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The Last Visitor

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Author's Note: This story takes place six years after the events of "[The Dragon Shield](#)."

Sunlight through the canopy dappled her pale skin, making the figure seem equal parts shadow and light. The ends of her black dress melded into the surrounding trees and shrubs so that it was impossible to tell where she ended and the forest began.

Small spheres with hides like an insect's carapace bobbed in the air around her. Otherwise, nothing moved. No birds called, no animals scurried in the nearby branches, no wind stirred. The figure accepted the silence, used to the awe her presence demanded.

The distant toll of a bell caused her to raise her featureless mask of a face. Majestic antlers scraped leaves from branches and sent them tumbling to the forest floor. The spheres surrounding her spun and danced with anticipation.

Fudaiju. The figure knew the meaning of the bell. Of course she did, as did all of her kind. It was a call for aid from the most ancient order of monks. How to respond to the call during such times, however... was a question without a clear answer. She decided to do nothing, at least for a time.

And so she listened to the bell's toll, season after season, considering her actions carefully. She watched leaves fall and bloom, snow gather and melt. All the while, in contemplation.

For six years, the bell rang, unceasing and mournful. For six years, she pondered her course. And then, decided, she moved.

She answered Fudaiju's call.

Hamano lashed out with his *bo* staff. A *katana* blade, floating mid-air, parried the blow. Hamano anticipated the defense, and his counterstrike caught the kami behind its wall of swords across one cheek. The thing roared in surprise, the sound of a hundred trees cracking in half. The forest kami's defense parted and Hamano pressed forward. His *bo* smacked the side of the kami's enormous head, then spun and struck between its eyes. Hamano tried not to wince as the face--a beautiful maiden's face carved in wood--cried out in pain. Two more blows and the kami had retreated several paces away. It floated low to the ground, roots dangling from where the maiden's neck would have been.

"Hamano!" a voice called. "Too far! Get back to the circle!"



He looked quickly to either side, surprised he had pursued the kami so far. Hamano vaulted, hand over heels, backward to join his comrades in arms.

No sooner had he resumed his place than the kami resumed its attack. The delicate mouth snarled angrily as the countless *katana* surrounding it slashed towards him. Hamano spun his staff at the ready. Verdant energy poured from his eyes and encased him like a second skin.

Hamano knocked one sword aside, meeting another. He ducked beneath a third, its blade close enough that Hamano could hear it slicing the air above him. The kami advanced slowly behind its curtain of swords, its comely face twisted in a mask of hatred. Hamano concentrated on the whirling swords that attacked from every direction, but he could feel the wooden eyes boring into him.

A crash, then a shrill cry, and the *katana* clattered to the ground. The kami had been so focused on him that she had not seen Kaito's approach. The burly, bare-chested monk hefted his maul from the wreckage of the once-beautiful kami. Like Hamano, green energy cloaked Kaito. The monk winked before he spun back to his place in the circle to meet a kami that looked like nothing more than a shambling pile of dark soil and moss.

The bell tolled once, loudly, behind him. The sound echoed within Fudaiju, clinging to the broken shell the monks had once called the Wall, then drifted out into the Jukai Forest. Hamano tried to focus on his time at watch. Had that been the third toll? Fourth? Hamano didn't know. He couldn't even tell if it were morning or afternoon.

Hamano's thoughts were broken by a grunt of pain from Kaito. The monk had been driven to his knees by the shambling kami, who now loomed over its prey.

Hamano dove, arms outstretched. He tackled Kaito and rolled as the kami crashed to the ground with a sound like thunder.

"Not quite a mother's embrace, but I'll take it," Kaito chuckled. He pushed Hamano from him and, in one fluid motion, grabbed his tremendous maul and rose. The monk struck the nightsoil kami so hard that clots of it sprayed across the battlefield in a wide arc. As he struck, Kaito roared his defiance.

Hamano dashed to his place in the circle. He quickly scanned the ground for his *bo*, but saw no evidence of the wooden staff. Instead, he retrieved an abandoned machete and spun it within his grasp. Hamano had not wielded a sword in months, but he quickly found the balance of the blade. With his own battle cry, he met an advancing kumo.

The kami looked like a spider with too many legs, yet it was the size of a horse. Hamano's wide blade drew sparks from the thing's stone-like hide. It turned on him. He grabbed one of the kumo's scythe-like legs in one hand and spun. Hamano pivoted his weight, throwing the kumo through the air. The spider-thing sailed high and far, shattering against a section of the broken Wall. Pieces of its body stuck in the sticky webs that hung everywhere like drapery. Hamano thanked the strength given to him by Jugan, their onetime guardian.

Another of the kumo rose from a curtain of webbing and advanced. Hamano stood his ground. As he waited, an arrow whistled through the air and sank into one of the kumo's eyes. It roared in pain but continued its charge. Hamano bowed slightly to slender Asuka, wielding her *hankyu* a dozen paces to his left in the circle. She did not return the gesture, instead loosing another arrow at a nearby kami that seemed all roots and teeth.

Hamano leapt skyward as the kumo charged into him. His free hand grabbed the arrow still embedded in its eye, using the shaft for balance. His other hand brought the machete downward, between the stony plates separating the kumo's head from its body. Fluid pulsed from the wound, and the kumo staggered to one side. Hamano leapt free as the kami stumbled and fell still.

Kaito was bellowing when Hamano rejoined his place in the circle. The monk stood over scraps of night soil that had once been his foe.

"Come! Come and test my might! Come and test the strength of--!"

Fudaiju's bell cut his words short. The sound rolled through the monks and outward like a wave.

“Seventh toll! Fall back!” a voice behind him yelled. The voice was Saruka's, the young *budoka* monk who had just begun his training when the assault on Fudaiju began.

Saruka leapt forward, a figure bathed in green light. The youth with the over-large nose held aloft a polearm twice his height. No sooner had he taken his place in the circle than Saruka met the root kami Asuka had been battling. The thing looked like a pincushion, its stumpy form now filled with arrows. Saruka sliced into the gnarled mass with the barbed blade of his weapon. As he attacked, he loosed a cry for the monks of Fudaiju. Similar cries echoed across the circle as fresh monks took their place at watch.

Hamano staggered backwards, his watch finished with the seventh toll of the bell. He panted heavily.

“Rest!” Kaito bellowed as he slapped Hamano's shoulder. Kaito also struggled to catch his breath. “The hours will pass too quickly, you well know.”

Hamano surveyed their surroundings. What monks had survived this watch were gathering near the base of great Fudaiju. Some meditated in silence while others swapped tales. All looked near death with fatigue despite the bright glow that surrounded them.

His gaze wandered. A mere twenty paces from the resting monks was what some called the New Wall, a living circle of fighting monks who had protected Fudaiju and its bell since the old Wall had fallen so long ago. Shattered hulks of debris from the broken Wall littered the compound, along with kami, too many corpses, and weapons. White webs draped everything outside of the monks' circle, sticky remnants of the kumo who streamed endlessly into Fudaiju.

“I hardly recognize anything,” he voiced his thoughts aloud. “I hardly remember our home as it was.”

“Bah!” Kaito snorted. “When we beat the kami back, we can restore Fudaiju to its former glory. These kumo webs would make fine silk, I think. We can begin a trading post worthy of Lord Konda himself! Not a bad way to fund our rebuilding efforts, eh? I hear the silk trade is quite profitable.”

“So you have said before,” Hamano said with a weary smile.

“Have I?” Kaito blinked. His broad face broke into a grin. “Well, it is a good idea. Come, Hamano. Sit. I refuse to watch you die because you cannot lift your weapons.” The man patted the ground beside him and settled his broad shoulders squarely against the trunk of Fudaiju.

Hamano took his place beside Kaito. To his other side sat a monk, scribbling upon some sort of scroll. A journal, Hamano thought. For several minutes, Hamano closed his eyes, trying vainly to ignore the sounds of battle around him and focus instead on the sounds of quill on parchment.

“They're becoming less organized,” Hamano said.

Kaito grunted. “Maybe. But so are we.”

“No, we are getting fewer, not less organized. There is a difference.”

“If you say so.”

The two lapsed into tired silence. Usually, their post-watch banter lasted several minutes, but the fighting had seemed particularly brutal this time, and tiring. The kami were less organized than before. Their brazen assault spoke of desperation rising in their ranks. Yet he could not deny Kaito's words, either. At every watch their numbers shrank. What had been a thousand of Kamigawa's most fearsome *budoka* now numbered less than fifty.

“Who did we lose during our watch? Anyone?” he asked after several minutes.

“Who can know? Someone will come and tell us sooner or later. Probably Naoto, if he survived. The man seems obsessed with our body count.”

“Yes,” Hamano said, stifling a yawn. “Probably Naoto.”

Hamano realized he felt the stirrings of sleep behind his eyes for the first time in ages. When the dragon Jugan had died, he passed his strength to the monks of Fudaiju. Without the dragon's magic, the monks would have died of hunger, thirst, or fatigue long ago. Hamano's desire to sleep spoke either of the enchantment wearing away or of the extreme toll the monks had placed upon it. Perhaps both, Hamano thought.

For a long while, Hamano kept his eyes closed in meditation, an attempt to draw strength directly from Fudaiju's wood. Eventually, even the sounds of war faded as he turned his attention inward. For a moment, he found peace.

An agonized scream opened his glowing eyes. A lanky monk named Yumi was fighting two kumo simultaneously. One of the kami had severed her left arm at the elbow before other monks in the circle could come to her aid. Hamano watched the monks--young Saruka among them--beat back the enormous spiders while Yumi spat blood into the dirt.

"Not Yumi..." Kaito said thickly. As they watched, Yumi grabbed a spear with her remaining hand and rose unsteadily. With a flash of green in her eyes, Yumi left the circle. She whirled her spear one-handed, wading into the sea of kami within the compound. She soon disappeared behind a wall of webbing. They were spared the sight of her death, at least.

The monks on either side of Yumi reformed the circle of the New Wall to fill her absence. Hamano felt a flush of pride as he realized the body of the kumo he defeated helped fill the gap left by Yumi. It was an odd thing about which to feel pride, he reflected dully.

Hamano continued to scan the battle. After awhile, he turned to Kaito.

"Shouldn't the bell have tolled by now?" he asked.

Kaito shrugged. He looked glum and drawn, a contrast to his usual boisterousness. "Who can tell? Kazuki will ring it when it needs to be rung. He knows his duty."

"It's been too long."

"Go see Kazuki, if it will help you feel better," Kaito growled.

"I think I will." Hamano rose stiffly, painfully. "I am sorry about Yumi, Kaito. I know she was a friend."

Kaito nodded but did not meet his eyes. Hamano left him to find the bell chamber.

He picked his way through the resting monks, circling around the great tree Fudaiju. The tree was as wide as a temple and taller than Kamigawa's tallest buildings. A few monks dotted the Spiral Path overhead, a series of knots that encircled the trunk, each watching for sign of aid. In years of searching, however, the scouts above had reported nothing but new legions of kami. Hamano tried to keep bitterness from creeping into his thoughts. He hummed the lullaby his mother sang to him as a boy.

A third of the way around the tree, he found the hand-crafted stairs leading to the bell chamber. Hamano climbed the stairs wearily, his legs protesting the lack of. At the top of the stairs lay the bell chamber, a boll large enough to hold a man-sized bronze bell and its guardian.

Kazuki had always been one of the strongest within Fudaiju. His strength was, in fact, undoubtedly the reason Master Rokuan had chosen him for the task of ringing the bell, without fail, since the battle began. After years at the bell, his body was overwrought with muscle. His broad shoulders and back made him look a god amongst men. Indeed, Jugan's emerald light shone from within Kazuki like a sun, making it almost painful to look at the man.

"Kazuki!" Hamano called, then cursed himself for a fool. Kazuki had been deafened by his task long ago. He climbed the steps and waved to the bellringer.

Kazuki did not respond. He seemed not to notice Hamano at all. The bellringer looked past him, unmoving. Hamano looked over his shoulder, following the man's gaze into the Jukai. He saw nothing unusual.

"Kazuki?"

It was then that Hamano saw the log Kazuki used to ring the great bell lying at his feet. Panic coursed through him.

"Kazuki! What is it? What has happened?" Hamano dashed to the man's side. Kazuki turned his green eyes upon him. He looked blind as well as deaf, unable to see the monk in front of his face.

"Ayumi..." Kazuki whispered.

"What?" Hamano gasped. Fear constricted his throat. How long had the bell gone untouched?

"Ayumi..."

"Ayumi? The Last Visitor? What are you saying?" Hamano forgot the man's inability to hear his words. He grabbed Kazuki's thick arm. Touching the man brought Kazuki's voice forth like a fountain.

"At the End of all things, she will be there!" He roared.

"Yes, yes, Kazuki. We know the prophecy. Calm down! What are you saying?"

"She will be there to collect the last fallen leaves of Boseiju!" Kazuki continued to bellow. Tears streamed down the monk's face. "To weave them into parchment! To sit atop the highest bough! To record the final hours!"

"Yes, yes! What are you saying?!" Hamano pleaded.

"She will record the End, so its cause may be avoided when things begin anew!"

Hamano grabbed the monk's other arm. He shook the man violently. "Why have you stopped ringing the bell?!"

Kazuki seemed to see him for the first time. He blinked. A wave of self-consciousness passed over his face.

"Ha-- Hamano?" he whispered.

Hamano nodded, refusing to break the bellringer's gaze.

"Ayumi," Kazuki breathed. "Ayumi is coming..."

"What?" Hamano gasped. "How could you-- When?" Kazuki was drifting again, his eyes growing distant. Hamano shook him again. "Kazuki! When?" he shouted into the man's face.

"She is now... Here."

Hamano turned. His legs took the bell chamber steps three at a time as he bounded to Fudaiju's base.

"Someone! Anyone!" he heard himself shouting. "Kazuki has gone mad! He has stopped ringing the bell! He says--"

It was as if Hamano struck an unseen wall. Silence. Fudaiju did not swarm with battle. No swords clashed. No screams punctuated the air. No kami shrieked their rage. Nothing. Silence. Hamano stopped mid-stride, gaped mid-sentence, and surveyed his home.

Monks at watch and at rest all had gathered in a mass to look outward at what was once the Wall. Kami of all shapes and sizes had turned their backs on Fudaiju, facing the same direction. Hamano turned his eyes to follow their gaze.

A figure three times the size of a man stood at what was once Fudaiju's main gate--now, it was merely webs and debris. She looked like a slender noblewoman, with pale skin and a flowing black dress that bared shoulders, arms, stomach, and legs. Her face was a serene mask, smooth and featureless. From each side of her hairless skull branched enormous antlers, surrounded by dancing, chitinous orbs.

Hamano wanted to ask what was happening. He wanted to demand an explanation. Yet words failed him, as they seemed to have failed all embroiled in the endless fight for Fudaiju. All

Hamano could do was watch as the figure stepped carefully across the battlefield toward the gathering of monks. Kami parted before her to allow her passage unhindered.

It was a voice behind him that broke the silence.

“At the End of all things, she will be there,” Kazuki said boldly. Hamano turned, as did many of the other monks. The bellringer had descended from his chamber to join the others, still shining like a green sun.

“She will be there to collect the last fallen leaves of Boseiju, to weave them into parchment, to sit atop the highest bough, and to record the final hours. She will record the End, so its cause may be avoided when things begin anew.”

“Ayumi,” Hamano whispered.

“Yes,” Kazuki said, reading his lips and smiling. He laid a hand upon Hamano's shoulder. “Ayumi, the Last Visitor, has answered our call.”

A great cheer erupted from the monks of Fudaiju, so loud that it seemed to rattle the ancient tree. Hamano added his own voice to the raucous sound. Ayumi, faithful scribe of ages, a force of ever-living duty and calm. Of course it would be Ayumi who finally answered the bell and came to Fudaiju's aid. Every muscle in his body cried with joy and release as Hamano shouted himself hoarse in celebration.

A second great cheer began when the kami surrounding Fudaiju began their retreat. In small packs, the beings from beyond the veil picked their way through the devastation to disappear into the forest. Their movements were silent, almost reverent in the presence of Ayumi. How could they be anything but reverent, Hamano thought dizzily, before one who called them back to their true purpose?

Ayumi stepped into the midst of the monks, surveying them quietly. All around her, monks jumped and cheered, prayed and hugged. Hamano raised his fist skyward as tears blurred his vision. Someone tousled his hair playfully.

Kazuki stepped forward, and despite the monks' delirium, they parted for him. Ayumi saw the mountain of a man approach and turned to face him. Monks saw the gesture and many fell still. Their breaths slowed as they watched the silent exchange between bellringer and savior.

Calmly, Ayumi lashed out with fingers each as long as an arm. Claws that had not been there a moment before tore a great hole through Kazuki's chest. Gore sprayed Hamano as Ayumi's hand emerged from the bellringer's back.

As one, the spheres orbiting Ayumi each distended a curved stinger. Ayumi lashed out at another monk, cutting her in half, as the orbs dropped into the crowd.

It all happened in a moment. Monk cheers turned to wails of protest, shock, then death. Half lay in pieces at Ayumi's feet before the monks could respond. A few, a valiant few, launched an assault that ended as long, black talons extended from Ayumi's wrists. With calculated precision, the majestic kami cut her way through Fudaiju's remaining defenses and stood before Hamano.

The monk did nothing, could do nothing. He stared upward as Ayumi's arm extended toward him. One of the black talons pierced his shoulder. Blood welled in the wound and spots danced before Hamano's eyes as Ayumi lifted him upward to meet her featureless face.

“Why?” he gasped. It was the only word he could manage.

Ayumi's regarded him dispassionately. With something like boredom, she twisted her talon and Hamano cried out in pain. His was the last voice remaining, he realized. He was the only survivor of Fudaiju.

“Why!?” Hamano cried out in anguish. He could feel consciousness fading.

Hamano saw the great kami draw her other arm back. For a fleeting moment, the black talon on her other arm pointed down at him. Then it descended.

Ayumi surveyed her work and nodded. It had begun in Fudaiju, but it would not end there. The Kami War would end. The balance between mortals and immortals would be restored. It would

take time, yes, but Ayumi was known for her undying patience. Fudaiju was a worthy beginning.

And when she had finished, when she had torn Konda's heart from his chest and watched its last shuddering movement, she would show mercy. Ayumi, the Last Visitor, would leave two human children alive to learn Konda's lesson. Only then, she had decided, could the mortals begin their world again.

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