

The Epoch Engine

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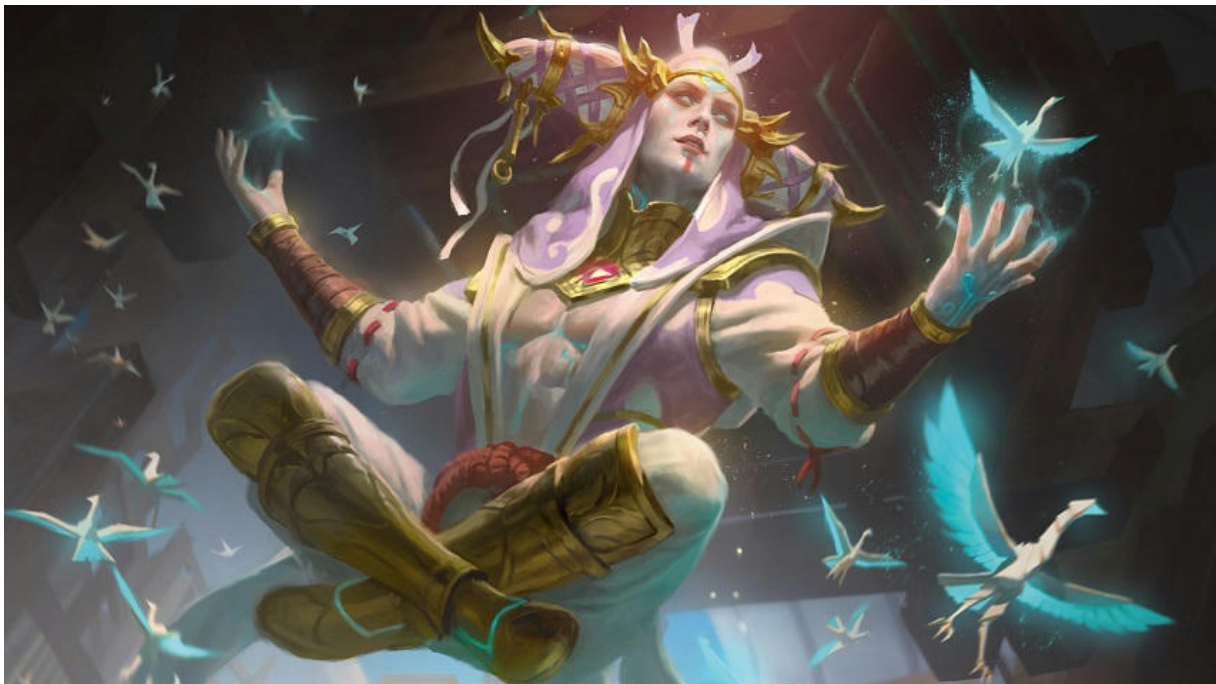
From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

As Katsumasa led her through a maze of passages, Kotori's skin crackled with exhilaration. He'd brought her to his secret laboratories many times before, but not to these innermost sections. Here, corridors shifted into shadows and doors dissolved behind occlusion veils. Kotori only glimpsed fragments: a stretched body covered in glowing enchantments; a large machine with a needle as long as an arm; a somber, hairy face behind cage bars.

Kotori followed Katsumasa through yet another veil and into a domed chamber. Soft blue lights shone from the walls. In the middle of the room, there was a raised platform with nothing on it.

"You know I trust you the most out of all my protégés, Kotori," Katsumasa said, folding his hands behind his back. "Your determination and self-sacrifice over the past seven years have proved you exceptional, even among the most talented of my inner circle."

Kotori glanced up at her teacher. A telepathic implant gleamed bright across his brow. His long ears draped shadows over his sharp jaw and broad shoulders. Although age was beginning to carve lines into his skin, he still looked indomitable. Across Otawara, his name was spoken with hushed reverence: Katsumasa, the Animator, puppeteer of the mechs, engineer of the future.



Katsumasa, the Animator | Art by: Heonhwa Choe

"You flatter me, teacher. Hideji is much quicker in the air."

"Hideji. He lacks composure, so he'll never be great." Katsumasa's mouth quirked, and then his expression darkened. "In any case, the pilot's speed matters little when the blasted mechs can't keep up."

She'd heard this part before. Katsumasa had been trying to improve the technology for years, to shrink the gap between thought and action—but synchronization between mortal and machine had proved difficult to perfect. She'd seen her teacher, in a fit of frustration, burn a three-year experiment to ashes.

"This is a classified project, obviously"—he gestured at the veils—"so you are sworn to absolute secrecy. I can't have another department catching wind of this experiment. Now, I know, as Futurists, progress is our driving force. But not all scientists are as principled as you and me, Kotori. They'd claim all credit for themselves and leave us not even a crumb. And if the Imperials came sniffing—well, that'd be even worse. You know those self-righteous pedants always misunderstand what we're trying to achieve."

Kotori nodded. Her skin prickled beneath the thick fabric of her suit. Katsumasa had brought her into clandestine projects before, but the strange thrill in her teacher's voice made this time seem different.

Katsumasa's implant flashed. Something shifted—another occlusion veil dissolving. The platform was no longer empty. An enormous mech with a geometric silver torso balanced atop two powerful legs. Massive arms ended in hands like grappling hooks. A pair of shoulder blades gleamed with razor-edged wings.

"Beautiful," she breathed.

"My prototype for a new generation of mech. I call this prime iteration the Epoch Engine—and I want *you* to be its pilot."

With a low hum, the mech extended a small platform to the floor. When Kotori stepped onto it, clamps affixed to her shoes. She was pulled up and up, air whistling around her ears, and deposited in the pilot's seat. The transparent hatch sealed around her soundlessly.

Suddenly, Katsumasa was just a tiny figure in her viewport, a pale spot against a dark background. She could squash him under one giant metal foot.

Kotori leaned back. A band wrapped around her head, cool and gelatinous against her skin. She murmured her routine checks—emergency release, messaging portals, system enchantments, energy status, safety belts. The configuration was a little different, but the controls were essentially the same.

The interface activated.

She was no longer bolted into a cramped, dim cockpit. She was suspended in space. Her body was large, much larger than she'd ever known it to be. Her torso was an impenetrable wall. Her arms coiled at her sides, ready to punch through a concrete wall at the subtlest command. Her steel legs hummed with stored energy.

All her senses roared. She could hear two scientists in the next building whispering about a leaked research paper. She could feel the vibrations of a rodent scurrying through the walls. She could smell something faintly acrid and chemical like ammonia, oozing from Katsumasa's pores.

And her vision—she'd never experienced anything like this. The occlusion veil around the chamber had become a transparent shroud. The walls were tracing paper. She thought, if she tried hard enough, she might even see through her teacher's skin, into his very bones.

Kotori lifted her right arm. A ridged fist thrust toward the domed ceiling. She wriggled her toes, and they responded instantly, clanging against the ground. She had embodied the previous mechs, but it had always been clunky, fraught with communication errors and lag time and gut-wringing nausea. How had Katsumasa achieved such perfect synchronization?

Kotori sank deeper, relinquishing her original form entirely. There was something flickering beneath—something dark, forceful, compelling.

She heard Katsumasa calling from a long way away: “Careful—terminate if something’s not right—”

An onslaught of emotions slammed into her: wave after wave of elation, curiosity, nervousness, rage, terror, radiating out from a single point like a pulsar.

She was tumbling head over heels.

Shorikai.



Shorikai, Genesis Engine | Art by: Wisnu Tan

The voice wasn’t hers. She hadn’t even been sure it was a voice—more like a finger, pressing a name into her mind, gentle and cold.

She disconnected.

Came out gasping, in a frigid sweat.

Seat. Viewport. Flesh-and-blood body. Katsumasa, gesturing at her from below. She yanked off the band.

A few minutes later, she descended from the mech. Only a few beads of sweat betrayed her broken composure. Katsumasa’s eyes were gleaming.

“Was it not astounding? Seamless control, near-zero reaction times, powerful energy streams—”

“Something felt different, teacher—”

“By the stony gray hell, sometimes I wish I were a pilot “

“Teacher, what’s the new technology in the machine?”

“A stroke of my own genius, that’s what. Oh, Kotori, I think you’ve taken to the Epoch Engine like a fish to water. Together, you will be the pinnacle of my life’s research. I want you in training every day. Practice as much as you breathe. I expect you to be combat ready by the end of the month, understand?”

Daybreak was Kotori's favorite time to visit downtown Otawara. She'd chosen a coffee house in the upper levels of the floating city. From her booth next to the window, she had a breathtaking view of spires and curved buildings rising from a sea of mist, ablaze with rosy light. A cool breeze drifted through the open roof, bringing the scent of rain.

Kotori sipped her bitter brew and surreptitiously examined the other patrons. The three middle-aged moonfolk in lavish, gold-foil robes, sharing coffee and biscuits, didn't look too suspicious. But the black-clad figure sitting in the opposite corner could very well be a Veilshaper—professional spies whose job it was to make sure Futurist secrets never fell into the wrong hands.

She'd taken the long way from her apartment, walking along the canal in the half-dark to a different transport station from her usual, detouring through the central concourse to lose any trackers in the milling crowds. Ever since she'd started working with the Epoch Engine, she'd noticed more surveillance around her. Someone was keeping tabs. She wondered if it was a rival scientist, or Katsumasa himself.

She told herself not to wonder too much.

A slender figure slid into the booth. Kotori startled, not recognizing her old friend at first—until Arima pulled back their hood and deactivated their illusory mask. The false features slid aside to reveal vivid black eyes, brown skin, a wry smile.

"Sorry to be overdramatic," said Arima. "A few more death threats than usual this week, so I'm taking sensible precautions."

"Death threats? By Kyodai's faces, what's going on?"

"I've never mentioned them before? Oh, I've been getting *delightful* fan mail since my promotion three years ago. You know the type. Incompetent researchers without enough talent and too much time between their ears, unhappy about someone born outside Otawara rising through Futurist ranks." Arima flipped through the enchanted menu and selected a sweet spiced tea and two platters of fried dumplings. "Anyway, I'm so happy to see you again, little sister. You're looking more furtive than usual. What's going on?"

Kotori wrapped her palms around her coffee cup, warmed by Arima's familiarity. The two of them had met in school, when twelve-year-old Arima had been assigned as buddy to six-year-old Kotori. Now, Arima was one of the most talked-about young scientists in Otawara, and Kotori was a rising star amongst the pilots. They didn't meet as often, but they still regarded each other as family.

"Katsumasa's brought me into a new project," Kotori said. "His designs are remarkable. I wish I could tell you about it, but it's still under wraps."

Arima pressed their lips together. "What's he asking of you?"

"Oh, same as before. He needs a good pilot to learn the machine. I've been training long hours. It's complex, more difficult to understand than the old generation of mechs."

The waiter arrived with tea and platters of fragrant, crispy parcels of mushroom and chives.

"Why are you still working with him, Kotori?"

"What do you mean?"

Arima snagged a dumpling and waved it in the air. "You know what I mean. You know I've never idolized the excellent Animator the way you do."

"I don't *idolize* him. He's guided me since I was thirteen, Arima. He's been generous with his knowledge and time. I owe him a lot. Plus, no matter what you say, he's a talented scientist. There's much I can gain from staying at his side."

"But he's so shady, Kotori. Hey, aren't you eating? I got a serving for you, too—dig in. You said you've got a long day ahead of you. I just don't like the way he works, okay? Secrets within secrets, like an origami box of occlusion veils. Some people talk, you know. Some people I work with. They say his research is unnatural."

"Imperial folk would shut down all of Otawara if they knew what was really going on in most of our labs—"

"These aren't Imperials talking. They're Futurists, like us."

Kotori shoved a dumpling into her mouth and chewed angrily, hot juice scalding her tongue. "As far as I'm aware, Katsumasa hasn't done anything unethical. And Arima—you've known me long enough. If anyone asks me to do anything dubious, I'd walk away."

"It's not that I don't trust you, little sister." Arima frowned, leaning their elbows on the table. "It's just, well when someone destroys a tree slowly, whittling away an inch every day, you might not notice anything—until you can see right through the forest."

Kotori groaned and covered her face with her hands. "It's too early for Jukai metaphors, my friend."

"All right, all right." Arima chuckled. "Just keep your guard up, okay? Don't do anything I wouldn't do, how 'bout that?"

Sleep had been more difficult to come by, lately. Sometimes, Kotori would lie in bed for hours, replaying conversations with Katsumasa, running through her practice sessions with the Epoch Engine, and tracking back through her day's movements, just in case she'd missed anything.

Arima had left Otawara for a conference in Eiganjo, and Kotori wished she could escape, too, just for a few days. The mists of the floating city seemed to be drifting into her mind, clotting her thoughts.

On the worst nights, she'd leave her apartment and stride in the brisk air, looking at the slumbering buildings and the pinpoint stars. The training hall was four blocks away, accessed via a concealed alleyway and an entrance protected by security wards.

The mech had begun to respond to her. As she approached across the shadowy arena, it would shed its veil and hum into alertness. When she put her hand on its cold leg and whispered, "Hello, Shorikai," it would open its hatch and lower the platform to fold her into the kernel of its mind.

Kotori adjusted her old routines for Shorikai. She murmured her pre-combat checks—emergency release, portals, enchantments, energy, belts—tapping each panel in turn as a marker of their readiness. She twisted her braided bracelet, a childhood gift from her grandfather, three times on her left wrist. She muttered a quick prayer under her breath: guide us, kami of courage.

She wasn't superstitious, but the routines made her feel like the plane was in order. And to be the best pilot, everything had to feel right in your bones.



Kotori, Pilot Prodigy | Art by: Aaron J. Riley

When she wrapped the band around her head and sank into Shorikai's body, the clouds were swept from her mind. The exhaustion. The stretched sensation that came with years of striving. The fear of losing Katsumasa's respect, of coming in second-best. Of failing. There was only the training session, the timeless night, and herself, quietly expanding into the mech's smooth joints and spacious shell.

They charged and swung across the training hall. They moved like an arrow, calm and precise, through a still-life of granular detail. Sometimes, the gap between thought and action was so miniscule, Kotori couldn't perceive it at all. Sometimes, the thoughts themselves vanished—she was only movement, only herself-in-Shorikai. The feeling terrified and exhilarated her. What would it be like to give up control entirely—to hand the reins to the machine and recede into the background?

Kotori wasn't sure if it was her sharpened perceptions, or a strange new gift of Shorikai's. She'd trained in this hall for years. She knew its length and breadth intimately, all the bumps in the floor. But Shorikai could do something to the dimensions—stretch and bend them, to accommodate for a higher leap, or an arcing skid. Once, they misjudged a turn and braced to slam into a padded post, but the impact never came. Another time, they felt the drizzle of rain, just for a few seconds, as though the ceiling had momentarily ceased to exist.

Kotori probed deeper into the mech's layers, wondering if she might hear more than a name. Things came whirling into her—characters streaming across her vision; an impression of her body being dismantled and reassembled; Towashi's neon skyline, dwarfed by the branching glory of Boseiju; a bittersweet feeling of mingled confusion and curiosity.

"Shorikai?" she ventured. "Are you there?"

But there was no further language—nothing since that single word she'd taken as its name.

In these drawn-out spaces, where the world was both chaotic and crystal clear, things from her own past also dissolved into her. Katsumasa, walking with her to an awards ceremony in central Otawara: "Kotori, I suggest you stop associating with that childhood friend of yours, Arima. Trust me—in my long experience, outsiders inevitably cause trouble within the enclaves of the Futurists."

Her father, leading her, a shivering child, to the edge of a frigid, ice-topped canal: “You must jump in, Kotori. This is how you learn to swim.”

And then a vision not at all from her past. Katsumasa, leaning over a table in his laboratory, origami drones spiraling around his body. Her own hand, rising behind him, extending a knife to the side of his neck. Sliding the blade soundlessly into his jugular. A glittering spray of blood, like confetti.

Kotori disconnected, plunging back into the cockpit chair, gasping and shaky. She’d given Shorikai too much control. From now on, she’d better keep a tighter grip on the synchronization.

The Veilshaper pilot guided the cloaked aircraft over the shimmering city of Towashi. Kotori-in-Shorikai stood in the bay, enormous feet magnetically locked to the floor. Five more Veilshapers and an Imperial samurai, dwarfed by the mech, sat along the bay wall. The kitsune samurai, with his pointed ears and gold, fan-shaped shoulder guards, stood out among the Veilshapers, who wore dark, layered robes and illusory masks.

Kotori gazed down at the urban landscape through Shorikai’s eyes. The city seemed to have grown since she last visited. Fluted, tiered towers and elevated train tracks spread and multiplied like a holographic fungus.

The aircraft dropped toward the tangled streets at the roots of mighty Boseiju. On Kotori’s enhanced vision, their destination lit up: a nondescript round building, almost invisible among the glowing towers and bridges.

“Unusual to find Reckoners under the Boseiju tree,” Kotori murmured under her breath. She felt a spike of echoed curiosity from Shorikai. In Towashi, the underground gangs of the Reckoners usually kept to the undercity.

Several days ago, Katsumasa had deemed her combat ready and assigned her to a routine raid on a Reckoner safehouse. “Nothing you haven’t done before,” he’d said. “Imperial-led mission—their samurai will brief you. They want to keep things discreet. You’ll be the team’s power support.”

The craft landed abruptly on a pitched surface. The others jumped out at once, not waiting for the mech. The Veilshapers drew weapons from their belts—longswords that unfolded from the hilt, thumb-sized diamonds that expanded into paper-thin throwing stars—and activated their cloaking robes. The kitsune samurai seemed unconcerned about attention. Moonlight glinted off his helmet as he strode out.

Kotori never let other people’s rushing distract her. They needed her more than she needed them. She activated Shorikai’s occlusion veil, repeated her checks, twisted her bracelet on her left wrist, and stepped out onto the sloped roof.

Boseiju District was difficult for a mech to navigate, tangled with tree roots and hanging bridges. There were a few locals walking in the streets below, oblivious to unfolding events. Kotori chose their steps carefully, watching the data coming into her accessory viewscreens. Their weight placed wrongly could collapse the structure.

“This will do,” said the Imperial samurai, nodding at the mech.

Kotori stamped Shorikai’s right foot down, punching a precise hole through the roof. Wooden beams and clay tiles shattered in a storm of dust. She leapt down first, plunged through darkness, landed on stone floor. The others zipped down after her.

Kotori glanced around, using Shorikai's enhanced vision to scan the building systematically. Something didn't feel right. No posted watch, no vigilant henchmen, no sentry technology. A humble building—one large central area, two adjoining smaller rooms.

One of the smaller rooms held food supplies and a couple of crates of disruptors. The other contained the heat signatures of seven human-sized life forms, clustered close together.

"This place isn't Reckoner," muttered one of the Veilshapers, and Kotori realized that she wasn't the only one in the team who'd been misdirected.

"You gave us a fake brief?" another snapped at the samurai.

"I gave you the brief for the job," the samurai retorted.

One of the heat signatures was moving rapidly toward the door—

"Seven of them," Kotori interrupted. "Disruptors. From there!"

The door slammed open. Disruptor waves reverberated through the air, shutting down Shorikai's automated systems and disabling the Veilshapers' cloaks and masks. A stout, gray-haired woman with wooden armor and a flexible sword barreled through the door. Pebbles, twigs, and strange blue lights wheeled around her body as if caught in a gravitational field.

A member of the Order of Jukai, the fringe group of nature worshippers and anti-technologists. They operated from small, decentralized units scattered in hideout cells across Kamigawa—and Kotori's team had kicked a hole right in the middle of one.

Six more wooden-armored acolytes burst through the door. They were a motley bunch—two older men with spears, two skinny youths brandishing knives, and two hissing orochi, holding themselves tall on their serpentine tails. None of them were kami-bonded like the older woman.

Kotori's head whirled. She seized manual control of Shorikai's functions while the mech performed a rapid reboot. Katsumasa had not sent her to disarm a criminal gang, but to take out some Jukai monks. Sure, she had no love for the Order—it was well known that they despised Saiba Futurists as amoral, and their *modus operandi* often involved debilitating strikes on Futurist research centers—but this preemptive assassination felt wrong.

Systems reactivated. As the Veilshapers and samurai leapt into the fray, Kotori sent an urgent message up to Otawara:

Katsumasa—Jukai not Reckoner? Please clarify.

She knew her teacher's implant would shoot the message straight into his brain. She waited ten seconds, then twenty.

No reply.

One of the youths came toward her, clutching a disruptor in his fist. Kotori-Shorikai swiped it away, cutting off the youth's hand in the process. The kid dropped to his knees, howling. Kotori-Shorikai tapped his head with a finger to knock him unconscious.

An orochi sneaked up from behind, attempting to throw a grappling hook into the mech's leg. Kotori-Shorikai sidestepped and swung their other leg in a precise roundhouse kick. The orochi hit the wall, and then the floor, and didn't move.

Kotori tried again.

Teacher! I'm confused. Please reply.

All of the Jukai were down except for the stout woman with the floating symbols of a bonded kami. The Imperial samurai had taken a spear blade in his side but did not seem critically injured. The Veilshapers were unhurt.

The last Jukai gazed up at the mech, narrowed eyes flashing with disgust and rage.

“You should not exist,” the woman hissed. “Your creator has twisted nature into monstrosity.”

The Jukai channeled a blast of icy water at the mech. Kotori shielded and returned a flurry of darts. To her surprise, the woman deflected most of them with another flick of water; the few that she missed landed in her wooden armor.

Kotori had heard that kami-bonded Jukai carried a focus on their person to channel the powers of their spirit partners. She noticed a smooth gray stone on a string around the woman’s neck. Just as a blast of sharpened pebbles flew at her, Kotori-Shorikai sidestepped and swung for the necklace.

Steel fingers sliced into the Jukai’s neck as they closed around the stone.

The woman crumpled to the floor, gurgling blood.

A serpentine spirit detached from the Jukai’s body. Pebbles and twigs and skeins of water coiled around it in a whirlwind. A river or creek kami, perhaps. Its long shape curled over the fallen woman.

Kotori-Shorikai crushed the stone in one hand. The kami, however, was unaffected. Perhaps the focus was just a link between kami and mortal—unnecessary now that the mortal was gone.

One of the Veilshapers ambled forward, unfolding his longsword. The kami was still hunched over the woman’s body. It had a spine of small stones, a mane of glittering droplets, and a pale blue aura. It left wet marks on the dusty stone floor. Though it was a spirit, it was material enough.

A sudden fear churned through Kotori. Was it coming from her, from Shorikai, or somewhere else?

The Veilshaper hovered over the river kami and drew back his weapon to strike.

The kami twitched aside, but not fast enough. The blade tore through the kami’s tail, releasing a spray of mist.

The Veilshaper drew back again.

The terror grew sharper, burning down Kotori’s throat and into her gut. Shorikai lifted an arm and fired.

The Veilshaper slumped to the floor, a steel dart protruding from a weak spot in his armor, just under his chin.

Kotori could hear the other Veilshapers shouting, but their voices were coming from a long way away. She hadn’t commanded Shorikai to fire. She hadn’t. She tried to lower the arm, but the mech wasn’t responding. Everything seemed suddenly distilled, sharp as glass and in slow motion. The wounded kami, writhing over the dead Jukai. The eyes of the Veilshapers, boring into her. Katsumasa’s lies. Katsumasa’s silence. And Shorikai—something about Shorikai that she’d suspected for weeks, but to admit the possibility to herself had been far too horrifying.

There was a kami inside the mech.

“Kotori.”

The voice was unfamiliar, but the way the mouth shaped her name made her jump. One of the Veilshapers stepped into Kotori-Shorikai’s field of view.

“Teacher?”

The Veilshaper inclined her head. Her expression was disconcertingly impassive, her eyes blank. The implant in her brow flickered. Katsumasa must be controlling her remotely.



Universal Surveillance | Art by: Aaron J. Riley

“Kotori, I believe I need not remind you. It is, after all, repeatedly drilled into all pilots during their earliest years of training. If a mech’s obedience systems are malfunctioning, it is a pilot’s duty to override the synchronization and seize control.”

Kotori closed her eyes briefly. The synchronization was already unstable. Spikes of adrenaline and cortisol were affecting the connection, snapping her out of Shorikai’s body and back into her own sore, soft, tiny form—just for brief blips, before hurling her back into the mech. Bile rose into her throat. She fought the urge to retch.

“Kotori. You’ve always been rational. Don’t compromise the mission. I couldn’t *bear* to see the consequences on your career if you do. I’ll explain everything afterwards, all right? You know I wouldn’t make you do anything wrong.”

Kotori opened her eyes. She could see the possessed Veilshaper with her real eyes and with Shorikai’s eyes, twice over, layered on top of each other like disjointed ghosts. She could override Shorikai, but who knew what damage that might do to the kami trapped within?

But the alternative was to relinquish control to someone else.

Unexpectedly, her fear receded into a quiet calm. The synchronization was stable again. She reached into Shorikai, into the shadowy spaces that had become as familiar to her over the past few weeks as her own body, into the mech’s core—

And she withdrew, letting go.

When Shorikai took control, he revealed his true form to her, just for a second. She saw a seeping, dark aura. She saw a waterfall of tangled black hair; a body built of many wordless and uneasy things; a multitude of hollowed, eyeless faces.

Shorikai's form was pinioned by metal spikes. Glowing threads bound kami to machine in a thousand different ways, more complicated than an intricate embroidery. These were knots only Katsumasa could unpick.

The sight filled her with horror and sadness, but also with understanding.

"Kotori!" screamed Katsumasa, but the sound was soft, almost pitiful, fading into inconsequence. The scream trailed away as Shorikai slammed the Veilshaper into the wall. The implant went dead.

Kotori could hardly understand it. With control surrendered to the kami, the mech was far more powerful than it had been under her guidance. Shorikai's strength was doubled. The building no longer felt substantial, or even relevant. After all, if they really needed, Shorikai could warp the walls and bend the floors.

The remaining Veilshapers rushed at the mech, hollering about betrayal. One of them was signaling for backup. Shorikai disposed of her first. It took only a few more seconds to silence the others, including the injured samurai, who begged half-heartedly for mercy.

Spots of light burned in Kotori's vision. She felt disconnected from her body, and then grotesquely compressed into the smallest part—her prickling fingertips, her congealing gut. When her senses gradually returned, the scene flooded her mouth with bitterness.

The round room had been utterly transformed. Splintered wood, broken tiles, used throwing stars, misplaced limbs, and streaks of blood were scattered across the floor. Mangled and fallen, the members of the Order of Jukai and of her team were difficult to tell apart. The blue kami still curled over the body of its former partner.

The walls were strangely bent and twisted by Shorikai's abilities—the full extent of which even Katsumasa probably didn't understand. In one spot, the wall had warped so much that it flickered and buzzed with unearthly energy. Specks of dust and blood wafted toward the distortion.

The river kami finally unfurled and crawled toward the flickering zone in the wall. It paused and gazed back at the mech. Kotori wondered if some wordless communication was passing between it and Shorikai. Then, the river kami floated into the distorted wall and disappeared.

Kotori guessed that the distortion was a warped merge: an unstable melding between utsushiyo, the material realm, and kakuriyo, the spirit realm. If left uncontained, the instability could spread and corrupt the integrity of both realms.

"Shorikai," Kotori breathed. "What have you done?"

To her astonishment, she received a reply. *Not my doing, but perhaps an aftereffect.*

The kami's voice was heavy and sinuous. She remembered the things she'd seen: the shadowy aura, the gaping faces, the disquieting body. Only a moment ago, she'd felt an unspeakable terror. But now, that fear was subdued, dampened by sadness. Shorikai had settled back into the machine's framework. The synchronization was once more balanced, responsive. Flawless.

Katsumasa was still up above in Otawara. He would find out about the mission's outcome one way or another. If she surrendered now, perhaps the consequences to her career would not be so dire. Perhaps she could salvage her reputation with some excuse about an erratic connection.

But if she went back, her mech would surely be dismantled, and Shorikai would either be destroyed or imprisoned within another experiment. For some reason, Arima's face floated into her mind. Kotori felt awash with confusion and guilt. She had killed so many. She had almost watched a kami die.

"What now, Shorikai?"

Something powerful churned within the mech, like a tide crashing over rocks. *Take our own path.*

Kotori looked around the collapsing room. A cool breeze was drifting in through the torn paper windows. With their enhanced vision, she could see through the walls to the surrounding buildings, glowing like lanterns caught up in Boseiju's giant gnarled branches.



Jungle Hollow | Art by: Lucas Staniec

She knew that fleeing wasn't a permanent solution. They could run, but at the end of the running, there would be a fight. A reckoning, with consequences. But at least they'd have time to think about everything that had happened, hunt for more information, and decide what to do next.

The union of their wills—mortal and kami—felt as effortless as water flowing downstream.

"I agree," she replied.

Clouds of blood and dust whirled around Kotori-Shorikai as they stepped past the warped merge. The wooden door crumbled at their touch. Outside, the first pale streaks of dawn were edging through Boseiju's massive canopy, but perpetual shadows lay beneath the great tree-roots.

Activating their occlusion veil, Kotori-Shorikai left the Jukai hideout and walked into the darkness.