

# THE PAINTED SHŌGUN

*The Disgraced and Dying One*



ANDREW S. CIOFFI

# The Painted Shōgun

BOOK II

**The Disgraced and Dying One**

---

ANDREW S. CIOFFI

Illustrations by:

BENJAMIN R. CIOFFI

The Painted Shōgun. Book II – The Disgraced and Dying One  
Copyright © 2020 by Andrew S. Cioffi/Mokkou House Publishing

The Painted Shōgun series is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events and occurrences are either the product of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious way. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

First Edition

**ISBN 978-0-9897156-7-6**



**Mokkou House Publishing**

## **Dedication**

For my family, I am indebted...

## Table of Contents

Preface .....	vi
Introduction .....	ix
Map of Daichiyama .....	x
<b>Part V, cont.</b>	
Chapter 1 His Newfound Darkness .....	1
Chapter 2 Against The Will Of Others.....	8
<b>Part VI</b>	
Chapter 3 And Then Came The Dragons.....	14
Chapter 4 More Than Just Stories .....	28
Chapter 5 Something Unspoken.....	35
<b>Part VII</b>	
Chapter 6 The Halls Of Kimura.....	46
Chapter 7 The Strongest Hold.....	49
Chapter 8 A Man In Control.....	58
Chapter 9 The Way Of The Sword .....	65
Chapter 10 Into The Unknown.....	73
Chapter 11 The Secrets Of The Enemy .....	82
<b>Part VIII</b>	
Chapter 12 For The Dragons .....	97
<b>Part IX</b>	
Chapter 13 The Other End Of The Island.....	126
Chapter 14 Some Unexpected Exercise.....	133
Chapter 15 What Was Left.....	135
Chapter 16 For A Dragon He Hunted.....	137
Chapter 17 The Painted Shōgun .....	148
Chapter 18 When All The Guests Were Gone .....	168
<b>Part X</b>	
Chapter 19 Silly Little Bird .....	181
Chapter 20 A Champion To The Elders .....	191
Chapter 21 Gateway To The Dragons.....	194
Chapter 22 Just Stories.....	198

Chapter 23	One Last Time.....	202
Chapter 24	The Colors Of The Shōgun .....	212
Chapter 25	By His Lantern Light .....	216
Chapter 26	A Whisper Of The Blade.....	234
Chapter 27	Peace Of Mind.....	243

## **Part XI**

Chapter 28	The Turtle From The Sea.....	253
Chapter 29	A New King To Kill.....	258
Chapter 30	Unchain The Dragons.....	262
Chapter 31	A Squirrel In A Tree.....	272
Chapter 32	The Owl And The Huntress.....	277
Chapter 33	A Dragon Out Of Line .....	290
Chapter 34	A Quest For Fire .....	295
Chapter 35	On The Road To The Shōgun.....	307
Chapter 36	In His Presence.....	321

## **Part XII**

Chapter 37	A Festival To Remember.....	325
Chapter 38	Until The Castle.....	334
Chapter 39	The Scales Of War.....	352
Chapter 40	Under Her Own Will.....	362
Chapter 41	The Way Of The Tigers.....	378
Chapter 42	In His Majesty's Colors.....	385
Chapter 43	A Hymn For A Fallen Friend.....	394
Chapter 44	The True Lord.....	398
Chapter 45	The Shadows Of Dragons.....	407
Chapter 46	Some Secret Key.....	408
Chapter 47	One With The Heavens.....	414
Chapter 48	In The Presence Of A King.....	416
Chapter 49	The Death Of A Daimyo.....	421
Chapter 50	The Sea Of Tigers.....	424
Chapter 51	A Necessary Evil.....	438
Chapter 52	The Reflecting Heavens .....	451
Chapter 53	Under The Nose Of The King.....	455
Chapter 54	Fanning The Flames.....	458

Chapter 55	The Shōgun And The Girl.....	462
Chapter 56	An Uncanny Reunion .....	471
Chapter 57	Long And Lonely Steps .....	482

### **Part XIII**

Chapter 58	Regarding His Dragon.....	489
Chapter 59	Marked By The Dragon .....	493
Chapter 60	The Rats Who Left Stones .....	502
Chapter 61	The Opposite Of Fear .....	506
Chapter 62	An Appearance Of Might.....	512
Chapter 63	The Nest Of The Forsaken Rider .....	522
Chapter 64	Her Place At The Table .....	526
Chapter 65	His Cunning And His Blade.....	539
Chapter 66	From A Nightmare Into A Dream.....	549
Chapter 67	On The Hatred Of The Shōgun.....	558

### **Part XIV**

Chapter 68	A Lady, A Lord, And The Silver, Shining Moon	566
Chapter 69	His Fear Of The Sky .....	588
Chapter 70	He Cast A Mighty Shadow .....	593
Chapter 71	What Little Remained .....	610

### **Part XV**

Chapter 72	A Lonely Passage.....	630
Chapter 73	A Great And Powerful Shōgun.....	648
Chapter 74	The Edge Of The Prefectures.....	657
Chapter 75	In The Heart Of His Own World.....	676

### **Part XVI**

Chapter 76	Along The Old War Path .....	682
Chapter 77	The Disgraced And Dying One .....	689
Chapter 78	An Ember In The Rain.....	710

### **Appendices**

Appendix I	Locations of Daichiyama.....	
Appendix II	The Dragons of Onidara.....	
Appendix III	What's in a Name?.....	

## Preface

Where does power come from? How does a writer make a story and the struggle between its characters compelling without exploring the powers at play? Physical strength - the ability to hurl a spear or cleave a body with a blade - is often attributed to great heroes; the power of the mind to make wicked schemes, great villains. Our super-hero stories and fairytales find “phenomenal cosmic powers” central to the conflicts that have captured our imagination. But it is not only in this way that we know the power of great storytelling. What about the powers flaunted in a romance novel? Are the powers of attraction not as strong as the powers of great contest? Does it not devastate when our power is taken? Are there not great and powerful moments at the loss of a loved one? Of course, it’s also not always as hyperbolic as that.

See, I have this theory that all great storytelling can be reduced to transactions of power, no matter how big or small, what prices are paid, what debts are settled, the victors, the spoils, if for better or for worse... It doesn’t have to be in the title, the characters need not carve monuments of it, and it might not even be spoken so clear as to be named. We know from the subtext, though, the silhouettes and shadows, that power is always there, always seeking balance.

Our smallest, most fundamental pieces are pushed and pulled into place by extraordinary powers. Maybe those are the forces, from the star stuff we’re made of, that make us yearn. We yearn to make sense of the push/pull and what it means for our experience and for the footprint we leave. In this way, on a molecular level, we yearn to hear, tell, trade, and be a part of great stories.

Dragon Festival, Harvest Fire introduced Daichiyama and the world of the Painted Shōgun. It is my hope that it laid a foundation and breathed a bit of life into a place I like to imagine. The preface to that book includes a line that says that “life in Daichiyama is as our own.” Another hope I have is that I can convey that the powers, especially the small ones, of our own world are worth hunting and holding. May you, the reader, recognize a struggle, a heartache, a flutter, a shudder, or something unspoken that will make you stand closer to one of the characters, or step further away. If I’ve done my job, you will be pushed, and you will be pulled by our titular character.

The Disgraced and Dying One is a story of nothing if it isn’t one about power. We’ve seen a Shōgun flex the full might of his military and a single small girl penetrate his defenses. We’ve seen the will of Elders and the wrath of the Dragons. Students fought with physical prowess and a boy was beaten of mind and body by a person he holds dear. But what happens when a Dragon’s heart and soul is stripped from her claw? How is a Shōgun to handle traitors, insubordinates, and a foreign army that threatens a second Tora War? What stands between the boy and a hard job suited to a harder man? And did I mention that in this one there are Tigers?



With the world and all its powers in place, there was an opportunity here to take a deep dive into character development and advance the plot at a (sometimes) breakneck speed. That's not to say that there aren't slow and quiet moments, too, but the pursuit of power is not always a patient one. Some wield it like whip, others, a brush and ink. Some, as you'll see, let it slip through their fingers. In so many ways, it's the characters who wrote this story. It's their journeys that continue to excite me as a reader and as a writer and I hope to share some of that excitement with you.

The people of Daichiyama, as in the places we all know, paint the world with color. They laugh and sing, they make a meal, love their own, respect their elders, bury their dead, and honor their gods. But just like our own, they're quick to quarrel over money and maps and will kill for lesser evils. The powers of faith, family, and tradition are as real for them as the wills and wants of others. They stand to shape a world that will do its best to sort them out.

In the end, there is always balance. Attaining balance in a physical world where opposite forces attract is no small feat. In a world built on ideas and emotions, titles and wealth, love and war, balance isn't attained without suffering or sacrifice. As the forces of nature oppose in search of balance, so too must our characters.

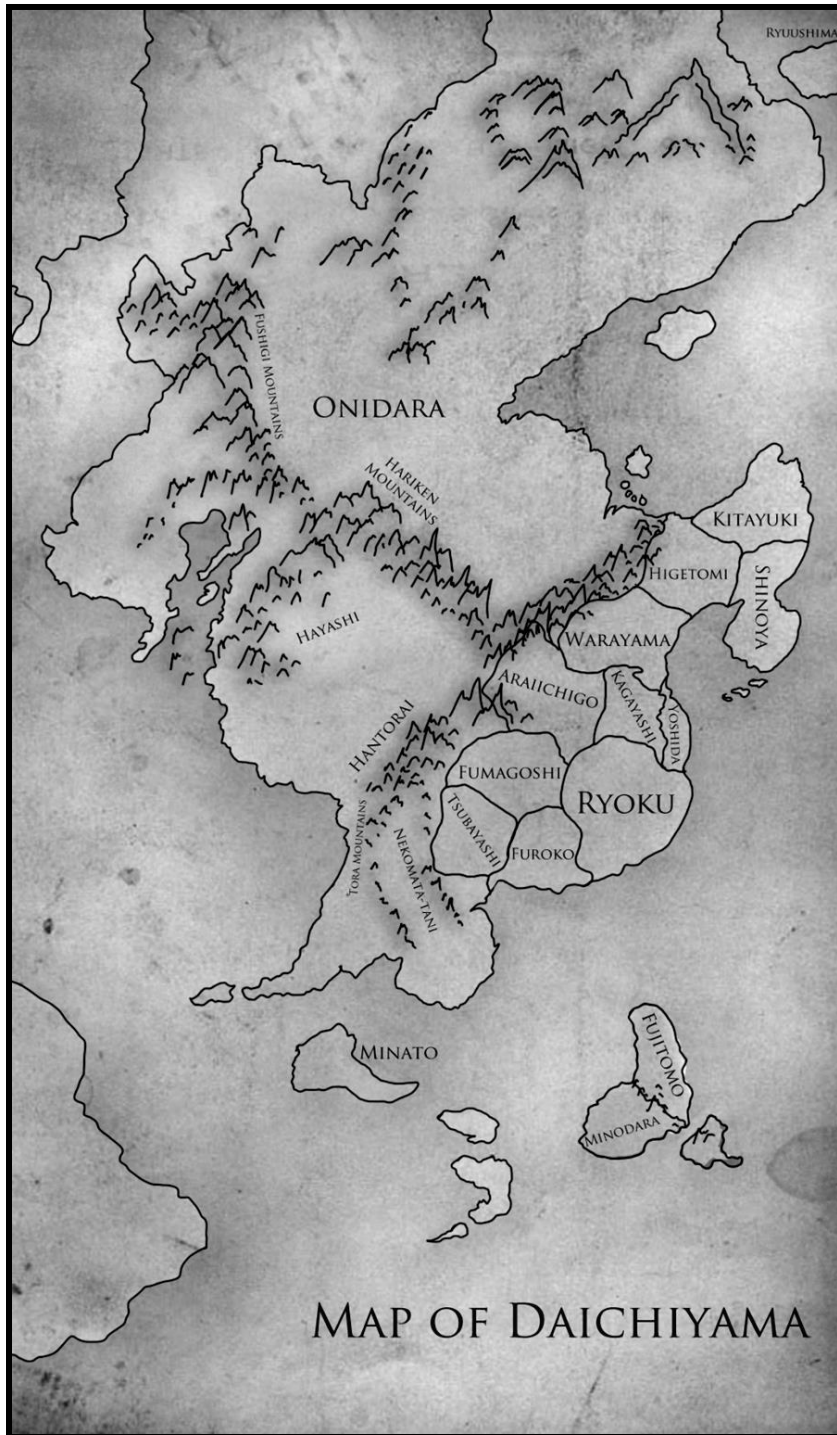
These are the tales of a Shōgun sentenced to either death or divine rite, a Dragon and her Rider pushed to bind or be broken, a newly unburdened girl who questions the fates, and a boy with little liberty put against things far worse than dying. The powers are varied, and the pull comes from somewhere beyond. Each of their lines are driven by a fight for some semblance of control, only, as in the words of Ginjiro on his ceremonial passage, "the ocean does not care."

After six long years of writing, rewriting, and letting the characters roam, I am proud to present the second book in the saga of the Painted Shōgun, *The Disgraced and Dying One*. There are more stories to tell of our painted Shōgun and those who stand around him. I hope that you continue to find a world worth revisiting.

- A.S.C.

## **Introduction**

This is a tale of common folk and Dragons, of Shōgun and handmaidens, of pirates, scoundrels, fishers, and men who make war. Their world was made by people from places we once knew. It is as much our home as it is a far-off land. Magic is there for those who believe in it.



## **Part V, *cont***

## Chapter One – His Newfound Darkness

**M**ichio shuddered with panic. He froze but couldn't calm his breathing. "Who's there!" the man called again, this time from right inside the window. The boy clung onto what he could, hoping he'd not lose another tile; the first one fell and shattered three stories below. The heights didn't bother him before, but they did now. If he didn't move quickly, he would be a sitting target for men that should not have been there. It was just out of reach. Just a little further.

*Don't look down*, he thought. Stretching on the balls of his toes, he could touch it, but he was too low to grab hold.

"Almost...there..." he said, straining.

There was a commotion inside. Someone was readying to go out to check. There wasn't much time. Clinging to the wall between the upper two roofs of a small and apparently no longer abandoned old castle, Michio gathered bearings and jumped. He pushed closer to the wall and grabbed the arrow, midair. It didn't pull free. He jumped again. Still, nothing. The third jump was with everything he had, and "Got it!" he said. When he hit the narrow roof under his feet for a third and final time, the row of tiles started sliding. One-by-one they slid off into the courtyard and one-by-one they shattered. Seven were counted at least, maybe more. He was to leave no trace. At that, he failed. How dearly he was to pay depended on his next moves.

Carrying an arrow proved far more inconvenient while fighting not to fall. He needed his hands, so he gripped the bolt in his teeth. The front entryway was directly below. That was where the yelling came from. They saw the shattered tiles, which gave them clue enough for where to look; someone yelled "He's on the roof!" It was a familiar voice. It was his father's voice. Meizu stayed behind the wall from where he fired the arrow for the boy to retrieve. This was supposed to be a simple exercise in climbing.

*Why is he helping them?!*

Michio couldn't get off the roof fast enough. He did the only other thing that he could do before more arrows made his acquaintance. He dove in through the window. It was a gamble on the part of an unarmed boy that the voice he heard had moved along. It was dark and it was, for the moment, vacated. Arrows didn't just pepper the outside. Shots fired through the window. Arrow after arrow came and, after a pause, more followed. He was long enough left alone that his eyes adjusted to his newfound darkness. There wasn't much time to make his choice once the volley halted again. Looking out the window wasn't an option because of the one who surely trained an arrow. Footsteps in the stairwells were coming to flush him out. Whoever they belonged to would not be indulging the boy in a game of back and forth. Whatever his choice, it was one that needed him to commit. He wasn't going to chance an escape through the window. His next move was to get out of the room.

There was one other room, which was smaller and without windows. He'd not fare any better in there. In fact, he'd fare quite worse. Michio pierced and ripped through one of the mid-height squares on the shoji to look. It took the few men - whose house it may or may not have been - far less time to scale the steps than Michio took to reach the roof. They were in the hallway, calling threats for their intruder;

making noise, rattling their weapons and pounding the walls. They were scared. With a stiff thrust of his forearm, Michio broke through several pieces of the wall's lattice, making an opening to the next room. It was loud enough that they'd heard it and came in after him. He scurried up the windowsill opposite his new doorway. The first man entered the room, followed by three more. The one had a lantern, the three were armed. They looked like Senshin. Michio tucked into a jungle of cross members and support beams and was hopefully out of sight and holding his breath. The hardest bit was turning away his eyes so that his dark robes and black hair would disappear, but his ears remained keen.

He'd not likely remember their words, but the three sets of footsteps that shuffled out were clear. They were to trap him in the next room or flush him to the lantern-less warrior left behind. His window was small; he would have to catch him off-guard and do it when the others were still in the next room.

With a pounding heart and an arrow between his teeth, he thought *Now!* His legs flipped back over his head and he dropped in over the cross member. When his feet hit the ground, they were heard, but he wasn't seen until he was through the door. He was a flash into the stepwell and then he was gone. The four followed, assaulting the stairs before he was down. Michio slid around the corner out of sight, but he had to keep moving. Voices from the lower floor were joining in the chase. *The window!* It was the only way out now. The archer would hopefully still be focused on the higher level. Michio turned toward what he knew to be the front of the house; he remembered passing windows on his way to the top. He dove through the door, not stopping to open it, slid open the heavier partition on the outer wall, and was out the window, sliding with the tiles before he could see what waited below.

The sole archer laid, throat cut, in a pool of his own demise. The man was cold enough that Michio may have been safe to go out the first window after all. To the ones left behind, Michio, still crouching, looked like he'd done it. There was no way he would wait to see what they had to say. The other archers added urgency.

Opposite the wall, his father waited. "You're welcome, boy," he whispered. "Let's go." And they ran. Michio's rush carried him further than his burning legs alone could have done. Still they ran. His father didn't make a sound, but the boy huffed hard and crunched just about anything there was to crunch underfoot.

They ran until it was safe not to run, but they didn't run to their boat. "That's where they'll check," his father said. "Besides, we're going back there tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?!"

Michio was almost killed. He wasn't in a hurry to return. If he never returned, it was too soon.

"Tomorrow."

Sōke was a convenient title to throw around at such a time; Michio dared not question his training. He only awaited the scolding for slipping up. That time, it did not come. They didn't speak further on it, or anything for that matter.

The boy wasn't comfortable sleeping out in the open knowing he was hunted, nor was he sleeping somewhere he didn't know, especially with sounds that weren't welcoming. His father seemed not to have the same problems.

*So, this is the other island,* he thought. So far, he didn't like it.



Their little boat was borrowed, so when it went missing before the morning it was a fitting piece of karma. The docks looked a little different during the day, but they were still just docks. No market, no fishers...only boats. That was a workers' village, which explained everything except for the small castle. Those men shouldn't have been there and Michio couldn't stop looking over his shoulder. His father couldn't be bothered; he would either not have been noticed or was confident he could handle them. Maybe he knew what he walked the boy into. *He waited outside the wall last night*, remembered Michio. *He wasn't seen*! It was the day's first lesson: it wasn't as easy to disappear from the same place twice.

"Father," he decided against restraint, "tell me about the Elders."

"The Elders? What do you want to know about the Elders, boy?"

What he really wanted to ask, he couldn't. His old fisher friend told of Elders that were, by at least an old man's account, visitable. Michio would wrestle with that regardless of what his father added next.

"Who are they?"

"I suppose we don't talk much about them, do we? I guess it depends, really."

"What do you mean?"

"It depends who you ask. People believe things differently, Michio. Even absolutes. To some they are the keepers of the old ways. No more, no less. They remind us of our history and our traditions. Who we are. Where we are going. They also remind us of our mistakes. To others, they are beacons of faith. Magical beings that bend the rules of our world to their will. These are things that men fear. No one knows for sure, though."

"Why not?"

"Because they won't say."

"So they're real?!"

"Of course they're real. Would you trust someone that puts faith in imaginary Gods?"

It was far more hypothetical than his second question.

"Do you remember the prophecy and how I said that there could be years of war?"

"Yes. The Elders were...fractured?"

"You see, when a people believe so deeply, they'll fight for it. To the death. But...they can also be molded by it."

"What do you believe the Elders are, Father?"

"Do you know where I put my faith, boy? Here," holding open both hands, "and here," putting one on Michio's chest.

It was a good while before his young mind could find the following, to which his father only responded with his eyes: "Are we going to mold them?"



As hours grew on, so did Michio's nerves. They tip-toed around the island while avoiding the castle grounds. Dinner wasn't hearty. Day turned into night long ago and with every passing owl shout in the cold black, the boy drew nearer the edge.

Without notice or gesture or even a look back, his father stood and set off. The pace he set would challenge the boy to follow. But follow he did, for if much ado had been given, he'd have not run so willingly back to that place. Michio could see much more of where his steps fell than the night before. He

tried to lift his weight the way his father did, trying to make no noise. And then there it was: lantern light above a wall and an open gate he knew wouldn't welcome him. His father slowed and crouched behind brush.

Michio wasn't eager for them, but he wanted to know what his next steps were. It looked like his father lifted a finger to call for quiet, but quiet was a given. When the boy didn't move, he made it a little clearer where he was pointing. He looked before he scurried to see that there were branches enough to hide him. The climb was steady and quite slow; quite unlike the last tree he conquered. With height came voices and with vantage came more than terror. In fact, scared was something he only felt in his guts. His mind was curious. He thought to breathe, as steady as he climbed. He squinted his eyes like his father taught him, for "the fire will reflect in them." Through squints, what was there was blurred, but he could see enough to know that they were out in force.

Sōke made hollow clicks with his tongue against his mouth, calling the boy down. It could have easily been a bird. It took a second set for Michio to look down. He took just one last look through opened eyes before he worked his way back down.

Without notice or even a look back, his father stood and set back in the direction from whence he came. They ran on, further than they ran before; further than they ran last night. They ran until the docks. It was a different run; a safer run. Further still they ran up the gangway of a manned vessel ready to either set sail for home or on another adventure. They were both greeted by familiar men making ready. Michio smiled to think that his father wasn't just a master at disappearing from plain sight, he celebrated it. But the real lesson for Michio to learn was that there were reactions, consequences, even. What's more is that he caused them. What he saw was no small pack of regular men. He had called a fully armed patrol of nearly one hundred Senshin out from hiding. His father shot him a smile. They both nodded and he knew. There was a power that the Yoru had that one could stand many on edge. Somehow Michio knew that it was a power enough to defeat them.



## Chapter Two – Against The Will Of Others

**H**is nightmares weren't lessened any. Without a bringer of death hiding in his trees, they should have been. If anything, they were visiting nightly, now; sometimes twice.

That night, the Shōgun had the worst sort of nightmare. The other kind was better when it ended. This one, though, lingered past waking. He dreamt that on the one hundredth day celebration, he held his boy; that nothing was afoul; that no Yoru had taken him; that the peaces of his life hadn't been undone. The hurt was reforged. If only he was given the chance to switch places...

To strike his pipe he burned a candle. Enough of a spark lit his face from the first drags that she could see his eyes. He waved her forward before snuffing the flame. They weren't burning the cauldrons anymore and his men weren't told about her. There was still a real chance she'd be fired upon. If either that happened, or she brought another knife to his neck he'd let it be so. With great interest he watched and with deft she bound over the wall. How she crossed the moat would remain a mystery, but once she passed the guard deck on the second level, she had help. Yamamoto lowered a rope.

She took far less time than he expected, and she didn't climb up and over his handrail. He was busy searching over the side when the door to his chambers slid shut, sounding off behind him.

"Well," he said, prior to turning. "You've clearly done this more than once."

"I didn't need your rope."

The rope that he pulled up was considerably lighter. Up came the frayed end of where she cut the bulk of it loose. He understood her want for letting him know she was armed.

"Would you like to come inside? Can I call for tea?"

"Not necessary," she said as she stepped into the chambers before him. He was surprised that she turned her back to him, but it wasn't settling to step into the dark after her. If this was when it would happen, he'd well enough finish his pipe.

The girl was inside, and she'd lit a single candle. She stood transfixed. The painting of the Shōgun and his family was both comforting and bothersome. Although she'd not changed it that much in her mind from dwelling, there was an innocence that she couldn't quite get right without her eyes. The thumb-worn face of his beloved Masuyo put him in a softer light. It was arresting and it stole her back to the night when she tried to kill him. It was his best defense.

It had been a long many years, a third of her life almost, between their first two encounters. This was only weeks from the last, but it was near as long for a girl that desperately tried to make sense of what lingered between butchery and trust. Asking how - after what he'd done - he was qualified to teach of the Elders was as much a reason to return as her want to satisfy another burning question.

"So, what do the Elders have to do with not killing me?" she asked. Anger held back tears in eyes left clinging to the portrait. So much was taken from her, but they had that, amongst other things, in common.

"I appreciate your candor," he said. "In a word, everything. Believe me or not, I was your age once," most of his charm was lost on her and she had little patience now for stories. But she finally turned to look on him. "Except when I was your age, I was to become Shōgun...after my father. Do you remember your lessons?"

In fact, she remembered her lessons clearly, or how her father spoke of them. Well, she at least remembered having lessons. Mainly, she remembered being bothered by having them, but she would happily kill to be that kind of bothered again; being awake through the night left little in the way of ambition. When she gave it an honest bit of thought, which she hadn't in some time, she couldn't remember whether Fujikawa taught of the Elders or not. 'Other little girls in other villages are not so lucky to attend a school, Tsukiko,' her father would say as he'd share, but not threaten 'because they are forced to labor. This is why we have come to the Hayashi.' More sincere, he would plead with her 'Please take your lessons very carefully.' They were memories that did not put the Shōgun in any more favorable a light.

"Of course I remember," she snapped back to him. She also never forgot Fujikawa-Sensei.

"What of the Elders do you recall?"

She knew the basics, but not from school, and she answered him with pride. "We were people of the Wind. We honored our Elders as we honored the Wind that carried us to the Hayashi." Those were two amongst many lines she practiced outside of his wall for many nights. They felt strong.

"That's very good," he said.

"That still doesn't tell me why you spared me. And what does my old teacher have to do with any of it?" She wasn't just referencing his recall of her lessons. She wanted to know what was exchanged between them that night and he knew it.

"Don't you know? I would have thought by now... Tsukiko, we honor the Elders as we honor *all* the forces around us. We look to them for guidance. Your Elder is not one with the Wind entirely, but he speaks to it and he connects us by it. You know, ages before, they were once called the Kindred, but time brought them another name. They don't so much like to interfere," and that word resonated.

Actually, it hit her in the chest like a fall from heights. In that moment she knew. *Both of them?!* she thought.

"...but sometimes they must. It's not ever for us to understand. They deal in other forces than just the natural ones. Those are things not to be meddled in. When they are, I'm afraid terrible things happen, and..."

"And little girls are brought to remind you of them?"

"Something like that," he said.

She remembered his painting, though, when sullen eyes flashed on it for a moment.

There was silence.

"You're a smart girl, Tsukiko Mori." He remembered her last name. "I won't disguise my words. You are alive because of the will of your Elder, and probably against the will of others. He said that you would play a part. I thought your part was to kill me, but now I'm not so sure."

Her eyes told him not to be so sure, but her body spoke of a different, more confused message. After a pause, he re-focused.

"Anyway, they only draw power together. By themselves, they are destructive. When they oppose one another, terrible things may come."

"Terrible things have come!"

"Precisely... Don't think that I would have so soon forgotten."

Her eyes questioned what he was driving at.

"Tsukiko, this may be difficult to understand. It was not my own will alone that moved on the Hayashi."

"The Elders were involved? But if Fujin-Sama..." it was the first time she'd called him that. And her eyes opened wide before she could ask, let alone answer. 'We were betrayed!' were the words he spoke that night. *He said WE*. She knew that she'd better be careful. At once, her old teacher was the only one on her side. Opened eyes tunneled. "You didn't kill me that night and you're not sure what part I'm to play. Yamamoto-Sama, what do you want with me?"

"The will of the Elders isn't for either of us to question. And you'll not be so bold as to challenge that." It was the first time in their long relationship that he stepped into a place of authority with her. It worked.

He thought and he took care to revisit her question. "What do I want with you... To answer your question."

She waited, but there was nothing more. That must have been what he wanted: to find out what he needed her for.

The Elders sent their General after one of their own. He was indignant to question their will, especially when the interferences of an Elder cost him his son. What was certain to him then more than before, and painfully so, was that he was bound to the girl whether or not either wanted such a fate. Whatever her involvement was to be, so far, she'd not wronged him, though at times they both wished she had. For that, he didn't have the heart to tell her that worse things were coming.

# Part VI

## Chapter Three – And Then Came The Dragons

“Welcome, all! Welcome,” said Yamada-Sensei, “to the first day of your new lives!” Saburo, the newest of the Oninohara's instructors motioned for their response. “Sensei!” the recruits called. Twenty-one of them, there were, each as wide-eyed as the next; each a fresh new start for the Sensei.

“And welcome to the Oninohara. This place will be your home. These boys will be your brothers. For ten years, boys, you will become men together. Great men. You will become warriors!”

He had never spoken these words to a group this young. They were delivered with a conviction that he wasn't sure he had. As Sensei, he knew of what brethren were capable. Armed battalions protecting those grounds were a painful, albeit necessary reminder of that. But there was no room on those fields for the Senshin that the Shōgun left behind. Their business was elsewhere.

The man himself needed no introduction, even amongst the youngsters. What he did need, though, was to lay claim over their autonomy. Sensei was just a word, one meant for someone born before another; one well respected, anyhow. In that way, and in the basest allusion, the boys would be surrounded by Senseis. It was also a title that referred to their instructors. Not one given lightly either, for they were each masters at their crafts. They were each to be addressed as such. Yamada would not tolerate the students making bones about it. But *Sensei* struck another meaning; one of much more fear and regard; of someone unyielding, absolute; that he was the beginning and the ending of life, now, as they were to know it.

“Respect, boys. You will learn it here. Respect above all else. A life lived with respect will end with honor... There is no higher reward. You will all learn...there is no other way.”

On their first day, the Sensei was speaking of death. It was not expected, but it didn't seem to faze the other instructors. That part seemed to unsettle the boys some. It was no secret what'd been happening. Even when an old man died an old man's death, the news made its rounds. Ten sensational killings surely left a sting. Nine, really, but none knew of Ginjiro save a few, for the moment. What they thought they knew gave a dangerous air over things. Death seemed to follow their Sensei. It was a terrible thing for a good man to be known for. If they thought for a small time that he wouldn't address it, they weren't far enough out of their comfortable little selves.

Yamada's ever-long stare about his own words was even more worrisome. He meant to linger on his mortal meaning, and so he meant it for the boys as well.

“Come now. What have you all heard? There will be no secrets kept from you, so long as you keep none.”

The twenty-one shuffled where they stood, but so did the other instructors. It was an open call for ghost stories, and it was more than enough to show that he rid them of what circumstance and pomp they were expecting. But what's more is that it was a cunning Sensei's first inspection.

“You there,” he said, pointing. “What is your name? What have you heard?”

“Me?” the boy mouthed while pointing to the same boy as the Sensei. The others roused up just a little but were sent right back down by the Sensei.

“Yes you, boy.” A fully formed and suitably armored warrior bearing down on a terrified little boy was, after all, a bit more amusing than it would have seemed to the child.

"M..my name's Joji."

"Sensei."

"Oh. Sorry. My name is Joji, Sensei."

He did well for such a timid little thing. His hair was mussed and his robes needed a little straightening. Crouching to speak closer, the Sensei asked, "What rumors have you heard?"

The boy's eyes met the ground first, but he didn't know better than to look him square in the eye when he spoke. None of the others would have dared, but it wasn't bravado. It was...innocence.

"Well, Sensei. It's... I mean..."

"Go ahead, boy..." he said, no longer amplifying his voice.

"One of your students killed those people. And then...well...you made one of your other students kill himself."

Like a child, he didn't seem to hold the full weight of his own words. His delivery was naive enough to take the bite away. Joji-San leaned in and whispered something that at least several of the others were wondering, and many of them heard.

"Is it really...haunted, Sensei?"

The boys laughed. The Sensei smiled.

"Very good, Joji-San." Yamada put a hand on Joji's shoulder and continued his address. "Very good."

"Any others? Anyone brave like your brother Joji-San? Rumors? Questions?"

"Sensei."

"What is your name, boy?"

"My name is Tomio, Sensei," he was quiet, but not timid or quite as funny as Joji. It was a darker kind of quiet, one that was entitled in challenging Yamada. "The rumor that I've heard is that the Elders are furious because your Rider failed."

"Perhaps a little too bold, Tomio-San. Anyone else?"

"Himeo, Sensei." He was the biggest and may have been the oldest of the twenty-one. "I've heard that he survived...the Rider. That we will be safe here because he's protecting this place."

Whether he believed it or not, the Sensei knew it was directed at those in the group who were frightened.

Yamada nodded to him in acknowledgement.

"Himeo-San.

"True words, boys. There have been deaths here. True, Joji-San, that one of my students killed those people. You need to know his story. Takeshi-Senpai started here as a student much like yourselves. He became very strong, very fast. So strong, in fact, that he was chosen long before most of the others could make a bullseye. He grew stronger while the others stood by and watched."

Saburo was sure he was guilty of what the Sensei spoke.

"To be safe, no Rider amongst you will be chosen until the last of the sakura falls on your tenth year." He paused to gather the spirit to take on blame, though it was too complex for the boys to understand. "When that was taken from him, he turned on us. Remember, you are all family now. Never forget that family comes first. Always. There are worse things than killing. It's also true that one of my students took his own life. He did so here, on the northern courtyard. By my request. It was the only way for him to

regain his honor. You are not allowed there. It is not haunted but leave him his peace. And Himeo-San, Tomio-San, boys...your Rider."

A pair of sharp bursts preceded hearty rumbles and the boys all spun around to check the open fields. There was a drizzle in the air that was singed, leaving a smell like before the thunder. Red haze and green mingled into yellow, lingering just enough to silhouette two Riders. The Dragons' heads towered high and they belched great plumes of fire. Most of the boys weren't as quick to bow as Saburo and the others. Yamada got out in front to greet the pair after making sure the rest knelt. It wasn't disrespectful, nor was it taken as such; they were wholly and rightfully awed. But so were the other instructors, once the dust-up cleared.

With tears filling his eyes, Yamada approached him, and then he threw an embrace on the Rider. After all he'd gathered and been told, he still hadn't seen him prior to this very moment. Much had changed, but not a lot was different.

"Ginjiro-Sama!" Yamada remembered his place and he swooped back into a waisted bow. "We are indebted."

Ginjiro's lack of return only showed his understanding of custom. He had much to tell.

"And Basho-Sensei, we are indebted." Yamada could have referred to Basho as Sensei just from respect. However respectful, it was also much more practical. Master Basho didn't directly speak of the Rider's return when he showed himself at Yamada manor. He didn't have to. Showing was enough. It was with a sigh of relief that Yamada missed most of what the old Rider told him of Ginjiro those few nights ago. *Had it not been longer?* Basho was a man of action and Jūn-gar was far from fading away, probably even farther from servant's work. Instead of an early end, they offered their service to the Oninohara. What was a warrior without a battle? And it was a hard-fought battle on Basho's end to convince Yamada that he need not offer his own post. Besides, Ryota-Sensei, may he rest, left big enough britches to fill in teaching the boys to make war.

And then came the Dragons. The exact order in which to address them here is quite tricky. Jūn-gar is much older, and he's earned every scrap of respect through hard fought battle. Jiraya hasn't. She is the youngest and least experienced of the Tatsukihei, but her power is not to be denied. Both were honored on this Harvest past. It was Jiraya's first, but it was Jūn-gar's last. They are as bound as they were to their Riders, but Yamada paid his debts to Jūn-gar first, saving highest honors for Jiraya. Jūn-gar accepted it with a grace he's not been known for.

"...And Jiraya-Sama," he said, lowering his eyes, "I am indebted." *For not killing Ginjiro.* He didn't say it, though it need not be spoken for a Dragon to hear. "And we are all indebted," bowing ever lower. He held his bow just a little longer for her. When he turned to address the boys, she retreated to the sky.

Before all else, Yamada was a Sensei, but the students could wait.

"Saburo-Sensei. Douzo."

And with that they were taken for an introduction to the grounds.

"Shall we, gentlemen?" asked Yamada to his newest Sensei and his newest Rider. The barracks, over tea, was as good a place as any to rest heels and heal bonds. Touring students would leave them be for at least the next two hours. By their return, Yamada would be ready for a proper introduction of the Verge.



The skies had opened over the training grounds before they were off the main field. Saburo was pushed in his first official duty as Sensei not to let it break them. This was where a little demonstration would go quite a long way. The first field north of the Verge was the kyūdō range. It wasn't uncommon for a Sensei here to expect seventy-meter marks after two years. Saburo was about to show them what that meant.

"This is the long range, boys. Who here has fired a bow?"

Unsurprising to Saburo, all hands went up. His own first wasn't far from memory whenever he handled a bow, or with every festival game since. Saburo spoke few words in the way of what trainings would follow. He was eager to show them instead. Grabbing up the bow from the range-hand, he began.

The bow rose up high with his breathing and it was drawn fully as he settled it back down. The hane rested lightly to his cheek so he could align his sight. Marks were already set and they were at better than seventy, eighty meters, even.

"He won't hit it," whispered Tomio. It was loud enough to cause the group to stir.

Saburo never was flustered by stirrings alone, nor had he ever let down a drawn arrow. Neither did he fluster, nor did he miss his mark. Whether it was to the chagrin of Tomio mattered little. The good and hearty thunk almost splintered the target and surely it silenced the boys.

"Tomio-San," called Saburo, breathing with his follow through. Turning on heel he asked him to "please repeat."

"Sensei?"

"What did you call me, Tomio-San?" his words were calm.

"I called you Sensei, Sensei."

"Precisely. Sensei. And don't you forget that. Yamada-Sensei spoke of respect, here, boys." What he meant was for Tomio to rethink some things. "Tomio-San. I ask you again. What did you say?" his words were just as calm.

"I said that I thought you would miss it, Sensei."

"Tomio-San, walk with me. We'll find out together."

The eighty meters felt like more for the boy. It was clear from where they set off that he center-punched his target, so every step belittled him to his peers. Though, that was not Saburo's intention. It may have been his intention to cause his own stir, and to that end, he succeeded. The other students, or any of the other instructors, or crewmen for that matter, hadn't any ideas what he was up to, but they could see him speaking to Tomio for some time and about more than just an expert marking. When he walked back without the boy, the stirrings were more vocal. By then, the rain affected range visibility.

"Tomio-San!" belted Saburo. "Tomio-San, begin!" The wind ripped his words to slivers.

Students chattered while instructors wanted a word with Saburo. Lifting up his bow, they were silenced. It was as much the bow that silenced them as its lifting. This was no ordinary bow he wielded. It was his festival bow. Carved for the Dragons, by them, in honor of the Rider he shot to commission. How he longed for this tour to end so he could set eyes again and, with any luck, good words on Ginjiro.

"Begin!" he called once more.

The rain made it harder, but Tomio struck the lantern he was handed, and he held it high. There were shouts, pleads, and commands coming from all around, but to the archer, they melted away.

Saburo drew power from his breath and with it, he drew back his bow. He let half a breath filter through the fletching like the reeds of a woodwind. With his breathing, he whispered his bow words of



guidance. Instinct more than eyes triggered his release. The shot snapped away, leaving an echo in the rain of what power pushed the arrow. It sizzled towards the boy leaving a trail of steam and rage. Tomio had no time to react. In not so much a sequence as happening at once, Tomio hit the ground with a shriek, the arrow split on impact, students were stunned silent, Saburo finished his follow through, and the instructors sprinted towards the boy. But so too did the lantern catch from falling on the archer's broken bullseye.

"He's fine," said the archer. "He'll join us when he's ready. You will not all ride with Dragons, boys. But that doesn't mean you will not ride with demons!"

"Sensei!!"

His same mistakes wouldn't be repeated. There would not be another Takeshi, not on his watch. It was in that moment, in their calling him, that a new Sensei was born.

For the rest of the grounds tour, they were all, students and instructors alike, attentive to what Saburo had to say.



Ginjiro couldn't sit comfortably being away from Jiraya. Basho didn't seem to struggle. Though the Rider ranked highest at the table, he sat in the presence of his masters and in silence until called upon. He was happy to be back in his old barracks again. The place seemed like a distant fond memory, one he longed for, though he'd been there not long ago. Perhaps his memories were fonder than the times he'd had there. Ginjiro always was a bit of an outcast. Even now, amongst the Dragons, he didn't quite fit. What he was about to share with Yamada could set that right, however, else it'd be a long twenty harvests.

"And of what business from the Dragons can you speak, Ginjiro-Sama?"

Ginjiro half missed it. He wasn't daydreaming. No. He was listening for her instead. It still wasn't second nature. Basho's presence made it clear that he carried Jūn-Gar, that the Dragon was there, plain as day, opposite the tea. Fiercely Ginjiro envied him that.

"Sensei," he said cordially, leaning in. His hesitating was mistaken for poise. "The Dragon's business is not mine to speak of...presently. But I can speak of what business I am charged." His pause told Yamada what Basho already knew.

"Takeshi."

A Dragon-Rider prefers it when they answer their own questions, like Yamada had. In that way, they don't have to give anything beyond that which is needed. But Yamada, for sake of his family and students, felt he needed more. So much of what filled the time since they last spoke would remain a secret. Yamada knew that because Ginjiro wasn't speaking.

"So how can we help you?" is what was finally asked.

Something clearly had the Rider's mind. After sipping tea, he simply stated "the northern courtyard."

Where Koichi ended. Yamada may not have ever been sure if regaining Takeshi's honor was Ginjiro's onset, or if it was part of his orders, something to hide behind, if he didn't want blood on his hands, or if his intention was to make a spectacle. Ginjiro was Tatsukihei now and only he and one other would know what was on his mind. One thing was certain, however: Takeshi had gotten to Ginjiro. Whatever it was, Yamada offered his accord. Tea glasses were not heavier at that table in recent memory.

"Sensei?" Ginjiro had to ask to break the man's long stare.

"Tell me something, Rider. What good is flying if you can't feel the wind in your hair?"

Basho broke out and Ginjiro smiled like a monk before rubbing his newly balded head.

"Well, gentleman. I believe that is for us."

The singing bowl rung by the crewman who'd not for anything interrupt a speaking Sensei sounded the ready. "Let's show them what we do here, shall we?"



The front battle fields were tended in a different way than they were left. Haystack soldiers and bundled barricades brimmed the Verge. Though they were of straw and wood and placed to train, at first glance, an army had invaded. A showing the likes of what the Shōgun suffered was about to be rained down upon a troop of soaked but bonded boys. One small, albeit full, battalion had readied, and so marked the debut of Yamada's boys into the Onikishu. They were outnumbered near fifty to each before the Dragons took the sky.

"The history of our bonding with the Dragons is a storied one," called Yamada, who found himself needing to shout. The heaviest rains still hammered the fields. It was as if Saburo brought back a monsoon. "During the Tora War, before the prefectures, before all of our times, our ancestors faced an army more than tenfold what you see. They brought Tigers here in search of Dragons."

The battles he spoke of berthed their alliance with the Dragons. They were well told tales to the boys before then. But before then, they were only tales.

"On these very grounds they fought." That was Master Ran's cue. "In this place, we made peace with Dragons by making war in their name. Above all, our lives and deaths, now, are for the Dragons."

Windless was the rain now, but it wouldn't stay so for long. Not with Dragons in the sky.

Jūn-gar stood with Master Basho but Ginjiro stood alone. The Rider's hull was with Yamada, but in his mind, he raced to find her. Rain fell inside and out for him. Bursts from the fields made the others start. No matter how he fought, he couldn't find the places that they'd meet in his mind through the deluge. A particularly loud crash jumped him back. In reality, his first days weren't as exciting as theirs, but even the Rider was struck with awe at what they waged. It was as though he was a boy handed his father's blade. He was sure he'd be able to use it when the need was upon him, but mostly, he didn't quite know how. There were horse-mounted archers, guided by General Tanaka, under sky-bound guardians and Ginjiro was somewhere stuck between, searching to take a side.

Yamada could not compete. It was far too loud, though his points were well taken. Most of the half and three dozen little fingers were wedged in ears anyways. The same many eyes fought the elements to see what would happen. Not a one, not even young Joji-San, tried to retreat. Rain and fire birthed sizzling steam, barricades exploded, and demons bore down hard to bring the rest to ruin. It felt as though under Dragons, no harm could come to them.

Through the thickest of parts, Basho stood proudest. A part of him wished to be up there. In fact, the same part of him focused all he had on holding Jūn-Gar down. That old Rider, though, knew from the look on the new that something was amiss. Connecting with the males was rumored more manageable for most Riders. Basho'd even wondered why women weren't chosen to bind with the females. What he saw, he'd seen before, but something on Ginjiro wasn't quite the same. Something bothered him deeper than Nyraji bothered her Rider after the last seating. Yamada hadn't the retrospect to tell. Basho gave Ginjiro

the nod that he knew. It was something between two Riders and it spoke of sacred bonds. Basho would watch over him and offer guidance and no one else would need to know.



A cold group of boys were given warm bellies full of food before briefing on the barracks rules. By then, they were well enough on their way to being brothers. The day brought both thick and thin and the road ahead of them was long, but the sense that they would walk it together was growing. Yamada couldn't have asked for more from them on their first day, except, maybe, for one last task.

Yamada didn't so much *not* intend to assign bunks as much as he quite simply forgot. Letting them work it out proved much more enjoyable. Quarrels were few and solved without interference from a grown-up. Clemency was shown to those that had a harder day; namely Tomio. The room he chose had once upon a time belonged to a young Ginjiro, who had quietly, before the Dragons were through, slipped away. Himeo chose Takeshi's old room. Someone had to, and he wasn't afraid. But Joji...he was left Akio-San's old quarters, the boy who died on the Verge. Like Himeo, Joji was not afraid, though he knew no better. Their connections were nothing more than curious. However, those were curses that Yamada was eager to end.



Arashi would stay stabled for the night; the rains were too heavy to travel. Yamada was wet enough so he made no mind to bother his beast. Anyway, he made short work of his trek to the infirmary.

"Hana-San!" he called, and peeking in between the two guards, he called "Tatsuya! Where is my Tatsuya?!" Their captivity was something of a two-sided blade and Yamada sought to make the most of it. His plan was to share saké with Hana. He decided not to speak of Ginjiro with her until putting eyes on him, so his seams were bursting with news.

Tatsuya was in arms other than Hana's, though. Seeing Yamaguchi-Sensei standing where Tomogawa-Sensei stood was still so new. The doctor's replacement was more than capable, and his addition to the grounds was, in fact, quite welcome. The need for him, though, still enraged Yamada.

"Sensei," he said with a bow.

The room's only light came from a few small lanterns.

"Hana-San is not feeling well. She should rest."

"Thank you, Sensei," is what Yamada managed. What he meant was entirely different. *She's never not well.* Though he had likened her to family, she wasn't. Bursting in was not what she needed. His news of the Rider, however exciting, could wait one more day.

"She's well tended, Sensei. May I suggest dry robes? The last thing these boys need is a Sensei with fever."

"Thank you, Yamaguchi-Sensei. We do have a big day ahead of us. Please tend to her as you would our Rider."

"Not to worry, Sensei."



The rest of the tales of Tigers that night - in front of fires to warm the boys - told of the great histories of which they were entering. Basho-Sensei, of all people, saw to that. The boys were told never to forget. Having seen how the Dragons fly was, truly, not forgettable.

## Chapter Four – More Than Just Stories

Going home hadn't felt that way in a long time. Not since before she knew the old woman's words, and when her cooking was all that kept her from fleeing, but not once before had she felt afraid. Not like this. Tsukiko couldn't keep the thoughts from coming. She may have endangered herself even thinking them. Until then, Chiku-San seemed like a parent in so many ways. It wasn't just with her care, or the bed she made, or the times she scolded, the times she didn't have to, or how she offered words that Tsukiko didn't want to hear. Namely, it was in her intuition. Children often wonder how parents know what they know. Tsukiko felt like her thoughts were read, but then she thought it impossible. Somehow, Chiku-San's dealings clearly went beyond ceremonies and garments. They went even beyond Shōgun. Tsukiko didn't believe in magic and she wasn't sure that the Elders were more than just stories. Surely, she couldn't trust what the Shōgun said, but if it were true, that those two were Elders, and that the Elders were involved...she was in danger. If Chiku-San could see her mind, everything she thought about getting to Fujikawa-Sensei was futile. If she didn't feel betrayed before, she did now.



Both ends knew she was coming and going, so sneaking was a curious thing. It made sense not to alert the neighbors and she was quiet as could be bounding down from the rooftops. Chiku-San was snoring. That stopped mattering months ago. With all diligence done, Tsukiko slid the door open enough to slip inside. There were a lot of things that she expected, but a sleeping old woman wasn't one of them and Fujin-Sama, who had come and gone, was away. With care she readied for sleep, breaking silence at opportune times, but to no avail. Chiku-san wouldn't budge, not unlike every other time, but it didn't sit well on Tsukiko's nerves. If Tsukiko learned anything about the old woman, it was that she'd have been awake if that's how she meant to be found. So, she surrendered to bed, but sleep would be a different battle.



They must have been sitting to tea for some time because when Tsukiko finally woke, it was past mid-morning.

"Nonsense!" was the first thing she heard, and it pricked her eyes awake.

"With all respect, it tastes like spinach!"

"Spinach?! You, Fujin-Sama, are impatient."

"Who has patience for spinach?! You can't honestly tell me... Oh, good morning, Tsukiko-san... Ah, where was I. Yes. You don't like it yourself, and it's a cruel trick to serve it to me. You are a trickster!"

"I am not. Good morning, 'Kiko-San," said Chiku-San as she slid the girl a cup of the lemon-colored tea that they were arguing over. "It's an insult, really. There's no better tea to be had. I grow it, I shade, I pluck it, I brew it. And this... This is just too much!" Chiku-san was talking more to herself, was damn-near bewildered, and she carried on and on, even after getting up to re-pot another batch.

Shouting over, as though she couldn't hear him otherwise, "No rush, Chiku-San. Please," said Fujin.

Fujin winked at Tsukiko while the other Elder in the room grumbled something of how she would "...show that old" something or other.

His nose turned up and he made a face that matched the first taste of her tea. "Apparently it's an acquired taste. How are you this morning, Tsukiko-san?"

However she answered would be more public than she wanted presently.

"Well, Tsukiko?" called the old woman.

Heat flushed her face like when she was chased or about to jump from a tree. It was a simple question, really; one she still hadn't answered after both Elders asked her. She tried stalling.

"I'm sorry, Chiku-san?"

"Come, dear. How is the tea?! Your old teacher called it spinach! Do you believe it! Well, I suppose there's nothing wrong with spinach. Except, of course that anyone can grow spinach. But this. Oh no. This is certainly not spinach."

He touched a nerve. The old teacher that she knew mocked her to Tsukiko while she yammered on about spinach. Tsukiko got her message to him, though, the only way she knew how. Her eyes moved to indicate the insulted tea slinger to the bearded man before her. He asked back in return with an inquisitive look. Tsukiko ran a finger into her collar and popped out the moon stone totem like she'd learned a big secret that Chiku-san couldn't know. It was clear he understood, but he shushed her down. There was hope in his eyes, though, that he'd allow her to revisit it quite soon.

"Perhaps honey, eh, Chiku-san," he goaded, still having a little fun with her old name.

Either the request or the goading ticked her a little. Whatever it was, it was clear that honey had no place in what she was brewing.

With the unpacking of the tea tray, Tsukiko had run as far away from facing Elders as she could have.

"Alright, Tsukiko, tell us about your night."

"It still smells like spinach. Where in the..."

"Oh, will you give it a rest! Tsukiko, please..."

"Nothing. I mean, Chiku-san, I didn't see him."

The old woman pursed her lips just a little and she took a drink. With hot tea she swallowed down what looked a little skeptical. "'Kiko-san, please. Tell us about your night." Stern wasn't exactly what she was, more...refocusing, polite...with nettles.

Thoughts and promises of Elders not interfering crossed her mind, but she hardly felt safe.

"Tsu..."

"Hold off you old bat." He was playful in his treading with care. "Kiko-San, whatever he's told you isn't news to either of us. You have to hear it. It would help to know, but if now's not right, don't let her push you."

Chiku-San took another uneasy sip.

"He told me more about that night."

Her old teacher motioned. All of Yamamoto's talk of the will of the Elders returned...

"No, its ok," she replied, before continuing. "And he told me about you. He told me what I needed to hear...at least from him."

"Oh?" inquired Chiku-san.

"In her own time, Chirikujio."

"It's alright, Sensei. Chiku-san, you tell me what he said. You seem to always know. And any help explaining it would be helpful..."

The old woman smirked. "I... I..."

"I know, Chiku-san. You can't interfere. He told me all about it. And he's even told me what happens when one of you does interfere." If ever she thought she turned tables on the Elders, even for but a moment, she was mistaken.

"If you need some explanation, we can help with that, but you'll mind manners, Tsukiko. And there are rules..."

"Now hold on, you two. It really would help me to know what she knows," said her old teacher. "But there's no need to fight about it."

"No one's fighting about anything. Now Tsu..."

"What do you want with me?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The Shōgun told me that you need me." Those details weren't very clear in her mind anymore, but her sense of purpose was slipping through fingers of a clenched fist. "That he thought my purpose was to kill him. Now he's not so sure. Killing him won't bring them back. I know that now."

"Tsukiko, Master Fujin and I would like for you to meet the others."

"Why?" she answered with demand in her voice. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Kiko-san, I'm not sure what you want to hear," answered the one that was once her house mother.

"I'm to play a part, according to him!" She slammed down her tea-cup, unable to hide her frustrations and she pointed towards Fujin.

"If it were only that simple, dear. Here," said Chiku-san, moving to refill the girl's glass.

"No," said Tsukiko, but it wasn't over tea.

"I don't blame you. I think it's turned," said Fujin.

"Be quiet!"

Except, her words weren't just spoken or simply shouted. They echoed. They felt pushed by something powerful. Oh there was something below Chiku-san's surface about to bust loose. Fujin backed down about the spinach. Tsukiko's mind was made, though.

Tsukiko knew that they couldn't interfere. She also knew she had protection from her moonstone. She knew she was needed for something and she didn't like it staying secret. Not by those two or the unknown others. But mostly, she knew she didn't much care what came next. Her voyage was draining, and it left her unfulfilled.

"I'm sorry, Chiku-san," minding the manners she was warned to mind. "I meant *no*, I can't do it. I won't. I want it all to stop," she stood as she spoke.

"Tsukiko, you need to sit so we can discuss."

"No, I'm sorry, Chiku-san. I must go. There's nothing more for me here," and she turned away, with her heart in her throat. The two that she turned her back on argued things she couldn't hear over the drumming in her head.

"Where will you go?" called Chiku-san, but the door closed her words in with her and Fujin. Tsukiko took a deep inhale before setting off, for once, onto a path of her choosing.



"It had to be an outlander..."

"Please don't go there, Chiku-san. Besides, I don't know why *you're* so worried."

"This affects us all, you know that. And don't make me remind you why we're even having this conversation. What do you plan to do about it?"

"We aren't supposed to interfere, Chiku-san."

"Save it..."

"Don't worry. She'll go. I'm already after her and I'll stay with her. She just needs a little time. She'll go."

"Well, what about the boy?"

"I don't know any more than you do. I'm having trouble finding a certain fisher and his bird."

"Keep searching. We may need him after all. Where is she headed?"

"Home."



From rooftop-to-rooftop, above Tsukiko's travels away from Ryoku, followed the two shrouded specters from Master Fujin's company.



## Chapter Five – Something Unspoken

Smiths and armorers were to the right, just before the fisher's gate, when they used the inland entry way. There was something unspoken between the mongers not to acknowledge the boy with his father. Even Nobuo-san and even the king-mackerelmen greeted him not. One of the snail shell sellers almost did the boy in when he recognized him, but his tune was changed when the crab hocker offered something to taste. Those were his real friends. Michio knew it, but they weren't terms he liked traveling under, not through those parts. But for a boy looking to disappear, he found strength in his allies. The market-going Michio, friend of Shimura, wasn't seen by the wise Yoru master who led the way.

The same didn't hold for Yoji-Sama, the muted blade smith. That's not to say that Yoji was no friend, of course, they just didn't share the same history. When he saw Michio, he may well have shouted his name. A fool would have seen that they were known to one another in an instant, and Meizu was no fool. He was a fool who never took the boy through the forges. Michio's training brought with it his father's heavy hand. Having it fall on himself was difficult enough to manage, but when it threatened to be brought down on another, the guilt he felt struck far deeper. Meizu never laid a hand on Yoji-Sama, but he grabbed hold of authority, as Michio had seen before, with intimidation. There were times more than others when the boy wished he could disappear. This was one of those times.

Having the hard part out of the way, however, Michio was to tell the bladesmith his order, except, he didn't know exactly how.

"Tell him, Michio, why you are here."

"Yoji-Sama..."

"So you know this man's name..."

Michio knew well enough what was coming. In fact, he didn't intend to use the man's name at all. If only he paid closer attention to his father's near rampage, he'd have anticipated as much. It was a foolish error. Luckily for his sake, he could be a bit of a liar, thanks to his training.

"The man who came to the door called him that. Just there," he said, pointing.

"What man?"

They were talking around Yoji-Sama, which Michio didn't care for. The boy looked to him for help and Yoji was a natural. His hands picked up tools that weren't there and they hammered imaginary nails. Then he mimed like someone eating from a bowl before pointing to the stall across the way.

"It looks like he's trying to say that man that uses tools went to eat something, Father." Michio ducked to make it look like he was looking for the man again.

"His stall is empty. I think that was him."

"Excuse us, please," Meizu asked of old Yoji. "We need to have a few words in private." But it didn't appear that he would be stepping outside with his boy, rather, he had asked the old man to

leave his own shop. What surprised Michio most was that he up and left, and he did so with a wink to the boy on his way through his own noren.

"Michio. What is going on here?"

"Nothing, Father. I heard that man call his name!"

"Which man, Michio?! That one. There!" with a whip of his hand, he snapped up the curtain so Michio could see the nailsmith back at his stall and hard at work. "Is he the one who left? For lunch? This early in the day? You take *me* for a fool, Michio?"

"No, honest..."

"Yuto-san!" Meizu called the man by name, which wasn't what Michio wanted to hear after pleading sincerity.

"Oy! Who is that?"

With another whip of the noren, and a duck and tug through, it was time for introductions.

The nailsmith made a deep bow. "Meizu-Sama!"

"Good morning, Yuto-san."

Michio didn't like where this was going.

"How is business?"

"Very good, Meizu-Sama. And who is this?"

"Oh. Yuto-san, this is my boy, Michio."

"Michio-san! It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Is it?" asked Meizu. "Tell me, Yuta-san," but he was eyeing his boy. "...how was your lunch?"

"Lunch, Meizu-Sama?! It's not near midday. No lunch breaks for me yet. Have you eaten? If you're hungry..."

"That'll do, Yuto-san. Thank you. Michio. Let's wait inside for Yoji-san to return, shall we?"

"I wonder where he's off to," said Yuto-san. "I didn't see him leave."



"Father, I..."

"We'll talk about it when we get home."

"But, Father, really, I..."

"End it."

Michio had hoped he was cutoff that time. He had a need to talk about it, but he couldn't find the right words. What he was afraid of were the words his father would find along the way back. The worst thing was not knowing.

"Besides, it was a long while ago, right?" asked his father.

Oh sure, he had stowed away to those parts within the month, but the while his father suspected was even longer. He had no reason to suspect otherwise; it would be absurd to think his seven-year-old son had the means to make such a trip. Sometimes a boy is forced to maintain a lie.

"And after today, we won't see this side of the island again. Where is this bladesman? I'm losing my patience."

After his words settled, in through the noren came someone rather unexpected.

"Mi..." both men raised their eyebrows. "...ster Fisher-Sama."

Michio remembered his training and how he learned to handle names. Mizuyo also asked that his name stay a secret from his father, and it wouldn't serve his back any better to be remembering anyone else.

"Oh. Hello, then," said the fisher. "What are we interrupting? You old flying fish bag! It's your fault, really. You always make us interrupt important business! I'm sorry, gentleman, about my bird." The old man leaned in like it was time for telling secrets, though he didn't speak any softer. "His brain is just a wee thing," and he topped it with a wink. He was met with a stare from one and a smile from the other. The man was known to the boy as Mizujin, Elder of the Water and his guide and guardian. He couldn't have come at a better time. To his father, he was a water-bound vagrant who had just stopped being a novelty and started sniffing a little too close.

"Who scared Yoji-san away?" asked the fisher.

His father wasn't talking, only staring. Michio figured he'd bite.

"What do you mean? He said he'd be right back," said Michio.

It was a silly thing to say because "...No, he didn't say a word. He doesn't speak, boyo. But he was headed out to the docks in a bit of a hurry."

"Well if he's gone, boy, we are going. Come on. Say good bye to your friend, here."

"No! You can't go. Not yet. Here, hold this," said Mizujin, handing Michio's father his bird. "I'll be right back. Don't" he pointed "drop it!"

Meizu's blood boiled, but he stopped dropping the bird after the third of fourth time. Hiroyuki squawked something fierce each time he had to jump back up.

"Play nice, you two," called the fisher. He was making quite a ruckus, banging around things he shouldn't have been banging. "Well I can't find it. Must mean it isn't here." All told, he hadn't really looked long. "He must've forgotten about me... Pigeon headed. Absolutely pigeon headed. Something's back there with your name on it, boyo. Who can blame him, really? Well I suppose I'd take orders from paying customers before old friends if I were him. But I'm not. Alright, sir, please unhand my bird. I'll be off."

Michio was far more amused than he should have been. Neither the boy nor his father offered parting remarks. "Thanks, sonny," the old fisher said to Meizu with a pinch of his cheek as he walked on out. Michio choked down a laugh.

Meizu moved after the boy when they were again alone, like somehow it was his doing. They were interrupted, though, as was old Mizuyo's sea song by the bladesmith's return. Yoji backed the fisher right in through the noren, in fact.

"We're back, it seems, boyo. And look! Look who we've found. I was just about to tell him you two were waiting, I was. And look. Here he is."

Meizu's stare cut Michio down. His father must have really needed him to get his blade. Michio accompanied him so far as a ship or a market, but he never saw his father actually working as a Yojimbo. The boy knew that his father's restraint was not far from ending.

What power and mastery Yoji-Sama had was paired with gentle ways. The old fisher was growing more animated, though, and was onto something about being hurried. Michio couldn't help but wonder if it was Mizuyo or Shimura that was hurrying Yoji along. When Yoji grabbed for his hands, however, as if speaking to a child, he calmed him.

Yoji wasn't long behind the curtain the first time. In fact, he must have known right where the old fisher's filet knife was shelved.

"Help them, old friend. We'll settle up after. Go on, boyo, you can ask him."

"With respect, gentlemen," Michio wasn't too sure how much respect his father actually offered, "this is a private matter."

"Is it, then?" asked the old fisher. "Don't worry about him... Who's he going to tell?!" It wasn't clear if he meant the bladesmith or the bird. Perhaps he meant both, but whatever it was, he thought himself clever.

Meizu tightened his eyes.

"Don't worry about me either, plum dumpling. I'll be going now. Keep an eye on him, boyo," he said, speaking past an angered Meizu. "He's a spicy one."

Both men left through opposing curtains. Meizu cursed under his breath. He clenched so tightly that he cracked his knuckles and then, side-to-side, he cracked his neck. It was subtle, but Michio saw that he touched his blade.

For a second time, Yoji-Sama wasn't long to re-emerge. Regardless of the wrappings, there was no mistaking that a completed and sheathed blade was in the package he held. Two words were what his father spoke. Two words were all he needed. Angry, humiliated, dangerous; not knowing why or how Yoji-Sama already had his blade, there were many more than two words to be spoken. Regardless, he was still Sōke. "Michio, kneel."

With just two words, Michio was entered into something sacred.

The bladesmith followed the boy to kneel after he placed down the sword; a small stand was set between them on the floor.

The cooling cloth on top of his head was replaced by a twisted, white headband above his brow. It wasn't much of a change, but enough that his white robes suited him more for a small ceremony. For the most part, Meizu left them to it, though there'd be conversing on the matter to come.

Yoji-Sama motioned and they both bowed to the blade. His story to Michio wasn't told with words, but his meaning was quite clear. He spoke of pride and heritage, of honor and respect, of discipline, of his father and Sōke, and of life. Again they bowed. With a hand, he asked that the boy remain still, and then Yoji-Sama bowed again. His hands followed him up in front of his face and then one final time, he bowed. Grabbing for the blade, kashira in hand, he turned it up. With patience, he unwound the cord wrap holding the doubled over pouch-end in place. They were

special knots that the Sōke would surely teach. After the cord came the tag that the fisher mentioned. Michio couldn't read well, but he knew that the tag said *For Michio*. The boy dared not turn to see what the Sōke had to say. In one sweep, with a steady hand, Yoji-Sama unbagged the boy's blade. Awe struck Michio before the reality of what was being bestowed.

It was a beautiful blade and it seemed to boast power in the hands of the bladesmith. It was a blade befitting a new warrior, but it was a warrior's blade, nonetheless. Michio could hardly wait to handle it.

Yoji's black lacquer work was unparalleled. From where the boy sat, he could see the stretched image of his reflected, kneeling self. A short, neatly tied sageo was the man's handhold while he popped the blade forward with his thumb. Every inch of his father's blade was known to the boy, and his own had a familiar shine. Only the mune rode the saya; not another stitch of steel touched while he whipped the blade from its home. Even in the morning, Yoji's stall was dark, and even in the dark, the blade shone bright. Not a fleck of dust or printed finger marred the finish. The Yurutō looked at the same time to be hot and cold. Steel was only hardened to kill. Yoji-Sama was about to pass much more than a blade to a boy.

Following final scrutiny, the smith was sure of his work.

The blade was soundless coasting into the saya, but it locked with a solid, sturdy clunk. It was coasted back down to the resting stand by a solid, sturdy hand. Yoji-Sama motioned before he bowed for the boy to join. He motioned once more, and the blade belonged to Michio.

Gone was the bladesman and gone was his hearth. Gone were his bucket and all of his tools. Gone were the noren to the back and the front. And gone was the chatter of those just outside. What was most important was that gone was the Sōke from the young student's shoulders and gone was his father from bothering his mind. In that moment, Michio sat as he should have, alone.

His hand stretched out, unsure at first, as waiting for warmth from a flame. The first touch to the cord wrappings told him of their texture and that it was a safe spot to hold. It was exactly the right size around for his hand. Michio could feel the weight and balance before he hefted it from its stand. Michio's Yurutō felt keener, sharper in his hand than his father's. Within its saya, even, it sliced through the air. With as sure a hand as Yoji-Sama, Michio removed the scabbard and peeled forth the precious blade. A pinging, singing hum resounded all around. There was energy coursing through him, like when he summoned his best kata. He inspected the edge like his Sōke taught. Just like his Sōke's, the ha disappeared. He marveled at the thickness of the spine, and how, unlike his father's, his hamon was crested like a wave. The line that the bladesmith crafted between the smoked and mirrored finishes would serve to remind him of, oddly enough, his fisher friend. But what was most striking to the boy was the etched dragonfly atop the black oval tsuba. When he first dreamt of the day he got his blade, he dreamt of slicing through one just like it. It was an image that stuck with him, and one he'd wondered whether he should tell old Mizuyo-san about. Now he had no choice.

The blade was hammered home, and with it came crashing back everything around young Michio. He was one major step closer to becoming a Yoru. With blade in hand, his real training was about to begin. But the first words he heard weren't really words at all. Hiroyuki squawked from somewhere just outside. Though sometimes unseen, Mizuyo-san wasn't ever very far. He was also often quick to translate for his companion.

"He says *good luck*, Boyo. He seems to think you'll need it." It sounded like he was sitting. Maybe in the road. "What do you mean, that's not what you meant? You said it, not me..."

Michio found comfort in the way those two argued.

"Michio, we are through here, let's go," barked his father.

"Not," said the fisher as he parted his way in through the noren, "until he pays the man."

Mizuyo caught a deathly stare from Meizu who reached in for his purse.

"No, no. Your money is still no good here, Mr. Endo. But this time, the boy can pay...right boy?" said a fisher that his father never met. He said it as he patted his pocket to jog Michio's memory.

Michio still had the two coins that Nobuo-san wouldn't collect; the two that his honesty with Shimura earned him. They were the same two coins that would have afforded him far more than the fish they ate. A blade, though, and possibly some change, would have easily been covered. Everyone was back standing again and all of their eyes were on the boy. He promptly slid through his belt the blade he was about to pay for from his own pocket.

"Yoji-Sama, please accept these coins as payment."

Yoji-Sama motioned his money away, though, as if it was a gift.

"But blade maker, the boy insists," added the fisher, with newfound sincerity. "Go ahead, boyo, you can pay him."

They never discussed a price and one wasn't marked anywhere for Michio to see. He at least had faith that Mizuyo-san wouldn't be guiding him astray. Michio neatly folded the coins back into their rice paper wrapping. With his hands folded, he passed them forward as he bowed. Yoji-Sama was hesitant, but at the boy's request, he took payment.

Meizu was seething about a great many things, but he was hottest that the boy overpaid. Yoji's eyes opened wide when he realized by how much. He tried to give back the heavier of the two coins, and Meizu tried to let him, but it wasn't the fisher or his bird that insisted. For Michio, it was a clever way of not owing his father full obedience to the most difficult ways ahead. By rights, he should have a say now. For an Elder, it was a clever way of not interfering with that.

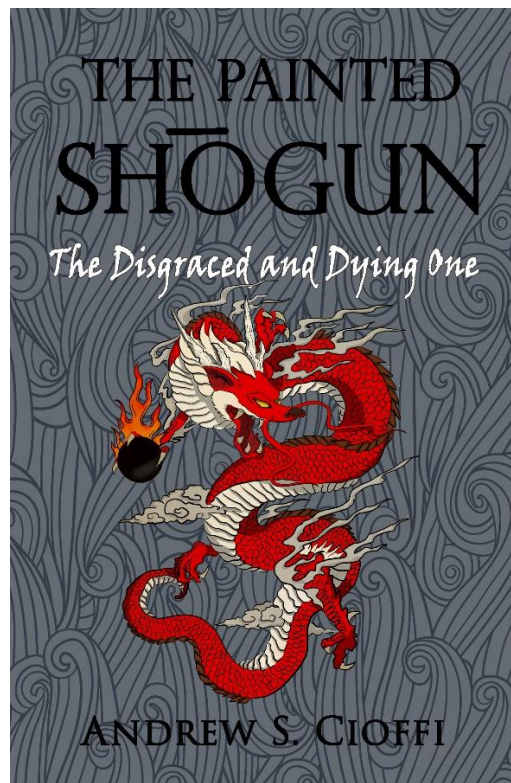
# The Painted Shōgun

BOOK II

The Disgraced and Dying One

ANDREW S. CIOFFI

**AVAILABLE NOW – Paperback and Kindle**



Link to [The Painted Shogun on Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1496714444)

Author's page <http://andrew-s-cioffi.com/>

Other Works by Andrew S Cioffi – Available Now

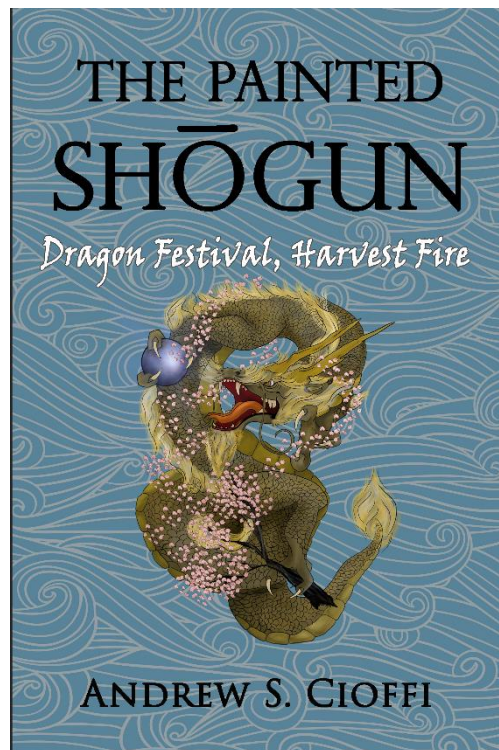
# The Painted Shōgun

BOOK I

Dragon Festival, Harvest Fire

ANDREW S. CIOFFI

**AVAILABLE NOW – Paperback and Kindle**



Link to [The Painted Shogun on Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B000APR004)

Author's page <http://andrew-s-cioffi.com/>



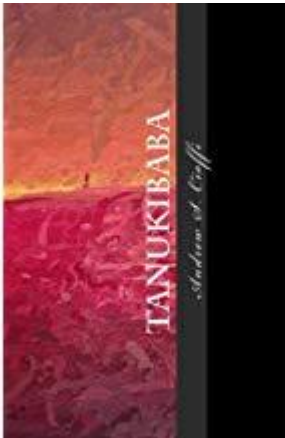


## Mori No Akuma – Forest Demons

Four traditional Japanese ghost stories from the world of The Painted Shogun

Link to [Mori No Akuma on Amazon.com](http://MoriNoAkumaonAmazon.com)

Available for FREE at <http://andrew-s-cioffi.com/free-books/>

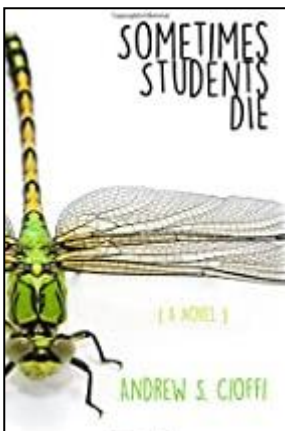


## Tanukibaba – The Cunning Old Witch *A Novelette*

A traditional fairy tale from the world of The Painted Shogun

Link to [Tanukibaba on Amazon.com](http://TanukibabaaonAmazon.com)

Available for FREE at <http://andrew-s-cioffi.com/free-books/>



## Sometimes Students Die

Losing a student to suicide is the hardest thing that any educator will face. Minho Park had an uncommon charisma that made his passing all the more painful. No amount of training could prepare his advisor, Peter Cahill, to receive a letter asking that he help Min's family understand. The problem is, they live in Tokyo. Hiding behind the dying wish of a boy he barely knew. Peter leaves his wife and unborn son to chase a life-long dream of seeing Japan. What begins as an attempt to retreat becomes a soul-search for the lengths that one man will travel in the name of his son by helping a broken family put theirs to rest.

Link to [Sometimes Students Die on Amazon.com](http://SometimesStudentsDieonAmazon.com)

First Six Chapters for FREE at <http://andrew-s-cioffi.com/sometimes-students-die/>