

# Episode 4: The Break-In

## Akemi Dawn Bowman

From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

The emperor stood across from Kaito, the amber glow of the nearby lanterns silhouetting her slender frame and her half-hidden face under the shadow of her wide hat.

Ten years ago, Kaito had sworn never to step foot in the palace until the emperor returned. And now she was here—a planeswalker, just like him—surrounded by the walls of the Imperial Palace.

Kaito felt no nostalgia for Eiganjo. Standing in the emperor’s sakura garden felt like standing in a dream that didn’t belong to him. Like he was a piece in the wrong puzzle.

There was an emptiness in the emperor’s eyes that suggested she felt it, too—the displacement.

Tamiyo rolled up her scroll and slipped it carefully into her satchel, severing the invisibility spell that had been cloaking them for hours. “I still think we should’ve alerted the guards to your arrival at the gate.” She shook her head with the kind of silken grace Kaito had never mastered. “We cannot keep your return a secret forever.”

“I don’t need forever,” the emperor replied quietly, white hair shifting in the early morning breeze. “I only need a few moments.” She turned for the porch, slid open the door to Kyodai’s temple, and disappeared inside.

Kaito tried not to react to the knot building in his throat. He had dreamt of their reunion for nearly a decade, but the emperor had barely looked at him since she stopped the mech on Otawara.

Maybe time had made them strangers.

She was the Emperor of Kamigawa; a childhood friendship was probably the least of her concerns.

“It must be overwhelming to come back here after so many years,” Tamiyo’s voice drifted like a lullaby. *Not just for the emperor*, she added without words, *but for you, too*.

Kaito flattened his mouth. “Is that a lucky guess, or are you reading my mind?”

“I cannot hear thoughts in all their complexities. But I sense the truth behind your eyes.” Tamiyo motioned toward the surrounding garden. “You have been here before. Many times, perhaps.”

Kaito gritted his teeth as he stared at the nearby flowers. They looked more withered than he’d ever seen them, and there wasn’t a kami to be found.

As a child, the emperor’s garden was one of Kaito’s favorite places on Kamigawa. But now? It felt void of life, as if it were no more than a forgotten graveyard, or an empty shrine.

Kaito never lost hope that the emperor would come home, but maybe not every Imperial shared his faith.

“We used to meet here, when we were kids,” Kaito said quietly. “I never felt like I belonged in Eiganjo, but the emperor—” His voice turned solemn. “She was the reason I stayed for as long as I did.”

Tamiyo nodded. “She was also the reason you left. A path that led you to becoming a planeswalker.”

Kaito released a tired laugh. “If you’re about to give me a pep talk on fate and things happening for a reason, don’t bother. I believe life is a series of choices.” He shrugged. “If we don’t like our options, we can either beg, fight, or steal to change them.”

Tamiyo’s brow twitched, unimpressed. “You have a very grim sense of optimism, Kaito.”

Before he could reply, a strange moan sounded from deep inside the temple. Kaito recognized Kyodai’s voice—like a shout, a song, and a whisper all at once. Tamiyo’s eyes flashed toward the door, mind assessing beyond what Kaito could see, but he didn’t wait for her permission. He ran toward Kyodai and the emperor, feet pounding against the wooden floor the way his heart had pounded ten years ago when he was running down the very same corridor.

It was Tezzeret he found in the room that night. The man with the metal arm that he had hunted for ten years.

Kaito turned the last corner and skidded to a halt. It wasn’t Tezzeret who waited for him—it was Kyodai, finally reunited with the emperor.

The kami’s golden body stretched deep into the mist, half hidden in the shallow water. She writhed uncomfortably, even with the emperor’s hand pressed against her lowered face, the black sphere in her forehead duller than Kaito remembered.

Kyodai moaned like she was in pain, and the emperor flinched, clutching her stomach in response.

Tamiyo floated urgently to her side. “Your spark is still unstable. You cannot remain on Kamigawa without help.”

There was a tremor in the emperor’s fingertips. The fight to stay on this plane wasn’t an easy one.

“What kind of help does she need?” Kaito strode toward them, arms fixed at his sides. “What can I do?”

Tamiyo’s violet gaze was latched onto the emperor’s. They were having a conversation Kaito wasn’t a part of.

He didn’t care about being left out. He just wanted what was best for his friend.

The emperor gave a short nod, and Tamiyo looked at Kaito and held out her hand. “The Reality Chip, please.”

Kaito pulled the object from his pocket without the slightest hesitation, thrusting it against Tamiyo’s palm. “Will it stop her from planeswalking?”

Tamiyo studied the jellyfish-like wires for a moment before taking the emperor’s hand. “I believe this will help to stabilize you for a time, but it is not a permanent solution. Without studying it, I cannot know its full effects—or if any of them would pose a danger to you.”

The emperor’s jaw tensed. Above her, Kyodai howled in confusion. “Do what you must.”



Art by: Alix Branwyn

Tamiyo placed the Reality Chip on the back of the emperor's hand. In an instant, the panel flashed with light, and the wires fused to her flesh like veins pulsing with energy. She let out a sharp yelp, bracing against the pain, until the Reality Chip seemed to settle like a mere extension of her own being.

Kyodai stilled, and for a moment, the emperor looked at peace.

Kaito watched her face crumple once more, and she threw her hands to her temples, squeezing like she was in agony. He whirled toward Tamiyo. "Go and find Light-Paws—she needs to know the emperor is back. Maybe there's something she can do to help!"

Tamiyo nodded and flew for the door without another word. When the emperor sunk to her knees, Kaito knelt too, hands pressed to her shoulders like formalities no longer mattered.

Outside of sparring, it would've been forbidden to touch the emperor like this. But Kaito didn't see the Emperor of Kamigawa—he saw a friend that was in pain.

"What do you need?" His gaze dropped to her hand. "If it's hurting you, I can remove it."

"No," the emperor said quickly, breaths hitched. "It—it's not that. It's the visions." Her fingers scratched against her skull. "I can see the lab. I can see the *monster*."

*Jin-Gitaxias*. Kaito frowned. He'd found the Reality Chip beside a machine. Was it possible the two were linked somehow?

The emperor winced, but after a few seconds passed, the pinch in her brow eased, and her face softened. She dropped her hands against Kaito's arms. It was the closest they'd ever been to an embrace.

She looked up, blinking away the confusion. "Kaito?"

"I'm here," he said, voice cracking. He'd waited ten years to say those words.

The emperor took a shallow breath. "The monster—he's informed Risona and the Asari Uprisers of my return. They plan to attack the palace imminently. They're hoping to catch the Imperials unprepared, before word spreads through Kamigawa that their emperor has come home."

Kaito's mind raced. "If the Uprisers are coming, we have to warn the Imperial samurai. Eiganjo is in danger."

The emperor squeezed Kaito's arms. "We have to stop the monster. He's been experimenting on kami. Torturing innocents." She shook her head. "I will not let him cause another war between the mortal and spirit realms."

"You think that's what Jin-Gitaxias wants? A war?" Kaito was stoic. The Kami War happened thousands of years ago. The Living Historians and archives may have preserved the stories, but those ancient days were like a myth to most people. Something that was more legend than reality.

Could it really happen again?

Kaito couldn't understand the logic. Surely there'd be easier ways to cause friction between kami and humans. Jin-Gitaxias could've attacked the merge gates, or slaughtered kami in broad daylight.

No. This wasn't about war—this was about something else. What Jin-Gitaxias was doing to the kami was never meant to be discovered. He did it in secrecy, and even murdered Tameshi to keep him from asking too many questions.

"Whatever Jin-Gitaxias is up to involves Tezzeret." Kaito looked up at Kyodai, who was still swaying high above him. He'd never realized how truly terrifying the kami was until he could see the hundreds of golden limbs twitching beneath her body. "The night you vanished, Tezzeret used a prototype of the Reality Chip on Kyodai. I think he's trying to find a way to control the kami."

"I don't care what he wants," the emperor said. "But I will stop him before he endangers my people."

Kaito's eyes darted between hers, when he suddenly realized how long he'd been staring, searching her face for his old friend. He started to pull away, but the emperor tightened her grip around his arms.

"You were looking for me," she said quietly. "Even after all this time."

He blinked, face flushing. "How did you know?"

"I have traveled to many planes over the years. A Kamigawan planeswalker searching for his missing emperor is not a story people easily forget." She offered a weak smile. "Sometimes I was only a step behind you. If I'd been able to control my spark, our reunion might've happened much sooner."

Kaito felt the ache in his chest again. All this time he'd been searching for her, it never occurred to him she might be searching for him, too.

"I'm sorry it took so long to bring you home," Kaito said.

"I couldn't have expected anything else," the emperor replied. "You were always late to everything—even our sparring lessons."

"What? That's not—" Kaito stopped himself, hearing the laughter hidden at the edges of her voice. He sighed. "I was late *once*."

The emperor smiled, eyes brightening like a timid sunrise. Like it had been a long time since she'd felt truly content.

They may have both changed over the years, but in that moment, Kaito felt like they hadn't really changed at all. They were two friends in the Imperial Palace, talking to each other like all the rules of the plane didn't matter.

And this time, there wasn't even a silk screen between them.

Kyodai sang overhead, body retreating into the mist.

“She’s still confused,” the emperor admitted. “It’s because of our bond—the uncertainty of my spark affects her a great deal.”

“Is there any way to fix it?” Kaito asked, but the emperor didn’t reply. She simply stared after Kyodai, watching as the kami disappeared into the vast length of the room.

A rustle of footsteps sounded outside, and the temple doors burst open. Standing in the archway was Light-Paws and Eiko, with Tamiyo floating closely behind them.

Light-Paws’s mouth was parted in shock, her dark eyes moving from the emperor to Kaito and back again. Kaito immediately dropped his hands from the emperor’s shoulders, and they both rose to their feet.

The emperor lifted her chin with unwavering grace and said, “It is good to see you, Light-Paws. Thank you for helping to take care of Kamigawa in my absence. I am grateful for all the court has done.”

Light-Paws didn’t just stumble into a bow—she practically collapsed into it. Eiko bent at the waist, face ashen under the bright lights.

The emperor twisted her mouth. “Please—we have little time for formalities. Risona and the Asari Uprisers are on their way to Eiganjo as we speak. We must prepare our forces at once.”



Art by: Ekaterina Burmak

Light-Paws rose, nose twitching with confusion. “How do you know this?”

Eyeing Kaito briefly, the emperor lifted her hand with the embedded Reality Chip. “It seems this device is still connected to the compound it was stolen from.”

Tamiyo pressed her feet to the ground. “You’ve had a vision of the present?”

The emperor nodded. “The monster has alerted the Uprisers of my return. They want to attack while they believe they have the upper hand.”

“I don’t understand what Jin-Gitaxias has to gain by attacking Eiganjo.” Kaito lifted his shoulders. “He wants test subjects, not a throne.”



“Maybe he’s using war as a distraction.” The emperor’s eyes turned glassy. “Perhaps he wants Kyodai. Or perhaps he just wants what was stolen from him.” She glanced at the Reality Chip. If it made her nervous, she hid it well. “Either way, a battle is coming, and we need to be ready to fight.”

“The Reality Chip is dangerous even in the most noble of hands.” Tamiyo held out her arms, emphasizing the warning in her voice. “The best thing we could do for Kamigawa is destroy it while we still have the chance.”

“Absolutely not,” Kaito argued, blood rushing to his face. “That chip is the only thing keeping the emperor from planeswalking. Without it, she could be lost for another decade—maybe even longer.” He shook his head stubbornly. “We have to find an alternative.”

The emperor studied the device like she was mulling over her thoughts. “I do not wish to wander the Multiverse with no way of returning home. But if it’s a matter of protecting Kamigawa “

“Kamigawa needs an emperor,” Light-Paws interjected. “*You* are what’s best for your people.”

Beside him, Eiko folded her hands and nodded. “We have been preparing for a rebellion for many years. The Imperial samurai are ready—we will protect you and Kyodai.”

Kaito looked at Tamiyo seriously. “There has to be another way to stop Jin-Gitaxias.”

“I do not know a way for the Reality Chip to exist without posing a threat, but perhaps the more immediate danger is the research we left behind.” Tamiyo pursed her lips, thoughtful. “If we destroy the lab, we destroy everything they’ve been working toward—and perhaps destroying the link to the Reality Chip will give the emperor more control.”

The mixture of unease and hope in the room was palpable.

“I’ll do it,” Kaito insisted. “I’ll destroy Tameshi’s compound.” His eyes moved past Light-Paws, ignoring the pinch in his chest as he did, and looked at his sister instead. “All I need are a few detonators from the Imperial vault. I’ll get the charges into the lab and set them off from the outside.”

Eiko pulled her face back with disapproval. “Those weapons were confiscated, Kaito. They are not regulation approved. You shouldn’t even *know* about them.”

Kaito raised a brow, taunting. “Why keep them locked away if you were never going to use them?”

“They’re looked after until they can be disposed of safely,” Eiko corrected tersely.

Kaito held out his palms. “That’s exactly what I’m suggesting! I’m going dispose of the detonators safely. Inside Tameshi’s compound. Preferably next to the Reality Chip’s machine.”

Eiko scowled. “Blowing up a building is *not* —”

“Kaito is right,” the emperor interrupted, making Eiko—and Light-Paws—stiffen. “We must destroy the compound, and all the research inside it.” She turned to Light-Paws. “We are dealing with an enemy from another plane, a danger to Kamigawa we have never witnessed before. Using unapproved weapons may not be ideal, but it is our best solution. And it will allow every Imperial to remain in Eiganjo where they are needed most.”

Eiko and Light-Paws lowered their heads in acceptance.

“You’ll need help,” Tamiyo said to Kaito, fingers shifting delicately at her sides. “They sent a mech after you last time. Who knows how many henchmen are still searching for you on Otawara.”

Kaito quirked a brow. “You volunteering?”

“I believe two planeswalkers are better than one,” Tamiyo replied matter-of-factly.

"I will join you both." The emperor shifted in place. "My visions from inside the compound could prove useful. And there are kami that still need to be set free."

"With respect, Emperor, but you are needed here," Light-Paws said, flattening her ears. "Your people will be looking to you for guidance."

"They can look to the court for guidance, as they have throughout my long absence," the emperor replied. Her words had no malice or spite—she was merely stating a fact.

But Kaito sensed the shift in her voice again. Kamigawa was no longer the home she left. Maybe she was wondering where she fit in it, the way Kaito had for most of his childhood.

Eiko hesitated before speaking. "If the Reality Chip is what this Jin-Gitaxias is looking for, then the safest place for you is surrounded by these walls and the samurai sworn to protect you."

Light-Paws's tails flicked behind her in response. A sign of approval. Kaito knew it well—it was something he never had, while his sister had it in abundance.

He'd never been jealous of Eiko over anything except that.

The emperor stood with her thoughts for several long moments, weighing her options. She was both the Emperor of Kamigawa and the Wanderer—but perhaps each role needed to be different. "I will remain here," she said at last.

Light-Paws and Eiko nodded, leaving the temple to alert the guards. Tamiyo moved to follow them, pausing in the doorway at the other end of the room.

Kaito didn't move. He was still trying to read his friend behind her silence.

The emperor stared into the mist like she was searching for answers.

"Nobody on Kamigawa can protect the Reality Chip better than you can. And no wall is going to make a difference," Kaito said quietly. "But something tells me you already know that."

She met his gaze. "My duties to Kamigawa involve more than simply showing my strength. Sometimes it's more powerful to give my *people* strength."

"By letting them think they have to protect you?"

"Having something to fight for unites people. It has been that way as far back as the Historians have recorded our stories." The emperor motioned toward Kyodai. "And there is someone else to protect. If it's Kyodai they're after, I will make sure she's safe. But promise me you will free any captive kami before you set off the charge."

"You have my word," Kaito replied.

Tamiyo looked away, feigning privacy, but her thoughts slipped into Kaito's mind. *We should go now. We have a long journey ahead.*

Kaito gave a curt nod and moved for the door. He looked over his shoulder, watching as the emperor stepped into the mist where Kyodai was hidden, and made a silent promise that he would find a way to help her and make it so that she'd never have to disappear again.

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By the time Kaito and Tamiyo reached Otawara, the sky was streaked in shades of apricot and plum. A sign of the fading sunlight.

The streets were quiet, but not unusually so. There were no hints of Undercity henchmen scaling the rooftops or watching from the alleys. No mechs surveying the ground for Kaito and his friends.

It felt like they weren't being hunted at all.

Kaito couldn't get rid of the knot in his brow. On one hand, it wasn't a surprise Jin-Gitaxias's henchmen weren't swarming the floating city. They were outsiders, after all, and working outside of what most Futurists stood for. But on the other hand

*This feels too easy*, Kaito thought to himself.

Tamiyo's face was painted with the same suspicion. *Perhaps our enemies on Otawara have joined forces with the Asari Uprisers and are headed for Eiganjo*, her thoughts suggested.

Kaito didn't envy what the Imperials were about to face. They were some of the best fighters on Kamigawa, trained in the most prestigious and elite academies. But they'd been living in relative peace for over a century. They'd never known war outside of the historical records.

The Uprisers were different. They knew what it was to work hard and fight to survive. Even the snowy volcanic climate they grew up in was harsh. They knew what true perseverance felt like—and what they were willing to sacrifice to win.

Kaito didn't doubt the Imperials could match them in skill, but in sacrifice?

Would they give up the Reality Chip to keep the emperor safe? And if the emperor was taken would they give up the throne to get her back?

*Light-Paws would never allow it*, Kaito's mind hummed. She always said a throne was more than a chair—it was a position. And if you gave up a throne, you gave up the symbol that held Kamigawa together.

Kaito never had much faith in the Imperials, but the emperor had Light-Paws and Eiko on her side—and Kaito had faith in them.

Moving quickly toward Tameshi's compound, Kaito and Tamiyo slipped inside without being seen and raced for the lab. There was still evidence of Kaito's earlier visit. His device was still interfering with the cameras. There were scuff marks on the floor, no doubt from the henchmen who'd scrambled to chase after him.

And the lab doors had been left unlocked.

Kaito frowned, hesitating near the panel. Something didn't feel right. It was as if every barrier had been left unguarded. Months of Jin-Gitaxias's experiments were sitting beyond the doors. He'd never leave them so vulnerable. Not unless—

Kaito froze. *Not unless he's already moved them.*

Hissing a curse under his breath, Kaito bolted through the lab doors, ignoring Tamiyo's sharp warning to wait. He didn't see the point in waiting, not when he might already be too late.

When he turned the corner for the lab, he saw the equipment through the long glass window, still glowing in neon colors.

But the kami

Kaito felt their absence before he reached the window. Forehead pressed to the glass, his eyes scanned the empty metal beds, each marked with a sheen of metallic ash. The only evidence of a kami dematerializing.

Guilt gnawed at Kaito's bones, and he shoved from the glass toward the next room where he'd found the Reality Chip. The machine was still there, flickering with life, but the kami that had been attached to it with wires was gone. Murdered by the same people who'd killed Tameshi.



Tightening his fists, Kaito turned to Tamiyo. “We’re too late to save them.” Twice he’d seen what was happening to the kami, and he’d turned his back on them for his own reasons. He’d told himself his mission came first—finding the Emperor was all that mattered.

But he’d never meant for them to die like this.

And he’d promised the emperor

Tamiyo’s face was blank. Controlled. “It is not your fault, Kaito. You could not have known what would happen.”



Art by: Marta Nael

He rolled his shoulders back, nodding toward the machine. “We need to destroy it. All of it. So that they can never harm the kami again.”

“It is not the kami we were ever truly after,” a low voice drawled.

Kaito and Tamiyo spun around. Standing several yards away was a man with pink eyes and a metal arm.

Tezzeret.

Kaito’s voice was an earthy growl. “*You.*”

Understanding washed over Tezzeret as he studied Kaito’s face. “The boy from the palace—from the rooftops.” His tone was laced with mockery. “You looked as angry then as you do now.”

Tamiyo took a step forward. “If you’re not after the kami, then why did you kill so many of them?”

“We needed to test the connection between kami and the spirit realm, to study the bond between the material and immaterial aspects of existence—the body and the soul. And kami are much easier to come by than what Phyrexia *really* needs.” Tezzeret flashed his teeth, eyes sparking like wildfire. “I should thank you.”

Kaito scowled. “For what?”

A horrible scrape of metal sounded, and Jin-Gitaxias appeared from the shadows, moving beside Tezzeret like a looming nightmare. Tezzeret didn't blink, even as Jin-Gitaxias flexed his metal claws and leaned forward.

"For allowing the research to flourish by bringing planeswalkers to our laboratory," Jin-Gitaxias snapped with an eerie delight.

Kaito stiffened before exchanging a wary glance with Tamiyo.

*It's us they want*, she pressed into his mind. *The experiments—they're about planeswalkers, not kami.*

By the time Kaito's sword was in his hand, the Undercity henchmen appeared from every corner of the room. They'd been waiting all along, knowing Kaito would come back.

It was a trap—and Kaito and Tamiyo had walked right into it.

Kaito could feel Tamiyo's thoughts pressing against his own, but he ignored them, focusing instead on the serrated edge of his blade. He broke his sword apart with his mind, sending each piece forward in sharp bursts of speed, every star-shaped blade headed for Tezzeret's chest.

But they stilled in the air, inches from the man with the metal arm.

Tezzeret sneered, eyes darkening, and he flicked a hand toward the throwing stars and sent them scattering back toward Kaito and Tamiyo. They pulled back in unison, bracing for an impact that never came.

The blades hovered against their skin, daring them to move.

Tamiyo reached for a scroll, when a strip of metal equipment tore from the ceiling and wrapped itself around her hand like a monstrous restraint. She barely blinked when one of the scrolls began to rise from her satchel, but Tezzeret merely tutted.

"I wouldn't do that. Not if you want your friend to live," Tezzeret warned.

When Tamiyo glanced at Kaito, she saw the two star-blades that had inched their way against his throat. It would take less than a second to puncture his skin.

"Don't hold back on my account," Kaito offered with a ragged breath. "Besides, he needs us. I saw what they did to the kami—hooking them up to those machines for who knows how long. He's not going to let either one of us die before he gets us on those tables."

Jin-Gitaxias's voice clicked like a mechanical insect. "Multiple test subjects would provide more opportunities to expand our knowledge. But if one of the fleshlings threatens productivity, then a single specimen will suffice."

Tezzeret looked down his nose at Kaito. "You're the planeswalker who has been asking questions about me. The one searching for the emperor across the Multiverse." He stepped closer, and Kaito felt the metal blades digging through his armor, moments from breaking through. "I have to admit, I imagined someone less disappointing."

Kaito's throat burned. "Don't worry—I'm just warming up."

Tezzeret shifted, hair falling over his shoulders, but before he had a chance to reply, Kaito flicked his fingers against the air. A dagger hidden in his belt went sailing toward the ceiling, slicing through the wires holding up one of the overhead lights.

Sparks exploded, and the lantern fell from the ceiling toward Tezzeret, who jumped out of the way just as glittering shards of glass burst across the floor. Kaito used the distraction to twist away from the blades, charging for the nearest ninja who'd already raised their sword to attack.

Kaito ducked low, sweeping a leg against the assailant's knees, and swung his elbow back around until it collided with their chin. Bolting forward, he removed one of the smoke devices from his belt, preparing to throw it toward Jin-Gitaxias, when Tamiyo's voice sounded in his thoughts.

*Kaito* , she said. It sounded like a plea.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Tamiyo wrapped in even more metal than before, with a fragment of silver stretched over her eyes. She couldn't read her scrolls, and Kaito would never be able to free her from so many restraints.

If he fought his way out of the compound, he'd have to leave Tamiyo behind.

"Like I said," Tezzeret's raspy voice sounded, hands held out to his sides as every scrap of technology around him seemed to vibrate in response. "We only need one of you."

Kaito couldn't help Tamiyo. But he couldn't leave her behind either.

Not to this fate. Not when he saw what had become of the kami, tortured until their death.

Kaito would stay, and fight, and likely be captured—if he wasn't killed first. But how would that help the emperor?

He reached for the charge in his pocket. There was still time to destroy the lab, with Jin-Gitaxias and Tezzeret along with it. He could protect Kamigawa. The emperor and Kyodai would be safe from harm.

Maybe without the Reality Chip tethered to the machine, the emperor could even find a way to repair her spark.

Kaito's fingers curved around the detonator. People sacrifice everything to war.

But this?

He'd make this sacrifice only for a friend.

In one quick motion, Kaito pulled the device from his pocket and hurled it toward the room with the machine, listening to the whistle as it flew through the air.

But the weapon never made impact—it stopped just short of the glass before slowly floating into Tezzeret's hand.

He let out a dark chuckle. "Your problem," Tezzeret said icily, "is that you depend far too much on the technology I've already mastered." In his palm, the detonator broke apart piece by piece, until it became nothing more than a pile of useless metal and microchips.

Something cracked against the back of Kaito's head, and everything around him faded to black.



Art by: Lie Setiawan

The Wanderer's eyes flashed open in alarm. Sweat pooled at her brow, and she gasped against the cold air, fingertips digging into the misty temple floor.

Eiko was beside her, face curled with concern. "What is it? What have you seen?"

The Wanderer inhaled sharply, searching the room like she was trying to remember exactly where she was.

It wouldn't have been the first time she'd woken up in an unfamiliar room.

But Kyodai's slow moan was enough to remind her that she was still on Kamigawa. She was still home, however unnatural that might've felt.

The Wanderer clutched her robes as she stood. "Kaito and Tamiyo they're in trouble."

Eiko's eyes widened, swollen with fear. The Wanderer hadn't known Eiko the way she'd known Kaito, but she still remembered the stories he'd told her of his sister. She knew their bond was strong—maybe even stronger than the bond between kami and channelers.

After what the Wanderer glimpsed inside the compound, Eiko was right to be worried.

Light-Paws stopped pacing at the edge of the mist. "What kind of trouble?"

"They were ambushed by Tezzeret and Jin-Gitaxias." The Wanderer shuddered at the memory. It felt so visceral and real, like she'd been there herself. "If I don't help them, they'll never make it out."

Light-Paws's tails rose behind her like a fan. "Eiganjo needs its Emperor. We have gone too long without a ruler, and it's caused friction among the Imperial court and instability throughout Kamigawa. Not to mention the Asari Uprisers could be at our gates at any moment."

The Wanderer met Light-Paws's gaze. "You have been helping to look after the palace for ten years without me. You can handle another ten minutes."

Light-Paws opened her mouth to argue—to plead for the Wanderer to remain behind—but it was Eiko who interrupted.

“We will protect the palace in your absence,” Eiko said, bowing slightly. When she lifted her face, her eyes shimmered with fresh tears. “Please bring him home,” she mouthed inaudibly.

For Eiko, her loyalty to the palace had always come first. But she would not risk her brother’s life for duty’s sake. Not even with Light-Paws watching.

It was an alignment the Wanderer and Eiko shared.

The Wanderer nodded. She turned to face Kyodai in the distance, lifting a hand to beckon her closer.

*My old friend* , the Wanderer sent her thoughts through the mist. *I need your help.*

Kyodai appeared with a lilting cry and lowered her head. *What is it you need from me, Emperor?* To anyone else, Kyodai’s voice was a mixture of sounds, layered together like a chorus. But in the Wanderer’s head, it was as light and clear as the ring of a bell in an empty room.

*I cannot control my spark. But perhaps with your help—with our bond—I can stabilize it enough to planeswalk into the compound* , the Wanderer explained.

*It will be dangerous* , Kyodai warned. *The monster will do all he can to take the Reality Chip, and you.*

*I am not afraid of the monsters I can see* , the Wanderer replied. *I’d rather face the enemy when it’s right in front of me than have it hunt me from the shadows.*

Reaching behind her shoulder blade, the Wanderer drew her sword, gripping it tightly with two hands. She nodded to Kyodai, who hummed above her, swaying absently in the mist.

Energy filled the Wanderer’s chest. She could feel the erratic call of her spark—but Kyodai’s warmth was there too, calming her. Centering her like a compass pointing in the direction of home.

Even if she wasn’t entirely sure where that was anymore, something inside her heart wondered if home didn’t have to be a place at all.

Maybe home was with the people she cared about, who cared about her, too.

And Kaito never gave up on the Wanderer. He travelled across planes to find her and willingly faced a monster to bring her home.

She would not give up on him now.

Leaving Light-Paws, Eiko, and Kyodai in the temple, the Wanderer planeswalked out of Eiganjo and into Tameshi’s compound with a flash of light. She did not announce herself. She did not search for Kaito in the room. And she did not hesitate when the eyes of the chrome-like monster turned to meet her.

The Wanderer brought her sword down like a blow from the heavens and cleaved Jin-Gitaxias from his neck to his chest.

The wound was severe, and the metallic cry that erupted from his throat rattled through her eardrums. The Wanderer fought her way to Kaito and Tamiyo, both bound to surgical tables like they were being readied for an experiment. She took one look at the restraints and cleaved them apart, too.





Art by: Cristi Balanescu

Pulling Kaito toward her with one arm, she watched his eyes flicker back to consciousness.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” he asked groggily, fingers fumbling for a weapon that was no longer there. “Stand back—I got this.”

That was the Kaito she remembered—the boy who refused to ever admit he’d lost a fight.

“I think you’ll find that I’m the one saving *your* life. Which, by my count, is the second time in less than a day.” Her eyes flashed with humor. “There are other ways of getting my attention, you know.”

The Wanderer could hear the shuffle of footsteps nearby. They were ready for a fight.

But so was she.

The Emperor of Kamigawa handed Kaito a dagger from her belt and smirked. “I can see all our time apart has left you severely behind on your training, but do *try* to keep up.”