

ONE FLAME CAN BURN AN EMPIRE

# REBEL FIRE

ANN SEI LIN



*When this flesh withers  
Throw my soul unto the flames  
And forge me anew*

## PROLOGUE

On Princess Tsukimi's seventh birthday, her father set fire to a God.

The snow-white stag was taller than the cherry trees that lined the royal courtyard. Its antlers shook the blossoms from their branches as it was pinned down and wrapped in chains. Blank eyes rolled in fear. Hooves beat the ground, thrashing, bucking, as her father approached it with a flaming torch in hand.

Something in Princess Tsukimi's blood trembled, though she could not tell if it was awe or anger that made her heart pound.

Members of the royal court cheered her father on as he boldly approached the stag. It was all a sideshow. A display of strength. Even as a child, Tsukimi knew how performance was tied to power; how looking like you were strong was halfway towards making people *believe* that you were strong.

The stag lunged at her father. Its mouth opened to crush the Emperor's skull between its teeth, but the chains held it back. In that moment, Tsukimi got a glimpse of its white teeth, its snowy tongue, the folds of paper that made up the muscles of its jaw. The stag was a marvel of crimp folds; its hooves made from box pleats, its tail a twist of paper, its fur a series of ripple creases that patterned its hide.

Once her father was a foot away from the beast, he tossed the torch at the stag's feet. Living paper became a living pyre as fire licked up the creature's body. The stag screamed, but the flames were merciless, devouring it in a thrashing mass of heat and light while the royal court applauded.

"Good riddance," her brother, ever the oaf, muttered. "One more shikigami we don't have to worry about."

As the cherry blossoms fell they were burned to cinders upon the flames, but Tsukimi could not tear her eyes away. Something in her blood sang to her, whispering that what she was witnessing right now was the death of a God. A tingle of electricity ran through her fingertips.

The stag looked at her as the flames licked up its body. When their eyes met, a thunderclap rolled through her heart.

She was sure that she would never see anything so beautiful ever again.

“That concludes the report, Your Imperial Highness.”

Tsukimi blinked. She glanced around the ruined throne room, her eyes travelling from the cracked tiles and broken statues that littered the floor to the messenger prostrating himself before her.

Ah yes, the report. She was supposed to be listening to the soldier’s account of the damage to the sky city, not daydreaming of the past.

She sighed. Why should she care whether the locals were blaming her for the destruction of their precious city? A lion had more important things to worry about than the feelings of the ants beneath its feet. *She* had more important things to worry about.

It had been three days.

Three days since the dragon shikigami had burst from the underbelly of Sola-II. Three days since her summer palace had been reduced to ruins, and her library of precious books burned to cinders. Worst of all, it had been three days since those shikigami children had escaped her.

Yet she was still here, stuck on this floating rock with a city in need of repair, bodies to bury, and angry locals on the verge of rioting over something that was not even her fault. Yes, she was trying to make her own shikigami. And yes, she had experimented on humans – orphans and beggars no one would miss – but the dragon that had attacked the city had nothing to do with her. Despite the Sorabito’s accusations, she did not know where the dragon had come from and, frankly, she did not care – not when there were more important things preying upon her mind.

She had heard nothing from the men that she had ordered to chase after the children. Even Fujiwa, her prized imperial Crafter, had sent back no reports. Did he not know how important it was that she capture and study those children immediately? Did he not realize how rare and precious such shikigami were?

Incompetence! Tsukimi was surrounded by it! Irritation clawed at the back of her throat. Like a salvager spotting the glint of a buried treasure chest, her fingers itched with the urge to get her hands on those children and take them apart.

The messenger coughed. “Your Imperial Highness, it would be helpful if you were to attend the funerals at least. The local Sorabito are also unhappy with—”

The doors to the throne room burst open.

A soldier entered, smartly dressed in a black uniform trimmed with gold. The moment Princess Tsukimi saw him she knew that he was not one of her troops: he walked with the confident swagger of a man who had not yet learned how to fear her.

“Your Imperial Highness, Princess Tsukimi!” He bowed only as low as required. Even his voice was reedy and irritating. “Your father, the Lord Emperor, sends his greetings. And his disappointment.”

Tsukimi’s mood plummeted. She knew exactly what was coming next.

“Due to the ... disaster that has occurred here, he has decided to personally visit Sola-II and ensure that order is restored. The Lord Emperor has heard the troubling rumours regarding your conduct here. Rumours of your attempts to create shikigami. Rumours that you are conducting Godless human experiments. The Lord Emperor orders you to remain here in the summer palace until he arrives. You must—”

A sigh escaped Tsukimi’s lips. Her father was a chore to deal with even on the best of days, always harping on about responsibility and the importance of empire. She would rather be flung into the deepest pit of Yomi than stay here and listen to his squawking.

“It’s been three days since Sola-II was attacked, and yet he only sends me this message now?”

The soldier frowned. “The Lord Emperor sent me to Sola-II as soon as he heard what had happened. This was as fast as I could get here, Your Highness.”

“He could have sent a mechanical bird instead.”

“The Lord Emperor wanted to be certain you would receive his message.”

“And how will he know if I have received it?”

The soldier looked at her in confusion. “Because I will report back to him, Your Highness.”

Princess Tsukimi laughed. She disliked stupid men. “Will you now? And what makes you so sure?”

At last, the soldier caught on. “P – Princess!” The blood drained from his face.

There. That was better. That was the look all men should wear in her presence.

She rose to her feet. With a cry of alarm, the man stumbled backwards, tripped, and fell onto a pile of rubble. Tsukimi’s smile was as thin and sharp as a knife.

“Why don’t you stay here and wait for my father? I’ll even let you sit on the throne while I’m gone.”

“G – Gone?” squeaked the man.

“Hunting,” she said, sweetly. “I’m going hunting.”

## ONE

Silver fish cut through the clear water. Each glimmering scale was bathed in the soft glow of dusk. Kurara peered over the edge of the stream, watching the image of her face ripple as the fish passed through her reflection. Her wide eyes and round face disappeared beneath the splash of a fishtail. Strands of black hair, growing just past her shoulders now, skimmed across the surface of the water.

She drew back when the fish scattered. Her hands – one as white as fresh snow, the other utterly unremarkable – clutched at the tufts of grass that grew on the riverbank. Her nails sank into the dirt.

A pond skater landed on the water. The fish surged towards it, mouths open. As they broke through the surface of the stream, Kurara's left arm suddenly snapped off at her elbow.

The limb crumbled into a hundred tiny squares of paper that circled around her like asteroids in orbit. A single paper square broke from its path and sliced through the air, impaling one of the fish through the middle with more force than an arrow. Its companions fled as a drop of blood bloomed across the water's surface. Kurara clicked her fingers and the piece of paper floated into the air, dragging the impaled fish with it.

“Got one!” She pulled out the sharpened bolt of paper and tossed her catch to the boy sitting by the campfire.

Haru's hands fumbled over the slippery scales. He paled as his gaze slid down to the fish's bulging eyes and dead, gaping mouth. Thrusting it away from him, he cried, “OK, good job. Now take it back, Rara! It's looking at me!”

The empty sleeve of Kurara's kimono fluttered against her stump of an elbow. Paper danced around her; a slow, confetti parade. As they circled her, they merged together again, each tiny square of paper combining with the next, stretching and hardening until they formed a smooth, marble-white arm.

The paper limb reattached itself to her elbow. Kurara gave it an experimental swing. The weight felt good. Though it looked nothing like a real, human limb, it was as solid as muscle and as supple as flesh. She took the fish from Haru's nervous hands and settled down near a dead tree stump to gut and prepare it.

*Maybe this body isn't so bad after all,* she thought, as the tips of her paper fingers turned knife-sharp.

She did not look anything like the snow-white, origami creatures that people usually thought of when they pictured a shikigami, but she had to accept what she was. Her insides were filled with bloodless, paper organs and string-like muscles. A paper core instead of a heart lay suspended inside the cavity of her chest. Denying the truth of her body was pointless.

Besides, she had more important things to worry about.

The moment Kurara had met Tsukimi, she knew that the imperial princess would never let her or Haru go without a fight. She remembered the way Princess Tsukimi had looked at Haru. How the princess had looked at *her*. Surely the princess had sent men after them. Perhaps they were even already here, in this forest. Every rustling bush could be the sound of a soldier approaching. The growl of thunder might be the rumble of a hovercraft engine.

“Did you hear footsteps?” Kurara looked up as the tree branches whispered and knocked together in the wind. Yes, being on constant alert was draining and stressful, but she had good reason to be.

Haru circled the edges of their small, makeshift campsite. They were surrounded by bushes and trees that pressed in upon them from every side. An amber sky wheeled far above the tangled branches, the dim light casting murky shadows that made it difficult to see beyond the clearing.

“I don’t hear any footsteps. I’m sure it’s just your imagination, Rara. *Again.*”

“I thought I heard voices too.”

Haru sighed. “Come on, Rara, relax. Why don’t you show me what you’ve learned since I’ve been away?”

“Away.” That was what Haru called the period of time he had spent as nothing more than a tatty ball of paper in Kurara’s pocket. As if he had not burned alive in that forest after the *Midori* came crashing down, leaving nothing but his core behind. As if there had been no doubt that he would come back.

Kurara wondered if he called it “away” for her benefit or his own. She wondered a lot of things about Haru these days. After he had told her that he had always known they were shikigami, after he had told her that he remembered all the things she did not, there were cracks all over their relationship – hairline fractures that she knew they both felt, even though they were pretending nothing was different. Fissures that she was scared would become rifts.

“I’ll show you when Tomoe and Sayo come back.”

“Ooh, you’re going to give us a proper demonstration then?”

Haru’s eyes lit up with joy. Kurara had not realized how much she had missed it until she was faced with the impossible brightness of his smile, the boyish angles of his face and



colt-like limbs, the curls of his black hair falling over ink-black eyes. Princess Tsukimi was many things, but at least she had done a good job recreating his physical form. He was perfect.

“Sure. When they get back.” Kurara tensed. “Didn’t they only go looking for firewood?”

Tomoe and Sayo *had* been gone for a while now. How long could it take to gather some sticks? They were in a forest. There was wood everywhere!

Before she could speak, Haru jerked his head towards the south side of the camp.

“Did you just hear something?”

“What?”

“It sounded like a bear or something.”

“Oh, so it’s OK for you to hear strange sounds in the forest, but if *I* hear something I’m being paranoid.”

“I’m being serious, Rara!”

Kurara snapped her mouth shut. A thousand awful possibilities circled her thoughts.

“Keep your ofuda out and ready.” Haru stepped closer.

“My ofuda is always ready. I’m made of it, remember?”

Haru nodded. “There’s something—”

“Heeeey!”

Kurara jumped. She pulled a piece of ofuda from her arm and flung it in the direction of the sound. The paper square cut through the air like a throwing star, slicing through several tree branches.

“Whoa, Rara!” Tomoe leapt clear as the branches came crashing down in front of her feet.

“Sorry!” Kurara paled. She had not meant to do that. Well, she had, but only because she thought they might be something dangerous.

Tomoe pushed her way into the clearing. Like all Sorabito, she was tall and willowy, her steps light as she hopped over the fallen branches. In one hand she held an armful of mushrooms cradled to her chest like a particularly ugly baby. Sayo trailed behind her, empty-handed and sullen.

“Look before you throw!” Sayo scowled at Kurara. “Or have you lost your mind already?”

Kurara sucked in a sharp breath. That was a low-blow. A reminder that she was not human, that she was a shikigami without a master, and that beings like her usually went mad when they were not bonded to Crafters. That Tomoe and Sayo made a living hunting her kind.



“Sayo!” Tomoe scolded her. “I thought we agreed not to mention the shikigami thing!”

Had they? Kurara flushed, annoyed that they were treating her being a shikigami like some kind of awkward condition that should not be brought up in polite company.

Haru quickly switched the subject. “I see you found a mushroom patch. Did you get those for me because I’m a fungi?” Pointing to Tomoe’s arms, he grinned. “Get it? Because mushrooms are a kind of fungus.”

Sayo pinched the bridge of her nose. “Dear skies, you think you’re funny.”

“I’m *hilarious*! Right, Rara? Rara?”

“Don’t worry, Haru, *I* think you’re funny!” Tomoe looped her free arm around Haru’s shoulders.

“Did you spend all this time picking mushrooms? What about the firewood?” As glad as Kurara was for the food, she could not help but notice how the sun had dipped further below the horizon. They would have to eat quickly and sleep immediately afterwards if they wanted to set off first thing tomorrow.

“Actually, we found something amazing!” Tomoe grinned.

“Will this amazing thing help us shake Princess Tsukimi’s soldiers off our tail, get us out of the forest and back to the skies?” Kurara wanted to add “and teach us about all the mysteries of shikigami blood bonds”, but she reckoned only she cared about that.

“No, but it’s something just as good!”

## TWO

“Behold, a roof!”

Tomoe stood before the ruins of an old, run-down temple. It was not clear why anyone had thought it was a good idea to build a temple in the middle of the forest, or how long it had been left abandoned, but the cracked flagstones of the courtyard were overrun with weeds and the rotting wooden porch was crawling with ants. Fallen leaves and twigs gathered over the top of an old stone well, next to an offering box that housed nothing but spiders and dust.

Kurara jerked away as something with far too many legs crawled out of the box. Besides a few moths and the odd stowaway ant, insects were not something she had to deal with in the skies.

Tomoe danced gleefully across a stone path half buried beneath weeds and dirt. “Finally, somewhere out of the wind! I’m tired of waking up with leaves in my hair. All this ground is unnatural, I tell you. I’ll need to purify myself when we get back to the sky!”

Kurara peered at the top of the building. Clouds, dyed in the bruised-pink glow of sunset, brushed over the sagging roof. A long time ago, the temple had likely been a magnificent sight to behold, but now the paint on the wooden walls had lost its colour, tiles were missing from the roof, and the pillars that held up the overhang were rotting and buckled. It was impossible to tell what the statues lining the courtyard were meant to be. Lions, perhaps? Or maybe some sort of cat-headed fish?

“It’s late. We might as well take shelter somewhere cool and dry for the night. Dry-ish, I suppose,” said Haru, eyeing the holes in the roof.

“Exactly! Look at the sky! Look at those clouds! It’s going to pour tonight, and the last thing we want is to get sick from sleeping in wet clothes. All the mosquitoes will be out! My hair is going to curl! I’m going to stink!” Tomoe grabbed her long red plait and waved it in front of her nose. Though the tips remained the same dark crimson, it was beginning to look brown at the roots.

“I suppose it will do us no harm to stay one night; it doesn’t look like anyone’s been here for a long time. As long as we leave at first light,” said Sayo.

“I don’t know...” Kurara hesitated. “It looks...”

Ancient. Haunted. The kind of place where people disappeared and were never seen again. She was not sure if Sorabito had ghost stories similar to the groundling tales Kurara used

to hear on the *Midori*, but the temple seemed like the perfect location for a horror story about vengeful monks and bloodthirsty yōkai.

Yet Tomoe was already climbing the rickety steps to the porch and the others were making their way through the weeds towards the temple. Well, Kurara supposed, the clouds *were* darkening. Even if it did not rain, the temple promised shade from the heat and humidity of late summer.

Reluctantly, she followed the others up the creaking steps. As she reached the warped threshold of the temple entrance, she swore that she heard a voice singing.

*“A dying star fell from the heavens.”*

She froze, heart pounding, ears straining. That sound had come from somewhere inside her own head and echoed against the walls of her skull. It almost sounded like...

Kurara shook her head. She was just hearing things; songs from her own memory. The temple had her nerves on edge, that was all.

Taking a deep breath, she followed the others inside.

\*

The interior of the temple was far larger than it had seemed when viewed from outside. Light filtered through the cracks in the walls and the corridors were blocked by vast cobwebs hanging over every path like heavy drapes. Kurara crept over the rotting floorboards, testing them first before entrusting them with her weight as she followed the others past empty rooms with battered, lopsided doors.

The dry air sucked the moisture from her mouth. Rotting floorboards and decrepit walls stank of rot and mould. The acoustics were strange too, contorting even the slightest noise so that, even though Haru was walking beside her, the sound of his footsteps seemed to come from somewhere miles away.

Kurara tried not to think of it as evidence that the temple was haunted.

They found food in what was once the kitchen – a small sack of rice and some jars of pickled vegetables in remarkably good condition – along with some old clay bowls and an iron pot.

“There was a well outside, I think. There might be water in it still,” said Haru. “We could light the cooking pit and have a proper meal.”

“We can make some okayu!” Tomoe crouched in front of the hearth. Kurara gave the girl a wide berth as she grabbed the bits of charcoal and dead wood scattered among the ashes.

Ever since the day the *Midori* crashed – the day soldiers had set Haru’s body alight – fire had made her nervous.

Once the food was prepared, the four of them sat down to eat. The rice was on the mushy side, the mushrooms were a bit burnt and they had nothing to season Kurara’s fish with, but it was good, hearty food. Kurara could feel it slide down her throat and settle in her paper stomach, warm and heavy.

“We’ll head out at first light.” Sayo swirled an old wooden spoon through her steaming rice. As the *Orihime*’s navigator, and the only person who could tell that they were not walking in circles, she was in charge of setting their pace. “We’re about a week away from Nessai Harbour. Once we reach Nessai, we can take an airship as far south as we can. As close to the Grand Stream as possible.”

“A week!” Tomoe groaned. “Everything is so slow when you have to walk!”

“Well, if *someone* could fly us out of the forest like Himura...”

Kurara glowered at the mention of Himura. “He never taught me how to fly. And even if he did, I could carry one, perhaps two, people, but all four of us is far too big a strain!”

She did not know how to describe the bone-deep exhaustion that came from over-using her ofuda; how it felt like someone sticking their hands in her head and pulling her brain in different directions. Even the giant paper ball she had created to save everyone when they had fallen from Sola-II had been difficult to hold together.

“Hear that, Sayo? If Kurara flies us out of the forest on her ofuda, we’d have to leave you behind.” Tomoe nudged her.

Swatting the girl away, Sayo muttered something under her breath.

Kurara had seen Himura’s paper creations, of course. She had once marvelled at the way his ofuda folded together to create such intricate beasts – box pleats turning into fur, curling paper becoming horns and fangs, and folds cascading into limbs. She had seen Himura fly on a paper falcon larger than a horse, but she had never seen him carry anyone else on the bird’s back.

Still, a part of her wondered if she could do more. If she were better at controlling ofuda, perhaps they could have left the ground behind by now.

“It’s not your fault, Rara. I bet the best Crafter in the world couldn’t manage flying with four people.” Haru pulled a bunch of mushrooms from their skewers and slid them into Kurara’s bowl.

Kurara startled. She had forgotten how perceptive Haru could be. She was not used to having someone so closely attuned to her moods once more, someone who could read every

furrow of her brow and twitch of her lips with pin-point accuracy. How strange it was to be so known.

Especially when she was just discovering that she did not know Haru that well at all.

“So we go to Nessai. Then from Nessai we go to the Grand Stream. And what if the *Orihime* isn’t there when we arrive?” said Tomoe.

“It’ll be there,” Sayo insisted. There was no room for doubt.

“But what if it’s not? What do we do about Suzaku?”

“Suzaku? You’re going to *hunt* Suzaku?” Haru jerked his head up so suddenly he almost stabbed himself on a mushroom skewer. “I thought your crew only hunted shikigami that were a danger to others. Suzaku’s not doing anything! It never leaves the Grand Stream.”

Staying in one place was part of the problem, thought Kurara. The phoenix shikigami that ruled over the Grand Stream was known to tear apart any ship that flew too close. People said that the beat of its wings was the source of the violent winds that created the Grand Stream. For years, it had remained hovering around the southern tip of Mikoshima: an immovable, untouchable monster that none could destroy. No one could pass through the winds and plenty of people died when their ships sailed too close to the currents.

“Oh, Suzaku’s killed plenty of people!” said Tomoe. “It’s a nuisance! Fortunately, it’s a nuisance that’s going to make us rich. We’ve never hunted anything so big, but Captain Sakurai’s got a foolproof plan. And when we’re done, we’ll be famous throughout the empire! Not to mention rich.”

Haru frowned. He did not look upset, but Kurara knew him well enough to tell when he was troubled.

“Let’s concentrate on getting to Nessai Harbour first,” said Sayo. “We’ll need to keep a low profile. I bet Princess Tsukimi has soldiers waiting for us there too.”

“Why do you say that?” Kurara’s core felt as though it had dropped into her stomach.

“Because that’s the only big city close to Sola-II, and if we don’t want to walk all the way to the Grand Stream, that’s where we need to go to get an airship back to the skies. I know it. Princess Tsukimi knows it. She’ll have someone waiting there for us, you can bet on it.”

Great. It was not as if Kurara needed more things to be anxious about.

Her skin tingled, but not the way it did when she was near a Crafter. Perhaps it was just her imagination, but Kurara could not help but feel an odd pressure on the back of her neck – the strange, hair-raising sensation of being watched.