



For Talaus: You sparked my literary passion.
Thank you for our many adventures on and offline, your
unconditional love, and for the years of laughter.
I'll never forget.

For Allan Rochin: I love you #TheMost
Thank you for your belief in my dreams, unwavering support
and unconditional love.

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WHY DO THEY ALWAYS ATTACK JAPAN?

The city of London burned and crumbled, as the remnants scattered into grains of sand across the vanishing night sky. Crimson orbs sparked to life, filled with malice. Black slit pupils materialized within the irises, aglow with intense flames.

Where am I? Jasper Kain trembled as his heart thundered in his chest.

A weak wheeze escaped the lips of the paralyzed man. His muscles convulsed as the crimson glare drew closer, mere inches from his face.

"The First King's shadows have begun to rise from the pit," boomed a deep male voice. Sharp talon fingers sprung from the darkness, mercilessly sinking into the man's bare flesh and instantly hit bone. "You have been chosen by Chaos to bleed."

No...this hell can't be real. Jasper's eyes welled with tears, and fear.

Memories of the dead vividly flashed through Jasper's mind; his body involuntarily quivered. *Please, no!* He gasped, overcome with searing pain all over his body.

"Ring a ring o' Roses," chanted the voices of children. "Ashes...ashes." The words echoed through the void, fading into whispers.

"You have been chosen to die yet live forever," a female voice hissed softly, as a cold wind swept over the man's shaking form.

"Embrace your destiny, Jasper," asserted the first voice. Red lightning flashed and splintered in the darkness. "Rise from the shadows; embrace the darkness."

A massive bolt of lightning struck the helpless man's chest, enveloping him as a vibrant red blaze flared in his irises. *Stop!* his soul cried out, as an extraordinary power surged through his body and burned; a supernatural wildfire he couldn't escape.

"Awaken, my Blood Knight," the female voice commanded. The glowing eyes drew closer, as a newly formed wicked grin, lined with sharp teeth, appeared.

Jasper shrieked into the void as searing pain engulfed his senses, as an evil essence seeped into his body. Streams of light swirled around his palms, searing circular designs into his skin.

Shadows rose from the ground, morphing into misshapen creatures with glowing red eyes.

"What are you doing to me?" Jasper panted in a series of shallow breaths. Crimson magic illuminated his veins and rushed into his heart.

Lub dub. Lub dub. Lub dub.

He gasped as a cold sweat broke out across his face.

Ba-dum. dum-dum. ba-dum.

His body convulsed as each beat loudly throbbed in his ears.

Ba-dum, ba-dum.

slower and slower

Ba-dum.

Until finally, it stopped, and the world faded into darkness.

"Ohayo gozaimasu, Tokyo!" a chipper woman's voice beamed, followed by soft music and the applause of a studio audience.

Jasper's eyes flicked open. *Not again, when will the nightmares stop?* He shifted around his room to study the still shadows. *Shite.* He sharply exhaled, relieved to find himself alone.

Jasper glanced at the red digits of the clock on the nightstand—9 am. *I need to get out of here.*

Music burst out from the speakers of the TV, followed by the cheers from the studio audience.

"Bloody hell," the fatigued man muttered, grabbing the TV remote. "Oh, belt up." He hit the power button, yawned, stretching his legs out underneath his sheets, tightly curling his toes.

Jasper jumped out of bed before dashing across the chilly wooden floor in his black boxer briefs to the loo. He walked over to a white porcelain sink then studied his tired blue eyes in the mirror above it.

"I must be losing my mind after two hundred-odd years," Jasper mumbled. "Old man..." He sighed, scratching his defined jawline.

Jasper still looked twenty-six, the age at which he had died. "Nah, you've still got it, mate," he smirked, running his fingers through his messy blonde hair. Suddenly, a small nose nudged against his leg.

"Oi!" Jasper jumped and then laughed at the four-legged feline intruder. "Good morning, you little runt," he greeted the Egyptian Mau with a spotted black coat while rubbing his eyes. "How did you get back inside?" He knelt and scratched the feline's cheek as it moved closer. "I could have sworn I shut the window last night." A new silver tag hanging from the cat's black collar caught his eye. It carried an engraved name: Bub. "I'm sorry, little Bub. I don't have any food for you today."

Bub flicked his tail into the air as he walked around in a circle before laying on his side then rolled onto his back.

"Just one more scratch, mate, and then you have to go home," he said, but obliged for a moment, thinking about the teenage girl he had seen with the cat in the condo next door. She stood out because of her Japanese–African-American ethnicity.

Bub purred and swiped his front paws forward, then kicked the air with his back legs, jumping back onto his feet. He licked his paws then brushed one against his fuzzy cheek.

"I wish I were a lazy house cat," Jasper sighed, grabbing a pair of black leather pants and a Union Jack T-shirt draped over a chair. The cat rubbed itself against his black leather boots.

"Aren't you a needy one?" Jasper snickered fastening the red straps.

"I've been cooped up here watching Netflix and eating junk for far too long," Jasper groaned. "I can't bloody well hide forever." He grabbed a crimson and black duster from a hook on the wall then slid it on. "Come on, mate. It's time to go. I'm heading to Yoshitake for a spot of tea and a couple of sushi rolls." He smiled, opened the front door, letting the cat out before locking up.

Jasper had just stepped outside his condo when the crisp chill in the air hit his skin, as a few droplets of water drizzled over his hair and face. "Bugger," Jasper sighed. He dug through his pocket for coins then dashed toward the nearest bus stop just as a bus pulled up; the doors opened for him.

"*Ohayo gozaimasu,*" greeted the middle-aged uniformed Japanese driver.

Jasper nodded and returned the greeting, "*Ohayo.*" He deposited his fare.

Droplets of water dripped from Jasper's damp hair onto his light five o'clock shadow as he walked to the back of the bus and took a seat by the window. He gently ran his cold fingers through his wet bangs, pushing them away from his eyes. He pursed his lips then retrieved a pair of iPhone buds from his jacket pocket. Placing them in his ears, he scrolled through his playlist. *Pray for the Wicked* by Panic! At the Disco, caught his attention. *Brendon Urie, very fit* He eyed the album cover, smirking. *Say Amen, Saturday night*. He hit the play button then lightly tapped one boot against the floor in sync with the beat of the music.

He retrieved a gold antique pocket watch hidden within his duster and fidgeted with the souvenir, studying the mysterious symbols carved onto the lid.

"Rise from the shadows?" He said, then slid the keepsake back in its place, staring out of the window at the shops downtown through a speckle of raindrops.

"Woah, it's Saturday night," he quietly murmured the lyrics as he rotated his right palm upward and studied one of his tattoos—a mysterious runic tree. He traced the lines of the ink with his finger. Runic symbols adorned the inside of the tree's circular shape, exactly matching the one on his other hand.

"What's going on?" an elderly Japanese woman asked as she scanned the space around her seat with wide eyes.

Jasper noticed the woman in distress, then removed his earbuds and slipped them into his pocket. Then when he heard a creepy demonic hissing noise, he swallowed nervously. *F-M-L*. He sighed exasperatedly. *That's not creepy at all*.

"Why is it so dark?" an old man muttered, trying to rub the window next to him with his jacket sleeve.

The windows dimmed and darkened. Jasper hopped onto his feet, glancing at his palms. He inhaled sharply as his tattoos shimmered with a faint red light.

The bus tires screeched abruptly, and people yelled as they flew out of their seats. The vehicle skidded down the street for a minute, before coming to a complete stop. Darkness enveloped the bus until the only sources of light were the man's cursed tattoos.

The mysterious shadow creatures were getting desperate. Jasper had only caught glimpses of their dark figures in the past but had felt their power. He feared for the safety of the innocent people around him who might get caught in the crossfire. Jasper tapped the darkened glass causing an intense static charge to travel up his arm. Silver sparks rippled across the window, a strong barrier. *Blast*. The creatures had blocked all escape routes.

Jasper groaned at the notion of using his weapons in front of mortals. Nevertheless, there was no other option at this point to save their lives.

He closed his eyes, focusing on the power coursing through the veins in his chest and arms. Crimson liquid burst forth on each side, swirling into twin vortexes, lightly cracking the windows.

"Bollocks," Jasper muttered, narrowing his eyes as the liquid darkness swirled, reflecting decayed faces on its surface. "All I wanted was to listen to a little Panic." He clenched his fists, as the churning blood rippled within his grip with crackling static, transforming from a formless liquid into twin four-foot-long razor-sharp katana blades.

The hilts of the weapons slid into his grip as he bolted toward the doors. He thrust his arms in front of his torso then slashed the shape of an X, bringing together the solid steel, creating two streaks of light inside the mostly dark bus. He concentrated on the blood-drenched doors. Moments later, the back of the bus exploded, clearing the way.

"Move out!" he instructed in Japanese. Then, took a deep breath, exhaling sharply, he jumped out too. *And to think the day had started so peacefully.*

Jasper heard the distant roar of thunder. He glanced up at the sky, noticing the rain had mostly stopped.

Jasper cautiously walked down the street, scanning the deserted road. "I'm not going to play mind games with you," he seethed. "Show yourself, damn it!"



SHADOWS OF DEATH.

As Jasper glanced from one side of the street to the other, he could feel the shadows observing him. It felt weird and eerie; they seemed to be waiting for something. But what? The street and sidewalks were almost empty now as the last of the frightened civilians had run into the surrounding buildings to hide.

Deformed shadow demons with scaly skin and glowing red eyes glided over the surfaces of buildings, leaving deep claw marks on the concrete structures with their long talon fingers. They hissed and whispered inaudible words in a language he had never heard before.

Jasper raised his blades as the shadows swarmed around him. "What do you want?" he demanded.

A soft laugh echoed off the buildings. "You forgot to say please," a male voice taunted him. "The answers are written in your blood."

"Who the bloody hell are you?" Jasper lightly rotated and cracked his neck.

"I am your blood brother—a crimson Knight destined to find the Knight of Wands. All hail the First King, the God of the Heavens—creation and destruction alike," the voice replied.

"Chaos?" Jasper shook his head. "Knight of Wands? Enough of these bloody mind games. I know you've been following me."

A swarm of black feathers materialized and encircled Jasper in a cyclone that threatened to consume his entire body. From within the gale, a crackling hole full of static became visible that grew as the gale spun faster. He lashed out with his swords to fight the windstorm, which turned more rapidly until the form of a lean man with short silver hair with red highlights stepped out from the chaotic portal. He had a pale complexion and wore a steampunk black jacket with a high collar and goggles atop his head.

"Why are you after my life?" Jasper growled and furrowed his brow.

"After your life?" the man asked, and a sly grin crept over his full lips. "You poor, naïve boy. You have been chosen to eradicate the mortal world. This scumbucket full of vermin will all soon to become but a distant memory," he said with a cold gaze.

"Bollocks," Jasper retorted.

The mysterious man stepped forward, and the storm of feathers formed a shiny pair of wings extending down to the end of his knees. He hovered over the ground and proclaimed, "The time has come for you to awaken and join me, my brother. Swear your allegiance to the First King."

"You'll have to bloody kill me first," said Jasper, tightening his grip around the hilts of his blades.

"I wouldn't dream of it," the man smirked. "The King has chosen you. You must rise for the world to burn." He adjusted his goggles and gloves, adorned with silver skulls, as red lightning crackled around his knuckles.

"Piss off," Jasper growled. "You're bloody crazy."

"Crazy?" The man blinked. "Oh no, boy. I'm the one-eyed king in the kingdom of the blind. You will soon start seeing things our way."

The shadows moved swiftly along the buildings toward their target and rose from the ground, taking on hideous forms: each minion transformed into a more twisted version than before, sporting arms, razor-sharp teeth, and blades — their beady-red reptilian eyes; filled with heinous intent.

"Who are you?" Jasper asked, his eyes darting from side to side.

"Of course, where are my manners?" The pale man grinned. "I should introduce myself. My name is Vincent Angelo." He placed his hand across his chest and bowed. "It's my pleasure to meet you, my blood brother."

"The feeling isn't mutual," Jasper spat.

"What do you think of my pets?" Vincent smirked. "I'm still trying to come up with a cool name for them." His eyes flared to life, and a single shadow demon charged at Jasper.

"What the hell?" Jasper muttered and readied his weapons.

The demon rushed forward with its talon fingers extended and hissed as sharp claws emerged from its nailbeds.

"SHITE!" Jasper swiftly dodged the creature's attack before thrusting one of his blades sideways and slicing it in half. The dead creature's blood seeped into his cursed sword, and its aura intensified.

"Oh, you've got some skills, boy. But I doubt you can take all of them."

Jasper smirked, straightened his back, and lightly tilted his neck. "I don't have to take them all," he said confidently, pointing one blade at his opponent. "Just you, mate."

Vincent turned his palms over, revealing a set of circular runic tattoos of the tree of life that matched Jasper's.

How? Jasper gasped, and his eyes widened with surprise.

Vincent raised his arms, and blood streamed from the tattoos on his palms and froze midair.

Jasper's mind was racing, trying to make sense of Vincent's tattoo and the pattern of runic letters. "I'm going to finish this."

"Alright, that's enough talk," Vincent grinned, thrusting his chin out as the blood connected to his tattoos receded and crawled up his arms. The liquid first moved up his biceps, then around his shoulders, and finally his hands, in the shape of red transparent demonic claws. "I won't hurt you...not much anyway. Now, let's dance. I will show you the strength of the Goddess," Vincent declared. Raising his arms and laughing wickedly, he said, "Yami will rise!"

Jasper narrowed his eyes as he saw a wave of shadow demons rush at him. He swiftly jabbed both his swords forward and pierced the skulls of his first opponents before swinging them down and cutting them in half. The weapons' auras blazed brightly with a red light.

He turned his body and sidestepped an incoming attack. Then, maneuvering his left sword, he decapitated another creature. He ducked to his right flank and sliced vertically upward, splitting the dark figure into twitching halves.

Vincent smiled and pulled out a golden pocket watch from his jacket pocket as his chosen brother killed the dark children. "I see those blades cursed by the Goddess have an insatiable thirst for blood—they are the secret to your dark immortality and eternal youth."

"Gift? What shite, complete rubbish," Jasper's eyes widened when he saw the golden watch, identical to his own. "Where did you get that?" He leaped away from the demons, and gracefully landed at a safe distance.

"Enough, my children," Vincent commanded the demons. He turned to Jasper. "It was a gift from our King."

"Gift? What a bloody joke," Jasper scoffed. "The symbols on that watch are seared into my skin. This curse has destroyed my life. Tell me everything you know," he demanded. He then raised a brow when he noticed an odd expression on his opponent's face. "What are you doing?" he asked, bewildered.

Vincent smiled as he glanced at the bus, which was slowly rising into the air. "I will show you the glory of the Goddess; soon, you will join us."

"Damn psychobabble..." Jasper mumbled. He turned his gaze, and his eyes widened at the enormous floating vehicle that was plummeting through the air in his direction.

"Show me your true power, brother!" Vincent's eyes filled with madness.

Jasper swallowed hard and felt a knot in his throat. He promptly rolled out of the way and dodged the twisted projectile by barely a few inches.

The bus crashed through the front of an office building. Jasper heard the terrified shouts of the people inside as the glass shattered violently and the structure caved in.

"Glory to Yami, for her love will save us," Vincent preached, lifting his arms toward the sky. "Among the cosmic gifts she offers, the believers with pure devotion shall receive the blessing of the First King, Chaos!"

"Screw your Goddess and your so-called First King," Jasper said. "I'm not interested in drinking the Kool-Aid," he quipped sarcastically, "cults aren't my thing."

Vincent narrowed his eyes. The amusement had visibly drained from them.

"You'll never escape your destiny," he said, raising his arms as he began chanting in a strange tongue. The shadow demons around the building began to transform again. Their bodies expanded, their muscles became bulkier, and their hands morphed into deadly, bladed weapons.

"The time for games has ended, my dear boy. You will regret defying me," Vincent sneered. "Get him." He ground his teeth, "NOW!"

"Bring it on, you little wanker," Jasper said, motioning them to come closer. "You better hope you can kill my arse," he smirked.

A new wave of demons rushed forward, and Jasper assumed a defensive stance when, out of nowhere, a high-pitched whistle pierced the air.



THE BLOOD WILL GUIDE YOU.

Jasper turned his head just in time to see a shower of glittering silver arrows rain down from the sky.

"Bloody weird..." He muttered.

The creatures shrieked in terror, writhing in pain as the projectiles shredded and burned their flesh.

Vincent's eyes widened, speechless for a moment he turned in the direction the arrows had come from and met the determined gaze of a beautiful young Japanese girl.

"You little bitch..." he hissed, baring his elongated canines as his irises dilated.

"Now, now, watch the language," the young girl quipped, narrowing her purple eyes, and then pursed her full pink lips.

Jasper eyed the girl suspiciously.

She appeared to be about five feet and four inches tall. Her features were symmetrical, with an effeminate nose and slightly rounded cheekbones. He studied her blue and black Gothic Lolita-style top, skirt, and knee-high kitty socks.

"Bloody hell, did a geek convention break for lunch around here?"

The girl gracefully jumped onto an overturned car in the street with a hollow thud as her black Mary Jane shoes slammed against its metal roof. She swiftly raised her silver bow in her gloved hand then tossed one of her long purple and black ponytails off her shoulder, while an arrow materialized within her grip, ready to fly. She fixed her sights on Vincent, smirking before releasing the projectile.

The silver arrow multiplied midair. However, the insane man moved with lightning speed reflexes, dashing to the side, he dodged the attack.

"What are you?" Vincent mused as he raised his brow, eyeing the girl's form and weapon.

"Bored..." scoffed the girl as she released more arrows.

Vincent clenched his fists, and they steadily brightened with a red light. "I call upon the power of Chaos. Grant me the power to strike down this child!"

"What the heck?" muttered the girl. "Who is this guy?"

A field of blood encircled Vincent's body, brimming with bright sparks. As he chanted, the blood drained out of the motionless shadow demons. His eyes erupted with the power he drew from his slain minions.

The archer raised her hand then pressed a button on the Bluetooth device in her ear.

"Oni-san, any day now. You're taking forever," she impatiently sighed. Then, she raised her bow again, as a new silver arrow materialized between her fingers.

"Who are you?" Jasper asked, raising his brow.

"None of your business. And do you think this is the time for introductions?" She raised her manicured eyebrows. "That guy is cooking up some serious magic. You'd better get out of the way and leave this to us before you get yourself hurt."

"Oi! You've gotta be taking the piss out of me." Jasper glared at the girl then turned his attention back to his rival; his blades were ready for battle as demons rushed at him; he went to work, slicing and dicing.

The sound of a motorcycle in the distance became steadily louder. Soon after, a man wearing a silver helmet with a dragon decal sped into sight.

"You're such a show-off," the girl snickered. "We have some trash to take out, Oni-san."

The man pulled his motorcycle up beside the car, where the girl stood poised to attack.

"Took you long enough," she huffed, rolling her eyes.

A large gray, black, and white falcon flew to the man's side then landed on his outstretched forearm. It then hopped onto one of the handlebars of the motorcycle.

"I guess you've decided to join the party," Aito rolled his eyes as he placed the bike's kickstand down. "I thought you were tired of this crazy fighting?"

"So, did I," Hanako snickered. "Never again, Aito. Never!" She then stuck her tongue out at the Falcon. "It's nice to see you, Angu-kun."

"Don't just sit there, Tenchi," Aito sighed, rolling his eyes at the falcon. He removed his helmet to reveal short black hair, dark eyes, thin lips, and a square jawline. Next, he slid his black leather jacket off his muscular shoulders.

"Spoken like a true dictator," Hanako quipped, then shot an arrow into the head of a demon behind Jasper.

"I had to cancel on a client last minute to answer your call. Do you honestly need my help to handle a few weak creatures?" asked Aito, raising his brow.

"Are you serious?" Hanako retorted. "Real talk, I'm sure your clients would appreciate it if you stopped the monsters from overtaking the city."

"Hana-san, this is not a game," said Aito drily with a note of impatience in his tone.

"Okay, *dad*," Hanako mocked. "There are bigger things at stake here than your next business deal. I doubt your banker buddies will care if you miss lunch. Believe it or not, I think the superhero gig comes first."

"Fine," Aito huffed. "I suppose you two can't do anything without me."

"These creatures are dangerous," Hanako protested, "I think one of them tried to kill me before after our powers awakened."

"Are you sure?" Aito furrowed his brow.

"I'm pretty sure," Hanako tensed, "I'll never forget those red eyes."

Aito glanced at Vincent floating motionlessly, still in a trance, as his power grew. "Ryūjin, God of the Sea, I summon your power." He threw his arm forward, revealing a blue, black, and white Japanese dragon tattoo with long black whiskers on his bicep. The ink shimmered with blue magic, as a long silver whip uncoiled from the design and fell loosely to the ground next to his feet.

Meanwhile, the falcon flew a few feet away from Aito's motorcycle handlebars and landed on the ground. Its face began to transform into a human one; first, a pair of soft brown eyes emerged, followed by an average nose and full lips. Short black hair materialized on his head in a fauxhawk style. The falcon's wings transformed into lean muscular arms, and his body became elongated. His feathers blazed with magic that swiftly changed into a fitting white t-shirt with a stylish Japanese flag, jeans, and black boots.

"Follow my lead, little brother," Aito lightly furrowed his brow.

"Yeah, whatever." Tenchi shrugged his tensed shoulders.

Jasper eyed the attractive Japanese man stepping forward. "What's going on here?"

Tenchi raised one arm and turned it over, palm side up, to reveal an intricate tattoo of a falcon. The ink burst to life, as the radiant lines of ink shimmered. An oak Bo staff emerged from within a shower of white magic. The sturdy weapon adorned carvings of a bamboo forest. A majestic silver falcon head topped it with green crystal eyes.

"Enough of these useless games. You cannot deny our destiny given to you by the First King," Vincent growled. "Capture the Knight and KILL THE HUMANS!" He unleashed a large group of shadow demons.

"You three," Jasper snapped at the siblings, "take the demons!" He hadn't counted on the company, nor wanted it for that matter, but since they had shown up, they could at least make themselves useful by taking care of the lesser threats. "That ass hat belongs to me." He raised a single blade toward his menacing opponent. "I'm taking him down for good."

"Excuse me? Who is that guy?" Aito scowled.

"I don't know," Hanako said. "He was already here when I arrived."

Jasper charged at Vincent as more demons rose from the ground. His thirsty swords glistened, ready to consume more blood.

Jasper's katanas and Vincent's bladed fingers clashed in a shower of sparks, and the men violently flew a few feet away from each other before charging again.

"Hana-chan, does this guy think we're the hired help or something?" Tenchi grimaced. "I guess we'll just stand over here then."

Aito gripped his long silver whip and maneuvered his wrist with great skill. He lashed forward swiftly and bound a group of demons with the metal. Then, he viciously twisted the weapon, slicing the demons into pieces. Blood, flesh, and bones exploded, creating a huge mess. The deadly weapon tightened. The end of the whip came to life, morphing into the head of a dragon, resembling the tattoo from which it had emerged.

The dragon head fiercely bit into one of its victim's clavicle with razor-sharp teeth; the creature's cries of pain filled the air as did the cracking of their bones. Another flick of his wrist and the remaining demons littered the ground in small bloody chunks.

Aito lashed out at more of the demons, unleashing a flurry of dragon heads from the end of the enchanted weapon. Blades materialized along the spines of the dragons lacerating the bodies of his opponents.

Tenchi lunged forward into a crowd of demons with his staff, twirling the weapon in three sixty degrees. Each blow from the silver Falcon skull crushed their bones, as its beak tore into their flesh. He planted his staff firmly into the ground then launched his legs into the air. His right foot met the first demon, and with precision, his left struck the second. He ran in a circle, knocking his opponents down to the ground, as his sister skillfully shot her arrows into the fallen.

Hanako maneuvered through a group of demons on the battlefield with superhuman speed. She lashed out with the end of her weapon, which instantly caved their faces into the back of their skulls.

"Where did you get those bloody tattoos?" Jasper demanded; his narrowed eyes fixated on the circular runic symbols on Vincent's arm.

"The same place you did," Vincent replied. He arched his back with his arms tensed up, ready to strike. "And it was one hell of a party," he said with a wide grin and crazy eyes. "Come with me, and I'll show you the way. Surrender yourself to the Goddess."

"What Goddess?" Jasper asked.

"She is our glorious mother. She has chosen us. No, she has gifted us with a destiny to recreate the world; hail Yami!" Vincent said smugly. "Her power is ancient, born from the flames of Chaos."

Jasper contorted his face with disgust. "You can take your Goddess and go to hell," he said. Rushing forward, he swung one sword at his opponent, who parried, slashing out with one of his claws. Their blades collided with great force, making them fly away from each other.

Vincent gracefully landed in a crouched position; he raised his wild eyes, fixing his sights on his chosen blood brother.

"We are beyond such confining boxes that are constructed from clumsy concepts and based on flawed designs. Hell is just a story that was invented to frighten small-minded humans into submission. The true reality of their fate..." he trailed off, licking his lower lip. "Oh, it's so much worse."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Jasper rushed forward then sidestepped into a round-off flip as his weapons drew close to Vincent's face. The tip of his left sword grazed Vincent's cheek, and droplets of blood instantly absorbed into the cursed blade.

Vivid memories flashed through Jasper's mind. He saw a frightening and lucid vision of a mysterious woman—tall and slender—with a black cloak draped over her form and a hood hiding her face. She reached out and caressed the arm of an unsuspecting man. Her touch, laced with a deadly poison—a spell to infect him with a blood curse that spread to everything and everyone he touched.

Jasper saw his father vividly, with oozing plague pocks all over his face and frightened bloodshot eyes. "Save me, son!" the dying man vanished into a plume of smoke then dissipated.

The world came rushing back to Jasper as he fell; disoriented, he landed hard against the concrete ground. He struggled to his feet, still unsettled—the vision from the blood had left him a little shaken.

Vincent laughed mirthlessly. "You see, we are connected, brother," he said, with outstretched arms. "We are the Knights of Chaos."

"Knights of Chaos?" Jasper repeated. Through gritted teeth, he asked, "How did you know my father?"

"I didn't, but the Goddess did. She watched over him for a long time, until the day his first son, little Jasper was born—an heir with powerful magic, chosen by destiny to play a role in something special and divine. The creation of a new world, a beautiful paradise—" Vincent stopped mid-sentence as Aito's whip trapped his torso.

"You demon scum!" Aito tightened his grip on the weapon.

"Foolish human," Vincent smirked. "I am no demon, and I'm far beyond the threat of silver." He turned to face his attacker, then tightly gripped the whip in his hand and yanked it.

Aito tried to resist Vincent's strength, but he could not withstand the force.

Vincent flexed his arms and extended them upward, loosening the grip of the whip around his body. He then lashed out with his claws and sliced Aito's chest with violent force. Warmblood sprayed out into a crimson shower.

Aito's eyes widened with shock. He let out a cry of pain as his arms shook until the whip fell out of his grip.

"Oni-san!" Hanako steadied her bow and took a deep breath to calm her nerves. "I can do this." She narrowed her eyes and aimed an arrow.

Vincent scooped the bloody man's limp body into his arms then swiftly took flight. "You have amusing friends. If you ever want to see him alive again, you will do as I say."

"Get your arse back here!" Jasper threw his arms into the air with frustration. "Bloody maniac!"

Tenchi turned around after nailing a demon in the face with his Bo staff, with a grunt, then stopped dead in his tracks when he saw his helpless brother. "Aito-san!"

Vincent shook his head as his wings exploded into a storm of feathers. "I have no idea why you care so much about protecting these pathetic humans," he growled. "If you want to find out more about your destiny as a Knight and the Goddess Yami, the blood your blade absorbed from my flesh will guide you into the embrace of Chaos." A moment later, he vanished with Aito into a vortex of darkness.

The siblings ran to the spot where Vincent had vanished.

Hanako's silver bow disintegrated into glowing particles of magic and returned to the tattoo on her forearm. The design, a beautiful cosmic stag head dotted with silver stars with a shining full moon nestled between its antlers. She turned to Jasper and scowled, "Who was that crazy man?"

"I have no bloody idea," Jasper muttered.

Hanako picked up Aito's whip and wrapped it around her forearm and shoulder. "Tell us what you know."

"The bloke was insane," sighed Jasper.

"Where did he take our brother?" Tenchi demanded, stunned. He paced in a circle on the road, unable to hide his distress.

"This is all your fault," Hanako snapped. "Why didn't you strike when you had the chance? Our brother had him all tied up!"

"I need that man alive, at least for now," Jasper replied, but he couldn't shake off a strong sense of guilt over what had happened. "He has answers about my past that I need to know."

"You're selfish," Hanako sneered.

Jasper turned away. "I'm sorry about your brother. I plan to track Vincent down, and if your brother is still alive, I will save him." He snapped his wrists and returned the crimson katanas into the cursed ink.

"We don't have time," said Tenchi impatiently. "If we wait for you to find him, it might be too late."

"Let's go," Hanako said, her eyes brimming with tears. "Let's consult Masumi. She's always had one foot in the spirit realm."

"Obaasan will know what to do," Tenchi said, hopping onto Aito's motorcycle. "Let's go!" He revved the engine and sped off.

"We're going to save our brother, with or without your help," said Hanako, glaring with disdain before running down the road.

Jasper stood silently for a moment, lost in thought, as his brain attempted to process what had just gone down. "The blood will guide me to the truth," he whispered, haunted by the image of his father's face. The idea of another confrontation with Vincent filled him with dread.

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Thank you so much for reading this sample of Curse of the Shadow King.

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