

Episode 5: Threads of War

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From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

The compound was a chaos of metal and blood, but the Wanderer didn't stop moving. She was a part of the dance—a figure in the ever-moving battle.

Nearby, Kaito's sword clashed again and again, fighting the onslaught of Jin-Gitaxias's hired henchmen. Tamiyo hovered in the distance, scroll unbound as she held Tezzeret in a temporary state of paralysis.

Deep claw marks were streaked across the floor where Jin-Gitaxias's half-severed body lay. A sign that he'd tried—and failed—to stand back up.

Now, he was unmoving.

The Wanderer didn't bother checking to see if there was still life in him. Fighting felt like being in a trance. It consumed every one of her thoughts, and it wouldn't end until the danger passed.

One by one, their enemies fell. The Wanderer and Kaito made sure of it.

When the chaos faded, only the ring of silence filled the Wanderer's ears. She turned, breathing controlled despite the adrenaline coursing through her, and saw a flicker of relief in Kaito's grin.

"We make a good team," he said, twisting the handle of his sword until the jagged edge flattened and the blade was once again smooth. "It's a shame there's no one left for round two."

"I didn't realize you'd developed such a taste for war," the Wanderer replied, straightening her hat. "The boy I remember would've much preferred the spoils of the palace kitchen."

Kaito's laugh was loose. In one smooth motion, he sheathed his sword at his back. "You've been gone a long time if you think palace food is still the best on Kamigawa. I'll introduce you to this vendor in Towashi—they make these smoked crab rolls that practically melt in your mouth and—"

Tamiyo cleared her throat, motioning to a magically bound Tezzeret. Though his body didn't move, his pink eyes raged with life.

Kaito ran a hand over his shaved head, sheepish. "Right. Business first, food later."

Tamiyo looked at him briefly before focusing her attention on the Wanderer. "It is clear this man poses a threat to Kamigawa, but perhaps it would benefit us all to learn the truth of his plans before we lock him away?"

The Wanderer swept a strand of white hair from her brow. "Whatever his plans, it's the kami he hurt—and perhaps it's the kami he should answer to."

Kaito frowned. "You want to take him to Kyodai?"

Her voice was as unyielding as stone. "Yes. We will decide his fate together."

The emperor was taught to control her emotions, even during battle. But she was still a child when her spark sent her to another plane. For a long time, she was all alone. *Grieving* alone.

So, she did the only thing she could—she tightened the lock on her heart and turned her controlled demeanor into a means of survival.

Now that she was home, she could feel her emotions thundering against her chest, longing to be set free. But she wouldn't let her guard down. Not until she knew for sure that she could stay on Kamigawa.

Because if she opened the gates to her heart and allowed herself to feel the joy of seeing her people again—seeing *Kaito* again—only to have it ripped away from her once more?

It might take an entire lifetime to recover from that kind of heartbreak.

The Wanderer stepped toward Tezzeret and sheathed her own sword. Whatever he'd done to Kyodai ten years ago had inadvertently set off the Wanderer's spark. Perhaps that meant he was also the key to reversing whatever damage his prototype chip had done.

She'd get answers from him. But she'd do it with Kyodai at her side.

"We leave for Eiganjo at once," the Wanderer ordered.

Tamiyo gave a slight bow in acknowledgement. Kaito merely nodded.

But Tezzeret watched them with a newfound energy. The veins in his neck strained against Tamiyo's story magic, gaze drifting down to where the Reality Chip was embedded on the back of the Wanderer's hand. He couldn't move his body, but his mind?

Maybe his mind was all he needed.

An icy shudder ran through the Wanderer. There was no time to say anything—no time to shout a warning before Tezzeret took control of the Reality Chip.

The Wanderer screamed, hands shooting to her temples as the device pulsed with energy. The metal wires dug themselves deeper into her flesh, throbbing with power. There was a flash of white, and she felt her mind jump from the compound to the Imperial Palace, where Kyodai wailed in her chamber. It was as if their minds had been united—and the connection meant that Kyodai was in agony, too.



Art by: Wylie Beckert

The Wanderer felt like her soul was flickering between the doorway of one plane and the next. The Reality Chip was disrupting her spark, forcing her on the verge of planeswalking. But it also sharpened the Wanderer's bond with Kyodai, and through it, the Wanderer could hear Kyodai's thoughts as clearly as if they'd been standing in the same room.

Eiganjo is under attack, Kyodai called out. *Risona has brought an army. You must not planeswalk again—the palace needs you.*

The Wanderer tried to respond—to tell Kyodai about Tezzeret and the Reality Chip—but it was no use. Pain radiated through every nerve. Her spark was destabilizing.

The Wanderer's mind fluttered.

"No!" Kaito shouted, voice hoarse. He threw his hand out, reaching for a large crate in the distance, and tugged with his mind. With a desperate growl, Kaito sent the object flying across the room, where it landed with a heavy *crack* against Tezzeret's spine.

He slumped to his knees, dazed, but Kaito didn't give him time to recover. A second crate crashed into the back of Tezzeret's head, louder and faster than the first.

The impact knocked Tezzeret out cold.

Tamiyo flattened her mouth and reread the paralysis spell. "His power over technology allows him to manipulate the Reality Chip." Her gaze drifted to the Wanderer. "Whatever he's done—it is making your spark volatile."

Kaito knelt beside the Wanderer, face crumpling with concern. "I thought you said the chip would keep her on Kamigawa?"

Tamiyo floated closer. With an ethereal grace, she leaned down and lifted the Wanderer's hand to get a closer look at the device. "I believe Tezzeret has activated something inside the device. But this technology is beyond my understanding. I do not see a way to undo it."

"I can feel it. It's like I'm splitting apart from inside," the Wanderer said with a pained nod. "Please—help me remove it."

"You will risk planeswalking if I do," Tamiyo noted.

"The chip won't keep me here. Not anymore. And if I planeswalk *with* it, I'll be lost in the Multiverse with an unstable Reality Chip. Who knows what could happen?" The Wanderer clutched her chest, fighting for a way to tether herself to this plane. "The chip opened a path to Kyodai. I can concentrate my energy on her and use our bond to try and control my spark."

"Will it be enough?" Kaito asked, voice raw with hope.

The Wanderer didn't dare look him in the eyes. She was too afraid he'd see the cracks. "It will have to be," was all she said.

Tamiyo gave a nod of understanding and pressed a finger to the Reality Chip, waiting as the strange wires writhed and shook free of the Wanderer's skin.



Art by: Aurore Folny

The Wanderer bit the edge of her lip, trying not to gasp from the pain. “There’s something else,” she added, watching the way Tamiyo was studying the chip like it wasn’t a weapon at all but a book in an ancient library. Something that needed time to be understood. “Kyodai said Eiganjo is already under attack. If there’s any hope of stopping the Uprisers, we need to get there before Risona reaches Kyodai.”

Kaito frowned. “She wouldn’t hurt a kami, would she?” And not just any kami—Kyodai was the spirit guardian of all Kamigawa.

The Wanderer’s face paled. “Risona wants to abolish the empire and bring an end to Imperial rule. Perhaps she believes taking the throne by force will be enough to destroy it. But if she realizes Kamigawa will never accept a radicalized republic without Kyodai’s blessing, she may seek to remove Kyodai altogether. Either way, I must protect the temple.”

“It will take us hours to reach Eiganjo.” Kaito motioned to a still unconscious Tezzeret. “And unless one of Tamiyo’s scrolls happens to be a levitation spell, we’re going to have to carry our prisoner all the way there. Who, may I point out, is almost *exclusively* muscle and metal.” He lifted his shoulders. “I’m just saying, this may not be the best time for a back injury.”

“I was able to planeswalk from Eiganjo to this compound,” the Wanderer said. “I can return to the palace the same way.”

“But you’d be alone.” Kaito shook his head. “Not to mention you don’t have the chip this time. What if it didn’t work?”

“Then we need transportation.” The Wanderer’s voice was level. Serious. “Something faster than the sky ferry, with room to carry all four of us.”

Kaito twisted his mouth. “There are surveillance mechs all over Otawara. But they’re unpilottable. Someone would have to hack into the controls and route a course for Eiganjo manually.”

Tamiyo hummed, pensive. “Perhaps there is an alternative. The Reality Chip seems to augment power that is already there, such as the Wanderer’s spark.” She looked at Kaito. “Like you, I am telekinetic.”

Kaito was still kneeling beside the Wanderer, the concern forming a pinch in his brow. “Please tell me you’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting.”

Tamiyo lifted the Reality Chip to the back of her own hand and pressed the panel to her flesh. The wires nestled into her skin, making her suck in a quick breath before the edges of the device began to glow.

She motioned to Tezzeret. “Help me carry him to the nearest mech. I will get us to Eiganjo.”

The group moved quickly, carrying the weight of their enemy on their shoulders. They made their way to the edge of Otawara, where a surveillance mech shaped like an enormous origami reptile was perched on a high platform. Its sights were glued to the sky ferry below.

Kaito tilted his head toward the armored machine, where a pair of projectiles rested on its shoulders. “Anyone else see the problem here?”

“Allow me,” the Wanderer said as if accepting a friendly challenge.

She moved swiftly across the pavement, staying clear of the mech’s cameras. Sword in hand, the Wanderer raised the handle over her shoulder, blade pointed skyward, and heaved the weapon straight for the metallic beast’s neck—right between two plates of armor at the top of its spine.

The sword struck hard, and sparks flew from its neck like a display of faulty wires. The mech let out a ragged groan before lowering its body to the ground and settling into a state of hibernation.

The Wanderer climbed up its back, using the fan-like armor as steps, and retrieved her sword before twisting to look at the others. “We should hurry—it’s only a matter of time before someone notices the surveillance feed is no longer working. And we don’t exactly have time to be answering questions.”

Kaito and Tamiyo helped to drag Tezzeret’s body onto the mech’s back, doing their best to secure themselves to the array of metal disks layered along the spine.

With Tezzeret wedged beneath one of his arms, Kaito glanced warily at the Wanderer, and then back at Tamiyo. “Right, so do we count to three or—”

Tamiyo didn’t wait for him to finish; she shut her eyes, took a breath, and let the Reality Chip’s power course through her veins.

Beneath them, the reptilian mech shook. The Wanderer threw a hand forward, bracing herself against one of the shoulder blades. It sounded as if the sky was being ripped in half—and then the mech lifted into the air.

The Wanderer’s heart lurched as Tamiyo sent the machine sailing over the edge of Otawara. They flew through the clouds, wind hammering against their faces. Kaito grinned wildly, enjoying every moment, while Tamiyo’s brow was furrowed with deep concentration.

The mech shuddered beneath them—it was a great deal of metal to control, and the Wanderer wasn’t sure how the Reality Chip could be affecting Tamiyo. The Wanderer used it to help her planeswalk, but that only took a few seconds. It would take significantly more time to reach Eiganjo.

She tightened her grip around Tezzeret and hoped the breeze would carry them faster.

When they finally broke through the clouds, the Wanderer could hear the faint sound of war in the distance. The clash of metal. The screams of the wounded.

On the surface below, the Wanderer watched as the walls outside the Imperial Palace turned to rubble.

Risona and the Asari Uprisers had indeed come to Eiganjo—and they’d already breached the gates.

When Tezzeret stirred, the Wanderer wasn’t fast enough to draw her sword.

With a ferocious wave of his hand, he yanked every smoke device from Kaito's belt, sending them scattering across the mech's back. They exploded in bursts of white and gray smoke, leaving Kaito, Tamiyo, and the Wanderer coughing violently and straining for clean air. The mech rumbled, teetering from side to side, and the Wanderer felt her hand start to slip.

Kaito reached out, fingers latching desperately around her forearm. "I got you!"

But the Wanderer's eyes were pinned to Tezzeret's glowing pink ones. He sneered before launching himself from the mech. At the same time, Tamiyo let out a strained cry.

She couldn't control the mech alone—and they were seconds away from impact, too close to the surface to avoid smashing into the earth.

The Wanderer looked at Kaito with a desperate urgency. "We need to jump," she ordered.

Kaito didn't want to let go—she could see it in his horrified gaze. But the Wanderer wasn't going to give him a choice.

She yanked her arm from his grip and leapt for the surface.

The last thing the Wanderer saw before twisting her body to soften her own landing was the mech exploding against the side of an Imperial apartment.

When the smokey haze finally cleared, Kaito stood, strength returning to his limbs, and searched near the remains of the mech for any sign of the emperor.

He couldn't find her.

Maybe it was a good thing not to find a body. Maybe it meant she survived the fall.

Moth riders swept overhead before diving into the nearby battlefield. They weren't interested in the wreckage. Not when the war continued to rage on the other side of the wall.

And Tezzeret—where had he gone?

When Tamiyo appeared in the clearing, Kaito stared wide-eyed. "What just happened? I thought he was paralyzed!"

Tamiyo lifted her hand, displaying the flickering Reality Chip that remained there. "Using the chip must've interfered with my magic. I could not maintain the spell and fly the mech at the same time."

Kaito laced his fingers together and rested them against his head. "He's a planeswalker—he could be anywhere."

"Tezzeret will not leave this plane without the Reality Chip," Tamiyo pointed out. "And he still believes it's in the emperor's possession."

Kaito's stomach dropped, but the grating sound of metal on metal pulled his attention away. He ran to the other side of the debris, skidding to a halt before he reached the railing, and peered below at the chaos flooding through the Imperial courtyard.

An enormous mech folded itself into the shape of a lion, energy blazing from its outstretched jaws toward the Uprisers charging through the broken wall. Kyodai's temple was still protected, but with the first wall breached and a slew of bodies crowding the gardens, Kaito couldn't say for certain which side was winning.

In the distance, he saw the emperor. Round hat shielding most of her white hair, she was making her way toward Kyodai's chamber. She moved like a gust of wind, determined and focused, and when Kaito's gaze drifted higher, he saw why.

Risona was there, a few buildings ahead, with several Uprisers scaling the wall beside her. She must've used the battle as a diversion and slipped past the most heavily guarded areas.

But the emperor was moving quickly. If her path remained clear, she'd be able to cut Risona off before the Uprisers reached the temple.

Unless Tezzeret found her first.

Tamiyo reached the edge of Otawara, slender finger pointing toward the rooftop below. "There." Her voice was sharp. "He's going after the emperor."

Kaito's brows knotted as he scanned the black roof tiles. With his black clothes and dark hair, Tezzeret wasn't easy to find. But when the sunlight glinted off his metal arm, Kaito hissed through his teeth.

"I'll get us closer," Tamiyo said. With one step, she wrapped her arms around Kaito, lifted him into the air, and soared toward Eiganjo's inner wall.

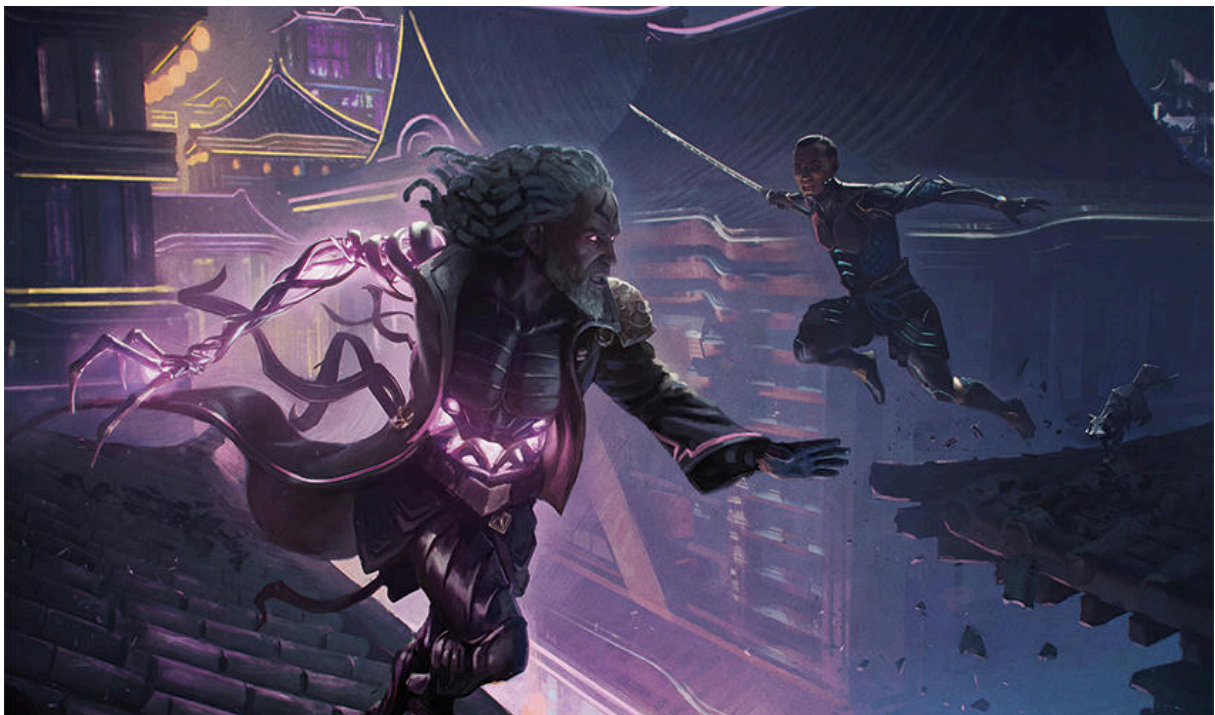
They slammed against one of the roofs with an unpleasant *thud*. Kaito rocked back on his heels to keep from sliding, sending several tiles toppling to the ground.

"I apologize for the rough landing." Tamiyo stood, regaining her composure. "Flying is much easier as a solo venture."

Kaito removed his mask. Himoto folded and refolded like metal paper before shifting into her familiar tanuki shape. Launching her forward with one hand, the drone flew down into the chaos below.

"What are you doing?" Tamiyo asked, puzzled.

He blinked, watching the drone vanish in the crowd. "Making sure we have a backup plan." There was no time to explain—not when the emperor was in danger.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

Kaito charged across the roof, scaling wall after wall, trying to close the gap between him and his enemy. Tezzeret was too focused on the emperor to notice Tamiyo flying above, scroll already beginning to unroll.

But Kaito was anxious, and too hungry for a fight. He took one look at the stone lantern perched in the nearby garden and used his mind to send it flying toward Tezzeret. The object smashed against Tezzeret's shoulder, sending him wobbling over the roof tiles. He spun, livid, and spotted Tamiyo first.

The recognition in his eyes when he spotted the Reality Chip on her exposed hand was unmistakable.

Tamiyo didn't get a chance to read her scroll; Tezzeret used his power to summon a bladed electric fan from a sand garden on the other side of the wall and hurled it toward her. When it was only an arm's length away, Tezzeret made a fist with his hand, and the ornament exploded.

Sand hit Tamiyo's eyes, and when she recoiled, her scroll fell.

Kaito leapt to meet them on the roof, not bothering to reach for his sword. His weapons would not help him now; not when every one of them was enhanced with Futurist technology.

With both hands in front of him, Kaito pulled several tiles from the roof and sent them toward Tezzeret like an onslaught of arrows. Tamiyo floated back, squinting as she searched the garden for the scroll that had fallen.

Kaito charged before Tezzeret had time to recover, swinging his leg around until his foot collided against Tezzeret's chin. Again, Tezzeret stumbled, jaw clenched and hands becoming fists.

Kaito could feel the thrum of Tezzeret's power pulling at every scrap of tech on his body—every weapon and piece of armor all of it made Kaito vulnerable.

But this was Kamigawa. Kaito's home. And he'd spend most of his life scaling the rooftops, making sure the next time he met the man in front of him, he'd be ready.

There was nothing vulnerable about retribution. If anything, it made Kaito stronger. His heart was in this fight, far more than Tezzeret's could ever be.

Kaito shook off the bulk of his enhanced gear, letting his knives and pocket-sized devices trickle down the roof like heavy rain. He didn't need them. Not for this fight.

Kaito's fist met Tezzeret's cheek. He swung with unrelenting force, pushing Tezzeret back across the roof, throwing punch after punch.

Tezzeret brought his metal arm up in defense. This time when Kaito swung, Tezzeret snatched his shirt, pulling him close. Only a fist of metal remained between them.

"You and I were here once before," Tezzeret seethed. "And it didn't end well for you."

"Well, you know what they say—if at first you don't succeed " Kaito braced himself, "then next time, bring a friend."

Tezzeret paused, confusion taking over, when his mouth tore open and he let out a pain-stricken howl. He released Kaito, stumbling back on the ridgeline. In his thigh was a gleaming dagger, the gold handle carved with the symbol of the Imperials.

Kaito looked down into the courtyard, where samurai and Uprisers had destroyed any semblance of order in the moss garden, and found Eiko. Beside her, Kaito's drone hovered in the air, and a matching blade was in one of her fists.

He gave his sister a mock salute before turning back to Tezzeret, who had only just managed to remove the blade from his wounded leg.

Tamiyo floated down, paralysis scroll stretched in front of her. In an instant, Tezzeret stiffened as if turned to stone.

Tamiyo didn't take her eyes off of him, and when she spoke, her voice was like iron. "Tell the Imperials to prepare an appropriate holding cell. Somewhere *without* tech."

Kaito gave a curt nod. "I'll tell Light-Paws." He turned, getting ready to clamber down the nearest trellis, when Tezzeret's cold voice snapped like the crackle of a last ember.

"There's no need to keep me in Eiganjo," he drawled silkily. "I already have what Phyrexia wants."

Kaito turned, brow furrowed, and watched in horror as Tamiyo's hand flashed and the Reality Chip came to life.

Tamiyo wasn't prepared for the hold Tezzeret would have over her, or how it would sever her connection to her story magic. She reeled, face ashen, and clutched her hand to her chest.

Kaito barely had time to process her distress before Tezzeret lunged, grabbing Tamiyo's trembling body by her shoulders. Snarling, Tezzeret lashed at the air with his metal arm, and a violent, jagged line split through the sky. The crack of electricity pierced Kaito's ears as he watched the portal grow to Tezzeret's full height.

Tezzeret yanked Tamiyo through the snapping light, and they both vanished from the rooftop.

Kaito took a step forward, blinking like he was trying to will everything back to how it was. But it was no use. The portal gave a metallic hiss and snapped shut.

Tamiyo—and Tezzeret—were gone.

Risona moved in circles, footsteps calculated and hair sticking to the sweat on her face. "I will not yield."

The Wanderer matched her pace. "Surrender is not a requirement," she said, voice echoing throughout the chamber.

The fallen bodies of Risona's Uprisers were slumped on the floor. They'd entered the temple only to find the Wanderer waiting. Most of them were easy enough to take down, but Risona was stubborn, and her style of sword fighting was brutal and relentless. It would've made most Imperials sweat.

But the Wanderer was not just any Imperial. And unlike Risona, she had trained on more than one plane. Adapting was second nature to the Wanderer now.



Art by: Johan Grenier

Risona rotated her sword through the air, building momentum for her next strike.

It would do her no good. The Wanderer could've ended the fight ages ago with a blade straight through her heart, but she was holding back. She wasn't after needless bloodshed—she was merely waiting for Risona to accept the inevitable and avoid an execution.

Except the fire in Risona's eyes burned too strong for surrender.

Kyodai's layered voice carried across the mist on the far side of the room. *Your mercy would not be returned if the situation were reversed*, she said into the Wanderer's mind. *She has no interest in peace with the Imperials.*

Risona swung hard, and the Wanderer twirled out of the way with ease, exchanging positions on the opposite end of their imagined battleground. Huffing with exhaustion, Risona only gripped her hilt tighter.

The Wanderer's mouth twitched. She was focused on Risona's faltering steps and the way her shoulders sagged with the weight of her sword.

Risona was tired. And the Wanderer did not wish to humiliate her any further.

The Wanderer raised her sword high. "Drop your blade. There is no need for you to die this way."

"You abandoned your people for over a decade," Risona seethed. "You know *nothing* of what any of us need."

Her words were like an icicle straight to the Wanderer's chest, even as she tried not to show it. "Leaving was never my choice."

"It doesn't matter," Risona bit back. "You were gone, leaving a weakened kami to oversee the merging of the mortal and spirit realms, and a bickering, power-hungry court to rule in your stead. The Imperials have always had too much control, but your disappearance caused instability to ripple through Kamigawa. You may have Kyodai, but it is the *people's* faith that makes a true leader. And the people lost faith in your return long ago—they will not see you the same way they once did."

“You stormed the palace and murdered dozens.” The Wanderer’s voice was like steel. “There is no amount of faith that could be recovered after what you’ve done.”

“Perhaps not,” Risona said, breaths uneven. “But it is far better to have no Emperor at all than one who cannot be depended on to stay.” She raised her sword to the Wanderer’s. “We will finish what we started.”

Risona lunged—just as something flew across the room and cracked against the side of her skull, knocking her unconscious.

The Wanderer blinked at the stone lying near Risona’s body and turned to find Kaito standing several yards away. “Did you—did you just throw a *rock* at the leader of the Asari Uprisers?”

Kaito shrugged, cheeks pink. “I found it in the garden on my way in. I’m out of smoke bombs. And to be honest, after the day I’ve had, I’m not all that comfortable using metal.”

The Wanderer went from aghast horror to something much more like amusement. And when she laughed, the lilting sound poured out of her like it had been locked away for far too many years.

Once Risona was bound in restraints and marched outside as proof the Uprisers had lost, the battle met a swift end. Between those who fled and those who surrendered, there were only a handful of defectors left for the Imperial samurai to deal with.

Kaito stood in the temple window, peering down at the grounds below. He could see Eiko giving orders in the distance. She was suited to Imperial life, even in times of crisis.

“Looks like they have everything under control out there,” Kaito mused. “You’ll be pleased to know that order is once again restored.” He turned toward the emperor, expecting to find her still basking in the relief of victory.

But the emperor was hunched at the waist, grimacing in pain.

Her spark was destabilizing. And without the Reality Chip

Kaito hurried to the center of the chamber, sliding to his knees. “Tamiyo has the chip.” His stomach felt like it was ready to evaporate. “I—I don’t know where Tezzeret took her.” *I don’t know what to do to help*, he wanted to scream.

The emperor pressed a hand to his forearm, shaking her head. “I don’t have much time.”

Kaito’s eyes burned. “There must be something left—some kind of research in the lab that could help keep you here.”

When she didn’t respond, he felt a familiar ache tighten in his throat.

Guilt flooded back to him, pounding like tidal waves, refusing to ease.

Kaito rubbed his forehead, jaw clenched. For the second time in his life, he’d failed to protect her. “I’m so sorry.”

She looked up, expression soft. “This is not your fault, Kaito. It never was. And you have *nothing* to be sorry for. You have been the most loyal friend I have ever known—and I am grateful to you.”

Kyodai’s voice was layered with confusion and sadness. She swayed, shadows dancing below her, and lowered her head just above the floor. The black sphere in her forehead flickered like a light beginning to fade.

The emperor watched the kami, conversing with thoughts Kaito couldn't begin to guess. But whatever was said, the emperor did not balk, even when she was met with Kyodai's wails of protestations.

Kaito could see it in the emperor's body language—the finality.

Whatever she was asking it was the only way to help Kamigawa with the time she had left.

Finally, the kami bent her head.

The emperor forced herself back to her feet and looked at Kaito, still clutching her ribs. "Find Light-Paws. And please—hurry."

Kaito didn't have to run far. Light-Paws and Eiko were already making their way up the temple stairs in search of the emperor. In clipped sentences, he told them what had happened. What was *going* to happen.

He told them that the Emperor of Kamigawa was running out of time.

They burst back into the chamber, where Kyodai towered above the emperor like a mystical guardian. The bond between the great kami and the emperor had always been strong. The same bond was probably the only thing keeping the emperor in Eiganjo for a few final moments.

"Light-Paws," the emperor said, lifting a hand like she was calling her advisor closer.

Light-Paws moved quickly, bowing at the waist. "Please—tell me how I can help you."

The emperor lifted her chin. "Kamigawa needs someone to rule while I'm away. Someone Kyodai and my people can look to as a true and rightful authority. It is the only thing that will stabilize our lands." She paused. "Kamigawa needs an emperor."

Light-Paws didn't blink, or breathe, or move. She stood the way the stone relics of the ancient forests had stood for thousands of years.

Light-Paws's eyes fluttered. "You can't mean that I?" She couldn't find the words to finish.

"Kyodai gives her blessing, as do I." The emperor nodded. "You will be my proxy, and rule Kamigawa for as long as I am unable."



Art by: A. M. Sartor

Light-Paws knelt then, forehead pressed to the ground. A sign of great respect. “I will do what you ask and honor your legacy every day until you return.”

The emperor winced, lips parted as if her tether to Kamigawa had finally snapped.

Kaito felt a panic rush through him. This was happening too fast. Too suddenly.

He wasn't ready to say goodbye.

The emperor looked at him. There was no joy in her eyes, but she smiled at him anyway, to offer what little comfort she could. “Kaito—” she started.

But Kaito didn't hear the rest. The spark took hold of her, and the emperor once again vanished from Kamigawa.

Kaito felt his heart shatter in a thousand places. Eiko gasped nearby, hand covering her mouth. Kyodai howled with the ache of a farewell.

Light-Paws continued to bow to the empty space the emperor left behind, her seven tails draped against the floor. Finally, she stood, turning to face Kaito and Eiko.

Behind her, a brand-new tail formed.

And with the sunlight framing her kitsune-like shape, Kaito and his sister bowed to the new Regent of Kamigawa.

There was no trace of Jin-Gitaxias in the compound, or anywhere else on Otawara or Eiganjo. Kaito's best guess was that Tezzeret took him through the portal after Tamiyo.

There'd have been no reason to return for just a body—which meant Jin-Gitaxias must have survived.

And somewhere in the Multiverse, Kaito felt certain that Tamiyo was alive, too.

“I thought you'd have left already.” Eiko's voice sounded nearby.

Kaito released his grip on the railing and looked toward the rest of the balcony where his sister stood in her traditional garb. “I wanted to congratulate my sister on her big promotion. *Senior* advisor, was it?”

Eiko rolled her eyes. “I know you think it’s ridiculous, but you don’t need to mock—”

“I’m not,” Kaito said, earnestly. He pressed a hand to his chest. “I’m proud of you, Eiko. Truly.”

“Oh.” She hesitated. “Well—thank you.”

Kaito pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “Looks like the outer wall is almost back together.”

Eiko’s disposition shifted from sister to royal advisor, and her voice rose to match it. “There is still a lot to clean up. The Uprisers are not happy we’ve taken Risona prisoner. And the power shift within the court has been an adjustment.”

“If you’re worried about a coup, I have some experience with intervening—and a pretty good throwing arm,” Kaito offered with a smirk.

“Kaito,” Eiko said slowly. “As much as I look forward to having you closer to home, I am not giving you permission to throw stones at members of the Imperial court.”

Kaito said nothing.

Eiko took a place beside her brother, staring into the clouds. “You’re not staying, are you.” It wasn’t a question.

“I made you a promise.” Kaito took her hand and squeezed. “I said I wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye.”

She shut her eyes and took a slow breath. “Are you going to search for the emperor again?”

Kaito followed her gaze into the clouds like he was imagining another plane. “Yes—but there’s someone else I need to find first.”

He’d already been to Tamiyo’s home. He needed to be the one to tell her family what happened. To look them in the eyes and tell them he would search every plane to find her again.

He owed Tamiyo that much. And if she still had the Reality Chip, perhaps he could use it to track down the emperor, too.

Before Kaito left the house, Nashi had promised, as soon as he was old enough, he’d help look for Tamiyo, too.

Kaito knew what such a promise felt like, so he didn’t point out how dangerous it would be, or how impossible it would be for Nashi to travel to other planes. Instead, Kaito told him he was looking forward to seeing him again someday, if only to leave the child with hope.

“I know you can’t send a drone where you’re going, but “ Eiko shook her head, smiling slightly. “Just don’t wait too long to let me know you’re still alive, okay?”

Kaito nodded, wrapping his arms around her. “Okay,” he whispered against her hair. “But the next time we meet, it had better be in Towashi. I’m not coming all the way back to Kamigawa without first filling up on curry and noodles. Priorities and all that.”

Eiko laughed, shoving his arm lightly when he pulled away. When she spoke again, her smile faded. “You should see her before you go.”

Kaito’s throat knotted. He knew who she meant; he’d been avoiding Light-Paws’s path for days. “Things were awkward enough when she was an advisor. And now she’s the Regent of Kamigawa.” Kaito lifted his shoulders. “Maybe we’re not meant for a reconciliation.”

“Promise me you’ll try, someday,” Eiko urged.

Kaito stilled, running a hand behind his neck. “For you? I can promise someday.” And then he lifted a hand. “See you around, sis.”

She nodded, mouth flat as tears filled her eyes. It was all the goodbye she could give him.

For the second time in his life, Kaito left the palace with no plans to return. He would master his planeswalking. He would search the Multiverse for Tamiyo.

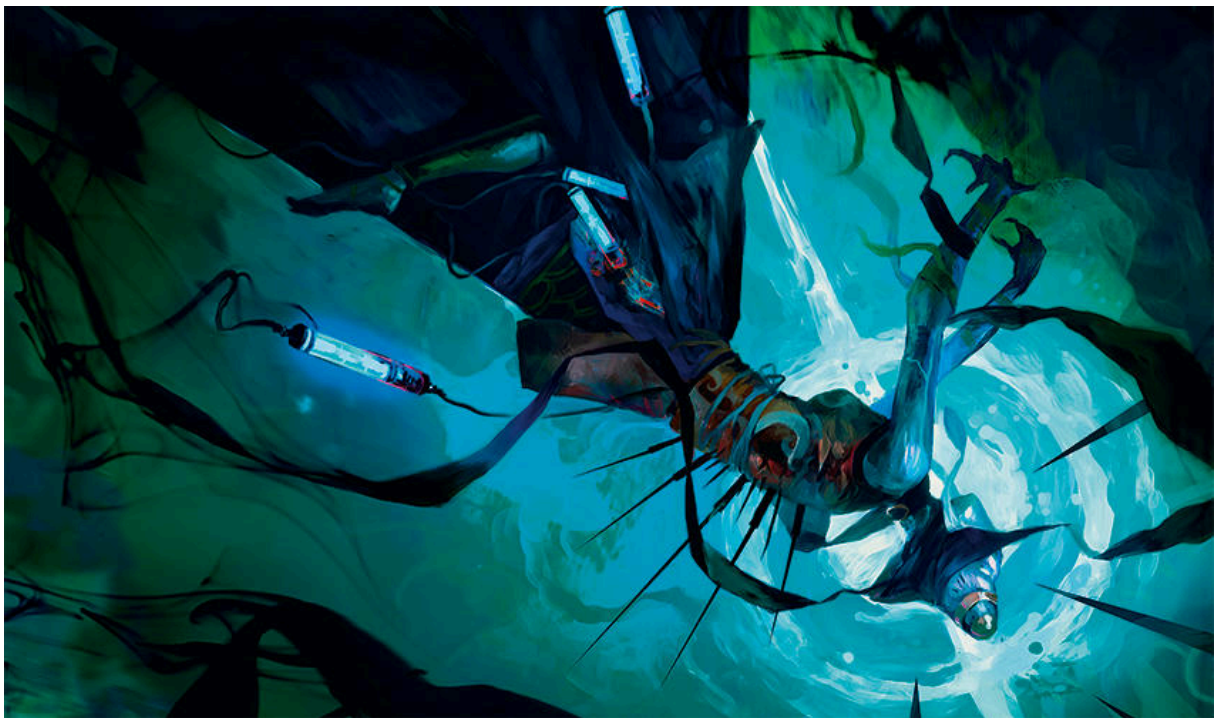
He would find a way to finish what he started and bring the emperor home.

EPILOGUE

“Arise, first of the Phyrexian planeswalkers. You will not be the last.”

Tamiyo’s eyes fluttered at the sound of Jin-Gitaxias’s voice. She sat up, processing the shapes around her. It wasn’t the first time she’d been awake in the laboratory, but it was the first time it felt familiar.

Frowning, Tamiyo reached for her satchel and pulled out one of her story scrolls. She stared at the parchment, watching as the words flashed with a metallic sheen and morphed into another language entirely. She read the Phyrexian text as if she’d been doing it all her life and felt a strange contentment wash over her.



Tamiyo’s Completion | Art by: Dominik Mayer

Phyrexia was her new home. She was a part of it—mind, body, and soul.

Tamiyo looked down at the chrome flickering across her arms like strange patchwork. It was as freshly polished as the rebuilt portion of Jin-Gitaxias’s chest.

The monster shifted nearby, teeth clicking together as he studied the cable-like wires flowing with bright liquid. They trailed from Tamiyo’s flesh to a nearby machine.

Tamiyo felt only gratitude to the monster. She had always loved her family and would do anything to protect them. Now, she would protect Phyrexia with the same unfailing loyalty.

When Tezzeret's reflection appeared on one of the surgical glass beakers, Jin-Gitaxias turned, snapping his sharp jaws in greeting.

"Your presence has been scarce in recent days," the monster noted. There was a hint of sharpness in his voice.

Tezzeret brushed off the veiled accusation and lifted his metal arm. It glowed with a faint pink energy. "Using the Planar Bridge takes a toll. I was recovering." He glanced at Tamiyo with distaste.

She tilted her head. Something was rattling him. Something he was attempting to conceal with irritation. "You do not like me. I can feel your truth." If he was not loyal to Phyrexia, she would discover the reason why.

There was a vulnerability in the way he watched her. Perhaps it was not solely to do with his damaged body.

Tezzeret bit down on his unease, replacing it with indifference. "You and your friends tried to interfere with Phyrexia's plans. I have no reason to like you, and even less reason to trust you."

Tamiyo could find only truth in his words, so she settled back in her seat, glancing briefly at the three iron-bound scrolls she swore never to use. She'd always believed they were far too powerful and risked causing great destruction.

But she also promised to intervene if there was ever an immediate threat to the place—and people—she considered home.

Phyrexia was her family now. And there was nothing she wouldn't do for her family.

Jin-Gitaxias snarled. "Your doubt for the previous fleshling is understandable. But the test subject has proven a worthy candidate. To trust the planeswalker now is to trust Phyrexia."

Tezzeret blinked, solemn. "It sounds like things are going well. Does Elesh Norn know you've succeeded in creating the first Phyrexianized planeswalker?"

"She has been informed and has been suitably chastised for underestimating my intelligence." Jin-Gitaxias moved aside, metal body gleaming. "The work continues to progress, but there is still much to be done."

Research. Further data. *Progress.*

Tamiyo had traveled the Multiverse for knowledge. And if that's what would protect Phyrexia, then she would help in any way she could.

Her family would always come first.