

MEET THE CHAMPIONS

Champions of Kamigawa



Everything

Gwendolyn Kestrel

The most valuable knowledge is that which no one can teach, yet you still learn. It is the secret of yourself. It is truth. It can be a blessing or a curse.

I am Azami, head librarian of the largest and most comprehensive library of all the land. I have everything I ever wanted, yet I am not happy.

As a young girl, I grew up in the Kawabe Province downriver from the falls. My father served in the military and was away from home much of the time. My mother studied soratami lore and wrote scholarly works about them. She spent little time with my brother or me.

Mother was very strict. She owned many scrolls and papers, which she forbade us to touch, much less to read. She told us they were too valuable, too sophisticated, or too steeped in magic for us to read. Of course, these were the very texts that interested me the most, so I often smuggled these books out of my mother's private library. I would sit by the river and read.

One day, while the world was steeped in mist, I purloined a scroll from her collection. I took it to the river. I would have to wait a little while for the sun to burn off the morning fog before it grew light enough to decipher the text. While I sat there idly tossing twigs into the river and watching them float downstream, a river spirit surfaced to look at me. It was a strange scaly creature with dozens of fins and four bulbous eyes. At the time, I thought it a Great Kami. I was but a young girl.



"What are you doing?" it asked in a strange, burbling voice. It stared at me without blinking while I mustered the courage to answer.

"I came here to read, oh, Great One," I said.

"Why do you read?" it asked.

This time I spoke without hesitation. "To gain knowledge."

"And is that what you want most?"

"Yes, oh yes," I said.

It slowly blinked each of its four eyes in sequence.

"What would you give up for it?"

My stomach fluttered. As in the legends and tales of old, the Great Kami must be offering me a pact.

"Everything," I whispered.

"Then you shall have it," the spirit said as it disappeared below the river with a splash.

Joy filled my heart. I eagerly anticipated the fulfillment of my wish. Days passed and nothing of note happened, yet I did not despair. I continued to filch and return documents from my mother's library.

About a year after the incident with the river spirit, my mother noticed my absence from the house. While searching for me, she fell into the river and nearly drowned. Fever stricken, she was confined to her bed. The best efforts of the local healer and resident jushi failed to restore her health. I, too, was to care for her, soothing her forehead with a cool cloth and feeding her soup, but I spent more hours in her library than at her bedside. Within a moon, she died.

Philosophers claim that death is but change. With my mother's passing, much changed in my life. My father decided to send me to the Minamo School. He said that he wanted me to be able to fulfill my

potential, but I knew that he did not want to be troubled with raising a daughter. So, in this way, that was the year that my father was also lost to me. He sent my mother's library with me, to assist my studies.

The parents I lost seemed a small price for the opportunities I gained. I tried to mourn, for my mother, for my father, for the price charged for my knowledge, but I could not. I felt these tragedies beyond my control. The river spirit was fulfilling its bargain. It wasn't my fault, it was the Great Kami's magic acting to bring me knowledge.

I sent a paper boat with an offering of sweet incense and flowers out into the current before I moved to the school.

* * *

At the school, I met Etsumi Urano. She and I were both young, bright, and ambitious. Under other circumstances, we might have become rivals, but instead we became close friends.

Happy years passed, and we grew to be beautiful young women. We cared only for our studies and for each other.

Etsumi balanced her studies with training in the bo and in a variety of magic.

For my part, ancient lore fascinated me. So much valuable knowledge had been gained and then lost again. In one aged manuscript, I found a reference to a soratami spy on a mission into nezumi territory. The spy had stolen the battle plans and journal of General Sonzaki. About to be captured, he had secreted the cumbersome scroll tubes inside a shrine in the Kitanosu Temple. He escaped and returned without the documents. By the time another mission could have been organized, the great battle was long over and the manuscripts deemed inconsequential.

Perhaps they were inconsequential at the time, but to me now, a student of history and lore, an aspiring scholar desiring to make her name, the documents would be invaluable.

The Temple still stood. It was located only a few leagues into nezumi territory. I convinced Etsumi that we could sneak in, find the manuscripts, and sneak out again. With her skill with the bo and our knowledge of veiling and protective magic, we would be there and gone with ease.

I was wrong. Getting there and getting in was difficult, but manageable. We avoided the haphazard nezumi patrols. Sneaking past a human ochimusha snoring in a drunken stupor in the temple itself also proved little challenge.



Our search for the manuscript hiding place in the dilapidated, ransacked temple took time. We found them just as the ochimusha began to wake. He glimpsed us as we left. He called out after us, alerting the two disgusting rat creatures guarding the settlement.

One pursued us. The other alerted the village, crying out that it was under attack.

We had a good lead, but the nezumi hunting us began to close the distance. The heavy burden of the scrolls slowed us down.

Etsumi and I ran pell-mell through the swamp.

"Quicksand!" I called, just a moment too late as Etsumi sank up to her thighs in the mire.

"Azami, take my hand," she said, remaining calm. "You can pull me to safety. If we leave the scrolls, we might be able to outdistance the nezumi."

"Hand me the scrolls first," I said.

It wasn't my fault, I had to act as the Great Kami decreed.

Cradling the oilskin-wrapped parcel, I left her in the marsh, sinking slowly in the quicksand. The nezumi would find her soon and his hunt would likely end with her. Though her cries pursued me, louder still was the memory of my own little-girl whisper. Over and over, I heard it: "Everything."

* * *

If I had been an ardent scholar before, after Etsumi's death, I pursued my studies with even more vigor. I published scholarly, annotated versions of the volumes. They gained me great status.

My dedication and skill led to rapid advancement. Because I passed much of my time in the library, I became an authority on the collection. The school placed me in charge of obtaining and cataloging new texts. All my endeavors flourished.

All successful people have those that wish them ill. The head of the library, Atsuko Shimazaki, endeavored to thwart me at every opportunity.



I sought to make peace with her and invited her to a picnic at the top of the falls. I ate lightly as I plied her with food and drink and conversed lightly on topics of common interest. I spoke eloquently of wanting to learn from her and have her as an ally instead of an enemy. She ate and drank heartily, but expressed an unwillingness to respond to my overtures of friendship. It was most unfortunate that the sweet mushroom salad I served for dessert included a poisonous variety. Indeed, with my knowledge, I should have known better, but a mistake would not be impossible. The small portion I ate made me only mildly ill but convinced others of the honesty of the mistake. The large quantity Atsuko consumed led to a very painful, prolonged illness that permanently prevented her return to her duties. Most unfortunate, and quite beyond my control.

* * *

Years passed, and I grew more respected and powerful without impediment. Now, I am the head librarian of the most prestigious collection of books in the world.

Recently, a band that hunted the kami of the Great Falls brought back a strange river spirit. It was strange scaly creature with dozens of fins and three bulbous eyes, a scar crossed an empty socket and showed where a fourth eye had once been. It was older, and the years had not been kind, but I could not fail to recognize it.

After much study, much of it unpleasant for the creature, for the first time, I learned more than I ever wanted to know. It was no Great Kami with power to fulfill wishes. It was a simple river spirit with no magic beyond the ability to summon fish. The events of my life had not been molded and shaped by a manipulative kami, no, the responsibility for the deaths of my mother, Etsumi, and Atsuko Shimazaki were mine and mine alone.

The weight of this knowledge settled on my soul like a cairn. How could I have been so naïve and gullible? The creature had not been a powerful kami. It had never made me any promises. Curious about humans, the creature had merely asked me some questions and uttered a mere platitude wishing me well as it left.

Yet even now, I do not mourn for the dead. I do not repent my actions. I regret the years of self-delusion. I had lived a lie. The worst aspect, the thing I cannot reconcile, that which makes me bitter, is that I would rather not have learned the truth.

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