

## DOCTOR WHO SHORT TRIPS: THE RONIN OF TIME

A Fan Made Audio

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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 Miyamoto Musashi was not the samurai he used to be.

Three years ago, he had single handedly defeated the entire Yoshioka clan with only his *katana* and his strategic mind.

But now? Now his *katana* was merely dead weight against his hip. His bed was a pile of hay in the back of a barn, whose owner had put him to work as a farm hand. To the city of Edo, he was merely a peasant, nothing more.

Until now.

The kick in the ribs had awakened him. Musashi immediately rolled over, hands gripped on the *katana* he always kept by his side.

In front of him stood a sneering giant of a man. The sight sent a chill straight to Musashi's heart, for he knew it was Shishido.

It had been years since they had last laid eyes on each other. Back then, Shishido had sworn that the next time they met, it would be on the battlefield. Now here he was. And he wasn't alone.

Behind his enemy stood a crowd of familiar faces. All of Musashi's neighbors. Shishido had probably told the rest of Edo who he was and led them over to the barn.

Musashi relaxed his grip on the *katana*. Shishido wouldn't kill him here. Not in a public ambush. There'd be no honor in that.

"So...it *is* you. *Musashi*," sneered Shishido as he spat the name with venom. Yes, *that* name. Gone were the times when people shuddered at the very mention of it. Now, the name "Miyamoto Musashi" only reminded him of who he used to be.

"Too long I've spent trying to find you. A pity." Shishido glanced him up and down. "Now, it'd be a waste to challenge you."

"You're probably right," said Musashi. 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 Musashi.

Shishido's face turned redder. "Tomorrow! At this hour, in the field there! Do you accept?!" Musashi 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 he turned his back on Shishido? He must be confident in his victory.*

But as Musashi closed his eyes, he knew the truth: he wasn't confident. He was *terrified*. For Shishido was not his usual opponent.

Shishido was a master of the *kusarigama* sickle. But the sickle itself wasn't the problem. It was the chain attached to it.

Over the past few years, Shishido had developed a reputation. He would wrap the chain around his opponent's sword, pull it away, and slay his enemy with a slice of his sickle. All within seconds.

He had been so accurate, in fact, that people spoke of swords literally flying out of his opponents' hands. Whether or not it was true, one thing was certain: no ronin had walked away from Shishido alive. Because of his unbeatable reputation, Shishido even had the audacity to have the chain made in *gold*. Musashi could see the tactical advantage in that, however. The gold could create more of a glare from the sun to blind the opponent.

*But what could **he** do against it?* The image of facing that chain kept Musashi awake. He 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.

Musashi opened his eyes. That wasn't his stomach. It was coming from outside. With his hand over the *katana*, he 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 earlier? Before he could think, a man emerged from it.

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 those of a foreigner 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. Now let's see what this time ripple could be..." The stranger suddenly stopped as he spotted Musashi. "Oh, hello."

Musashi 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.

"Who are you?"

The stranger held up his hands. To Musashi's surprise, he looked remarkably calm. Almost as if he were used to having a weapon thrust into his face.

"That's an awfully rude way to greet a man. I'm the Doctor."

(That meant nothing to Musashi. He had no need for a doctor.) "I'd ask 'how do you do,' but I think your *katana* answers that for me. The so-called Doctor eyed the blade.

Curious, Musashi studied the stranger's face. This wasn't a foe. He carried no weapon on him nor had he made any attempts to reach for one. Yet something about him was deceptively dangerous. An eerie calmness under pressure. One that pointed to a lifetime more experience in combat than he had faced himself.

"You do not cower in the face of danger."

"Well, I'd certainly hope not."

"You are a great warrior, then."

"Now, I didn't say that..."

"Do not deny it. I know one when I see one."

"Well I'm afraid you're wrong. Now, I'm sorry to have bothered you, but I think I should be on my way." The Doctor stepped back, as if planning to return to his box.

"Wait." Suddenly, Musashi lowered the *katana*. If this man was a warrior, perhaps he could guide him. Perhaps he'd know how to defeat Shishido.

"I did not mean to offend you. I seek guidance."

The Doctor studied him more closely. "Well, now that you asked nicely, perhaps I could see what I could do."

"Do you know how to defeat a *kusarigama* sickle?" asked Musashi.

"Sickles? Not really my area, I'm afraid," said the Doctor.

"But surely you have a weapon of choice."

The Doctor shook his head. "Again, not my area." Musashi looked surprised. A warrior without weapons was either a complete fool or a powerful warrior indeed. The Doctor continued. "As far as I'm concerned, the best weapon is the mind."

"Ah. That, I can respect." Musashi sheathed his *katana* and bowed. "It is an honor to meet you, Doctor. I am Miyamoto Musashi."

"Miyamoto—" Suddenly, the Doctor looked at him with interest. "Oh, of course! Miyamoto Musashi! It's an honor."

"It is?" The Doctor's sudden enthusiasm seemed to come from out of nowhere as he bowed in return.

"Yes, of course it is. Now, what did you say about sickles?"

"My opponent, he wields a *kusarigama* sickle. He has remained undefeated."

"Is that so?" wondered The Doctor out loud. His eyes peered into Musashi's. They were a strange blue color. Not brown like others he knew. "And you're afraid you won't be able to defeat him."

Musashi looked surprised. This man hadn't just looked into his eyes. He had read his soul. "How do you know this?!" he blurted out.

"Chalk it up to experience in conflict. Have you noticed anything unusual recently? Anything that doesn't belong?"

"Yes."

"And what would that be?"

"You. And your...cabinet."

"Oh yes. But besides that. See, I've been following a time ripple." He noticed Musashi's blank expression, then backtracked. "It's a bit complicated to explain, but basically, something's here that shouldn't be. Something that doesn't belong. And I get the feeling your duel and my time ripple are connected." The Doctor locked the blue box behind him. "Come along. We'll devise a strategy. You are a student of strategy, aren't you?"

Again, Musashi felt as if the Doctor had read his soul. The mysterious outsider walked past him and the ronin strangely found himself compelled to follow, wondering what had sparked the Doctor's newfound interest in him.

To the Doctor, however, this was no mystery. For the man walking by his side was the most famous samurai of all time.

*Miyamoto Musashi*. Teacher of the School of Two Swords, but more importantly, author of *The Book of Five Rings*; the strategy handbook that would inspire martial artists and military leaders for centuries to come on Earth. Of course, he wouldn't write that for decades. *This* Musashi was much younger. Still in his twenties.

Then it struck him. The TARDIS had told him that a time ripple was dislodging a fixed point in time and threatening to undo the future of the planet.

Just like all the other ripples that came from the Time War. If anything was going to create an impact on the future, it'd likely involve Musashi.

Without him, there'd be no *Book of Five Rings*. And without a *Book of Five Rings*, who knows how many martial artists would have different fates? How many military leaders would have been defeated? How many wars would be lost? The Doctor was certainly no fan of war. But it had its own place in human history.

Musashi *had* to be at the center of it. But if nothing unusual was happening in his life, then the Doctor had to think of a different source. "Tell me what you know about your opponent, Musashi. What's his name?"

"Shishido."

"Fascinating."

"So you've heard of him."

"Well not exactly," replied the Doctor. From his knowledge, Musashi had over sixty duels in his career. But the one against Shishido in 1607 was barely significant. Not nearly as famous as the three duels against the Yoshioka clan from years before. Or the duel against Sasaki Kojiro in the

years to come. Musashi's duel with Shishido was less of a legend and more of a footnote.

But the fact that the time ripple brought him here could only mean one thing: Musashi was in danger of losing both the duel and his life.

"Shishido is a dangerous ronin. Undefeated. A master in the *kusarigama*, but mostly with the chain. It has never missed a sword."

"Never? Seems unlikely..."

"He has great power. They say swords fly out of the hands of the men he faces. This is why I seek guidance."

The Doctor thought over how to respond. Musashi would not be able to understand the full extent of the time ripple. Nor could he know about *The Book of Five Rings* when he was decades away from writing it. Right now, the ronin's only interest was in winning. If he were to keep Musashi close to him, he'd have to give him incentive.

"I believe I may be able to assist with that," said the Doctor. "But first, I need to see him use this weapon. Where can we find Shishido?"

Musashi led the Doctor around the corner into the local market. "The merchants will help us."

Luckily, it wasn't hard to get information. One simply had to ask who had seen a warrior carrying a chain and sickle on him. Each merchant was forthcoming to Musashi, though suspiciously glanced at the foreigner with the odd clothes next to him.

Eventually, everyone's story corroborated that Shishido would be practicing in the field outside his farmhouse just a few miles away.



The Doctor and Musashi ventured over and waited behind the trees as they watched Shishido in the distance.

Sure enough, he was swinging the chain over his head and practicing his aim. Musashi studied him, seizing the opportunity to size up his opponent further. He appreciated the rationale behind the Doctor's request. It was a mentality that he had already garnered for himself; study the enemy and know his weaknesses. This was all part of the art of war.

But Shishido was sharp. Precise. Every time he swung the chain, he met his target. In fact, he didn't miss *once*. After watching Shishido, Musashi was wracked with more uncertainty than ever before. In spite of all his past successes, would he be able to defeat such an opponent?

Frustrated with his own doubts, Musashi blurted out, "I do not need to witness this."

"On the contrary, it's proving to be most helpful," said the Doctor. "Musashi, is there something odd about that chain to you?"

Musashi looked again as the glare of the sun reflected off the chain. *Ah*, thought Musashi. *The garnishing.*

"The chain is gold. I find it...ostentatious."

"Well, yes and no. Yes, it's ostentatious. No, it's not gold."

"What?"

"*That* is Aurorium steel. Similar to gold. Same in color. But from a planet with a magnet core. It's meant to draw other metals to it. The time ripple must have brought it to Earth in this time period."

Musashi stared blankly. "You speak in riddles, Doctor."

"You said Shishido always manages to capture the sword with that chain. That swords *fly* out of his opponents' hands? It's *not* because of his skill. It's because his chain *attracts* swords to it. Draws them in. That's what makes him unstoppable."

Musashi looked again at Shishido. Whatever respect he had for his rival began to fade away. From what he understood, Shishido was cheating. He fumed. "If Shishido has an unfair advantage, then we have to destroy it."

"We can't."

"And why not?"

"Well for one thing, it's indestructible."

"Then we remove it and we destroy his honor. I will not duel with a man who cheats."

"Destroying the chain will do nothing to his honor. He will just get another one and challenge you with it. You *have* to duel him tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Because, well...you'll have to trust me on this, but because you *have* to." The Doctor refrained from going further. He had said too much already.

Sure, Musashi would survive if he skipped the duel with Shishido. But the duel was part of recorded history. A fixed point in time. For all he knew,

there was something more important about this duel than the history books let on. Skipping it would ensure Musashi's survival but it would still damage the web of time.

"You speak in riddles again, Doctor. It frustrates me."

"Let me put it to you this way. How would you live with yourself knowing you could have faced your opponent...but ran away instead? Where would the honor be in that?"

Musashi thought through his words. The Doctor was correct. It wasn't like him to be *this* resistant towards going into a duel. "We can remove the Aurorium. But we replace it with a regular chain. You'll still have to face him, but at least it'll be a fair fight."

Musashi simply shook his head. "No."

The Doctor read the ronin's face, realizing what was happening. The Aurorium steel may have given Shishido an advantage, but it also had succeeded in doing something else. It had made Musashi question himself.

Now, even if Shishido wielded a different chain tomorrow, Musashi would still be terrified of him. His reputation had already put the ronin on edge. To set history back in place, they'd have to do more than just replace Shishido's chain. Musashi would need to regain his confidence.

Quickly, an idea formed in the Doctor's mind. He took a second to congratulate himself for it, then turned to Musashi:

"Very well. You wanted to know the best defense against a *kusarigama*? I can teach you."

"You said you couldn't."

"Because I hadn't thought it through. But I have now. And I'll share how you can defeat him *if*, and only if, you agree to face him tomorrow."

Musashi thought it over. "It appears I have no choice. Show me"

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An hour later, Musashi and the Doctor stood on a separate field. The ronin had his *katana* in hand.

But he had also brought a *wakizashi*; a shorter sword that used to belong to one of the Yoshioka clan until he took it as a trophy. Now it was in the hands of the Doctor as a practice sword for their training.

Musashi was looking forward to learning from a great warrior.

Except the Doctor was spending more time admiring it than using it.

"Impressive handiwork. The swordsmith really should have been an artist."

Musashi grew impatient. "You said you'd teach me."

"Oh, yes. The lesson," said the Doctor, as he swung the sword carelessly in the air, making Musashi wonder if he actually knew what he was doing.

Because the Doctor really didn't. In fact, he had no plans to tell Musashi how to defeat Shishido because it was something Musashi would have to figure out on his own.

Instead, he wanted to help clear the cobwebs of the ronin's mind. Force Musashi to move in ways he hadn't moved in three years. And remind him

that he was the swordsman who defeated the entire Yoshioka clan. *He* was Miyamoto Musashi.

"The lesson...is for you to teach *me* the way of the sword."

"What kind of lesson is that? You do not know yourself?"

"Oh, I know a bit. But I need an idea of what you know first."

"I do not teach, Doctor."

"Really? Maybe give it a chance then. You might like it. *En garde!*"

Musashi didn't know what "*en garde*" meant. But he defended himself accordingly.

For what felt like hours, they clashed swords and Musashi made observations. As he suspected, the Doctor was more experienced than he had let on.

Yet he also seemed strangely terrible at fighting too. His stances were all wrong. He held the *wakizashi* with one hand while the other hand inexplicably flared out to the side.

Musashi was puzzled. "That is not the way of the samurai! What school did you learn your art, Doctor?"

"Well, uh, it wasn't a school, really. Just a few teachers. Like Errol Flynn..."

"Er-rol Flynn? That is not a school I'm familiar with."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't be."

Musashi shook his head. Perhaps if he survived his bout with Shishido, he could challenge the clan of "Errol Flynn" next.

Still, he focused on showing the Doctor everything he knew. The guard positions. The forms. The ways of gripping the sword.

"You must hold the sword with the thought of slashing the opponent."

The Doctor tried to hide his smile. "Now that feels familiar." He knew exactly where he had heard it before: it was a passage from Musashi's very own *Book of Five Rings*. Perhaps Musashi's confidence was coming back.

Except the ronin snapped at him. "No! Not like that!"

The Doctor fixed the grip on his sword, but something was nagging in the back of his mind. His plan didn't seem to be working because Musashi didn't seem that much more confident. In fact, he seemed...angrier.

"You're a fraud, Doctor! You can't even grip a sword properly!"

"Now that's a bit harsh." The Doctor looked almost hurt. "I'm a good century out of practice!"

"Enough! If you are a warrior, defeat me!" yelled Musashi. Furious, he struck the Doctor's *wakizashi*. Thankfully, the Doctor stepped back and managed to parry a few more of the blows.

*Well this is exciting,* thought the Doctor as he grinned. *I'm dueling Miyamoto Musashi.* His face dropped as another thought sunk in. *I'm dueling the **undefeated** Miyamoto Musashi.*

Yes, he had been trained by Errol Flynn. Richard the Lionheart. Cleopatra's guards. He dueled against the Master and others. But Musashi, even this early in his career, was in another class entirely.

Musashi struck the *wakizashi* enough to make it fly out of the Doctor's hands. *Oh dear*, thought the Doctor as Musashi charged directly towards him. *I have a few regenerations left, but it'd be embarrassing to have to use one from this.*

Without a sword, the Doctor had only one recourse left. He dodged out of the way of the *katana* and reached into his coat pocket, gripping the cold steel hidden there.

Musashi thrust the *katana*, realizing too late that he had missed, as the Doctor brought the sonic screwdriver right up against Musashi's ear, turning it on at full power.

The sonic blasted Musashi's ear drum.

The samurai cried out in surprise. He grabbed his ear as his back arched. The Doctor saw the opportunity and proceeded to flip Musashi in the air. The *katana* went flying as the ronin landed on his back, knocking the wind out of him.

Musashi stared up at him from the ground, shocked, as the Doctor dusted himself off. "In case you were wondering, that was Venusian aikido."

"What was that...instrument?!"

"Oh this? Sonic screwdriver." He buzzed the screwdriver in front of Musashi. The ronin was not amused.

"You claimed to not carry weapons!"

"It's not a weapon. Well, most of the time."

Musashi rolled over and picked himself up. "This was a duel of swords. And you cheated!"

"Cheating? *Cheating*?! No such thing. In every fight, you have to use what's at your disposal."

Musashi turned his back and started walking away. "This lesson is over!"

"Musashi, wait!" But the ronin did not listen.

"Leave," cried out the ronin as he picked up both the *katana* and *wakizashi*. He headed back to the barn, storming off.

The Doctor watched him go, wondering if he had just made everything worse.

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It didn't take long for the Doctor to find him. Musashi was back in the barn by the TARDIS. This time, however, he was meditating in the hay.

He didn't need to open his eyes to feel the Doctor's presence.

"I told you to leave."

"I wanted to apologize. And confess...I don't know how to defeat the *kusarigama*. I lied."



"I know." There was a pause. "But I should...apologize as well." Musashi shifted in the hay. Clearly, apologies didn't come naturally to him.

"I should not have attacked you in that way. I followed feelings rather than reason."

"We all do, from time to time."

"Yes, but I am used to instilling that anger in others. I am not used to feeling it myself. Why did you lie about your knowledge?"

"I thought in having you train me, you'd regain your confidence. Remind you of who you are."

"Your strategy did not work, Doctor. You only reminded me of who I *used* to be."

"It's natural to be afraid of death, Musashi."

"It is not just fear of death. If I knew I were to die tomorrow, I would be at peace. If I knew I were to live, I would be even more at peace. It's *not* knowing either outcome...that is the hardest part of all."

"Ah yes, uncertainty. Believe me, I know how that feels."

Musashi opened his eyes, but his body remained still. "Who are you really, Doctor?"

"What do you mean?"

"You appear like a warrior. Yet you refuse to be one. You do not look as if you're from this land. But you know as much about it as I do. Clearly there's more to you than what you present."

"You could say I'm like you. A wanderer."

"You are a ronin, too?"

"A ronin..."

"A samurai without a master," translated the swordsman, mistaking the Doctor's musings for a question. But the Doctor was more surprised by the comparison than anything.

"Well for one thing, 'master' isn't a term I'm particularly fond of. But let's just say that yes, I *am* a ronin, like you. And like you, I have a battle to go to myself. Well, more of a war, really. I've been trying to avoid it. But I'll have to fight it eventually. It's inevitable."

"That is not the way of the warrior."

"I told you, I'm not a warrior, I'm a Doctor."

"All men are warriors in their own way. And a warrior must be prepared to go into battle at all times. Even at the cost of his own life."

"Sounds an awful lot like the Sontarans."

"That is another clan I am unfamiliar with."

"Perhaps I should introduce you. You'll get along splendidly--"

Musashi ignored the comment. "Whether you are ronin or not, there is a code you have to live by: better to face death head-on than live as a coward for the rest of your days." Musashi suddenly trailed off. As if struck by the reminder.

"What is it?"

"If I *am* to abide by that code, then I *must* face Shishido tomorrow. Even if that means I die." He looked over at the Doctor. His face was still stone but his eyes were filled with gratitude.

"Perhaps you reminded me of who I am after all." The Doctor smiled. "There is no better reminder of your principles than passing them onto another. If I survive tomorrow, maybe I *will* take up teaching."

"I'd say you may have a knack for it."

"I am ready." And with that, Musashi closed his eyes and went back to meditating, prepared for the duel ahead.

The Doctor, satisfied, left the barn. There was one more thing he needed to do before the mission was over.

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Hours later, the Doctor stood outside Shishido's home.

Getting in would be easy. He'd just need the sonic screwdriver. Plus it appeared that Shishido was already asleep for the night.

No, the difficult part was moving *without* making a sound as he carried the replacement gold chain by his side.

After leaving Musashi to meditate, he had taken a quick trip to a blacksmith in 1821 who owed him a favor after he saved him from a Cyberman. Once the chain was crafted, the Doctor returned to Japan, prepared to make the switch that would allow Musashi to win.

Inside, the Doctor scanned the house, knowing that the weapon would be by the warrior's side. Sure enough, he found Shishido lying on the floor next to his wife. The *kusarigama* lay right next to him. Carefully, the Doctor lifted it from the ground and carried it outside.

He hoped he kept enough distance that the sonic screwdriver wouldn't wake anyone inside. He found the bottom of the hilt, where the chain was attached to the sickle, and aimed the screwdriver.

After a quick buzz, the Aurorium steel came right off.

The Doctor then took the replacement chain from the blacksmith. Another buzz from the screwdriver and it attached.

It wasn't a perfect copy. Surely, Shishido would be able to tell from the weight that something was off with the new version. But the Aurorium steel would at least be gone, leaving the two men to fight a fair fight.

Satisfied, the Doctor snuck back inside the house. His job was finished. He would go back to the TARDIS and allow history to take its course. Let Musashi defeat Shishido.

But something was nagging at the back of his head. *For Musashi to win, Shishido would have to die.* The Doctor knew that was part of history. But in setting history right, would that make him responsible for the man's death? He didn't need to stick around to find out.

The Doctor left the chain on the ground to Shishido. In his mind, he apologized. There would be nothing he could do to save him. As he turned, he froze.

Standing in front of him was a small child, around three years old. Staring at him in wonder.

The Doctor stared back in return. He then put a finger to his mouth as he moved towards the door. The child looked on with curiosity.

Then started crying in fear.

The Doctor bolted before Shishido could wake up. He had no wish to face an angry ronin in the middle of the night.

As he ran outside, he overheard Shishido addressing the child. "What is it?!"

But then the warrior's voice shifted and became soothing. Comforting his child.

*Shishido has a son, thought the Doctor. **Why did I have to see he has a son?***

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Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor stared at the controls, thinking over what he had seen. *Take off now, a voice told him. Forget Shishido's family. Leave Musashi to duel him. Let history play out as it should.*

But he knew he couldn't.

Musashi wouldn't just be killing any opponent. He'd be killing a father.

And judging from the culture of this time period, the son would surely want revenge for his father's death. He'd want to kill Musashi. Train his whole life for it.

And if Musashi really were left undefeated and died of old age, then that meant Musashi would kill him. Shishido's son would have to die too.

Could the Doctor save the child from the same fate as his father?

No. He was a Time Lord. It was his *duty* to make sure that history was intact. With the Time War ripping the fabric of reality, this was now more important than ever.

Tomorrow, a man would have to die and it couldn't be Musashi. The ripple effect would be enormous.

On the other hand, if he allowed history to happen and let Musashi kill Shishido, he'd be allowing *both* the man *and* his son to go to their deaths. Could he stand idly by and allow it to happen?

It was an impossible choice.

The same choice that he had been running from this whole time. The choice of fighting the Time War.

He knew he *could* join the Time Lords against the Daleks. They had tried to recruit him countless times. But each battle would be at the sacrifice of other planets. Other universes. Other lives.

He couldn't be a part of that. Yet even now, no matter where he went, death always seemed to follow. It was the inevitability of battle. Of war.

Could he truly avoid it? What would he do?

The Doctor seated himself next to the console. Taking a page from Musashi, he closed his eyes. It was time he did a meditation of his own.

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Musashi stepped onto the field the next morning, making his way towards Shishido. He had spent the entire evening in a meditative state. Yet despite not getting any sleep, he felt as alert as he did three years ago when he faced the Yoshioka clan. Better still, he had worked out his strategy on how to defeat his opponent.

He took a breath and stepped into battle.

Shishido grimaced as Musashi approached. "I didn't think you'd show."

"Let's get this over with."

Shishido pulled out the *kusarigama* sickle and began swinging the chain over his head.

Musashi unsheathed the *katana*. The two men faced each other, sizing each other up. The sun glared off Shishido's chain but Musashi knew to keep it only in his peripheral vision so it wouldn't blind him.

He exhaled as he kept his distance. If the Doctor had been true to his word, his opponent's chain had been replaced with regular steel. But even if the Doctor failed, Musashi was ready.

Shishido swung the chain faster. And faster. Then he launched the chain forward.

As expected, it wrapped around Musashi's *katana*.

Shishido smiled. His victory was guaranteed now, as he pulled on the chain, letting it drag the ronin towards him. His other hand held the sickle, ready to grant Musashi the same fate as all the others.

But Shishido's heart skipped a beat.

Because Musashi was *smiling back*. His hand reaching for the *other* scabbard around his waist and drawing...the *wakizashi*.

Musashi had brought a *second sword* to their fight.

The *wakizashi* came for Shishido. And Shishido's life seemed to flash before his eyes as the glint of the blade blinded *him*.

Suddenly, a voice rang out.

"STOP!"

Just then, Musashi *missed*, stabbing the *wakizashi* into Shishido's shoulder.

Shishido dropped the *kusarigama* and landed on the ground, wounded, as the Doctor ran up to them.

Musashi looked shocked. "Doctor, what are you doing?!"

"This duel is over, Musashi. Let him go."

The ronin was astounded. "The duel is *not* over!"



"I'm afraid it is. You've already proven who's the better fighter here."

Shishido looked up from the ground. "Let him kill me. He has already taken my honor."

"Oh please. That's just ego talking. You don't *really* want to die."

"I am a samurai! I am meant to die by the blade."

"And if you *really* believed that, you would've used a different chain."

Shishido looked shocked. "How do you know this? Who...who are you?"

Musashi interjected, "He is the man who helped me beat you. He is the Doctor."

The Doctor stepped in between Musashi and the wounded man. "Let me guess. Years ago, you came across a wreckage. A crashed spaceship, where you found the gold chains. Once you saw they could draw swords to it, you knew they could help you in a fight. They worked too well, Shishido. They turned you into a coward."

"I am not a coward, I am a warrior!"

"No, that's where you got it wrong. A warrior isn't someone who wins every battle. A warrior is someone who fights *without* knowing he'll win or lose. Who fights *without* knowing the outcome. *That's* true courage. But you lost that long ago."

Shishido looked down in shame, knowing the Doctor was right. "Give me the sickle. I will commit *seppuku*."

Musashi reached for it but the Doctor stopped him. "What is it with this era, thinking everything can be solved with violence? There's another way."

"Which is?"

"Give up this life, give up the sickle. Let the warrior known as Shishido die here today. But live on as a man. For your wife and son, at least. There's no honor left in fighting, but there's still honor in caring for the ones you love."

Shishido considered. He thought of his honor and his reputation.

But then he thought of his family. His son. The choice was simple.

"Then today is my last duel."

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They carried Shishido back to his farm where his wife had dressed his wounds. He would never be able to lift his arm again, but he wouldn't need to. For the rest of his days, he'd raise his family as a farmer.

Word spread in Edo that Shishido had been defeated. Since no one ever saw him again, most assumed that Musashi had killed him.

Only the farmers on the outskirts of Edo knew the truth. And their son would grow up, hearing stories of his father's days as a warrior from the man himself. When he would hear the name "Miyamoto Musashi," he would not feel vengeance. Instead, he would feel gratitude for the ronin who spared his father's life.

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After returning Shishido home, Musashi walked the Doctor back to his TARDIS. "So you figured out how to defeat the *kusarigama*."

"In every fight, you have to use what's at your disposal," quoted Musashi as he patted the *wakizashi* by his side.

"Of course. Two swords."

*That* was why Musashi needed to go into this duel. It was *here* against Shishido that Musashi had established his famous two-sword technique. The one that he'd teach for decades. The one that he'd write about in *The Book of Five Rings*.

Musashi bowed. "Thank you, Doctor. May you gather the strength to face your own battles. The way you helped me face mine."

The Doctor bowed in return. "Thank *you*, Musashi. And I think I already have." He returned to the TARDIS.

When Musashi turned his back, he heard the familiar sound of steel scraping against steel. He looked to see what was happening and watched as the blue box gradually faded away.

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Inside the TARDIS, the Doctor congratulated himself for a job well done.

With Musashi surviving, he was ready to face his future duels. Gonnosuke. Sasaki Kojiro. The Battle of Shimabara. He would start the School of Two Swords. And write *The Book of Five Rings* to influence Earth for years to come.

Yes, the Doctor could say with confidence that he knew everything about Musashi's future. In fact, he *always* knew the future of the people of Earth.

But what of his *own* future in the Time War?

He thought back to Musashi's words.

"Better to face death head-on than live as a coward for the rest of your days."

Was that what he had become? A coward?

The Doctor had been avoiding the Time War because of the inevitability of death.

But here, in an era where death was rampant, he had found a loophole.

History had said that Musashi killed Shishido on the battlefield. But with no witnesses other than the Doctor himself, it would be easy for Shishido to take on a new identity and live the rest of his life in peace.

History was set right again. *With no lives lost.*

If he could find a way to do that in a fixed point in time, perhaps he'd be able to do it with the Time War. All he knew was that he had to try.

With a deep breath, the Doctor set the course for Gallifrey. His home. The heart of the Time War.

It was time for him to face his fears. It was time for him to join the battle.

As the TARDIS took off, the Doctor mused that maybe he shouldn't consider himself as a Time *Lord* anymore.

Maybe Musashi was right. Maybe he was more like a ronin after all.

A Ronin of Time.