

MEET THE CHAMPIONS

Champions of Kamigawa



Told in Whispers

Rei Nakazawa

"They've been lying to us." The youth grinned, and his friends could almost smell the smugness. It was a familiar sight - Kajiya, though just seventeen and no older than his friends, had already proclaimed himself a master sage. His smirk, framed by glittering brown eyes and his slicked-back, raven-black hair, was a common slash of color on his pale face.

The small study room was cramped, as were most study rooms in Minamo, with only enough space for a table, a shelf for inkpots and brushes, and a few chairs and lanterns. The small window looking out on Kamitaki Falls offered such a pathetic view that most students agreed it was an afterthought. Except for the occasional bird whistle, and the constant rush of the falls outside, there was little to divert students from their appointed studies... even if they wanted it. The young man's proclamation therefore snapped his fellows immediately to attention.



"Astonishing," Rina sniffed, the two ponytails hanging from the back of her hair quivering in wariness. She attempted to return to her reading, thinking the conversation over. But Kajiya wasn't ready to let it drop.

"You can scoff if you want, but it's true. I heard it all from Gen."

"The same Gen who got himself expelled last week for stink-bombing the Great Library?" Nozomi rolled her eyes. "He wouldn't know an intelligent idea if Master Hisoka himself dropped it on his head."

"There are different kinds of intelligence," Kajiya replied with a smirk. "Gen has what my friends back home called 'street smarts.' He knows how to find out things that others want to keep hidden."

"Who's been lying to us?" Motomura would never have otherwise admitted to being interested, but he was bored. The incantations on the scroll in front of him were all starting to blur together, and he'd just been praying for some distraction when Kajiya piped up.

"All the top sensei of the school, of course, up to and including Master Hisoka and Lady Azami. Rather odd for a place dedicated to knowledge, don't you think?"

"If you grin any wider, your face will crack." Rina sighed. "You've already destroyed my concentration, so we might as well listen to whatever nonsense Gen fed you. So tell us: what's this special secret that the sensei would lie to keep quiet?"

"A kami." Kajiya's grin widened as he saw the emotions the word brought into his friends' faces: suspicion, disgust, fear. But most of all, interest. "A kami brought into this world right here at Minamo!"

"That's insane," Nozomi stammered. "Who in their right mind would summon a kami in this day and age? Especially here?"

"And how could we not know about it?" Motomura added. "A new kami appearing is a big event. How could even Master Hisoka and Lady Azami cover that up?"

"Very carefully." Kajiya's voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm talking about things unspeakable."

"Oh, that," Rina groaned. "I've heard this story before. It's just a fable, made up by some upperclassmen to scare the new students."

"No! Gen told me that the sensei are hiding the truth in plain sight. *They* want you to think it was all just made up. But it really happened!"

"What story?" Nozomi cut in. "I haven't heard this one."

"You're too new," Motomura answered. "But everyone who's been here for a while knows it. They spread it to each new class as a scary bedtime story."

Rina finally broke the suspense. "Supposedly, about fifteen years ago, there was a student killed by a water kami. Her friends wanted revenge, but the sensei wouldn't let them take action that could possibly get Minamo sacked by hordes of angry kami. So while Master Hisoka and Lady Azami were away, the friends broke into Lady Azami's private library and stole some scrolls."

Nozomi gasped. "I'm surprised they weren't slaughtered just for that!"

"What ended up happening to them was worse," Kajiya cackled. "They used some ancient spells designed to gain knowledge, hoping they could use them to find out which kami killed their friend, and how to bind it. But they didn't realize that those spells were kami magic. It summoned forth a kami completely unknown to mortals, and for good reason: its domain embraces all the forbidden knowledge that only the kami are supposed to know. Imagine something like that loose on Kamigawa!"

Nozomi inhaled sharply; she hadn't realized until then that she'd been holding her breath. "So what happened to the students?"

"No one knows," Kajiya replied. "Not even Gen. But on his direction, I've talked to some of the teachers who were students around the time it happened, and none of them could remember anyone who'd mysteriously vanished or anything like that. But they did remember a student killed by water kami. A couple of her friends were sent home shortly afterwards for lagging in their studies. Or so the sensei at the time claimed." Kajiya's excited gaze swept over his fellows. "Don't you see? This proves that the story is true!"

"So what if it is?" Nozomi asked. "If it did happen, doesn't that mean we should let it be?"

"That's the problem with new students," Kajiya proclaimed with a grin that set Rina's teeth on edge. "They come here from small farms or villages, so they can't imagine anything beyond that. But Minamo teaches you to look at the larger picture. Never mind the fame we'd get from officially documenting a kami that hardly anyone knows about. Remember, this thing is a kami of knowledge! Who knows what we could learn from it? Think about it! We could turn around the entire war! Not to mention whatever we can use for ourselves!"

"But according to Gen, the last students who tried to deal with it vanished," Rina interrupted. "Why would we have any more luck than they did?"

"Ah, but they had no idea what they were getting into. They didn't even know this kami existed. We do. We'll be prepared."

"And what makes you think that Master Hisoka and Lady Azami haven't done this already?" Rina continued. "Or that they haven't tried, and failed? Surely there's a reason for them to be covering this up, if they created this massive conspiracy as Gen claims."

Kajiya snorted. "You know them. They're content to shut themselves away in their own little worlds. Master Hisoka is too conservative, too scared to let anything happen to Minamo. As for Lady Azami, who knows what she cares about." Nozomi's and Motomura's eyes widened. The latter frantically looked about, as if expecting to see them standing in the room, listening and glaring. "Like I said, some people just can't see the larger picture. But we can! We have the chance to be remembered! Forever!"

"Like those two students in the story? Forget about Gen's fantasies. We have tests and kami to worry about."

"I don't know, Rina," Nozomi said reluctantly, fingering the odd streak of white in her long, luxurious hair almost self-consciously. "Maybe Kajiya has a point."

The other girl stared as if her friend had just grown antlers and jumped off a cliff, yelling that she was a magical flying elk. "You're not actually going along with this?"

"My parents are dead," came the flat reply. "They were killed by the kami. So were my older brother and my uncle. If it weren't for Minamo, I'd be just another orphan, starving on the streets." She paused. "My little brother doesn't even remember our parents. He has no idea how sad he should be." She looked up, her eyes red, but dry. "I came here to make a difference. Stop the war. If I have to disappear to do it, I'll disappear."

Rina turned to Motomura. "I know you," she told him almost pleadingly. "You're not going on this fool's errand, are you?"

Motomura blushed. "I'm not very smart, Rina."

"Motomura..."

"No, don't try to lie. I know I'm not as good at magic as you or Kajiya or Nozomi. I mean, I want to do something that'll make a difference, like Nozomi, but I know I'm never going to do it by myself. I don't want to die alone and forgotten, Rina. I want people to remember me. I want to leave things better than it was when I was born, but I don't think I can do it without help." He looked up at her with a look she'd never seen before, one that was alien on his big, meaty face. Burly, tall, and sporting a shiny shaved head, Motomura looked more the role of a Jukai acolyte than promising Minamo wizard. His half-lidded gaze certainly seemed "slow" to those who didn't know him, but if there was one thing about Motomura that was dependable, it was his stability, even in times of greatest crisis. But now, he seemed almost... scared, which in turn scared Rina more than she knew how to describe. "This could be my best chance. My only chance."

Rina looked from face to face: Motomura, drowning in sorrow; Nozomi, deep in thought; Kajiya, still grinning like an idiot. She sighed. "Fine. If you all got expelled, I'd hardly have any friends left. Someone has to keep you guys out of trouble."

Kajiya laughed. "That's the spirit!"

"So, where do we start?" Motomura asked.

"Where do you start anything around here? At the Great Library."

* * *

All four students were silent as they stepped into the confines of the Great Library, and not only because of the stern scroll-keeper who glared at them as they entered. The library's walls were cloaked in the gloom of late afternoon, making it seem boundless. The glow of hundreds of enchanted lanterns cast a soft light over racks of scrolls and stacks of papers and tablets. The only sounds were the occasional cough or the rustle of paper, which echoed off the domed ceiling. The air smelled of dust, age, and wisdom. When Nozomi was first shown the library, she remarked, in an awed, breathy tone, "This must have been what it felt like to revere the kami." No one could disagree.

"So what are we looking for?" Rina asked. "I know Lady Azami is here, so we can't steal from her personal library too, but what are you hoping to find?"

"Information," Kajiya answered. "About this kami and what it does. Plus, there's something else Gen told me: Lady Azami no longer has a personal library."

"That doesn't sound like her," Motomura said.

"It's not. Gen said he'd heard rumors that Master Hisoka himself made her give it up, partly because of the incident and partly because he thought she was hoarding the best material for herself. I've looked over plans for this school, and pretty much every square inch of this place is accounted for."

"So where are all those forbidden spells those students used?" Rina muttered.

"Exactly. Gen doesn't think they're in the vaults, so I thought, what better place to hide a set of scrolls than in a library? Especially the largest library in Kamigawa?"

Motomura's face twisted in doubt. "You really think the scrolls are here somewhere? And we'll find them?"

"If they're not here, I don't know where else they could be. As for finding them, well, that's why I needed your help. We'll split up and each take a quarter of the library. Look for anything that could possibly reference the kami we're looking for, and the ancient spells while you're at it. We'll meet back here in about... two hours?"

"Two hours?" Motomura repeated in dismay. "To search one quarter of this place?" His gaze flickered to the row upon endless row of shelves.

Kajiya smiled. "Then we'd better get moving, shouldn't we?"

* * *

When Motomura flopped down into a study chair near the library entrance two hours later, his eyes were drooping and bleary. He only saw Nozomi return through a curtain of blur, and even then he could see that there were quite a few more hairs out of place than there were earlier that afternoon.

"Find anything?" Her forehead immediately fell to rest on the teakwood table with a soft thunk, her exhaustion born more of sheer boredom than fatigue.

"Bad poetry. A treatise on honorifics in orochi grave inscriptions. More bad poetry. A samurai chronicle in which nothing interesting happens. Papers from old students that are more badly written than anything I've ever done. And I didn't even get half done with my section. On the bright side, I now know a spell that can make clams glow in the dark. You?"

"A self-serving essay on the superiority of archaeological finds in Araba," she replied, her face not lifting from the table. "A dictionary full of words that stopped being used two centuries ago. A laughably out-of-date atlas. Art books that could put a kami to sleep. Nothing of any importance."

"Isn't this great?" Kajiya beamed as he joined the two. "Research, reading, searching... Doesn't make you feel alive?"

For the first time, Motomura saw why Rina sometimes expressed a desire to shove Kajiya into Kamitaki Falls. "So you found something?"

"Nothing whatsoever!" he answered merrily. "But remember: it's the journey that's important, not the destination!"

Motomura was about to ask why they were even there in that case, when Rina scurried up to the table, her arms filled with parchment. "I think I've found something."

Nozomi's head shot up from the table. "Finally!"

"What is it?" Kajiya asked, his head already craned over Rina's shoulder, straining for a peek.

"It's called 'The Wayfarer's Journey.' It's the journal of a former samurai who spent years wandering Kamigawa years ago. He goes into a lot of detail, especially about any kami he learned of or encountered during his travels. He apparently heard that..."

"Students are poking their noses into matters that don't concern them?" The icy voice sent shudders through the backs of all four. Slowly, aching slowly, their heads turned, hoping against futile hope that they wouldn't see what they knew they would see. Lady Azami, her arms folded in front of her chest, glowered at them over her glasses with a piercing gaze that stuck daggers through their hearts.

"It was nice knowing all of you," Motomura croaked.

* * *

"You're trifling in matters that don't concern you!" Kajiya's sonorous tone was an eerily close mockery of Lady Azami's; it was as though she were lecturing the group all over again. The four were gathered in Kajiya's quarters, their faces still steaming from the heat that the head librarian's words generated. "Or else participating in a massive waste of time! Take your pick!"



"That was... scary." Nozomi stared into space with wide, shell-shocked eyes.

"New students always feel off after they're first yelled at by Lady Azami," Motomura said quietly. "You'll recover soon."

Only Rina looked calm, almost thoughtful. "She was overreacting," she said in such a faraway whisper that she might as well have been talking to the mysterious kami of things forbidden.

"Lady Azami? Overreacting?" Motomura's face scrunched in thought. "You're right. That's strange."

"I agree. She was practically screaming by the time she told us there was nothing to Gen's 'rumor mongering.' I hate to say it, but I think Gen, and Kajiya, are on to something."

"Not that there's any point to my vindication," Kajiya muttered, his head bowed. "Lady Azami barred us from the Library for a month. She took 'The Wayfarer's Journey.' How are we supposed to find out anything now?"

A small grin, not unlike Kajiya's from earlier that day, spread across Rina's face. "That's a very good question. Perhaps with... this?" With a dramatic flourish, she reached into her robes and swept out a scroll. Kajiya snatched it from her at once and opened it.

"In my travels, I've heard about a kami that..." He looked up in astonishment. "It's...! But how?"

"My father used to be a magician. Not a *jushi*, but one skilled in simple slight-of-hand tricks to amuse children. He taught me a thing or two about how to have quick fingers."

But no one else was paying attention by then. They all huddled around Kajiya's desk as he slowly unfurled more of the scroll, reading aloud as he went.

* * *

Perhaps I should have trained to be a ninja instead of a jushi. The thought that fluttered through Kajiya's brain was so absurd that he almost chortled out loud, ruining his attempts at stealth. Breaking into the Great Library after hours was, after all, supposed to be the next hardest thing to stealing from O-Kagachi, the grand kami, himself. But he was finding it ridiculously easy, perhaps because he had fresh motivation. *I know where the ancient scrolls are!*

"The Wayfarer's Journey" had much to say about the kami of unspeakable things, called the kami of the forbidden by the few who'd even heard of it. "Apparently," Kajiya had told the others as he read the account in his quarters earlier, "there were vague whispers of some unknown force all over Kamigawa then. It would've been around the time that the incident happened. Those who knew of it called it 'Towazu.'"

"That's an odd name," Motomura had remarked.

"It's just a nickname. But some were reluctant to even call it that. They were afraid of even naming the thing for some reason."

But two facts were clear: knowledge was disappearing, and people were dying. Even hundreds of years before the Kami War, industrious *jushi* were attempting to learn and harness kami magic. Some sought power, others wealth, and a rare few were merely curious. It was this last group that Kajiya could most relate to.

Such research was long banned by Eiganjo, but no daimyo could watch everyone every day, so it continued in secret. A thriving black-market trade in arcane wisdom sprang up, a market that even Minamo apparently couldn't resist; thus the presence of the ancient texts on that fateful day.

"Almost every priest the author talked to had feared that the kami would retaliate," Kajiya had told his friends, "but there were no real repercussions from the spirit world, so it went on. When the Kami War first

began, some jushi were killed by mobs that knew about the black market, and were afraid that it caused the war. Eventually, they realized that something else was to blame, but, of course, the black market dried up. And that was the end of it, except...

"Except?" Rina had prompted.

"Except, after this, Towazu began appearing. Scrolls known to contain arcane lore began disappearing. Their owners and guardians were always found alive, but comatose, never to awaken. They said that this was the work of Towazu. For some reason, it'd been unable to come to the material world like the rest of the kami. Not until those students opened the door and invited it in."

Nozomi had been the most quiet through Kajiya's narration. "So Towazu is trying to reclaim kami knowledge from the hands of humans?"

"Some seemed to think it was more. A rare few of Towazu's victims were found not comatose, but insane, babbling nonsense that literally harmed anyone who heard it. This caused many daimyos to order the executions of such people, but all of them had once been great seekers of knowledge, famed for their wisdom and curiosity. The author wonders why they were treated differently."

"And so do I." It took a moment for Kajiya to realize that the whisper had come from his own lips, jolting him back to the present. But then, finding out was why he made his way into the Great Library. The lanterns still glowed, but its halls were deserted. His every footfall rang in his ears like a drumbeat as he wended his way through the stacks, towards his goal.

He and his friends had all been very disappointed when they finished reading the scroll. They'd learned much, but none of the important answers. They'd decided to end their quest for the night and decide on a course of action in the morning. An hour after the others had departed, Kajiya had already reread the scroll five times, trying to will every nuance into his mind. It was only when he noticed the scrap of the next section of the journal, about the author's travels in Jukai Forest, that it all became clear.

Finally, he found the shelf he was looking for, one that Motomura had looked over in their first search. He knew that none of his friends would read too far into any of the scrolls, just skim the first page or so, then move on. That was the clever thing about where Lady Azami hid the ancient secrets.

Kajiya had already known, though it took the journal to remind him, that orochi did not bury their dead with markers. They planted trees in their graves, to complete a great circle of life or some other nonsense. So why would a fake treatise on orochi gravestones be in this library, when Lady Azami herself approved everything that passed through its doors? The most likely answer: as the perfect hiding place.

Sure enough, only the first page, written not more than a few years previous, discussed the orochi. The rest of the scroll was much yellower, in crabbed, cramped, ancient writing. Cackling in glee, he began stuffing scrolls into his bag.

* * *

He knew he should have called the others right then, and damn the curfew. But he couldn't resist. The jewel was in his grasp, so how could he **not** admire it? The second the door to his room snapped shut behind him, he was reading. With every yellowed word, he found his eyes being almost physically tugged down the pages, absorbing and digesting each new bit of lore. There were moments when he wanted to look up, catch his breath, adjust the lantern. But his attention remained on the pages, pulled from scroll to scroll like a carp wriggling at the end of a sharp metal hook.

Kajiya found himself whispering, his lips copying the arcane words printed in front of him. He had no idea when he'd started, but his mouth was dry, so it must have been... an hour? More? How long had he been sitting there, reading? Could he see any glimpse of sunlight peeking through his window? He didn't know. He couldn't turn to look. Not an inch, not for a moment. Not when the words sang to him.

As he whispered, images blossomed in his head, of times long forgotten by mortals, when the kami themselves still walked the planet. More words flung themselves out of his mouth, and more images came, of grand crystal palaces that caressed the sky, of great beasts seething of flame and fear, of disembodied eyes floating on seas of silken waters, watching and waiting for something that sent a chill through his back. Still more words. The world today. War, blood, tears. A great crime, a parent's woe.

I am here.

A shadow that he couldn't see, but that darkened his eyes anyway. Writhing, growing.

I am here.

Yearning, seeking, constantly seeking. Rage, sorrow, grief. A heart pulled almost asunder, duty and destiny spread before him like silk.

I am here.

Only then did Kajiya's gaze rise from the scrolls.

The thing that drifted before him was literally indescribable. With every blink, it seemed to shift form and function. One moment, it was a roiling blob of pure, faceless energy, and the next, it bore a growling face out of nightmares. It was dark. It was light. It was everything. It was nothing. It was around him, over him, under him, behind him, within him, burrowing into his soul staring into the abyss of his heart and laughing at what it found there... Kajiya's mind felt thick and heavy, as if a sneeze were building within his brain. He

found himself without the desire to yell or flee; he simply sat, and watched the dancing shape, eager to see its next terrible form.



The kami finally began to stabilize, coalescing into a bat-winged... *being* that seemed a hodge-podge of hundreds of different forms smashed together like wet clay. Four azure eyes blinked down at him as a thin slit of a mouth smacked and quivered. Insect-like legs surrounded a belly that belched fog and whispered to Kajiya in a thin, reedy hiss. As its feathered tail whipped about, passing right through him, he stared, though whether in awe or terror, he couldn't tell.

Through it all, Kajiya was vaguely aware of how much danger he was in. Would the kami attack? Take him away somewhere? Or merely destroy him with a thought?

When Towazu finally acted, it did none of these things.

It did something worse.

It spoke.

* * *

It was another full day for Azami Ozu, head librarian of Minamo: the constant kami problems, the constant student problems, teaching.

Then there was young Kajiya and his friends.

She'd known all along that they'd disobey her. That was the point of putting the ancient texts out onto the main library floor in the first place. As if she didn't have an infinite number of safer places to hide them! But she'd known that eventually, someone would come who would satisfy the Unspeakable.

Kajiya's friends had been concerned, naturally. They'd come to her earlier that day to look for him. They obviously hadn't believed her when she said that she'd expelled him. She'd have been disappointed if they had.

"But if you'd wanted to do that," the girl called Rina had asked, *"wouldn't you have done that yesterday to us all?"* Of course she would've, but she didn't say that out loud. She merely warned the three to mind their own business and forget about the boy. He was obviously not Minamo material, and there were far greater things to worry about in the world than one child. None of them left satisfied; the one named Motomura in particular seemed agitated, and young Nozomi gave her the oddest look as they'd left her office.

They could be trouble. But then again, they could also be the next to encounter the Unspeakable. Better to watch and wait.

Azami found herself in the catacombs carved into the depths of the floating island on which Minamo's main buildings stood. She blinked, startled; she'd come here from the library before she even realized where her feet were taking her. But it made perfect sense; this was but one of her duties.

The first cell held a boy (no, he would be a man by now) who had been there for fifteen long years, though she was sure he no longer had any inkling of time. The same held for the girl (woman) in the cell next door. The third, though, whose door she opened, held someone new, by far the brightest hope Azami had seen in years.

Kajiya was huddled in a corner, shuddering, his eyes darting everywhere as if watching a gnat in flight. He constantly whispered in the same forgotten, guttural language as the others. Though her magical wards kept her mind whole (unlike the guards who brought Kajiya from his quarters, though they were slowly recovering), they also kept her from hearing or comprehending any of his babbling. The very thought made Azami's heart ache.

When Master Hisoka had asked her if there was anything she could do for these poor wretches, naturally she lied. She could cast a spell of her own design, a spell of forgetting, and eventually these three would return to sanity. But it would also erase any trace of the knowledge that Towazu had imparted on them. And that would be an even greater tragedy than the lunatics who were imprisoned here.

According to her research, Towazu, despite its jealous guardianship of its lore, was still a kami of knowledge. And even it knew that once the Kami War started, there was a chance, however slight, that its kind would cease to be. Then the wisdom of ages would be lost forever. She could only imagine that its grief at the very thought matched her own. So it began searching for mortals with the intelligence and curiosity to preserve and guard these most ancient kami secrets as it did. Sadly, the ignorant mortal mind was not equipped to deal with all of this lore, let alone this ancient kami language – they retreated into madness. The foolish daimyos slaughtered most of Towazu's early "apprentices," but she knew where her destiny lay when she realized that she had its first two right here in her hands.

And now a third. Someday soon, through these three, she would discover a way to decipher Towazu's words without going mad. On that day, she knew, the Kami War would be won. The needless slaughter would be stopped. And she... she would be vindicated, of everything. That would be a fine day indeed.

Until then, the students, not to mention Hisoka himself, would have to be kept in the dark, for a little while longer. Azami sighed, wondering if Lord Konda ever had days like this. It was a heavy burden, seeking the truth alone. But then, perhaps some things were better left unshared.

She shut the door, leaving Kajiya muttering to himself in the darkness.

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