

Episode 1: A Stranger in Eiganjo

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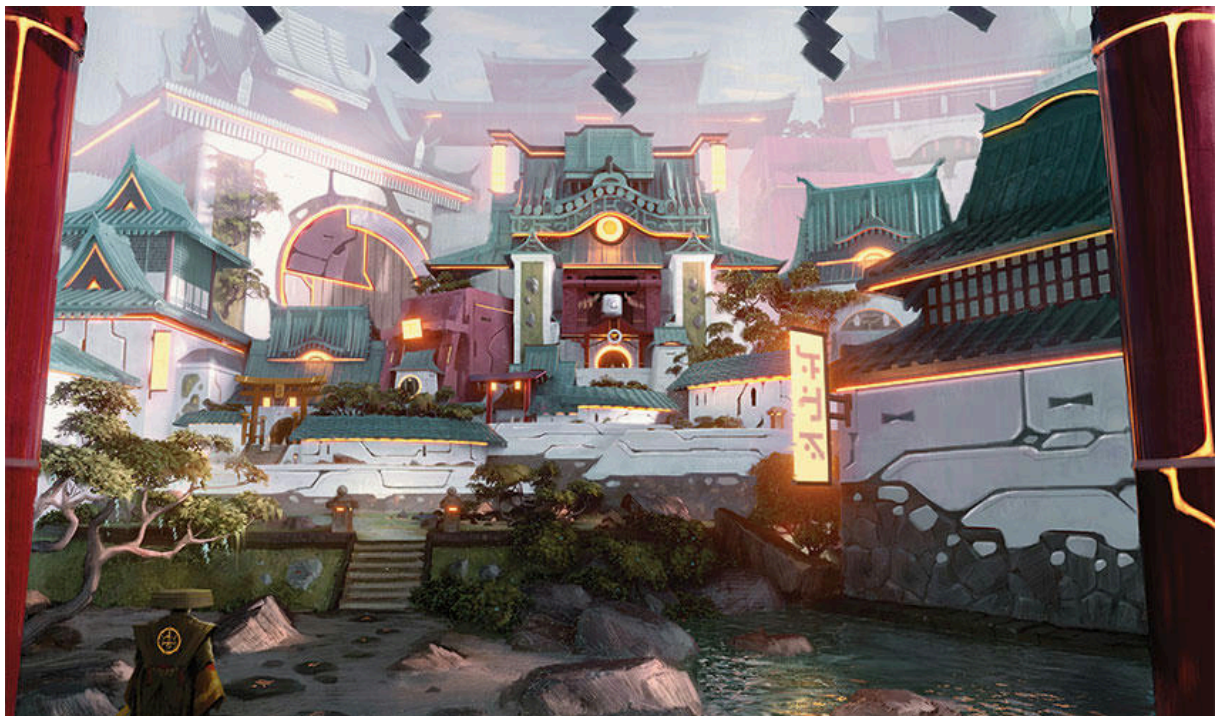
From set *Kamigawa: Neon Dynasty*

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Of all the rooms in the Imperial Palace, the kitchen was Kaito's favorite.

The fragrant smell of ramen broth, pork dumplings, and katsu curry wafted through the corridor and out the side window where Kaito was perched. He inhaled like he was in a haze and slipped off the ledge and into the storeroom, keeping his footsteps as soundless as possible. Just like Light-Paws taught him.

Not that the emperor's advisor would approve of Kaito's extracurricular activities.



Art by: Julian Kok Joon Wen

Dishes were stacked on the nearby counter; the basin beside it was filled with soapy water, bubbles rising dangerously close to the edge. Kaito was nearly to the door when a small kami poked its head out of the water, blinking like it had just been woken from a nap. Four miniature teacups floated around its salamander-shaped body, its face framed by a collection of painted horns that resembled broken shards of porcelain.

Kaito paused, bracing for a lecture, when the Kami of Imperial Dishware snatched up another dirty plate and sunk below the water, uninterested in whatever Kaito was up to.

The corner of his mouth tugged with humor, and he darted around the corner toward the wide-open kitchen.

The palace cooks were distracted with their preparations. Between the clattering pans, boiling broth, and *thwacking* sounds of a butcher's knife against a chopping board, it didn't matter that Kaito was soundless—he might as well be invisible.

His eyes trailed hungrily over the center table, where round pieces of blue mochi sat in uniform rows, each decorated with a smiling face and small, yellow eyes shaped like crescent moons.

Kaito raised a hand, fingers dancing lightly like he was gathering his courage. Two pieces of mochi floated up in the air, hovering inches above the table.

Kaito pulled the sweets closer with his mind, concentrating as they drifted toward him. He reached out, holding his breath, and snatched them out of the air—just as one of the cooks spotted him from behind a pot of glass noodles.

“Hey!” The cook's face was already red from the steam, but now it was turning a shade of purple. “What did I tell you about stealing?”

Kaito tore back down the corridor, stumbling over his footing. He could hear someone running after him, but he wasn't about to waste time looking over his shoulder. He turned back for the storeroom, elbow catching the edge of a dirty pan, and sent a stack of plates toppling over the counter.

With the mochi still clutched against his chest, Kaito threw out his free hand to hold the dishes mid-air. They hovered in place, but the footsteps in the hall were close. Too close.

Kaito had no choice.

He released the dishes and leapt for the window just as the explosion of porcelain echoed behind him. The kami burst from the soapy water, shrieking at the mess and the startled cook standing beside the broken dishes.

With a smirk, Kaito shoved one piece of mochi in his mouth and the other in his pocket, jumped from the windowsill, and made his way back over the surrounding wall.

Like most buildings in Eiganjo, the Imperial Palace had low, curved roofs and terraced spaces. Moss and sand gardens were featured in abundance, some of them trailing up the sides of the palace, with trees protruding from the displays.

Even with the palace guarded by loyal samurai and towering Imperial surveillance mechs, Kaito roamed freely between his lessons. Most Imperials didn't pay him any attention at all. They were more preoccupied with maintaining positive kami relations, regulating tech, and monitoring how closely the Futurists were following the rules.

Balance, Light-Paws often called it.

Kaito didn't care about balance; he was just glad nobody seemed to bother watching the rooftops.

Scaling the edge of the nearest apartment, Kaito followed a makeshift trail over the houses and back to the sparring room's rock garden. The sliding doors were wide open. As far as he could tell, Light-Paws wasn't even there yet.

Kaito hurried across the sand, passing a spiral of shattered stones half-sunken in the ground. They hummed faintly with energy; an ancient relic from the past.

The moment Kaito stepped through the sliding doors, he knew he was not alone.

“You’re late,” Eiko’s sharp voice rang out from the shadows. “And your face is covered in rice flour.”

Kaito spun toward his sister. Even though they were the same age, Eiko had always seemed older. Maybe because after their parents died, she felt like it was her responsibility to look after her brother.

Kaito looked after Eiko, too, but he would never chastise her for having fun.

Not that Eiko did much of that anymore.

He dragged a sleeve across his mouth. “Don’t be mad.” He dug the other piece of mochi out of his pocket and held it out to her. “I brought you a gift.”

Eiko frowned, but the hint of a smile flashed in her eyes. With a sigh, she took the mochi and popped it in her mouth, dusting her fingers against her shirt. “You need to start taking your training more seriously. It’s been five years—most Imperials would’ve chosen a specialty by now.”

Kaito shrugged, still grinning. It usually kept Eiko from being *too* angry with him. “We’re the exception, not the rule. Maybe if we stick with general training long enough, we’ll never have to be separated. We can stay just like this forever.”

Eiko flattened her mouth, cheeks blossoming with color. “Kaito, I—”

Light-Paws entered the room, and whatever Eiko was going to say seemed to halt at the edge of her lips.

Dressed in her decorative kimono, Light-Paws strode across the room with the balance and nobility of someone who wasn’t just raised an Imperial—they were the very *example* of one. Seven white tails flicked behind her. A sign of the kitsune’s age and wisdom.

Kaito and Eiko both bowed respectfully. Light-Paws was their teacher, but she was also the closest thing they had to a guardian.



Art by: Randy Vargas

Even if Kaito didn’t love the rules of the palace, it never stopped him from craving Light-Paws’s approval. He just wished it came as naturally to him as it did to Eiko. Imperial life suited his sister.

But for Kaito, there were too many walls.

Light-Paws folded her arms behind her and looked straight at Kaito. “You and Eiko will no longer be sparring partners.”

Kaito’s brows pinched. “We aren’t training anymore?” He glanced at his sister, but she only bit the edge of her lip.

“You will train,” Light-Paws corrected. “But not together. Eiko has chosen to study as a kami diplomat. I have arranged her schedule to coincide with her fellow Imperial students.”

Kaito felt the plane tilt. He turned to his sister. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Eiko’s shoulders sank. “I tried to. Many times. But you never want to talk about our future, and I couldn’t delay my training any longer. We won’t be children forever, Kaito.”

“Delay?” he repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She flattened her mouth. “The reason I took so long to choose a specialty was because I was hoping you’d pick one first. I thought—I thought it might make things easier.”

Kaito flinched, wounded. He may not have wanted things to change, but he also never wanted to hold his sister back.

How long had she been keeping such a secret?

“I’m sorry,” Eiko said, pressing a hand to her brother’s shoulder. “But it’s time. For both of us. And maybe now you’ll be able to choose your focus, too, without worrying about me.”

Light-Paws observed them both without speaking, so still even her tails had stopped swaying.

Kaito blinked, fighting the sting in his eyes. “It’s fine. I’m happy for you.” It was what a good brother would say.

And he wanted to be a good brother, even if he didn’t make a good Imperial.

Eiko nodded, letting her hand drop. Things would be different now. She’d study in the libraries and council rooms and take trips to the bustling metropolitan center of Towashi, and perhaps even to the outskirts of the Jukai Forest to mend kami relations.

There wasn’t much of the forest left—most of it had been cut down to make space for the city. Now the kami guarded it fiercely, and only the most skilled in kami diplomacy had any chance at quelling hostilities.

It would be the perfect job for Eiko, one day. All the while, Kaito would be stuck here. In the palace. Without any plan for his future.

Light-Paws took a careful step forward, raising her chin slightly even as she peered down at Kaito. “Swift-Arm is waiting for you in the sakura garden. He will introduce you to your new sparring partner.”

Kaito swallowed the knot in his throat, but he couldn’t shake his surprise. Swift-Arm ran the elite Golden-Tail Academy for Imperial samurai. What would make him ever agree to train Kaito? And *why*?

“I’ll go at once,” Kaito said with an even voice, and left the room, eager for a distraction.

The sakura gardens were deep in the heart of the Imperial Palace. There was a shortcut over the wall, but Kaito took the long route through the buildings and up the stone stairs. He was close to the emperor's chambers and Kyodai's temple; he had to at least *appear* to be on his best behavior.

Kaito had only ever spoken to the emperor behind a screen door. The first time was by accident—he'd climbed over the wrong wall trying to get away from a Kami of Spring Blossoms, who did not take kindly to Kaito accidentally trampling a flower bed, and ended up in a private garden surrounded by hydrangea and koi ponds. An extravagant porch led to a paper screen door, where warm light glowed behind it. Someone was sitting at the edge of the room, but all Kaito could see was their shadow.

He'd tried to sneak away but only made it two steps when a voice called out to him and asked what he was doing.

Kaito hadn't known it was the emperor. All he heard was the voice of a girl his own age. Someone more likely to be his friend than someone who'd report back to Light-Paws about the mischief he was up to.

So Kaito told her the truth. How he'd snuck into the restricted section of the library on a dare and was halfway toward grabbing one of the books when someone spotted him. How he'd never run so fast in his life trying to get away and had to climb across three different roofs, five walls, and scale a building just to get to safety.

The girl had smiled behind the screen. He could hear it in her voice when she told him she'd never heard anything so silly in all her life.

They talked for nearly an hour before Kaito realized he was late for a lesson. And when he asked what the girl's name was, she didn't tell him. It was forbidden for the emperor to reveal her name, even to those closest to her. But she told him he was welcome to come back and see her the next time he needed somewhere to hide.

As Kaito was leaving, he climbed back up the wall and looked around at the building—so he'd know where to return—when he realized he was standing in the emperor's garden.

A good Imperial would've known better than to return. A good subject would've known speaking so casually to the Emperor of Kamigawa was improper. And a good student wouldn't let a distraction get in the way of their studies.

But Kaito wasn't good at anything but following his own heart.

The next time he went to visit the emperor behind the screen, he didn't make a big deal about knowing who she really was, aside from calling her "Your Emperorness" when he felt he needed *something* to call her. He just talked to her like a friend, day after day.

And eventually, that's what they became.

Kaito reached the gates of the sakura garden and curled his fingers into fists. He'd tell the emperor about Eiko's choice the next time he spoke with her. But when she inevitably followed up by asking how Kaito felt about it, what would he say?

Light-Paws was grooming them for service to the emperor. It was their duty to elevate their training. How could he possibly tell the Emperor of Kamigawa that he was *unhappy* about it?

Becoming a samurai made the most sense for Kaito. He was strong and fast for his age, and he had telekinesis—he could be an asset to the Imperials with the right training.

Maybe this was Light-Paws's plan. To put Kaito in a position where if Swift-Arm recruited him directly, he wouldn't be able to say no.

Swift-Arm was waiting on the grass, his Imperial armor assembled strategically around his kitsune shape. The metal flickered against the sunlight, made up of varying shades of gold, bronze, and russet, with an extravagant fan spread against his back.

Beneath his matching helmet, Swift-Arm gave a curt nod. "Light-Paws tells me you are an excellent swordsman."

Kaito grimaced. This was it. He was going to be pulled deeper into Imperial life, with no way of ever getting out. He'd be a samurai until he died. "Er—yes, sir."

Swift-Arm grunted. "I don't believe Light-Paws to be a liar, but neither have I ever met an *excellent* swordsman who hesitates." His whiskers bristled. "Want to try that again?"

Kaito straightened. "I can fight well, sir. I've been training with my sister for many years."

"Good." Swift-Arm turned to his side, stern eyes fixed beyond the sakura trees. "We're in need of a new sparring partner. Someone adept in skill who won't fall behind on their studies. And since you haven't moved on from general training "

Kaito heard the distaste in his voice. The implication that Kaito was lazy and not at all samurai material. He hid his delight. Maybe there was still hope.

Swift-Arm was too busy watching something behind the trees. "You will remember to be respectful at all times, but you will also treat these lessons just as any other, understood?"

Kaito nodded, and a nearby door slid open. Footsteps sounded down the path. Swift-Arm bowed low.

Preparing to do the same, Kaito pressed his feet together but stopped short when a girl appeared around the corner. A girl with snow-white hair, brown eyes, and an expression too serious to belong to someone so young.

"Thank you for your service." Her voice was practiced and formal, but Kaito recognized the familiarity in it, too.

The Emperor of Kamigawa.

Kaito's eyes widened. He'd never seen her face before—only her shadow. But the shadow he knew was full of warmth, and heart, and dreams of what the plane could one day be.

She was more than a shadow. She was someone Kaito cared about.

He remembered to bow. "Thank you for the opportunity, Your Emperorness—er, *Highness*."



Art by: Eric Deschamps

She didn't react to the clumsy nickname he'd been using for years, but Swift-Arm's nose twitched disapprovingly. He picked up one of the wooden practice swords from its stand. With two hands, he held it out to the emperor and dipped his head. When he retrieved the second, he tossed it to Kaito from several feet away.

Kaito was quick—his hand snapped into the air, catching the sword by the handle before it hit him in the chest.

Swift-Arm eyed him but said nothing.

Taking up their positions on the grass, Kaito and the emperor raised their swords, preparing to spar.

Kaito knew he should be watching her every movement, but he couldn't look away from her eyes. Did she recognize him? Did she recognize his voice?

Did she think of him as a friend, or had Kaito only imagined it in his head?

Swift-Arm gave the order to begin, and Kaito swung his sword. The emperor blocked—her fighting style was like water, fluid and powerful. They moved in circles around the makeshift sparring ring, swords clacking together with precision, neither of them breaking a sweat.

Kaito took a step back, sword raised in defense, when he caught Swift-Arm's glare.

Treat these lessons just as any other.

Clenching his teeth, Kaito nodded. He understood what was expected of him. And he hoped the emperor would forgive him.

He swung his sword hard, pushing the emperor back toward the edge of the ring. He was relentless, attacking in sharp, quick bursts of fury—the opposite of her calm energy.

If she was a breathless lake, he was a tsunami.

Kaito would wear her out in moments. He was sure of it.

The emperor blocked, again and again, and then spun away from him like floating silk, so graceful that the force of her next blow caught him off guard. His sword strained beneath hers, and she held firm. And then in one swift movement, she rolled her body and cracked the edge of her sword against Kaito's handle.

He felt it rattle in his palm, but it was too late. She spun again, kicking Kaito in the stomach as she took possession of his sword with her free hand and held both wooden blades to his neck before he even had time to steady himself.

Kaito looked up at the emperor—at the way the sunlight exploded behind her, silhouetting her slender frame like she was once again a shadow behind a screen—and watched a smile appear at the edge of her lips. A smile of recognition.

Swift-Arm was still watching, so Kaito tried not to smile back. But inside, he was glowing.

Over the years, Kaito and the emperor continued to train together. And when they weren't training, Kaito found ways to meet her in the garden, where they could speak through the porch screen. Without Swift-Arm's watchful eye, they were just two childhood friends sharing their secrets.

Kaito hoped what they had would never change, even as the plane around them did. Rumors of Uprisers in the mountains of Sokenzan City plagued everyday conversation. The Futurists had grown increasingly frustrated by the Imperial regulations over technology. In the Jukai Forest, kami relations were still fraught with tension.

And Eiko was always busy studying. Sometimes it felt like the emperor was all Kaito had left.

Pressing his fingers against the black roof tiles, Kaito double-checked his grip. It had rained overnight, and some of the guttering still flowed with water. But he liked the challenge, and it was a good way to practice staying on his toes—literally.

In the distance, the Eiganjo train rounded a corner, pulling into the station like a metal dagger. Mechs shaped like origami beasts loomed from the surrounding cliffs, and moth riders appeared overhead, waiting to greet the new arrivals—Futurists coming in from the floating city of Otawara to speak with the emperor's advisors.

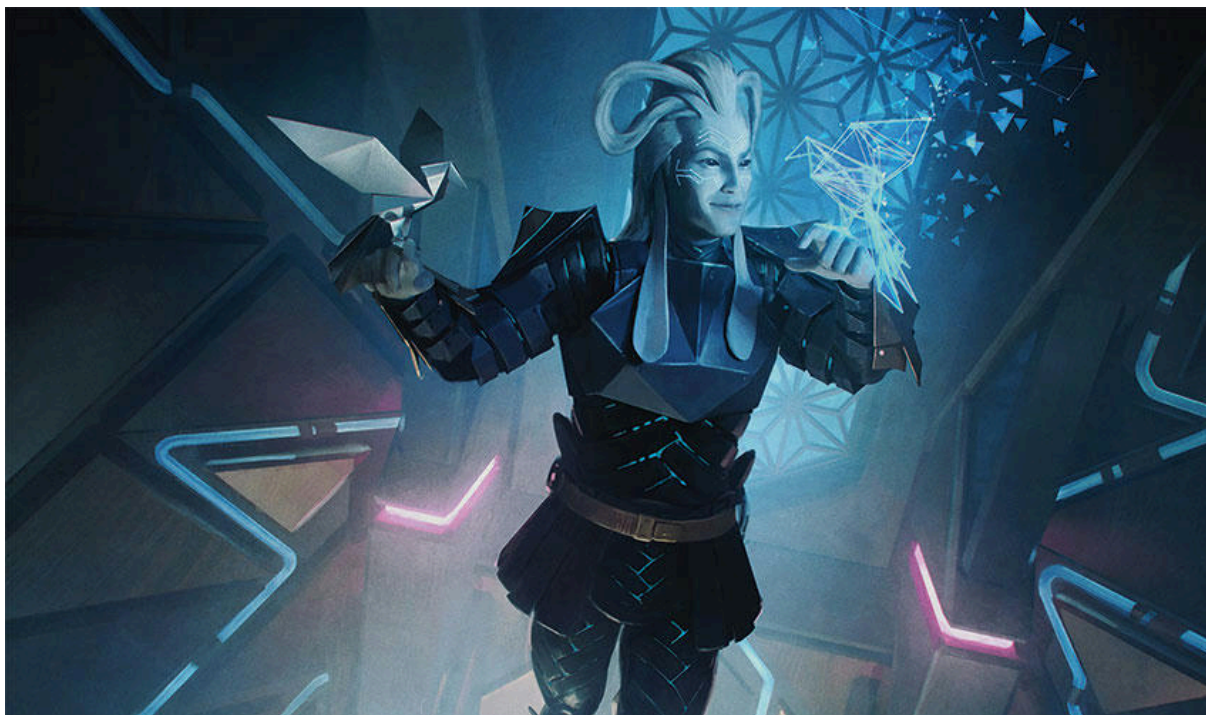
Kaito stuffed the last piece of red bean bun into his mouth, clapped the crumbs from his hands, and skirted along the edge of the roofline toward the emperor's dwelling.

Halfway there, he spotted a man dressed in Futurist armor standing in one of the terraced gardens. A moonfolk, hovering several inches above the grass.

He must have come ahead of the others, Kaito observed.

Blue lights blazed across the Futurist's chest in uneven patterns, making the nearly white color of his vest glow. Thin sheets of rose-gold metal sat on his shoulders in layers. The man pinched one with his fingers, plucking it like he was pulling a leaf from a tree.

In his hand, the triangular shape expanded before folding over itself again and again, shifting into an origami crane-shaped drone. It took off quickly, disappearing into the clouds like it was carrying a secret on its wings.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

When the man turned back around, Kaito was standing in front of him.

The stranger widened his eyes, clearly startled. He soaked in Kaito's youthful face, assessing his age, and relaxed, feet pressing against the ground. "Impressive, kid. It's been a long time since anyone snuck up on me like that." With a chuckle, he added, "But you're lucky the Imperials took my weapons at the gate. People like me tend to slice first and ask questions later."

Kaito didn't move. "I'm not a *kid*." He nodded toward the man's shoulder. "And I'm pretty sure Futurists aren't supposed to bring outside tech into the palace."

"I was only sending a friendly message," the man replied easily.

"Friendly enough that you had to hide in the garden to send it?"

The man tilted his head. "No offense, but you don't seem much like an Imperial to me." He waved a hand over his own face for emphasis. "Most of them have a smugness about them. But you? You just seem curious. Plus, you know, you're still here, talking to me."

Kaito crossed his arms. "I wasn't born an Imperial. But this is my home now." Even as he said it, the words felt wrong. How could something true still feel so much like a lie?

"No parents, huh?" When Kaito didn't reply, the man shrugged. "Me neither. Mine died working in the factory. There was a toxic spill, and the sensors there were so old, nobody knew about the fumes until it was too late." He tensed his jaw. "Could've been prevented if they'd had access to better equipment, but with all the Imperial regulations and the cost of upgrading anything in the Undercity " The man's voice trailed off, but he forced another grin. "I'm lucky I had extended family on Otawara. Otherwise, I might still be down there, fighting over outdated tech and struggling to keep a roof over my head."

Kaito didn't talk about his parents, and neither did Eiko. Not to anyone.

It felt wrong to complain, when the Imperials had given them a safe place to study, with plenty of food, and the kind of shelter some people on Kamigawa would willingly fight over.

And yet

“There was an accident at the Towashi lab where my parents worked, and they were both exposed to radiation.” Kaito stiffened. Saying the words out loud felt strange, and too much like a betrayal. What would Eiko say? Light-Paws? The emperor?

But the words needed to come out. Maybe it was better Kaito was giving them to a stranger.

“Ah,” the man said. “Hardly anyone in the Undercity can get the right med-tech for radiation poisoning. It’s far too expensive.”

Kaito’s face flushed with a budding anger he didn’t even know he’d had. “My dad—he *had* the med-tech. He was going to use it with my mom. But it hadn’t been approved yet.”

“Black market?”

Kaito nodded. “My dad was arrested. He died in prison, and my mom died not long after.”

The man’s voice was edged with compassion. “It’s not right that anyone should control who lives and who dies. Technology should be for the people. So they can look after themselves, when no one else will.”

Kaito twisted his mouth. “But without regulations, anyone could build anything. Bad people could build weapons.” There needed to be rules. Light-Paws had emphasized that point more than once.

The man clapped Kaito on the shoulder and leaned in. “That’s what people say when they want to control you.” He pulled his hand away and plucked another small origami crane drone from his armor. “Here. From one person the system failed to another.”

Kaito took the gift, surprised by how comforting he found it. The Imperials had drones of their own, but this one felt different. It was a piece of a world Kaito had yet to see.

The moonfolk strode for the door, limbs flowing with grace despite the rough edges of his voice. “I’m late for a meeting. But it was nice chatting with you, kid.”

“Not a kid,” Kaito called after him.

The man laughed over his shoulder. “If you’re ever looking for a job, I think the Futurists could use someone like you. Just ask for Katsumasa.”

He disappeared into the building, and Kaito felt like the earth had shaken something free. Something he’d buried a long time ago and was too afraid to revisit.

Until now.

He wished he had someone to talk to. But Eiko was dedicated to Imperial life—she would never understand the conflict in his heart. Neither would the emperor. Not when she ruled Kamigawa and believed so fully that controlling technology was the only way to maintain balance between the merging mortal and spirit realms.

Kaito watched the moth riders fly over the palace, wondering if Light-Paws would make sure that was him one day. A loyalist until the end.

But at least he’d be with the people he cared about. Maybe giving up a part of his heart wouldn’t be so bad if he was fighting a battle that kept his family safe.

He’d already lost his parents. He wouldn’t lose anyone else, ever again.

Tucking the crane drone into his pocket, Kaito sighed at the clouds and remembered he had a meeting of his own. He climbed back up the wall and went to meet his friend.

The months passed slowly. Kaito never told anyone about the Futurist in the garden. It was a secret he carried with him. A secret that wouldn't leave his thoughts.

But he did tell the emperor how his ideals were changing. She didn't agree, but she let him talk, and somehow that only gave his feelings more purpose. But even as his mind began to branch away from the Imperial teachings, the rest of his life seemed completely unchanged.

Until the day Kaito found Light-Paws standing in the sakura garden.

"Where's Swift-Arm?" Kaito tilted his head, puzzled. "Did our sparring lesson get cancelled?"

"There will be no more sparring lessons." Light-Paws tucked her hands in front of her. There was a time she seemed to tower over Kaito, but now they were the same height.

"I don't understand." Kaito's gaze trailed around the garden for the emperor, but she wasn't there.

Light-Paws's nose twitched slightly. "You are nearly an adult, Kaito. There is no reason for you to be anyone's sparring partner. You must choose a path and begin your own journey. Swift-Arm thinks you'd be a good fit for—"

"I don't want to be a samurai," Kaito interrupted. He hadn't even realized he'd made the decision until the words left his mouth.

But he was tired of hiding who he was, and how he felt.

Light-Paws's tails straightened behind her. "I know you and the emperor have a friendship." Kaito looked away. "But it is time both of you focus on your duties to Kamigawa—the emperor to her people, and you to the emperor."

"I don't need to join the Golden-Tail Academy to do that," Kaito argued hotly.

"The emperor has many enemies who wish her to fail," Light-Paws warned. "She needs samurai. *Loyalists*." She paused, voice sharpening like a blade. "Not a sparring partner more interested in filling her head with ideas about a different future."

Kaito's heart cracked down the middle. "She—she told you?" They'd spoken about so many things over the years, one shadow to another. They'd told each other their fears. Their hopes for the plane.

But never once did Kaito think she would betray his feelings to Light-Paws.

"It is our duty to protect the emperor, always. Privacy is an illusion for someone of her status." Light-Paws sighed, taking a step toward Kaito. "Perhaps I allowed you to hold on to your childhood for too long. It might've been better if I'd intervened and put you on a better path."

"A better path?" Kaito choked, fists trembling. "You have no idea what that is!"

Light-Paws's dark eyes remained fixed. "Balance is the *only* path. The machines we build can change Kamigawa. That is a power that needs supervision."

"A single path only works when everyone is equal," Kaito shot back. "The Imperials are safe in Eiganjo. There is harmony with kami, and technology is available whenever they need it. But there are places on Kamigawa that don't have those luxuries. People who need to push the boundaries of tech because their world isn't designed for comfort. And you shut it down—you *control* them because you can't imagine a plane where a civilian might need to invent different equipment to keep themselves alive,

and safe. You limit access to anyone who doesn't have the right permits, without any regard to those who can't afford them. Where's the balance in that? You are *killing* people and—"

"That is enough, Kaito," Light-Paws snapped, ears bent and nostrils flaring. "Those permits and regulations ensure technology is *safe*. You are using radical words that have no place in the Imperial palace."

"What you mean," Kaito replied bitterly, "is that *I* have no place here."

It was the first time Kaito had turned his back on his mentor. It didn't feel brave, or powerful, or overdue.

It felt like severing something that might never be repaired.

Kaito couldn't sleep that night. He tossed and turned for hours, trying not to think about what had fallen apart between him and Light-Paws.

When the alarm rang through the palace, he was already awake.

Tearing from his bed, Kaito grabbed his metal crane drone from the dresser. It had been modified for everyday use and now fit comfortably against his wrist. He ran for the hallway; samurai and Imperial staff were everywhere, alerting one another and racing for their posts.

Kaito started to move toward Eiko's quarters when he spotted one of the librarians running toward him. He held up an arm to stop her. "What's happened?"

She shook her head back and forth, the terror lingering in her eyes. "There's an intruder in the palace. They're saying the Uprisers are here!" Pushing his arm away, she bolted past him for safety.

Kaito hesitated. Nobody would be looking for Eiko. She'd be safe with the other diplomat students.

But the emperor

Kaito turned on his heels, searching for the nearest balcony. Samurai would be watching the halls, and the doorways, and the gates. But Kaito spent years running around the palace, moving in and out of places unseen.

And the guards rarely watched the rooftops.

Beneath the velvet and starlit sky, Kaito took the fastest route to the emperor's chambers. His chest burned as he flew across the black tiles, eyes pinned on the garden where he'd spent so many afternoons. When he spotted the porch, there was no light spilling across the grass.

But the door was already opened.

Kaito leapt from the wall, rolling into a careful stop at the bottom step. He tiptoed silently, pausing at the door, and removed the metal drone from his wrist. It folded itself into an origami crane and flew straight for the shadows.

He pressed a finger to the chip against his temple that let him see through the drone's camera. The emperor wasn't there, and neither was the intruder. But the door to Kyodai's chamber was also open, and inside, moonlight swept across the floor.

A sound echoed through the room—like three voices crying at once. A shout, a song, and a whisper, all of them edged in pain.

Kaito didn't care about waiting on the drone to show him what was behind the door. He ran to the sound. Because if Kyodai was in trouble, then the emperor

He skidded to a halt when he reached the grand chamber, just as the drone landed back on his wrist. An indoor hot spring pooled in the distance, the fog blanketed across the water, making it appear as if the room stretched on for an eternity.

Kaito had never laid eyes on Kyodai before. The guardian spirit of Kamigawa only spoke through the emperor—*channeled* herself through the emperor in a way no one else could ever experience. Not without the great kami's blessing, which was only meant to be given upon the emperor's death.

The kami was enormous, with hundreds of golden, human-sized arms forming her belly and limbs. Gold spheres trailed along the fans at her back, with a large black one embedded in her forehead. With a pointed mouth like a dragon, three masks lined Kyodai's face. They represented Michiko Konda—the first emperor to channel with Kyodai.



Kyodai, Soul of Kamigawa | Art by: Daniel Zrom

Kaito's gaze trailed to the massive central machine hanging from the ceiling. It was once told to him that Kyodai would cling to it like an enormous cable, almost as if she were keeping herself separate from the mortal plane below.

But now Kyodai writhed in the water, lashing at the fog like she was hurting and confused.

The emperor was nowhere to be found.

Kaito was ready to call the guards—to shout for them to come quickly and see what was wrong with Kyodai—when he saw a strange man rise from the fog beside the kami's body.

A man dressed in chrome armor like nothing Kaito had ever seen before, and a metal arm that pulsed with purple energy, the ends forming a monstrous claw.

When he locked eyes with Kaito, they glowed an otherworldly pink.

With a sneer, the man leapt from the fog toward the open balcony. Kaito had no weapon, but it didn't matter; he wouldn't let the intruder escape, no matter what it cost.

He chased after him onto the rooftops. The tiles broke beneath the stranger's weight. He was too fast, and too determined.

But Kaito was determined, too.

Eyeing a loose tile, Kaito flung his hand forward and sent the object sailing through the air. It shattered against the side of the stranger's head.

But it barely seemed to hurt him at all. The man with the metal arm spun, teeth bared, and then dropped his gaze to Kaito's wrist. A sneer formed across his mouth, and he flicked his fingers at the air.

Kaito felt his wrist tug, and then he was yanked from the roof, flailing as he tried to grab for the ledge—for anything at all—before his body fell through the air.

His back hit the sand garden with a *thud*. Kaito winced, tearing the metal drone from his wrist like he wasn't sure if it had been compromised, and hobbled back to the wall, climbing as quickly as his injured body would allow.

When he reached the roof pitch, the man was already gone.

By the time he returned to Kyodai's chambers, where all the high-ranking guards and advisors were waiting, he realized the emperor was gone, too.

The Imperials spoke over one another, trying to figure out what to do—what had *happened*. They barely paid Kaito any attention at all, too busy trying to blame the attack on the Uprisers.

"I saw him," Kaito argued. "The person who did something with the emperor. He had a metal arm, and glowing eyes—he wasn't an Upriser." He *couldn't* have been. Not with those strange clothes and a power over technology Kaito had never witnessed before.

Light-Paws appeared with all seven tails fanned out behind her. "A metal arm?"

Kaito nodded, relieved. Light-Paws would believe him. She'd listen to him. She'd understand that—

She turned to the other advisors. "Perhaps the Futurists are responsible for this. They may have used an unregulated prosthetic device to kidnap the emperor, to try and force her to change the laws."

"What? No! That's not what happened," Kaito said pleadingly. "It wasn't the Futurists. I know what I saw!"

But Light-Paws wasn't listening. She was busy convening with the Imperials, figuring out who to blame and how to retaliate.

Kyodai shuddered in the distance, swaying like she didn't understand what was happening or where she was.

Maybe even *who* she was.

Was it possible that somewhere out there, the emperor was just as scared and confused?

Kaito's face burned. There was raw fury in his voice. "You're looking in the wrong direction. You're trying to blame the Futurists instead of chasing after the man I saw—the man I know is responsible for this."

Nobody stopped to listen. Not to Kaito.

He shouted over the noise and the fog. "He's getting away. If someone doesn't do something, we might never see the emperor again!"

Light-Paws turned, eyes admonishing. "Go to your room, Kaito. This is an Imperial matter."

Kaito felt it then—what he'd always known.

He didn't belong here.

He never did.

Tearing himself away from the temple, he didn't stop the angry tears from falling down his cheeks. And by the time he reached his room, he knew what he had to do.

It would break his heart to leave Eiko, but she had a place in Eiganjo. She had a purpose.

And even if it wasn't the one he wanted, now Kaito had a purpose, too.

He would search Kamigawa for the man with the metal arm. He would find his friend and bring her home. And for as long as he could help it, he would never step foot in the palace again.

That night, Kaito climbed his final wall in Eiganjo, and he didn't look back.