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# Episode 1: Don't Go Past the Old Dark House

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From set *Duskmourn: House of Horror*

19. 08. 2024

*Many years ago ...*

Thin clouds hung hazy in the sky, blocking the light from both the greater and lesser suns, turning the street below into a twilight landscape of shifting shadows and uncertain dangers. A wind brushed along the walkways, a skirl of dry autumn leaves spinning orange and brown within its clutches. Despite the gloom, it was midday; most of the houses were empty, their inhabitants off at work or school, leaving the street to rest in uneasy slumber. The gray weight of winter was looming, but for now it was brittle, changeable fall, shifting between clement and chilling in an instant.

For the most part, the homes of this residential neighborhood were unremarkable, single-family structures, standing alone on their little plots of land, isolated in the presence of community. Their yards were tidy, their windows clean—a place for people who wanted to disappear into their surroundings, absorbed by their community. Three colors appeared over and over again on the homes' exteriors—beige, a pleasant sort of neutral green, and a blueish slate gray. Everything was clearly planned, designed for the comfort and conformity of the residents.

Everything, except the old house on the corner where the neighborhood drew nearest to the scrubby woods. This was a towering construct of ornamental flourishes and architectural oddities. Gargoyles peeped from the rafters, and a widow's walk circled the cupola on the roof, which stood slightly askew like a reminder that entropy would come to everyone, in time. The windows were covered in a film of dirt, like cataracts shrouding the house's eyes, and the garden was a riot of weeds and untrimmed hedges. No one lived there. No one had lived there for quite some time.

If the black-shingled roof and gray brick façade of the house hadn't been so out of place when set against their surroundings, it might have been possible to overlook the small sign that had been set up in the yard. It was a plain white piece of wood, with the word "SOLD" scribed across it in meticulous, red-painted letters.

A modern-looking carriage pulled up in front of the house, conspicuous in its lack of draft animals to pull it. Anyone who could afford one of the new, internally powered vehicles would surely fit in with this neighborhood ... if only they hadn't stopped in front of the neighborhood's greatest shame.

The carriage doors opened, and a small human family emerged into the wan afternoon light, clutching suitcases in their hands. As they stepped onto the walkway, the curtains in the front window fluttered, like a breeze had managed to work its way into the house, and the door swung open of its own accord, as if to welcome them home. The three shifted all but involuntarily toward each other, briefly unsettled for reasons none of them could articulate.

"The movers must have left it unlocked," said the man, with a note of seemingly sincere joviality in his voice. "Come along, now. It's not going to get any warmer out here."

He was the first through the gate into the yard, and the first up the porch steps, his wife following behind with a little grimace of distaste at the state of the flower beds. She would have that set right in short order, her expression said. Both of them were dressed to fit their new neighborhood, sedate clothing in respectable cuts and colors. Their teenage daughter, who walked slowly after them as she took in her surroundings, was better suited to the house in her elaborate, nearly antique clothing and cobwebby makeup that spread out around her eyes like an intricate stain. Her lips seemed set in a permanent downward curve as she followed her parents into the foyer, cluttered with trunks and boxes holding their worldly possessions.

She put her suitcase down at the bottom of the stairs and ran her hand along the polished oak banister, checking her fingers afterward for dust. They came away covered in glittering dust, like the scales from a moth's wings, and she rubbed them together before wiping her hand on her skirt and continuing deeper into the house, leaving her parents behind as she explored.

The doors she passed were closed, until she reached the basement. That door stood ajar, revealing a thin slice of stairs descending into the darkness. She paused there, as if she had seen something.

"Marina!" called her mother. "Come choose a room, we need to figure out where the furniture's going before the movers come back."

"Coming, Mom," she called back, reluctantly pulling her attention from the open door. Whatever was down there had waited this long. It could wait for her for just a little longer.

She didn't know what it was, but she already knew that it was patient. It could wait.

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*Now ...*

The sky was never truly dark on Kamigawa, not even above the clouds, not when Otawara was nearby in all its polished glory. Every speck of light from the moon above and the cities below reflected off the glorious Soratami stronghold, transforming glass and chrome into a soaring beacon. Starlight refracted from crystal sculptures and glassine spires, magnified into impossible beauty. This was the pinnacle of the moonfolk's art, and even the devastation wreaked by Realmbreaker hadn't been enough to dim its light. Repairs would be ongoing for years, if not decades, and yet still the city shone.

A shadow moved through the brightly lit streets, somehow avoiding the drones that swept the city in constant arcs. Phyrexia was gone, but the always security-oriented Soratami had yet to stand down from their increased measures. Pressing himself flat against an alley wall, Kaito Shizuki watched a drone soar by and thought, not for the first time, that *this would all have been so much easier if the artifacts recovered after the war had been stored in the Imperial Palace, instead of in the skies.*

But done was done, and he couldn't change it. All that mattered now was the mission and seeing it to its proper conclusion.

The ancient palace of Oboro had sustained some damage during the invasion. While it remained closed to outsiders, many of its treasures had been moved temporarily to a heavily guarded stronghold. Guards stood outside while others patrolled the halls and roof at regular intervals, attention turned outward, waiting for signs of danger. Kaito slipped past them one by one, clinging to the shadows and moving with a silence the moon itself might envy.

At last, he reached a secluded nook from which he could see a barred, guarded door reflected in the polished metal of a flight suit damaged in the invasion that was set up as a display. Breath silent and steady, he crouched there, waiting as the minutes ticked down. Finally, a moonfolk guard approached down the hall, waving the two who flanked the door away. The changing of the guard: it was the best time to move, almost always, for little irregularities could be overlooked in the face of choreographed chaos.

Sliding into the open, Kaito moved behind the guard and hit him on the back of the head with the pommel of his sword. The guard stiffened, then went limp. Kaito caught him before he could fall, lowering him gently to the floor. On Kaito's shoulder, Himoto adjusted her position, unhappy with the assault on a citizen of Kamigawa, even as she understood the need.

Kaito checked the guard's pulse, verifying that he had done no more damage than intended, then turned his attention to the door, extending a seeking spear of telekinetic energy. It slid into the locking mechanism, where he twisted and pulled until the lock clicked softly, and the perfectly weighted door swung far enough open for Kaito to ease his way inside.

The room beyond was a treasure trove of priceless Imperial treasures entrusted to the moonfolk, prototype technologies that had been judged too dangerous to remain accessible, riches beyond all measure. They would be moved back to Oboro and impossible to reach without giving grave insult to the moonfolk by the end of the next moon cycle; he had to act now.

Scanning the shelves as he moved, Kaito stepped into the room, eyes fixed on a lit pedestal at the very back, almost in a corner. An iron scroll rested there, seemingly unremarkable compared to the wonders around it. Attention fixed on the scroll, he moved quickly toward it, one hand reaching out to claim his prize—

Only to stop a foot from the pedestal, eyes catching on the final layer of security. A spider kami hung above the scroll in a delicate spirit web, which extended to wrap around the scroll itself. Any attempt to touch it would break the web and attract unwanted attention.

"Himoto," he breathed, voice barely more than a whisper in the still air, "can you unweave this web?"

She nodded and began to inch along his outstretched arm toward the web, intending to free the scroll. She was almost there when a sound broke the silence. A throat being cleared, immediately behind him.

Kaito spun, sword already assembled and in hand, only to find his blade caught against another. The white-haired woman standing behind him offered a slight smile, her sword still lifted to prevent him from completing a stroke. A gold and white dog stood at her heel, tail wagging, and Kaito almost smiled to see Yoshimaru, finally joyous again in the company of his beloved master.

"Hello, old friend," she said. "You're as good as you ever were. But when it comes to bladework, I'm still better."

Kaito stared. Asking the Emperor where she had been was a fool's game, as he knew from their most recent encounters; in the absence of her spark, she was finally free to truly learn the plane that was her birthright, no longer hurled across the Blind Eternities without choice or control. As such, she had asked Light-Paws to maintain her regency for now, while she walked among the people she was meant to lead until she understood them better. So he didn't ask. Instead, he took a deep breath, straightened, and lowered his sword.

"I—this isn't Imperial business," he blurted. "This was Tamiyo's. It should never have been confiscated."

"I'm not here to stop you," she said. "I came because I need your help. Nashi's in trouble."

Kaito froze. "And you think mid-robbery is the time to tell me? You need to work on your approach."

The Wanderer smiled. "Finish your business here quickly. I'll meet you on the palace roof." She took a step back, away from him. She was *always* moving away from him. "I'll see you soon."

She turned to leave the room, leaving Kaito staring after her. He returned his attention to the scroll as Himoto finished her journey to the web and began pulling it apart, piece by careful piece.

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The wind was cool as it blew across the palace rooftops, scented with cherry blossoms. The occasional pink petal danced on the breeze. Kaito stepped between them almost without thinking about it, the iron scroll a heavy weight in his pouch as he moved across the polished shingles. They used to play here when they were children, a boy and his companion, when they knew they would be subject and emperor one day, in the future, which was as far off as the moon.

The moon wasn't so far away now, and the future had long since arrived. Kaito hopped down onto one of the low, semi-hidden gardens that studded the palace roof, landing silently on the mossy stone ground. The Emperor was there, sitting under one of the cherry trees with one end of a length of silk rope in her hand. Yoshimaru worried at the other end, growling playfully.

She glanced up as Kaito approached. "You were successful?"

"I was." Kaito patted his pouch. "Genku will have his lost wife's scroll back in the library come morning. You say Nashi is in trouble?"

"We don't know for sure, but it seems very likely," said the Emperor. "He's missing. I came looking for you because we need someone who can still walk the planes unassisted to assemble a team that can retrieve him."

Kaito frowned. "The last team I was on didn't do so well. You remember."

"I do," she agreed. "But this is different. This isn't Phyrexia. And you did well enough that we're both still here."

Kaito glanced away. "Not everyone is," he said.

She had no answer to that.

Yoshimaru pulled the rope from her hands and whipped it back and forth, breaking the neck of whatever small opponent he imagined. This accomplished, he dropped the rope in front of Kaito and looked at him with meltingly hopeful eyes.

Kaito sighed and picked up one end of the rope, beginning to play tug of war with the dog.

"How long has Nashi been missing?" he asked.

"Three months."

Kaito stared at the Emperor. "That's not—I would have noticed! Or Genku would have told me!"

"I know we both feel responsible for Nashi," she said. "And at the same time, he blames us both for his mother's death, to varying degrees, and I think we both blame ourselves as well. It's been easy to keep away, thinking that was what he wanted. When was the last time you went to see him? Or spoke to Genku?"

Kaito paused. It had been ... "Months," he admitted. "I've been focused on recovering his mother's scrolls. They should never have been taken, and I hoped that having them might ease his heart a fraction, even if it could never be enough."

The Wanderer nodded. "You see? We were all grieving in our own ways, and he slipped away like ripples in the water. Three months ago, he told some of the other Reckoners that the scroll containing his mother's living memory had vanished. He was distraught."

"He should have come to me!"

"He was a heartbroken child, and when he started hearing her voice calling him to come and find her, he answered it. He followed her call to a door covered in strange carvings, one that had no place in Kamigawa. He was clever enough to send in a series of drones through it before attempting to enter on his own, and they transmitted footage from the other side before breaking, one by one. That was when he took a few of his closest friends and traveled through." The Wanderer paused. "They never came back out. Worse, the door vanished as soon as Nashi passed through. We have drone recordings of the area. I reviewed them and went to where the door should have been, but there was nothing, only a whisper on the edge of my planar awareness, like something terrible had brushed against our world in that spot."

"No one on Kamigawa could help me, so I was forced to look farther afield. I traveled the Omenpaths seeking the echo of that door, and I found it on Ravnica, being guarded by Niv-Mizzet."

"So, he controls access to this door?"

"Yes."

"And do you trust him?"

"No." The Emperor's smile was brief, and bitter. "I believe he wants to learn the secrets of that door far more than he wants to bring Nashi home. We're all just game pieces to him, things he can summon and sacrifice at will. But I believe he has the resources we need to do this, and it must be done."

Kaito sighed, weary to his bones. "I'll take the scroll to Genku tonight and ask him if he knows anything. Then I'll gather our team, and meet you ..." He paused. "Where should I meet you?"

"There's a stable Omenpath near Eiganjo that will take me to Ravnica's Tenth District. Niv-Mizzet is waiting for us there." She reached over, taking the end of the rope from his hand. "Do you know where you're going?"

Kaito nodded without hesitation. "I have a good idea where to start," he said.

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Tyvar Kell, elf prince of Kaldheim, stood shirtless in the snow, feet set in a warrior's stance, a broad smile on his face as he stared down the massive wolf in front of him. It was alone, with no pack to come to its aid. If it had been part of a pack, it wouldn't have been preying on the village for the past several weeks, and he wouldn't have been called to glorious battle.

The wolf growled. Tyvar laughed.

"Well, beast?" he called. "Come at me!"

The wolf, which was easily twice his size, leapt, and Tyvar swung a mighty left hook at the soft underside of its jaw, the power of his punch enhanced by his body becoming living stone midway through the motion. The wolf was knocked backward into the snow, landing without a sound. Tyvar scowled, body bleeding back into flesh.

"Get up," he said. "This is only a hero's battle if you last more than one hit."

"I have to admit, you playing dogcatcher is *not* what I expected," said a voice behind him, welcome and familiar.

Tyvar turned, beaming once again. "Kaito!" he cried, jubilant to the last. "What brings you to Kaldheim, my friend? Seeking grand adventure and glorious danger?"

"Not so much," said Kaito. "I'm not really in the market for danger, glorious or otherwise. I was hoping I could convince you to come and help me with a little problem ..."

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Some hours later, Tyvar and Kaito sat inside the feast hall, platters of meat and cheese before them, tankards of hot cider close to hand. The villagers had already skinned the great wolf and hauled its body away; the sheep it had eaten would have clothed many of them for a season. Now, it would serve in place of the missing members of the flock and warm the people through the winter snow.

Tyvar nodded with deep solemnity at Kaito's words, brow furrowed in concentration. "So, you want me to travel via Omenpath to the city of Ravnica, there to pass through a mysterious door into possible doom?"

"That's about the sum of it, yeah."

"When do we leave?"

"I'm supposed to put together a team," said Kaito. "I have stealth handled. The Emperor is planning to accompany us, and she can handle navigation. We're both fair fighters, but you're a one-man wrecking crew. Niv-Mizzet is all but certain to want one of his own people to accompany us; that gives us a scientist. The rest of our former strike team is ..."

"Friend Kaya would come, if we knew where to find her, but I fear she may be done with adventures for the moment," said Tyvar. He didn't mention the others. There wasn't any point. Picking up his tankard, he took a swig of cider and asked in a speculative tone, "What needs are yet unfulfilled by the gifts among us?"

"We could use someone with defensive skills," said Kaito. "Someone who's better at shielding and distance engagements. I can't be our only ranged fighter."

Tyvar looked at him gravely. "You anticipate much trouble, then?"

"Better safe than sorry."

To his surprise, Tyvar roared with laughter. "Wonderful!" he said. "More trouble is more drama in the telling! I think I may have just the hero that you need—and best of all, they're currently on Kaldheim, so you won't have to go far."

"You vouch for them?"

"I do. And between you and I, they need to get out more. A trip to a terrifying new place filled with unknown dangers may be precisely the solution to their doldrums."

"Is this someone I've met?"

"I don't believe so." Tyvar's mouth twisted briefly. "Niko Aris. They were a Planeswalker, before ..."

Before whatever had changed. Before so many sparks blew out like candles in a stiff wind, leaving their former bearers fumbling without a light to see by. Before Phyrexia, before the sylex ...

Before they failed.

"I'm sure they'll be a great asset," said Kaito. "Where can we find them?"

Tyvar gestured toward a particularly raucous corner of the feast hall, where a large cluster of local hunters had formed. They had three rough-hewn wooden targets propped against the wall and were alternating throwing small hand axes at their marks, missing as often as not and chopping chunks out of the feast hall's support beams. As Kaito watched, a particularly burly hunter with his beard pulled into three neat, oiled braids stepped forward, weighing an axe in his hand, and tossed it almost nonchalantly toward the smallest target.

It struck dead center, and the other hunters cheered.

"Niko?" asked Kaito.

"No," said Tyvar, laughing. "That's Trygve. His skill with throwing axes is as impressive as his skill with a bow is not. He's a terrible hunter, but a fine sportsman." He nodded at a slimmer figure seated at one of the tables near the axe-throwers. Half their head had been shaved; the hair that remained was long, straight, and dark at the root, paling to silver at the end. As the contestants roared at Trygve's throw, the figure stood, moving smoothly through the crowd, and picked up a pair of axes, one in either hand.

They exchanged a few brief words with someone Kaito assumed was running the game, then tossed both axes at the target, one right after the other. The first struck the handle of Trygve's axe, splitting it lengthwise. The second repeated the trick, splitting the stranger's axe right down the middle.

Tyvar laughed and waved the figure over, receiving a raised finger signaling him to wait. Several purses changed hands, and then the stranger was moving toward their table, looking unmoved by their own impressive victory.

"Kaito, my friend, this is my friend Niko Aris," said Tyvar, once the stranger was close enough. "They're originally from Theros, and they're about three nights of gameplay from getting us both thrown out of this feasting hall."

"Only because you insist on wading in when the locals get tired of losing," said Niko. "I can handle my own fights."

"Yes, but when you keep starting them for me, all tempting and enthusiastic, I can't resist joining in." Tyvar beamed at Niko, who scowled at him in response.

"Ah," said Kaito, who didn't want to get stuck in the middle of a brawl, however much Tyvar might have enjoyed it. "You seem to have quite the aim."

"I never miss." Niko pulled what looked like a gleaming shard of magic out of the air, holding it above their palm. "The invasion didn't take that away from me, at least."

"Friend Niko, like myself, no longer feels the Blind Eternities in their bones," said Tyvar.

Niko's scowl deepened. "And I suppose you do?" they asked Kaito, voice sharp.

"I do," said Kaito. "I, and someone I know well, need your help, on Ravnica. Will you come?"

"We found the Omenpath that will carry us there just last week," said Tyvar, joyfully. "Come, Niko! Will you leave these unworthy opponents and follow me into certain danger?"

Niko looked at the shard in their hand, then shrugged and flung it underhand at the axe-throwers' largest target. It embedded itself squarely in the center, gleaming like a sliver of starlight.

"I may as well," said Niko. "Can't let the Planeswalkers have all the fun."

Kaito stepped out of forever onto the streets of Ravnica, looking up at the bruise-purple sky, and wondered—not for the first time—why he retained his spark when so many others didn't. Tyvar was untroubled, and the Emperor relieved, but Niko was clearly angry, bitter on a level Kaito couldn't fully comprehend, having never lost such an essential piece of himself. The former Planeswalker from Theros resented being made less than they had been, even if their fascinating shard magic remained intact, even if the Omenpaths meant they weren't trapped on any one plane. They had trusted in the Blind Eternities, and they had been betrayed.

Kaito couldn't entirely blame them, even as he slowly turned, looking for someone he could ask to take him to this "living Guildpact," whatever that was. He paused at the sight of a slender female human barely taller than Nashi standing at the entrance of a nearby alley, fiddling with a small geometric device with a crystal front that oscillated through colors, like it was somehow reading the local energy levels. Kaito stopped a few feet away from her, frowning.

After a moment, she glanced up, and jumped. "Oh—oh! Hello! You must be Kaito! We've been waiting for you!"

Kaito nodded. "I must be. You are ...?"

"Oh! Um." She closed her device, collapsing it into a disk and sliding it into her pocket before offering Kaito her hand. "I'm Zimone. I'm a student? Quandrix College, at Strixhaven University. I'm here to work with the Izzet League on my graduate thesis on theoretical extraplanar spaces. The dragon asked me to wait for you."

"Why?"

"Oh. We've been expecting you." Zimone paused, adjusting her glasses. She seemed to realize that wasn't enough information, then continued: "I'm supposed to take you to him."

"We'll have to wait for my companions. They're traveling via Omenpath."

Zimone looked at him politely, clearly not understanding why that was a problem, and Kaito realized she lacked the certain haunted cast to her eyes that he associated with former Planeswalkers. For her, the advent of the Omenpaths had been the beginning of a bright new era, not the ending of a beloved older one. Together, they turned to watch the square.

Time passed. Eventually, Tyvar came bounding out of another alley, enthusiasm undimmed as ever.

"Why isn't that man wearing a shirt?" asked Zimone.

Kaito just laughed.

Tyvar hurried to join them. "Well met, fond companion! And new face." He turned to Zimone, bowing slightly. "To whom do I speak?"

"Zimone Wola," she said, sounding more flustered than flattered.

Niko emerged from the same alley, walking like they were seasick and on the verge of keeling over. Slightly greenish with inexplicable nausea, they moved to join the trio.

"Niko, this is Zimone, of Strixhaven," said Kaito. "Zimone, this is Niko. They're originally from Theros, but presently hail from Kaldheim."

"A pleasure," said Niko.



Zimone clapped her hands. "All right, follow me," she said, and scurried off down the alley. The others exchanged a look, shrugged, and followed her.

The alley ended in a small courtyard, dominated by a massive red dragon lounging on the far side like a cat, massive wings furled against his sides. Zimone led them straight to him.

"Mr. Guildpact, I found the search team," she said, as they drew closer.

"So, you did," said the dragon, rising. "Excellently done, Miss Wola. Kaito Shizuki, I presume."

"Yes, sir," said Kaito, bowing. "These are my selections for the retrieval team, Tyvar Kell and Niko Aris."

Niv-Mizzet nodded, massive head generating a brief wind as it moved. "Very well. Follow me."

A line of gleaming white wards appeared ahead of them. Kaito paused. "Azorius work," said Niv-Mizzet. "They'll let us pass."

"Wonderful," said Tyvar, though it wasn't clear he understood what that meant. Then: "Are you to be our host? I have always wished to speak in more depth with a dragon."

"If we have the time, I will gladly speak with you," said Niv-Mizzet dryly. "You're not the first ones here, of course. The Wanderer returned yesterday, following another of your companions."

Kaito blinked. "Our companions?" he asked.

"Yes. A young girl, younger than Zimone here, who calls herself Aminatou. She said you would need her help to succeed."

Niko stopped dead, staring. One by one, the others drifted to a halt and turned to look at them. "Niko?" asked Tyvar.

"Aminatou?" asked Niko.

Niv-Mizzet nodded. "Yes."

"The child who spins cocoons of fate."

Niv-Mizzet blew a thin plume of smoke, looking thoughtful. "That would fit with what she's been seen to do so far, so I believe yes."

"I don't believe in fate."

"But fate believes in you," said Tyvar, clapping Niko on the shoulder. "Come, let us disbelieve this stranger to her face."

They walked on. Kaito frowned again as he spotted a sign on the wall, marked with the sigil of the Boros Legion, warning of necromantic energy in the area and ordering an evacuation. Niv-Mizzet saw him looking and blew another puff of smoke.

"There's no such contamination, of course," he said. "We just needed to clear the area to conduct our research."

They stepped across the wards, which warmed their skins for a moment before letting them pass harmlessly on. Niv-Mizzet continued without slowing until a woman in clothing devoid of guild insignia appeared down a side street, waving one arm for his attention.

"That will be Madame Etrata," he said. "She and her employer have been handling the arrangement of the researchers who will be remaining here, on Ravnica, while you undertake your work." He led them toward the woman, until they were close enough for her to speak.

"You're late," she said bluntly, with none of the respect Kaito would have expected her to extend to a massive flying predator.

"I'm precisely on time, now that our incursion team is here," he protested, with a growl of warning.

Etrata shrugged.

Niv-Mizzet blew a plume of smoke. "You know, I had hoped your level of respect would rub off on Proft, rather than the other way around."

The group continued down the side street she had emerged from, reaching another courtyard. This one was larger than the first, and more secluded. Researchers in protective gear, marked by the sigils of the Izzet and Simic, bustled to and fro, aiming incomprehensible devices at an unassuming door. A tent had been set up nearby, where the Wanderer sat with Proft, Yoshimaru, and an unfamiliar young girl Kaito assumed to be Aminatou. It was strange to see an actual child here, but he'd seen plenty of strange things before.

The Wanderer stood as they approached, leaving the tent to join them. "Is it time?" she asked.

"Yes," said Niv-Mizzet. "Come along."

Aminatou trailed after her, Yoshimaru close behind, and Niv-Mizzet led the group through the crowd of researchers to the door. Signs surrounded it, declaring "DANGER" and "KEEP OUT" in dozens of languages, only some of which Kaito recognized. Niv-Mizzet gestured grandly to the door. "This is why we're here," he said with sonorous importance.

Tyvar frowned. "This?" he asked. "But it's just a door."

Indeed, there was nothing visibly special about the door, which was made of stained cherry and decorated with an intricate design of carved moths and branches. It looked perfectly innocuous, not radiating hostile magic or anything else of the sort.

And yet, Aminatou gasped and recoiled as her eyes locked on the door. For a moment, her fear and revulsion made her look younger than her actual age, like a terrified toddler who had no business anywhere near this situation. The Wanderer patted her reassuringly on the shoulder, and Aminatou drew back against her, Yoshimaru standing in front of her as if to defend her from the door.

"It hears us," whispered Aminatou. "Mind your words, or it will know our plans."

*That was an unsettling idea,* thought Kaito.

"Come with me," said Niv-Mizzet. He led them back a bit, to the tent. It was a tight squeeze with the dragon among them, but they managed, cramming themselves into an uncomfortable closeness.

"Is it an Omenpath?" asked Niko.

A man in a long brown coat, who had joined Etrata during their return from the door, scoffed. "It has none of the hallmarks of an Omenpath. If it is one, it's entirely unique. We've never seen anything like it."

"We have recordings from inside, Mr. Proft," said Zimone, before Niko could react to the man's tone. "Nashi's drones sent the footage back before they failed. It's a house."

"A house?" asked Kaito.

She nodded. "Just a house, perfectly normal, if in need of a good cleaning service. A little run-down, possibly abandoned, and possessed of some very strange angles. I think space is distorted inside, somehow." She paused, then beamed. "I can't wait to get a closer look."

Kaito met Tyvar's eyes and nodded. This was the researcher he had predicted Niv-Mizzet would embed among them. "All right, Miss Zimone," he said. "I'm not entirely comfortable with Aminatou joining us, however, given her age."

"I can't," said Aminatou. "What waits for you on the other side of that door would be infinitely more dangerous if it managed to get its hands on me. No. I stay here. This is where you need me. This is where I help you."

"How?" asked Niko.

Aminatou looked at them calmly. "I'm sorry, destiny-called; I understand why you hate me. But my magic and the magic of the house deflect each other, like water deflecting oil. Because of this, I can send you through the door with fateshifters." She paused.

"What are those?" asked Zimone.

Aminatou shrugged. "Tokens, really. Bursts of my power in physical form. They can be used to evade horrifying ends."

Niko straightened, anger coloring their features. "What?" they demanded. "You can do that? Are our lives only game pieces to you?"

Their anger seemed to jump to Tyvar, although not as brightly: "If you have the power to show us these answers, why did you let us march against Phyrexia without them? Why did we lose so many of our own in a fight you could have spared us?"

"Because that's not how my power works," said Aminatou. "It was hard enough to make these. When you make a choice that would lead to your certain death, everyone nearby who holds a token will see the outcome, feel like it's real, and then snap back to the moment before you made the decision, giving you a chance to make it again. But the vision is short—no more than a minute—and only works once for any single person. Even before my spark left me, my power wasn't without limits. I won't force you to take them. I don't take people's choices away like that. But, if you refuse my aid, at least one of you won't come back. That's certain."

The group exchanged looks. Finally, the Wanderer stepped forward.

"We are grateful for your help," she said. "Only the foolish refuse aid freely given."

"Then take these," said Aminatou. She reached into a pouch at her waist and removed a handful of roughly carved figures, none larger than her index finger, and each shaped to give the vague impression of a person's face and form. She handed them around the members of the team, giving the Wanderer a second. "For your friend."

"Thank you," said the Wanderer. "Will you mind Yoshimaru for me? Danger is no place for such a dear and loyal companion."

Kaito, who intended to walk with her into danger, raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

"Take these," said Etrata, picking up a square device from a stack of similar and offering it to Niko. "They'll monitor the energies in the house and help us build a better idea of what sets it so apart."

One by one, they took the monitoring devices and approached the door. It swung open as the Wanderer reached for the knob. On the other side was a foyer, some kind of hallway, but glimpsed through a membrane of strange, fuzzing blue energy. One by one, the group filed inside.

The last thing any of them saw before the door slammed shut was Aminatou, one hand clenched in Yoshimaru's fur, standing with Etrata, Proft, and Niv-Mizzet as she watched them go. They looked like they were much farther away than they should have been. Then the door closed, and the House was all.



Art by: Borja Pindado