

MEET THE CHAMPIONS

Champions of
kamigawa



Bonds of Ice and Fire

Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar

Seitaro Yamazaki watched the girl enter his room. She was pale, thin and awkward. Her black eyes opened wide, in part because of the dim light but chiefly because it was her natural expression. In the girl's arms, cradled to her breast like a child, were a number of tattered scroll cases.

"Great-uncle?" she said into the darkness, her eyes not yet adjusting. The room was large--sparse but dignified--with two lone candles burning on either side of Seitaro's wooden chair. Wood was prized this deep in the Sokenzan Range, attesting to the old man's influence. Indeed, the dwelling itself was enormous, able to house the entire village in a crisis. From a distance, it looked more like a mountain stronghold than the home of an old man and his brother.

Seitaro shifted in his chair, flexing joints tormented by age and battle. The seat protested. Hearing the noise, the girl bowed suddenly, accidentally spilling many of the scrolls onto the floor.

"Greetings, Mariko," he said in a thin voice. He hated what his voice had become as an old man. "I was told you were looking for me."

"Yes, Great-uncle," Mariko said, retrieving several scroll cases only to have more tumble from her grasp. "I have a great many questions."

"Ask them, Mariko, but first I have a question for you."

The girl paused from gathering the scrolls. "Yes, Great-uncle?" Her eyes were impossibly big in the candlelight.

"Nothing so serious, child. I only wish to know how your studies at the Minamo School proceed." He smiled a gap-toothed smile.

"Ah, that is in part why I come, Great-uncle. My studies are well. The instructors tell me I will be a great *jushi* some day."

"Good. We must all make our peace with magic in this life. Still, I suppose it is too much to hope you will lose your way to the great school some day and pursue a life of the warrior instead of the scholar?"

Mariko bowed respectfully. This time she held tightly to the scrolls. "I am quite content, Great-uncle."

"Yes, yes," Seitaro impatiently waved away the girl's obsequiousness. "Of course. It is only that I have never met a great wizard who loves anything but words. Warriors, meanwhile, possess a love of everything in life. Everything," he laughed, "except perhaps words and wizards! Ah, a glorious life, the life of a warrior. Have I ever told you of my and Shujiro's training under that dog Konda to become samurai?"

"You have, Great-uncle."

Seitaro frowned. "Ah, pity. I enjoy telling it."

"It is your life of the warrior I wish to discuss, Great-uncle, and your service in the war."

Seitaro raised a white eyebrow. "Is it? Ask your questions, then, child."

Mariko took a deep breath, gathering herself. "It is only that everyone in the village reveres you and Great-uncle Shujiro. They call you heroes of the Kami War." Her voice trailed off as if unsure how to continue.



“As well they should,” Seitaro said haughtily, straightening his curved spine as best he could. “Shujiro and I fought many battles in the war, always side by side. We defeated countless kami.

“As you have often told me, Great-uncle. It is just that--” Again, she paused.

“Say it, child! Ask your questions or let an old man sleep!”

Mariko bowed, avoiding his scowling gaze. “It’s just that I have read everything in the great libraries on the Kami War, Great-uncle. I have scoured the scrolls for almost four years now, pouring over every word in ‘Observations of the Kami War’ as well as more obscure texts. And, and...”

“...and you can find no mention of either your Great-uncle Shujiro or myself, eh?” He asked, suddenly bemused.

Mariko kept her eyes on the floor. “How can it be, Great-Uncle? If you are truly heroes, how can history have forgotten you?”

Seitaro scoffed. “Bah! Not all heroes were made at Ganzan Pass or the Battle of Silk, child, and few of war’s true heroes show up in those scrolls you covet. But I will tell you a short tale to ease your mind. Sit, child, sit and listen. I will explain why history forgot your Great-uncles while this village remembers still.”

The girl’s eyes lifted, wide as ever. She sat cross-legged on the floor, neatly placing the scroll-cases in a row between her knees and Seitaro’s chair.

Seitaro cleared his throat. “Well then, where to begin? As I said, Shujiro and I were in the service of Lord Konda when the Kami War began. Then we received word that Konda was pulling forces away from the Sokenzan Range to strengthen his army at Eiganjo. Shujiro and I had not been home since leaving for our training as children, but we knew that Konda’s move meant the destruction of our village, and the surrounding villages as well, to kami attack.

“Disgusted, we left Konda’s service and returned to the Sokenzan. There we met a barbarian lord named Godo. Ah, I see your scrolls have not forgotten him, eh? Good. Yes, Godo was a fierce warrior who opposed Konda with every vein in his body. Shujiro and I became his most respected lieutenants.”

Seitaro paused, letting the memories pool in his mind’s eye. His voice became wistful.

“It was after a failed assault on Eiganjo that my brother and I left Godo’s service as well. A messenger had arrived, carrying a note from our father that urged us to return home. He had been using his magic to protect the village from kami, he said, but he needed our aid. Shujiro and I discussed the matter at length, and after the defeat it was clear that Father needed us more than either Konda or Godo. I believe Godo understood our obligation, for he never hunted us as we expected.

“Yet as Shujiro and I approached the village, we suspected that we were too late...”

* * *

Seitaro rode, scowling. His mountain dun picked its way through a rocky path too small to ever be called a road, stepping around scrub, snow, ice and stone.

Seitaro’s bandit armor, though fur-lined, padded, and heavy, could only shield him so much from the cold. His breath puffed in bursts that clung briefly to a frosted mustache before disappearing behind. Autumn was just beginning to tan leaves across the rest of Kamigawa, but high in the Sokenzan Range winter had long since arrived.



Yet a fire burned within Seitaro. He was angry, fiercely so. If he ever paused to examine his own heart, he may have admitted that his inner fire also came from fear. Seitaro had seen countless villages over the past days ravaged by kami, leaving nothing alive. At each village, the words of his father's message rang in his ears. *I am weakening, he had written, and our village will fall to the kami without your aid.*

He stole a glance backwards. Behind him, on a dun of dark brown, his brother Shujiro rode scowling as well. Shujiro was Seitaro's twin, identical in appearance. The two even wore the same mustache and chin hair, the same red armor. The only outward difference came from their fierce helms. Whereas the ram horns on Seitaro's *kabuto* curved backward as if meant for butting heads, Shujiro's curved forward like the bottom fangs of some terrible monster.

Seitaro smiled ruefully. Perhaps their helms spoke to the real differences between the brothers. Seitaro had been called the leader of the twins because of his passion and impulsiveness, indeed ramming heads with anything that stood in his way. Shujiro had become, since a neck-wound from a kitsune arrow that nearly took his life, both quieter and more reckless, a monster held in check only by his brother's indomitable will.

"What?" Shujiro barked, and Seitaro shook himself from his reverie. He must have stolen more than a glance at his brother.

"Can these horses go no faster?" Seitaro barked back. Explaining personal reflections to Shujiro was like explaining mercy to an *oni*, so he rarely bothered to try.

"We are almost there," Shujiro said.

Seitaro faced forward, concentrating on the path. It was true. Recognition of their location filtered into his mind like a dream. The path had opened to a narrow valley, protected slightly from the howling wind that made its home in the Sokenzan Range. Here a stream flowed during summer. Yak were plentiful and easily hunted when the snow revealed grass. Seitaro's grandfather had told him how, when his own ancestors had discovered this place among the mountains, they had given thanks to the kami for their good fortune. Now it seemed the kami were set on reclaiming their gift.

"Smoke," Shujiro grunted from behind.

Thin tendrils rose from behind the next bend, where their village lay unseen. Seitaro hoped fervently that the smoke came from cook fires, but the previous villages they had encountered suggested otherwise. He had seen far too much destruction during this war to harbor hope.

Yet still Seitaro's heart plummeted when he saw the figure standing in their path. They were too late to save their village from the kami.

It was the size of a man, clad in what looked to be samurai armor made of ice. Where its face should have been was a sheet of fire. Flames crackled in an aura around the ice-armor. As the two brothers approached, the creature raised a *katana* of flame, clearly warning them to stop.

Rage boiled within Seitaro, banishing all trace of fear. With a battle cry he leapt from the startled dun back towards the creature. His hands gripped a broad-headed *naginata* polearm, its shaft as black as death.

The samurai of ice and fire faltered, surprised, yet recovered in time to bring its weapon to parry Seitaro's first savage slash. Seitaro spun and whirled with his polearm, cutting open a crease in the armor along its belly.

The creature made a gesture and ice leapt from its fingers to encase Seitaro's torso, pinning his arms to his side. Seitaro fell to the ground, dropping his weapon awkwardly and screaming in fury.

A sharp clang echoed in the valley as Shujiro joined the battle. Two serrated and wicked blades flashed in his hands, one considerably larger than the other. Before it could bring its fiery sword to its defense, the creature had already taken several blows from Shujiro's onslaught.

Seitaro roared, splintering his icy bonds and reaching for his *naginata*. In one practiced motion he planted the butt of his polearm into the rocky soil and pulled himself to standing. As his feet touched the ground, he

was already swinging the weapon towards his foe. The polearm careened off an icy shoulder and the creature collapsed.

"This is what threatens our village?" Shujiro taunted, "It does not even seem to fight back!"

Seitaro narrowed his eyes as the creature struggled to stand. Its armor hung in shards where the twins' blades had struck. Flames faltered along its body, sputtering in the wind. The sheet of flame the thing used as a face looked up intensely and, Seitaro thought, imploringly.



"Wait--!" Seitaro yelled, but it was too late. Chuckling with menace, Shujiro had already advanced on the kami. With a single swing from both blades, crossing in front of him as if drawing curtains, he beheaded the creature. Flames vanished in smoke. Ice immediately turned to slush, then water. What was once their foe became nothing more than a steaming puddle.

"To the village!" Seitaro yelled. They had defeated the kami, but the victory had brought with it an indescribable dread. His boots crunched in snow as he ran.

Shujiro shrugged as Seitaro passed, then joined his brother. Seitaro imagined that his brother followed not because of a matching sense of dread, but in hopes of finding another kami. His twin's lust for war was insatiable.

Seitaro charged ahead, around the bend in the rock. Surprisingly, the village appeared unharmed. Small, round huts made of clay bricks and yak hide littered the valley. Smoke from a handful of cook fires climbed towards the Sokenzan peaks far above. The scene looked as Seitaro had remembered it--slightly smaller and less grand than a child's memory perhaps, but familiar. Only one part of his memory was missing.

"Where are the people?" he asked Shujiro, who stopped to survey the scene. His brother grunted. The two made their way into the village warily. Seitaro clutched his polearm before him while Shujiro's blades spun with anticipation in his grip.

As they neared the perimeter of the village, a man appeared from behind a hut. He was of middling age and obviously thin as a reed beneath a fur coat and hat. The man seemed to notice the brothers' battle stances, his eyes growing wide at the sight of weapons. He bowed deeply before them.

"Greetings, Seitaro and Shujiro Yamazaki," he said hurriedly. "I bid you welcome to the village of your birth. I am Hideaki Minematsu, apprentice to your father and sent to meet you. Only," he looked up, his face again a mask of confusion, "where is the Guardian?"

"Guardian?" Seitaro asked, "We have met no one alive in these mountains save a small band of akki two days ago and a kami just now."

"All are now dead," Shujiro added.

"I see," the man said, stroking his chin, "But this is most unusual. Your father anticipated your coming and so sent the Guardian to escort you... Kami you say?"

"A kami of ice and fire, yes."

The man paled as if suddenly slapped.

"Where is my father?" Seitaro demanded. "He should be the one to welcome us if he knew of our coming. He is, after all, the one who requested our aid."

"Your father!" the man exclaimed, his face near panic. "If you have defeated the Guardian... Oh! We must see Master Yamazaki!" Without another word, the man turned and sprinted into the village. Seitaro had only time to exchange an annoyed look with his brother before giving chase.

As he waded into the village, Seitaro noted a number of villagers returning to their lives. He guessed that they must have scurried into hiding upon hearing the sounds of battle, with Hideaki's voice signaling safety once more. Or, perhaps, the sight of two men in bandit armor was no longer alarming. Nearby a man began working on repairing a roof while below him a woman ground a root into paste. Small packs of children appeared in various states of play. Within minutes, the village was alive and vibrant. More than half of the people watched the two brothers openly, their faces a mixture of smiles and appraising stares.

Hideaki ran to a large hut at the center of the village. Without ceremony he threw the hide doorflap open and disappeared inside.

"What is going on?" Seitaro shouted to whoever could hear. With a violent motion, he pushed the doorflap aside and followed, Shujiro at his heels.

Smells of incense and herbs assaulted Seitaro's nose. The inside of the hut was dark and simple, with no decoration nor furniture save a small wooden chest against a far wall. Scrolls and books were piled in places, along with a myriad of candles, lanterns, and quills. In the center of the room were piled furs, and within the furs lay a man.

Hideaki knelt at the man's side, cradling a frail hand to his lips. Tears wet his cheeks. As Seitaro's eyes adjusted to the candlelight, a sob tore itself from Hideaki's throat.

"Father?" Seitaro asked, approaching the furs. It was difficult to match the skeletal face before him with memories of his father. The man Seitaro remembered had been strong of shoulder, cunning in expression, with fierce black eyes and a proud, graying ponytail. Here was nothing more than a sack of skin stretched over bones, hair white and thin, mouth gaping and toothless. It looked as if something had leeches all vitality from his father, leaving a husk.

"He is dead!" Hideaki wailed. "Dead! The Guardian was a projection of him, summoned from his own heart. When you killed the Guardian, you killed..." Hideaki did not voice his thought before another sob wracked his body. "Oh! What will we do? Our village stands only because of your father's magic!"

Dead. Outside, Seitaro could hear that someone, a woman, had overheard Hideaki's wails. "Yamazaki is dead!" he heard her scream, then someone else exclaimed in terror. More voices joined the chorus, rippling outward across the village.

Behind him, Shujiro said nothing.

Seitaro's mind turned inward. The fire within him extinguished, leaving a cold pit. Dishonor and shame stained his vision. Seitaro could hear nothing but that hated word, repeating itself in a dozen different voices outside. *Dead. Dead. Dead.* His father had summoned a Guardian, something of his own soul, to protect the village from kami. Yet even the great wizard feared failure, and had turned to his warrior sons. *I am weakening*, he had written, *and our village will fall to the kami without your aid.* In calling for aid, Seitaro's father had only succeeded in dooming himself and his village.

Seitaro had seen countless deaths in the Kami War, seen atrocities of every kind. Yet only once before had he faced the death of family, the arrow wound that Seitaro was sure had killed Shujiro. His brother's slow recovery from that injury had restored an unspoken belief in Seitaro that although death came to many in the Kami War, it did not touch the Yamazaki clan.

Now his father, killed by his own sons' hands. Killed by the hands of Seitaro and Shujiro Yamazaki.

Several moments passed. Suddenly Seitaro realized that the shouting outside and turned from shock to hysteria. Screams rose around the hut, most from people running past. Seitaro looked to Hideaki but the man was lost in his own grief, still clutching his father's hand and weeping. With a snarl, Seitaro stormed outside.

Chaos. Woven baskets lay overturned, their contents forgotten, as villagers ran in every direction. One woman, pushed from behind by a youth, stumbled and fell at Seitaro's feet. Her wide eyes focused on his red armor, the black polearm still clutched tightly in one hand.

"Help us!" she cried. "The kami have come!"

Shujiro emerged from the tent, pointing. Seitaro's gaze followed the line made by Shujiro's finger, upwards and to the east.

A figure, twice the size of a man, floated like silk towards them. Its body was a tangle of translucent skin, at once both orange and green, and crimson scales. Darkness clung to the thing like tattered clothing, making it impossible to distinguish limbs from body. The head was its most terrifying feature, a polished white theater mask whose surface resembled that of a woman's smiling, painted face. All around the kami, other theater masks floated disembodied amidst flame.

"We fight?" Shujiro asked, his hooded eyes ablaze.

"We fight," Seitaro agreed, gripping his weapon. The fire within him had returned. "We must be the guardians now. Father called us here for aid and we have failed him, failed him miserably with murder. We failed Konda long ago, and Godo as well. I will not fail again, brother. I swear here and now that this kami shall not touch a single hut nor harm a single child!"

Shujiro smiled, twirling his blades.

They attacked.

* * *

"Did you defeat the kami?" Mariko asked, breathless.

"We did," Seitaro said dourly, his voice like parchment. He had not anticipated the bitterness that would come from telling the tale. "And every kami thereafter. This village never fell to kami attack throughout the war or after because of Shujiro and I. The Myojin has whispered to me that the kami fear our village now." He shook himself and focused a small grin on Mariko. "So, you see, to this village we are worthy of being called heroes even if your scrolls do not know our names."

"Why have you never told anyone outside of the village?"

"Bah! Who would I tell? We never returned to Lord Konda's army or Godo's hordes, likely marked as dead or deserters for our efforts. Indeed, since arriving home so many years ago, your Great-uncle Shujiro and I have never left.

"Now, excuse me, child, I must ask you to leave. It is long past time for me to nap and wait for death to take me. Have a safe journey back to school."

Mariko bowed, slowly and respectfully. "As you say, Great-uncle. Thank you for speaking with me. Only... I would like to come again before I return to school, perhaps to hear about more of the battles you fought?"

Seitaro looked up and thought he caught the glimmer of a smile on the girl's lips. The candlelight glowed brightly in her eyes. "Perhaps tempted by the life of the warrior, child? Hmmm. Yes, you can come again."

She smiled openly at that and began gathering her scroll-cases to leave. As she reached the door to his room, Seitaro called out, "There is one question you may never ask, however."

Mariko paused, looking at him with wide eyes.

"You must never ask why Shujiro and I no longer speak to one another. If you feel you must know, find Shujiro in the other half this great house and ask him, though I doubt he would speak to you any more than he speaks to anyone. If you ask me of it, I will send you away and never see you again. I will refuse audience to anyone who claims to know you, so long as I draw breath. Do you understand?"

"I understand, Great-uncle. I will not ask."

"Good. Now out with you."

The wooden door slid shut, leaving him in silence. In the darkness, Seitaro Yamazaki sat alone, listening to his own heartbeat.

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

