

PROLOGUE

Lightning split the sky, creating a rift between the worlds just large enough for the good fox to slip through. Red and white, the little fox raced with her bundle, doing her best to outrun those who were out to kill them both.

“High and low, searching they will go. The dark ones will seek, and they will kill. This poor little infant’s blood they will spill.”

Keiko looked down at the baby she carried in her mouth. Poor little thing. So wanted and so hated.

So loved and so feared.

“I am all that stands between you and death.”

And she was just a tiny little fox. A trifle compared to the other, more powerful creatures who wanted this baby dead. Those who could hunt without tiring.

Why her goddess had chosen her for its keeper, she had no idea. She wasn’t much older than a kit herself.

But she was fast. And she must be faster still.

Running, she tucked her head down and headed for the nearby woods as more lightning flashed and thunder rolled. The others were coming through the portal she'd just used, as determined to kill the babe as she was to save him. She heard them cursing. Felt their powers crackling.

They sought this infant and the power he would one day hold.

The power to give life and to take it.

"Don't worry, Ryu-chan," she murmured as she ran. "I will protect you."

She hoped and prayed. Because if she failed, the world would fall to the kage-kami, the shadow gods, and everyone would perish. Then there would be no holding back the eternal night shadows that would swallow the world whole.

You must find a place to hide him, Keiko, her goddess, Haruka, had ordered in those last desperate moments. Find a safe den for him while his powers are dormant. One where the dark kami, Ryukage, can't find this child.

Where Ryuichi could grow up safe, away from those who would corrupt him and turn his heart to darkness, the way they'd done his beautiful mother. Because of the shadows this baby alone would control, any mortal who ever learned of his parentage would be honor bound to shun him or kill him.

And if they killed him, there would be no one who could fight the dark powers that were growing. There would be no holding back the eternal night shadows that would swallow the world whole.

Only this child would inherit the powers to stop them.

He alone could save humanity and repel the cruelty that was headed for them all.

And she alone could protect him.

The whole of Japan was dark now.

At war, and fighting.

Nowhere was safe. *As above, so below.* How could the Master Powers have forgotten that one basic rule?

Or did they no longer care?

The Ryukage and his masters were a sickness, and once they took root, they killed everything in their wake. There was no stopping them or the damage they brought to everyone in their path. Their evil had corrupted the gods, and now it was spreading throughout the human world, tainting everything it touched.

The Ryukage had destroyed Ryuichi's noble mother, Haruka, whose sacred duty had been to protect the boundaries of the worlds. To limit who could traverse the gates and when. All so that Ryukage could have the power to come and go to whatever realm he pleased.

Now Haruka was gone, and Keiko refused to allow Ryukage to destroy this child too.

The goddess had been firm with her orders. *Ryuichi holds in his hands the fate of Japan.*

But it was more serious than that. Ryukage didn't just want to rule Japan. He would take over *all* the worlds. Any realm he chose at any time he wanted.

To do that, he needed access to every portal Haruka had controlled.

With the powers that Ryuichi would one day command, no one would be able to defeat him. Ryukage knew that too.

They all did.

It was why Ryuichi must live. Why no one could find or harm him before he learned to master his temper and his powers.

If Ryukage couldn't turn this child to his cause—couldn't control him—he would kill him. As would all those enemies who wanted to stop them both. All those who would fear that this child was corrupted by his parentage.

Yorukaze Ryuichi was cursed. Marked for death by all beings.

As above, so below . . .

But he had one stalwart defender.

As she ran the endless miles, Keiko chanted to Ryuichi, lulling him to sleep. "I will hide you where no one will find you."

Not until he had come into his powers and was ready to take on all his enemies.