

CHAPTER 1:

SPIRITED AWAY

Sam blinked the sun from his eyes and sat up, stretching and yawning to banish the fatigue from his muscles.

“Good nap, eh?” rumbled a friendly voice nearby.

Running a hand through his sand-crusted hair, Sam gave the glittering waves a mistrustful look. After a long, stressful day at his soul-crushingly mundane retail job stocking shelves, he had been looking forward to catching a few waves.

The sound of the surf had always soothed his soul and had lulled him to sleep like a baby.

His rotund cat snoozed on the warm sand nearby, looking alarmingly like a very large baked potato dropped by a careless tourist on the beach.

Sam sighed wistfully. There wasn't much in the world he had, but having access to a slew of beautiful beaches within minutes from his postage-stamp-sized apartment, and his loyal cat, was enough for him.

“Watch out, Sam. That crazy haole has found you again,” Kale said, shifting in his seat. With arms like socks stuffed full of bowling balls, Kale pivoted his wheelchair around and pointed.

With a thread of panic giving him the adrenaline to rise to his feet, Sam looked for the striking figure.

He found her instantly.

She was hard to miss. Her porcelain skin was inked with a sleeve of glowing symbols, fake katanas sheathed at her hip, and a ridiculous samurai outfit.

You didn't get many cosplayers in Hawai'i outside of the few conventions a year, but this woman was on an entirely different level.

Her fanged grin beneath that conical straw hat wasn't encouraging Sam to stick around.

"You take care of her this time," Sam said, reaching out for the surfboard speared into the sand. "I'm going to catch a few waves while there's still light."

Before Kale could argue, Sam curled the board beneath one tanned arm and scooped up his cat with his free hand. "C'mon, Komachi. Let's hit the surf."

The lazy cat yawned, stretched all four limbs, and looked up at him with a gentle, soul-searching gaze. She had turned up on his doorstep a few years ago and simply let herself in.

Cats choose you, not the other way around.

So, Sam had no choice but to let her stay. They got along famously; she was the only cat that seemed to love the water.

It was always a popular trick with the ladies when he put Komachi on his board and together the two of them sliced through the waves.

For a few moments every day, he could forget about the stresses of life and just enjoy the present.

Paddling out to sea, Komachi strolled to the tip of the board as if she were walking down the street. Sam looked over his shoulder at Kale, gesturing wildly with his trunk-like arms. They usually did a good job of attracting any woman's attention, but this one... she only had eyes for Sam.

He really wished that wasn't the case.

There was something deeply unsettling about her gaze. He could feel it between his shoulder blades when he turned away.

The salt-sweet fresh smell of the ocean soon took Sam to his happy place. Where there was nothing and nobody but himself, Komachi, and the unimaginable power of the sea surging beneath his board.

Angling himself to catch the next set of waves, Sam paddled furiously as the rising swell pressed against his stomach and chest. In one smooth motion that had taken him nearly a decade to get down, Sam got to his feet.

Komachi, perched on the very edge of the board, kept a keen eye out for any fish. Everybody thought he was lying when he said his cat could pull a fish out of the barrel of a wave.

It was something you had to see to believe.

As the wave curled in on itself, Sam dropped in and crouched as the white spray formed a low ceiling above him. Komachi made an excited yowl and, for the first time that Sam had seen, turned to him.

She never had eyes for anything other than the sea and the free morsel of food she could pull from the deep blue's infinite bounty.

That itching sensation made his shoulder blades twitch. Sam, realizing Komachi wasn't looking at him, but beyond him, looked over his shoulder.

His heart just about stopped.

Behind him, the samurai dashed across the water. Against all reason, and breaking several laws of physics, she chased after him through the tunnel of water.

Who then slashed a glowing blade into the water. Energy traced along the wave and swirled past him.

Pumping furiously for speed, Sam didn't even register the impossibility of it all. It wasn't just that he had seen more weird things in the last week since this crazy haole began stalking him than he had in the last twenty years of his life. Though that definitely contributed to his ability to keep calm.

Sam was remarkably single-minded when he wanted to be. And right then, he focused solely on carving the face of the wave for all the speed he could eke out of it.

As he turned back to the front, he realized the futility of it all.

Ahead of him, where the exit of the barrel should have been, a swirling portal opened into another world.

Somewhere dark and foreboding.

Hard pass, Sam thought.

His immediate thought was to bail. He would eat it hard since the barrel of the wave had him fully enclosed. But with a madwoman defying gravity behind him, and a *whatever-the-hell* in front of him, Sam had few options.

Just as he reached a decision, Komachi looked up at him and said in a tiny voice, "It'll be okay, Sam."

There are only so many crazy, insane, and utterly nonsensical things that a person can take before their brain just straight-up shuts down.

Hearing his cat talk was Sam's breaking point.

Unable to think, much less act, Sam's body worked on autopilot, keeping him centered in the barrel on a collision course with that swirling portal where the exit should have been.

"I've got you now," the samurai shouted over the ocean's roar.

"You will Level Up, and you will *like it!*"

Darkness folded over Sam, his board, and his rotund little cat as they slipped through the glittering darkness of the portal.

Far more practiced at bailing and eating it than successfully carving a wave, Sam snatched up Komachi and let his legs relax at the knee.

He collided hard with the ground, the surfboard making a godawful squeal. Sam rolled easily amid the warm seawater that spilled in. Once he came to a stop, Komachi wriggled out of his arms and sprinted away.

“Hey!” Sam yelled after her, scrambling to his feet and hurrying after her.

His cat sat in front of a giant sword stabbed into a crystal boulder. Spread all around them was an incredible view of the Pacific and a cluster of familiar islands. Only, it was all far below them. They were somehow floating high in the air.

Sam was trapped. There was nowhere else to go.

Naturally, Sam looked for an exit but came up dry. Whatever portal had whisked him away to this strange place was gone.

“Finally,” the crazed woman said, wringing out her dark hair.

“There’s two ways this goes. You free that sword, unlock your Incarnate powers and fight with me for your world’s Ascension and mine. Or you can’t, and Earth falls to the same apocalypse that’s destroying my world.”

“This sword?” Sam asked, putting his hand on the hilt sticking out of the crystalline rock. “What am I, King Arthur?”

“An Earth legend? Near enough.”

Komachi jumped up onto the cross guard of the sword and perched there, looking at him intently.

Sam stared back. “Don’t give me that look—hey! You spoke to me.”

“Nuh-uh,” replied the cat.

Okay, Sam thought, I get it now. I was surfing, must have lost control and went under the water. Probably hit my head on a rock, and I'm losing oxygen while I drown. That's... it, right?

The reality of the situation was far beyond what Sam was capable of rationalizing away. He could feel the strange dry air of this place that somehow looked out onto the islands below and yet was surrounded by stars and darkness like a pocket dimension.

What have you really got to lose? he couldn't help but think.

Sam nodded to himself, placed both hands on the wrapped-leather hilt and pulled with all his strength.

Nothing happened.

He looked at his cat, daring her to say something. She always had a smug look, but now, of all times, she appeared encouraging.

Sam looked at the madwoman. "Listen, I'm not sure what's going on here. But you can't just go around pulling swords out of—"

"Stop holding yourself back," she demanded. "I know what you are, Sam. But you need to realize it, down into your soul."

Swiping a strand of wet hair from his eyes, Sam gave her a level look with his blue eyes. Most people found his dark hair and sapphire-blues a bit jarring to look at, but this woman just stared right back.

"Fine," he said. In the end, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Or at least near enough that it made no difference.

If it's good enough for Holmes, it's good enough for me, Sam thought as he widened his stance and tensed every muscle he had.

It wasn't much. Even with all the surfing and HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts) tournaments, protein was expensive, and

you couldn't afford much working retail. Still, Sam bent every ounce of his strength to the task at hand.

Sometimes, there were benefits to being single-minded.

Shutting out all of the distractions, Sam strained with all his might. His bare feet slipped on the damp stony flooring, his elbows and shoulders ached from the strain, but he didn't give in.

While Sam was no stranger to failure, he found that the only gift he ever possessed seemed to be control over his body. It was why he had a job as a stocker. They practically paid him to work out, and it was *easy* despite his lack of muscle.

Sam focused all his attention on how light the sword was. How easy it was to pull it out, how he wasn't *actually* pulling a sword out of a crystalline boulder. That would be ridiculous. He was merely returning it to its rightful owner.

Himself.

"The barriers are breaking down already...." the woman said, but her voice was distant, muted.

Down below, fractures in reality spread through the very air itself like lightning frozen in time. They shattered into a thousand points of light a moment later that revealed a gaping nothingness beyond. Holes in Hawai'i's famous blue sky.

What poured out were monstrous things that would have given Lovecraft nightmares.

Sam ignored everything but the sword in front of him.

His world distilled into his fists, wrapped around the sword's grip as it ever-so-slowly inched its way free. Oddly, it made no sound. Sam half-expected nails-on-a-chalkboard and was pleasantly relieved at the silence.

With one final surge of strength, Sam yanked the huge sword free. Komachi leapt off to the side as Sam was sent in a backward arc that landed him hard on his back.

The sword clanged against the ground, shaking it like an earthquake.

Breathing hard, eyes closed, Sam nevertheless saw words flash into being. They shimmered and blazed like gold fire. No matter how hard he blinked, they didn't go away.

Incarnate Bloodline recognized.

You attune the [Shatterblade].

Initiation of Incarnate Bloodline: War confirmed.