

THE RONIN OF TIME *An Eighth Doctor Story, set during the Time War before The Sontaran Ordeal*

By Ben Wan

1607, Japan. A once legendary ronin (masterless samurai) now lives as a farm hand, sleeping in a barn. His old rival, Shishido, finally tracks him down, wakes him up, and challenges him to a duel for the next day. The ronin quickly accepts and asks to be left alone so he can sleep, leaving witnesses to think he's confident in his victory. Deep down, however, he's terrified. Shishido isn't a fellow swordsman. He uses a *kusarigama* sickle with a chain that can easily wrap and pull away any sword. No swordsman has walked away from him alive and this duel may be the ronin's last.

As he tries to devise a strategy, a strange sound interrupts him. The ronin investigates to find a giant blue box. A man with an odd complexion and funny clothes walks out, talking *to* the box on how the "Time Lords won't think to find us in this era." The ronin pulls out his sword, demanding to know who he is. The Doctor introduces himself and the ronin notes how unfazed he appears to be under the threat of a sword. He deduces that the Doctor must be a "great warrior," which the Doctor vehemently denies. The ronin, however, asks the Doctor for help in defeating Shishido. Once he hears the name "Shishido," the Doctor quickly changes his tune, agreeing to help later that day. The ronin returns to the barn, grateful, as the Doctor goes into the TARDIS to verify his suspicions on what events in history are about to take place.

The ronin meets the Doctor in a field, prepared to learn, only for the Doctor to insist that the samurai teach *him* the way of the sword first. The ronin is confused, but agrees, letting the Doctor use his spare sword; a *wakizashi* that he took from his opponent in his last victory. But both the ronin and the Doctor are stubborn in their ways. The ronin puts his faith in his sword techniques while the Doctor believes that the *mind* is the most powerful weapon, employing tactics that the ronin considers to be cheating. They butt heads until the ronin grows frustrated and leaves.

Later, the Doctor tracks down the ronin at a local inn and apologizes. He had hoped that, by taking the role of a teacher, the ronin would remember his own skills and gain the confidence to face Shishido. But all it did was make him second guess himself more. The ronin asks how the Doctor can perceive so much about him and the Doctor shares that he, too, is terrified of an upcoming conflict in his own life: The Time War. He's been trying to avoid it, but he knows he'll have to face it eventually. The ronin tells him that this is not the way of the warrior. One must be prepared to go into battle, even if that means death. The Doctor says that this sounds awfully like the Sontarans. The ronin, confused, says he's not familiar with that clan. He shares his code: better to face death head-on than live like a coward. The Doctor takes this into consideration as the ronin stops what he's saying, realizing he *is* prepared to take on Shishido after all. He just needed a reminder of his willingness to die in battle.

The next day, the Doctor witnesses the ronin duel against Shishido. As expected, Shishido wraps his chain around the sword, but the ronin surprises him by unsheathing a hidden *second* sword: the *wakizashi*. He outsmarts and defeats his opponent, proving that the Doctor was right. His mind *is* his most powerful weapon.

The Doctor pilots the TARDIS away, excited that he was just trained in swordsmanship by the famous ronin *Miyamoto Musashi*.¹ His plan worked; earlier in the TARDIS, he learned that a "time ripple" from the Time War had dislodged Musashi's 1607 victory from being a fixed point in time, leaving the ronin's fate in flux. Without Musashi's legacy, decades of military strategy would have come undone. By giving him the confidence to defeat Shishido, he ensured that Musashi would live on to write *The Book of Five Rings*, a handbook teaching generations of martial artists and military strategists. The Doctor isn't a fan of combat, but he knows Musashi's place in human history. In fact, he *always* knows the future of the people of Earth. But what of his *own* future? He thinks back to Musashi's words on facing conflict, rather than avoiding it. He takes a breath and sets the coordinates for the thick of the Time War, ready for what lies ahead. He muses that maybe he's become a bit of a ronin himself. A ronin of time.

¹ "I was trained by Musashi himself..." - The Eighth Doctor, *The Sontaran Ordeal*

Opening Excerpt- Ben Wan

He was a man of legend. Without a home. Wandering from conflict to conflict. Naturally, he had made enemies.

After all, a man with no enemies could never be a true samurai. But the ronin was not the samurai he used to be. It had been three years since his last battle. His bed was now a pile of hay in the back of a barn, whose owner had put him to work as a farm hand. His *katana* was merely dead weight against his hip. To the town of Edo, he was merely a peasant, nothing more. Until now.

The kick in the ribs had awakened him. The ronin immediately rolled over, hands gripped on the *katana* that he always kept by his bedside. In front of him stood a sneering giant of a man who sent a chill straight to the ronin's heart. It had been years since they last laid eyes on each other. Back then, Shishido had sworn that the next time would be on the battlefield. Now here he was. And he wasn't alone. Behind him stood a crowd of familiar faces. All of the ronin's neighbors. Shishido had probably told the rest of Edo who he was and led them over to the barn. The ronin relaxed his grip on the *katana*. Shishido wouldn't kill him in an ambush like this. There'd be no honor in that.

"So...it *is* you," sneered Shishido before he spat the ronin's name with venom. Yes, *that* name. Gone were the times when people shuddered at the very mention of it. Now, that name only reminded him of who he used to be. "Too long I've spent trying to find you," declared the rival. "A pity. Now, it'd be a waste to challenge you."

"You're probably right," said the ronin. To the amazement of the crowd, he turned his back and lay down in the hay as if nothing had happened. The crowd burst into laughter. Shishido fumed. "I'm not finished!"

"You talk too much," replied the ronin. Shishido's face turned redder. "Tomorrow! At this hour, in the field there! Do you accept?!" The ronin raised his head. He had been waiting for the customary challenge to come. Now that it was here, he had no choice. "Accepted. Now if you're done, I'd like to go back to sleep." Shishido stormed off as the crowd whispered to themselves. *Did you see how the farm hand turned his back on Shishido? He must be confident in his victory.*

But as the ronin closed his eyes, he knew the truth: he wasn't confident. He was *terrified*. For Shishido was not his usual opponent. He was a master of the *kusarigama* sickle. The sickle itself wasn't the problem, though. It was the chain attached to it. Shishido had developed a reputation for wrapping the chain around his opponent's sword, pulling it away, and slaying his enemy with a slice of his sickle. No swordsman had walked away from him alive.

The ronin tossed and turned in the hay, ignoring the growling from his stomach as he tried to think of a strategy. Would this be his final duel? Would he survive? Soon, the growling grew louder, almost sounding like the scraping of steel.

The ronin opened his eyes. That wasn't his stomach. It was coming from outside. With his hand over his *katana*, the ronin peeked out of the stable. Perhaps Shishido had wanted to duel early.

But it wasn't Shishido. Outside was a strange, giant blue box. Was he *that* unfocused these days that he never noticed it there earlier? Before he could think, a man emerged from the box. A man unlike any he had seen before. His hair was not long and black, it was short and brown, like the color of earth. His facial features were strange and his clothes looked oddly formal and informal at the same time. But strangest of all was that he appeared to be...talking *to* the box?

"Well done, old girl. I doubt the Time Lords will think to find us in *this* era..." The stranger suddenly stopped as he spotted the ronin. "Oh, hello." The ronin reacted the only way he knew how. Within seconds, he closed the distance and unsheathed the *katana*, his blade stopping a hair away from the stranger's throat...