

# Kaito Origin Stories: A Test of Loyalty & The Path Forward

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## A Test of Loyalty

The street was crawling with kami tonight. The Lantern Festival was a favorite for many of Towashi's night-loving spirits. On any other day, Kaito might've appreciated the extra camouflage. Part of his job required the ability to move through the streets unseen—and hordes of kami were an ideal solution. But he was running out of time. If he didn't finish the job soon, he'd lose a payday to another Reckoner.



Art by: Nils Hamm

It hadn't taken Kaito long to find his target. Gamblers were notoriously bad at keeping secrets, and this one had a history of debt and soured friendships. But if Kaito moved too soon, he'd risk scaring him off. And on a night like this, with heavy crowds and an abundance of fireworks displays, there were a thousand places for a stranger to hide.

A group of children ran past Kaito with sparklers in their fists, shrieking with delight. He flinched at the sound.

It had only been a year since the emperor went missing. Twelve months since Kaito chased the mysterious stranger out of Kyodai's temple.

The rest of Kamigawa may have been carrying on as normal, but when Kaito saw the bright red festival lanterns floating through the sky, the skewers of syrup-soaked rice dumplings in every street stall, and the Kami of Exultant Revelry blazing across the rooftops in all its twinkling glory, he didn't feel an ounce of joy. All he could think about was his friend.

Kaito would save his celebrating for the day the emperor came home.

He stepped beneath the canopy of neon parasols that kept the street vendors sheltered, where a trio of electric kami squabbled near one of the faltering outdoor heaters. The smallest of the three spirits leapt up, and the floating metal orbs around its industrial-style body flashed with irritation. Kaito threw up a hand to shield his eyes from the bright light, blinking several times before the kami scattered across the street to find another source of energy. When his vision readjusted, he was almost certain he'd lost sight of his target entirely.

And he probably would have if it weren't for the man's garish coat.

The edges glowed a fluorescent yellow, and the rest of it was patterned with glossy, holographic koi. It was a bold choice for a man who owed Satoru Umezawa money.

But there was something about festivals that tricked people into letting their guard down.

Soundlessly, Kaito approached the man dressed in yellow, watching as he perched himself on one of the thin wooden chairs outside a curry stall. He leaned across the table, speaking in rushed, loose words to a woman with flour smeared across her forehead and drops of curry splattered on her apron.

The Hyozan Reckoners wouldn't want witnesses. Kaito needed to be careful.

He slipped between the approaching customers, moving as if he were no more than a wisp of smoke in the shadows. He walked behind the man without stopping, and in one fluid sweep of his hand, Kaito reached into the man's coat and retrieved his wallet.

The man didn't feel a thing. Kaito made sure of it.

Following the shifting crowd to the edge of the market, Kaito distanced himself from the mark. When he was sure he hadn't been followed, Kaito paused at the street corner, opened the wallet, and counted the translucent banknotes inside.

Most people on Kamigawa were happier using credit chips attached to their wrists, but anyone with a penchant for gambling wouldn't be silly enough to use wearable tech. Those who frequented Towashi's card dens had a saying: *only risk what you're willing to lose*. To avoid the temptation of risking everything, gamblers preferred physical money over credit chips.

Luckily for Kaito, he'd picked up a few new skills over the years—pickpocketing being one of them.

He thumbed through the notes, counting a second time just to be sure before removing a miniature tablet from his pocket. One day, he hoped he'd be able to afford hands-free tech like the retina lenses he'd seen some of the other Reckoners wear, but for now, the outdated comm would have to do.

The device scanned his eyes, and a blurry hologram materialized. Kaito waved a finger, scrolling through details of every active listing, until a pixelated image of the gambler's face appeared. Below was the man's name, how much money he owed Satoru, and tip-offs as to where he might be hiding.

Kaito typed a coded message into the device and hit send. The target's listing flashed from blue to red before vanishing. In the space it left behind was the word "Completed."

Across Kamigawa, the Hyozan Reckoners would receive the same alert.

They'd know Kaito cleared another job and that he'd be on his way to Satoru's den in the Undercity to collect the bounty.

Kaito stuffed the device back in his pocket, the sound of festival drums and fireworks echoing behind him. It was true that he wasn't ready to celebrate—but that didn't mean he wasn't hungry. Kaito pulled a few of the extra notes from the gambler's wallet, walked up to the nearest stall, and bought the biggest dumpling skewer he could find. As he made his way to the train station, shoyu dripping down his hand, Kaito decided that even though working for Satoru hadn't been his first choice, being a Reckoner had its perks.

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The Undercity was shadowed by looming skyscrapers and vibrant cherry trees that failed to mask the stench of the open sewers nearby. Kaito had been doing jobs for the Hyozan Reckoners for nearly a year. He'd grown used to the worst parts of Towashi's underbelly. He'd even grown used to the people—and they were far worse than anything that came out of the sewer.

Kaito held his wrist up to the paneled door, and a red light scanned the wearable keycard. Security was mild in comparison to the Imperial Palace, but no one with any sense would ever attempt to break into Reckoner territory. A security system was merely a formality.

The door slid open, and Kaito followed a metal staircase down to a wide lobby where card tables littered the room and a neon counter lined the back wall. Reckoners were perched on chairs and standing in doorways, most of their faces partially hidden by masks elaborately decorated with teeth and sharp horns. Colorful tattoos were visible on their arms. Some of the underlings only had one or two, but the higher-ups had tattoos that spread from their wrists all the way to their shoulders.

For most Reckoners, their loyalty tattoo was their first. If they betrayed Satoru, the initiation mark would eat into their flesh, eventually leading to a slow and painful death. Kaito wasn't the youngest underling amongst them, but being on the cusp of sixteen made him just young enough to avoid initiation.

He tried not to think about how long that would last.

It wasn't that Kaito *intended* to be disloyal. Satoru had given him a job, after all, not to mention a place to live and food to eat. If it weren't for the Hyozan, Kaito would've still been wandering Towashi, surviving off the few coins he managed to scrounge up from the gutters—and maybe a few more from the pockets of unsuspecting strangers.

But Kaito hadn't joined the Hyozan Reckoners for the money. The gang's extensive network gave them access to every scrap of criminal information that existed. If anyone was going to know about a man with a metal arm, it would be Satoru's spies.

If it meant finding the emperor's assailant, Kaito would suffer a loyalty tattoo and stay in the Undercity for as long as it took. It was a small price to pay to bring his friend home.

A burly figure wearing sculpted, insectile armor stood in Kaito's path, brows as thick as caterpillars. He huffed, breath sour and eyes bloodshot. "You stole my mark."

Kaito eyed the man's katana, its edges glowing a merciless red. Most of the Reckoners' weapons were laced with poisons and illegal enhancements. All Kaito had was a thin knife that was more suited to slicing fruit than it was to drawing blood, but the last time he'd gone to the armory, the knife was all he could afford. Kaito had never been one to shy away from confrontation, but he couldn't deny they were unevenly matched. So, he fought back with his words and hoped it wouldn't cost him a broken nose.

"If a name is on the list, it's fair game," Kaito bit back coolly. "Not my fault you were too slow to get there first."

The Reckoner whistled through his crooked teeth. "The gambler was only tagged as a mark this morning. How did you manage to find him so quickly?"

"It was a festival," Kaito remarked. "People go where the food is."

"I'd say you got lucky, but you don't even have blood on your hands." He narrowed his eyes. "If you're stalling for time—trying to keep the rest of us from him, just so you can score a bounty "

At the suggestion, a few of the other Reckoners glanced up from the nearby card table. One was a muscular woman with metal gloves trailing up to her elbows, each finger pointed and needle sharp. Kaito had seen her work before—one swipe of her hand would leave a special kind of poison that caused venomous flowers to blossom from a person's wounds.

"I know about the code," Kaito said, and he made sure the others could hear him, too. "And I don't need to lie to get a payday—or rough up a target just to make myself feel important." He shrugged. "The listing said he owed money, so I got the money."

"You're cocky for an underling, and too soft-bellied for a Reckoner." The man tilted his head accusingly. "Mercy is for the Imperials."

"It wasn't mercy," Kaito snapped back. "I just don't see the point in wasting time making someone bleed when there are plenty of other jobs I could be doing. We aren't paid by the hour."

"No," the woman with the metal fingers chimed in, a hint of a tattoo appearing along her collarbone. "But it sure is fun to make them beg."

The others laughed in response, and the sound went straight through Kaito's core like an icy dagger. He knew if he wasn't careful, he might someday find the same kind of dagger in his back.

A tall woman with jet-black hair appeared, and the laughter ceased. Kaito felt the chill seep through his bones, filling him with a sense of emptiness. Wisps of black smoke circled around her like phantom serpents. Unlike those who channel kami magic through mutual respect, this woman took a different approach to channeling. She'd allowed Azamaki, the Kami of Treachery Incarnate, to possess her, and more than once. She believed doing so gave her prophetic hallucinations and visions of what would come to be.

All Kaito could see was the dying gray color of her skin, and the way the black of her eyes spilled out into the whites, like the kami hadn't just borrowed a part of her—it had consumed her very soul.

"Satoru wishes to speak with you," she said in a hollow voice, sweeping a hand toward one of the back rooms.



Art by: Anna Pavleeva

Kaito followed her without a word, happy to leave the others behind, but he felt his nerves jolt to life across his skin. It was rare for Satoru to summon anyone. When he did, the people who stepped into his office usually came out with one less finger, or several missing teeth—if they came out alive at all.

Kaito felt the weight of the stranger's wallet. Did Satoru know he'd taken some of the money to buy dumpling skewers? Kaito had counted the money several times over. There was plenty to cover the mark's debt. What Kaito took was extra—it couldn't possibly be seen as stealing from Satoru.

Could it?

The woman pushed the door opened, and Kaito stepped clumsily inside, eyes growing wide when he saw Satoru sitting behind his desk, bright tattoos trailing all the way up to the bottom of his ears. His black hair was wound in a tight bun and a harsh expression knotted his entire face. Metal armor was latched strategically across his chest and arms, but there were windowed panels across his shoulders and stomach that showed off his colorful markings. A gas mask hung from his neck, neon green with painted blue swirls, making it look like the jaws of a monster.

Satoru didn't motion for Kaito to sit. He didn't say a word. He simply stared in a way that made Kaito's knees falter.

"I can explain," Kaito said quickly. "I knew I'd be bringing you a profit on top of the debt. And I'd been tailing the guy since the afternoon, so when I smelled the shoyu—"

Satoru held up a hand to interrupt, and Kaito snapped his mouth shut.

When the leader of the Hyozan Reckoners still didn't speak, Kaito pulled the wallet out of his pocket and set it carefully on the table between them.

Satoru's eyes dropped before gesturing to the nearby channeler. She took the wallet and moved away to count the contents. After a moment, she simply nodded.

Satoru pressed his elbows against the table and clasped his hands together, leaning in. “I’m impressed by how well you’re able to tail your marks. This is the third time this week you’ve cleared a name from the list on the same day it went up.”

Kaito swallowed, clenching his fists as if he were protecting his fingers.

“However,” Satoru said. “While your efficiency is worthy of praise, I’m not sure you’ve grasped what it means to send a message.”

Kaito’s throat burned. He needed this job; he needed to be somewhere he could help the emperor. He couldn’t afford to let Satoru doubt him.

“There are Reckoners who can send a message, but they don’t clear as many names off your lists as I do.” Kaito knew he was being too bold, but it was all he could do to mask the cracks in his voice. “I’m the best underling you have.”

“Yet you have no loyalty mark.” Satoru motioned to Kaito’s bare skin, and then to the large screen against the wall. Surveillance feeds from the lobby appeared in rectangles. He’d been watching them the whole time. “It seems I’m not the only one who wonders whether you have the stomach for this job.”

“I’m here because I want to be.”

“Yes.” Satoru paused. “You lived in Eiganjo before you came to us. I have seen Imperial samurai leave the palace for a different kind of life, and every now and then, one of them winds up here. But they leave because they see a broken system.” His eyes darkened. “You don’t strike me as someone who cares much about systems.”

The memory of his childhood made Kaito’s cheeks burn. He still felt guilty—not about leaving the palace, but for leaving Eiko behind. Not that she would’ve followed him beyond the wall. Her heart belonged to the palace and everything it stood for.

Kaito’s heart didn’t really belong to anything. At least not anything that could easily be explained.

Kaito stiffened. “I ran away because I knew the things I wanted out of life weren’t things I was going to find in Eiganjo.”

“And what is it you want?”

Kaito shrugged. “Money. A better sword.” *To find out what happened to the emperor and bring her home.*

At that, Satoru chuckled, brow still furrowed. “I have a job for you,” he said finally. “One that isn’t on the list.”

“A job?” Kaito blinked with relief. Maybe he’d get to keep his fingers after all.

Satoru leaned back in his chair. “There’s a moonfolk on Otawara—a Futurist prodigy, as they’re calling him—who is prototyping a way to connect tech and kami. His research would sell for a high price on the black market. And it’s only a matter of time before Hyozan’s rivals hear about it and get the same idea.” He tilted his head, studying Kaito carefully before dipping his chin. “I want you to bring me the schematics.”

The pay would be good—black market dealings always were—but it would also be a way to prove his loyalty to Satoru. *Without* having to send any messages.

Kaito gave a curt nod. “Consider it done.”



“I’ll send you the details through your comm.” Satoru waved a hand. “You can see yourself out.”

Kaito left the room, ignoring the way the channeler watched him with black, assessing eyes, and once he was out in the street under the shadows of a high-rise, he pulled out his tablet just in time to see the private message flash up on his holoscreen.

There was only a photo, and a name.

*Tameshi.*

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Otawara wasn’t at all like the surface. So many of the buildings were covered in metal and glass, reflecting the plane like it was shining a spotlight on every sudden movement. There were surveillance drones everywhere, and enormous, origami mechs that prowled the edges of the floating city.

After the emperor vanished, the Imperials blamed the Futurists for the attack. Kaito wondered if the Futurists’ raised defenses were a response to the accusations or if their security systems were less about protection and more about concealing whatever was going on in their labs.

It wasn’t a secret that the Futurists liked to push the boundaries of technology. But maybe they were past toeing the line—maybe they’d already leapt over it entirely.

Kaito would be lying if he said the thought didn’t pique his interest.

When Kaito finally managed to track down information on Tameshi’s whereabouts, he discovered the moonfolk was no longer on Otawara at all. He’d moved his research to the Boseiju District—the kami-filled forest, and home to the Order of Jukai.

Tailing a mark and breaking into laboratories was one thing, but angering the kami? The ones in Boseiju were there to get away from the rest of Towashi. They were barely tolerant of the Order of Jukai. It was part of the reason Eiganjo trained so many kami diplomats to try to keep the peace between the mortal and spirit realms.

The forest would not be friendly territory. Not without someone to mediate. So, he contacted the only person who could help him and pleaded his case.

Kaito paced beneath the archway on the outskirts of Boseiju. Stone pillars carved into the shapes of ancient kami were perched throughout the moss garden, their mouths wide open with enough space to leave an offering. Some of them housed fruit, while others contained origami animals scribbled with messages for the spirits yet to enter the mortal realm. Behind the temple stood a wide merge gate, the colors around it shimmering with metallic hues.

Most people knew not to get too close. No one knew exactly what would happen if a mortal tried to step through the void. But kami did occasionally make their way through the gates, and while the Imperials had constructed them to keep the crossings safe, the Order of Jukai built the temples to make sure the kami felt welcomed. They believed spirits were a sacred part of nature that should be revered.

Kaito never saw the point in treating kami like they were gods. There was something about seeing a lethargic kami sunbathing in a heap of mud that made them less ethereal.

The crunch of footsteps sounded nearby, and Kaito lifted his head to find his sister standing several feet away.

His shoulders relaxed. “Eiko. You came.”

She'd cut her hair since the last time he'd seen her. It was chopped short and severe, and made her look older. The way her lips were pursed and her eyes narrowed, she appeared strangely foxlike. *Like a human version of Light-Paws*, Kaito thought, mouth curving slightly at the resemblance.

Eiko crossed her arms. "Don't look so happy. If I'm going to help you, there will be rules."

Kaito held up his hands innocently. "I wouldn't have assumed anything less."

"First of all, I'm not here to steal anything. I'm here to protect the kami from whomever this Tameshi is. Because if he's doing the things you say he is—connecting tech and kami—then he's breaking Imperial law and threatening the balance of both realms. And in case your judgment is as poor as I remember, absolutely *no weapons*. We cannot make the kami here feel threatened in any way."

"Great speech," Kaito chirped. "But if I needed a battle buddy, I would've asked someone from the Undercity. You're here because I need an Imperial to guide me through the forest under the guise of diplomacy."

"You know I'm not officially a kami diplomat yet, right?" Eiko pointed out. "I haven't completed my training."

"The Order of Jukai don't need to know that. And with any luck, we won't even see them. You're just here to make sure the kami don't attack us along the forest border."

"No," Eiko countered. "*I'm* here to put a stop to your friend."

"He's a mark, not a friend."

There was a moment of silence, and when Eiko spoke again, her voice softened. "Why are you doing this, Kaito? If joining the Hyozan Reckoners is your way of getting back at Light-Paws for not believing you, then—"

"It's not," Kaito interjected.

Eiko's expression splintered. "Then why are you working for *criminals*?"

"I'm doing this for the emperor," Kaito replied, voice stiff. "I've already heard rumblings of a secret organization not aligned with the Futurists *or* the Reckoners. The palace wouldn't listen to me about the man with the metal arm, but I know what I saw—and if he shows himself in Kamigawa, the Reckoners will know about it." He shook his head. "Satoru is already questioning my loyalty. If I don't get him what he wants, I'll be back to where I was when I left the palace, with no leads, and no one willing to help."

At that, Eiko said nothing.

Kaito's jaw tensed. "All I need is Tameshi's research. After I take the schematics to Satoru and secure my place with the Reckoners, you can tell the Imperials whatever you have to."

Eiko stood with her thoughts for a while, the tension building mostly in her shoulders. "Fine," she said at last.

Kaito tried not to appear too grateful in case she changed her mind. He nodded toward the trees. "We should go while there's still light. I'd prefer to avoid running into the Kami of Empty Graves in the middle of the night." He smirked like it was a peace offering. "Especially since your plan is to go in unarmed."

"Oh, I've met her. She's quite polite," Eiko noted, straightening the metal bracers around her forearms. "If I were you, I'd be more concerned with the Kami of Forgotten Clearings. She's *famously* territorial."



Kaito had the good sense not to laugh, even when Eiko's eyes sparkled with humor, and he followed his sister into the forest.

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Eiko stood in front of the Kodama of the West Tree. It towered over her by nearly thirty feet, wide limbs covered in bark and its mouth stretched with threads of golden sap. A dozen luminescent blossoms circled the kami's head, and cascades of smaller branches trailed down its shoulders like a crown of hair.



Art by: Daarken

Kaito drummed his fingers against his arms, watching the introduction from a distance. He didn't know exactly what his sister was saying, or how displeased the kami was to see trespassers so close to the border of Jukai Forest, but after a while, Eiko bowed low and returned to Kaito's side.

"She says we can pass through safely, as long as we don't go beyond the river," Eiko explained carefully. She cast a glance over her shoulder and lowered her voice. "I didn't mention Tameshi. I thought it might complicate matters if they knew there was a threat in the forest."

Kaito smirked. "Lying to the kami? Would Light-Paws approve?"

Eiko scowled. "Don't make me regret this."

They walked for nearly an hour. Kaito's eyes searched the faraway trees for signs of Tameshi's new research grounds—flattened earth, fresh tracks, metal where it shouldn't be. But if Tameshi was nearby, he'd done a thorough job of covering up his presence.

Kaito sensed Eiko's stiffness beside him and turned to face her. Her chin jutted out, and her mouth was pressed into an impenetrable line. It was the same look she'd get as a child when she was worried about being reprimanded—usually because of Kaito's mistakes.

She didn't like lying to the kami. But Kaito wondered if the possibility of disappointing Light-Paws was also weighing on her shoulders. He couldn't blame her if it was; he remembered the feeling all too

well. The only difference was that Eiko *wanted* to make their mentor proud, whereas Kaito he wanted Light-Paws to be proud of the person he already was, and not the samurai she hoped he'd become.

The ground shuddered without warning, and Kaito leapt backward, dagger finding his grip before his eyes had even processed the threat.

It wasn't an attack—just a slow-moving rock kami burrowing itself deeper into the earth for shade.

Kaito relaxed, but Eiko's hardened stare made his cheeks burn.

"I thought we agreed no weapons," she hissed.

Kaito gave a sheepish shrug in response. "I would *barely* call it a weapon. It's more of a survival tool. Depending on your perspective, you might even call it a small kitchen utensil."

"My *perspective* is that you pulled out a blade the first time you saw a kami move!" Eiko replied tersely. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is exactly what I was worried about."

Kaito slid the dagger into his belt, no longer bothering to conceal it in his clothes. "It's nothing. Nobody got hurt."

"Don't you understand how serious this is? If you threaten the kami, you're not just putting us both in danger—you're putting everything I've worked toward in danger, too."

Kaito bristled. "You didn't have to come."

"Yes, I did."

"No." Kaito took a step closer. "You could've told the Imperials about Tameshi. They would've sent samurai straight here, arrested him, and made sure his research was destroyed. You knew the risks, and you still *chose* to come. And I'm grateful for your help, but you can't just—"

"I didn't come here to help you," Eiko confessed abruptly.

Kaito flinched.

She balled her fists. "I—I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. But this isn't just about stopping Tameshi's research. It's about proving what his research *is*."

Kaito frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw something that night, too, Kaito. The night the emperor disappeared."

Kaito felt as if the entire forest had become a tidal wave. He locked his knees, eyes glued to his sister, and waited for her to explain.

Eiko chewed the edge of her lip, trying to find the right words. "When the alarms sounded, I—I tried to find you. I was halfway across the student gardens when I saw you running toward Kyodai's temple. And that's when I saw something on the roof."

Kaito's heart pounded. "Did you see the man? The one I chased?"

She shook her head. "It wasn't a man—it was a light. It was glowing as bright as a star, and then it *exploded*. Everyone else was so busy looking toward the wall, but I was looking for you. And the light—it transformed into an animal and vanished. When I found out the emperor was missing, I knew they must've been connected somehow. That maybe the Futurists had found a way to *weaponize kami*."



Art by: Dominik Mayer

Kaito scraped a hand through his hair, frustrated. “I’ve told you a thousand times—what happened had nothing to do with the Futurists. There was a man in the temple that night. A man who was in the very room where the emperor was last seen. *That’s* who’s responsible for the emperor’s disappearance. Not a glowing animal.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You said Tameshi’s research involves merging kami and technology. What if that’s exactly what I saw on the roof?”

Kaito stared, face morphing into understanding. “Light-Paws didn’t believe you.”

Eiko blinked.

“She didn’t take what you saw seriously, the same way she didn’t believe me.” Kaito recognized the sting in her eyes. “That’s why you came—to prove to her that you were right.”

“You make it sound childish.”

Kaito snorted. “It *is* childish. So what if she didn’t take you seriously? She didn’t believe me either. But at least you’ve had Light-Paws’s approval since we were children.”

Eiko’s expression faltered, eyes turning glassy. “Kaito “

Kaito looked away. “You were always the better one of us. I never expected Light-Paws to see anything else. But I stood in the temple that night begging the council to listen to me, and not one of them would.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Maybe they didn’t listen to you then, but the difference between you and me is that one day, they will.”

“I do believe what you saw, you know,” she said quietly.

“You believe he was a Futurist.” Kaito lifted his eyes. “And that’s not what I saw.”

Eiko nodded. “Maybe Tameshi’s research will prove one of us right.” She hesitated. “You can still come home, you know. It isn’t too late to continue your training.”

“That isn’t my life. Not anymore. But you?” Kaito flashed an earnest grin. “You’ll be great at it.”

Eiko took his hand, squeezed, and turned back toward the path. Sometimes the unspoken words between them were the loudest of all.

Beyond the next rock bed was a stone staircase that wrapped around a hill. Cascading from the crest was a small waterfall, trickling over the moss edges and pooling below. The stepped earth created uneven levels beneath the river, making the clearing echo with the sound of rushing water all the way through the heart of the forest.

Kaito knew the best place to hide in Towashi was within the largest crowds. Maybe in Jukai Forest, it was near the loudest waterfalls.

Eiko held out a hand to stop Kaito from moving. “We can’t go any farther. I promised the Kodama of the West Tree.”

Kaito pointed ahead at the mist beyond the trees. “If Tameshi is here, he’ll be close to the river, where it’s loud and he can hide his tracks.” He glanced at Eiko. “The only promise I made was to the emperor—and I’m not leaving here without the research.”

Ignoring Eiko’s objections, Kaito stepped carefully across the protruding stones in the stream, balancing with care. When he reached the muddy bank, he scrambled to catch his footing before grabbing a fistful of thick vegetation and hoisting himself up the rocky hill. He turned to see if his sister had made it across the river—but she was gone.

He had no right to feel hurt. He’d broken most of her rules, and they both had so much to lose if something went wrong.

But the bitterness of being abandoned pinched his heart. Maybe it’s what Eiko felt when he’d left Eiganjo.

He wondered if it made them even.

With his sister gone, it would only be a matter of time before she reported back to the Imperials. Feelings didn’t matter—Kaito needed to find Tameshi before someone else came looking for him.

Ducking to escape a low branch, Kaito found a path between the hills that led to a clearing. He pressed a finger to his wrist, and his metal crane drone came to life, breaking into sharp fragments before fluttering into the air. Kaito touched his temple and sent the drone skyward, squinting at the distorted image that shuddered through the camera feed. He’d been caught up in more than a few scuffles during his time with the Reckoners, and his drone had paid the price.

There was no point using the damaged tech to track anyone in Towashi’s busy crowds, but Kaito was only looking for one person in the forest. No matter how blurry the feed was, it was better than nothing.

The crane raced through the woodland, and Kaito followed behind, staying close to the river. When he spotted metal on his camera, he knew he was close.

The rushing water in every direction masked the noise completely, but the makeshift laboratory was almost impossible to miss. Laid out across the side of a felled tree was a collection of odd machines, all connected with wires and warped light. Most of the research was made up of scraps of metal, including a large steel box perched at the far end.

Kaito took one step forward. The box rattled in response.



Not a box—a *cage*. And there was something trapped inside.

Kaito heard the snap of twigs over the cascading waterfalls, but by the time he turned, it was too late. Tameshi had the upper hand—and he used it to crack his fist against Kaito’s cheek.

Kaito stumbled, fingers folding quickly over his dagger, and pointed the blade at the moonfolk. Tameshi had pale lilac skin and hair spun in a high knot. His lanky build and smooth face gave away his youth. He couldn’t be more than a year or two older than Kaito.

Tameshi lifted a brow, blue robes fluttering as he hovered in the air, and laughed. “I didn’t realize the monks of Jukai were so primitive.” He tilted his head. “I’ve seen better knives for scaling fish.”

“I’m not with the order,” Kaito replied, studying Tameshi’s body language for a weakness.

“That explains the Undercity clothes. Reckoner, I presume?” He paused, calculating. “I knew word of my research would get out eventually. I’m just surprised the Imperials didn’t get here first.”

“What can I say? Getting people to underestimate me is kind of my thing.”

Tameshi nodded toward Kaito’s sad excuse of a weapon. “You’re welcome to come back when you’re more prepared. I’d hate for you to spend the next five minutes embarrassing yourself.”

Kaito cracked a smile. “If I made it too easy on you, it wouldn’t be any fun.”

Tameshi shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He withdrew a small rod from his belt and pressed it tightly to a panel on his chest. In an instant, the rod expanded, reshaping like folds of origami, until it transformed into a metal staff with a serrated edge. Tameshi twirled it several times in his hands.

“Okay, now you’re just showing off,” Kaito muttered, finding the edge in his voice. He had a feeling he’d need it.

Tameshi charged, sweeping his staff against Kaito’s legs. Kaito leapt, steadied himself, and spun with his dagger wedged in his fist. Tameshi cracked his staff down again, and Kaito rolled out of the way, slicing at the air. He couldn’t reach Tameshi—not with the staff blocking his every swing. He could barely reach his robes.

But Kaito had trained with the best teachers on Kamigawa. Of all the things he learned, the most important was that if his opponent was stronger, then he needed to be faster.

The next time Tameshi swung, Kaito didn’t hesitate. He jabbed his blade against the serrated edge of the staff with just enough force to keep it in place, then snatched the rod with his free hand and swung his leg up, striking Tameshi’s head.

The blow knocked Tameshi to the side, but the moonfolk glided back up, hovering in the air and still holding tight to his weapon. Kaito refused to release his own hold on the staff and dug his heels into the earth.

Tameshi retaliated, dropping fast to the ground. He threw his elbow toward Kaito’s chin, but Kaito didn’t falter. He used his weight to spin around Tameshi, keeping the staff in front of the moonfolk’s chest, until he managed to pull the rod against his opponent’s throat.

Tameshi was taller, and stronger, but Kaito had never been one to back down from a fight. And Kaito couldn’t lose this one—not when he needed the Reckoners to help him find the man from the rooftop. Everything Kaito did was an effort to bring the emperor home. She was Kaito’s best friend—and she was worth every risk, no matter the odds.

Kaito pulled hard, and Tameshi choked against the metal stick, pushing back with all his might. Kaito heard him gasp, but all he could see in his vision was a desperate, unyielding red.

Eiko's voice snapped him from his frenzy. "Kaito, what are you doing? Let him go!"

He flashed his eyes toward his sister, still holding tight to the staff. "I thought you left!"

"I had to leave an offering for the kami. Because contrary to what you think, paying respect and following rules *can* actually make a difference." She took several steps closer, words edged with authority. "Stop it before you squeeze the life out of him. Have you forgotten he still has information we need?"

Kaito gritted his teeth. "He started it!"

"I don't care," Eiko hissed. "This is not how we handle diplomatic relations."

Kaito huffed before releasing Tameshi with a shove. He curved both his fists over the staff.

Tameshi bent over, coughing violently. When the air returned to his lungs, he eyed Eiko. "So," he rasped, rubbing his throat, "they sent the Imperials after all."

Eiko folded her arms in response.

Kaito searched the sky before pressing his temple to recall his drone. It only took a few seconds to appear, and when he held out his arm, the crane shifted like paper and reattached comfortably to his wrist.

Tameshi's eyes widened in surprise. "Where did you get that?"

"It was a gift," Kaito said thinly. "From someone I met a long time ago."

"You know Katsumasa?" Tameshi dropped his arms. The fire in his eyes receded, replaced by a strange recognition.

"How do you know that name?" Kaito demanded. It had been years since he'd met the moonfolk in the Imperial gardens, but he could still picture him. More than that, he still remembered the things Katsumasa spoke of—about the future, and technology—and how they'd made Kaito feel like there was so much more he wanted to know.

"He was my mentor. The drone you have—it's the design we worked on together." A spark of pride filled Tameshi's eyes. "It's what I've been building my research on."

Eiko scowled, eyes blazing with anger. "Your experiments with kami and tech—it's a violation of the very foundations of Kamigawa."

Tameshi frowned. "I'm trying to *protect* kami."

"Is that why you have one of them in a cage?" Eiko marched toward the display of equipment. There was no lock on the crate, but she yanked the door with such force that Kaito wondered if a lock would've stopped her at all.



Art by: Campbell White

She stepped back, waiting for a kami to appear, when the silver face of a metal tanuki peeked its head around the corner and released several beeps and a whistle.

Kaito blinked. “What is *that*?”

The robot leapt to the ground, limbs clicking like a thousand pieces of metal were falling into place, and twisted its head toward Kaito. Its paneled eyes scanned him, and for a moment Kaito was sure it was the robot’s attempt at curiosity.

“I told you,” Tameshi huffed, straightening. “My research is to help kami—and the rest of Kamigawa. We know our two realms are merging and that one day they will exist as one. But we still know so little about what’s beyond the merge gates, or how our kinds will be affected when the merge is complete. If we’re going to truly understand the kami, we need a safe way to study them. A way to preserve the kami existing on Kamigawa. Technology doesn’t have to just be for us—it can be for kami, too.” His voice was impassioned, and maybe a little wild.

But Kaito couldn’t find anything evil in his motives. He turned to Eiko—to see what she thought—when he realized she still hadn’t moved.

Her eyes remained pinned to the metal tanuki, lips parted slightly like she was stuck in a trance. “This robot is almost identical to the animal I saw.” She turned to Kaito. “The one that appeared from the flash of light.”

Kaito frowned, turning to Tameshi. “My sister thinks this creation of yours is the reason the Emperor of Kamigawa vanished. Care to defend yourself?”

“What you’re accusing me of is impossible. This *creation* didn’t even exist until a few months ago.” Tameshi’s shoulders fell. “But I’m familiar with the creature you speak of. I’ve been searching for it, too.”

“Why?” Kaito challenged. “And what does it have to do with the emperor?”



“The light you saw was a kami being born. A very rare kami, and the only one of its kind. It is the very embodiment of the relationship the emperor shares with Kyodai and the spirit realm,” Tameshi explained. “I’ve been chasing it across Kamigawa for some time and looking for ways to protect it.” He motioned to the metal tanuki. “It’s what I built this prototype for.”

Eiko folded her arms. “There are thousands of kami all around us, and none of them have ever required a *robot* for protection.”

“A kami that embodies a connection with the spirit realm could have a radical effect on the merge gates,” Tameshi said, and Kaito didn’t miss the warning in his voice. “There are variables here we have not accounted for. So yes, I want to protect it, but I also want to study its relationship between the two realms.” He shrugged. “Creating a connection between kami and machine would give it the armor it needs. Think of it like a protective mech suit. It would allow us to track the kami, and make sure it remains safe. And that we remain safe, too.”

“That same research could allow someone to manipulate it.” Eiko pointed out. “If the kami really can affect the merge gates, you’d essentially be giving that same power to whoever holds the controls.”

Kaito’s stomach dropped. If Satoru knew the truth, he would never sell the schematics on the black market. He’d keep the kami for himself. And if the spirit really did have untapped power over the merge gates?

It would make the Hyozan Reckoners the strongest cell in the city. Maybe even in all of Kamigawa.

*Nobody* should have that much power.

Before anyone could say another word, a noise echoed outside of the canyon. A sound Kaito knew all too well. A shout, a song, and a whisper, like three voices layered on top of one another.

*The voice of Kyodai.*

“It can’t be,” Kaito mouthed. He moved slowly across the grass, eyes scanning the distance for a flash of the great kami.

Kyodai never left the temple. If she were here, in Jukai Forest

Did that mean the emperor

Had the emperor *returned*?

Kaito didn’t wait. The hope in his heart was too powerful. Too desperate. Ignoring the warning shouts from Eiko and Tameshi, he raced after the sound.

He fought branches and brambles, kicking up clumps of dirt and running until his chest burned. There were so many things he wanted to say to her again.

But mostly he just wanted to see her face and know that she was okay.

Kaito skidded to a halt at the foot of an enormous camphor tree, the branches twisting in spirals and the leaves glittering an emerald green.

But Kyodai wasn’t there, and neither was the emperor.

Instead, he saw the tanuki-shaped kami, with glowing white eyes and translucent fur.

And the kami saw him.

## The Path Forward

Kaito's chest felt bruised. He'd really thought the emperor might be in Jukai Forest—and that hearing Kyodai's voice was a sign she had finally found her way home.

But the tanuki kami standing in the grass wasn't the friend he'd lost. And it certainly wasn't the ancient kami from the temple.

The creature released another layered call, quieter this time.

With Tameshi's staff still in his hands, Kaito slowly sank to his knees, eyes never leaving the kami's glowing face. Tameshi said it was the embodiment of the emperor's bond with Kyodai. If that was the case, was there a part of her still here? Would she—would the kami—recognize Kaito?

He set the weapon on the ground and pressed a hand to his chest. "I mean you no harm."

He'd come to Jukai Forest for Tameshi's research, but now that he knew what it could lead to, and what the kami represented

A knot formed in his throat. He had to keep the kami safe.

Leaves fluttered behind him, and a dark object burst from the treeline, metal body glittering beneath the sun. It hovered in circles above Kaito before making a slow descent. When it landed on the ground beside the kami, they were nearly identical in build. The difference was that while one was clearly a robot, the other was as dazzling as starlight, with multiple golden orbs spinning carefully around its body. They were like the spheres that ran along Kyodai's back, only a great deal smaller.

The robot beeped. The kami released a layered greeting.



Art by: Rudy Siswanto

Eiko and Tameshi appeared on the hill. When their eyes fell on the kami, Eiko's gasp was audible. She slowly made her way to Kaito's side, hand clutched at the material near her neck. "Did—did it say anything?"

Kaito shook his head. “Kyodai spoke to the emperor telepathically. Maybe this kami works the same way.” He met Eiko’s eyes. “We have to protect it.”

Eiko nodded like it was never a question. When she spotted the tanuki robot, her face crumpled. She sucked in a breath before spinning to face Tameshi. “I was wondering how you were tracking my brother so easily. You didn’t just build armor—you built a *drone*.”

Tameshi pressed his hands against the air. “We need to be able to locate the kami if they get lost or hurt.”

“Drones have been *weaponized* with the right upgrades,” Eiko argued. “Do you have any idea what the repercussions would be for something like that?”

Kaito tried to imagine a Kamigawa where spirits ran around with armor and blades like miniature mechs. Spirits that could be controlled by people like Satoru.

The thought was unsettling.

“That isn’t the purpose of my research,” Tameshi said, firm. “The design isn’t about controlling the kami—it’s about keeping them safe.”

“Safe from what?” Eiko demanded.

Tameshi’s jaw hardened. “From whatever is on the other side of the merge gates.”

Kaito and Eiko both fell silent. He wasn’t just trying to study the kami and the merge; he wanted to study what was on the other side.

“You’re trying to send kami back to the spirit realm,” Kaito clarified.

“If I can find a way to connect kami and drone, then eventually, yes,” Tameshi sighed. “There’s still so much we need to learn. And the knowledge is out there—we just need to be brave enough to find the key and open the door.”

“You don’t care about the kami. You’re just trying to protect the information they’d bring you if they could move between realms,” Eiko clenched her teeth. “Your research threatens the balance of Kamigawa. It can’t continue.”

Tameshi was stoic. “We already have the ability to channel with the kami. Is this really any different?”

“A channeler has built a *relationship* with the kami. There’s trust, and mutual respect. It’s meant to be a gift,” Eiko sounded exasperated. “What you want to do is capture their power and give it to whoever the highest bidder is.”

“No, I—” Tameshi started, but Eiko wasn’t finished.

“You might not intend for it to be a weapon, but it is. And if your research gets out, someday someone will use it to their advantage.”

Tameshi looked away, flustered. “What I’m trying to accomplish is not about greed. It’s about understanding. The merge gates are proof that there is more to life than what we know. And to have that kind of knowledge—to lift the veil of the unknown—it may require sacrifices some aren’t willing to make.”

Eiko shook her head. “Power requires balance. And in the wrong hands, your knowledge could *destroy* the merge gates. It could destroy Kamigawa.”

Tameshi’s gaze shuttered. “You say that because you’re too stubborn to look ahead to the future. Of what Kamigawa will someday become, and the steps we need to take to make sure that future remains

stable.” His eyes flashed open. “The Imperials will fail us all if they don’t take bigger risks to study the merge.”

“We are protecting the plane we have now.” Eiko’s voice didn’t waver. “Your research—it needs to be destroyed.”

At that, Tameshi’s shoulders sank. “I’m so close. If I could just—”

The small kami howled again, voice raised in warning. Kaito’s instincts clamored in agreement with the kami’s distress. Something wasn’t right. The forest had gone far too quiet, and there was an emptiness in the air, almost like—Kaito stiffened. The last time he’d felt this way was in Satoru’s den.

The grass rustled nearby, and Kaito spun to find Satoru’s spies. Five Hyozan Reckoners, their belts littered with blades and their arms etched in colorful ink. The one in front was the woman with needle-tipped gloves.

Nari—the Reckoner with an expertise in poisons, her hair scraped back into a high braid. And behind her was Satoru’s channeler. Nari flashed her teeth. “Satoru sends his regards.”



Art by: Rovina Cai

Kaito tried not to react when tendrils of black smoke poured from the channeler’s skin, snapping at the air like vipers. “I don’t remember putting a request in for a babysitter,” he said.

Nari sniffed, flicking her claws at the air. “Satoru always did wonder whether you were a spy. A former samurai is one thing, but an Imperial student?” She tutted. “Hard to believe anyone would leave such pretty walls unless they were *ordered* to.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m not a spy.” Kaito’s fingers danced at his sides. His knife was tucked in his belt and the staff was still in the grass; there was no chance of reaching either weapon before the Reckoners retaliated. “Satoru knows that. Why do you think he hand-picked me for this job?”

Even her words were laced with poison. “Probably for the same reason he asked us to keep an eye on you.”

They'd been watching him. How did Kaito not realize? How did he not sense them?

For a moment he could hear Light-Paws's voice in his head, telling him he was too brazen and overconfident, that his ego was creating blind spots.

Kaito tried not to scowl. Bluffing was the only card he had left.

"If you've been tailing me, you know I came here for the schematics," he said with a shrug.

Even if they *had* been following Kaito, what could the Reckoners possibly have on him? Up until he came face to face with the kami, he'd never intended to double-cross Satoru. Everything he'd done before that was to get ahold of Tameshi's research.

The channeler lifted her gray face. "You know I channel Azamaki, Treachery Incarnate." She didn't blink, but when the smoke formed into insect-like pincers that expanded from her spine, Kaito took several steps back. "Did you really think I wouldn't sense your betrayal?"

One of the Reckoners moved quickly, grabbing hold of Eiko and holding a sword against her neck.

Kaito clenched his fists, face growing hot. "If you hurt her—"

Nari waved a hand. "You sought out an Imperial to help you. An Imperial you *knew* would report us." She lifted a thin brow. "It's all the proof Satoru will need to see you're a spy."

Kaito's mind desperately tried to piece together a plan. But all he had was a way to stall for time. "Was this a setup from the beginning?" he asked, determined to keep the conversation going for as long as he could. "Did Satoru even *want* the research?"

"Of course he did," Nari replied. "Your loyalty may have been feigned, but your talents were not. He hoped you'd lead us to Tameshi." She flashed her canines. "And you did."

Kaito inhaled sharply when he heard the kami move behind him. He wasn't sure if the Reckoners understood its significance, or if they knew quite how rare it truly was, but Kaito had understood the moment he heard its voice.

He needed to get the Reckoners far away from the kami.

Kaito tried to draw their focus. "The schematics aren't here. They're back at his camp." He turned to the moonfolk. If Tameshi really did want to protect the kami, this was the only option.

Though Tameshi's face was ashen, he gave a curt nod like he understood more than Kaito did. "I can take you there," he said to the Hyozan. "But only if you let the others go."

*What are you doing?* Kaito wanted to hiss. Tameshi was practically a stranger. He didn't owe Kaito anything. But he was trying to spare them from harm, in whatever small way he could.

Nari laughed. "You are hardly in a position to be making deals."

Tameshi scowled. "You'll never make sense of the research. Not without my help. So either let them go, or I'm not telling you a thing."

Nari stalked toward him and lifted Tameshi's chin with one hand, nails dangerously close to breaking skin. "You will." She tilted her head and gestured to one of the other spies. "We don't need witnesses. And don't forget the kami." She met Kaito's stricken gaze. "Something tells me we might need it."

Kaito snarled and was bending his knees to lunge for the nearest spy when Eiko slammed her head back against her captor's face. As the Reckoner growled in pain, Eiko pulled her sleeve up to reveal a hidden weapon. A metal coil unwound from her, the miniature blades connected by a glowing white



light, until they formed a sword. She gripped the hilt and swung for another Reckoner's neck with impeccable speed.

Kaito didn't have time to gape—he hurled himself at one of the Reckoners and pinned him to the ground. Throwing several punches against the man's face, Kaito used the distraction to scramble for Tameshi's staff.

He recovered it just in time to block a steel blade flying toward his chest. The Reckoners became a whirlwind of steel and fury. Kaito fell back, blocking again and again, staving off as many of them as he could until he reached Eiko on the battlefield.

"What happened to 'no weapons'?" Kaito managed to shout as they fought back to back.

Eiko grunted, kicking one of the assailants square in the chest. "This is diplomacy. When words fail, we use our blades." Her sword met flesh, and as the man fell, she threw a look over her shoulder. "I told *you* no weapons because I knew you would do the exact opposite."

Several yards away, Tameshi landed beside the kami. Kaito couldn't hear him over the frenzy of weapons, but he could tell by the way he was holding onto the robot that he was trying to get the kami to merge with it.

But the kami refused.

Kaito strained beneath Nari's sword. The only thing keeping her back was the metal staff between them. He grunted, shoved hard, and swung his weapon to meet hers.

Kaito and his sister may have been trained by the most elite samurai on Kamigawa, but they were clearly outnumbered. With every clash of metal against metal, Kaito's fear flowed to the surface of his mind.

If something happened to his sister, he'd never forgive himself. He knew she would watch over the kami. She'd make sure Tameshi's research never fell into the wrong hands. She would do what was best for Kamigawa, and the emperor. If only one of them was going to make it out of the fight, he wanted it to be Eiko.

"Take Tameshi and the kami and run," Kaito hissed.

"Whatever you're planning, you can forget it," Eiko hissed back. "I'm not leaving you behind."

Kaito opened his mouth to argue as a roar broke through the trees. The Reckoners hesitated only for a moment, and when Kaito looked up at the ridge, hope seeped back into his chest.

The Order of Jukai had arrived.

A woman with yellow flames in her hands stood at the edge of the hill. Seven glowing stones floated beside her, and she wore a helmet made of bone. All around her were at least a dozen more kami channelers, clad in leather armor and ready for a fight.



Art by: Howard Lyon

Nari released a guttural shout, and then—chaos.

The Order of Jukai met the Reckoners in the clearing, and the once-silent forest filled with battle cries. It was a whirlwind of black smoke and yellow flames.

Kaito grabbed Eiko by the arm and tugged. “We need to go!”

Eiko’s breathing was heavy. “But the Order—”

“—are not going to be very happy with us if they win this fight,” Kaito pointed out. “It isn’t safe here. For any of us.” He turned to look at the tanuki kami. Whatever happened, he needed to get the spirit out of the forest.

Tameshi sent his drone for cover in the clouds. “I tried to explain, but she won’t come with me.”

“She?” Kaito repeated, staring straight into the kami’s bright eyes. He knelt to meet her. “These people—they’ll hurt you if they get the chance. I need to take you somewhere safe.”

The tanuki stared back.

Kaito took a breath and hoped the silence was an understanding between them. “Please don’t bite me,” he mouthed, and scooped the kami up in his arms.

When he ran, Eiko and Tameshi followed him.

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The woods were a blur of moss and bark. Kaito felt his throat burn with each running stride, desperate to catch his breath. There was only one place he knew the kami would be safe, but he needed to get over the border first, and far from Jukai Forest.



Tameshi and Eiko weren't far behind. He could hear his sister's footsteps and the rush of air each time Tameshi flew under a branch. The moonfolk could've left them at any time and soared back to Otawara without a second glance. But he didn't. He stayed by their sides like he was more friend than foe.

Kaito decided that someday—if they made it out of the forest in one piece—he'd find a way to repay him.

The ground rumbled, and Kaito froze in his tracks. "Please tell me that's another rock kami," he said warily, watching the earth for movement. Eiko appeared on his left, face drained of color.

A kami exploded from the river, and the entire forest seemed to shudder in response. With an ear-splitting cry, the spirit tore past the trees, felling one of them with a mere slice of its bone-like arm.

It moved in erratic bursts, long limbs stretched out like it was searching by touch. Two orbs of unnatural green light glowed from a delicate stone face, but the carved smile it wore didn't match the anger radiating from its core. Frail as a skeleton, it had enough arms and legs to rival an insect, with heavy black cobwebs that fell over its crooked shape like a veil. Silk thread trailed from one of its bony fingers, fixed to a paper lantern that swayed in front of its chest like a pendulum.

*Gravelighter, the Kami of Forgotten Clearings.*



Art by: Miranda Meeks

"I—I'll try to talk to her," Eiko murmured, almost too low for Kaito to hear.

"It's way too dangerous," Kaito started, but she pressed a hand against his forearm, and then a finger to her lips. She wanted him to stay quiet.

The kami flashed toward them, head rotating at odd angles, searching for the sound as if her glowing eyes couldn't see anything at all.

Eiko knelt, pinning her eyes to the ground. "I am Eiko Shizuki of the Imperial Palace, and a Kami Diplomat." The moment she spoke, the kami slammed into the earth in front of her. Eiko's hair fluttered

at the movement, but she didn't recoil. "It was not our intention to disturb you, nor do we mean to trespass in the forest any longer. We ask for safe passage to return to Boseiju."

Gravelighter cracked her stone mouth open, too wide to be anywhere near human, and all Kaito could see was a horrible black void.

The kami stopped inches away from Eiko's bent neck, sensing her posture, and her presence. When Gravelighter reared back too quickly, Kaito didn't know if she was going to leave or attack.

He assumed the latter.

"No!" Kaito shouted, bursting from his place in the grass and skidding in front of his sister.

The kami wailed, and Kaito squeezed the tanuki close to his chest and wrapped an arm around Eiko like he was protecting her.

Like he was protecting them both.

The Kami of Forgotten Clearings ripped through the trees, splitting branches and pummeling the earth, and raced straight for Kaito's exposed back. But before she landed her attack, the tanuki kami leapt from Kaito's arms and flew toward the larger spirit.

Starlight exploded around them.

Kaito squinted. He couldn't see what was happening—it was too bright, and both kami were moving too fast. But it was enough time to pull Eiko to her feet and usher her toward Tameshi.

"Go!" Kaito shouted. "I'll catch up!"

Tameshi took Eiko by the waist and lifted her out of the way of splitting earth and flying stones while Kaito ran back for the tanuki.

He held up a hand, staring at the heart of the light in search of the small creature. And he saw her, flickering left and right, trying to distract Gravelighter—except it only seemed to anger her.

The Kami of Forgotten Clearings swung an arm back, preparing to swipe at the tanuki with all her strength, when Kaito leapt, grabbed hold of the smaller kami, and rolled out of the way. With deadly force, the arm smashed into the forest floor, rattling the surrounding woodland.

Kaito searched the tanuki's eyes, frantic. There was nowhere to flee; he wasn't fast enough, and he'd never in his life fought a kami. He'd never even been trained for it.

All he could do now was hold her close and brace for the next impact.

But it didn't come.

Kaito peeled his eyes apart and found Gravelighter staring at him with her strange, marble face. She stretched her bone fingers closer, stopping inches from the tanuki's body.

The tanuki let out a cry in response.

No—not a cry. *A command*.

Gravelighter released a breath. The rumble made Kaito jerk backward—and then the Kami of Forgotten Clearings dove back into the river, water spraying in every direction, and vanished from sight.

Kaito shivered, looking down at the small kami still protected in his arms. "I—I guess that means we can go?"

The kami answered with a layered chirp, and Kaito got to his feet, wiped the river water from his forehead, and hurried to find his sister and Tameshi.

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The group reconnected near the border, to Eiko's visible relief.

"You could've been killed." She squeezed her arms around Kaito's neck, voice muffled.

Between them, the tanuki kami gave a growl before jumping to the ground.

Eiko pulled back and bowed apologetically. "Thank you. I think you may have saved our lives in the forest."

Kaito watched the kami stretch her legs, golden orbs dancing in circles. "Yeah. And she's not the only one." They both turned to Tameshi.

"You were going to give up your research to protect us," Eiko said.

Tameshi's eyes glinted. "Don't look at me like I'm a hero, because I'm not. Most of my research is up here." He tapped the side of his head. "And the rest of it? Well, I never keep all my research in one place. I was stalling, waiting for the Order of Jukai to turn up. I'm just glad they got my message in time."

Kaito felt the shockwave like a punch to the gut. "*You* sent for them?"

Tameshi laughed. "I'm not going to set up a research lab in Jukai Forest without making sure I have security cameras." He shrugged. "When I saw the two of you, I sent a drone to their temple. I figured you all could fight it out amongst each other while I got my equipment somewhere safe. Which, I'd like to point out, turned out to be an excellent idea."

Kaito shook his head. "And here I was, trying to decide whether I liked you."

Tameshi chuckled, and Kaito cracked a smile.

"We are grateful for your help. But I still have a duty to report you to the Imperials," Eiko said quietly. "And when I do, there'll be a mark against your name. They'll keep a close eye on you and anything you do for the rest of your life."

Tameshi waited. "Unless?"

There was another long pause.

"Unless you agree never to continue this research," Eiko finished.

"For the rest of my life, huh?" Tameshi pretended to weigh his options. "Well, I *do* enjoy a challenge "

Kaito snorted, and Eiko cast him a glance. "I know he sounds like you, but *try* to remember you're on my side."

Kaito lifted his shoulders. "What? As far as team players go, he isn't the worst."

Tameshi beamed. "I appreciate the compliment."

Eiko ignored their budding friendship and crossed her arms. "Do we have an agreement?"

"You don't need one." Tameshi sighed. "I may have created a prototype to merge kami and tech, but I wanted them to possess it of their own accord. It should be their *choice*."

Eiko frowned. “No kami would willingly sacrifice their freedom that way. It goes against their nature. Kami channelers are few and far between, but they exist because there’s an exchange. Something *shared*. A kami would have no reason to merge with a drone.”

“You’re right. Which is why I’ve been searching for this little one.” Tameshi nodded to the tanuki. “A kami born in the mortal realm is a new phenomenon. I thought perhaps being *born* differently would lead her to *react* differently.”

“But she refused you,” Kaito acknowledged. “When the Reckoners attacked, you tried to get her to merge with the tech, and she wouldn’t. Not even to save herself.”

Tameshi released a disappointed hum. “I am not one to easily admit defeat.” He shook his head. “But you don’t need to be concerned with my research. Not without a willing kami participant, which doesn’t seem to exist.”

Eiko nodded. “Good.”

“Still, you’re welcome to keep tabs on me.” Tameshi winked. “I can’t promise my next project will be *entirely* Imperial approved.”

Her lips curved. “Something tells me I’m going to regret you and my brother meeting today.”

Tameshi pressed a panel on his belt, and his tanuki drone flew down to Kaito. “Take it. It’s far better than that outdated crane you’ve been holding onto.”

Kaito’s eyes widened. “I—are you sure?”

“You can buy me lunch when you come to Otawara,” Tameshi replied. “Katsumasa would love to see an old friend.”

“Thank you,” Kaito said earnestly. He took the robot with both hands and flattened his lips to keep from smiling too wide.

“I better clear what I can from my lab. It would be a shame for the Order of Jukai to destroy perfectly good equipment.” Tameshi glanced at the kami. “Good luck out there. And thanks for the chase—it’s been fun while it lasted.”

They watched him disappear back into the forest, and it was Eiko who spoke first.

“So what now?” she asked.

“Well, now you take our new friend back to the palace with you,” Kaito replied simply.

Eiko pulled her face back. “To Eiganjo?”

Kaito shrugged. “If she really has a connection to the emperor and Kyodai, then who better to watch over her than the great kami herself?”

On the ground, the tanuki kami was staring at them, listening intently.

Kaito didn’t particularly enjoy goodbyes, but he hadn’t expected this one to tug at his chest so hard. He cleared his throat. “You should head to the train station before the Order comes back.”

Eiko stilled. “Where will you go?”

He knew her meaning. He wasn’t exactly going to be welcome in the Undercity any time soon. The Reckoners likely lost the fight, but there was always a chance some of them fled. Kaito preferred if

word about what happened *didn't* get back to Satoru, but it would be safest to lay low for a while, just in case.

"I'll be fine." Kaito grinned. "Don't worry about me."

Eiko pursed her lips. "You know what I think?"

"That you've had way more fun here than you've ever had in Eiganjo?" Kaito offered.

She made a face. "I think you never intended to give those schematics to Satoru. I think you asked for my help because you wanted to do the right thing. You're just too stubborn to admit it."

Kaito laughed. "You still think there's an Imperial in me, but I promise—I'm an outlier through and through."

Eiko looked down at the tanuki. "It would be good if we had something to call her. A kami this important deserves a formal introduction when we reach the palace."

"Aren't you supposed to be an expert on kami relations?" Kaito pointed out. "How do you usually find out their names?"

"It's not always that simple," she said. "Sometimes it's through words, or body language. Sometimes it's telepathic. But in some cases, you have to earn their trust before they'll properly communicate with you."

"I vote we call her Pompon-chan for now," Kaito said. When the spirit let out a layered chirp, he grinned. "See? She likes it."

Eiko moved to pick up the kami, but the tanuki immediately leapt out of her reach. When Eiko took another step, the kami scurried behind Kaito's feet for shelter.

"Don't worry," Kaito said. "You'll be in good hands. My sister is one of the best people in Kamigawa—you just have to get past the frown lines."

He took a step away, trying to encourage the kami to go to Eiko, but the kami released a frustrated howl and hid herself behind Kaito once again.

Eiko lifted a brow. "I don't think she wants to go to the temple."

"Well, she can't stay here alone. The Reckoners know about her. It's not safe," Kaito said.

Eiko held back a laugh. "For someone who thinks they're so clever, you are terrible at seeing what's right in front of you."

Kaito blinked. "But—I don't understand." He shook his head at the kami. "I have nothing to offer you. No shelter, or food. I barely know what I'm doing half the time." He ran a hand through his hair. "I just know that I need to find someone, and I'm not planning on stopping until I figure out how to bring her home."

The kami's eyes brightened.

Eiko pressed a hand against Kaito's shoulder. "Maybe that's exactly what she wants."

Kaito leaned down in the grass, drone still wedged against his chest. "You want to help look for the emperor, too?"

The kami let out a sound that mimicked Kyodai's song, and Kaito recognized the relief behind the light. The sense of purpose.

Maybe the kami was never hiding in Jukai Forest. Maybe she was *searching* .

Kaito nodded like he understood. “Okay. I guess it’s you and me from now on.”

Without warning, the kami leapt for Kaito’s chest and bonded herself to the tanuki prototype. There was a flash of light, and metal fluttering like a trillion chrome hummingbirds.

When the light eased, the tanuki drone blinked from behind its glass eyes. It clambered up Kaito’s arm until it found a place to rest on his shoulders.

A noise trickled into his mind, steady at first and faint as a bell, but in the seconds that followed the noise became an unmistakable chant. Kaito could hear it then—the kami’s name, echoing through his mind. When he turned to look at the tanuki, she lowered her head, and a gentle understanding passed between the two of them.

“Her name,” he said slowly. “She says her name is Himoto.”

Kaito stood to face his sister, whose mouth was parted in fear.

Tameshi’s research—she’d tried to stop it. Tried to make sure it would never fall into the wrong hands.

And now the very proof of it was sitting on Kaito’s shoulders like a beloved pet.

The tanuki robot shifted once more and drifted into Kaito’s hands. When he turned it over, he realized it had morphed into a mask.

He stared at the smooth edges and origami cutouts, wondering if a connection to the emperor really did live inside Himoto and if choosing to stay with Kaito meant anything at all.

When he placed the tanuki mask over his face, he felt it immediately.

Energy thrummed in his core, all the way to his fingertips. It was like static and magic and power, begging to be released. Begging for Kaito to *let go* .

Somewhere behind him, Eiko was calling his name. Shouting with desperate, terrified breaths.

But Kaito couldn’t answer her. Something was pulling his soul in another direction—to another plane—and he couldn’t fight it.

He didn’t *want* to fight it.

For the first time in years, Kaito felt as if he knew exactly where he was meant to go.

The power burst through him, coursing through every bone and vein. Kaito let it consume him entirely—and when he felt the tug against his soul once more, he answered the call as if it had been fate all along.

Kaito took a step forward and vanished from Kamigawa.

## **Epilogue**

The familiar smells of Towashi made Kaito’s mouth water. It had been a year since he’d tasted pork dumplings and curried rice—not because he hadn’t returned to Kamigawa, but because he never stayed for very long.

The emperor was still out there, somewhere in the Multiverse.

He couldn’t let street food distract him.

When Himoto, the Kami of the Spark, turned Kaito into a planeswalker, he knew it must've been for a reason. That somehow the spirit realm had known Kaito was the only person on a hundred planes who would never stop searching for her.

He'd made a promise, after all.

Kaito reached for his tanuki mask and slid it over his face, shielding himself from the crowds. He'd always known how to make himself invisible, but these days, it was practically an art form.

The Multiverse had information he needed—and in Kaito's experience, it was always better when his enemy didn't see him coming.

Kaito pulled up his collar and stepped onto the pavement, the city reflected in every puddle around him. He was a shadow among neon lights, who could disappear at a moment's notice.

And he would, soon enough.

But today, Kaito had a friend on Otawara who wanted to see him, and a sister in Eiganjo who was waiting on news.

And after that?

There were many more planes to search.



Art by: Yongjae Choi