

Episode 3: An Unexpected Alliance

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From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

25. 01. 2022

Sunlight spilled through the trees, rippling over the bog. Kaito didn't wander from the road. He knew even the most innocent looking flower could be deadly in the swamp.

The nezumi had never made it a secret they didn't like visitors; using the poisonous landscape to their advantage was the perfect deterrent. And under normal circumstances, Kaito would never have risked venturing so deep into their territory.

But the key to finding Tezzeret was with the nezumi.



Art by: Bryan Sola

After Tameshi's death, Kaito had spent weeks tracking down every scrap of information he could find on Tezzeret. He'd gone to Otawara's libraries, scoured every archive, and spoke with some of Kamigawa's most revered Living Historians.

Tezzeret did not exist on any data drive.

But he *did* exist in a memory.

A Historian who performed in one of Towashi's oldest theaters spoke of a village inhabited by the Nezumi-Katsuro gang. It had burned down five years before, attacked by forces that were never held accountable.

One of the survivors was a child called Nashi, whose parents had tried to get him to safety when the attack began. Nashi had only made it to the edge of the village when he watched in terror as his mother was burned alive and sparks of fire ignited every hut around him.

The nezumi village burned through the night, and after the fire cleared and the survivors gathered near the ashes, Nashi listened to the adults whisper the name of the man who ordered the attack.

They called him Tezzeret—and he'd been betrayed by his subordinates, who left him braindead in the burned village for the nezumi to find. They kept Tezzeret until the day a dragon arrived and bargained for his body.

The nezumi feared retribution from Tezzeret's organization. They were afraid that if anyone found out there were survivors, someone might return to finish the job. So, the nezumi did the only thing they could—they helped the child become a ghost. Then they became ghosts, too.

They could hide for the rest of their lives, but Nashi had no surviving family. It was kinder to send him far from the swamp, where Tezzeret's organization would never be able to find him and he could start over.

But the nezumi from the neighboring villages would not talk to Kaito. Not just about Nashi, but about *anything*. They shouted curses and slammed their doors and even threatened to poison him if he didn't leave. Judging by the number of toxic flowers along the road, he didn't doubt they were serious.

Kaito had no friends in the swamp. But there were answers here, and he wasn't ready to turn back before he found them.

Adjusting his tanuki mask, he followed the broken road, a translucent strip of energy, across the murky water. It was enough to keep Kaito dry, but he eyed the glowing yellow cracks nervously. If the road gave way, there was nothing to keep him above ground.

Being eaten alive by poisonous eels wasn't exactly the end Kaito had pictured for himself. Not that he had an aversion to eel; he was quite fond of them when they were roasted with sesame oil and wrapped in rice and seaweed.

Kaito hurried to the next shoreline. Massive roots protruded from the ground like a mess of tangled yarn, blocking the glowing road ahead. A smaller footpath was all that remained, covered in pebbles and flattened mulch.

Kaito followed the trail until he reached a village. It was smaller than some of the others, with houses made up of straw roofs and sliding paper doors. Houses that would easily fall apart if the wind swept in too fast.

Or a fire, Kaito thought grimly.

What happened to Nashi's family was violent. Maybe even vengeful.

Kaito needed to know why—and how it connected to Tameshi, and the monster he saw at the docks.

How it connected to the *emperor*.

A wide dirt path cut through the center of the village. At the far end was a junkyard full of metal scraps and outdated bits of machine.

It was long rumored that nezumi in the swamps were experimenting with unregulated tech. They often traded their creations with the Okiba Reckoners—a biker gang that was exclusively nezumi—in exchange for a near-constant flow of stolen goods.

But Kaito was a Futurist, whose core beliefs were to push the limits of technology for the greater good.

Who was he to judge what the nezumi got up to?

An older gray nezumi stood behind a wooden fence, the fur around her mouth peppered in silver. Her claws were wrapped around the handle of a gardening tool, the serrated blade shaped like a pincer and attached to a metal box that thrummed with energy.

“You’re not welcome here,” she barked.

Kaito hesitated, glancing at the jagged blade. It could easily be used as a weapon.

The nezumi narrowed her dark pink eyes. “It’s for harvesting mushrooms. Cuts the stems just right to keep the spores from releasing.” Her nose twitched. “If you’re here to check our permits—”

“I’m not,” Kaito said quickly, holding his hands in front of him, hoping to show he wasn’t a threat. Not currently, anyway.

His enemies were more monster than rodent.

She sniffed at the air. “Humans don’t travel all the way out here unless it’s for their own benefit.” She flashed her yellow teeth. “We’ve never been worth the inconvenience.”

“Your stolen goods and illegal side projects are not my concern. I’m here for information.” Kaito let the silence follow. It was a risk to call out the nezumi so brazenly, but he’d dealt with enough of them in Towashi to know they respected brutal honesty far more than sugar-coated words.

Most of the time.

A dark brown nezumi appeared on the nearby porch, long tail trailing behind him. He glared at his neighbor, hissing violently. “You share too much with this stranger, Mud-Tail.”

The elder nezumi snapped her jaws in response. “Go inside and mind your own business, before one of these mushrooms takes a detour through your house.”

The neighbor snarled slightly, hackles rising at the back of his neck, but he took a step back in submission.

“I’m looking for someone called Nashi.” Kaito glanced between them. “He used to live a few miles from here when he was a child.”

At the sound of his name, several kami poked their heads out from beneath the neighbor’s porch. Kami that unmistakably belonged to the swamp, with their collection of floating toadstools and poisonous flowers spinning around their heads. One stared up at Kaito with six enormous frog-like eyes. Four bubbles circled around him, with tadpoles wiggling anxiously inside.

The nezumi may have been experienced with lying, but the kami were not.

Beneath the porch, they began to whisper to one another. Mud-Tail cut them a sharp look, and they retreated into the shadows.

She shrugged at Kaito. “Never heard of ‘em.”

Kaito glanced at the roof. The straw was thinning and frayed near the corners. “Looks like you’ve lived here a long time. Long enough to remember the fire.”

Her tail lifted behind her, swaying hypnotically. “The humans didn’t help us then. Why would we ever help you now?”

“Maybe because of my good looks and charming personality?” When the nezumi didn’t react, Kaito lifted his shoulders. “Look—I only want to talk to him.”

Mud-Tail leaned the wooden handle against the gate and moved for the house. “I don’t think that’s really your choice.” The nezumi was nearly to her front door when she snapped, “Take your questions back to wherever it is you came from. We don’t want you here.”

It was the politest dismissal he’d had all day.

When she vanished inside, Kaito glanced at the stranger still on the porch. His eyes were darker—more onyx than ruby.

“I know the nezumi hid him. I know you want to protect him.” Kaito’s fingers were restless, dancing at his sides. “But what he knows it could help *all* of us on Kamigawa.”

“I’ve never bitten a human before. We stopped attacking with our teeth to appear more civilized to you humans. We thought it might change things—show you we were equals, not animals.” He flashed a sneer. A warning. “But some of us are tired of pretending to be something we’re not.”

It would only take Kaito half a second to pull his sword from his back. Not to mention he could pelt the nezumi with poisonous mushrooms merely by flicking his fingers.

It would’ve been the most fun he’d had all week. But it wouldn’t get him information. For that, Kaito needed to play nice.

Or at least pretend to.

He took a step back. “Thanks for your time.” Kaito turned from the village, feeling the eyes of a dozen nezumi on his back.

The glowing road appeared ahead, and Kaito reached for his mask, letting the metal shift into a small tanuki. He didn’t stop walking, even when Himoto, the drone, launched from his hand and disappeared through the nearby trees, back in the direction of the village.

Kaito walked until he was certain he couldn’t be seen.

Ducking behind a willow tree, he kept his distance from every unfamiliar plant and pressed a finger to his temple. Using his drone’s camera, he flew across the bog and entered the village from the side. The drone took cover in the wilted plants, sights locked onto the Kami of the Wetland that trudged clumsily toward another hut, bubbles floating around it with urgency.

The drone chased after it, careful to stay out of sight, and followed the roof toward a smokeless chimney before diving for the hearth.

Kaito listened to the croak of the kami as it shuffled into the living room, relaying a barely audible message to whoever was inside.

“I know,” a raspy voice retorted. “Our village isn’t the first he’s visited—and the more he speaks Nashi’s name, the more danger he puts him in.”

The kami croaked again. This time, Kaito caught a word.

Otawara.

“Yes. I’ll warn her. But there’s no point sending a drone before nightfall—he’d be able to track it too easily in the daylight,” the figure said in a hushed voice. “For now, we just need to make sure our silence is all we give the human.”

The tanuki drone lifted back up the chimney, settled behind the stones, and waited.

By the time Kaito reached the edge of the swamp, the sun had set. With the feed from the drone still live, he watched as the nezumi's drone folded itself into the shape of a rabbit and set off into the darkness.

The tanuki followed, and Kaito headed in the direction of Otawara.

It was nearly dawn when Kaito reached the city in the sky. The nezumi's drone had vanished in one of the crowded neighborhoods, but it didn't matter. Kaito would search the streets by foot.

After reuniting with his tanuki mask, he moved across the park, scanning the houses in the distance. It wasn't until he turned into a narrow moss garden that he realized he wasn't alone.

A shadow stretched across the grass. In an instant, Kaito's hand was around the hilt of his sword, and he swung it forward and spun to face the approaching figure.

A moonfolk hovered in front of him with barely a flash of emotion behind her purple eyes. In her hand was an unrolled scroll, with several more bundled in a satchel at her waist.

Kaito twisted his sword, and the blade's serrated edge appeared only for a moment before a dozen star-shaped blades broke apart from one another, held in place by his telekinesis.

The woman briefly glanced at the weapon. "It is not my wish to hurt you."

"Give it a minute," Kaito said, voice smooth. "You hardly know me."

The stranger glided to the left, moving like a silent breeze. "Your search must end today. Please go home in peace, and do not speak the child's name again."

"Sorry," Kaito replied. "I'm not going anywhere until me and the kid have a conversation."

She dipped her chin. "A conversation does not require so many blades."

"Kind of depends on how willing the person is to talk, doesn't it?"

Her jaw tensed. Clearly Kaito hit a nerve.

He had no intention of harming the nezumi child, but he also wasn't in the mood to explain himself to a stranger—or take orders from one.

"If there is information you need, I am certain you can find it elsewhere," she said, voice even. "But you will stay away from my family."

"Sounds like there's a threat laced in there somewhere," he noted, fist tightening. He'd never seen scrolls like hers before, but if they were magic, he wasn't about to take any chances.

Her feet hovered several inches above the moss. "Violence is not my intention."

Kaito cracked a lethal smirk. "You snuck up behind me with an ultimatum and a floating scroll—so forgive me if I don't believe you." He flicked the handle of his blade, and each star shot toward the woman's unrolled parchment.

She spun, swift and graceful, and opened her palm at her side so that the scroll floated beside her.

The throwing stars arced through the sky before returning to Kaito, glinting beneath the sun. With a grunt, Kaito charged toward the slender moonfolk, hoping to distract her with hand-to-hand combat. She skipped back like she was dancing across the air, arms spread like wings as she remained out of Kaito's reach.

Launching himself forward, he swung hard, but the woman was fast. She ducked before twirling to the side, hands raised like it was merely a part of a performance.

Kaito's eyes were locked onto the floating scroll. With a mental nudge, every star went sailing toward the parchment, chasing it in circles as the woman used her own telekinesis to pull it away. Kaito swung his leg around to meet her, but she shot up into the sky. He caught his balance, reaching toward the razor stars still circling around the garden, and summoned them back in line with his sword. He watched as the woman's eyes drifted back to the scroll.

If he only had a moment, he was going to take it.

Kaito commanded the stars to attack once more, aiming not for the woman or the scrolls, but for the rope attached to her waist. Only one of them found their target, but it was enough. The rope snapped, and the satchel began to slip toward the ground.

Sweeping an arm beside her, she caught the rope before the scrolls fell, but the distraction left her first scroll unguarded. Kaito reached out a hand, and it sailed through the air and into his fist.

The woman blinked, and a second roll of parchment drifted into the air and unraveled in front of her.

The moment she read the words, Kaito felt his entire body stiffen. His sword fell from his hand, and the rogue blades followed, clattering into the moss like broken toys. The scroll floated upwards, and by the time the stranger's feet touched the ground, it had returned to the satchel with all the others.

Kaito couldn't move. His bones felt like iron, heavy and unbending. Straining against the magic, he gritted his teeth. "I'm not trying to hurt the kid."

She tilted her head curiously, and when she spoke, her ethereal voice sounded only in Kaito's mind. *You are telling the truth, and for that, I have only gratitude. But my son is not to be found. By anyone.*

"Your—your son?" Kaito tried to turn his head when the woman moved beside him, but he remained still as stone. Only his eyes could trail her.

She nodded curtly before plucking one of the scrolls from her case and unrolling it.

"What are you going to do to me?" Kaito asked, cheeks going hot. He was still thinking fast, hoping for a way out of this.

"You needn't be afraid of a simple memory spell." With her mind, she added, *Sending you on a different path will keep you and my family safe. Do not worry—you won't remember any of this.*

Kaito's stomach felt hollow. After all he'd done to get here to find the emperor and bring her home

He couldn't let it all be for nothing. She couldn't take his *memories*.

His words were fueled by reckless anger. "I'm trying to save the emperor, and your son may be the only person in Kamigawa who can help!"

The woman floated in front of him, mouth turning into a flat line. "You are mistaken. Nashi knows nothing of the emperor."

"But he knows about Tezzeret," Kaito said, still fighting against the paralysis spell.

There was hardly any color to her face already, but in that moment, she appeared ashen. Her eyes studied Kaito—searching for a sliver of falsehood—but found none.

She hovered with the truth for a stretch of time before gently tucking the scroll away. At once, movement shuddered back through Kaito's body, and he collapsed to his knees.

With a groan, he grabbed his fallen sword and stood, muscles aching. After summoning every blade from the moss, he sheathed the reformed sword at his back and turned to face the moonfolk.

“So,” Kaito said, still panting slightly. “Are you going to tell me how you know about Tezzeret, or are we going to have to fight again?”

“Your arrogance is part of why you lost the battle.” She waved a slender hand. “It makes you unfocused.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I mean, most people call me Kaito, but ‘unfocused’ works, too.” Eiko and Light-Paws would almost certainly agree.

There was a faint hint of amusement in her stare. “I am Tamiyo,” she said, voice as unwavering as steel. “And perhaps you and I are meant to be allies.”

Kaito soaked in the details of the room. Watercolor paintings were dotted around the space. Landscapes that might seem fantastical to the people of Kamigawa.

But Kaito recognized them. They were real places. Other *planes*.

He turned back to Tamiyo, who filled two cups with green tea before setting the porcelain pot carefully on a low table.

Kaito blinked. “You’re a planeswalker.” It wasn’t a question.

Tamiyo sat in the opposite chair and lifted the cup to her lips, blowing gently at the steam. “I believe only a fellow planeswalker could make that discovery simply by looking at a few amateur paintings.”

Kaito knew there were other planeswalkers in the Multiverse. But he had no idea there was another on Kamigawa. His gaze landed on the leatherbound books and bundles of scrolls scattered across most of the surfaces.

Understanding dawned on him. “You’re gathering information.” He frowned. “Why?”

Tamiyo sipped her tea. “I believe it is my duty to preserve the truths of the Multiverse.” Lifting her brow, she added, “Knowledge helps us grow—as individuals and as a society. It is a gift I do not take for granted.”

Kaito held his cup between his palms, letting the warmth move through him. “Tell me about Tezzeret. Who is he? What does he want?”

Tamiyo started to reply when her demeanor shifted abruptly. Her eyes landed somewhere behind Kaito, and her face softened into a smile. “I believe you know of my son, Nashi.”



Art by: Valera Lutfullina

Kaito turned to find the young nezumi standing in the doorway. With bright white fur and gray spots, he wore a black leather jacket with sharp cuts and silver rings along the edge of his ear.

Nashi took one glance at Kaito before his face lit up. “Cool mask! Is that a drone?” He held up a piece of hardware that flickered with pixels. “I’ve been trying to build one myself with recycled parts. You know—make something old new again, and all that. Did you build yours? What kind of chip did you use to link your camera? Do you use micro implants, or—” Nashi froze for a moment before grinning sheepishly. “Sorry. That’s probably too many questions at once.”

Kaito pulled his mask from his head, letting her fold again and again until she looked like an origami tanuki.

“Woah,” Nashi said, beaming. “Nice.”

Tamiyo lifted her chin, eyes full of gentle humor. “Did you need something, Nashi?”

He held up the metal. “I need an old data chip. I fried mine trying to connect a piece of broken hardware. Can I go to the second-hand market?”

“Take Rumiyo and Hiroku with you. And try to refrain from filling up on dumplings and coconut buns before dinner.” Tamiyo smiled at her son, but her thoughts were very much inside Kaito’s head. *Don’t ask him about Tezzeret. Most of what I know was kept a secret from him, to protect his heart. I do not wish to remind him of a darkness he’s tried so hard to escape.*

Kaito nodded lightly and grinned at Nashi. “Good luck with the drone.”

Nashi flashed a toothy grin and hurried back out of the room.

When his footsteps faded and he was out of earshot, Kaito set his cup down and stared at Tamiyo. “Tell me everything.”

So, she did.

Kaito learned that Tezzeret wasn’t just a planeswalker—he was the planeswalker with the metal arm. The man Kaito saw in Kyodai’s chamber all those years ago.

The man who had something to do with the emperor's disappearance.

Kaito's eyes stung with salt. He felt an ache in his chest—a mixture of grief and clarity that was too overwhelming to carry in such a short moment. But he listened anyway, even as his head swayed and he felt the plane tilting.

Tamiyo explained that Tezzeret had come to Kamigawa to acquire magical artifacts from the swamp near Nashi's village. But when the nezumi refused to sell their land, Tezzeret retaliated. Things escalated quickly, and the entire village burned as a result.

Kaito blinked slowly like he was gathering his thoughts from a far-off place. "But what was he doing with Kyodai? What does he *want*?"

"I believe he is researching kami. I do not know what his true intentions are, but I am determined to find out." Tamiyo's voice sharpened. "It is not my wish to intervene in the matters of other planes. But Tezzeret has brought his experiments here, to my home. My family is everything to me, and far more important than my desire for neutrality."

Kaito stilled. "You're going to try and stop him?"

"Not until I have learned all there is to know about his research."

"Threatening kami and kidnapping the emperor wasn't enough?" Kaito shook his head, cheeks flushed as his emotions began to take over. "I don't need to understand him—I want to know where he took my friend."

Tamiyo glanced away momentarily, and Kaito sensed the unease in her eyes.

There was a desperate rasp in his voice. "What haven't you told me?"

Her gaze drifted back to him like a tumbling wave. "There is a planeswalker called the Wanderer whom I met once on Ravnica. She told me about Tezzeret and the weapon he was prototyping."

Kaito frowned. "What kind of weapon?"

"It is called a Reality Chip, and it may be dangerous not just to Kamigawa, but to multiple planes. The night the emperor went missing, Tezzeret had gone to the palace to try and control Kyodai using a prototype of the chip." Tamiyo blinked solemnly. "It did not work. Not in the way Tezzeret had intended. Instead, the chip set off the Wanderer's spark."

Kaito's heart battered against his ribs. When he spoke, he could hardly hear his voice over the ringing in his ears. "What are you saying?"

Tamiyo exhaled. "The Wanderer and the emperor are one and the same."

The emperor. She was still alive, just like Kaito had always believed.

Hearing the truth made his chest quake with relief.

"A planeswalker. All this time." He swallowed the knot in his throat. "Why didn't she come home?"

"She is unable to do so," Tamiyo explained. "The Reality Chip left her spark unstable. The Wanderer does not control her gift the way you and I can."

Kaito tightened his fists. "If the prototype of the Reality Chip sent her away, maybe it does the opposite, too. We find Tezzeret, steal the chip, and bring the emperor home."

"I agree that we need to try. But we must work together on this. Tezzeret does not expect us—we may only get one chance." Tamiyo stilled. "There is more going on at the labs than either of us knows. Whomever Tezzeret is involved with is after something bigger than just the Wanderer. This is not about

ruling Kamigawa—he must want control of the kami for a reason, and I intend to find out what that is. *Before we chase him underground by going after the Reality Chip unprepared.*”

“The emperor needs us,” Kaito argued. He wouldn’t let her down. Not again.

“We must be patient,” Tamiyo insisted.

Kaito stood suddenly, pulse quickening. “I’ve waited ten years.”

“All of Kamigawa has awaited the emperor’s return.”

“Not like I have. She—” Kaito couldn’t find the words.

But Tamiyo understood even without them. *She was your friend*, her mind said. *I understand the loss you’ve felt, and the hope you’re desperate to replace it with. But we are not ready for this fight. Not yet.*

Kaito set his jaw, pulled his mask over his face, and moved for the door. “Thank you for the tea,” he called over his shoulder, “but I have somewhere else to be.”

If the Reality Chip would bring his friend back, then he was going after it.

And he wasn’t about to wait for Tamiyo’s permission.

Kaito stood outside Tameshi’s lab, staring at the solid doors and the glowing panel on the wall. In his hand was Tameshi’s key card—the one Kaito had taken from his friend’s pocket just before the warehouse went up in flames.

He’d never wanted Tameshi to die. But if his death led to bringing the emperor home

Kaito twisted his mouth stubbornly. He didn’t want to think about the trade-off. If Tameshi had come to him, maybe there’d have been another way. A different ending to their journey that involved them working *together*.

He’d trusted Tameshi with his life. But Tameshi’s trust came with secrets. Secrets that got him killed.

The ache it left in Kaito’s heart would last an eternity.

He swiped the key card over the panel, and a green light flashed. The door slid open, and when Kaito stepped inside, he mouthed a word of gratitude to the friend he’d never see again.

It was the closest thing to redemption Tameshi might ever get.

Kaito had already worked his magic on the cameras, but he kept his footsteps silent, moving along the shadows of the room like he was a shadow himself. He slipped past enormous glass cylinders that bubbled with pink liquid. He didn’t know what had been kept inside, but he knew a cage when he saw one.

Checking for movement, he crept toward the glass window ahead and peered inside. The room was full of tables covered in the same glass tubes he’d seen at the docks, but there were far more of them than Kaito could easily count. It wasn’t just an overnight experiment—this was an entire operation.

But even with the abundance of neon-hued liquids and metal equipment splayed out on the tables, it was the shapes on the floor that Kaito couldn’t look away from.

Bodies. *Kami* bodies.

There were dozens of them—alive, but shriveled and dull, as if their very essence was being sucked out of them. Kaito felt his heart splinter. He’d heard the screams the night on the docks, and he’d done

nothing to stop it. The kami had been inside, stolen like cargo, and brought to Tameshi's lab to become test subjects.

The kami hadn't been Kaito's mission. But looking at them now, he felt a horrible guilt surge through his body.

If Eiko were here—if she knew Kaito had heard the screams and done nothing—would she blame him?

He pushed away from the window to search the next room, only to find another unconscious kami. Its body was shaped like a paper lantern, with four small candles scattered around it, confined to a metal surgical bed. There was a haunting grayness to its face, and its candle wicks looked cold to the touch.

But the object behind the kami caught his attention.

Sitting beside an enormous machine was a piece of metal, thin and square and no bigger than Kaito's palm, with wires dangling from the edges like a jellyfish.

Kaito had seen it before when he'd searched Tameshi's office. The blueprint had been on an encrypted data drive. Back then, he didn't know what it was, or what it could do.

But as he watched the way the light pulsed around it, following the trail of wires that connected the machine to the kami's body, Kaito knew exactly what it was.

The Reality Chip.

Kaito slipped through the door, eyes fixed on the chip as he moved passed the comatose kami. There was nobody guarding the machine. No casing to hide it from prying fingers.

It was just there, waiting.

So Kaito reached out, grabbed the Reality Chip from its stand, and shoved it in his pocket.

See, Tamiyo? Kaito thought smugly. *Patience is overrated.*

He left the room, pulling the door shut behind him, and hurried for the exit. But when he turned the final corner, a looming shadow forced him to halt in his tracks. Kaito's sword was in his hand before his eyes had even registered the monster blocking his path.

The monster who murdered Tameshi.



Art by: Chase Stone

Kaito clenched his teeth, eyes blazing with anger.

“Your fleshling eyes suggest familiarity, but knowledge of our meeting evades my memory. The existence of a second Jin-Gitaxias on this plane is highly improbable, therefore your recognition must be accepted as genuine.” The monster tilted his head, artificial light glinting off his metal spine. “Schematics are unimportant in this instance. Theft is an offense that will require swift retribution.”

Kaito ignored the weight of the Reality Chip in his pocket, focused only on the monster. “Yeah, well, consider this retribution for what you did to Tameshi.”

Jin-Gitaxias let out a guttural, metallic sound. “Your goals derive from revenge, but they are subjected to misguided assumptions—your fleshling companion was a willing participant, even at his demise. But his inquiries made him inefficient. The work must be protected.”

Half a dozen armed ninjas appeared at the monster’s sides. Hired henchmen from the Undercity were notorious for doing anyone’s dirty work, as long as they were paid.

Kaito pulled his sword back. “Good thing I’ve never been one for small talk.”

The first ninja charged forward, and Kaito struck his weapon against the masked figure’s blade with an unyielding blow. For all their confidence, the stranger wasn’t prepared, shuddering under the weight of the blade. Kaito pushed hard, forcing them to the ground, when the next figure attacked.

Kaito didn’t waste time—he swung for the approaching assailant, who caught the blade with two double-pronged daggers. Throwing his foot back, Kaito braced himself before flicking the handle of his sword. The blade broke into throwing stars, and Kaito rolled to the right just as the figure fell forward in surprise.

The stars sliced through the stranger’s armor, making him cry out before his body fell limp to the ground. He didn’t rise.

Kaito felt the air shift as the henchmen closed in. They were angry—but so was Kaito.

Calling the stars back to his hilt, they hovered in line like a blade that had been stretched too far. When the next two ninjas approached, Kaito swiped his sword downward, sending the intermittent stars snapping through the air like a whip, catching one of the henchmen in the face.

The other swung a dagger at Kaito. He ducked, legs tensed, and summoned his blades back in place to reform his sword. He swung upwards, against the ninja's dagger, just as two more Undercity ninjas charged. A violent clash of metal sounded, and Kaito blocked again and again.

He faintly registered Jin-Gitaxias up ahead, pacing with the kind of calm that suggested he believed the fight was nearly over. That he'd won.

But he didn't know Kaito. This wasn't about revenge—it was about fulfilling a promise that was ten years in the making.

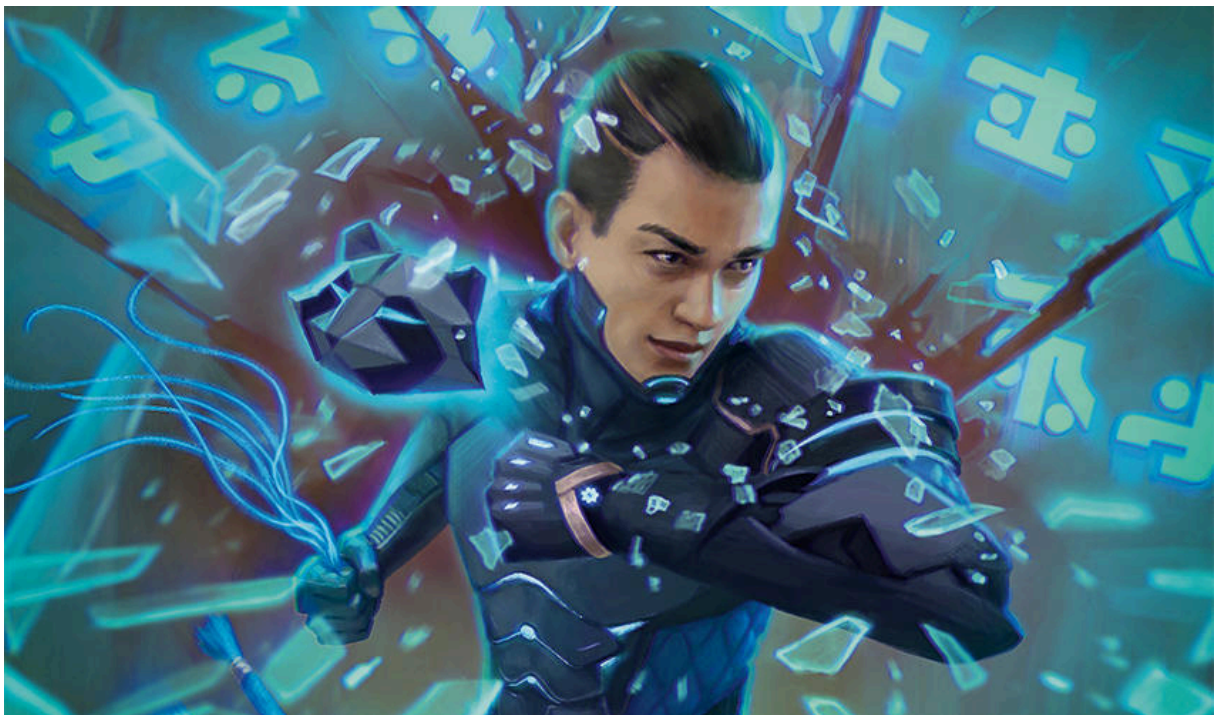
Tonight, he would not fail.

Kaito became a whirlwind of metal and precision, staving off each attacker with the kind of focus that would've made Light-Paws proud. But there were too many of them, and Kaito's energy would not last forever. So, he fought them off, forcing them back, and pulled a small metal device from his belt shaped like an acorn. He threw it against the floor with a ferocious *crack*.

Black smoke exploded through the crowd, and Kaito darted outside of its range just before the electricity snapped through the cloud. The henchmen cried out in confusion at first—and then pain.

Kaito raced for the lab doors without looking back.

He ran from the compound, cold air catching in his throat. He didn't know where he was running, only that he had to get away as fast as possible. Streetlights followed the glowing road, but Kaito leapt over a low wall and took a path through the buildings instead. Jin-Gitaxias was almost certainly aware Kaito had fled with the Reality Chip by now. If they weren't on his tail, they would be soon.



Art by: Mila Pesic

Feet pounding against the concrete, Kaito skidded to a halt near one of the fenced-in platforms. It was dark, but he could see the drop toward the clouds below.

Kaito turned, searching for a hiding place, when he saw the hired henchmen approaching, scaling the rooftops across the stretch of walkway. Above them, an enormous mech appeared, metal folding over itself until it settled into the shape of a dragon. It leapt over the nearest building, landing a stretch away from Kaito, and let out a mighty roar.

Magic filled its core, glowing blue from within. Charging for an attack that would be nearly impossible to escape.

Kaito considered planeswalking. It would get him to safety, away from the mech and Jin-Gitaxias's henchmen.

But the Reality Chip was still in his pocket.

What would happen if he planeswalked with it? Would it affect him the way it affected the emperor?

Would he be able to find his way back to Kamigawa and finish what he started?

Leaving right now was too great a risk.

He dug his heels into the ground, balled his fists, and prepared to do whatever was necessary to fight his way out of this.

The mech approached, opening its wide jaws to reveal an orb of crackling energy, when Kaito felt the Reality Chip moving in his pocket. Brows pinched, Kaito pulled it out and stared in horror as the wires writhed against the night air, thrumming with life.

And then the dragon howled.

When Kaito looked back up, the light in the mech's jaws had faded, and a glowing orange streak was sliced all the way across its armored throat. For a moment, the mech remained perfectly still—and then both pieces slipped away from one another and collided with the earth, no longer a threat to anyone.

Standing behind the broken machine was a woman with snow-white hair and a sword in her hand. She lifted her face, features appearing beneath her wide hat, and Kaito recognized her brown eyes immediately.

The last time he'd seen the Emperor of Kamigawa, she was still a child. But the years had changed her. The depth in her gaze seemed to carry the wisdom of a hundred lifetimes. She wasn't just older; she was a warrior. A planeswalker.

The Wanderer.



Art by: William Arnold

Kaito pressed a hand to his chest like he couldn't hold back the emotions. The *relief*.

His friend had finally come home.

The emperor stalked toward him, paying no attention to the figures scaling the rooftops. She was looking only at Kaito.

The flutter of movement sounded nearby, and Kaito broke their gaze to find Tamiyo floating in the night sky, mouth pursed with mild disapproval.

"This is not at all what I meant when I suggested we come up with a plan." Tamiyo unfolded the scroll in her hand, acknowledging the emperor with only a brief nod.

The moment Tamiyo's eyes finished passing over the scroll, the shadows above the buildings stopped moving. Jin-Gitaxias's henchmen were no longer running; they were searching the ground for something they couldn't see.

"We should not linger," Tamiyo said in a low voice. "There are far better places to have a reunion, and the invisibility spell won't last forever."

Cloaked beneath Tamiyo's magic, the three planeswalkers fled from Otawara in silence.