

MEET THE CHAMPIONS

Champions of Kamigawa

Mountain Secret

Jay Moldenhauer-Salazar

Ryusaki Kumano shuffled weakly across the small rocky plateau, away from the shelter of the mountainside. He did not relish this visit to the jagged ledge, where wind shrieked and threatened to throw him onto the pass below.

Gnarled, black eyebrows bunched together as Kumano gazed over the ledge. A mile below he could see four figures – one quite large – moving ponderously slow through the icy mountain pass. The pass, winding its way through stripped granite, led only to Kumano. He could feel the magical wards he had set crumple at the group approached. Kumano sighed, sending a burst of mist into the wind. He had come to dread these sporadic visits always shrouded in mystery. Nothing to do now but wait.

Kumano's fur cloak flapped wildly as he backed from the ledge. He clutched feebly at his garments. Wind bit through the heavy buffalo-skin cloak, through tight *haori* jacket and baggy *suzukake* trousers, through calloused skin, and seemingly through his very spine.



Snow and ice crunched beneath him as Kumano crossed the plateau on gaunt legs. His stooped form collapsed before a crude wooden altar set against the mountainside. The altar consisted of wooden planks fitted together, two as legs and one horizontal to hold offerings. Two objects lay atop the altar, a iron-ringed staff of Kumano's height and a conch shell smaller than his fist. Both objects shuddered each time the wind surged.

Bending his fur-capped head to the altar, Kumano began the meditative exercises that filled most of his days. At first he concentrated on silence, pushing the howling wind and numbing cold away. In the silence, he sought images. Kumano could see, through closed eyes, flames and lightning dancing until they became one. Sound joined images. Thunder and the roar of raging fire built in his ears. Kumano slowed his breathing as the scene filled him. He let himself be buffeted by the fire and lightning, riding them in his mind like a raft adrift. With his magic, studied and perfected throughout a long life, cold and starvation could batter Kumano but not kill him. He had survived years atop the craggy plateau with nothing but his altar and his practices of focused will.

But the day's visitors required more than survival. Kumano called on the rage of the fire, the decisiveness of the lightning to fill him utterly. His thin body swelled with strength. Stooped shoulders straightened and broadened. Gaunt face became chiseled and strong. Hands clenched to mighty fists. And still the power of the fire and the lightning flowed, consuming him.

Time passed – though how much time he could not say - and Kumano opened his iron-colored eyes. He stood, transformed from teetering hermit to true *yamabushi* warrior priest, and surveyed his surroundings.

Few ventured to such heights in the Sokenzan Mountains beautiful but for the awe they inspired. All hope of life had been stolen by the constant, icy wind. What remained was jagged rock reaching upwards at violent angles and covered by snow. Above him lay the bleak white spire of Untaidake Peak, rising like the polished bones of some fallen giant. The only reminder to Kumano that color existed in the world was the dome of blue sky overhead. But Kumano seldom looked up. Since beginning his self-imposed isolation, he had found strength in the terrible enormity of Sokenzan. He felt the presence of the rock around him as family, the wind as the voice of a dear friend. He regretted that these mysterious visitors would interrupt his exploration of this deepening connection.



Thunderous footsteps, a heavy *foom foom*, echoed in the mountain pass. Casually, Kumano plucked the ringed staff from atop the altar and donned the conch on a leather cord beneath his cloak. The steps continued, slow and unbroken. *Foom foom*. Kumano lifted the staff, swinging it experimentally through the wind. *Foom foom*. He could hear other noises besides the heavy footfalls rise - a scampering, skittering set of noises like several sets of teeth chattering. *Foom foom*. Kumano turned to face the barren outcropping where the winding mountain pass met his small plateau. *Foom foom*. Soon after, his visitors stalked into view.

The first arrivals each walked on three long, furry legs whose knees towered at least six feet from the ground and whose spindly thighs angled downward to meet a hideous head. The creatures had no bodies nor arms. In some ways, Kumano observed, they were like enormous spiders with half of their legs plucked away. They moved like wounded spiders as well, hopping awkwardly through the crusted snow on clawed feet.

One spider-thing climbing over the rocky outcropping was a drab gray, its furred legs connecting to the head of a cadaverously-old man. The next creature was white, its legs blending with the snow and leading to one lidless orange eye. The last, entirely black with a featureless head in the shape of a man's, scabbled to join its mates. Each of the monstrosities dragged behind it a heavy iron chain, pulling the final visitor, with its booming footsteps, up the pass.

Kumano swallowed hard. Towering twenty feet into the air, a barrel-chested crocodile and wearing a black kimono loomed over the ledge. Its red scales glistened like rubies in the day's light and cast a faint glow on the surrounding snow. Eight massively-muscled arms stretched out from its body in all directions. One of the clawed hands, easily as big as Kumano's torso, held the ends of the three chains. Two other hands wielded a black tetsubo taller than the creature itself, its broad blade the size of a small fishing boat. The remaining arms danced intricately through the air, claws snapping. In a great arc over the crocodile's head floated a series of disembodied mouths, all translucent and with orange lips pressed firmly shut.

Kami, Kumano reflected unhappily.

"Greetings Kumano, fabled *yamabushi* of the mountains," the crocodile intoned, its voice like an avalanche, "I am glad to find you alive in spite of rumors. I am Kakkazan, Great Kami of the Mountain Fire. I have brought the Kami of Ash, Searing Wind, and Black Glass in my quest for you."

Kumano bowed ceremoniously but said nothing to Kakkazan's apparent surprise. The giant kami cleared its throat with an irritated rumble.

"I am told you hold the secret to O-Kagachi's rage." The wind gusted fiercely for a moment and the mountainside seemed to scream. The great kami paused and Kumano stared back, silent and unblinking though his heart sank. Others had made this claim. He knew what demands would follow.

"I am also told that kami both minor and great have come to you seeking this secret that will save your world from our wrath." A pause, and Kumano remained silent, frowning. "Finally, I am told that none of these kami have returned from this mountaintop, either with your secret or without."

Kumano sighed, the mist stolen by the wind, and he squared his broad shoulders. Between he and Kakkazan, the three minor kami danced awkwardly at the end of their chains. Kumano wished he could stop the great kami from speaking its next words.

"Kumano, Master Yamabushi" Kakkazan boomed, "I demand this secret you have held from my kind. And I demand you speak it to me now."

Kumano inhaled as wind cried across the plateau. Still frowning, he spoke from a throat that had not been used in months.

"Great Kami of the Mountain Fire," he said hoarsely, "I regret to tell you that you have been given misinformation. I would ask you to tell me who gave you this misinformation."



Kakkazan growled. "The means matter little, human. Tell me the secret. Now."

Kumano cleared his dry throat. "I will gladly tell you all I know, but I am afraid it will be of little use. Years ago, I traveled to this remote place in order to meditate on our world's troubles. It is true that I have seen visitors during these years, and, yes, these visitors were of the spirit world, all demanding answers as you have demanded of me. They all refused to believe my ignorance, and so these encounters regrettably ended in death." Kakkazan growled at that, but Kumano continued undeterred.

"Yet I will try again, and I will say what I have said to those before you." Kumano's next words were spoken slowly and with care to be heard over the wind. "I did not climb this mountain with secrets, nor have I found them since arriving. We can speak of the cold and rock, for it is all I have known these past years. I even suspect you can address some questions I have about the rock, with whom I now feel some kinship. But I have no secrets to share, Kakkazan, only complaints of old bones and weary reflections. I cannot help you."

"You seek to defend he who has brought the wrath of O-Kagachi?" the kami bellowed incredulously. The three other kami chattered and scampered around the outcropping, hopping in apparent fury.

Kumano raised his hand imploringly. "I seek to defend no one. I hold no love for Konda and would gladly see his crime punished severely. He is a glory-hungry madman. I merely tell you that I am not the key to his undoing despite what you have heard. If you will not tell me who has led you astray, I beg you to leave me and share the news that I know nothing of worth."

Now it was Kakkazan who remained silent, yet it was a terrible, roiling silence. Kumano stifled another sigh. He had said the same to other kami, and he suspected he knew the result. Kumano decided to try his plea again.

"If you would tell me--" he began, but Kakkazan's roar stole any other thought.

"You have brought death to yourself on this day! I shall delight in charring your flesh!" With a flick of one massive wrist, Kakkazan released the three chains from its grip.

The three kami surged forward as the chains vanished in smoke. The Kami of Ash, its gray legs befooling the snow as it moved, planted a clawed foot to either side of Kumano and lowered its head. The face of an elderly man, its shaggy brows creased in anger, opened a toothless mouth in mute fury. The mouth grew impossibly large as the kami's head lowered, and in one motion it had swallowed Kumano whole.

Utter darkness surrounded him. Yet in a heartbeat Kumano's entire body crackled with a bright yellow fire. The flames danced along his arms to the ringed staff, which he swung overhead.

Something screamed and the darkness collapsed like a paper hut being shredded around him. Pieces of ash flew in every direction, littering the stone outcropping.

Kumano continued the swing of his now-fiery staff to strike the oncoming Kami of Black Glass. A sound like a blacksmith's hammer echoed down the valley, and the featureless head staggered backwards on black spider-legs.

A sharp whistling to Kumano's right signaled the Kami of Searing Wind's attack. The lidless orange eye glowed with a bright light that streamed outward in a cone of brilliance. The light washed over him, burning into his clothes.



Kumano held up a palm to the light and spoke a word of magic. Instantly, where the beam struck his hand it fractured into a thousand smaller parts. The plateau flared with light as the creature continued its blinding assault upon Kumano's shield.

Another word from Kumano, and he thrust his staff upwards. Though the weapon struck only air, the icy rock above the kami rumbled. A moment later the eyeball disappeared under a shower of snow and rock from above. The sudden avalanche covered nearly a third of the plateau and left a single white-furred leg exposed and limp.

A black claw struck him hard across the cheek. Kumano rolled with the blow although spots danced in front of his eyes. The Kami of Black Glass struck again and this time Kumano parried from one knee. Another hammer-strike echoed down the valley.

Kumano blocked blow after blow from the kami, moving backwards until his back flattened against the mountainside. Another clawed thrust and Kumano ducked, the black leg embedding in barren rock. As the Kami of Black Glass struggled to free itself, Kumano's fiery staff cleaved the featureless head in two.

As each half of the kami fell, new legs snaked outward like bamboo shoots. Kumano grimaced as he now faced two Kami of Black Glass, smaller than the original yet identical.

Kumano swung his fiery staff in a torrent of blows. He thundered a battle cry as his weapon clove black legs and heads to pieces. Each time, new legs grew, new kami rose, and he struck again and again. Ten kami became twenty, and twenty became forty, each smaller and smaller as Kumano swung his staff like a scythe. When only shards remained, littering the plateau and beginning to rise, Kumano dropped to one knee. With a shout he released a ring of fire outwards. The black kami sizzled and burned as they were swept off the plateau and into the howling wind.

Kakkazan did not allow Kumano to savor his triumph. With a mighty roar, the Great Kami swung the enormous *tetsubo* into Kumano's ribs. The warrior priest grunted as he flew sideways like a limp doll into the mountainside. Bones crunched against unyielding rock.

Then he was falling into open air, the attack having thrown him off of the plateau. Kumano faced upwards, seeing nothing but the blue sky. Cold wind screamed in his ears.

A shadow quickly blocked out Kumano's view as Kakkazan launched its twenty-foot bulk in pursuit. Kumano felt only the wind whipping at his charred clothing and saw only the Great Kami of Mountain Fire, its horrible glowing form growing with each passing moment.

Kumano struck the earth with a grunt and an explosion of snow. Less than a heartbeat later, Kakkazan crashed atop him. The Great Kami slashed with claws and sweeping strokes of its polearm, cleaving snow, ice, and rock alike. Kumano spoke a word to the stone beneath his back, and the mountain enveloped him.

For a moment there was blackness, and after a whispered word of thanks from Kumano the rock spit him onto a ledge. Kumano now stood fifty feet from the kami's immense, crouched form.

Kakkazan had stopped its assault to look wonderingly at blood and tattered clothing that littered the remains of the rock. Kumano raised his staff. Instead of yellow fire, it crackled in glowing blue.

"Where are you, warrior priest--" The kami began, then groaned as lightning struck from above. Another bolt flashed, and another, each dotting Kakkazan's ruby scales with a blackened dent. The kami whirled, its reptilian eyes searching, until it found Kumano.

The *yamabushi's* staff arced electricity first into the sky, and then down on the kami in brilliant threads of lightning. Again the lightning struck. And again. Kakkazan raised several arms as a futile shield.

Yet the attack was tiring Kumano beyond fatigue. He could feel the raging fire in him trembling. Lightning flashed at more sporadic intervals. For an entire breath, it halted altogether.

"No more!" Kakkazan thundered, "NO MORE!"

The kami's broad tail thrashed, sending a spray of snow into the air. At once, the arc of mouths surrounding Kakkazan pressed their lips tight and then opened in a roaring scream. They screamed fire.



Kumano hurriedly cast a shield of rock before him that melted to slag in an eyeblink. A torrent of flame engulfed him. At first, his magical resistance to the elements held. He could see nothing but the dancing inferno, feel the distant heat. He was aware of the conch shell at his breast glowing and holding the fire at bay. Yet Kumano's protections weakened quickly. The heat rose. Fire began to sear his skin. The blaze continued, and then Kumano could see and hear nothing but his own pain. Flesh blistered. Kumano Ryusaki gasped a final prayer to the rock that had sheltered him and the wind that had befriended him these past years. He fell to one knee.

Then, like a candle sputtering out, the fire ceased.

Kumano's ears hissed with the absent roar. He blinked through bloodshot eyes.

Charred, blackened rock stretched twenty feet around him. Where there was once snow, tendrils of smoke rose and were stolen by the wind.

Kakkazan glowered with unmasked hatred, his bulk swaying unsteadily. The mouths floating around him still opened, gasping mist. The crocodile body, once so solid and imposing, now seemed like a mirage. Kakkazan drifted transparently, the rock and snow clearly visible behind him.

Kumano smiled with cracked lips. "You have used up your power in this world," he rasped, "We will have to continue our conversation at a later time, I fear." He coughed blood.

"Indeed," Kakkazan growled, its voice a distant echo, "do not believe this is an end, Kumano. Your secret..." it began, and then was gone.

"Tell them," Kumano croaked to open air. "Tell them I know nothing."

He collapsed onto the smoking rock, shuddering and retching. Black fingernails stroked the wounded stone.

* * *

Two days later, when Kumano could stand, he gathered his singed staff and scarred conch shell. Nearly naked and again a stooped hermit, it would be a slow, painful climb down the Sokenzan Mountains.

Kumano glanced upwards at his home these past years and then surveyed the Sokenzan peaks. "Kakkazan was correct," he whispered painfully. "Our battle was a beginning. It is long past time to uncover who has been telling the kami I hold a secret and why. I will return, noble mountains, with answers and a head hanging from me belt." One shuffling step across the black rock and he winced in agony.

The only response amidst the barren rock was a wild gust of wind, its cold biting at his spine.

[About Us](#) | [Jobs](#) | [New to the Game?](#) | [Inside Wizards](#) | [Find a Store](#) | [Press](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#)

© 1995-2007 Wizards of the Coast, Inc., a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) - [Privacy Statement](#)

