

The Blade Reflected and Reborn

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From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

Seven heads gathered around the shrine at the heart of the problem, young and old alike—unusual in a neighborhood like Far Corner, where it was usually just the old. Chishiro eyed their reverence from the roof of the brewery storehouse where he'd been invited to sleep. They wouldn't see him if they turned; though he was large, he had more than enough skill to conceal himself in the shadows.

Not that he expected the worshippers to pay heed of anything but that damnable shrine.

Ayari, a young local woman who crouched beside Chishiro, saw the tension in his arms: three crossed over his chest, a fourth massaging his scaled jaw.

"They're afraid," she said defensively.

"Are they?" Chishiro asked. Ayari did not respond, and he shrugged it off. "I suppose they are."

When he'd arrived in Far Corner, Chishiro had thought the worshippers foolish. The locals had hired him for his grim reputation; they knew the worst stories about him, the ones that sickened softer folk because they were true, and therefore gruesome. They thought his cunning and willingness to kill for any promise of coin would keep their heads attached to their necks. So, he thought, surely they would obey his orders, if only he glowered and laid a hand on his sharp silver blade. He had told them never to travel alone; to remain indoors, whenever possible; and to fastidiously observe their daily routines, lest their scheme be uncovered.



Chishiro, the Shattered Blade | Art by: Lius Lasahido

But no matter how often Chishiro instructed the people of Far Corner to stop clustering around that strange little shrine at the end of the neighborhood's main street, he was ignored. Inevitably, they would come, one at a time, to kneel and gaze upon the shrine with a dreamy reverence, like sleep-drunk children listening to a favored grandparent's stories.

In any case, they couldn't be allowed to stay—especially not now, with death breathing so rankly down their necks.

Chishiro bared his fangs at Ayari. "Tell them to get back inside before they make any more mistakes."

She frowned at him but slid down the tiled roof and hopped from the edge to the hard black pavement below. A spry young woman, already scarred on her arms and face, Ayari had designated herself Chishiro's right hand (his third, she said) from the moment the elders of Far Corner hired him. She possessed a budding gift for violence, which she employed most often with her knives, fending off the Reckoner gangs who sought to take tithes from her neighbors.

Shortly after the elders hired Chishiro, he had asked them if the missing Reckoner scout who was the origin of their woes had fallen to Ayari's blades as well. The elders had exchanged quiet, tense glances and answered in vague terms. Chishiro at first assumed that they disagreed over whether their dear girl had done something so rash. However, in the days since

He watched as Ayari approached the seven townsfolk gathered at the shrine, coaxing them to rise from their knees and return to their assigned tasks. Their lingering, glassy looks back at the lonely, desolate shrine told him all he needed to know.

When they'd all gone their separate ways, Chishiro slid down the storehouse roof. Despite his muscled bulk and the power of his tail, he dislodged no tiles and made barely a sound, even as he landed. He crossed the dusty street to regard the shrine by himself.

Far Corner lived up to its name—once a modest village on the cusp of Jukai, it had been gradually subsumed by Towashi to become one of its newest and most ignored neighborhoods. It was too removed from the towering trunk of Boseiju and the light-limned shadows of Imperial skyscrapers to be

considered part of the Undercity. Then there was the untended field at the end of the paved main road, which stretched until it met the ragged edge of the receding forest.

Nearly all plants within the black-paved boundaries of Far Corner had been intentionally placed. First and foremost, a lone pair of cherry trees had been transplanted from the Undercity canals to the gate that was the formal entrance to the neighborhood.

The only other vegetation was the shrine. It had split and burst through the stone pavement at the Jukai end of the main street like the heaving curve of a massive back, all dark searching wood. Distinctly paler, thinner roots whorled around it in intricate twists. The shrine itself, though small, was natural. An odd knot in the great black root formed a hollow about as large as Chishiro's fist. Within it, the paler root had clustered and tangled upon itself like a gnarled heart that seemed, when studied, to beat.



Go-Shintai of Boundless Vigor | Art by: Johannes Voss

A kami slept within the shrine, the locals told him. It hadn't yet told them what sort of kami it was—when it spoke, it was in rumbling whispers and fractured dreams, images that coalesced and blurred together with a chasmic ache. They suspected that it was some shadow of harrowed Jukai, here on the edge of Towashi.

Chishiro loomed over the shrine as the sun set. The silver sword strapped to his back was only as heavy as metal ever could be, and the shadow it cast was as lifelessly black as his own. The kami didn't see fit to speak to him, though he didn't doubt its presence. It was as real as breath and unkindness. And however much it might love the people who loved it in turn, it would, inevitably, be disappointed in them.

As such, he had come to give it a warning:

“Don't trouble them more than you already have.”

The kami said nothing in return. Chishiro wasn't surprised. He had already decided that it was a selfish creature.

Years ago, Chishiro had been more than himself. His friends and comrades, the ones with whom he hunted those Futurists who dared infringe on Jukai's borders, had known what he meant when he said so. He did not mean only that his jade-flecked blade was an extension of his being—rather, it was that his own spirit had been compounded with the resonance of his kami, and therefore with Kamigawa.

Chishiro was *himself* to such an extent that he-as-self mattered not at all, for what *did* matter was great Kaima, the darkly radiant blade forged by their bond and all that they meant to accomplish together.

Chishiro had tried, a few times, to explain himself to the Futurists they caught instead of killing. One had been greatly afraid of him and thought him possessed, and by dint of that, wholly unreasonable. Another had spoken to Chishiro as if he were Kaima, and she had aped obeisance because she thought she might trick her way to freedom. A third told him: "I understand, I think. There are moments when I see the plane folded upon itself—when I see the way in which I'm enfolded within it."

Kaima stirred in Chishiro. He said: *A new branch wishing to unfurl and flower. A chill recedes, and the buds peek bravely.*

Chishiro leaned forward to study the Futurist, a moonfolk woman, her pearl-colored face creased in thought, her elegant hand pressed to her mouth. "And what do you do, when you feel that way?" he asked her.

"What I was doing when you caught me," she said.

Chishiro admired her honesty, brazen though it was. He had cornered her and her underlings in the depths of Jukai. This band of Futurists had been doing their best to understand kami by first isolating them in their most natural habitat, then breaking down and dissecting that habitat into its most elemental parts—in so doing, hoping to break and dissect the kami.

She doubtless expected him to kill her, as he and his comrades had killed others of her ilk. So, Chishiro let her go, stripped of all her technology and gear, into the depths of the forest she had sought to ravage. The kami would decide whether she escaped or died, as was their right.

Chishiro's comrades had said: "We wish you'd stop doing that."

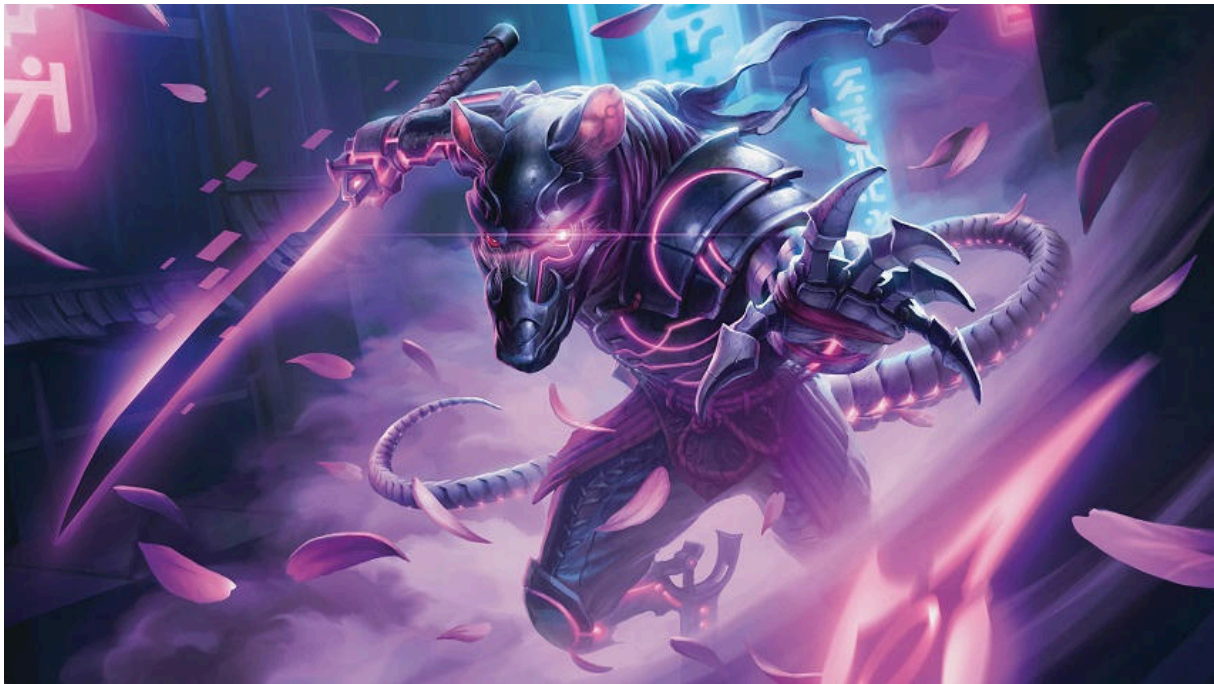
He'd said: "I have to."

He'd meant: "I want to—and Kaima does, too. Therefore, we will. We must."

They had an obligation, one that defined the presence of Kaima in Chishiro and of them both on Kamigawa: forest and fellowship, the plane and its bindings. They would seek always, first, to understand.

Perhaps that had been the problem—a fundamental flaw writ into their being. They had been too eager to ask and listen, to give counsel and to take it. It had broken them, in the end.

Far Corner's trouble was the Mukotai, a Reckoner gang that had chosen to plague this otherwise quiet neighborhood. Every Reckoner family nursed its own brand of violence—poison, blade, or curse. The Mukotai prized the clever and sneak thieves, and only rarely did they decide to throw their weight around with the kind of threat that they had delivered to Far Corner.



Mukotai Ambusher | Art by: Raymond Swanland

It might have been different if their scout hadn't died in Far Corner's streets. Chishiro thought the problem lay less in the fact of the man's death than in how he had been killed, and why.

He had received no straighter story after the first non-answer the Far Corner elders offered. Ayari insisted, in a sideways manner, that she had killed the man. Chishiro doubted this. He had found the body where she attempted to dispose of it in the field between Far Corner and Jukai, and he had seen the roots running through the body's flesh and tangling out from its gaping mouth.

The Mukotai had signified their intent to retaliate with a hand nailed to the gate of Far Corner. The hand had belonged to a young mechanic called Jenzo—a son of Far Corner who had recently gone to study at the Imperial Academy. He was returned home the following day, left half-dead on the main street, shivering and sweat stained.

"A week," Jenzo told the elders and Ayari as a prosthetic edged in white light was fitted to his wrist. "We leave by then, or we die."

For the slight of their dead man, the Mukotai intended to burn Far Corner to the ground. Far Corner's kami had taken one of their own, and they intended to repay the transgression in kind.

Perhaps the people of Far Corner were more clear-eyed than Chishiro thought; after all, they had hired him. It suggested they realized that the kami they loved could not be expected to protect them.

So Chishiro had taught Far Corner's able-bodied the proper use of blade and arrow in the field between their homes and Jukai. Their dexterous and deft he sent to the brewery storehouse, where they salvaged scrap to construct the devices Chishiro described. Jenzo, the mechanic, had propped himself up in a corner of the storehouse, practicing with his new prosthetic, finessing the devices his neighbors constructed.

"Uniquely illegal, isn't this?" he'd asked Chishiro, his tone more inquisitive than accusatory as he cradled the palm-sized box of carved wood and wrought metal, tinkering with its innards.

"Yes," Chishiro had replied, and he'd said nothing more.

Only one sort of person knew how to craft a disruptor, a device that could tear magic from metal like claws tore life from flesh: the sort of person who pledged themselves to Jukai. Chishiro no longer pledged himself to anyone, but he had, once, and he had come away with his fair share of lessons to go with the scars.

To wit, the plan was to lure the Mukotai down to the Jukai end of Far Corner's main street. After all, the Reckoners wanted the shrine. There, they would meet the trap: a meticulously arranged series of disruptors, which would be triggered in rapid succession once the Mukotai reached the appointed area. Then, as the Mukotai were forced to pit whatever true blades they carried against the ones Far Corner brought to bear, the Reckoners would be forced toward the forest of Jukai—and toward the kami lurking within.

Thus, the people of Far Corner would give the Mukotai a choice, just as they had been given: Flee, or face those who hate you for daring to transgress against them.

The end of the week fell on a moonless night. Chishiro lurked on the roof of the teahouse—at three stories, it was the tallest structure in Far Corner. As had become her habit, Ayari crouched quietly beside him, ready to carry his orders wherever they needed to go—until she began to curse frenetically under her breath.

She darted away from Chishiro's side, toward the other end of the teahouse roof and nearly out of the shadows. He caught her just before she exited cover, his scaled hand snared at the back of her neck.

Ayari tensed under his touch but didn't struggle, only inclined her head toward the object of her frustration: Jenzo, crouched in the side street between the brewery and the storehouse, where one of the disruptors had been planted.

"What does he think he's doing?" Ayari hissed. "They're almost here. They'll gut him."

Other Far Corner locals lay in wait, hidden in alleys and behind doors, ready to dart out and herd the Mukotai toward the field once the disruptors had gone off. These were the individuals who Chishiro had chosen to train, for they had the strength to bludgeon and skewer. Jenzo, still recovering from his injuries, was in no state to do the same.

"It must be necessary," said Chishiro, though he eyed Jenzo, too, and the quick movements of his hands over the device nestled in the brewery's slatted sides.

"He's going to be seen." Ayari said this not with the heat of fear, but the even keel of certainty. Her eyes hardened as she looked to the Towashi entrance to Far Corner.

The Mukotai had arrived.

The Reckoner vanguard flitted in shadow, lithe shapes cleaving to dark corners and up onto the roofs. The rest came behind, stride unhurried, the enamel hilts and staffs from which their weapons would spring slung over their armored shoulders. As they approached, they ignited their blades, one after another. Eerie light crawled around the shapes of otherwise invisible swords, scythes, and other sharp-edged brutalities.

Behind them, the mech. It was all dark cherry wood, partly carved, partly grown in gnarled whorls to fashion the joints of its curving spine, its dragging, three-jointed arms, and its finely articulated feet. It had no head; a pale veil concealed the pilot's cockpit in its sunken belly.

And at their fore, a lumbering beast that moved with sudden speed and terrible impact. A corpse-swallower toad from the canals, its throat throbbing and its slow-blinking eyes rolling with lurid interest. Astride it, a man, limber with confidence, his searching gaze sharp.

“Far Corner—we know you didn’t run,” the toad-rider called. His voice, though lazy, cut the night with its sneer. “We know you’re hiding. But the Mukotai aren’t monsters. This is your last chance. Get out, or you’ll wish you had.”



Tatsunari, Toad Rider | Art by: Justine Cruz

If one had the presence of mind to think such things, they might have thought this strange. Hadn’t the Mukotai come to take from the kami of Far Corner what had been taken from them? If so, why would they tell their victims to flee? To flush them out of hiding, perhaps. Yet what mere citizen could hope to hide from the likes of a Mukotai Reckoner?

Such thoughts flitted through Chishiro’s mind, but they remained at the surface, gossamer and insubstantial. Something else stirred in the depths of his heart, something dark and labored. Unconsciously, one of his hands settled on the hilt of his silver blade.

More pressingly, as the toad-rider spoke, one of the shadow vanguards slid into the alley where Jenzo frantically worked to hide the disruptor he had been tinkering with.

“Please let me go.” Ayari pleaded with Chishiro, her tone as tight as her fists around her knives. “They can’t learn what we’ve done. They—”

She broke off, though Chishiro thought little of this. His attention was now fixed on the unexpected nexus of his troubles—on the man who spoke for the Mukotai.

Tatsunari, they called him; as Chishiro gathered information on the Mukotai threat, he had learned this name but little else. He had not yet heard the man’s voice, let alone seen his face. Nor had he seen the man’s blade.

A simple thing, the last. Its metal edge barely gleamed in the pink and twilight glow cast by the Mukotai gear. A black metal hilt, tarnished by use and age.

Familiar.

And that face the idle cant of Tatsunari’s head. The serrated edge of his hungry grin.

Familiar as well.

Familiar like an old scar split open, like blood on his tongue and sick in his gut. Chishiro had in that moment been reduced. Honed. He had been a yawning deep, and now he was the small dark hollow at the center of it—a hollow in need of filling.

He had gone many long years with this absence within him. He had never thought to give it a name, for he had thought it obvious: treachery and betrayal; his own lacking self. And so, he had never thought to fill it. It hadn't seemed the sort of wound that could be mended.

But oh, now, the sight of this man, it was as water to parched earth. If Chishiro could have Tatsunari's torn heart in his hands, then at last, perhaps, he could know satisfaction.

Yes. It would be a selfish murder and a crude one, unhallowed too, but Chishiro desired it so viciously that he was no longer fettered by such thoughts.

"Chishiro," he heard, faintly, his name spoken in urgent whisper. Again, "Chishiro, what—"

Chishiro had by then descended.

He launched himself from the roof with the vicious totality of his bulk. He collided with a Mukotai bruiser who had not the time to be shocked before Chishiro's blade had slit his throat.

He left the man gurgling, thrashing in the street as he lunged toward the next—a guard with a bright-edged naginata. She tried to leap back, but Chishiro had already seized the head of her spear, just under the blade, with his two right arms. He wrenched it from her grasp. As she tripped toward him, he thrust his own silver blade between the grooves of her plate armor, into her belly.

By then, answering cries of alarm and shrills of violence rang out down the street. Panic bled into desperate action.

Chishiro heard none of it through the roar in his mind as he met Tatsunari's keen-eyed stare. The toad had half-turned, its body bristling with tension, its teeth wet with a glistening hunger. Tatsunari, atop it, threw back his head and crowed a laugh that melted into the rising clamor.

It was the delighted, frantic laugh of a man who knew he faced his death—who realized his only hope was to kill first.

Shortly after Chishiro sent that Futurist to her fate in the depths of Jukai, he and his comrades had returned to one of their Order's havens: a little copse of trees beside a waterfall, above a river that flowed to a nearby village on the edge of Jukai. The village was friendly with their Order and helped them hide supplies in the copse for different cells.

A young man—a boy—had been waiting for them there. Human, small, Towashi born and bred. Unfamiliar to them all, but he'd known the codes. Chishiro learned later that he had befriended one of the Order's spies and eked the truth from them before ending the friendship in the most abrupt fashion imaginable.

The boy did much the same that night. He played an eager student well—he was hungry enough for it. He wanted to better know the forest, he said, and the spirits who graced it.

"There are spirits aplenty in your city, too," Chishiro said.

"Not like yours," said the boy, eyeing the green-edged blade strapped to Chishiro's back—the weapon that was the crystallized focus of his bond with his kami. There was such envy in that gaze. Such want. And yet

Kaima thought it strange as well. He said to Chishiro: *An emptied nest. A fallen chick. A spring run dry, and the thirsting herd.*

Chishiro agreed. The boy so clearly yearned, and he reached with grasping hand toward anything that might answer the yearning. Yet his hands were empty. Why had nothing seen fit to fill them?

Chishiro pitied him, as did his comrades.

So, they listened. They spoke. They ate with the boy and failed to notice that he didn't eat from the supplies the rest of them shared.

That night, Chishiro and his fellows fell into a deep, unmoving sleep. He woke in a haze, the moon low between the branches.

Chishiro couldn't move. Neither could any of the other figures in his line of sight. Some didn't breathe either. They had bled from their throats into the mossy earth beside the raging waterfall.

The boy crouched over Chishiro, though he was looking elsewhere. He stared defiantly into the dark between trees, at the looming shape within the shadows that shuddered with terrible, heavy breaths, its massive claws digging nervous furrows into the earth and its branching fangs quivering. Kaima, great and fearful.

"Why won't you *move*?" The boy swept a hand toward the limp bodies he'd felled with his poison, and in that hand, he held a blade—a familiar one. Chishiro's focus, stolen from his side, though when not wielded by his hand, it held no light but for that which it caught under the moon. "Don't you love them?"

Chishiro felt Kaima's response all through his veins: *Bones jutting through flesh. Gasping through rot.*

The kami's fury raged, impotent, a consequence of their unique bond. Kaima was by nature fettered to his home, but his bond with Chishiro enabled him to act in any stretch of the mortal realm that Chishiro carried him to. It also rendered him vulnerable to the vagaries visited upon Chishiro's flesh.

Great Kaima was now hindered by the confines of foolish, poisoned Chishiro. Even as their comrades were murdered one by one, Kaima could do nothing—even as the boy's stolen blade was poised to kill Chishiro, too.

In that fell moment, Chishiro struggled to wring something from his paralyzed throat. His mind was too clouded by grief and anger and fear to know what it would be before it leaked out from his mouth. *Stop*, he wished to say. And *why*. He managed only a feeble croak.

The boy sneered down at Chishiro, disgusted—delighted? He turned back up to Kaima, teeth bared. "Well? You know what I want. Bond with me, and I'll have no need to kill him."

Foolish, thought Chishiro, and despaired. What idiot thought they could force a bond? Had the city folk fallen so very far?

No, he thought as he stared at this desperate boy, and a chill set in from his lungs to his throat. It was the boy's hunger that kept him lonely. Not even a kami driven by that same need would open their arms to him—no kami would give themselves to a mortal who wanted only to take and take, who had no notion of what he would be expected to *give*.

And what, now, did Chishiro have left to give to Kaima?

Great Kaima trembled still. His boar's head bent, a translucent shadow, and his glinting eyes met Chishiro's.

Chishiro thought: *Let me go. Be free.*

Kaima lurched to the side, his breath a hot wind that shuddered the trees. He said: *The tree wracked by storm, and the root clinging to the earth. Clinging. Clinging.*

The boy's jaw tightened, and he raised the blade over Chishiro's petrified neck.

The root in Chishiro's mind snapped, and the blade in the boy's hand shattered.

The forest shrieked with Kaima's roar. Shadows burst from between the trees, and the immensity of Kaima charged, bearing down on both boy and Chishiro with crushing force.

Chishiro felt the excruciating pressure of the kami's passage in the grooves of his scales—but he was not trampled, and in moments, he was alone.

Acutely so. Chishiro had not known *alone* ness for long years—not since Kaima

He could not hear Kaima.

Chishiro breathed raggedly in the silence, staring up at the moon through branches, feeling small, and frail, and finite. He struggled to drag himself onto his side to see what had come of the boy and his partner.

A line of ravaged, broken earth flowed from Chishiro's body to the riverbank. There was no sign of his kami, or his focus, or of the boy who had broken them apart.

Chishiro, numb and unthinking, waited and waited for Kaima to return, but when dawn crept through the branches overhead, there was still only nothing but himself. Only then did he manage to drag himself upright and discover what had come of the village below the waterfall. The last images Kaima had poured into him flashed again through his mind as he beheld the carnage below: *A ravaged tree. A sundered root.*

The village lay in ruins, the villagers ruined with it. They had been reclaimed by Jukai's roots in a single night, and with savagery.

Chishiro knew not what to do with himself, absent Kaima. Even less, with the seeping surety that the responsibility for this destruction lay not wholly with the boy, but with himself. His frailty. His willingness to surrender.

In the end, he burned the bodies of his friends, and of every villager he could find. Then he left, returning in silence. He didn't choose to sell his violence so much as he began to be paid to do it, and he had done so ever since.

This was why the kami of Far Corner had only ever earned his wariness. Why, even if it loved its people, he could not bring himself to trust it.

Why now, even so, he would protect it: he hated the man who threatened it second only to how ferociously he hated himself.

The disruptors triggered in haphazard sequence. One stretch of Far Corner went suddenly dark as Mukotai weapons flared and died while others remained luminous with threat.

A samurai fell to her knees under the weight of deadened, hulking plate armor that now threatened to crush her. A group of Far Corner's neighbors set upon her with staff and sword, bludgeoning and cutting.

A ninja flung daggers into one Far Corner local, then another, and another. One by one, his victims staggered and fell, screaming as the daggers ignited with violet fire.

Jenzo tumbled over the pavement of the main street, smacked away from the disruptor he had tried to trigger by the uncanny three-jointed arm of the Mukotai mech. The disruptor landed between them. Jenzo scrambled toward it just as the mech dug its clawed feet into the cracking pavement and lunged.

Ayari dodged past another struggle just in time to tackle Jenzo out of the mech's trajectory. They skidded free, but the mech had swiveled amid its attack and, with eerie grace, flipped over its own body to land, squatting, before the abandoned disruptor. It picked the device up off the ground between its long, delicate fingers and held it before the tattered veil that concealed the cockpit, examining its prize.

A minuscule squeeze; the disruptor shattered.

Then the mech reached for them.

Until it lurched awkwardly forward. Something had struck its back. It twisted to turn on the assailant, but he had already clawed and coiled up the mech's spine.

As the mech staggered, trying to throw him off, Chishiro twisted around the side of the open cockpit and latched onto its roof with two of his arms. He tore the veil aside with a third, and with his fourth, he shoved a pulsing jade disruptor into the pilot's hands.

The pilot stared at it, then him, in knowing horror. They were laced into their mech by a forest of braided wires and tubes, and a second from now, when the disruptor detonated, they would likely die with their machine.

Chishiro didn't wait to see if they did. He threw himself from the mech moments before the disruptor sang out and sent the hulking construct toppling to the ground behind him, dead.

Chishiro pressed on. He passed Jenzo and Ayari, now back on their feet. Jenzo tried to thank him, but Ayari held him back. As if through smoke, Chishiro registered the fury in her face, and the contempt.

Chishiro had made the mistakes he had tried to stop her from committing. Now people—her people—were dying, and it was his fault.

Chishiro understood her ire. He knew what it was to lose comrades to someone else's selfishness.

Yet he could not stop. He was single-minded in his pursuit of Tatsunari, a man whose death Chishiro needed like a drowning body needed air.

Tatsunari had run from the conflict. He had directed his toad to bring him thundering down the street, past all resistance, to the shrine that awaited him at the end. He waited there now with his blade drawn—Chishiro's old focus, resurrected and whole, dull with mortal metal. He had not yet struck. Tatsunari knew it took more than a blow to kill a kami.

Chishiro approached Tatsunari, bloodied and heaving for breath, his silver blade discolored by viscera.

The toad-rider's face was cold with an enmity deep as a current. "You," said Tatsunari, as he might to an old friend. "Thought you'd curled up in a hole and died."

"Throw down your blade," said Chishiro.

"Why would I do that?"

"So I can kill you with it."

Tatsunari threw back his head and laughed again, delirious with disbelief. "You bonded! You're all the same. So self-righteous, so determined that the world will do what you say."

"Spiteful wretch." But even as Chishiro snarled, realization cracked through his chest and bloomed into his whole being. "You hate them," he said, "the kami."

Tatsunari's jaw tightened, just as it had that long-ago night when he raised his stolen blade over Chishiro's throat. "No more than I hate anyone who'd kill one of my Mukotai."

It was Chishiro's turn to laugh. It began in the bowels of his gut and filled his chest like smoke. Tatsunari's grip on his stolen blade tightened, and he raised it as if unsure of whether to strike the shrine or the mad warrior before him.

"You do hate them," Chishiro spat. "You hate them because they see you for what you are. An empty man. A nothing."

And it was likely the same hatred that had brought Tatsunari to send his Mukotai scout to Far Corner in the first place. Towashi afforded precious few opportunities to kill a kami; Far Corner's small new shrine must have seemed an irresistible target for the empty man's anger. His fear.

Indeed, Chishiro's words seemed to cut into Tatsunari more cruelly than any blade could have. The man's face twisted with a pain beyond rage. His stolen blade lanced out, toward Chishiro—but Chishiro didn't move, his silver blade held slack in his hand.

He was thinking of emptiness. This empty man lunged toward him, but if Tatsunari dug his sword into Chishiro, he would only find more emptiness. Chishiro couldn't have said why that made him laugh, but it was this sound and no other that escaped him upon realizing the horrifying degree to which they were both nothing creatures, wretched in their lack.

The once-blessed blade caught Chishiro through the gut, just below his ribs, where it plunged deep and deeper until blood was welling in his throat.

Then something else welled with the blood. Light and heat, unfurling from within Chishiro's wound and sprawling out through his laugh—changing its tenor, until it became not the hollow bark of despair but an uncanny howl of imminent satisfaction.

Tatsunari's eyes widened with a wild fear as roots crept up out of the wound he had dug into Chishiro, fine and pale at first, then darker, surer. They slithered up the blade toward his hand, and he tore his hand free in horror.

The kami of Far Corner's shrine had awoken, and it said this to Chishiro: *A tree consumes the nail within it; the roots sup blood to grow and grow.*

It meant: Seize his vengeance and make it yours. I bid it. I covet it. For me, you'll do it.

The roots speared out of the ground in savage array. Powerful and lashing, they snarled up and around legs, through feet, into torsos.

Screams still ripped the air, but so did cries of delight and relief. The people of Far Corner saw their kami risen at last to save them—even as the dark roots sundered the walls and roofs of their homes to seize Reckoners striving to escape.

Chishiro had no time to spare for any fate but Tatsunari's. He coughed raggedly, but no blood spilled from his mouth as he released the meager silver sword from one hand and grasped the hilt of the sword stuck in his gut with another. The kami had bid him to retake the blade; it seemed to throb against his palms—just like it once had when it had been the core of his divine covenant. The kami of Far Corner urged him forward.

Tatsunari had fled back up onto his toad as it leapt away, croaking in fear at the bubbling torrent of roots cracking up out of the ground.

The kami spoke to Chishiro again; he dared not think it familiar, too: *The forest floor reclaiming old bones.*

Chishiro wrenched the blade free of his chest. He should by all rights have bled out, and for a moment, his blood did pump forth—but it was swiftly stoppered by the roots that snarled up as if from within him and plugged the hole. He still had the pain, but more than that, he had adrenaline and *need*.

Tatsunari was still alive. He didn't deserve to be.

Unthinking, Chishiro latched onto a river of roots that boiled up from the ground and carried him up into the air. From his high perch, he had the lay of Far Corner.

The Mukotai were struggling to retreat to the part of the neighborhood nearer to Towashi, where the roots struggled to worm past the thicker infrastructure. Tatsunari was with them, his toad leaping free of the kami's grasping rage.

Images surged behind Chishiro's eyes: *The diving hawk. The lunging tiger. The snake, striking—*

"Needn't be so obvious," he said. And he leapt, lifted by a remorseless joy.

Swift and perfect, Chishiro and his blade and the power within them plunged toward his target.

Tatsunari saw Chishiro's falling shadow and turned, eyes wide. He had only a second to choose: meet the threat or save himself. He flung himself from his mount.

Chishiro cleaved into the toad. He dragged the blade through its meat, its bellows unraveling into the night, until he had carved so thoroughly into it that it wheezed and at last died.

The body split and fell apart from itself in an unsightly mess. But no sooner had its sides slid to the ground then they were caught and consumed by the grasping roots, which sought to nestle and flower through its richness.

Chishiro turned, flicking his blade clean of gore. The edge glinted green in the lamplight.

Tatsunari had tumbled into the street after his jump and landed badly on his leg. The angle of the limb was all wrong. Chishiro advanced on Tatsunari, who bared his teeth, his eyes wet with anguished tears.

Chishiro loomed over the broken man, and he knew in his screaming veins that Tatsunari's brokenness was not enough. This man had killed too many, and he would kill again, because he was only the ugly spite with which he stared up at Chishiro, a poison, a—

Something in that broken look paused Chishiro's blade. Tatsunari still sneered, but Chishiro didn't think he was covering fear.

"Why?" Chishiro found himself demanding. "What made you—this?"

Tatsunari choked down a laugh that died in his throat. "Like you would understand. You're chosen. I'm *nothing*. You said it yourself. Now kill me."

Anger ran dark and jagged through Tatsunari's words, but beneath that fury, at once brittle and enduring, was despair.

And it was the despair that summoned an ache in Chishiro's chest, pulsing out from where Tatsunari had stabbed him mere moments ago.

A hot wind blew into the still night. Chishiro turned his eyes upward to meet the enormity of empty shadow that shuddered over broken Tatsunari. At last, he allowed himself to recognize the kami that had lurked in the gnarled little shrine, that had devoured a Reckoner for merely intruding upon its territory, and that now loomed over them with a silhouette both familiar and foreign—the majesty that had once been Kaima.

A seething brilliance lanced through the kami's image like lightning. A light like a poison, for with its every flash, another image burned through Chishiro's mind:

Crush. Gore. Devour. End this faithless wretch—and then end the next, and the next.

More cries rose on that gathering wind. Frightened yelps and pained gasps from within Far Corner—not from the fleeing Mukotai, but from those who had stayed because they thought they were safe in their homes. But the roots were not yet satiated. Neither was Kaima.

"Why?" Chishiro said again. The question had fallen from his mouth without him thinking it.

Kaima said: *Mortal flesh and mortal work. Only one sort of creature has heart enough to betray another.*

And for that, Chishiro realized, the kami intended to be their ruin; be they Mukotai or not, Kaima would raze them all for the sin of their fallibility.

Chishiro clutched the wound in his gut that Kaima had closed. It burned as if infected.

In the next moment, his world tilted. Someone had slammed into him from behind and knocked him aside. An armor-clad Mukotai bruiser had shoved Chishiro away for a crucial second to scoop Tatsunari up from the ground.

The shock never left Tatsunari's eyes as his ally carried him off, rescuing him from certain death. Chishiro's surprise faded far sooner—replaced by newfound resolve.

Betrayal, rot, and death, he had seen all this, yes, and he had seen them again and again. But these things were not the end. They never were.

Chishiro turned to the scene behind him. Far Corner cracked in every foundation, its structures crumbling under the assault of Kaima's roots, its people struggling to free themselves of their kami's relentless hatred.

There in the center of the street rose great Kaima, betrayal and hate coalesced into a massive bristling back and jutting antlered tusks. He stepped out of shadow and into colored reality, and all who saw him were struck speechless by the rage running through his fur like fire.

One look was all they needed to know: He was the kami who had come to them so suddenly through the earth, who they had tried to nurture with their love and attention—but this had not been enough to calm his brewing rage. He meant to kill them all.



Kaima, the Fractured Calm | Art by: Filip Burburan

Chishiro couldn't let him.

He spied Ayari and Jenzo down the street. He called their names, and they snapped out of their terror to stare instead at him, wary and wide-eyed. Chishiro jerked his head toward Towashi. It was all the message he had time to give.

As the two youths of Far Corner rushed to gather everyone they could save and ferry them into the city, Chishiro advanced toward his old friend—blade in hand and root in chest.

"Why these deaths, too, Kaima?" he asked as he glided over broken pavement and past shattered bodies. "They love you, you realize."

Kaima faced Chishiro, but Kaima was not looking at him. The kami's gaze, at once emerald deep and storm bright, was fixed on the space behind Chishiro. On Towashi and on the people fleeing toward it.

But it was what Kaima said that forced Chishiro to stop in his tracks. It came in image and sense, as it always did, only now there was a terrible specificity. When Kaima spoke to justify these deaths, he spoke not of the plane, but of:

Chishiro, teaching Reckoners the way of climbing trees and killing silently. Chishiro, teaching Futurists the means of shielding themselves against a disruptor's shattering force. Chishiro, once-bonded, now faithless and spiteful, moved not by creed but by coin, and hating not only himself, but—

"You think I hated you," said Chishiro. A dull ache crept through his chest as Kaima's judgment pulsed through his limbs.

For if the mortal whose life had once defined Kaima now hated him, what could Kaima become other than hateful, too? No matter that hate had once been so far outside great Kaima's world that he had barely understood it, now it was what had broken him, and so it was all he had left.

Only now did Chishiro realize that Tatsunari had not been the blade who severed their bond; he had been merely a fulcrum, and under his pressure, their tether had snapped. The weight of that cruelty bearing down had undone them both—had left them jagged cruelties in themselves, broken by their pain and unwilling to do aught else but force their pain upon others.

Once, Chishiro had thought it the place of the kami to choose when—if—a mortal should die. Now he had taken that choice into his bloodied hands, and he'd made it again and again.

And yet now

Far Corner creaked and splintered about them, and Chishiro couldn't hold his tongue.

"Who are *you* to choose?" Anger cut each word from his mouth, but his voice lacked heat. Chishiro asked as a man judged who merely judged in turn. "You're a shadow of yourself. A murderous ghost. You abjure mortals, but we're of Kamigawa as much as any root and flower—as any bird and wolf. You reject us now because you fear being hurt again. Didn't we choose that? To be hurt, together, for their sake. How could you let one man's spite so ruin you?"

Chishiro met Kaima's looming, leering eye, a black and drowning depth with his own unflagging stare. He thought, in the pit of his stomach: *We're going to kill each other.*

Then a crack ran through him, from skull through tail, and an image burst forth from it: *A clear spring muddied by a festering body, and his own reflection within the fetid water—because it was his own flesh, run through with roots that had become his crown and claws, that had poisoned the spring with his death.*

Oh, thought Chishiro, and he saw the realization rise in Kaima, too, who in that moment diminished, his rage skewered on his own self.

Oh, he thought again. *We already have.*

The orochi and the kami who had once been were no longer. Their bond as well was nothing but a memory, one they grieved together as the night grew still and suffocating. Kaima's roots no longer writhed. Far Corner remained standing, ruined though it was.

"I would right this, Kaima," Chishiro said, and he lowered his head as he offered up the blade that had been the heart of their bond. "I'll cut my life from you if I must."

He had seen himself, after all—the mortal flesh in that poisoned spring, entwined with Kaima's divinity, that which forced it to know putridity and wrongness.

A strange sound rolled out of Kaima as the kami seemed to tilt. The great spirit thudded to the fragmented ground, sending up clouds of dust around his sagging, kneeling form. He shuddered again, that sound still churning from within him. Laughter, Chishiro realized with a start. Old and tired. Sickly.

"I cannot be righted," said Kaima, spoken language new to his ancient throat. New, but a gift. An apology, wetly wheezing and eerily mortal. "I am as I am. Become what I become. It is possible, though, that I no longer wish to be that which I was."

Chishiro ached again to hear the shadow of that old inquisitive bent—the wonder that had driven the Kaima he had given himself to. The kami who had always searched for some way to reach those unlike himself.

Chishiro extended a tentative, empty palm toward the tremendous snout and was allowed to touch it. "Then how can I give you peace?" he asked.

"Is that my due?" asked Kaima.

"It might not be," said Chishiro. They stood in the wreckage of Kaima's rage, which was only the latest of his cruelties. And yet. "But I wish for you to have it."

"Then give yourself to me again," said Kaima, more quickly than he had yet managed any other words. His want was clear, and the need. Chishiro saw himself reflected in the black of Kaima's eye, and for

a moment, they shone together. “Remake me as I reforge you. Be my vigilance. My guard. My faith and bond.”

Chishiro thought: *I can't*. He thought: *I mustn't*. And he thought: *Why would you trust me again?*

But that, there, was the trick of a bond. Even when they lost hope in themselves, they could find it again, reflected in the other.

Chishiro once more raised the focal blade flat between them, and as he did, hairline fractures began to run down it. As the fragments fell away, one after the next, they revealed a light reborn.