

SHANE JIRAIYA CUMMINGS

YAMABUSHI K Aidan AND THE SMOKE DRAGON

Kaidan balanced on the highest blossoms of the tree that crested the summit of Mount Akiyama. His robes fluttered in the wind as he studied the columns of smoke rising from the village of Kyuusai below. The blossom tree provided him a view of the entire Autumn valley—leagues of patchwork fields ringed by mountains shrouded in mist.

“That troubles me.” He pointed to the line of smoke retreating from the village. “Salvation burns.”

Tsubasa the sparrowhawk screeched from a nearby branch, flapping his wings for emphasis, a mottled brown figure that contrasted against the snow blossoms.

“Yes, Tsubasa. An excellent idea,” said Kaidan.

Tsubasa launched himself from his bough, swirling blossoms in his wake. He circled high overhead, leaving Kaidan to ponder the smoke.

Blossoms floated around the Yamabushi, undisturbed by the southerly gale cutting through the trees. He wore a broad hat, peaked with black in tribute to the metal token caps of his brethren. The hat, like the blossoms, held a tranquillity at odds with the South Wind.

Kaidan dropped from his lookout perch, landing on the thickest of the limbs below him, and then sprang to the ground below. His landing, although feather-light, threw up another cloud of blossoms.

He walked over to the trunk, laid his hand upon it, and closed his eyes for a moment. “Thank you for your patience, old friend. May the sun bless you with its warmth today.”

A fast but faint irregular beat pulsed through the trunk and his palm. “It seems we have a guest on the mountain.” He inclined an ear toward the tree line, listening to the South Wind’s ire as it tore through the leaves—and something more.

He gathered up his bo, his iron-banded staff, which was resting in its customary place against the blossom’s trunk, and then began down the mountain. The trees blurred as he raced through their midst, winding down the secret paths, jangling his bead necklace as he went.

His pace was slow compared to his usual descent, almost ponderous, until he remembered his mantras. Three recitals of the Mikkyo Chi mantra—invoking the earth spirit—countered the wind mantra he had used to keep the spiteful South Wind at bay.

Liberated to full speed, Kaidan dimmed to an off-white haze as he dashed through a shaded landscape of auburn and green. He kept the South Wind at his back, even as it tried to steer him into cedar trunks or gullies. Too sure-footed for such antics, he allowed the wind to tear at his vestments and unwittingly speed his descent.

As he neared the base of the mountain, ragged breathing from somewhere below halted his descent. He paused to listen, controlling his own breathing until it was barely more than the sound of pine needles tumbling to the earth. With a few whispered words, he stepped close to a thick cedar trunk, merging with it, becoming little more than a lumpy protrusion.

A bedraggled young priest drew into view, panting and spluttering as he struggled up the slope. He wore the brown vest and white leggings of a Shugendo acolyte—a domestic brother to the itinerant Yamabushi. Exhaustion crippled the priest's pace.

"Akio," Kaidan grabbed the acolyte by the scruff with a bark-covered hand as he passed.

Akio screamed and flailed blindly at the tree-beast until he was released.

Kaidan stepped from the trunk into the broken light and shook himself like a wet dog. Pieces of bark, large and small, fell free, revealing the Yamabushi's vestments, hands, and face. "Akio, it's me. Kaidan."

"Yamabushi Kaidan!" Akio's voice was raw. "I didn't—"

"Do not be troubled. I caught you unawares. It is my shame for bringing you embarrassment." Laughter touched his eyes, despite his solemn face. He bowed low to the flustered acolyte.

Akio's face was sweaty and red like a beet. He dropped to his knees and bowed. "Yamabushi Kaidan. My apologies." He gulped at the air, struggling for his next words. "Kyuusai has been attacked."

Kaidan nodded, extended a hand, and pulled Akio to his feet. "Drink this broth." He withdrew a small phial from the depths of his vest and handed it to the Shugendo. "Quaff it all. Hurry."

Akio studied the green ooze before unstopping the container. He closed his eyes, screwed up his face against the mossy brimstone smell, and downed it in one sharp motion.

"Good?" Kaidan asked, as Akio handed him the emptied phial.

Akio nodded but a coughing spasm belied his answer.

“Let us go. Tell me what happened but hold my pace.” Kaidan tugged at Akio’s sleeve and then took off at a jog.

Kaidan and Akio weaved between the trees. Kaidan muttered a chant in tune with his clanking beads and shell horn. The men’s momentum forced them to a run but Akio gained strength rather than flagged.

“It was a dragon, Yamabushi,” Akio told him between breaths. “A huge creature coiled in smoke. Fire sprouted from its jaws. We tried defending ourselves but ...”

“Worry not, Akio. You acted wisely in seeking me out.” Kaidan waited for Akio to nod but if he did, he missed it. Trees whirred by as they ran side by side down the mountain.

“Elder Keiji despatched a runner to the Shinichi clan for aid.” Akio kept his eyes firmly on the treacherous path below.

“Does he not realise that bringing those power hungry samurai will gain them a foothold for control of this valley?” Kaidan spat. “I would not be surprised if Keiji wished to run to Daimyo Shinichi himself when that dragon appeared.”

Akio stifled a laugh.

“So the village will soon be crawling with Shinichi samurai?” Kaidan’s question was left hanging in the air, lost to the South Wind as they continued the downward rush. “Tell me more of this dragon of smoke and flame.”

The valley floor loomed ahead.

“It was huge, Yamabushi. Larger than the temple at Ise.”

“And its attack?”

“The beast razed the shrine, burned down some of the outlying houses, and scorched the well. The bandits inflicted the worst on us. They ransacked many of the houses and the shrine before the dragon burnt it down.”

“Keiji’s house was attacked?”

“Yes.”

Kaidan’s eyes were alive with thought as he scrutinised the young Shugendo. “How many? Where did they come from?”

“There were so many, three score or more. It was hard to tell, we could see nothing for the smoke. It choked our eyes, mouths, and hearts. They came from nowhere.”

“Did they bear any markings? Clan insignia?”

“No, Yamabushi. They wore black.”

“Where did the dragon go when it was done? Which direction?”

“I can’t be certain, Yamabushi, as I had fled to seek you out by then. I looked back when I reached this tree line and saw one smoke-drift off to the west.”

“I thought so. Very well then. Before I set out to find this dragon, we must tend to the wounded.”

Akio nodded.

“It is best if the Shinichi clan have little to do with this affair. Keiji is a fool to think their presence will benefit this valley.” Kaidan glanced to the sky and chanted an inaudible sutra, weaving complex knots in the air with his free hand. “But I have a way of keeping an eye on the daimyo’s men.”

Soon the tall cedars gave way to the knee-high grass and sabre-pronged shrubs of the lower slopes. Now in view, Kyuusai’s western district was mostly charred and smoking ruins.

“Akio?”

“Yes, Yamabushi?”

“Did they find the scroll I entrusted to the shrine?”

“No.” Akio withdrew an ivory cylinder from the folds of his vest. Lines of sutras and incantations were etched onto its surface. “I carried it to freedom, but I neglected to remove the decoy scroll.”

Kaidan’s broad hat couldn’t conceal his smile, which was matched by the acolyte’s.

Kaidan adopted an old man’s gait, leaning on his staff as they descended into battle-scarred Kyuusai. “They will be back. We must prepare.”

Tsubasa the sparrowhawk swooped over their heads, across the village, through wafting smoke, before winging his way from the Autumn valley.

The sparrowhawk perched atop the samurai’s helmet, tucked behind the oval Shinichi clan insignia. His landing was weightless, a practised manoeuvre. No doubt Kaidan would laugh at his audacity.

Tsubasa observed the column of riders as they galloped for the Kita pass and the village of Kyuusai in the Akiyama valley beyond. Daimyo Shinichi chose to send nine riders. Eight samurai in burnished cobalt plate and lacquered bamboo armour, all with matching clan insignia on their helms. One warrior rode ahead. He was more brutish than the rest, even in the saddle. The bright crimson armour, stylised as a bear, marked him as leader.

Tsubasa chose the samurai at the end of the column—the ideal place to spy on the band—but the sloppy ride jostled him around. The sparrowhawk quickly regretted his choice—this samurai was at the rear for a reason.

Tsubasa’s torment soon ended as the column slowed and reformed into two in preparation for the Kita pass. Again, his adopted samurai

dropped to the rear. Their pace was deliberate as they negotiated a path that wound between cliffs and trees crowding toward each other. Gnarled root systems riddled the cliffs, forming the legendary living walls of the Kita pass. The air was heavy, humid, and rich with the tang of moist earth and moss.

“Hey, Teraku,” Tsubasa’s samurai said to the man riding beside him.

The other samurai stroked his angular beard. “What, Haru?”

“Jinku told me this village was attacked by the Oni.”

“Nonsense,” Teraku chided. “I’ve seen many things—the dark-skinned heathens and their ten-armed gods, tall men from beyond the seas with skin like snow, but I have yet to see an ogre or demon. I’m not afraid of folk tales. You shouldn’t be either, Haru.” Teraku jabbed his finger at him to emphasise his point.

“Jinku is wise. He’s been in Shinichi service for many years. He’s seen things. Told me things.” Haru’s voice was tight and child-like.

“I’d not pay attention to the stories of grey-hairs and scribes.”

“He said a dragon was loose in the countryside. That it was looking for babies to eat and treasures to steal away to the Spirit World.”

“Don’t speak of such things, Haru. It’s nonsense.” Teraku’s hand drifted to the sword at his hip, his eyes darting from tree to rock to tree. His dappled brown mare snorted and shook her head.

“But Teraku, what if it’s true? What if Daimyo Shinichi is sending us to our doom. There are only—”

“Enough!”

Flapping wings filled the nearby forest. A quartet of olive coloured birds took to the sky.

A few warriors glanced back, their gaze moving from Teraku to a red-faced Haru. At the head of the column, their leader, the Bear, rode in silence.

Tsubasa kept his ears sharp but struggled to tear his gaze from the receding group of birds—White-eyes by their markings. His hunting instincts simmered.

“I’m sorry, Teraku,” Haru whispered, once the other samurai had turned away.

“Don’t speak of such things. Daimyo Shinichi is an enlightened man. He knows how to maintain peace. Besides, these disturbances are always starving bandits, nothing more. Have faith in your sword.”

Haru nodded, almost shaking Tsubasa from his perch. “You’re probably right. My uncle would not send me—us—here to die.”

The samurai traversed the final section of the pass and entered the Autumn valley. The blossom-crested expanse of Mount Akiyama

dominated the horizon. Other tall but lesser mountains enclosed the valley on all sides. Dwarf ferns and spiky-leafed shrubs dominated the lower slopes before giving way to stands of cedars and oaks higher up. In the distance, a few farms and rice paddies could be seen but cultivated land was not feasible this close to the highlands. It was widely known that the creatures of the wild mountains were extremely territorial.

Within sight of home, Tsubasa sprang from Haru's helm, rocking the man's head. The sparrowhawk wheeled in the air, glancing back to see the chubby samurai rearrange his helmet while wearing a slack-jawed expression.

"What was that?" the sparrowhawk heard him say.

"Your imagination, Haru," Teraku answered. "Now calm yourself before the Bear notices your prattle."

Soaring away, Tsubasa detected the tang of smoke on the breeze.

The destruction in Kyuusai was superficial—mostly burnt walls and collapsed supports. It was the frightened spirit of the people that cried out to Kaidan.

"Akio," he called to the Shugendo. "Are there further people waiting?"

In meditative prayer, bent over an old man, Akio took a few moments to register Kaidan's words.

"No, Yamabushi. Wait, Elder Keiji may need some attention. I've not checked his condition yet."

Kaidan nodded and watched the last of his charges shuffle away through the sliding paper door. The woman had been more scared than hurt but herbs and Mikkyo chanting had soothed her nerves. She left the door open a fraction, allowing a cooling breeze to wash through the room and toy with the candle flames. Miniature spirals of smoke coiled like a snake above the makeshift shrine. Kaidan frowned and then blew the smoke away.

Waiting for Akio to finish his ministrations, he wandered over to the door and studied the scene outside.

The Shugendo shrine at the west end of town—once a striking array of bright red pillars and curved tiles—was burned to rubble. The closest thatched huts were also smouldering and totally uninhabitable. Charcoal still hung thick in the air.

The Fujita family had given over their home unconditionally to Kaidan and Akio, allowing them to set up a new, temporary shrine and place of healing. The Fujitas stayed with their cousins a few doors down, offering the refugees residence for as long as necessary. Widow

Mizoki and her two boys had taken up the offer, along with old Tenryu, who had been badly burnt in the attack. She was tending his wounds in the Fujita's sleeping quarters. Everyone else had been billeted among family and friends.

Akio guided his patient past the Yamabushi to the door.

"May you find good fortune and the blessings of happiness," Kaidan said as he wove the sign of good luck with his fingers. The old man bowed deeply before shambling into the sunshine and towards the centre of the village.

Kaidan closed the door and ushered Akio back to the makeshift shrine. The candles filled the room with a sultry heat, tinged with the scent of wax. Widow Mizoki's boys murmured from the other room.

"Akio, you have done well. Your mantras are strong, and you channel Ki like a Shugendo with many more years of experience. Kyuusai is lucky to have you."

"Thank you, Yamabushi." Akio bowed low, perhaps to cover his flaring cheeks at the compliment.

The door slid open, revealing a slender girl covered in a green silk yukata—a dress, less formal than a kimono—patterned with herons. Such finery was rarely seen in an agricultural outpost like Kyuusai.

"Yumi, you've blossomed, child," Kaidan said.

She bowed, careful not to spill the water sloshing in the bucket she carried.

"Thank you, Yamabushi. We are honoured to host you." Her formal tone contradicted her lively gaze, which strayed to Akio, who was trying to reposition himself behind Kaidan.

Kaidan bowed very low, leaning considerably onto his staff. A smile crossed his face as he left Akio to suffer under Yumi's appreciative gaze. When he straightened, his face was solemn once more. A quick glance at the acolyte confirmed his suspicion—Akio's cheeks blazed scarlet.

"Thank you for the water and your hospitality, Yumi." Kaidan gestured for her to place the bucket on the floor. "I wonder if your father shares your feelings?"

Yumi blushed this time, turning her head slightly to recover herself. "My father welcomes you, of course."

"Is he in need of healing following the attack?" Kaidan paused. "Or your mother?"

"Mother is unwell since the dragon came and Father has a wound on his arm. He's proud. He has not sought Akio's aid."

"Allow us a few moments to prepare remedies and we will meet you at your home."

Yumi bowed again, sparing a glance for Akio, before slipping out the door.

Kaidan turned to the young Shugendo and gave him an appraising look. "This village is always full of surprises."

Akio nodded sheepishly.

"You still have much to learn, Akio. Come, gather the herbs and cloth."

Elder Keiji had always been an obstinate man.

"Show me your arm. If you prefer, I'll look at it when you're slumped glazed-eyed on the floor." Kaidan stamped his staff for good measure.

"Leave me be."

Kaidan locked eyes with the village elder.

Behind Kaidan, Akio tended to Yumi's mother Hisa—a handsome woman with knitted grey hair and eyes that spoke of many lifetimes worth of secrets. She was laid across a tatami mat and propped up on a cushion. Kaidan could feel her gaze on his back. Yumi stood mute by the door.

"Don't allow your bitterness to be your undoing, Keiji," said Kaidan. "The past is the past. Embrace your future."

"You'll not touch me, mountain wizard!"

Kaidan stepped forward, glowering from beneath his hat at the old man. The two men, proud and resolute both, stood toe to toe, neither flinching nor willing to look away.

"So be it," Kaidan said in a level tone.

A quick flick of his wrist was all it took. The iron-banded staff darted forward, striking Keiji on the temple—a blow that dropped him cold.

Yumi's gasp filled the silence.

"Akio," Kaidan barked. "Tend to the elder's wounds. I'll abide by his wishes and not lay a hand on him." Whirling around, he spotted Yumi and pointed at her. "You assist him."

Yumi and Akio glanced at each other, and then broke the connection as they fumbled with self-consciousness.

Kaidan stalked over to Yumi's mother, bundled an arm around her, and carried her into the next room. He laid her gently down onto the floor and began a fevered chant. His words ran together.

"Kaidan," she laid a hand across his prayer-knotted fists.

The words slipped from his mind, tumbling to silence as memories of her skin against his awoke something repressed inside him.

"Kaidan. Don't waste your mantras on me."

Her eyes were the cedar-brown he always remembered. “Why? Yumi said you took ill after the dragon attacked.”

“I’ve been feeling this way for some time. The pain flared up during the attack.”

“Hisa. You should have told me. I could have—”

“What? Used your tricks and illusions? We both know incantations are not a permanent answer.”

Kaidan removed his hat, allowing his long, straight locks, the colour of starlight, to crowd his shoulders.

“Tell me, where do you feel the pain? There must be a root or herb that can cure this.” Kaidan absently fingered at his necklace of prayer beads.

“Kaidan.” She placed her hand over his again.

He released his beads to take her hand in his, and after a moment’s hesitation, he bent down to kiss her knuckles.

“My years have been fruitful,” Hisa said. “I’ve known the chance to see joy in my daughter’s eyes. I’ve had a man—men—who’ve loved me with the fullness of their hearts.”

“Hisa, I—”

“The mountain is beautiful this time of year, is it not? The blossoms are like snow, floating down like blessings from Heaven. I think of you when the blossoms fall.” Hisa reached up with her free hand to stroke his silver hair. “You chose the mountain a lifetime ago. Let me go, Kaidan. Let us both go.”

A sound at the window snatched his attention.

Tsubasa stood there, his wings folded and his yellow eyes alight.

“We’ll finish this conversation later.”

“Don’t come back, Kaidan.”

He donned his hat, leaving his silver hair unkempt. He rose, propping himself against his staff more than usual. His fist was clenched into a ball.

“I mean it, Kaidan,” Hisa continued. “Don’t return. Stay on your mountain. Looking at your face, ageless and unlined and so much like when we first met ...”

“There are ways, Hisa. I would brave them to see you strong again.”

She turned away, the hint of a tear in the corner of her eye.

Kaidan strode from the room.

“Akio!” he shouted. “Meet me at the shrine when you’re done with Keiji.”

Akio and Yumi exchanged a look as the Yamabushi stormed from the house. The sparrowhawk landed on Kaidan’s shoulder as he took the thoroughfare, headed for the edge of the village.

The Earth rumbled of riders approaching from the north but the West Wind whispered of something far more sinister drawing near.

“From the west, the dragon is returning. From the east, Daimyo Shinichi’s men approach,” Kaidan instructed. “Akio, you must safeguard the scroll. Don’t allow the dragon get it. Don’t allow Shinichi’s men to know of it, either. Be sensible but keep it secret if you can.”

“Too late.” Yumi rolled from behind the ruins of the shrine. She was clad in a forest-green gi—wrapped pants and folded jacket bound with a wide fabric belt, ideal for combat. A sword hung from her belt.

“What are you doing?” Kaidan asked.

“Defending my village.”

Kaidan’s eyes darted from Yumi, to the approaching riders, to the cloud of smoke on the horizon, and back again. “Very well. Can you fight?”

The sword flashed from her scabbard, an arc of silver in the afternoon sun. She stood with the blade held forward, looking hesitant as the moment stretched out.

“Never draw a blade unless you intend drawing blood. You should know this is a tradition of the samurai.” Kaidan moved to the tip of her outstretched katana and pierced his finger on its point. A single drop of blood seeped down the edge of the blade, dissolving as it went. “There. The sword will not be restless when you next draw it.”

The fire in her eye wavered for a moment. She sheathed the sword.

“We will talk of this sword business when the danger has passed.” Kaidan shook his head.

“What is so important about that scroll Akio carries?” Yumi ignored Kaidan’s admonishment.

“It is best that neither of you know.”

“Yamabushi, I do not wish Yumi to face the dragon.” Akio kept his gaze intent on the ground before him. “Not with so few to stand against it.”

Kaidan turned to Akio and searched his face. “Then say it to her.”

Yumi glared at the acolyte as he mustered the courage to meet her gaze.

“Yumi, I..”

She faced Akio, hand on sword hilt, her mouth and fist taut.

“Yumi,” Akio repeated. “I don’t want you to die out here with me.”

Her expression softened as Akio became less self-conscious. It was perhaps the first honest moment they’d shared since childhood.

"I agree, Akio," Kaidan eyed them both. "Yumi will not die out here. She will protect the scroll with you. Now go, seek shelter in the Fujita house! The makeshift shrine may offer some protection."

"But, Yamabushi—"

Kaidan whirled at him, the Yamabushi's eyes alight with inner fire. Akio hesitated briefly before bowing low. "Yes, Yamabushi."

The sparrowhawk squawked.

Kaidan looked to Tsubasa, unobtrusively nestled on the top of a snapped pillar. "Yes?"

Tsubasa tilted his head back and screeched again.

Kaidan nodded, before turning to Akio and Yumi. "Hurry. The Shinichi riders approach. Make sure the people are indoors. When they are all safe, barricade yourselves inside the Fujita house."

The pair scurried back towards Kyuusai.

Nine Shinichi samurai trotted into view. They advanced toward the centre of the village. Their path destined them to cross that of Akio and Yumi.

Kaidan raised his seashell horn to his lips and blew two piercing, rapid blasts. With an effortless leap, he ascended to the tallest of the old shrine's ruined pillars, landing next to Tsubasa. The sparrowhawk fluttered his wings a little but otherwise showed no emotion.

He raised the horn again and sounded it twice more. The sound sliced the air like two sword strokes. The samurai band turned as one to see him waving his staff in the air. They wheeled their horses around and galloped straight for him, leaving the village unmolested.

As the red-plated samurai drew his troops closer, Kaidan glanced over his shoulder to gauge the advance of the smoke column. The true enemy.

It was close. Within a league and almost within sight.

The field at this western edge of Kyuusai was flat and surrounded by spindly bushes and a few stunted oaks. It had hosted several skirmishes for control of the village and was a perfect battleground to duel with a dragon.

The West Wind murmured of promises and deception.

Tsubasa remained on his perch, eyeing the samurai as they circled the razed Shugendo shrine. They found no trace of the Yamabushi, only ghost-white blossoms gently rolling with the wind.

"It was an Oni," Haru muttered. Only Teraku, Kaidan, and Tsubasa could hear him. The other samurai had begun the search for Kaidan,

moving from the shrine to the scarred buildings at the edge of Kyuusai and to the shrubbery beyond. No one had thought to check beneath the ash and rubble where Kaidan had concealed himself.

“Quiet,” Teraku said. “You’re panicking the horses.” Both samurai were having trouble reining in their horses. The mares were skittish and reluctant to obey even simple commands.

“But you saw him! Normal people don’t disappear! It must have been the work of demons—or ghosts.”

“Stop it, Haru. For the last time, there is no such thing as ghosts or Oni or dragons. He looked more like a monk, anyway.”

“A monk?”

“Yes. A Shugendo. They’re common around here. Could even have been a Yamabushi. They like their mountains.”

“Jinku warned me about the Yamabushi. They’re sorcerers, he says. Too wild to live with civilised folk. Mark my words, Teraku. They’re as bad as the Oni.”

Teraku shook his head. “They’re just crazy old hermits. A little soft-headed, nothing more. Now will you shut up and keep your eyes sharp before the Bear returns?”

“Teraku?”

“What?”

“I don’t like the look of that smoke.”

“Look around. What do you see?”

“Smoke.”

Teraku rolled his eyes. “And?”

“Burnt huts.”

“What does that tell you?”

“The bandits burned the village when they attacked?”

“Exactly, Haru! That smoke is a brush fire that has reignited.”

“But it’s getting bigger!”

Teraku rolled his eyes. “Just look for the monk.”

The other samurai soon returned to the shrine. Tsubasa looked down on them with yellow eyes while Kaidan meditated under the cover of his camouflage, gathering calm around him. He attuned his senses to the whispers from the world beyond.

“Teraku, find anything?” the Bear bellowed.

“No, Captain Karuido.”

“Haru?”

“No, sir.” Haru avoided the Captain’s eye.

The Bear grunted. “Kanaye? Roichi? Takai?”

All the samurai shook their heads.

Karuido scowled, his face the same shade as his armour. “This valley is full of peasants and vagrants! When I find this monk that plays games with me, I’ll—”

“Karuido?” Teraku said.

“What?”

Teraku pointed to the west. The bamboo plating on his arm trembled.

The smoke cloud clogged the sky, although no fire source was visible. The sun transformed into a tiny orange bead as the world darkened. The cloud spread its reach across the countryside and the village, carrying the stench of sulphur and charcoal. Its origin was obscured by a crest in the outlying field. The Four Winds had stilled, choked out by the smoke.

Haru fell into a coughing fit.

“Form up!” Karuido barked. “Single line!” He lowered his metal bear mask.

Kaidan climbed free of his hiding place, shaking the worst of the ash from his once cream-coloured leggings, vest, and robes. With the Shinichi samurai fixated on their approaching enemy, he took his time to pray and prepare.

Tsubasa took to the air, gliding and cutting through the thick haze as he took in the battlefield from the air.

A behemoth crested the rise and stepped onto the field into Kaidan’s view. The beast was vast, indistinct, and unlike any dragon he had ever seen, as big as the temple at Ise as Akio had suggested. It was squat, with an almost square body, stubby legs, and a short tail and neck. The creature’s body was wreathed in smoke, as if the fiery bellows of the Hells had been given earthly form.

The dragon’s eyes, nose, and mouth were all aflame from an internal blaze. The fire was caged by its dagger-sized teeth, each a spike of solid smoke.

The smoke dragon advanced, lining the samurai in its sights. Kaidan expected every step to shake the earth akin to a bloated swamp dragon, the only beast he’d seen of a similar size. Instead, the beast stalked in silence as though it were a ghost. The stillness was unsettling.

Karuido the Bear drew his sword and held it high, invoking his proud ancestry as he screamed his *kiai*—the warrior’s battle-cry. The *kiai* punctured the silence and echoed through the valley. The Bear’s stallion reared in the face of the dragon but held its ground.

Kaidan admired the samurai for his bravery and zeal.

The other Shinichi samurai did not share their captain’s enthusiasm. Their horses were skittish at the dragon’s approach. Several reared and

nearly dumped their riders. Others jostled into one another as their riders vainly attempted to form a battle line. Bumped by another horse, Haru's mare reared, throwing him to the ground, and fled for the shelter of the village. Haru groaned and rolled in the grass, rubbing his rear end. His face was screwed tight in pain.

The smoke dragon roared with a voice of scraping metal and superheated air. It reverberated as though from deep inside a cave.

Karuido the Bear and his stallion held their ground at the roar, but the remaining Shinichi horses surrendered to madness, bolting for safety. They scattered and bolted, carried their riders away—although the samurai themselves clung to the reins and kept their heads down. None fought to regain control or turn back to face the monster.

“Honourless cowards!” the Bear shouted. “I’ll flay your hides!”

Karuido turned back to face the dragon a moment before it scorched the earth with its fiery breath. The attack was clumsy and missed the lone samurai by several horse-lengths. The Bear reined his stallion under control as the first wave of warriors rushed him. They appeared from the very depths of the smoke—a company of bandits dressed in black as Akio had described.

With the Bear occupied, Haru forgot his bruises and scurried behind the fallen Shugendo shrine. He crept into the ruins, secreting himself as best he could under the debris.

Kaidan darted forward into battle, his staff raised and ready to strike. Like the Bear, he shouted his own *kiai*—an invocation of the Mikkyo Ka fire spirit to energise his limbs and empower his strikes in battle.

The smoke dragon advanced with methodical care with its allies charging before it. A dozen warriors, outfitted with disparate weapons—swords, naginata polearms, scythes—and piecemeal armour, threw themselves at the horseback samurai and the streak of white lightning that was Yamabushi Kaidan.

Kaidan cast himself at a clump of three warriors in a blur of motion, whirling his staff in a bludgeoning arc, catching all three across the face and torso. They fell unconscious where they stood.

Likewise, the Bear cut a swath through the bandits with his katana. He slashed as he galloped, cutting down two, three, four bandits. His warhorse's battle instincts suppressed its fear as another column of flame tore across the field. Where Yamabushi Kaidan was a mesmerising dance of white in the sun-drowned haze, Karuido the Bear was a crimson streak of death.

Their paths crossed beneath the flaming breath of the smoke dragon. With their immediate opponents defeated or dying, Kaidan's dervish-

spinning and the Bear's charge met head on. The samurai continued to bear down on Kaidan, even as Kaidan paused and lowered his staff.

The samurai's katana sliced downwards but met Kaidan's upraised staff. The Bear slashed twice more—twice blocked—before he wheeled his stallion around to run the Yamabushi down.

The stallion charged, spurred on by its master. Its iron-shod hooves ripped up the earth and drummed out a deadly beat. Kaidan leapt into the air a heartbeat before he was run down. He somersaulted over the Bear's head and landed behind him, straddling the horse backwards.

The pair duelled back to back in the saddle—the Bear whipping out his short-bladed tanto and stabbing at the Yamabushi, while Kaidan parried and bludgeoned with the middle of his staff. The close-quarter combat was awkward but brutal.

The Bear grabbed at Kaidan's staff, but the monk twisted his little finger and levered his hand off before he could gain a solid hold. The stallion galloped in a wide circle as the pair traded blows. The Bear slashed Kaidan's sleeve but was momentarily stunned when Kaidan counter-attacked with a reverse headbutt. The Bear continued to slash and stab wildly, awkwardly, with little regard for anything else. One mistimed parry and Kaidan would be gutted.

The dragon ended the contest prematurely. Another torrent of fire ripped across the field, terrifying the Bear's stallion. He reared, dumping both riders. Kaidan rolled fluidly, regaining his feet within a heartbeat. The Bear wasn't as lucky, crashing to the ground at a dire angle, absorbing the force of the blow across his shoulder. The horse took flight toward the village and safety. Its rider groaned in agony and clutched his arm, his red armour an easy target amongst the bodies of the bandits.

The smoke dragon loomed over the samurai, bellowing its echoed roar. It breathed another column of flames, but Kaidan acted quicker, dragging the samurai to safety at the last moment. The fire scoured the ground where the Bear had lain prone only an instant before.

More warriors appeared from the smoke trailing the beast, another dozen at least.

Kaidan dumped the dazed samurai on the ground out of harm's way.

Calling on the spirit of the Earth, the Yamabushi mustered a Mikkyo Chi incantation, snatched up a leaf, and pressed it to his lips. The effect was instant; it expanded to man-size proportions. He threw the leaf to the earth as it continued to expand, its sides curling upwards. He then rolled the Bear atop it with his foot. The giant leaf slid under the samurai's weight as though the ground were ice. The Bear waved an arm to ward Kaidan off but he brushed the arm aside and took hold of his armour.

He then pushed the Bear ahead of him as he ran towards the village. The leaf carried the samurai as a toboggan, skittering along grass and dirt and picking up speed. With the sum of his strength, Kaidan propelled the Bear forward. The hapless samurai skidded along the ground faster than a gallop, to disappear among the charred outbuildings of Kyuusai.

Kaidan turned to face the oncoming bandit warriors, leaned against his staff, closed his eyes, and took in a few deep breaths.

The bandits closed in. As they approached within striking range, Kaidan opened his eyes, tipped his hat to them, and then sprang forward with the power and grace of a grasshopper. He somersaulted once, bouncing off the closest warrior's head, leaving a dirty footprint on the man's scalp and forehead.

Before the bandit could cry out in surprise, Kaidan flew through the air, springing onto a second man, then a third. The bandits waved their weapons but sliced only air and smoke in Kaidan's wake. With his final leap, he soared towards the smoke dragon's head.

Kaidan shouted his *Ka-kiai*, invoking the fire spirit, and brought his staff down on the beast's snout with the thunderclap of an avenging god. The Mikkyo-enhanced attack snapped the dragon's head down, sending shockwaves through its neck and body. Its smoky essence rippled from the blow, threatening to dim and snuff out.

On his descending arc, Kaidan snatched acorns from his belt and hurled them at the creature's head, calling upon Mikkyo Chi and *Ka*—the power of fire and earth. The acorns exploded in blue-white clouds on contact, which singed the air with electricity and obscured the creature behind fizzing azure gas.

The bandits stood awed by the offensive. Some shuffled their weapons from hand to hand, others edged away from the fight, their eyes fixed on the blue cloud mixing with the smoke. Only when Kaidan renewed his attack on them did they regain the sense to fight.

As fog and smoke drifted across the field, the Yamabushi spiral-kicked his way through their ranks, calling upon Mikkyo Fu to lend him a whirlwind's fury. Smoke, loose leaves, and blades of grass swirled with his assault. Kaidan soon stood victorious at the centre of a field of crumpled warriors.

"Fighting dragons should be the business of younger men." Kaidan braced himself against his staff as he regained his breath. "Eh, Tsubasa?"

A screech sounded from high above; the sparrowhawk was veiled by the smoke.

Kaidan turned as the blue fog began to clear, expecting to find the smoke dragon sprawled on the ground, a withered physical remnant of

its supernatural self, or perhaps dissipated to the Four Winds. He had never encountered a smoke dragon before and had little knowledge of their ways of dying. It was unlikely the creature would turn to gold like the shaggy dragons of the north or become a mass of seaweed and salt as did the rockpool dragons of Sapporo.

When the blue fog cleared, he discovered a possibility he hadn't considered. The dragon's smoke and flames had not diminished; its smoky form remained intact, with only a slight bend to its head as reward for his efforts.

The beast roared its hollow roar.

"That's not possible," Kaidan muttered as he retreated towards Kyuusai.

The smoke dragon advanced within range of the village buildings ruined during its first rampage. A half dozen more bandits appeared from the smoke. They approached ahead of the dragon and fanned out toward Kyuusai, circling wide of the Yamabushi.

"Tsubasa!" Kaidan called to the sky.

The sparrowhawk spiralled through the blue-grey smoke and then disappeared again.

Kaidan worked his incantation through finger signs and muttered prayers, linking with the sparrowhawk's mind's eye from a distance.

The thought-images flooded through his mind. The dragon. The warriors. Where they were coming from. Within the blink of an eye, it all made sense.

Kaidan's roaring laugh froze everyone on the battlefield. "Thank you, Tsubasa. This will be entertaining."

Kaidan leapt backwards onto the old shrine's tallest pillar. He steadied himself against the wobble and then raised his seashell horn to his lips and blew three long calls. The sound was flat to the point of echoless and reverberated a fraction too long, rattling eardrums and vibrating bones.

"There is no deception in the Spirit World. Let the nature of things be revealed!"

The sky beyond the smoke swirled from blue to rainbow-pearl. The colours of the earth faded to shades of bone. Trees fell away, the mountains receded, and the smoke from the dragon cleared.

Winged and feathered Kirin floated through the sky, their single horns shining brighter than the sun. Other less hospitable creatures were also awing, trailing multiple tails, feathers, and talons capable to cleaving men in two. The wisps of unhoused spirits formed at the edge of Kaidan's vision: hungry, transparent ghosts yearning for blood and Ki to become whole once more.

Through this temporary passage to the Spirit World, Kaidan's eyes were open to the fraud of the smoke dragon. It was little more than a wooden frame cobbled together atop wide padded wheels. In the centre of its skeleton, a further group of the bandits pushed the contraption forward. Three more men worked an exotic bellows and metal piping system that fed from a tank in the beast's innards up to the head. The timber scaffold that formed the beast's head was snapped in several places and sagging to one side.

Kaidan examined each of the men inside and laughed when they sensed his stare. Only one man appeared unconcerned. At the Yamabushi's scrutiny, he withdrew something from a belt pouch and inked his forehead in the design of an incantation. He abruptly vanished from the Spirit World.

A rustle of movement at the base of the shrine snagged Kaidan's attention. Haru, the Shinichi retainer, cowered below him. The samurai's face was ashen. He gaped at the surreal landscape and the inhuman shapes soaring overhead.

With the approach of unsavoury spirits and creatures curious at the human intrusion, Kaidan sounded his horn in the same extended three blasts. In moments, the world rearranged itself from the blandness of ivory, pearl, and bone to bright swaths of natural colour. The smoke returned, clogging the natural beauty of the valley once more, as did the impressive illusion of the dragon.

"Hey, samurai," Kaidan called down to Haru. "Flee back to your daimyo and tell him of the fate that befalls those who meddle with Kyuusai—and the Yamabushi."

At first the samurai shook his head, refusing to budge from his ash and rubble sanctuary. A glower from Kaidan and another hollow roar from the smoke dragon did the trick, empowering Haru's legs with energy born of terror. The samurai scuttled free and fled for the northern road.

Kaidan leapt to the ground and strode forward, removing another acorn from his belt. Chanting a mantra of earth and fire, he hurled this acorn at the centre of the smoke dragon's torso—aiming directly for its creator. The acorn slipped through the outer layer of smoke.

Nothing happened at first, but then traces of blue smoke wafted from the dragon's belly. Soon, the dragon billowed competing blue and black smoke. The illusion eventually faltered altogether, revealing the flimsy construct he'd witnessed from the Spirit World.

The bandits took a long time to understand their ruse was up. Kaidan stood steadfast in the false dragon's path, his battle staff at the ready. The bandits eventually wavered, each looking to the other

for direction. Their leader had disappeared with the illusion. Kaidan stood before them with a smirk on his face, motioning for them to come out.

A very human roar from behind snatched Kaidan's attention and spurred the bandits into action. Karuido the Bear, recovered a little from his fall, had found his horse and was cantering towards them. The remaining warriors abandoned the dragon shell, choosing more traditional weapons of wood and steel to finish the battle.

The Bear rushed forward, his sword held awkwardly. With his helmet lost, his top-knot swung in the breeze.

A smear of soot flickered before the dragon shell. Kaidan spotted the incantation woven by the tattooed bandit leader, almost too late. A maelstrom of iron darts hurtled towards the mounted samurai and his stallion.

Kaidan leapt in front of the Bear, twirling his staff in a cyclone of motion. When he stopped, darts were scored along the length of his staff. With a shake of his wrist, Kaidan twisted the staff and flung the darts into the ground.

The Bear raged behind the Yamabushi and moved to run him down. "Monk, you have stolen my honour for the last time!"

Kaidan barely managed to turn before the katana whistled through the air. An explosion of light momentarily blinded everyone in the vicinity. The blade sliced through a cloud of yellow mist and flower petals, nothing more.

"Damn you!" The Bear scanned the area, oblivious to the bandits who stood around equally confused. The fog of war had descended upon everyone's minds.

No one noticed the Yamabushi clinging to the stallion's belly.

The Bear roared another kiai at the bandits and flourished his sword for good measure.

Kaidan whispered to the horse before he slipped free to crouch beside its flank. "Samurai!" Kaidan shouted, nearly startling the Bear from his saddle. Before the samurai had the wits to strike, Kaidan collected him in the back of the head with his staff. Karuido slumped forward over the horse's neck.

"Goodbye and safe journey," Kaidan murmured to the stallion. "Keep your Shinichi master out of this valley." He slapped its flank, propelling both horse and rider off into the countryside—headed north at a gallop towards the Kita pass and the Shinichi holdings beyond. "I have a feeling I will be seeing you again soon, sore-headed Bear."

A crash followed by the clang of steel snatched Kaidan's attention from the Bear's exit. Yumi fought a desperate battle against two bandits beside the ruins of the old shrine. A third waved a spear at Akio, who defended himself with a charred club. Yumi weaved between her opponents, hacking and deflecting their blades, while edging closer to Akio's assailant. Their life and death struggle renewed the other bandits' thirst for battle.

Kaidan brandished his staff in wild arcs to throw his remaining opponents into disarray. He swiped the ground and with a sudden snap, connected with a stone and sent it hurtling across the battlefield. Akio's opponent's head was flung sideways an instant later. The bandit collapsed at Akio's feet.

Free to act, Akio moved to intercept one of Yumi's opponents—a swordsman who had begun circling her while another bandit held her attention with a series of feints and prods. The Shugendo charged in, swinging his makeshift weapon and shouting a raw, wordless kiai. The bandit backed away from Akio's recklessness.

Yumi took advantage of the moment, batting the scythe from her assailant's hands. She followed up with a kick that caught the disarmed bandit in the side. He doubled over in pain. Yumi raised her sword above her head, sizing up the back of the man's neck.

"Yumi, no!" Yamabushi Kaidan shouted. "That is not our—"

Tendrils of soot and shadow snaked through the air, catching Kaidan by surprise. They slammed into him and tore through his vestments, throwing him to the ground.

"Yamabushi!" Akio screamed.

More bandits rushed at Yumi and Akio.

Distracted by the Yamabushi's fall, Yumi awkwardly blocked a blow that snapped her blade. It skittered along the dirt.

Kaidan's head rang from the sorcerous attack. His chest felt as though he had been trampled by a horse. He shook the worst of the disorientation off and struggled to his feet, but a high-pitched whine lingered in his ears. He opened his garments to inspect his chest. Sigils of prayer and protection were painted in silver and blue on his chest. Some had faded from absorbing the savagery of the blow.

"You're lucky. That spell would have killed most men," snarled the bandit with the forehead tattoo. He had reappeared on the battlefield surrounded by smoke. "Now give me the real scroll, monk!"

Kaidan spat blood, coughed, and took a moment to loosen his shoulders and mentally prepare his mantras.

“Yamabushi!” Akio cried. Two bandits had their weapons levelled at the Shugendo. A third had disarmed Yumi and pressed a blade to her throat.

Kaidan forced himself to calm, swallowing saliva mixed with blood.

“Yamabushi. Take this worthless trinket and give me the real scroll.” The bandit sorcerer tossed the decoy scroll at Kaidan’s feet.

He bent slowly, allowing his staff to take his weight, and retrieved it. He slipped the decoy scroll into his vest. “Let those two go free, and you’ll have the scroll you seek.”

“I am a man of my word, Yamabushi. Perhaps you’ve heard rumours of me? I’m known as Ryuji the dragon sorcerer.”

Kaidan shook his head.

“It’s of little consequence.” Ryuji stepped forward. His stringy black hair was of similar length to Kaidan’s, although his nails were coal black and talon-length. The hastily inked tattoo on his forehead pulsed and rippled, puckering into wrinkles where ink met skin. “Give me the scroll and those two will be released. On my honour.”

“Honour follows you to the grave, Ryuji the dragon sorcerer. There are an infinite number of lifetimes. Be careful with such promises, particularly to those with the means to hunt your spirit down and bind it in torment for every one of those lifetimes.”

Ryuji flinched, but the moment passed quickly.

“Do you still hold to your honour, sorcerer?” said Kaidan.

“I swear it.”

“Akio. The scroll.”

“But, Yamabushi—”

“Now.” Kaidan nodded slowly.

Akio pulled the scroll from his underclothes and tossed it to Ryuji.

Tsubasa streaked through the sky, swooping down with claws outstretched, but Ryuji was quicker, snatching up the scroll from the dirt with a snake-like arm. The sparrowhawk reeled away with empty talons.

The sorcerer weaved a shroud of soot in the air, vanishing from view as it enveloped him. The stench of rotting vegetables trailed on the breeze.

With his departure, the other bandits glanced around in confusion. Aside from those guarding Akio and Yumi, a small group milled about the defunct smoke dragon. Now leaderless and abandoned to face the Yamabushi, they chose wisdom and fled—leaving Yumi and Akio stunned but unharmed.

Kaidan allowed them to scatter, but his gaze lingered on their backs until they had cleared the furthest perimeter of Kyuusai.

“Yamabushi.” Akio threw himself down at Kaidan’s feet. “I’ve failed you. The scroll is lost.”

Yumi prostrated herself beside him, simmering in silence.

Kaidan allowed them to wallow for a few moments as he shuffled his weight onto his staff. Tsubasa returned from circling the battleground to land on his shoulder, flapping his wings in an indignant fashion. Kaidan bent down and touched both young people on the shoulder, sharing a smile with them.

“Such are the ways of the world.” Kaidan walked in measured paces for the sanctuary of Kyuusai, favouring his staff. Yumi and Akio followed. Kaidan’s smile became a momentary grimace, but he rubbed his chest and the colour returned to his face.

“Yamabushi, is there anything I can do?” Akio moved closer but his movements were tentative, his eyes still downcast.

Kaidan waved him away.

After glancing out across the devastated field, Akio stood in Kaidan’s path and looked him in the eye. “Yamabushi, with your blessing, I must set out to retrieve the scroll!” He rolled up his sleeves for emphasis.

“I’d rather sit for a while, meditate, and take a nip of the Fujita’s Sake.” Kaidan nudged Akio aside with his staff and continued walking for the village. “Yumi, do you believe Akio’s is the correct path to take?”

“My failure demands action... but there is something else. Something you are not telling us.”

“Very good. I’m glad your father hasn’t had too much of an influence.” Kaidan plucked a shattered spear-tip from his staff. “Do either of you know of the scroll’s purpose?”

“No, Yamabushi,” they answered together.

“If I said it did nothing, it would be unfair.” Kaidan rubbed at his prayer beads. “However, for all practical purposes, it really does nothing—there is no secret to the scroll. Once you counter the incantations on the case and solve the lock puzzle, you find inside an excellent set of Haiku that explores the follies of villainy. I imagine our new friend Ryuji will be discovering this for himself some time tomorrow.”

Akio frowned, creasing his eyebrows together in concentration.

Yumi merely nodded.

“Yamabushi, we’ve been safeguarding a scroll that does nothing?” Akio asked.

“Yes, Akio. Two, if you count the decoy’s decoy.” Kaidan patted the bulge in his vestments that hid the first decoy scroll. “While the scroll

contains no special power or hidden knowledge, it does have a purpose. To draw out the corrupt and the power hungry. The Yamabushi circulate rumours, and when petty tyrants emerge to seek such scrolls, the Yamabushi identify the evils of our world. Our self-opinionated friend, the dragon sorcerer, has just earned himself a long list of enemies.”

Akio's face lightened.

“What of us, the people of Kyuusai?” Yumi ran her thumb across her shattered blade before sheathing it. Her face was darker than the dispersing smoke. “Our lives have been risked for nothing?” She turned on her heel, and without another word, stepped over the bodies of the fallen and stalked away.

Kaidan nodded. Akio moved to follow her but was stopped by Kaidan's staff. “Allow her time, Akio. Allow yourself time. We have been through much this day.”

The struggle played across the Shugendo's face but he nodded in the end. “What are you going to do now, Yamabushi?”

Kaidan pulled the rim of his hat low, casting his face in shadows once more. “I will say goodbye to Yumi's mother, talk to the Fujita's about that nip of Sake, and then I must meditate further atop the blossom tree. There are many paths to take, but I suspect they will all lead back here.” He pointed to the buildings of Kyuusai, admiring their rustic grace. Dwellings dead, dying, and still vibrant, like the phases of his heart.

Mount Akiyama loomed above him and the village. The gentle East Wind was laced with the faint scent of snow blossoms and magic. The West Wind whispered of intrigue, discord, and adventure. Finally the North Wind swirled through, oblivious to the raging South, carrying the distant drums of wars.

Yamabushi Kaidan's smile was bittersweet, knowing his future was turbulent and murky but would always return him here, where his heart belonged: in a village named salvation; in a village named Kyuusai.

Afterword to "Yamabushi Kaidan and the Smoke Dragon"

Yamabushi Kaidan and the Smoke Dragon, the entire novelette, was written in one sitting on a balmy night at Clarion South (2005). The Smoke Dragon is the first of a series of Kaidan's fantastical adventures. I've only ever repeated the feat once, and that was with the second instalment, The Ghost of Musashi, written at Clarion South the very next week.

You notice the "Jiraiya" in my byline? That name came from a man who seemed larger than life at the time, and even more so with memory's embellishments. Kazuo Crando Saito was my sensei, a Ninjutsu grand master no less, a zen monk, and possibly the sneakiest man I've ever known. He is the real Yamabushi Kaidan, and in the time I spent in his company, he regaled me with stories of ninja, samurai, and most especially the Yamabushi, the warrior monks of the mountains, the foundation of the ninja legend.

I held off sending The Smoke Dragon to magazines, thinking I had to choose carefully if I wanted to see the Yamabushi series published together. *Fantastic Wonder Stories* changed my mind. What better place to begin a magic journey into a Japan that never was than an anthology full of wonder?
