

Maro and the Crows

Fiction

Kilmeny MacMichael

Oliver, British Columbia, Canada

He had been wasting his time on reading—or rather, trying to read—the tracks along the road. When the attack came, it came from above.

The snapping of twigs in the trees above provided some warning. He got a glimpse of a dark falling mass with claws crashing down through the trees towards him. Reacting instinctively, he crouched and, dropping the briefcase he carried, wrapped his arms over his head.

All Zakai Maro wanted was to manage his aunt's Sushiten, their small family restaurant, in peace, but Maro was born into bad luck. Four was an unlucky number. Maro had been born at four in the morning of April fourth, the son of a fourth gaijin — foreign — son.

All Maro ever did wrong was try to help.

The creature crashed into him. As the creature scrambled to get a hold on him, he pushed back, finding himself shoving against a crackling feather.

The creature was having trouble getting a grip on him, all he could feel was weight, but happily, he was not being rent limb from limb. Maro thought, well, what do you know. I guess that weird monk's charm actually works!

Maro had stopped at a temple before setting off this morning on this unwanted delivery assignment.

The monk, with reddish hair and narrow face, had been bent so his hands were nearly touching the ground. Maro had not expected the monk's protection charm to work.

But this demon — or whatever it was — trying to attack him, was having a very hard time getting its claws into either his cloak or himself. So, as long as the charm lasted, it seemed he would be safe.

And as long as he could get the briefcase to the rural fortress of Oyabun Agano by sunset, Shishi's debts would be forgiven. If only Shishi didn't gamble so much. If only Shishi wasn't obligated, and because Shishi was his cousin, Maro also obligated to the oyabun.

If you were very lucky, when you failed to meet an obligation to Oyabun Agano, you would find yourself enslaved instead of finding yourself floating face down in the harbor.

Zakai Maro had survived fire breathing clock-work dragons. He had fled women sorceresses who combed out the lengths of their hair until it reached around your throat. He had lived through a dirigible crash into Lake Biwa. He didn't know if he would survive attempting this delivery for Oyabun Agano, but he had to try. He didn't have much choice.

"I want to offer you a choice, young warrior," the monk at the temple had said. "I can offer you a twist in your luck for all time, or offer you protection from all harm for some time."

Maro, tired of adventurous twists in his fate, had chosen the protection charm.

Recently, there was trouble making deliveries to Agano. There were rumors of bandits in the woods. A suspicion that rivals were hiring assassins and priestesses to interfere with business. It was a small but important

delivery, the weekly delivery of accounts and cash carried in a meticulously buffed steel briefcase. The last stretch of the delivery route was from the train station to Agano's fortress, along a forested track, in this depopulated prefecture. It was along this stretch that most troubles came.

Maro had heard one gossip mention dragons. He really hoped it wasn't dragons again.

Maro had been "offered" the "opportunity" to make the weekly delivery of the locked briefcase from city to fortress. If he was successful, he would receive forgiveness for his cousin and himself.

So now, Maro crouched on the forest path, only five miles away from Agano's fortress, under attack from a mysterious beast.

Maro shook his entire body hard, and with a deep reverberating croak, the beast dropped into the trail. Maro got his first good luck at this rival.

It was a bird that had attacked him, with deep blue and black shining feathers and long black claws. It looked something like a crow, but it was very large. This bird was as tall as he was, and he was unusually tall. The bird was standing in his path, one eye glaring at him.

Maro didn't even like small birds and he stumbled over the briefcase as he took a step back.

Shishi had a pet mynah, which plucked metal buttons off of clothes. Birds liked shiny things, Shishi said.

How did this bird get so big?

As the bird glared, he had time to think,

oh, of course, bad magic. This prefecture had been poisoned a long time ago by the bad magic which seeped from the concrete castles built by the ancestors. That was why this prefecture did not have so many people, that was why it was an ideal place for Oyabun Agano to build himself a hideaway.

Did Agano know about this giant bird? Did it matter? No. Excuses would do no good if Maro didn't make it through with the briefcase on time.

There was another croak. It did not come from the bird in front of him, but from beside him. And then came the third croak, somewhere to the other side. Maro glanced around. There were at least three other birds, all nearly the same size as the first. Maro wished he could forget that the word for a flock of crows was a murder. Surely they didn't want to eat him? He tried not to look like a worm or a beetle.

A ray of sunshine struck off the side of the briefcase, shooting rainbows of sparkle into the air as the birds closed in to attack.

They croaked and groaned and hopped in close. They pressed against him and he saw now that they were infested with giant lice.

Maro shuddered and pushed backwards. The crows hopped after him as he took several long strides away from them.

The biggest bird's bill was battle-chipped along the edges. It opened that beak slightly and hissed in his face. Maro wanted to run away, but the option of retreat was not one he could take. There was only one way to Mr. Agano's fortress, and that was up this path past these giant birds.

He would have to go on the attack.

He drew his gyuto — his chef's knife — out of his belt. The leading edge of a viciously slapped wing snapped a few inches in front

of his face, and he stepped back again. They couldn't hurt him, right? Not with the charm he had.

Maro stepped sideways, thinking perhaps he could run around them, and one of the crows put its foot on top of his. He looked down at the scaly toes and the long claws. He grimaced and swung his knife, and it cut through the tips of the crow's flight feathers as it quickly pulled back.

Now Maro ran at them flashing his improvised weapon. The birds skittered this way and that, talking to themselves or swearing at him, he couldn't tell. One of the crows began to cackle. The volume alone was enough to raise the hairs on the back of his neck. He chased them this way and that, back and forth and in circles, his cloak swirling, as he tried to drive them off the path.

Suddenly, with a final horrible screeching, he succeeded. The birds hopped and flopped away, leaving behind only scattered feathers.

Maro leaned against a tree to catch his breath. I'll have to go back to that temple and make another donation to thank the monk. He tucked his gyuto back into his belt and gave it a pat.

He looked around him for the briefcase. Where had it gone to?

Too late, he remembered. Birds liked shiny things.

What had the monk said again? "Protection from harm, then, for a time, and for all time, your luck your own."

His luck was bad. It would always be bad. Zakai Maro gulped and began running after the crows. If he didn't get the briefcase back and delivered before dusk, Oyabun Agano would be angry. If the oyabun became angry with him, Maro would likely find him-

self thinking fondly of dragons.