

MEET THE CHAMPIONS

Champions of Kamigawa

Thankless Child

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A Story of Iname, Kami of Life and Death

Dosan's afternoon meditation was interrupted by a wet, sandpapery tongue licking his face. Drawing his spirit back into himself, he opened his eyes, and found himself nose-to-nose with a grey, wide-eyed wolf pup, panting in breath that stunk of rice and fish. Before he could move, the pup was suddenly replaced by an equally wide-eyed human face, framed in rough-cut, dirty black hair and pink cheeks.



"Master Dosan!" Ryo cried. "Look what I found!"

"I see..." was all the elderly monk could say for the moment. The friendly animal's fur tickled his forehead, wrinkled with age. He carefully reached up and wiped a spot of drool dripping from one of his snow-white eyebrows.

"He was all alone in the woods! I looked around, but I couldn't find his mother anywhere! I named him Kenjiro! He ate my whole lunch, but I don't mind!" The six-year-old boy, dressed in a simple cloth shift, danced about the forest clearing with the obviously bewildered wolf pup. Ryo was part of the latest wave of refugees seeking shelter from the kami. Unlike many of his fellow wanderers, both his parents had survived, and were among the few who showed themselves to be genuine seekers of enlightenment, and allowed to stay within the monastery.

"Ryo," Dosan began in the same even, calm tone he took with everyone from his most trusted students to the vilest nezumi prisoners, "where are your parents?"

The boy stopped his dancing, which seemed to relieve the dizzy wolf pup. His face darkened. "It's their turn to work in the fields today. They told me that if I ever needed anything, that I could talk with you."

"That is certainly true." He watched as Ryo rubbed the pup's head fur; the animal grunted and nuzzled Ryo's face. "And are you in need, young man?"

"No." The boy's face scrunched in a mixture of confusion and dread. "I don't know." He flopped down to the ground in front of Dosan, crossing his legs to hold the squirming pup. Dosan gently reached over and scratched between the pup's ears; the wolf almost purred in reply.

Dosan had much to do that day, much to plan with his budoka, much to consider and learn. But he did not rise from his seat in the clearing. "If something is troubling you, please tell me."

Ryo pouted, hugging the pup close to his chest. "Mother says I can't keep Kenjiro. She says he belongs with his real family. It's not fair!" A single tear squeezed from one of his eyes, which he was quick to wipe away. "All my friends stayed behind in the city. Their fathers were going to stay and fight the kami and defend the town! Father could've done the same thing! I could've helped fight! Now I'm here, and I don't have any friends, and Mother wants me to give away the only friend I have." He cuddled Kenjiro, rubbing his cheek against the pup's fur. "It's not fair!" he repeated.

Dosan regarded the child for a moment, letting the urge for tears subside before speaking. "Would you like to hear a story?"

Ryo blinked; as new as he was to the forest, to the monastery, even he knew that this was an event of note. "A story?"

"Yes. Perhaps it'll give you a better idea of what your parents are thinking. Are you willing to listen?" It was a question Dosan asked all the time, and from the boy's straightened spine and wide eyes, he believed the answer was "yes." Even Kenjiro had stopped his wriggling and stared up at the elderly monk with a canine version of fascination.

In the earliest times of the universe, Dosan began, when the water had not yet decided to run downhill, and the stars still needed to think of a reason to shine, there were the kami. Born of the Great Void, they drifted, silent and sleeping, for a time longer than existence has existed, until they began to awake. Unhappy and lonely in the Void, they started to do what all kami did in that time: create. You see, when the Void was all that there was, even the kami began with clean souls, white and untouched, waiting only for their own hands to write upon them their personalities and dreams. Worlds and ideas, vast wonders and terrible horrors, were imagined, and just as quickly annihilated. Much more time passed, more than humans are able to conceive, until the creators were satisfied, and began to build what we now call Kamigawa.

But not all the kami knew their path. There was a young one, a newborn in kami eyes, called Iname, who still did not know what he wanted to do with himself. He was still a formless thing, a being of idea but not matter, who wanted to mold himself into something, but knew not into what. He watched his older brothers and sisters spin earth and sky, and was filled with both awe and jealousy that he did not think of these himself. They had made themselves into the ancient and powerful kami we know today by sheer force of will, but Iname, who was still a child despite his power, did not have the will, or sense of purpose, he needed to make himself into his own being. He knew little about himself, and even less about the universe around him. He decided at once that he would consult with his siblings. Surely they could teach him the ways of existence, and would happily help him find his destiny.

He first approached one of his brothers, a kami of chaos. "What do you want, little brother?" he screeched. "You interrupt my important work! This had better be worth your intrusion!"

"Forgive me, brother," Iname said, bowing to his anger, "but I humbly request your help. I want to have a form and purpose."

"Oh, do you? And you come to me?" He thought for a long moment. "I suppose I could try. Come, brother, and see what I do. Who knows, you may even like it."

"So what is it you do?"

The kami laughed. "Such an ignorant little whelp you are! Have you never noticed the order which holds fast all things? Does it not bore you, the constancy of it all? I bring chaos, excitement, change! Come, and see how I break the shackles of order!"

And so Iname followed his brother. Even in those early times, chaos was the destructive force we know today. Planet battled against planet, sun against sun, and stars whirled in a constant struggle for survival. Iname watched as his brother conducted these wars with glee. He even joined in, helping him to set the chaos he craved into motion. Iname assisted his brother for thousands of years. But as time went on, he became disgusted by the wanton destruction. So he said, "Please pardon me, brother, but I must go."

"Go?" he demanded, his anger boiling. "But I have shown you the wonders of chaos! I have shown you the power of my endless rage! Do you not feel better, having vented your frustrations on these worthless worlds?"

"I must confess, I do. But your way is not the way I wish to follow."

"And you are a fool for it. Very well, then. Leave me to my work. Perhaps when you are older, you will understand why it needs to be done." He turned his back on Iname and continued his destructive path, quickly forgetting about the minor kami he had worked with for so long. Iname continued his search for purpose.

He next approached one of his sisters, a kami glowing with dazzling light. "It is so good of you to visit me, little brother," she said quietly. "I always have time to help my siblings. What is it you wish from me?"

"Forgive me, sister," Iname said, bowing to her benevolence, "but I humbly request your help. I want to have a form and purpose."

"I'm glad you have come to me, little brother. Perhaps I can help. Sit next to me, so you may see what role I fill in the universe."

"What is that role?"

"Ah, I see you have not yet learned all the ways of this life. I seek to illuminate what would otherwise be lost in shadow. There is so much of it, spreading even further than we kami can imagine. I sit, and give my light, in the hopes that even my single, poor efforts can help banish the dark, even for a little while. Sit, and watch what you can see when the Void is turned away."

And so Iname sat next to his sister. In those early days, the Void still stretched out over all. The minor light given by the stars was not nearly enough to make the smallest dent in its swallowing darkness. Iname assisted his sister for thousands of years, lending what little light he could to the ultimate glory. But as time went on, he became bored by the endless inaction. So he said, "Please pardon me, sister, but I must go."

"Really?" she asked, her face creased with puzzlement. "But I have shown you the importance of light. I have shown you greatness that lies hidden by shadow. Do you not feel good, having lent your brightness to my vital work?"

"I must confess, I do. But your way is not the way I wish to follow."

"And I understand. Very well, then. I wish you good fortune in your quest. I only hope that one day you are mature enough to understand the importance of mine." She turned her back on Iname and continued shining her light, quickly forgetting about the minor kami she had worked with for so long. Iname continued his search for purpose.

He finally approached one of his brothers, a kami of knowledge and learning. "Greetings, little brother," he said. "You interrupt important research. Please tell me quickly what you want from me."

"Forgive me, brother," Iname said, bowing to his wisdom, "but I humbly request your help. I want to have a form and purpose."

"Then you were very wise to come to me. I know I can show you the right path for you. Follow me, little brother, and learn with me."

"Learn of what?"

"Perhaps I overestimated your wisdom; your youth still shows. The answer to your question is: everything and anything. This existence is still fresh from the first creation; more and more wonders are springing up every second. I seek to experience those wonders, absorb them, understand them. Every step is a new journey. You'll see for yourself if you joined me."

And so Iname followed his brother. In those early days, everything was still new, so there was still an endless universe of things to learn. The two kami explored it all, with Iname helping to find new facts and new experiences for his sibling. For thousands of years, they traveled all of existence, seeking and probing and searching. But as time went on, Iname became weary of the constant exploration. So he said, "Please pardon me, brother, but I must go."

"Go?" he asked in a distracted tone. "But I have shown you all the wonders of the universe. I have shown you just a taste of the knowledge that still lies undiscovered. Do you not feel curiosity about what else you can help me learn?"

"I must confess, I do. But your way is not the way I wish to follow."

"Then please leave me. I have so much more to seek, and I must start at once. I only hope that you will grow up to have the same curiosity that I do." He turned his back on Iname and vanished, quickly forgetting about the minor kami he had worked with for so long.

Iname thought for a hundred years, very dissatisfied. His siblings had been wise, true, but none had really wanted to help him, just use him to advance their own work. They had looked down on his youth and formlessness, dismissing his own needs in favor of theirs. Seeking out any other kami would be useless; they would just do the same. But where else was there for him to turn? If only there were something other than kami, something he could learn from and talk to...



The idea flooded into his mind with the force of a tsunami. There may not be anything else other than kami, so why not **make** something? Excited by his new idea, he began work at once, molding matter and energy and light in his fingers. Even as this new life took form, so did Iname. His body grew long and green, his hair a fiery red, and wings of leaves spread from his back. But he hardly noticed this; all his attention was on his work. Unlike his fellow kami, he did not experiment with his creation, and then cast it aside when it dissatisfied him. He let his instincts lead him, happy at whatever shape struck his fancy. It took hundreds of years, but he found a form that pleased him. Finally, he lent just a touch of his kami life force to his creation, and the first kami Child since the beginning of time was

born. Thus did Iname become the kami of life.

The Child's first words were a greeting: "Hello, Father." Indeed, Iname was the first and perhaps greatest of all Fathers, for his creations led to the coming of humanity. His purpose was more wondrous than he could have ever dreamed.

At first, the Child followed Iname about, asking about life and purpose, much as Iname had done. Iname knew that despite his newfound purpose, there was still much of the universe he did not understand – in that way, he was much like his own Child. So instead of telling the Child what to do or where to go, he suggested that they set out and explore the universe together, taking whatever path struck their fancies. On a distant planet, the Child indulged a whim, and wove its first creation: delicate plants with soft, colorful petals, filled with a sweet fragrance that Iname had never smelled before. Soon, the planet was bursting in color, filled with the pollen of a hundred thousand spring afternoons. Thus did the Child become the first flower kami. Iname was greatly pleased.

To Iname, this was more than his Child: it was a piece of himself. It was a sign to his elder siblings that he was not too young to find his purpose. The Child, indeed, was his purpose. It was as though the universe and all its glories had come to being just so he could create this first small spark of life.

It didn't take long for the presence of the first new kami to be felt by Iname's more powerful siblings. All the major kami were delighted at the making of this thing called life, and they besieged their sibling with requests for new forms of life. The kami of infinite anger now had living, thinking beings that could make war forever, for at that time, there was no such thing as death. The kami of cleansing fire had supplicants to worship him and spread his glory. The kami of seeing winds had something new to study and learn from. The kami of creation's web could add to her finely woven tapestry of existence, and would one day share the power of life-giving. And, of course, the kami of night's reach had hearts to corrupt with the touch of the Void.

Iname and his Child visited the garden planet every chance they could. Each time, the Child had more ideas and more enthusiasm. The planet's surface swarmed with blossoms, bushes, and vines, constantly shifting colors as new experiences led to new creations. One day, Iname saw a strange blood-red flower that struck him as particularly unusual. He asked his Child where it had gotten the idea for such an odd thing.

"From my explorations into the far reaches," was the reply. "I call it a 'rose.'"

Iname frowned. "I did not know you had traveled that far. And without my supervision."

"I did not think you would mind. Perhaps I'll go again. There was much out there I wanted to explore."

Long after the Child left, Iname remained in the garden, staring at the rose, the Child's wistful words still hanging in the air. The Child was learning, but he hadn't realized until then how much, and how fast. Perhaps it was even faster than Iname's own growth. That single thought sent his thoughts tumbling. Even as night fell, the great kami of life brooded. A voice in Iname's mind whispered to him, a voice that he barely acknowledged, but one that crackled with malice. "Soon the Child won't need you anymore. It'll go out on its own, leaving you all alone."

"What a ridiculous thought," Iname muttered. "The very idea that my Child would abandon me..." But the notion stuck in Iname's mind, its hold surprisingly fast. "Besides, I can just create another," he argued to no one in particular in a forceful, reassured tone.

"So you can," the voice purred. "But this is your first Child. Is it right that it will forget about you? Is it right that it would be so ungrateful to you, its Father? If I were you, I'd be hurt and outraged at such thoughtlessness! Does it not know what pain it is causing you? Why doesn't it care?"

"Be quiet!" he cried out loud. Though the voice stilled for the moment, he knew it would return. So, he tried to ignore its words as best he could. He did not notice the new color that crept into the flowers around him: a dirty brown that withered the petals it touched.

One day, the Child came to him. "Father, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course, my Child. What do you want to know?"

"What is my purpose?"

Iname thought of all he had done in finding his own purpose, and remembered how long and far he had to travel to find it. If the Child went off as he did, that would mean that it could be gone for thousands of years... Iname shuddered at the thought. "Your purpose? Why, your purpose is to stay here with me, and be my Child. What other purpose could there possibly be?" The Child nodded and went off, but Iname could tell that it was dissatisfied by this answer.

"See?" the voice chuckled.

"Silence!" he told it. But it would not listen.

Twice more the Child came to Iname and asked, "What is my purpose?" Twice more Iname gave the same answer: "Your purpose is to stay here with me, and be my Child. What other purpose could there possibly be?" Each time the Child went away more dissatisfied than the last, and each time the voice would laugh in mocking glee. Iname's efforts to quiet the voice soon dwindled to nothing. He began getting used to it, and though he told himself that he wasn't listening to its lies, some part of his heart always took the voice's words very seriously.

The other kami noticed something strange happening to their life forms: once full of mystic energy, they grew tired. They demanded sustenance, something they had never needed before. And some even began to grow weak with age, as if the threads of life's tapestry were becoming frayed and loose from neglect. But they asked Iname what was happening, they were ignored.

The Child's absences grew longer and more frequent, and it refused to answer Iname's questions about where it had gone and what it was doing. Iname could see the Child's talents growing more and more each time the two reunited. He knew it was only a matter of time before the Child's skills and imagination, even with its limited domain, outstripped his own. And in a fraction of the time of Iname's own journeys!

Resentment grew in both their hearts. Iname seethed at the Child's ingratitude, and the Child felt trapped under Iname's increasing demands, while the voice within Iname prodded everything along. Iname's attention to the other kami's requests dwindled to nothing. He sat in the garden, and stared into the fields, his heart growing heavier and darker. The Child was off on one of its expeditions, taken against Iname's wishes; without its presence, the once warm and cheerful place felt cold and lonely. Yet it bore the touch of his Child, so he remained.

"I can't be selfish," Iname told himself. "After all, I only want what's best for my Child."

"Why not be selfish?" the voice within him whispered with its low, hissing tone. "Don't you deserve a little consideration? After all, you are the parent, and it is the Child. What you can create, you can control." It paused. "And you can destroy."

Iname gasped. "No. I could never..."

"What is life without control?" the voice asked. "It is a chaotic thing, no better than your brother's wars. It spreads and spreads, not caring about what it may destroy in its selfish growth. Your Child is the same way. It's so wrapped up in its own needs that it's forgotten you. It thinks it's better than you, because it has

learned and seen so much. You are the kami of life! Who is this ungrateful Child of yours to make a fool of you? It pretends to power it does not have! You have the power! Use it!"

"If you don't shut up," he roared, "I'll... I'll..." His anger choked within him as he realized what he was railing against: nothing. There was no one to confront, no one to struggle with, not the voice that taunted him, nor the Child who outgrew him so quickly. There was no one to vent his rage upon, except the vast meadow of flowers that stretched around him.

A stone, a pit of emptiness, welled within Iname's heart. He stoked it, nurtured it, much as he had with his Child. It was cold and hard, but he let it grow, until it began to fill his entire being. As the emptiness swelled within him, it found outlet in Iname's power.

Under the dark force, the flowers withered and collapsed. What had been a verdant field of color became a dismal plain of browned and blackened husks. Petals fell, stems collapsed, and roots became ash. Iname noticed none of this. He did not feel his steps falling upon the withered roses, nor its new thorns biting into him as his passing stomped it into dust. He had only one thought: find his Child. Bring it home.

His search lasted centuries. His fellow kami could offer no aid, and indeed, they shrank from him, from his aura, but he took no notice of this. He finally found his Child in one of the distant corners of creation. "Come," Iname said, in a voice shuddered mountains. "We are going home."

The Child quivered, but stood its ground. "No, not yet. I have something to tell you."

Iname's heart again grew cold. "What is it, my Child?"

"I am leaving, Father. Forever."

The words Iname feared the most had been spoken, and panic blossomed within his heart. "No!" he cried. "You cannot!"

The Child almost relented then, seeing its Father's despair. But its heart quickly hardened. "You see, Father? You want me to be your Child, and only your Child, forever. I can't be that. You gave me too much for me to be satisfied with that. It is the best for both of us. I can find my own purpose, and you will be free to create other children. It won't be so bad! Soon, you won't even miss me."

But the Child's words did not penetrate Iname's mind, which was broiling with fear and hate. "I won't allow this."

"This is no longer about you, Father. This is about me, and what I must do." The Child turned its back to him. "Goodbye."

"No!" he screamed. "You'll never leave me! Never!" The Child trembled under Iname's wrath, unable to move or speak. "I'll see you destroyed first!" A dark energy sprang from his fingers and wrapped around the Child. It screamed, pleading for mercy, but Iname was deaf to its pleas. The Child's body withered and crumpled under the dark energy, until finally, it was dust, quickly blown away in the celestial winds. For the first time, a kami had died.

The evil power vanished just as quickly, leaving Iname staring in horror at where his Child had once stood. "What have I done?" he whispered.

"What have you done?" the voice asked. Iname looked about; for some reason, it seemed louder and clearer than it had ever been. "You've done what you were meant to do: you've given me life!" And then, a terrible visage appeared before him out of nowhere. It was jagged and twisted, bristling with drooling fangs and razor-sharp hair. Its leathery wings shook with untold strength, its whole form filled with evil power.

"Who are you? What did you make me do?"

"I didn't make you do anything," the evil thing cackled. "Those desires and thoughts were always yours. I just encouraged them a little. And now that you have killed your Child, you've given birth to a new force: death, the destruction of all you hold dear. Most delicious of all, I am, and always have been, a part of you, Iname."

"You lie!"

"I've never lied to you, not even in my whispers, and I won't start now. But be of good cheer! I look forward to being your best and favorite traveling companion."

"I'll fight you with every bit of magic in my being," Iname cried. "I'll never accept you."

"You can fight me all you want," the thing replied with a smirk. "As for accepting me, well, you have little choice in the matter." Its gaze dropped, and Iname's eyes followed. Only now did he grasp the full horror of this creature. Growing out of the end of his body was another body, connected to him as strongly and as surely as a limb that had always been there. This body belonged to the thing before him. "I told you, I've always been a part of you. Now it's plain for anyone to see!"

Iname tried to continue his work, but was always haunted by the shadow of death always lurking nearby. Whenever his thoughts became dark, or his motives selfish, his other half would ascend, and gleefully rip apart everything he worked so hard to put together. Eventually, he would regain control, and create even more life to undo what had been lost. But always, his other side would eventually come out.

And so began the struggle between life and death that continues to this very day.

Dosan paused. Ryo stared up at him, his jaw dropped open; it took a full minute for the boy to even realize the story had ended. Even Kenjiro seemed hypnotized. "Sometimes," the elderly monk said, "a parent must think of his children before himself. If Iname had done so, perhaps we mortals would not have to face the fear and sorrow of death. But in his selfishness, he thought only of himself, and forgot that the effect of his decisions did not stop with him. He did not consider what was best for the Child, and it cost him dearly. It may be difficult to understand, and even more difficult to accept, but in the end, it must be accepted." Dosan reached over and ruffled the wolf pup's fur. "Do you understand, Ryo?"



The boy did not speak for a long while as his gaze dropped to the active pup in his arms. Finally he nodded, slowly. "I think so, Master Dosan." When his face rose, another tear slowly drifted down his face; this time he made no move to wipe it away. He scrambled to his feet. "I think I remember where I found Kenjiro; maybe his mother is back."

Dosan nodded. "Perhaps."

"Master Dosan?"

"Hmm?"

"What did my parents do when they left home? What were they thinking of? What did they leave behind?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask?"

The boy thought about this for a while, then nodded. "I will! Thanks, Master Dosan!"

Ryo bounded off, disappearing into the curtain of trees that surrounded them. Dosan rose, and brushed the grass off of his robes. There was still much to be done. It was time to get on with the business of life.

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