

## MEET THE CHAMPIONS

# Champions of Kamigawa



## The Dragon Shield

Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar

Kazuki rubbed sleep from his eyes as he climbed the Spiral Path. He hoped Master Rokuan's summons would not make him late for training. Perhaps, he thought, if the Master required only a few words he could still perform his morning meditations before dawn. His bare feet picked their way deftly up the temple steps, making haste.

They were not truly steps at all, just as the temple was not a structure built by mortal hands. Trees of immense size bent and grew sideways several hundred feet away, twining around one another to form a dense circle of wood known simply as the Wall. In the Wall's center stood a tree so large that Kazuki believed it the largest in the Jukai forest, larger even than Boseiju or the Center Tree, though in truth he had never traveled to either. The great tree, Fudaiju, and its surrounding Wall were Kazuki's temple and his home. The knots circling the tree's trunk were the Spiral Path he had climbed since childhood.

Generations ago, so the story went, an order of forest monks found their monastery destroyed by a stampede of serow. They salvaged only their most sacred bell from the ruins, a bell they carried across the Jukai until finding this tree shielded within its protective circle. The monks placed the bell within a bole of Fudaiju, made shelters behind the Wall. Each year scores of human and devotees ventured to Fudaiju to pray, ponder nature's beauty, and match their fighting prowess against the Order's best.



Kazuki frowned. Recently, rumors of war had also come, rumors that had unsettled the Order of the Sacred Bell like a kicked anthill. More and more, visitors arrived requesting shelter and protection instead of meditation and training. Could Master Rokuan's summons be somehow connected to the rumors? Kazuki continued to circle the tree, climbing upward, faster and faster in the pre-dawn darkness. His calloused feet scraped bark worn smooth, the only sound other than his own breathing.

"Greetings, Kazuki. You are just in time."

Kazuki faltered into a respectful bow. He had been so deep in troubled thought that he had not noticed his arrival. Upon a flat branch as broad as a boat, Master Rokuan stood watching the Jukai forest. He was old, his white hair falling nearly to his belt, yet he was still strong of body. His wide stance spoke of strength and dignity. Kazuki rose from his bow to approach Master Rokuan's bare, broad back.

Rokuan did not move as Kazuki stood beside him. At first, the young man looked to his master. Rokuan's mouth was set in a grim line, his expression serious. His eyes, which glowed a bright green as a testament to the man's power, stared out unblinking. After several silent moments Kazuki could do nothing but follow that implacable gaze and join his master in watching the Jukai.

The Wall twisted and twined complexly around them, separating Fudaiju from its lesser brethren. Pines and oaks stretched out below in a sea of green just now visible as the horizon brightened. Though Fudaiju's branches continued high above them, it felt to Kazuki as if he stood at the top of Kamigawa here.

"It is beautiful," Kazuki breathed.

"Is it?" Rokuan said curtly. "Look closer then, pupil."

For several heartbeats, Kazuki could see only the vague silhouettes of countless trees. Here and there he could glimpse an individual branch, a cluster of leaves in the almost-light. His young eyes strained, yet it was when his ears joined the search that he started.

"It is too quiet," he said. "I can hear nothing. No birds nor insects."

"Yes," Rokuan agreed.

"But-- but what does it mean, Master?"

"As I said, you are just in time." Rokuan's startling green eyes seemed to flare a moment as he watched the Jukai. "Here they come."

Once again Kazuki could see nothing at first. The Jukai forest looked merely like a still, silent mass of trees. Then shadows moved and coalesced. Kazuki watched as a spidery leg, four times as long as a budoka's *bo*, grabbed an oak for support outside of the Wall. Another leg followed. From the darkness a thing appeared, dozens of spider legs holding aloft the smooth globe of a body twice the size of an ox. The creature bobbed near the Wall, waiting.

Kazuki's mind had just registered the spider-thing when his eyes caught movement from somewhere else in the Jukai canopy. Other shadows moved and became huge spheres with too many spider legs. It seemed suddenly as if the entire forest shifted with life, though Kazuki could not hear a single rustle of leaves. Ranks of the creatures advanced near the Wall's perimeter, then stopped to bob menacingly among the branches.

Kazuki's breath came in shallow bursts. "What-- What are they, Master?"

"Kami," Rokuan answered, never taking his green gaze from the Jukai. "The world beyond the veil has declared war upon us, my pupil, and we are now asked to defend ourselves. My guess is that these kumo are but the first wave of attack against our temple, a stealthy attack meant to take us by surprise and destroy us utterly."

"Kami? But there are countless thousands!" Kazuki gasped.

"Yes," Rokuan said simply.



Kazuki watched aghast as the first kumo kami advanced from the trees, dropping silently to the forest floor. Another followed, and another, until the forest crawled on spider legs towards the Wall.

"Do not look so panic-stricken, my pupil," Master Rokuan said. "Their surprise has failed. We will not face this first wave alone."

Kazuki turned to his master. The old man had not yet taken his eyes from the forest, had not yet shifted his stance. Rokuan was the picture of calm. When Kazuki spoke, he could hear his voice cracking with fear. "Master, what do you--"

A roar split the morning air, shaking Fudaiju and sending Kazuki flat against the broad branch. Something enormous launched from the branches above to rain leaves upon master and pupil. Kazuki lurched to his knees in time to see a dragon soaring over the Wall in a wild, beautiful arc. The dragon's head was that of a lizard with antlers trailing from behind its one, central eye and long whiskers trailing from its jaws. Behind the head, the dragon's long, snake-like body whipped through the air as it descended on the kumo kami below.

"Behold Jugan, the Rising Star!" Rokuan yelled to be heard above the roar. He had not yet moved despite the dragon's grand entrance. "Jugan, great spirit who protects this temple! I have summoned the Shield of Fudaiju and he has come!"

Short arms near the dragon's sleek head lashed like whips. Jugan snatched up two of the kumo in each claw and, as it darted skyward, crushed the kami like overripe fruit. Even in the death the kumo made no sound, their mutilated bodies falling gently from Jugan's grasp.

The remaining kumo recovered quickly from their surprise. In legions they darted between trees, trailing phantasmal webs behind them that looked to be made of pale mucus. In moments the Jukai canopy was awash in a sticky membrane like wet snow. Jugan, charging after the kami, turned and twisted in midair to avoid the trap. Failing, the dragon spirit careened into a white mass stretched among the trees.

Jugan thrashed within the webs, uprooting oaks and splintering branches. His long snout darted out to tear spider legs from their bodies as the kumo advanced. For a moment, it looked as if the dragon spirit would succumb to the spidery kami. Yet no sooner had several kumo leapt from branches atop Jugan than the dragon ripped itself from its tethers. Kumo fell to the earth awkwardly as Jugan soared straight upwards, through the forest canopy and into the clear sky. For a moment the dragon curled in tight circles, using its arms to tear away the kami secretions. Jugan roared in triumph, shaking the Jukai forest.



The dragon dove within several feet of the forest floor, circling outside of the Wall like an emerald shark. Kazuki had pushed himself up to again stand next to his master, and both looked down on Jugan's sleek, serpentine body as it sped round and round them. Several kami darted forward from the shelter of nearby trees, thinking to rush the dragon, yet always a tooth, claw, or tail would lash out to crack kami bodies like eggs. For a moment, at least, the kumo looked disorganized and uncertain how to proceed in the face of this overwhelming threat.

"You have seen something wondrous on this day," Master Rokuan said at Kazuki's shoulder. "Only five such dragons exist in the world, each sworn to protect one of mortals' most important settlements. I am pleased to see that even when the kami have turned against us, the dragon spirits maintain their pledge. Fudaiju is the Jukai's spiritual center, and we cannot let it fall."

Jugan continued to circle below, his speed almost blinding. Again and again he launched himself into the oaks with a crash of wood, snatching kami in his teeth and shaking them until their wet innards decorated the trees. The kami retreated further into the Jukai, one by one disappearing into morning shadows.

"We are saved," Kazuki sighed. He was heavily muscled, body bare except for red pants and sash. Some said that if Kazuki was not the strongest of the Order, he was at least the most stout. He had been taught to endure extremes of heat and cold since the age of eleven, yet despite his resilience he now found himself shivering.

"Saved!" Rokuan spat. Below, Jugan roared. "You show me nothing but blindness, Kazuki, and I must wonder if I chose the correct pupil for a task that truly will determine whether we are 'saved' or not."

"Master?"

Rokuan sighed loudly. His eyes still scanned the forest and dragon. "Wait a moment. Ah, so, more kumo have arrived."

The entire forest clattered with the sound of a thousand river stones striking one another. Scuttling from beneath brush, a new sort of kami advanced towards Fudaiju. These kami looked more like spiders than the first wave of kumo, yet still they possessed too many legs on bodies as large as horses, and their flesh seemed to be made of mossy rock. Extended in front of each kami were long arms ending in scythe-like blades.

"I suppose the kami have given up hope of stealth since Jugan's arrival, eh? Good. I find orbweaver kumo unsettling in their silence. Let us see how Jugan fares against these new kumo." Master Rokuan seemed to be speaking more to himself than his pupil.

Kazuki craned his neck to look below. The temple buzzed with activity now. Budoka monks ran in pairs from Fudaiju to the Wall. Weapons of all shapes and sizes were being lined around the inside of the Wall. Here and there monks from other orders clamored to make themselves useful. Shouts of various kinds echoed around the temple, some of horror, others of command, and still others in search of Master Rokuan.

Jugan's bellowing roar drew Kazuki's attention back to the battlefield. The dragon spirit ripped these new kumo in half with his arms, crushed them in his massive jaws, and smashed them with his lashing tail. Jugan reminded Kazuki of a kite caught in swirling winds as his body tried to be everywhere at once, to keep not a single kami from reaching the Wall. The kumo slashed at the dragon's scaled hide only to be dismembered amidst Jugan's thrashing rage.

A sound like thunder rolled across the Jukai. Kazuki whipped his head around and easily found the source. Trees toppled violently aside within the forest as something below the canopy barreled towards Fudaiju. Jugan threw off several kumo and raced to meet this new threat. As the dragon arrived, a kami even larger than Jugan crashed forward through the Jukai. Whereas the kumo resembled enormous spiders, this new kami was nothing more than a gargantuan centipede whose black body extended deep into the forest. As Kazuki watched in horror, the centipede drew itself up to a towering height, clearly intending to smash down upon the Wall.

Instead, Jugan met the kami mid-fall. Dragon and kami rolled sideways in a twist of snake and insect, crushing more oaks like twigs. Kazuki covered his ears as the crash and dragon's roar split the morning air. Beside him, Master Rokuan watched the encounter unflinching.

Dozens of the kami's crimson legs held Jugan close to its body as huge mandibles tore into the dragon's hide. Jugan roared in pain and anger, twisting itself free and lashing out with its own teeth. The kami bucked as Jugan's long fangs pierced carapace, yet the dragon refused to release its prey. Fluid, dark and shiny in the dim light, gushed from the kami's wound. With a sound like the crisp bite of an apple, the carapace split in Jugan's jaws and the enormous kami fell to the forest floor.

From the thousand-legged kami's wound, more kami emerged. The grotesque spherical bodies of silent kumo pulled themselves into the fresh air, covered in the kami's dark blood. Without hesitation they spat forth strands of white mucus to cover Jugan. The dragon danced upwards in the air, trailing webs and kumo like braids.

"There were kami *inside* of the creature?" Kazuki gasped. He could hear his voice cracking with fear once again.

"For every kami that he defeats," Masuyo answered calmly, "Jugan could bring others into the *utsushiyo*. Some kami of the forest do not die, my pupil, so much as they are pushed to the other side of the veil for a time. We can hope in this case it is for a very long time indeed."

"Yet with so many, how can Jugan prevail?" Kazuki asked. Above the temple, the dragon had torn web and kami from its body and tossed them into the forest. It roared as several kumo advanced on the Wall, then the dragon dove to meet them.

Rokuan looked away from the forest for the first time. He gazed directly at his pupil with his glittering green eyes. The sky had brightened considerably, allowing Kazuki to see every grave wrinkle on his master's

face. Inexplicably, fear greater than any Kazuki had felt yet today gripped his heart in anticipation of what Rokuan would say next.

“Use your eyes, Kazuki! Jugan cannot prevail. Already the kami have wounded him and their forces are unrelenting. No shield, however great, can withstand so many blows. They will overwhelm our temple’s guardian and we will face the kami ourselves.”

Kazuki took a step backwards involuntarily. “How long?”

Rokuan returned to watching the battle. His voice became almost casual as he shrugged. “Who can say? Jugan will fight for days, perhaps weeks. Perhaps even months.”

“And then?”

Rokuan clucked his tongue. “Do not sound so despairing, Kazuki. Our bodies are weak compared to those of the kami, our knowledge limited, and our magic poor. Yet we draw breath. That alone is reason to hope. We will meet these kami attacks with surprises of our own when the time comes.

“Besides,” Rokuan smiled, “I do not think Jugan will leave this world without a blessing for those he protects. Fudaiju and its children will stand against the kami boldly.”

The earth shook as Jugan fell from the skies to dismember a phalanx of kumo approaching the Wall. Dozens of the kami with scythe-like arms leapt from trees, their plan clearly to overwhelm the dragon spirit in numbers. Jugan twisted and thrashed, a blur of tooth and claw, before launching himself into the air once again. In the early light, Kazuki could see several small wounds on the dragon’s length as it passed near their perch.

“Except you,” Rokuan said.

“Master?”

“You are a capable fighter, Kazuki, and arguably the strongest of body. But it is precisely because of this strength that I have set a different path for you in this battle. I have called you here to show you what we face so that you understand the enormity of your task. When you leave my presence, enter the Bell Chamber. Release the log from the wall and strike the bell.”

“Master?” Kazuki said weakly. His head swam. The sacred bell hung at the heart of Fudaiju, yet none of the Order had ever heard it rung. The bell was an artifact, something to remind the Order of their history and center their prayers. Kazuki had never thought of it as something to be used, had--amazingly it now seemed to him--never believed the mystique surrounding the bell.

“Strike the bell once and allow the sound to fade,” Rokuan said sternly. “When you can hear nothing of the bell’s toll except the ringing in your ears, strike it again. Keep striking it with all of your strength, Kazuki. By the time you have lost your hearing you will know how much time should pass before the next strike. If someone can be spared, I will send you food and drink. Yet if I do not, keep striking the bell even after fatigue has you in her grasp. Do you understand?”

“I--” Kazuki began. From below their perch, Jugan let loose a roar that shook the great tree.

“Do you understand?” Rokuan demanded. He had again turned on his pupil. Those green eyes bored into Kazuki’s heart.

“I understand.”

“Good. I fear that the Order of the Sacred Bell are the only ones who remember that the bell’s toll is a cry of help. I only pray I am mistaken. As you strike the bell, I suggest you pray as well. The bell must bring aid before Fudaiju is overrun, before our sacred shrine is destroyed.”

Master Rokuan sighed, resting an aged hand on his pupil’s shoulder.

“Go.”

Kazuki paused only a moment. He sped down the Spiral Path, circling the great tree. The urgent shouts of monks became clearer as he descended. Echoes of the battle bounced eerily within the confines of the Wall, the sounds of river stones clacking together and fruit being crushed in dragon claws.

As dawn broke upon Fudaiju, Kazuki reached the Bell Chamber. Outside, Jugan, the Rising Star, roared with the voice of an angry god.

