

# Episode 2: Lies, Promises, and Neon Flames

Akemi Dawn Bowman

From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

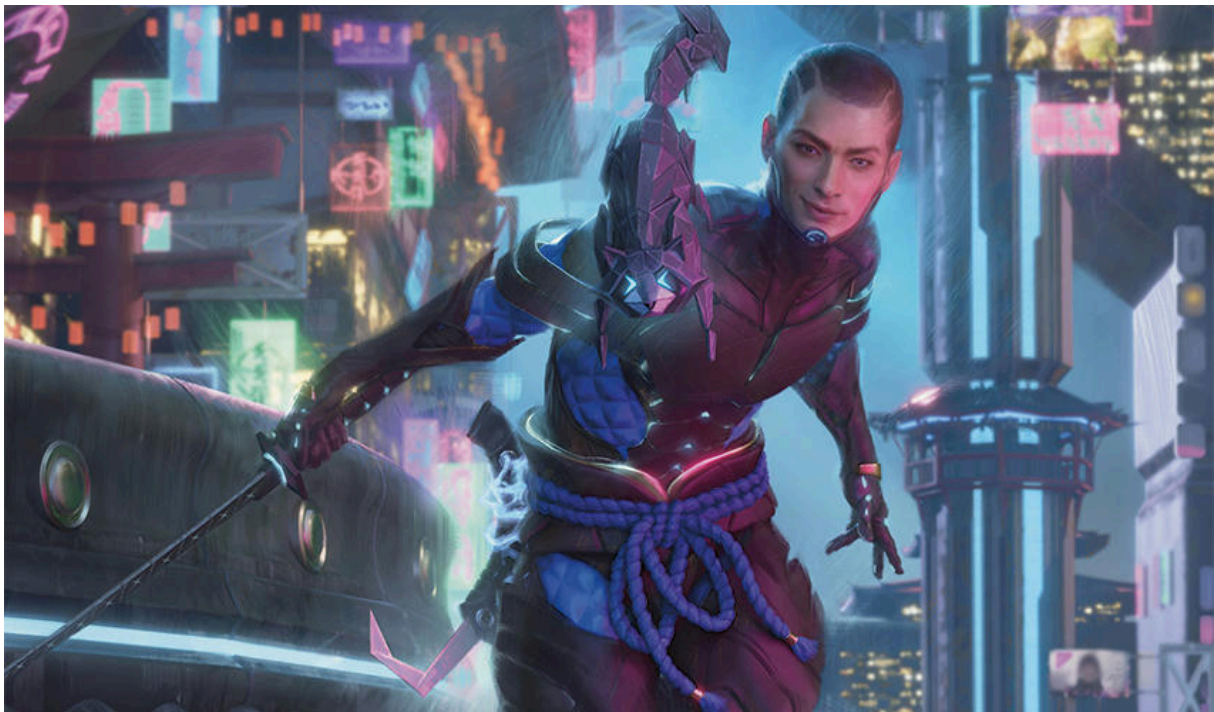
24. 01. 2022

Ten years had passed since Kaito left the walls of Eiganjo, but some habits were hard to break.

Rain danced across the roof tiles like a song. Kaito leaned forward, brows pinched as he searched the streets below.

Towashi was filled with even more color than usual. A parade of modified umbrellas seemed to float across the pavement, each of them glowing with a shield of neon energy that kept the people beneath them dry. A glass panel crackled with life as the evening menu for a teahouse rolled across the screen. Overhead, a pair of massive, fiery orange koi flicked their silken tails as they swam toward an ocean of sky and starlight.

Normally, Kaito loved the vibrancy of Towashi at night, but he didn't have time for nostalgia. He was looking for someone.



Kaito Shizuki | Art by: Yongjae Choi

Kaito pressed a finger to his temple, and the live feed from his drone appeared in his vision. The device was hovering above a darkened alley, and Kaito ushered the tanuki-shaped drone toward the bustling rainbow-hued street.

A decade in technological advancements meant it was far more sophisticated than the origami crane drone from Kaito's childhood. The crane had been easy to recycle. But Kaito wasn't sure he'd ever be able to replace his current drone, no matter how outdated she would someday become.

The tanuki and Kaito had too much history.

Tameshi warned him not to get attached to a single piece of tech. *"Everything new someday becomes old,"* his friend had said.

Most of the time Kaito was happy to listen to Tameshi's wisdom. He'd been both a friend and a mentor over the years. But Tameshi had also spent his life trying not to get attached to anyone, or anything.

Kaito was the opposite. He felt tethered to the people he cared about most, and he'd do anything to protect those bonds.

The tanuki drone, Himoto, was more than just a piece of tech—she represented the kami who had changed Kaito's life forever.

It was also a reminder that his friend was still missing.

The drone stilled near a corner before making her way down a row of street vendors, all of them sheltered by glowing canopies edged with hanging lanterns.

A Kami of Street Vendors sat moodily at the edge of a counter, its dough-like face puckered into a frown. Three gyoza hovered around him like they were teetering on the edge of hope.

The nearby vendor scooped a generous portion of ramen into a bowl before adding bright pink and white fishcake, slices of boiled egg, and a sprinkle of green onion across the top—all cooked to perfection. He passed the meal to a waiting customer, and the kami let out a disappointed moan.

Even through the drone's camera, Kaito caught the worry in the vendor's eye. Kami were everywhere on Kamigawa, but not everyone wanted to eat a meal beside a spirit with a temper. Sometimes it was better to keep them happy.

With a sigh, the man reached behind the counter for his own bowl of bloated noodles that had been sitting in hot broth for far too long. The kami's pudgy face morphed into pure delight, and the dish barely touched the counter before he threw his face into the ramen and slurped furiously.

The vendor rolled his eyes and turned to his next customer.

Kaito nudged the drone skyward toward the height of the nearby buildings. With a bird's-eye view, they scanned the city, searching the alleys one by one until he spotted a group of Imperial samurai standing outside of an apartment. Most of the upper windows were sealed shut with their curtains drawn, but one had been left slightly ajar. The gap was so small, it was hardly noticeable to the average person.

Kaito cracked a half-smile. He didn't see the impossible—he saw an invitation.

He tapped his temple again, shutting off the drone's visuals, and slid down the roof tiles and onto the balcony below. Following the railing to the corner of the building, Kaito slipped through the bars and scaled the wall back down to the pavement, losing himself in the nearby crowd.

Nobody noticed the drone approaching, or how Kaito snatched the device from the air in one fluid motion. In his hands, the metal shifted like paper, folding and refolding again until she became a mask.

The embodiment of the tanuki-shaped kami that caused Kaito's spark to ignite.

He'd become a planeswalker that day. Someone destined for greatness even beyond the borders of Kamigawa.

Kaito brushed a finger against the edge of the device. He'd followed the Kami of the Spark all the way to Boseiju hoping to find the emperor. But it wasn't his friend who was waiting for him in the forest district—it was his fate.

He shrugged against the rain, pressed the mask to his face, and straightened his hood. Kaito didn't care about greatness; he just wanted his friend back.

Kaito left the streets for the shadows like an undetectable wraith. Turning corner after corner, he followed the alleyways toward the heart of Towashi. When he reached the looming apartment building, he began to climb.

The Imperial samurai were posted at the door. He could hear the shift of their metal armor every time they moved. Armor made for battle, not stealth.

*So much unnecessary noise*, Kaito thought to himself before swinging over the ledge and planting his feet on the small balcony.

Time had changed him. He was no longer a child, or an Imperial.

But he was still the Kaito who climbed across rooftops and snuck through windows he wasn't supposed to.

Pushing the glass with his gloved hand, Kaito slipped into the room without making a sound.

The bedroom crackled with firelight. Kaito sensed movement, gaze snapping toward the hearth. He expected to find a kami nestled inside the flame, but there was no one there. Just an amber glow that caused shadows to flicker across the wall.

"Don't worry," a familiar voice said. "We're alone."

Kaito lifted a brow but didn't turn. "It was thoughtful of you to leave the window open."

There was an irritated huff. "We both know you weren't planning on using the front door. If your interplanar travels didn't teach you a thing about etiquette, I'm sure it's pointless to even hope."

"If I really wanted to learn about etiquette," Kaito began, turning to face his sister, "I'd have come straight to you."

Eiko's lips curled into a smile. "It's good to see you."

Kaito pushed his tanuki mask behind his head. "It's good to see you, too." He hesitated, trying to piece together the joy of seeing his sister with the reality of who she grew up to become. He didn't hate that she was an Imperial, but he hated the distance that came with it. "I know you don't leave the palace much these days."

"It's difficult," Eiko admitted. "Risona has supporters all over Kamigawa—not just the Asari Uprisers in the Sokenzan mountains, but spies in Towashi and the Undercity, too. It isn't always safe for someone like me to travel without protection."

"I remember you being quite capable of taking care of yourself," Kaito countered.

"I'm an Imperial advisor now. There is more to consider than just myself," she said quietly.

Kaito twisted his mouth. Her words reminded him of someone. Someone he hadn't spoken to since the day he fled Eiganjo. "Is Light-Paws here with you?"

Their paths hadn't crossed in a decade. Kaito wasn't *intentionally* avoiding his former teacher, but he also wasn't looking for a reunion. Because when it came to Light-Paws, Kaito still felt the hurt like a bruise beneath the surface.

Eiko shook her head. “Light-Paws doesn’t have time for diplomacy meetings. She’s too busy trying to prevent a rebellion and keep the rest of the court from turning on each other in their bid to gain more power.” There was an edge of frustration in her voice. “The Asari Uprisers grow bolder every day. The longer the throne remains empty, the more Risona is able to gain supporters who believe the empire should be abolished.”

As much as Kaito believed the Imperials could be restrictive, he never wanted a complete end to the Imperial’s guidance. They played an important role when it came to negotiating with the kami. And the last thing Kaito wanted was for Kamigawa to break out in violence.

“The emperor will come home.” Kaito’s throat tightened at the memory of what he lost. What *Kamigawa* lost.

He’d traveled across the Multiverse to find her, but he was no closer than he had been when his spark ignited. All Kaito knew was that the man with the metal arm was a planeswalker.

Which meant the emperor could be anywhere.

Eiko nodded solemnly. “I hope you’re right. For Kamigawa’s sake, and yours.”

Kaito looked away. Sometimes, when the days were long and the evenings quiet, the ache in his heart felt just as powerful as it had been when he’d stood in Kyodai’s chamber and realized his friend was gone.

But now was not the time for aching hearts. It had been months since he’d seen his sister—he didn’t want to waste their time together being sad.

“You always did love to worry about me.” He turned back, lifting a brow like he was baiting her. “Is that why you risked sending an Imperial drone all the way to Towashi?”

Eiko pursed her lips. Their dynamic was familiar—it made it easy to fall back into old habits. And banter had always been one of their favorites. “You are not the only one with eyes in this city, Kaito. If you were in trouble, I would know about it.”

The words slipped out of Kaito’s mouth too easily. “I didn’t realize I’d have to leave this plane just to get a bit of privacy.”

Eiko blinked. “You wouldn’t leave again without saying goodbye.” It wasn’t a question; it was a reminder of Kaito’s promise.

He didn’t regret leaving the palace, but he did regret how he’d left Eiko without any warning at all.

They’d come a long way since then. Eiko had been in Boseiju with Kaito when they’d been tracking the Kami of the Spark. She was the only Imperial on Kamigawa who believed he was right about the man with the metal arm having something to do with the emperor’s disappearance.

But some memories left their marks. And sometimes those marks stung.

Kaito lifted his shoulders, sheepish. “Oh, come on. You must’ve forgiven me by now. I basically saved your life in the forest district. *Twice*.”

“That’s not even close to what happened. You were barreling through kami territory without any sense at all. You’re lucky you even *survived* long enough to ignite that spark of yours.”

“You always were my favorite kami diplomat.”

“I’d say flattery will get you nowhere, but we both know that’s pretty much the only card you have.”

His laugh echoed through the space. “You wound me.”

Fire flickered in Eiko's glimmering stare. "I've heard the rumors about Futurists looking into illegal bio-enhancements that can mess with the physics of reality. Perhaps you could ask your friends to help you grow thicker skin."

Kaito's smile faded slightly. Another memory that carried a sting. "We're not the villains, you know. We believe experimenting with technology is the way forward—not to hurt people, or start wars, but to help. To *heal*."

"We already *have* tech for that."

"Yes, but who has access to it? Anyone who can't afford permits or upgraded motherboards has to hope for a kami's blessing to have any kind of power. And we both know how rare that is."

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe not everyone *should* have access to power?" Eiko countered. "The Imperials are not trying to be regressive. But we have merge gates to build and protect, and kami who see our expanding cities as threats to their homes. What happens if they start to see our inventions as a threat to their existence?" She shook her head. "For the good of the mortal realm and the spirit realm, there needs to be balance."

"Giving power to a few will always create a divide. Technology levels the playing field. Not just for the wealthy and the elite, but for *everyone*. We no longer have to rely on kami magic—we can protect ourselves."

"Who is it you need protecting from so badly? Because last I checked, the only people trying to start a war are the ones who want the same thing you do," Eiko remarked coolly.

"I do not support the Uprisers," Kaito said clearly. "But Kyodai hasn't been herself since the emperor vanished. What happens if something goes wrong with the merge gates and destructive kami are unleashed? It could take millennia for the mortal and spirit realms to become one. That's a thousand years of uncertainty. The Kami Wars may be legend, but can you honestly guarantee we won't see a threat like that again?"

Eiko stiffened. "The kami are not our enemy."

"We don't even *know* who our enemy is," Kaito stilled, swallowing the lump in his throat. "The emperor was taken from Kyodai's temple, and no one even saw it happen."

He hadn't been able to stop it. He'd been too late, too weak, and too unprepared.

They all had.

Eiko's face hardened. "There was nothing you could've done that night."

"If we'd had better tech—"

"Unregulated tech might very well have been how the emperor was taken in the first place!" Eiko interjected, cheeks turning pink.

Kaito scowled. "The Imperials already blamed the Futurists—and the Uprisers—without a shred of evidence. They almost caused a *war*."

Eiko was silent for too many seconds.

Kaito saw the hesitation in his sister's eyes. She was holding something back. "What have you heard?" He blinked, hope crashing against his ribcage like a tidal wave. "Do you know where the emperor is?"

"No," Eiko said. "But I received some intelligence." Even in the firelight, Kaito could see the strain behind her eyes.

Whatever she knew, she wasn't supposed to tell Kaito.

He took a step forward, urgent. “If this is about the emperor—”

“It’s about Tameshi,” Eiko interrupted.

Kaito’s thoughts stalled. He wasn’t sure he’d heard her right. “What does Tameshi have to do with any of this?”



Art by: Scott M. Fischer

Eiko’s eyes latched onto the doorway. Kaito had never seen her so nervous. She reached inside her robes and pulled out a small device shaped like a paper fan. With a brush of her thumb, the edges expanded into a small dome. Energy radiated outward, creating a cocoon of white light around the siblings.

“A noise suppressor?” Kaito folded his arms across his chest. “This must be serious if you don’t even trust your guards.”

Eiko took a slow breath. “My sources have been watching Tameshi for some time. He is involved in trading illegal merge studies involving kami, and—”

“If you think I’m going to provide information on my *best friend* to the Imperials, you are sorely mistaken.” Kaito gritted his teeth. “Eiko, you’re my sister, and I love you. But if you’re asking me to be your spy “

“I’m not telling you this because I want your help. I’m not supposed to be telling you this *at all* . But —” Eiko pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s not just the merge studies. It’s who he was with.” She sighed, dropping her hand. “Tameshi was seen meeting with a man in the Undercity. A man with a metal arm.”

The fire snapped behind him, but Kaito could feel embers burning in his own chest. A flame of defiance. “Whatever your sources think they saw, they’re wrong.”

Tameshi had met them both in the forest district. He knew about the emperor, and the kami, and the man Kaito was searching for. There wasn’t a single secret Kaito kept from his friend—not then, and not now.

It didn't make sense that Tameshi would hide something so important. He *couldn't* have.

"Believe me, I would never share intel with you if I wasn't absolutely certain it was true." Eiko's shoulders fell. "Especially not about this."

Kaito's voice was hollow. "Tameshi wouldn't betray me."

"I'm telling you what I know," Eiko said. "Ten years ago, you swore you would never stop looking for the emperor. If Tameshi knows the man with the metal arm and never told you, don't you want to find out why?"

"I won't feed you intel," Kaito said seriously. "And I won't turn in my friend to be used as a scapegoat."

"I'm not asking you to. We want the same thing—to find the emperor, as soon as possible. I'm simply giving you the information you need to do the right thing. To find out the *truth*."

Kaito looked away bitterly. There must've been another explanation. Tameshi would never lie to him. He would never betray him.

Would he?

"Kamigawa needs a ruler," Eiko said carefully. "Someone to restore the balance between our people."

Kaito tilted his chin, facing his sister. "I don't believe a throne is the key to restoring balance. But I will do whatever it takes to find the emperor."

He'd trusted Tameshi for a long time.

But he'd trusted Eiko much longer.

Whether her intel was right or wrong, Kaito believed in his sister enough to follow the trail. And if spying on his best friend was the only way to prove his innocence, then Tameshi would just have to forgive him.

Kaito moved for the window, leaving the protection of the dome behind him.

Eiko flicked the metal fan closed before tucking it back into her robes. "I'm sorry, Kaito." He paused near the ledge, listening to her somber voice. "I know what he means to you."

Kaito didn't want to believe it. But if Tameshi really was working with the man with the metal arm, and if he'd had knowledge of what happened to the emperor all this time

Then maybe their friendship was never what Kaito had thought.

---

Kaito stood at the edge of the alley, back pressed against the stone wall. Otawara was high up in the clouds, and sometimes Kaito was convinced the floating city had fewer shadows because of it, and far fewer places to hide.

His tanuki drone was too recognizable to be any help around Tameshi, so Kaito had to tail him the old-fashioned way—with his eyes, ears, and pure determination. As the weeks passed and he continued to gather information, Kaito found himself hating the new mask he wore.

The mask of a liar.

It hurt to teeter on the edge of betraying his friend. More than once, Kaito nearly convinced himself it was all a misunderstanding. That Eiko has been wrong, and that it *couldn't* have been the same planeswalker he saw in Kyodai's temple.

But every piece of intel Kaito uncovered only confirmed what his sister had told him.



Tameshi was hiding something. Not just from Kaito, but from the other Futurists, too.



Art by: Alayna Danner

Kaito watched him day after day, working at the Futurist department like his beliefs were aligned with the rest of Otawara. And then the sun would set, and when everyone else went home, Tameshi stayed inside his lab, carrying on with a project no one else in the compound seemed to know about.

Kaito had seen Tameshi making handshake deals in dark alleys for stolen power-enhancers. He'd watched his friend sneak boxes of cargo into his secretive workplace in the dead of night. And he'd watched the unregulated drones leave the compound and head straight for the Towashi Undercity.

It was evidence Tameshi was doing something illegal. But Kaito needed proof of his *betrayal*.

Tameshi appeared in the compound's main entrance, drone already unfolded in his hand. With a gentle push, he sent the ribbon-like dragon into the air, watching as it arched beyond the trees in search of the ground below. He checked the panel on his sleeve, observing the time, and in one graceful step, he flew into the air and vanished toward the horizon.

Kaito didn't wait long. There was no one else around; Tameshi's colleagues had gone home hours before. He removed a device from his belt—a small throwing star that glowed blue along the edges—and aimed for the nearest security camera. He flicked his wrist sharply, and the star spun through the air before attaching itself to the camera's side. It blinked once. Twice.

And then the glowing edges turned green.

Masked with his hood pulled tight, Kaito left the alley and walked straight through the front doors of Tameshi's compound. No camera would see him now—not with the device freezing the footage.

But he needed to be quick. There was no way of knowing when Tameshi would be back.

The tiled floors echoed like bone, cold and empty. Kaito fought the chill running through him. It wasn't his first time inside the compound, but it was the first time he felt like an outsider.

*Like a traitor*, his mind hummed, and he tried to push it away.



If Kaito was wrong about Tameshi, he would accept the consequences that might come his way. But if Tameshi had lied to him all this time

Kaito wasn't ready to face the truth, but for the emperor's sake, he would do it anyway.

He passed the metal door leading to Tameshi's lab without a second glance. There was no point trying to break in—not without a key card, or a giant mech.

And Kaito didn't think blowing the lab to pieces would do much good from an evidence standpoint.

Instead, Kaito headed straight for Tameshi's office. An enormous desk sat in the center, toppled with a combination of data chips and paperwork. A round lantern sat in the corner, and Kaito pressed a finger against the side to bring it to life. Using his telekinesis, Kaito lifted the lantern into the air until it hovered steadily beside him.

He looked through every drawer and cabinet in the room and went over every scrap of paper on Tameshi's desk. Most of it was unimportant, but there was a coded message that Kaito found tucked beneath a file. It didn't take Kaito long to decipher it—he'd learned every trick Tameshi was willing to teach him.

It was vague as far as messages went, but it seemed to be a request to meet in the Undercity. It was a long way for a meeting; the Undercity was on the surface, wedged between the shadows of Boseiju—the oldest and largest living tree on Kamigawa—and Towashi's skyscrapers. Certainly not a practical location for run-of-the-mill business.

To go so far from Otawara implied an even greater need for secrecy than the average Futurist required.

Kaito drummed his fingers along the edge of the desk, frowning at the message as he double-checked the date and time. The meeting was happening tonight, and soon—it must have been where Tameshi was headed.

But who was he meeting? And why?

As Kaito began to stand, he spotted a data chip tucked behind some of the paperwork. He connected it with his tanuki mask, took a few moments to bypass the encryption, and watched as the image appeared on the inside panel.

It was a blueprint of a strange device, thin and square, with wire-like arms reaching out of it like a jellyfish. Kaito had never seen anything like it before.



Art by: Campbell White

But it still didn't prove that Tameshi knew the man with the metal arm.

For that, Kaito would have to crash a meeting in the Undercity.

Kaito removed the data chip from his tanuki mask and tucked it beneath the pages. He stepped away from the desk and flexed his fingers, sending the lantern back into its cradle, and hurried outside.

When he was safely through the doors, Kaito flicked his fingers, and the device unlatched from the camera and floated back to him. He plucked it from the air, shoved it in his belt, and headed for the sky ferry.

Kaito skirted through the belly of the Undercity with ease. Even if it hadn't been the middle of the night, no sunlight ever made it to the surface, and the neon city lights didn't seem to reach the narrower streets. The murky waterways were blanketed with cherry blossoms, but even the charming aesthetics couldn't mask the stench of sweat and sewage in the air.

It didn't take long to track Tameshi—moonfolk didn't often venture into the Undercity, and more than one stranger was happy to trade intel for a small fee.

Kaito followed his friend's trail all the way to the docks. Light sources were scarce at the edge of the city, and the canal water was nearly pitch-black. Kaito could taste an unpleasant sourness on his lips—the chemical stain that came from being so close to the Undercity sewers.

He grimaced, keeping his hands loose at his sides, ready to reach for his sword at the first sign of trouble. He didn't know what he'd find, but if he saw the man with the metal arm again, he wasn't planning on letting him get away.

The steam from the nearby vents helped mask Kaito's footsteps as he wandered across the edge of the docks. Metal containers were stacked in uniform rows, offering plenty of places to hide. But Kaito's attention was pinned on the warehouse up ahead, where light spilled out of a pair of wide bay doors.

Kaito removed his mask, letting Himoto transform back into a four-legged drone. Silently, she flew toward the warehouse. At the same time, Kaito reached for the sword at his back. With a flick of the handle, the edges expanded into two rows of sharp, jagged teeth.

Tightening his grip, Kaito crept after the drone and pressed a finger to his temple.

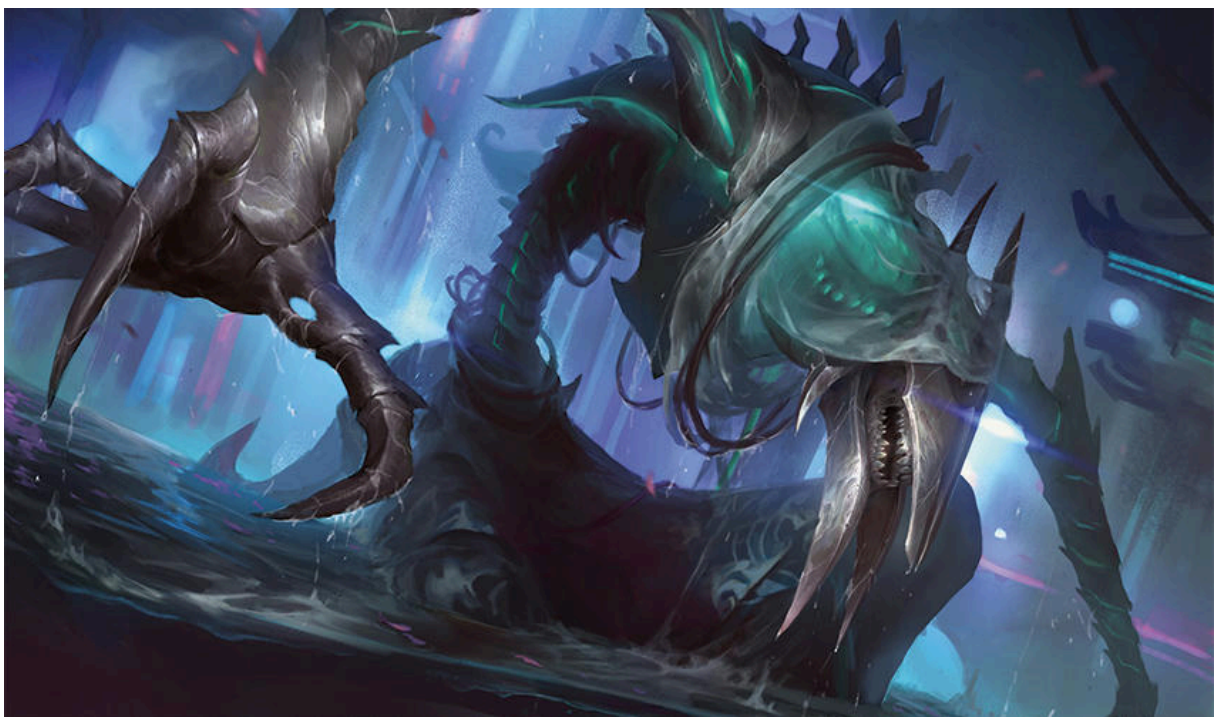
Inside the warehouse, the tanuki drone floated toward a dark space above the rafters. Metal crates filled most of the room, but at the far end was an open area filled with tables and lab equipment. Glowing beakers were contorted around one another like a maze of glass. Some of them bubbled with neon liquid, and others sparked with energy. Surgical instruments littered the surface—there were oddly shaped knives that looked like wide triangles, and others that were thin as twigs. Smaller beakers filled with strange, metallic-hued serums were laid out on a worktable, and fragments of metal and frayed wires surrounded each other like puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit.

Unease ran through Kaito's bones. These experiments they looked nothing like the Futurist work he'd seen on Otawara. Or *anywhere* on Kamigawa, for that matter.

Kaito ushered Himoto closer to the lab equipment when an enormous shadow made him stop. He could hear voices from the doorway. An argument that had long been underway.

Even with the drone's camera, all Kaito could see below was a too-large shadow. When it shifted, Kaito heard an unnatural tremor in the figure's voice, like metal grating against metal.

"The fleshling's previous utility is irrelevant. Doubt and weakness must be excised from the whole."



Art by: Joshua Raphael

There was a shuffle of footsteps near one of the containers, and a gruff voice mumbled something Kaito couldn't hear.

The enormous figure shifted once more, stepping further into the light. Kaito held his breath as a strange monster appeared. Its body was made of chrome, with clawed arms and a curved spine. Exposed ribs and pointed vertebrae were displayed like metalwork. His face and mouth were monstrous and bird-like, with too many sharp points and long, flat teeth that made Kaito stumble backward, even outside the warehouse.

This wasn't the man with the metal arm Kaito had seen in Kyodai's temple. This was something else entirely.

The creature moved across the space with an unnatural gait, and Kaito pulled his drone further into the shadows for cover.

"Finalize collecting the necessary materials and transfer the acquired specimens." The monster turned, jaws opening as the metallic rattle of his voice made Kaito's stomach go hollow. "Do not slow the progress. The subjects regaining a fully conscious state is an inevitable outcome."

A group of henchmen appeared on the drone's camera. Reckoners, by the look of their clothing. There were nearly a dozen of them, hurriedly shuffling equipment from the table and into a waiting vehicle. They left the beakers behind, still bubbling with color, and began shifting one of the larger containers toward the vehicle instead.

*The perfect size to store some kind of weapon*, Kaito thought blandly. *What has Tameshi gotten involved in?*

The henchman had the cargo partially loaded into the vehicle when a scream rang out from inside. Kaito's heart pinched at the thought of the emperor in a cage somewhere, but the noises inside the cargo were more animal than human.

They sounded like *kami*.

He wanted to investigate. He knew whatever was inside the container could provide answers about what was going on in the warehouse.

But there was no time, and Kaito couldn't take on a dozen Reckoners and a monster all by himself.

"What do we do about the beakers?" one of the henchmen asked.

The creature made its way toward the vehicle without looking back. "All evidence must be eradicated. Expansion of the work will continue in a more optimal location, courtesy of the fleshling."

With a sneer, the Reckoner turned, picked up one of the solo beakers, and threw it against the rest of the glass with force.

The explosion made Kaito jump in alarm, grip tightening around his sword. He blinked quickly, pressing his temple to call his drone back, and listened to the rumble of the vehicle as it sped away.

The angry snap and hiss of the fire was a warning.

But there was also evidence inside. Evidence that was being destroyed.

Kaito ran into the warehouse without another thought, hurrying toward the colorful flames that were already climbing up the side of the warehouse. In a few more minutes, the entire building would be engulfed.

His eyes scanned the tables for something to grab—something that could help him—but everything that was left behind was already burning, too fierce and bright to stop.

Kaito's shoulders fell, just as a moan sounded somewhere behind him.

He spun, sword raised, and saw Tameshi slumped in the corner beside one of the containers. The fabric of his robes had been slashed across the middle, clawed by a metal arm. His face had paled to a shade Kaito had never seen on his friend before. And all around him, blood began to pool.

Tameshi was mortally wounded.

Shoving his sword back into its hilt, Kaito ran to his friend's side and sank to his knees. There were so many things he wanted to say. So many things he wanted to ask.

But in that moment, his heart felt as shattered as the glass burning behind him, and he didn't have any words at all.

Tameshi lifted his head, eyes fighting to stay open. "Kaito "

Kaito shook his head again and again. This couldn't be happening. He would not lose another friend.

But death had other plans.

Tameshi's voice was as faint as ash. "I—I've made so many mistakes. But lying to you was the worst of them."

Kaito felt the fire roar behind him. He couldn't move Tameshi—it would only speed up the inevitable. And if seconds were all he had left

He wanted to tell him not to worry. To give him peace and forgiveness in those final moments. To give him everything a friend deserved.

But he had another friend, too. And there was still time to help her.

"Tell me what you know about the emperor," Kaito begged, fighting the sting in his eyes. "How do you know the man with the metal arm?"

Tameshi's eyes fluttered.

"No!" Kaito grabbed his friend's robes and tugged. "Don't you go yet. Not without telling me the truth."

Tameshi's last breath halted like the last whisper of a fight. He stared up at Kaito with so much broken, irreparable regret.

He was out of time.

"Tezzeret," Tameshi whispered like he was breaking a spell. And then he was gone.

Kaito's cry became a choked gasp, and the tears streaming down his cheeks felt like they were being seared into his skin. He felt the heat reach his back, the fire growing dangerously close.

Clenching his teeth, Kaito pressed his hand to Tameshi's eyes and mouthed a silent goodbye. Even though it felt wrong, he reached into his friend's pocket and removed the key card to his lab.

Tameshi may be dead, but Kaito had more to do.

His tanuki drone appeared at his side, folding itself back into a mask. Kaito covered his face and stood over his friend's body, fighting the anguish that rocked his shoulders, and walked away.

Behind him, the warehouse blazed.