

American Herald

Story By: Airafox

“What's going on? I can't... move...” The world around Joshua had gone dark, the blackness stretching for miles. The young man could not see his own hand in front of his face, although he was unable to actually move it to begin with. The sound of his heart beating was the only thing he could hear, but that was slowing to a stop with every passing second. It took only a moment for him to begin to understand. “I can't believe it... I'm going to die here... Just like that?! Really? It's not fair!”

“You poor thing!” The sudden voice the man heard interrupted his racing mind and demanded silence, even though the source if it had not yet asked. It was a heavenly voice that spoke with the elegance of a choir.

“Who's there?” the young man cried out, or at least thought he did. His mouth wouldn't move. The darkness surrounding him lit up in a blinding flash of light before receding into the view of the orange skies of the setting sun he had seen moments before. The skyline merged with the trees surrounding him as he found himself standing before a Japanese Shinto shrine. More specifically, a shrine dedicated to the god Inari. The architecture had to have been 400 or 500 years old, though it had been reinforced by the methods of modern infrastructure to keep the shrine as healthy as it had always been. While not extravagantly large, red-colored wood helped support the structure.

Behind him sat the torii gateway that served as the entrance to the shrine, while to his sides were two statues representing the kitsune guardians that protected the shrine. The one to his left was cracked down the middle with its head missing. Below it were the pieces of the head and the unmoving body of a man approximately 21 years in age. Blood leaked from a wound in their skull that dyed their brown hair around it a crimson red.

“No...” spoke the male softly. He was looking down at his own body. Joshua was looking as his own body. The tan shirt, the black shorts, the pitch black tennis shoes... They were all things he had been wearing, an obvious tourist. He brought his hands forward to look at them, see if he was really dead, but there was nothing, not even the ghostly visage of his arms. He swore he could feel them, but they weren't there. “Am I...?”

“Nearly dead, I'm afraid,” replied the feminine voice again. The man turned what he thought to be his head in search of the source, unable to comprehend what he was. Was he a ghost? A spirit?

The figure of what he thought was a woman slowly descended in front him, a beautiful woman adorned in gold jewelry around her neck and wrists and a shining white dress. Upon closer inspection, Joshua did not see any prominent bosom upon the figure, making him question if they were truly a woman at all. Their figure was androgynous. Their legs were not only hidden by the length of the dress, but the large floof of a snow white fox. The fox glowed with the same radiance as the dress itself. Had it lacked a face, the human would have mistake the divine being for riding atop a cloud.

“To think this could happen on these sacred grounds...” the individual spoke, reaching out to caress the human. Though he could see any form of his body, he felt their touch. It was warm and comforting. “I'm more disappointed in myself than anything.”

“What are...?” Joshua could barely utter anything else. The sheer pressure of the

figure's radiance made it difficult for him to speak.

"I am what the people of this land call Inari," the deity spoke kindly, patting Joshua on what he felt like was his head. "I occasionally visit the shrines these mortals have dedicated to myself to answer the prayers I find the most manageable. I am not sure whether it was coincidence or fate that brought you to my shrine on the day of my herald's death."

Herald? What did that mean? The thoughts of his continued racking against his brain, making it difficult to think about anything that was being spoken to him. Was Inari here to ferry him off to the otherworld? Did they wish to save him or punish him for being killed at their shrine? As he struggled to comprehend everything, one sentence managed to pass his lips. "What's going to happen to me?"

Inari smiled at his question, petting him as a loving mother would her child. "Alas, your destiny is not mine to control. Your place in the heavens is not for me to decide."

Joshua became forlorn at the response. If Inari didn't know what would happen to him, then who did?

"However..." Inari's words caught his attention. He looked up, meeting their gaze as directly as possible. "As I said, whether by coincidence or fate, you have found your way here at the moment of this shrine's herald's death." Inari's tone became exciting. They were plotting something. "Be that as it may, this shrine has an opening. When one herald dies, a new one takes their place. While I cannot interfere with your destiny, I can offer you the opportunity to forge it yourself."

"What do you mean?" Joshua managed to ask.

"If you wish, you may pass on to your ultimate fate. I'm afraid the healers of this time, those paramedics, will not reach you in time to save your life," explained the god. "But if you would choose to accept the position of herald, your time in those world can be extended."

Joshua lit up at the sound of those words. While he had no idea what that meant, he had ambitions in life he had not yet fulfilled. If it the choice was life or death, he would gladly choose life.

"I still don't know what any of this herald stuff is," he muttered to himself, barely loud enough for Inari to hear. His next words, on the other hand, came loud and clear. "But if you're saying that you can save me, I'll do it! I'll do whatever you say! Just please... Please help me! I don't want to die!"

Inari gripped Joshua's form tightly, squeezing it into a ball. At least, he could only assume as much given he could not exactly see what he looked like.

"Your words are your own," spoke Inari again. "This is the destiny you have chosen."

Inari lifted the almost invisible ball and pointed it toward Joshua's motionless body. With a gentle breath, the ball was shot directly at it, striking it with enough force to make the body spasm. The force of the impact shattered the stone on top of him into a thousand pieces of debris. The dust surrounded him. As the ball entered his body, his pants tore behind him.

Though unconscious, Joshua could smell and breathe dust around him from the shattered masonry. It brought forth a violent coughing fit that pained his face. With each cough, he felt like his face was being torn off, as if each outburst was pushing his face

forward. His arms twitched non-stop and he swore he could feel his feet cracking. Despite of this, there was no pain. Rather, he couldn't feel any pain. His nerves seemed incapable of registering pain toward his brain as anything more than pressure. Perhaps it was due to his near-death state, but there was no way he could be certain of that.

Joshua's body began to glow, spreading a warmth he had never felt before across and throughout his body. His heart's palpitations had not increased. If anything, they had slowed considerably, confusing him even more. This was not the way the human body was supposed to work. Then again, if he had been told that he was meeting the god Inari today, he would have probably chalked it up to insanity. He had been fairly agnostic in his beliefs, so Inari existing didn't puzzle him as much as everything else that was going on.

As the warmth spread to his head, Joshua's ears began burning. Some kind of invisible force seemed to be grabbing hold of them tightly and pulling on them, almost like they were being ripped off his head. The same force was grabbing at his feet, but instead of tugging, it was squeezing them, particularly around his toes now.

Finally his coughing began to die down. The intensity of his attack diminished, but each individual cough became harder and stronger. If he could describe it, it was similar to having something stuck in his throat that was he was trying to expel. He could feel his mouth begin to grind his teeth as he tried to contain the next cough. The grinding was intense enough that he could hear the enamel chipping away. Unfortunately his efforts prove to be in vain. A lump grew in his throat until it reached that surface, at which point one final cough had spitting up a glowing ball. The glow intensified and burned, before suddenly cooling down and solidifying it. In its place was a golden bell of sorts.

It was at this point that Joshua's consciousness truly left him. All his feeling, tastes, smells... They all just stopped. A figure began to cast a shadow over his sleeping body. A snow white paw reached down toward the ball, gripping it.

“So you're my new partner, huh?” hummed an older male voice above him. “If this is Inari's will, so be it.”

Several hours passed before Joshua opened his eyes again, but if he probably would have believed it if someone had told him he had been asleep for days. He woke up to the light of a full moon beaming down at him like some kind of divine symbol. It was admittedly kind of creepy. As he sat up and leaned forward, he reflexively grabbed the back of his head.

“Agh! My head!” he groaned loudly.

“No surprise you're still feeling it! That was quite the bump,” came the older male voice from earlier.

Joshua perked his head to his right. Sitting beside him was a large white fox.

“Anyway, it's nice to meet you, partner,” said the fox with a smile.

“Waaaaaaah!” Joshua suddenly fell backward, raising his arm to point at the mysterious vulpine. “You...! You just talked!”

As the white fox broke out into laughter, Joshua noticed something off about his arm. It was covered in white hair. And he was quite certain he had five fingers, not four.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!” he screamed again, even louder this time. Joshua

jumped to his feet and immediately lost his balance, kicking up tiles beneath him. It was only now that he realized he was standing on a rooftop. As he lost his footing, Joshua tumbled backward and rolled down the slop of the shrine roof top, plummeting toward the stones below with an extremely loud thud. His eyes started spinning from the impact.

“Oooof!” the white vulpine cringed from above, peeking down at his new partner below. “Maybe bringing you up here wasn't the best idea after all.”

A fluffy white lump fell on Joshua's face, allowing him to regain his sense. He began pushing it away, making exaggerating spitting sounds as he brushed hair out of his mouth. His actions stopped as he realized he was holding up a fluffy white tail. “Wha-?”

Joshua immediately began staring at it, then to his hands which had become white paws. He wasn't imagining what he saw earlier. He sprang to his feet, barely but successfully managing to keep his balance this time. He looked over his handpaws again, then down at his feet. He felt over his face and noticed that it stuck out considerably. He was also wearing a white robe with red embroidery for the seams at the wrists, neck, bottom, and chest.

“Finally calmed down yet, kid?” the fox on the roof asked him. The fox leapt from the tiles with a showoffy flip, landing gracefully upon his toes in front of Joshua. Now that Joshua got a good look at the vulpine, he could see that the fox was wearing the same outfit as him, though with noticeably thicker strands of red throughout. A band of beads was wrapped around his left wrist. Five beautiful tails protruded from his backside, each with an equally distributed layer of fluffy fur. Sitting down must have been difficult.

“You're a... kitsune?” inquired Joshua, still in disbelief at what was happening.

“Figures even non-Japanese folks would call us that name,” the five-tailed fox chuckled proudly. “Folks around here call every fox a kitsune, though of course they know the difference between the two, but you lot from overseas seem to differentiate our normal kin from us based on spiritual powers with your words.”

Joshua found himself swept up in the fox's pace, momentarily forgetting about his current predicament.

“My name is Junichi,” the kitsune introduced himself as with a courteous bow.

“...I'm Joshua...” the human found himself replying back with a brief pause.

Suddenly he could not remember his surname. He had wanted to say it, but when he tried to speak it his mind went blank.

“Joshua?” Junichi repeated. “Well, it's not the worst name I've heard for a kitsune, although it doesn't sound like a name for a herald. We can work on giving you a proper name later if we need to.”

“Hey! What's wrong with my name?!” exclaimed Joshua. His eyes twitched as his mind darted back to what Junichi had just said. He'd been swept into the kitsune's pace so quickly that he had forgotten all about the fact that he had sprouted a tail. “Wait! Hold on a second here! Kitsune? Herald? What in the blazes is going on here?!”

Junichi chortled silently to himself behind a paw and stepped forward. Placing a paw on his left shoulder, Junichu began guiding Joshua over to a small pond. The moonlight reflected off the surface, providing a mirror-like effect upon the water. Only now did Joshua see that standing beside Junichi was a second, smaller fox. He raised up his right handpaw to feel his face, noticing that the fox in the reflection was doing the same. He involuntarily twitched his newly pointed ears to take in the sounds of the quiet Japanese night. Strangely, despite all the changes to his body, the hair on his head was

still brown, in the same messy spiked style he'd had before. The only other feature that stayed the same was the amber-brown mix of his eyes.

“Wh-Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” he exclaimed loudly. “I... I'm a...”

“A kitsune,” Junichi confirmed. “More specifically a herald for our god, Inari. It is our job to watch over the shrine and help guide those--”

Junichi was cut short by incensive shouting. Joshua was loudly spouting “This is a dream!” and “This can't be happening!” over and over again. Junichi's patience was wearing thin, but this was to be expected of his new partner. His face furrowed into one of discomfort as the disrespect of being interrupted.

Joshua finally lost his footing again and tripped forward, delivering him a face full of grass and mud. His new tail rested upon his back, draped over his shoulder next to him. He glanced over it and purposefully flexed it, once again confirming that was real.

“This... This wasn't supposed to happen,” he mumbled to himself. “I just wanted to come to Japan once before I got a job. I wanted to see as much as I could.” Joshua started to sniffle. “I wanted to visit the hot springs and shrines. I wanted to get some souvenirs. I still haven't visited Kyoto, Nara, or all those places I wanted to visit. It... It isn't!” Joshua began screaming again, not caring who heard him. “IT ISN'T FAIR!”

Junichi approached Joshua's grounded body and kneeled down. He offered a paw to Joshua to help him to his feet. “I'm sorry things turned out this way, but this is what happened. I saw your injuries. Had you not become a herald, you would have sure moved on to the otherworld. Inari must have heard the your desire to live and gave you another chance.”

The five-tails sighed softly as he helped Joshua to his feet. He wasn't very good at comforting speeches and he could see he was not not making his new partner feel any better. “Besides, it's not like we HAVE to stay here. Even we heralds get a vacation every now and then.” Junichi scratched the back of his head, figuring out how to best to put the words together. “I suppose, one of these days, I could take you to those places.”

“You don't understand,” Joshua responded, although his sniffing had lessened thanks to Junichi's offer to help. At the very least the five-tails was getting through to him. “It's not just that. I studied my ass off in college! I was supposed to meet up some college buddies this fall and we were going to make our own game studio. How the hell will they react if I walk in looking like this? What are my parents going to think?”

“Well, probably nothing,” Junichi admitted, sparking more confusion from Joshua who clearly did not understand what the kitsune was insinuating. “Unless your family has a strong bloodline connection with Japanese priests and shrine maidens, they probably wouldn't even be able to see you.”

“Wait! What?!” Joshua reached forward and gripped Junichi's robes, causing a gold ball dangling around his neck to jiggle. “What do you mean they can't see me?”

“Well you are a herald now,” Junichi reminded him. “Heralds can only be seen by other spiritual beings and those with a strong connection to the gods, such as a priest or shrine maiden. We can interact with the world around us, but we can only see and speak to those who are connected to us. But if someone makes an offering, we can impose ourselves into their lives to help them out. If the offering is strong enough, we might even be able to meet them.”

Junichi's explanation made Joshua feel sick. This was not what he thought he had agreed to when he said he would become a herald if Inari saved him. Had they even

really saved him if nobody could see him? How was this any different from being dead? The only difference he could see was that he was a kitsune now.

“What if I stop being a herald?” he wondered aloud. He was not being entirely serious, but he did wonder if it was possible to quit. Junichi smirked as if expecting Joshua to ask that eventually.

“I'm afraid it's not that simple,” Junichi explained. “Sure, you could run away, but you'd never stop being a herald. Eventually neglecting your duties would take a great toll on your health. It'll corrupt your soul and you will eventually devolve into a youkai, a demon. You'll lose all sense of yourself and become a monster that must be put down by exorcists.”

Joshua was not entirely sure if he believed Junichi. It seemed to convenient to keep him around.

“Of course,” Junichi continued, “that would take a long time. It would take a couple hundred years for you to regress that far. Most heralds who abandon their duties realize they cannot take the strain and return to their shrines eventually.”

Junichi reached into his robes and pulled out a golden ball similar to the one around his neck.

“I suppose you're wonder what's stopping you from just taking an extended vacation then if you have a hundred years of free time. That's where this comes in.” Junichi held out the orb and squeezed it tightly, causing Joshua to freeze up. “This is your Star Ball. Think of it as your soul or spirit orb. You will always know where it is, and if any harm were to come to it, so to would that harm fall upon you.”

“Ngh! Th-That... hurts...” Joshua groaned.

“I bet it does,” Junichi cackled loudly. “Once you've proven yourself a capable herald, I'll return your Star Ball. Until then, I'll be holding onto it to ensure you don't go running off. Can't have my new partner disappearing on me and then getting lost.”

“Okay! Okay! I won't run off! Just please stop! Agh!” Joshua's whole body writhed in pain, suggesting that Junichi was doing far more than simply squeezing the orb. It was not like he could question it, though. Part of his harbored thoughts of finding a way to pay Junichi back for the pain as Junichi slowly loosened his grip, but if he were to move at an inopportune time, Junichi was sure to punish him far more severely.

Junichi perked up his ears.

“Come!” he ushered, grabbing Joshua by the scruff of his neck and pulling him into the air. The ground shrank beneath him as Junichi jumped, clearing the entire building and landing on the other side of the shrine. Joshua's landed was far less graceful.

“Look!” pointed Junichi.

Ascending the stairway to the shrine was a boy probably four or five years younger than Joshua was. His sullen face was hidden behind drooping black hair that had lost its combing over the course of the humid day. He was dressed in all black, his top a buttoned uniform and his legs covered in long black slacks.

“His name is Fujikawa Hayato, or I guess Hayato given how you from overseas address people,” explained the kitsune. “Though he does not wish it, he is the eldest child of the previous shrine keepers and is next in line to reside over this shrine. His mother was the shrine maiden. I'm afraid his father passed away when he was young and his mother died just over the spring.”

Joshua felt some form of sympathy for the boy upon hearing that. That was rough

for any child to deal with. He'd lost his own mother at a young age, but his father had found a nice woman a few years later and Joshua grew to love her like a mom as well. This boy, however, had lost both his parents.

“Hayato has a younger sister, but she's living with his grandparents on his father's side. Hayato does not want to be a priest. I think he mentioned wanting to be writer or something.”

“Then why does he stay?” Joshua asked the kitsune. It was one thing for Joshua himself, he did not get a choice in the matter anymore. But what was stopping Hayato from leaving?

“He's afraid if he leaves before his sister has a chance to take over, he'll risk losing a precious memento of his mother and--”

“What are you preaching about now, Junichi-sama?” Hayato growled as he came up the stairs, spotting the pair of kitsune. Hayato knew Junichi had a habit of talking about him to other heralds and he was not a fan, even if it was because Junichi cared about him.

“Good evening, Hayato-kun! Late night at cram school?” Junichi greeting, immediately changing the subject.

“I have high school exams coming up later,” Hayato sighed. “If I don't get a good score, I'll have to go to school on the other side of town. The last thing I need is to spend more unnecessary time doing that. And it's not like any of my friends are planning on going there.”

Hayato looked up to properly greet Junichi, meeting with the kitsune's welcoming sapphire blue eyes. Junichi reached over and patted on Hayato on the head. Whereas Joshua was not much larger than Hayato, Junichi was a good amount taller. Hayato's gaze finally met with Joshua. Barely paying him any attention, he turned back to Junichi.

“Did Yuudai-sama finally pass on?” Hayato inquired.

“I'm afraid so,” replied Junichi. “This here is my new partner, Joshua.”

“I see,” Hayato bowed to Joshua. “Please look over this shrine with Junichi-sama, Joshua-sama.” Hayato, too, agreed the name was weird, but unlike Junichi, he wouldn't dare be so informal with a herald.

“No need to be so tense, Hayato-kun!” Junichi laughed, pulling Joshua over next to him with a wide hug. “Joshua here is still young! Barely older than you! I hope you two will get along!”

“Yes. I understand,” Hayato replied with a soft smile. “I'm tired, so I am going to prepare dinner and then a bath. I'll talk with grandfather tomorrow about possibly setting up a proper service for Yuudai-sama.”

“Just keep it simple,” Junichi chuckled before allowing Hayato to head inside. He glanced over to Joshua, who seemed perplexed.

“He's a good kid, isn't he?”

“Huh? Oh... yeah.” answered Joshua. “But Hayato speaks English surprisingly well. I was just wondering why you would talk to him in English?”

“English? Kid, he was speaking Japanese the entire time.”

“I... What?” Joshua's confusion would never cease today, it seemed. “How?! I mean, I know a little Japanese (I took some in college), but I can't speak it that well!”

“It is one of the blessings of being a herald,” Junichi went on to say. “I'll have to teach you proper Japanese so you can read it, but when someone speaks to you, you hear

what they're saying in your mind and perceive it as your own language. It's so you can fulfill the prayers of all who come here, regardless of their origin.”

That made more sense than Joshua was expecting. With everything else going on today, that seemed like the least weird thing.

“Anyway, come watch the night sky with me. We have lots to talk about,” the five-tails requested. He once again grabbed Joshua by the scruff of his neck and pulled him up onto the roof with a single leap. The landing was better this time, but Joshua was still not used to walking on digitgrade feet. It would take a while for him to get the hang of it.

Junichi sat down on the roof, his tails never seeming to get in the way. He patted the tiles next to him, inviting Joshua to sit beside him. With nothing else to do, he conceded and took a seat. It was a bit awkward to sit with a tail, but since there was no support behind him, he did not have to worry about it too much.

“So kid, tell me about yourself. Where is it you come from? What was your life like before you became my partner?” Junichi asked him. He wanted to establish the fact that Joshua could talk to him about anything. After all, they would be together for hundreds of years if all went well.

Joshua gazed down at the scene below. The fox statue that had cracked before had been restored to its former glory, likely Inari's handiwork. Although it was faint and difficult to spot, Joshua's noticed even from this distance that the top of the statue's head had been altered slightly to vaguely represent the identity of the shrine's new herald. The smell of the grass and pond below came in much stronger on his foxish nose. The sounds of the cicadas on the warm night were more intense than before on his sensitive fox ears. This was all real. This was his life now.

Joshua wondered what would happen to his family and friends. Would any of them come looking for him? Would they ever learn what had happened? The thoughts depressed him, so he thought about talking to Junichi to cheer himself up a little.

“Well Junichi...san, as I said, my name is Joshua. I come from the United States, a state called California...”