his pulse raced. The trade wasn't that simple. It wasn't just about him and Billy. The Sacred Militia was a violent organisation. If they held such an influential position, the entire isle would be at risk. Especially if it were Reda. He'd corrupt The Maker's preachings into an excuse for genocide. Only Jacob currently stood in the way of this. The Maker had saved him from an incurable sickness for this purpose. His life as a teacher repaid that. It protected *everyone*. Billy's life helped

nobody. Billy was just...

"Jacob," snapped a voice from behind. "That's your *brother*." It was Christoff, his widened eyes cramping Jacob with an unwanted guilt.

The room's silence latched onto his shoulders, and Reda's unmoving, dark eyes shivered his spine — a torturous concoction that lasted an eternity, eventually snatching the word from his lips. "Fine."

Reda smirked, uncoiling his fist. "That's your temple down the hill? We'll see you there."

The Sacred Militia departed. Jacob searched for the feeling of relief, but his clamped teeth wouldn't let it in. While the doctor hurried to Billy, Jacob couldn't do the same. This wasn't his brother; it was a selfish addict. Just a liability who destroyed the lives of everyone around him. Jacob's tears dried, tightening his eyes like the rest of his body.

Christoff spun round after helping Billy to a seated position and yelled, "What's wrong with you, Jacob?!"

"Being a teacher was a significant part of me! Billy took that away. And his selfishness has endangered us all."

Christoff stood, his brow arched. "Do you know *how* you recovered from an untreatable sickness?"

"By the grace of The Maker, and the medicines he gave you."

"The Maker didn't save you. Neither did I. I didn't just *discover* the right mix of ingredients. I needed to experiment on someone. A test subject. Billy volunteered. Those experiments are what got him addicted to drugs. And they are what saved *you*. You begrudgingly sacrificed a *part* of yourself just now. Your brother willingly sacrificed his *entire* self."

A deluge of shame cascaded through Jacob, gnawing into every inch of him like a relentless parasite. He stumbled backwards, biting his lip to stave off the urge to vomit. "I... I didn't know."

"No. Because Billy didn't want you bearing that guilt. Even at his worst, he refused to tell you. Even at *your* worst."

Jacob braved a glance at his quivering brother and instantly wept. How had he not seen it before? Beyond the drugs, it was still Billy in there. He'd always been there. It was Jacob who'd stopped *seeing* him. Blinded by ignorance. The piercing pain was too much, witnessing the anchor strangle Billy, dragging every part of his brother's body and spirit down. How could Jacob have been so judgmental? Never asking *why* Billy made his decisions. He considered apologising, but he didn't deserve forgiveness. He didn't want it. It was no longer about him, anyway. Yes, with the Sacred Militia gaining influence, the Isle had a fight looming, but the more pressing battle lay right before Jacob. And the first strike in that battle was clear to him now. Jacob sat beside his brother, wrapped his arm around him, and said, "I'm here for you. Talk to me."



About the Author

Scott Wasilewski writes fantasy fiction that makes you think. His stories take real-life issues and integrates them into fascinating and gritty fantasy worlds. Travelling around the US, Europe, and the castles of the UK have led to such rich inspiration, as shown in his debut novel, ‘Shadows of Sacrifice’.

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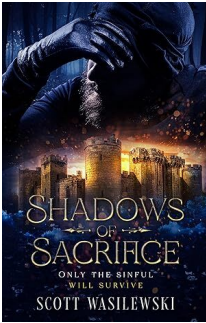
Blood & Faith is merely a taster of the harsh world that is the Diamond Isle. To experience more of the grit, the romance, and the war that takes place on these shores, be sure to check out **Shadows of Sacrifice**, the epic fantasy novel rated 4.5 stars on Amazon.

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Shadows of Sacrifice

When Roderick's wife fell critically ill, he made a promise he knew he might regret: he would do *anything* to save her. But 'anything' crosses many limits.

On the Diamond Isle, where war and treachery amongst kingdoms have become the norm, Roderick's promise to his wife becomes increasingly more dangerous, sending him down paths paved with gangs, gamblers, and killers. He never imagined he'd be forced to walk the fragile line between his own morality and the desperate need to keep his family alive. Roderick may have no choice but to accept the heartless truth...

The noble cannot bear the Diamond Isle; **only the sinful will survive.**



Divided by Fire

My whispers summoned them. Our screams made them stay.

One month married, and Jolene's world is torn in half by dragons. Dragons *she* summoned. On one side of the fiery rift, the Vertlean army - and her new husband. On her side, only ruin and vulnerability. Now, something even deadlier than dragons has sensed this. And it's coming. With the city's last defence trapped across the divide, she must face the fire she unleashed before it's too late. Haunted by guilt and driven by love, Jolene embarks upon a path fraught with secrets, blood, and magic.

She never wanted this, but actions have consequences. Atonement has a price. And this time, it might be the man she loves.

