

Episode 3: Mother, Son, and Story

K. Arsenault Rivera

From set *March of the Machine*

17. 04. 2023

There is a story.

Many eons ago there was a great wizard by the name of Urza. So wise was he that all the mages of the Multiverse flocked to him for advice; so powerful was he that only his brother Mishra stood as a potential rival. But Mishra hated him bitterly, and soon a war began.

The war spanned decades and took untold lives. Worse, it allowed evil without compare to blossom. An awful affliction spread through Mishra's armies—a black oil that changed everything in its path.

Tamiyo knows this story. This is only the way it starts; there is more, much more. Years ago, she memorized every word. Afterward, just as Urza's metal heir had set himself upon the task of creating a plane, she'd set herself the task of recording it. Like the oil, she'd found the story had seeped into her mind, begun to change it into something she did not like. Something dangerous.

She'd sealed it away.

What a foolish thing to have done.

Hovering over the neon skies of Towashi, she holds the scroll in hand. Oil seeps from her fingers onto the parchment. Before long it will be impossible to read any of the characters—but that is no worry for someone like her, someone who knows these stories better than she knows her own.

A Phyrexian centurion bashes in the roof of a building. People scatter from it like ants. No—not like ants, whose carapaces lend them strength, who act as one in all things. People could never be so reliable when trapped by flesh and mortal fear. No, as they pour out from the building screaming, it is only the visceral that drives them, the corporeal—the falsest parts of their existence.

There is an iron ring binding the scroll. Tamiyo slips it off. It plummets through the air, landing like so many other hunks of metal upon someone's unsuspecting crown.

The story continues.

The wizard Urza creates an heir from pure, unvarnished metal. He names him Karn. The same spark of creation that birthed him burns brightly in his breast. Karn, too, must create. As a sculptor chipping at marble, he shapes his world. When it is done—the creatures named and granted boons, the climate carefully crafted, the earth shaped and polished—he appoints his own successor, Memnarch, to oversee it.

The spirits of Towashi do not take kindly to her intrusion, nor the intrusion of her fellows. Boughs bend, steam sears sinew, leaves slice like razorblades. Other stories serve to protect her. Lesser stories.

Stories without purpose, stories that do not extol the glories and virtues she now sees so clearly. Every history, every tale, every fable that exists is either for unity or against it.

She can shed those histories that no longer matter. This one does; she must bring it to its conclusion.



Art by: Artur Nakhodkin

As her eyes scan the scroll, the characters light up—even those now consumed with black oil. Each syllable she reads booms and reverberates, shaking the skyscrapers of Towashi. Trains careen off their crumbling tracks and dive to the ground. The earth tears itself apart, opening crevasses in the city that has space only for itself. Rivers pour in, taking boats and fishers along with them. Streaks of black color the water. Phyrexian symbols etch themselves onto the papers hanging on the buildings yet standing.

It won't be long now. The story continues.

Memnarch, the heir's heir, is a copy of a copy—a faded image of Urza himself. It longs for the power its grandfather wielded as easily as a poet wields a brush. It longs for its parents' ability to create. It longs to see more. Over years it plucks life from this plane and that, settling them all within this garden, waiting for the flowers to come. And they do, but they aren't the flowers Memnarch expects: these bloom in black oil. Their choking roots wrap around that which is alive and whole. Soon, the whole garden drowns beneath the oil. The heir returns to discover his home has been torn asunder.

There is more to the story. There are the people driven from their home and trampled underfoot, their souls shucked from their bodies, their bodies altered beyond any recognition. A queen rising from among the muck to rule her people. A glorious, unending oneness—a life without war or conflict. The heir looks on all this with horror.

When Tamiyo wrote the story, she feared all of this. She didn't understand the peace that came with being part of a greater family. This is not the way she'd tell this story now. But it is almost done, and she will continue telling it.

Boseiju, the tree that once held this plane together, bursts apart. Like wine spilling from a cask, oil runs from between the splinters, dripping onto the thirsty earth. An unholy screech pierces the ears of all who will listen: kami, torn from their home, scatter out of the district. Some find their ends at the

tip of a lance, some find them torn apart by compleated fishers joined with their catches, but the result is always the same: the kami dissolve into a fine mist. Tendrils of smoke rise from the blackening soil, from the bridges dissolving into nothing, until the whole district is swallowed by the fog of dead kami.

There is a distant part within her that is screaming at the sight of all this. A small voice ringing in her ear, a tingling at her fingertips. But she cannot say she is afraid. This is what is right for Kamigawa. After centuries of war, have they not earned peace? Is this not simply another step to become whole?

The scroll itself becomes oil in Tamiyo's hands, dripping between her fingers.

This is how the story ends, and how it has always ended: with Phyrexia's victory.

A scar turns into a scar when you pick at it too much. A wound scars when it doesn't receive proper care.

Kamigawa's bleeding. Ravnica is, too. But Ravnica's got plenty of walkers to keep it safe. That's Teyo's whole thing, to start—and Ral's been dreaming up countermeasures for a while now. Said he had a hunch something big was coming. They can handle things there for a while, at least.

Kaya and Vraska were supposed to hold Ravnica down while Jace coordinated with the other planes. That wasn't going to happen now.

They'd manage without them. Kaito asked her for help stanching the bleeding on Kamigawa, and after what they'd been through, helping is the least she can do.

Even if she's got her own wounds to worry about.

Kaya's not sure how long hers will hang around. Are these the sort of memories that change who you are in the afterlife? If so, she's hopelessly lost. Seeing New Phyrexia was bad enough. But being in the middle of an invasion—watching New Phyrexia tear a plane limb from limb? The only way to keep from hurting is to let herself go numb to the sights.

There's too much going on to save everyone: the ground rattles with the cratering footfalls of centuries. Snarling machine hounds roam the streets, some with people caught inside their lattice of bone. Centuries of history evaporate in an instant—hundreds of potential futures are snuffed out all at once.

There's no time for thinking about it, no time for bitterness over how this all happened or why she's the one who must pull the Gatewatch together, no time for wondering what might go wrong. People are falling. No time to reconcile with the way her stomach twists after a planeswalk either—there's only moving, only doing.

She must act.

Kaya runs. One leap takes her onto a balcony as it splits off; another sees her landing on the teetering floor beyond. Horror sets in a second later: the houseplants, scattered clothing, and ruined kitchen give breath to her worst fears. This was a residential building. Hopefully most of the inhabitants escaped. A half-finished bowl of noodles at least says the people in this unit did. But there are others, aren't there?

A scream catches her ear, muffled by the ongoing chaos. Kaya phases through the wall, with its knick-knacks and mementos, trying not to think about how all those things will be lost after today. A young boy and his dog quiver in the corner on the other side. Fallen supports have trapped the two of them in place. There's space enough for the dog to squeeze through, but the boy would have far more trouble.

Kaya can't leave them here. She doesn't have much of an exit plan, doesn't know exactly how they're all going to make it out, but she can figure it out along the way. After all, it can't be harder than figuring out what to do about this invasion.

Phasing through the fallen supports is easy enough. Normally, phasing the boy out of his position would be hard—but it's easier when he wants out just as much as she wants to help him. She offers him a hand. When he takes it, she pulls him through the fallen beam. The boy grins—and the dog squeezes through after them.

"How're we getting down?" he asks.

A fair question, given the sight in front of him: the whole side of the building's been torn off. Towashi looms—or what remains of it. Floors and furniture tumble to the ground as smoke rises from the earth, an acrid, oily smoke Kaya doesn't want to think about too closely. The streets are packed with those fighting against the invasion and those furthering it. Black oil seeps from the mouths and eyes of the attackers and foul Phyrexian symbols glow on every surface. Worse—every few minutes a thundering boom shakes the plane once more, heralding the attack of Norn's skeletal, glowing branches.



Art by: Titus Lunter

If Kaya was a kid watching all this, she'd ask the same question.

But she's an adult now. Her job is to find answers where there are none.

"We're gonna jump from one place to the next," she says. The boy tucks his dog inside of his shirt. "Are you good at jumping?"

"The best," says the boy.

She hopes he is. She takes his hand, the two of them approaching the lip of the remaining floor. Up ahead there's the swinging remains of a balcony—if they can get onto that, then maybe they can shimmy down a rain pipe to safety.

"On three," she says. He nods.

One, two

Three!

The two of them jump at the same time, Kaya keeping the boy's hand in her own. But just as they should be landing, the balcony falls away.

Kaya, the boy, and the dog plummet.

You have a lot of thoughts when you think you're going to die. Fewer when you're responsible for saving someone else. Kaya thinks fast. She *might* be able to save the boy if she can slow down their flight. That's got to be the priority. As he starts to scream, she clutches him to her chest.

She closes her eyes.

Impact never comes.

An unseen force pushes back up against them, slowing their fall. Seconds before they hit the ground, they instead hover above it. Whatever's gripping them can't hold much longer; the two of them are trembling in its hold. A Phyrexian?

"Try to be less reckless next time."

Kaito.

Kaya opens her eyes to see him. His telekinesis is barely holding them up; sweat beads on his forehead. Handling a human-size object, let alone three, must be pushing his powers to their limit. Blood, oil, and dirt are splattered across his slick armor. He gives her a nod.

The boy acts first, hopping out onto the ground. A woman nearby shouts for him—he runs without a second look back. A woof from his shirt tells her the dog's okay, too.

Kaya gets up. She flicks the tip of her nose with her thumb. "Thanks," she says. "Would have been lost without you."

He lets that stand without correction, which she supposes is fair enough.

"We have to move fast. The Boseiju district is their prime target. The whole thing, the tree "

Kaito trails off, but Kaya can find her own answers. The tree over Towashi is rent asunder. A foul waterfall pours from its body.

"That's that's awful," Kaya says.

"It is," Kaito nods. "And worse, Tamiyo did it. Opened a scroll. You can see her." Kaito points toward Tamiyo, floating high above the city, near Boseiju's weeping boughs. "She's still reading from them. If no one takes her out, this is only going to get worse."

Hells—they're talking about taking out friends now. Not that Kaya's any stranger to assassination, but there's something different about this. Tamiyo of all people. "We've both got the skills for this. Should I do it, or do you want to handle her?"

"It's personal," Kaito says with a nod. "The kami are going to want to fight this as much as we do—the ones who *can* fight. See if you can convince them to come."

"Speaking of help—where's the Wanderer?"

Kaya didn't mean it as a jab, but Kaito seems to take it as one. The corner of his lip twitches.

"She's coming," Kaito says.

"You mean she isn't here?"

"She'll *be* here," he says. "Just have a little faith."

All around them Kamigawa is crumbling. He says have faith. It's like a bad joke, isn't it?

Or a scab they keep picking at.

Tamiyo floats above them. Or something that once was Tamiyo. She doesn't look down on them, doesn't seem to move, doesn't seem to care about what she's doing. Nothing could be further from the woman Kaito met in Otawara.

He sizes up the oil-slick bark of the tree. No matter what he'd thought of her before, this is about more than just him. Kaito sets his foot against the bark. He gets about three steps up before someone calls to him.

"A-are you going up there to fight her?"

The voice is small and timid. And as much as he'd like to ignore it, he knows he can't. Besides, if there's a kid hanging around this place they need to scatter, and fast. "I am. You should get going."

"I can't," says the voice. When he looks down, he catches sight of the kid: a little Nezumi in motley metal armor and a homemade helmet that obscures his face. He must have cobbled it together out of scraps. Wait a second "That's my mom up there."

"Nashi?" he asks.

Sure enough, he nods.

Kaito lets himself down from the tree. "You don't want to be here," he says. "Things are going to get bad."

"But you're not going to hurt her, are you?" Nashi asks, fussing his hands. "She looks different, but that's still her. I think she's forgotten herself—I thought, maybe if I talked to her "

Kaito runs a hand through his hair. "I don't think it's that simple."

"You have to let me try," Nashi says. He draws himself up to his full height—which isn't very tall. "I came all the way out here to help when I heard things were getting bad. Mom said that's what heroes do. If you can bring me up somewhere she can see me, then I'm sure she'll listen. No matter who she is, she'll always love me. She promised."

Kaito's chest goes tight. He doesn't want to do this. But if it was Eiko up there? Kaito doesn't want to think about the possibility, yet he knows he'd do anything he could to get her back. Even if getting her back didn't seem like an option. Tamiyo ended up this way because of him. The least he can do is try this plan.

"All right," Kaito says. "How's your climbing?"

"Okay," Nashi says. "Not good enough when there's all this stuff on the tree. It didn't seem like I should touch it."

"You shouldn't," Kaito says. He takes a repulsor from his belt Nashi couldn't weigh much, right? Kaito clips it to Nashi's sash and turns it on. A soft hum radiates as he starts to float. "Walk in the direction you want to go. It's a little slow, but you'll be able to follow along. If you hit the button one more time, it'll shield you. Don't hit it after that, unless you want to drop."

Nashi nods.

Kaito swallows, shaking away the sense of dread. If worst came to worst, he'd tell Nashi to leave. But maybe he's right, maybe there is a way to break through all this. Stranger things have happened. They need to try.

Boseiju doesn't make itself easy to climb. Between the torrents of oil raining down above them and the chaos behind, there isn't much in the way of mercy. Normally there were branches lower to the ground upon which some of the kami dwelled—but all those have split apart. The first branch that suits them is far higher up, and only half-stable at that. The air is cold and thin when they at last alight upon it; if it weren't for his training, Kaito would be dizzy.

Nashi isn't so lucky. When his paws meet the bark, he sways from one to the other, clutching at his stomach. Kaito sets a hand on his shoulder. He points ahead, to where Tamiyo still hovers. "Take a second if you need it, but she's there. Hasn't noticed us, either."

Nashi takes two steadying breaths. Kaito breathes along with him; sometimes it helped to have company when it came to that sort of thing.

"Okay. I'm ready," Nashi says.

Kaito hopes he is. Just in case things go wrong, he unsheathes his sword. "I've got your back."

Step by unsteady step, Nashi makes his way to the end of the branch. Kaito follows a pace or two behind. His heart hammers in his ears. Something in Tamiyo had to remain. Something in her would remember, right?

"Mom?"

Tamiyo's head swivels all the way around her neck. The eyes that behold them are not the kind, inquisitive eyes Kaito once knew. They're something else entirely—rimmed with black, the tears on her cheeks a testament to what she's become.

Tamiyo says nothing. Around her the scrolls swirl; the light catches the sharp edges of her claws.

"It's me, Nashi. You remember me, right?" he asks. "I-I don't think you want to do any of this. I think you've made a mistake. But I know someone's making you. I just want you to remember. Like in the stories about lost princes." Nashi trembles so hard that it is difficult for him to speak.

"Nashi," says Tamiyo. "What are you doing here?"

Kaito reaches out to steady the small Nezumi.

And it is then that the rest of Tamiyo's body snaps around to match her head, then that her face wrenches into a scowl. A shard of metal shoots toward them, flung from the orbit of scrolls floating around Tamiyo. It is only Kaito's time-honed instincts that save him: he deflects the shards with telekinesis the way he'd deflected all the stones his instructors flung at him. The clang of metal rings in his ears.

"I want nothing more than for you to join me, Nashi," says Tamiyo. Her voice rings wrong to Kaito—like a twisted cicada's cry. "You're only afraid because you don't understand. There is nothing to fear. In the light of New Phyrexia, all are one."

Kaito steps in front of Nashi. "Go back toward the tree."

"I can't leave her—"

"This isn't your mother," Kaito snaps. "Now go!" Kaito gives Nashi a push further back. If things are going to get violent, there's no way he wants Nashi to see it.

No sooner than Kaito shoves Nashi away does Tamiyo descend on him. Tamiyo was someone who did what she could to support others. A storyteller, an investigator, a woman devoted to her family. But now?

Phyrexia changed her. Warped that curious storyteller into a cruel hierophant. There was nothing behind those oil-weeping eyes.

Tamiyo's claws sliced through the air, followed by weaponized scrolls that grab at Kaito's neck and arms, threatening to bind and overwhelm him. Kaito slices through the paper while keeping the metal at bay—but his footing on this slick branch is treacherous. He slips. Tamiyo's claws skitter and spark off Kaito's armor before he manages to recover. The slightest skid of his feet and those claws will find a home across his neck. He manages to recover his balance with only a tear across his armor to show for it.

Kaito holds his sword out before him.

Tamiyo stares back at him unblinking. "This is a pointless fight."

"Maybe for you," Kaito says. "There's no way you're going to win this."

Without even a gesture Tamiyo sends five more shards flying toward him; Kaito blocks four. The fifth slices him across the cheek.

"I pity you," Tamiyo says. "Fighting against peace to maintain your loneliness. You stand in the way of your own enlightenment. Like a child, you fight against the parents who only wish to welcome you."

Hearing her like this tears him up. Kaito hopes Nashi can't hear her. And he hopes, too, that Nashi isn't watching when he throws his weight into a lunge. Tamiyo sways back and counters—a scroll wraps around his leg. He tries to shift his weight and cut himself loose.

Tamiyo pulls.

Kaito flips feet over head before he knows what's happened, dangling far above Towashi. The smoke of the burning city stings at his eyes. Somehow, he keeps hold of his sword.

"I'm giving you one final opportunity to surrender, Kaito. Phyrexia can give you the life you've always wanted. Come home. And let me welcome my family."

Blood's rushing to his head. Think. If he cuts himself down, he's going to fall. Maybe he'll be able to catch himself on something; maybe not. But he doesn't have many better options.

"I like my life the way it is," he says.

Kaito makes the cut.

He falls. Impact never comes. Instead, he feels something cool and soft beneath him. Something familiar. "We're up to three, if you're keeping count."

That voice. A smirk comes to him before his eyes are open—it's the emperor. She lands atop the branch in a hush of cloth, her sword held out at her side. Which means he must have landed on Kyodai—the guardian spirit of Kamigawa whose soul is bound to the emperor.

"Call it even with me?" Kaya's voice tells Kaito he isn't alone. She's right next to him, the two of them riding together.

"For now," Kaito says. "I told you she'd be here."

Kyodai swoops back up toward Tamiyo. They're level with the branch, now. His eyes are trained on the emperor as she confronts Tamiyo. Each step is cautious and graceful—the slickness that troubled

Kaito isn't a concern for the emperor. What jocularly there was in her initial greeting is gone when she addresses the monstrosity before her.

"Is this truly the place for a fight, Tamiyo?" the emperor asks.

"You should be asking yourself that," Tamiyo responds.

A flurry of shards fly out toward her, each split in two by a single cut of the emperor's blade. Tamiyo backs away with each step the emperor takes toward her—stopping right beside a frightened Nashi.

Tamiyo's hand settles on Nashi's head.

Kaito's stomach twists. He wonders if he should look away. Instead, he finds the strength to call out. "Nashi, turn around!"

Tamiyo reaches for a scroll at her waist, one bound with an iron band. She slips the band free with a finger. The silken paper unfurls.

"Kyodai!" the emperor shouts.

The great kami beneath them flies to her side. The emperor holds her sword toward her companion and Kyodai breathes upon it. Shining white lines the blade; characters float in the air around her. Kyodai's power flows through the emperor.

Tamiyo's mouth begins to move.

Nashi, at last comprehending what is about to happen, turns away.

A flash of white light, the sound of a blade unsheathing, the whistle of a distant gale.



Art by: Tran Nguyen

Tamiyo falls.

Kaito is on his feet in an instant. Nashi is all alone up there now—he's going to need company. By the time Kaito has closed the distance, the Wanderer is there to meet them. Kaito hugs Nashi tight.

"That wasn't her," Nashi repeats. "That wasn't—why was she like—why didn't she?"

There aren't any easy answers—certainly none Kaito can summon. A stone in his throat keeps him from speaking.

The emperor bows her head with grief. “Your mother will live on in your memory, and the stories you tell of her.”

It is wise counsel, but not necessarily comforting to someone in the thick of pain. Nashi's sobs only get louder. Kaito can't blame him.

Another hand alights on his shoulder, oddly light and cold. Kaya never seemed the type for tearful reunions, but maybe after what they saw on New Phyrexia she's singing a different tune. Any comfort is welcome now. Even Kyodai wraps around them all. For a moment it feels as if they're trying to hold the plane together. Perhaps in the case of this one young boy, they are.

Peace lasts until they hear Nashi's mother calling for him.

Tamiyo's voice does not drift up from the pile of metal the emperor struck down, but from right among them. This wasn't the cold Phyrexian whisper but the warm, familiar tones of her old self.

“Nashi, I'm sorry.”

Kaito shields Nashi with his body. Before them is a strange being: densely packed floating characters form a woman's silhouette. They glow and dim as if breathing. When they next hear Tamiyo's voice, a light at the center glows even brighter. Characters wink in and out of existence and change as he studies them. Towashi's projected neons can achieve all sorts of trickery, but this is something different. The way it's moving feels too intentional to be random, too imperfect to be artificial. The light glowing within reminds him more of a kami than any of Towashi's technical wonders.

“I understand you might be wary of me, but I mean you no harm,” Tamiyo says.

“What are you?” Kaito asks.

“Not a ghost, that's for sure,” Kaya calls—she's at the edge of the branch. “What do you want?”

The silhouette turns toward each of them, then nods. “I am what remains of Tamiyo—her story unending. You may think of me as her memory. Many years ago, she created me in anticipation of her death and sealed me away within a scroll until I was needed, bound with an iron ring.” Tamiyo's memory—her story—pauses. “I had hoped I might never be.”

“How do we know you aren't—” Kaito starts.

But Nashi is already breaking away from him, toward the odd conglomeration of characters. When he meets them, they swarm, settling into his arms.

Kaito moves toward the boy, but the emperor gestures for him to stop. The emperor turns away—toward the body, toward Kamigawa, toward the ruins of the night. “She's telling the truth.”

“How do you know?” Kaito asks. “How do you know this isn't another Phyrexian scheme?”

“Were you watching closely? Before I struck, Tamiyo mouthed something.”

“I saw that, but she could have been doing anything. I thought she was preparing a curse.”

“She wasn't,” the Wanderer says. “All the shards she threw at me went too wide to do any damage—didn't you notice?” She sets a hand on one of Kyodai's many masks, and the kami touches hers in turn. A hard-won moment of tenderness on a battlefield like this. “Tamiyo was making a request, in the only way she could.”

Kaito looks back over his shoulder. Nashi is still surrounded by the characters—by the story unending. It isn't a clean victory, or even a very good one. Kaito looks out over the burning city below Boseiju's wounded canopy. So many are dead, so many are dying, so many more that will die.

In the distance he sees shapes moving through the strange smoke—giant mechs lumbering toward the impact barb. Imperial forces gathering to counter the Phyrexian assault.

How much can they do? How many can they save?

Tamiyo fell—but Nashi lived.

Considering the work left to do, he'll take it.

There is a story.

Once upon a time there was a great evil, one that threatened to swallow the planes of the Multiverse whole. Unfeeling and uncaring, it infected the hearts of those it encountered.

There was someone who fought against it.

There was a protector in white.