



REBEL
SKIES

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COVER TO BE REVEALED

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Bird illustration by Amir Zand

PROLOGUE



WHEN Himura was nine years old, his home town was attacked by a giant tortoise. Whenever he told this story, he made sure to emphasize the “giant” part. Tortoises don’t seem frightening until you are leaning out of your window, staring up at the craggy face of a reptile the size of a mountain.

Trees grew from the back of its shell. Its head was covered with moss. Its claws – eating up the ground at an alarming speed – were stained with mud and the remains of animals it had trampled beneath its feet. Roads buckled. The earth shook. Those who weren’t fast enough to escape were crushed beneath its body.

Himura remembered the way his fingers gripped the

windowsill as the tortoise barrelled through the village. He remembered staring up at its wrinkled face as monstrous as the living earth. Yet beneath the layers of soil covering its shell, he could still see the yellowing folds of its body.

Paper. The tortoise was made of paper. A perfect construction of crimp folds and reverse pleats so beautiful Himura could only stare at it in wonder even as it thundered towards his house.

The tortoise's foot swung over the roof of his home, but the snap of wooden beams and the crash of the collapsing ceiling never came. He could not remember the exact order of what happened next; only the sound and the heat. A whistle screamed above him as something struck the tortoise's back, exploding into flames that licked up the creature's body faster than wildfire.

When Himura looked up again, dark ships filled the sky.

Rearing its head back in agony, the tortoise burned and—

The ground moved beneath Himura's feet, jolting him out of his memories. The airship's deck bobbed like a boat on the open sea. Turbines hummed. Propellers churned through the warm summer air. The lights of the capital city twinkled across the ground below, but the night was fading and the first strings of dawn were about to sound.

It had been a long time since Himura had thought about his home town or the *shikigami* that had been burned down by hunters. A fiery end befitting a paper beast. No normal person would cry over the death of

a *shikigami*, especially not one as masterless and mad as the tortoise had been, and yet Himura had felt something like grief as he had watched it burn.

It had been such a waste.

“Are you still here?” An annoyed voice drew Himura’s attention away from his thoughts. He turned to find the airship’s navigator clambering up onto the ship’s deck.

As she pulled herself through the hatch, Himura noticed that the rings beneath her eyes had grown darker. Both her hair and her kimono were in disarray: one a tangle of knots, the other a wrinkled mess. Sleep did not come easy when one had an entire airship to keep on course.

Himura took a piece of paper from his pocket and balanced it on the tip of his finger. “I was thinking, Sayo –” without him even touching it, the paper folded itself into an origami crane – “about a *shikigami* I met when I was younger. Even though it destroyed my home, it was such a magnificent beast I wish it had lived.”

He flicked the crane into the air and caught it, crushing it in his fist. When he opened his palm, the origami bird was in pieces. With a puff of breath, he scattered the scraps into the air. They billowed over the deck like petals of snow.

Sayo snorted. “You only say that because you’re a Crafter. Most normal folk would be glad to see a *shikigami* burn.”

With a flick of his fingers, Himura made the scraps of paper swirl around his feet.

Crafter. People had spat that word at him as though

it were a curse. Others had whispered it in terror. But when Sayo said the word “Crafter”, it was with the scorn of someone who knew Himura and was deeply unimpressed by him.

“Speaking of Crafters –” Sayo glanced from the dawning sky to the city lights glittering across the land below – “you should get going. You’ll need to arrive at the *Midori* by sunrise. According to the captain’s informant, the girl should be serving breakfast in the banquet hall. Come back with her or don’t come back at all.”

Himura turned his gaze towards the clouds. A single light glimmered against the plum-coloured sky. Though from a distance it looked like a stranded star, he knew the light was coming from the *Midori* – the empire’s first and only airborne banqueting hall.

What’s a Crafter doing serving breakfast all the way out here? he wondered. What strange twist of fate had reduced someone who could control paper at command, whose blood ran thick with the power of their ancestors, to the life of a mere *waitress*?

Himura supposed it was a good thing he was saving the girl from such ignoble work. He longed for the company, too. Travelling with Sayo and the rest of the airship’s crew was like being a wolf among sparrows. It was tiring to be surrounded by people who could never understand the buzz of power in his veins or how the rustle of paper tugged at his heart.

“Don’t make any trouble,” Sayo warned him. “Just get the girl and go. You’ll know who it is when you see her, right? You won’t bring back some random maid?”

“I always recognize my own kind.” Himura snapped his fingers and the pieces of paper fluttering around his feet swirled upwards. With a flick of his hand, they melted together into a white bracelet around his wrist.

Climbing onto the ship’s guard rail, Himura held his hands out like a tightrope walker for balance. His legs teetered between the deck and the open sky. The city lights spun below him like the lights of deep-sea fish luring prey to their doom.

It was a long way down. Swinging a leg out into the open air, he stepped forward and dropped.

At first there was nothing but the whistling wind. The summer air cut at his skin as he fell. Squinting through his watering eyes, Himura waited until he was a distance from the ship before pulling the bracelet off his wrist.

It broke into a thousand tiny squares of paper that spun below him in a furious cyclone. The pieces merged together to create a pair of wings, stretching down into tail feathers, and folding into talons.

A giant, white falcon formed beneath him. Everything from the tip of its beak to the curve of its claws was as white as snow; even its pupils were invisible against the whites of its eyes.

“Show-off!” Himura heard Sayo shout as he landed on the bird.

Himura smirked. He made no apologies for talent. Holding tight to its feathers, he repositioned himself so that he was sitting astride its neck. It was not like riding an actual *shikigami* – there was no intelligence in this paper puppet – but the thrill of it was the same.

Carried by the falcon's giant wings, he soared towards the *Midori*, where the banquet hall's red arches and wide golden gates lay open in a salute to the sky.



1



WHEN Kurara awoke to the ear-splitting sound of morning bells, her first thought was: *I would burn this whole place to the ground if it gave me ten more minutes of sleep.*

Lights pierced her eyelids as they flickered on. The bells blared against the walls of her box room. Outside, an attendant marched down the servants' hallway, bashing a gong and crying; "Up, up, everyone up! Give thanks to our great Emperor for this beautiful day!"

"Our great Emperor can go suck on a lemon!" Kurara rolled over with a groan. There were no windows in her room, but the glaring electric lights insisted that it was morning.

“Up! Up! Give thanks to our great Emperor that we may see another sunrise!” The attendant’s voice echoed through the paper-thin walls. “Give thanks to our great Emperor who protects us from the *shikigami!*”

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, the world slowly came into focus – the walls of her quarters, the balls of crumpled paper scattered across the floor, the twin bed on the other side of the room and the person still sleeping in it. A shock of coal-black hair poked out from under the sheets.

“Haru,” she called. “Haru, time to get up!”

The lump on the opposite bed shifted.

“Look at the koi pond. The water ... sparkles like gemstones...” A voice mumbled from inside the tight cocoon of sheets. Talking in his sleep again.

It sounded pleasant. Kurara wondered if he was dreaming about their home, their village. She wished that she could have dreams like that, but all of her memories before the *Midori* were hazy at best: a village in the mountains, a home by a small pond, blurred faces of villagers that left only a lingering feeling of emptiness like cold smoke after a fire.

“Nessai Harbour. Crab ... big as ... dinner plates...” The mop of black hair mumbled.

No matter how pleasant the dream, there was still work to be done. Kurara plucked a ball of crumpled paper from the floor and chucked it across the room. As it bounced off Haru’s bed, Kurara snapped her fingers and the ball froze in mid-air. A pleasant tingle ran through her body, the sensation both exhilarating and soothing.

With a flick of her wrist, the ball began to spin, folding with each rotation – crimp, petal fold and pleat – into an origami rabbit.

She was not supposed to do this. The head cook had explicitly forbidden her any activity that was not cooking or cleaning, but within the walls of her room she was safe from prying eyes. What other people didn't know wouldn't hurt them, and Haru liked her paper animals. At least, when he was awake enough to appreciate them.

At her command, the rabbit hopped across the bed and tugged at a lock of black hair poking out from the sheets.

“Sky cities...” A sleepy hand batted the rabbit to the floor.

Kurara gave an indignant squawk. She scooped the rabbit up, cradling it close before setting it on her pillow.

The attendant banged the gong. Doors along the corridor slammed open as the last sleep-addled servants scrambled down the hallway.

“Haru!” Kurara stalked over to his bed and gave him a firm shove.

At last, a pair of dark eyes peeked out from beneath the sheets.

“All right, all right... I'm up!” Haru groaned.

“Good! Come on!” Kurara tugged him to his feet. They would both make it in time if they ran.



Kurara's earliest memory was of the *Midori*. Of Haru's hand clasped tight in her own as the round hoverpod transported them past the red gates. Of a stern-faced man

who told them that this would be their new home.

The *Midori* was a place made for giants, an immobile castle of feasting rooms and private residences hovering six thousand feet in the air. Its gleaming pearl-glass windows loomed above the clouds. Birds built their nests inside moss-covered cannons while sky fish slipped between the *Midori*'s clockwork gears. Large rotor blades cut through the air like an upside-down halo, the golden rings growing smaller until they tapered to a drill-like point.

Dazzled by its appearance, Kurara had not realized that the *Midori*'s gleaming exterior hid a dark and chaotic heart.

“You’re late! This is coming out of your pay!” An attendant sneered at her as she arrived just as the breakfast gong sounded. Scrambling to her work station, she hurriedly tied the strings of her apron over her brown work dress.

Servants scurried past her, piling food onto silver trays. Another airship had just arrived and the demands for food and wine were already pouring in. These days, the docks were full of nothing but warships. The conflict in Estia had been dragging on for years – a war that would add another colony to Mikoshima’s growing empire – and the soldiers returning from abroad wanted nothing more than to wine, dine and forget about their battles beyond the sea.

Kurara hurried to her station, skidding past stacks of unwashed pots towering towards the ceiling. The fires turned the kitchens into one giant furnace. The stone

pillars that held up the cavernous ceiling seemed to sweat beneath the heat. A hundred different smells assaulted her nose: mirin, *togarashi* root, soy sauce and burnt sugar. Bells rang, tea kettles screeched, pans sizzled and plates slipped and smashed against red-tiled floors as the servants dashed back and forth with generously stacked platters of food.

“KURARA!” a voice bellowed. An empty pot sailed through the air, hitting the far wall with a bang that startled the other servants. “For God’s sake, girl, where is the plum wine? You were supposed to prepare the plum wine!”

A portly woman marched across the kitchen, brandishing a ladle in one hand and an iron poker in the other. Kurara’s eyes widened, her feet snapped together and her limbs arranged themselves into what was commonly known in the kitchens as “Position B”. (Hands behind back, head bowed, eyes to the floor: the “I’m sorry, it won’t happen again” position.)

“My apologies, Madam Ito, I forgot.”

No one had told her anything about plum wine, but there was no point in telling Madam Ito that.

“*I forgot?!*” Madam Ito squawked in a high-pitched imitation of Kurara’s voice. Her face was red, both from anger and from the heat of the fires. Her black hair, streaked with strands of silver, was pulled into a frizzy bun that wobbled at the top of her head every time she moved. As the head cook, she ruled over the kitchens of the *Midori* with an iron fist and an arsenal of iron pots, which she would often throw at whoever earned her displeasure.

Maids jumped in her presence, serving girls fled from her scowls. Even the attendants would tread carefully when in the kitchens, knowing that this was Madam Ito's domain.

Kurara averted her gaze, letting her eyes rest on the pot the cook had thrown as it rolled to a stop just inches from her foot. Its curved reflection revealed a suitably penitent girl, round-faced and pale, with a nose too round and ears too big, and hair that had been cut every month using the very same pot that now lay in front of her.

"Kurara!"

"Yes, Madam Ito, I'm listening!" She had not been listening.

The head cook's eyes narrowed. The veins on the side of her neck bulged.

"Girl." Her voice trembled with menace. "Do you know who is in charge of these kitchens?"

Kurara said nothing. The price for insolence was fifteen lashes, and the head attendant had recently bought a new whip. She had seen him just yesterday morning with it tucked under one arm, his hand curling around its handle a little too affectionately.

"You, Madam Ito."

"And who is it that provides for you, clothes and feeds you, while other, much more deserving little girls waste away out in the fields or the levystone mines?"

"You, Madam Ito."

"And who was the airheaded fool who forgot to fetch the plum wine today?"

"You, Madam – I – I mean—"

Madam Ito's chest heaved like a ship's bellows.

“I’ll go and fetch it right away!” Kurara bowed and hurried out of the kitchens before Madam Ito could throw another pot at her. As she made her way to the door, one of the maids thrust a large, silver tray in front of her.

“Girl, if you’re going upstairs, deliver this to the Wisteria Room.”

“But the plum wine!” she cried.

The woman shoved the tray into her arms. “Madam Ito is already in a bad mood. What do you think she’ll do if this tray doesn’t get to the room in time?”

“Clean out the cannons and shoot us into the sunrise,” Kurara sighed. It was one of the cook’s favourite threats.

“Then go.”

Kurara knew a lost battle when she saw one. Taking the tray with her, she headed out of the kitchens, pausing only to check her crumpled list of chores for the day. Someone had scribbled all over it, making it impossible to read. With a sigh, she stuffed the note back into her pocket.

One day, I’m going to get out of here. One day, I’m going to leave all this behind.

She just had to survive until then.



2



WHENEVER Kurara climbed out of the kitchens, she had to pause and wait for her eyes to adjust to the sudden presence of sunlight. The reception hall blinked into focus. A semicircle of golden lattice windows gave a perfect, one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the blue sky. A domed, glass ceiling extended far above her head. When Kurara had been younger, it had felt like the sky itself, beautiful and distant. Now, it merely loomed like everything else inside the *Midori*, making her feel small.

Shadows of clouds floated across the tiled floor. Real flowers bordered the foot of the marble walls; vibrant red and gold orchids, royal-purple chrysanthemums and

pink lotuses that bloomed as large as a person's head. Mechanical parrots made of steel and stained glass beat their wings among the leafy plants, flying off whenever Kurara approached. There was a coldness to the *Midori's* splendour. It was a beautiful birdcage.

"Rara!" A voice shouted from the top of the curling, grand staircase. Kurara looked up to see Haru making his way down the carpeted steps.

"Haru!" She rushed to meet him. "Did you make it to the banquet hall on time?"

"Fifteen minutes late!" The boy thumped his chest.

Such confidence could only come from the very brave or the very stupid, but Haru had a long history of getting away with things no one else could. Gap-toothed, crooked-nosed and with a pair of dark, mischievous eyes, he was awkward and coltish in a way that made others want to indulge him. Letting one's guard down around Haru when he had some half-baked plan in his head was the perfect way to end up sneaking into the food stores at midnight or releasing sky fish into the *Midori's* pipes – activities which always ended with a beating.

From the look in Haru's eyes, he was in the mood for mischief, but Kurara knew him far too well to take part in his schemes.

"Well, since you're here, do me a favour. I need to deliver this to the Wisteria Room, and you –" she snatched the tray out of range as he tried to swipe a sweet roll – "are going to help me get there in time."

Servants were not supposed to use the elevators. The stern-faced attendants who operated them would shoo

her away the moment they caught even a glimpse of Kurara's brown work dress, but Haru was different. The other servants often said that he could talk a chicken into buying its own eggs. Kurara had to stamp down on a familiar flutter of jealousy when the attendants opened the elevator doors for him without complaint.

Inside the elevator, Haru pressed the button for the fifteenth floor and allowed the doors to slide closed. Kurara ran a hand along the gold-plated interior as the steel cables hauled them upwards. The metal box was so shiny she could see her own reflection.

"So," she said, finally allowing Haru to take a sweet roll, "why aren't you in the banquet halls?"

When Haru grinned, his mouth appeared too big for his face. The black gap where his right incisor was missing tugged at her attention.

"I was coming to find you! One of the ships just came back from the Grand Stream! The Grand Stream, Rara! And the soldiers have the best stories about it! I didn't want you to miss out on the excitement."

Kurara turned her full attention to him. The world beyond the *Midori* only reached them through the stories the soldiers brought to the banquet halls; tales filtered and distilled into hours of idle, excited gossip.

"Did they see any *shikigami*?"

"I bet they did!" Haru grinned. Only he could be excited by the possibility of running into one of those paper monsters. "One day, let's visit the Grand Stream, too!"

Kurara scrunched up her face. "How about we go somewhere less dangerous?"

The Grand Stream was not just known for being full of with *shikigami*, but for its winds that would tear ships asunder. It was not a place any sane person should visit.

Haru grinned. "One day, we'll go everywhere!"

One day, yes one day. That's what they always told one another. One day they'd leave this cage and travel the world. To the Aogaki waterfalls, to snow-capped mountain ridges and green valleys carpeted with flowers. To the ocean where people said the water stretched all the way to the sun. To the very edge of the world.

"One day, we'll go home." The thought crossed Kurara's mind before she could stamp it out. Maybe if they travelled enough, they would find it again. Perhaps then she would finally remember something more than the *Midori*.

Haru's expression turned grim. He only ever frowned like that when they talked about the past. "I told you. That place is in ruins."

"That's all you ever tell me," muttered Kurara.

Whenever she brought up the past, he always skirted around the topic with an annoying look of pity in his eyes. It irritated her. Haru had memories of their childhood and their home, their old neighbours and friends, and she had nothing.

"They found you and Haru," Madam Ito had told her once, *"lying together in an empty barn. There was a great big shaft of wood sticking through his chest. Almost went straight through his heart, it did. He was lucky to survive. Made of stronger stuff than most people. It was almost unnatural."*

Even the head cook knew more about her past than she did! Kurara did not remember the incident. Trauma,

Madam Ito called it. The result of whatever had led her to being found in an empty barn with a shaft of wood impaling Haru's chest. Though Haru always denied it, she had never been able to shake the feeling that his injuries had been her fault in some way. Guilt haunted her as much as her missing memories.

"I tell you about the past! About the rice paddies and the lotuses that used to grow by the village ponds."

"You don't tell me about anything that matters!" she snapped. Inside the elevator, her own anger echoed in her ears.

Haru held a hand over his chest. Over the place the shaft of wood had impaled him. He always knew what she was thinking. "I don't like talking about things that hurt."

They stood in awkward silence as the elevator continued upwards.

"We could go to the sky cities," said Haru, after a beat. Though he did not say so, Kurara recognized it for the peace offering that it was.

"What about Nessai Harbour?" Kurara softened. She did not want to fight. "You were talking about it in your sleep. Something about crabs."

She pulled the crumpled note from her apron pocket and flicked it at Haru. It bounced off his nose and froze in mid-air. A pleasant tingle of electricity shivered through her body as the note blossomed into a paper crab with brittle, twitching legs.

"Madam Ito said that you weren't allowed to do that outside," said Haru.

Kurara remembered when he used to delight in her

creations, requesting a new animal each night to dance between their beds. She remembered the swell of pride in her chest each time her paper creations made him laugh. That had been before she had got careless. Before Madam Ito had caught them. Now he only wanted her to do these things in their room.

A prison within a prison, she thought bitterly. Although she knew it was Haru's way of keeping her out of trouble, sometimes she could not help the tiny spark of resentment. It was easy for Haru to say. He didn't have to fold himself up like origami, smaller and smaller, for someone else's sake.

"We're in a moving metal box. Who's going to see?"

Haru remained unconvinced. Bouncing from one foot to the other, he lowered his voice and hissed, "Remember what Madam Ito said about, you know, people..."

"People?" said Kurara.

"Crafters." Haru gestured to the paper crab floating between them. "People who can control paper."

Kurara remembered the beating more than Madam Ito's furious shouts. The bruises had remained for weeks. Between the pain, she vaguely remembered something about being sold off to the imperial family.

"That's where Crafters go. To serve the Emperor and his children. If you get caught, you'll end up as one of Prince Taketori's war dogs. Or as Princess Tsukimi's plaything."

The way Madam Ito had sneered made her think that the princess was the worst of the lot, but Kurara was not afraid. Princess Tsukimi and the rest of the imperial family were a distant threat, the kind of horror story that

mothers told their children to make them behave. She was a Crafter. The urge to take control of paper, to move and reshape it, filtered through her veins. Like wanting to run after a long day of sitting still, or the itch to take a shower after spending hours cleaning grease out of the kitchen pipes, the desire built up and built up until she would explode if she did not let it out.

“Seriously, Rara,” said Haru. “What if – what if they separate us?”

Never. Before Kurara could open her mouth, the elevator jolted to a stop. The Wisteria Room was on the fifteenth floor, but they had stopped on the tenth. She glanced at Haru. Had the stupid thing broken? It was early morning and the feasts were well underway. There should not be anyone outside the banquet halls to stop them.

“What’s—?” she began, but before she could finish her sentence, the doors slid open.

Kurara snatched the crab out of the air and stuffed it into her apron pocket.

A man stood on the other side of the doors. He was young, teetering on the edge of adulthood, though something in his high cheekbones and thick, proud nose made him seem more adult than child. A white bracelet in the shape of a snake wound around his wrist. His eyes were as grey as thunderclouds.

Something about him made Kurara’s nerves skitter on a knife’s edge. His presence was like a thunderstorm striking her spine. The man stepped into the elevator, forcing her to shuffle aside to make room. The doors

closed behind him.

Kurara and Haru shared a nervous look.

“Well, this is interesting.”

The man moved forward so suddenly Kurara had to press herself against the elevator wall so that he didn't step on her toes.

He wore an ominous smile.

“I've been looking for you, Crafter girl.”

