

16: Yagyu–Shinkage–Ryu

Kyoto, Japan
June, 2005

Mike paused before the imposing facade. He and Sean had just exited a taxi in front of an ornate piece of medieval Japanese architecture. A gentle rain was falling, and the whole street looked like something out of a movie. He expected a sandaled *Bushi* to come walking over the arched footbridge, a pair of swords in his sash.

“Wow!” Sean declared. “Too cool! Will we be using real katanas, Dad?”

“You will be using a bokken,” Mike admonished. He reached over to yank earbuds out of the fifteen-year-old’s ears. “From now on, the iPod is only for private time. You will use whatever your instructor tells you, and you will speak with respect. You may find things more formal than you’ve been used to.”

Sean looked nervous, then nodded. “Aren’t you afraid, Dad?” he asked.

Mike frowned. He remembered coming home from school as a kid, looking around for bullies, seeing if it was safe. Then he remembered the day something had snapped — three kids were bullying him, knocking his books into the slush. A rage came over him and he beat all three kids soundly. He wasn’t sure if he ever felt fear again after that. Sometimes he felt apprehension about whether he’d do something right or perform as expected. Was that a kind of fear?

“Son, we often have to face new things, new challenges. All we can do is do our best: do our best to learn, do our best to practice and improve, perform our best when the time comes. Then you just hope your best is good enough.”

They were ushered into the ancient building by a senior student, then shown to their room. The room was small, with two beds that were little more than futons over tatami on the floor. Sean made a face. Mike just smiled.

“It’s a small price for the lessons,” Mike told Sean.

Once they’d had time to unpack what few things they’d brought, a younger student scratched at the paper-paned sliding door.

“Master Tekaga will see you now,” he said.

Mike looked at his watch — 4:10 PM.

The master of the school was seated in traditional kneeling position. Before him was an ancient teapot atop a small charcoal brazier on a lacquered table. Small cups were set out.

Mike entered and bowed, watching Sean out of the corner of his eye. He was prepared to cue Sean, but his son was already bowing in imitation of his father. Mike advanced until he was before the table, waited for a gesture from Master Tekaga, then knelt, sitting on his heels, and gave a slight bow with his head.

The master smiled and returned the nod, then began the ritual of placing tea powder in each cup, pouring hot water, and whisking the tea with a small stirring brush. When he moved the cups toward Mike and Sean, Mike waited, watching Sean from the corner of his eye, waiting for Master Tekaga to lift his cup first.

The aged sensei smiled again, then lifted his cup and sipped, whereupon Mike and Sean did the same. Sean fought to hide his distaste of tea, causing the old man to smile again.

“You have impeccable manners, Young Cameron-san,” Tekaga approved. “And you, Cameron-sensei, you seem as one of us.”

“You are most gracious, Tekaga-sama,” Mike replied in Japanese. “When a *gaijin* is offered such an opportunity as this, he must do his best to show respect and adapt to his new surroundings.”

The old man’s smile broadened.

“I doubt if even the lowliest helper here could spend five minutes with you and consider you a *gaijin*,” Tegaka declared. “Your good friend, Lord Dewhurst of England, has many friends in high places. He speaks well of you. Others speak highly of your skills. To become at one with the katana, as you clearly have, and to have such an advanced *ki*, it must be that the *kami* of a great warrior resides inside you.”

Mike was puzzled. “You have yet to assess my skills in the dojo, Tekaga-sama.”

“Ah, Cameron-sensei, do you find me a weak old man whose years are failing?”

Mike smiled, then shook his head. “No, Tekaga-sama; you are still a great warrior. I feel the strength of your *ki*; there is nothing weak about you. I sense that you would be a formidable opponent in the dojo.”

“So, since I must assume you do not question my *haragei* — my ability to sense the level of your *ki*, what we are left with is *your* inability to accept the level of your own *ki*. You have profound energy; so much so that I must regard you, not as an inferior, but as an equal. As such, it is improper for you to address me as Tekagi-sama. I will be Tegagi-san and you will be Cameron-san. I think, in time, however,” he added with a twinkle in his eye, “it will become Yoshi-san and Michael-san, and be thus for many years to come.”

And so it began. Mike’s day started at sunrise and ended sometime after sunset. He saw little of Sean, except at meals. Even then, Sean was with other

students — at first students his age, then older students, when it became clear he was more advanced than those in his age group. Michael, he started with advanced lessons, then soon advanced to teaching specialized classes and taking private instruction from Tekaga-sensei.

Mike's technique of blending Kung Fu with his swordsmanship gave him an unorthodox style, one which intrigued Tekaga-sensei.

"Michael-san, I am fascinated by this *Chi-Jen-Do*, as you call it," Tekaga said one day. They were seated, sipping water, both sweating profusely after a strenuous session of sparring with sharp katanas.

Michael shrugged. "My original teaching was a blend of Wing Chun and Bak Sil Lum Kung Fu," he explained. "Certain aspects of Wing Chun, like sticking hands, stood out as unique. Most of the time, though, I was never certain what technique belonged to what style. And, I must admit, I didn't really care. I've always been more interested in learning to do a technique properly than worrying about what its proper name was. Then my Katana-Juitsu sensei confused matters more by also teaching me Shotokan Karate. Most of that I couldn't tell from Kung Fu. Frankly, I think he just gave me a san-dan (third degree black belt) out of respect. Kung-Fu levels always confuse people at tournaments, though some instructors are using coloured belts now. So, since it was hard to separate the various styles in what I do, and what I was teaching in Bermuda, then later in the Bahamas, I decided to call it *Chi-Jen-Do* — the *Way of the Man of Chi*."

"It is a good name, Michael-san. Your style relies on expressions of chi more than many I've seen. It is economical, wasting little body energy, with no excess movement, and uses the opponents energy against him, much like our Aikido. And your sword sensei taught you to meld these styles with your Katana-Juitsu?"

Mike pondered that. “No,” he said finally. “I think I did that from the very beginning. It is strange, almost as if I was taught all of this a long time ago, by two different masters, one of whom wanted me to blend the two arts into one. Sometimes in dreams I see glimpses of this.” He shook his head, then shrugged it off.

“Do any of these dreams take place in Japan?” Tekaga asked.

Mike nodded. “When I was a teenager, I had a bad experience: a man attacked me with a knife one night. I was in a bad part of town, where I probably shouldn’t have been. I succeeded in defending myself, but I did get cut across the stomach. I thought I had killed my attacker, and ran to the ferry terminal, where I caught the boat that took me across the harbour. I had to walk the rest of the way home, though I think I ran most of it.

“That night I began to have nightmares about having killed someone with a katana. In the nightmares, I’m wearing the armour of a Samurai.”

Tekaga leaned forward, keen interest showing in his face, and asked, “Of what is this armour made? What colour was it?”

The old sensei’s eagerness both puzzled Mike and aroused his curiosity.

“It was metal — iron, I think. The colour was a dark red — crimson.”

Tekaga’s eyes widened.

“Do you know anything of this person you killed?”

“I know I chopped him up pretty bad,” Mike replied. “I severed an arm at the shoulder, a leg high on the thigh, and cut off his head.”

“You must have been very angry,” Tekaga suggested.

Mike thought. “In the nightmares I seem more saddened — depressed. I killed myself soon after. I’ve seen that in dreams — *seppuku*. I can’t even touch a

wakizashi without feeling both nausea and great pain in my gut.

“I discovered this before Sean was born. My wife, Susan, and I were in Miami on our boat. She found a matched pair of swords — a *dai-ken* — in a shop. She wanted to buy them both for my birthday, but ended up only getting the katana. We went back to that shop several times, but every time it was the same. The moment I started to draw the *wakizashi*, I had the reaction. The last time I had a brief vision of kneeling in a garden, my armour removed and lying about me. There was blood everywhere, and a bloody *wakizashi*... Well; you know the ritual.”

Tekaga gave a slow nod. “In your dreams, was there ever someone of importance — a great lord, perhaps — someone who told you you would have to commit *seppuku*? Perhaps he just implied it.”

Mike reached back into memory, looking for such a scene, and found it.

“Yes,” he admitted. “At first, when you asked about a great lord, I wanted to say that my father had been one, but he was a lesser lord, not a great one.”

Tekaga smiled, nodding. “Yes; one of the lesser daimyos. But what of this great lord?”

Mike closed his eyes. “He was fat and wore eye makeup,” he said with a frown. “His name was *Tsunayoshi*. I called him *Tokugawa-sama*; he called me *Yakura-san*.”

“Have you read much of our history?” the sensei asked. When Mike shook his head, the master added, “I will have some books sent to your room tonight. One is by an American, entitled *Shogun*. It uses fictitious names; I will write the correct names for a few important characters inside the cover. Another is a history of the Tokugawa Shoguns. I also have an English copy of an ancestor’s diary. He taught swordsmanship to the sons of certain Daimyo. One of this students of particular interest was a boy named

Tomomatsu Yakura. Finally, I have an English copy of the story of *Miyamoto Musashi*.”

Mike knew his gratitude showed in his face.

“My Katana-Juitsu sensei spoke often about Musashi,” he said. “As for these other books, I shall study them and treasure them while I’m able to borrow them. If they shed some light on the mystery of these dreams, I will be eternally grateful.”

Tekaga laughed. “Ah, Michael-san, they are not a loan; they are a gift. We will put further discussion of this aside for now, and come back to it another time.”

Mike lived and breathed the katana for eight months. Reading Tekaga-sensei’s books brought back the dreams for a while, sometimes with new details, but they soon faded into oblivion. He had no idea why they had plagued him at various stressful times in his life, and he preferred to just push them out of his mind.

He was now teaching only senior students of the school, and spending his evenings with Master Tekaga.

The ringing of blade on blade filled the room like an echoing din, but Mike was almost oblivious to it. His focus was not on any one thing, but open to everything. He let his eyes go out of focus, relying on the motion sensors of his peripheral vision.

Tekaga was an enigma. He must have been eighty, yet he was as agile and as sharp as Mike. He paused, laughing.

“Have I shown you *anything* new, Michael-san? You respond to everything as if you’ve seen it or done it all before.”

Mike wasn't sure what to say. "There's much that I don't think I've seen before," he said, "but it all *feels* familiar, like I saw it in a dream or something."

Again Tekaga favoured him with an enigmatic smile.

"Your dreams may be the key to a vast, untapped part of you," he suggested. "You must not brush off these visions and dreams like unwelcome dust from a long journey; you should learn to embrace them as a part of who you are, perhaps as a part of who you once were."

Dreams— Mike had had his fill of dreams since he was about eighteen. He'd been on his way home from a movie when the thug attacked — just stepped out of an alley and slashed at him with a knife. Fresh from reflex training, Mike had no trouble switching into the mindless automatic mode that had almost resulted in the death of his assailant, so thoroughly did Mike retaliate. Indeed, he left the man, a recently-paroled convict, for dead, bleeding from every orifice. That night he had his first dream — nightmare — about hacking up an enemy, dressed in Samurai armour.

Mike ran over some of the details again in his mind as he soaked in the hot tub. The bath was a traditional one involving a round wooden tub and a somewhat scantily-clad young woman who poured more hot water into the bath at need and seemed determined to scrub at him with soap and a brush, no matter how much he protested not needing her assistance.

He did, however, appreciate the heat of the water. He'd always preferred baths to showers, the hotter the better. Something about the heat not only soaked his pain and cares away, but seemed to energize him.

"Ah, Cameron-sensei, you are becoming very Japanese," a senior student greeted. He'd just entered,

and was disrobing and getting into another tub. Mike recognized him — Watanabe — he couldn't recall the given name.

"Tekaga-sensei says you are very much the Samurai at heart — very *Bushi*. I have seen you in combat. I believe him," Watanabe commented.

"Why does Mariko snicker?" Mike asked. "I can't get an understandable answer out of her; my Japanese is too poor."

"Ah, no, Cameron-sensei —"

"Cameron-san," Mike corrected. "I would rather be your friend, Watanabe-san, than an instructor."

Watanabe beamed, nodding, yet hesitated. "Cameron-san — your Japanese is fine. She finds humour in how you like the water hotter than even most Japanese men, and that you are known for going through candles faster than anyone else here."

Mike frowned. "Are you serious? There are two candles on my desk. I light them both, but I only get to use them for a short time each night. It's not like I go to sleep with them lit?"

Watanabe chuckled. "Mariko thinks you suck the heat out of them like you do the water. She wonders if you are a *maha-tsukai* — a sorcerer, what your people might call in English a witch or warlock."

That made Mike frown all the more. He'd heard Tekaga-sensei use the Japanese words *maha-tsukai*, though he'd yet to explain their meaning.



"You are more advanced than any student I have ever taught," Tekaga-sensei told Mike. "Coming here is essential to your further development. Your friend, the British *Daimyo*, sent me a telegram, suggesting that you might benefit from this training. I think he is right. I think there is something inside you that strives to fulfill its potential — something that perhaps you

cannot see yourself. Yet, I am not sure that I am teaching you anything. Perhaps it is just being here in the old part of Kyoto that works magic upon you.”

Smiled. He loved old Kyoto. Then, thinking about the reference to Tony, the smile faded into a frown. *Tony? Why would Tony want to influence my training?*

They were at the top of a mountain, the peak lost in the clouds. There were hints of blue sky through the veil, but whatever view their might have been was obscured. Indeed, he could barely see Tekaga.

Mike nodded. “This will be about sensing what I cannot see or hear,” he said. “The fog not only obscures the vision, it dulls the hearing, making directionality of sound almost non-existent.”

The swordmaster paused, smiling. “I have been accused of being a *maha-tsukai* — a sorcerer. It is a matter of mental skill. I believe there is a *maha-tsukai* in you, also, Michael-san. There is great power in you, more than *ki*, though your *ki* is profound. I have had visions of you in the future holding fire in your hands. Yes, Michael-san, I have that sight. It is part of the gift, or curse, of the *maha-tsukai*.

“Today, though, we must begin with your *wa*. This is your...”

“Aura,” Mike completed for him. “The sense of my presence, the awareness of my unique *ki* that another with *haragei* might sense.”

Tekaga nodded. “You must learn to mask it entirely so that one with profound *haragei* cannot find you.

Mike nodded. “And how do I do this?”

Tekaga smiled. “This I do not know, Michael-san — that is, I know how I do it, but not how you will. It is difficult to explain. Some say that it is different for each person. Many never attain it. I do it by pulling all sense of myself inside of my mind, into a dark corner. I then project a sense of nothingness.”

Mike tried, aware that Tekaga-sensei was using *haragei* to sense his *wa*, monitoring his progress.

“Interesting,” he commented. “You have achieved partial success already, but the sense that you project is confusing. It makes me think your *wa* is not your *wa*. It almost feels like mine. Curious.

“Let us begin today’s test, then, with this new element added. Kozen?”

Mike was puzzled. Kozen was a name. Then he sensed the *wa* of a warrior, something unlike anything he’d sensed before. It seemed distant, but approaching.

Long before he expected, a figure appeared, still partially veiled by the mists. It was a man. The eyes were Oriental, but that was all he saw. The rest of the face was swathed in white cloth. The whole body was clothed in white. Even the twin shortened katana on his back, their hilts just showing over the shoulders, were white.

“*Ninja*,” Mike breathed.

“Shiro-ninja,” Tekaga corrected. *White Ninja*.

Mike understood. The ninja had a dark history. Assassins and conjurers, the most ominous clan, the Black Dragons, had come into being during the ascent of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first of the Tokugawa shoguns, their mission: to assassinate Tokugawa and end his rise to power. As the ninjas became little more than assassins-for-hire, the shiro-ninja or white ninja had come into existence, to combat the ninjas.

No sooner had all this passed through his mind than Kozen drew his dai-ken (two swords) and attacked.

Mike whirled into action, relying mostly in crane-wing parries with his katana, his style seeming to take the ninjas by surprise.

Tekaga had disappeared, but Mike could still feel his *wa*, even though it was partially masked. He converged on the master, trying to improve how he mimicked the sensei’s *wa*. To Kozen, he would have disappeared, leaving only the sense of Tekaga.

Appearing out of the mists in front of Tekaga-sensei, he tore the master’s katana from its saya, then

whirled back into the fog, now armed with two katanas, himself. For a second, he thought of it as now being equally matched. Then he remembered the ninja's shortened blades. Not only were Mike's katana longer, but his height and arm length increased his reach as well.

The battle dragged itself out longer than Mike wanted.

Kozen was an exceptional swordsman, with astonishing reflexes. He would disappear into the fog, using it as camouflage, then reappear, attacking. He liked to leap when he did this, coming down at Mike. And he was impossibly fast, striking Mike at his shoulder joints, elbows, wrists — never quite in the right spot to hit a nerve plexus, but always painful enough to make full mobility more difficult.

The effect was to disorient Mike. His sense of Kozen's *wa* was less certain. He was back to thinking he was further away when he was actually close.

"Let go your conscious self, Michael-san." It was Tagaka's voice, like a disembodied spirit in the fog.

Let go, Luke. You must use the force. His sense of humour made the voice of Sir Alec Guinness play in his head from the Star Wars movie. *This is no time for a jokes*, he thought, yet it was a reference he could relate to.

He closed his eyes — they weren't much good to him in this fog anyway — and used his *haragei* to find Kozen's *wa* — six yards and closing from a new direction. Kozen had caught on to his ruse with his *wa*. There was nothing he could do about that. Another might have moved close to Tekaga-sensei, letting Kozen attack him by mistake, but Mike refused.

He let out a soft groan, as if in pain, letting his posture sag slightly.

Kozen appeared out of the fog, dropping in front of him, twin katana raised to strike down into each shoulder.

Mike advanced, using his talent for speed. With mirrored movements, he reversed each blade, the spines striking just behind each of Kozen's wrist bones, paralyzing the nerves.

A flick of his wrists, and the spines of his blades struck the tsuba of each katana from behind, sending the blades flying, disarming Kozen.

Tekaga had been right. Letting go and using his *ki* and *haragei* let him be much faster — almost too fast for a human.

Now, with style... he thought.

He wasn't usually given to such flair.

He twirled his katana in his hands, reversing his grip so that the blades trailed, as if he were going to stab with a knife. His hands moved across his body, his arms forming an X. The blades also crossed in an X, its junction at Kozen's throat.

Kozen stood still for several seconds, amazement showing in his eyes. He then closed his eyes, as if awaiting death.

Mike retreated a step, then bowed. He sheathed his katana, then passed the other back to Master Tekaga, who was just appearing out of the mists.

"Your katana must be around here somewhere," Mike said to Kozen. "I'll help you look, if you like."

Kozen seemed in a dilemma, then, shaking his head as if shaking off a spell, he returned Mike's bow.

"*Domo*," he said, accepting Mike's offer. The swords were found in moments.

"I have much to tell Mutagi-sensei," Kozen said to Tagaka, "but I fear he may not believe what I have to say."

Tekaga smiled. "I will speak to him; he will believe. My friend carries a great *kami* inside him. He is also part *maha-tsukai*, though I do not think he believes it."

Feb. 9, 2006

Their last evening together finally came.

“I find myself wondering why you came to me, Michael-san.”

Mike frowned, puzzled. “I came to learn,” he began, hesitating. “I’ve always wished to study with great masters like yourself, like Master Ying. After what’s happened in my life, I needed to escape — to do something different. I was so focused on trying to keep Susan alive. Then, marrying —” he balked at even saying her name “— well, I honestly don’t know if I did that so Sean would have mother or so I would have a reason to keep going.”

“Keep going for your son’s sake,” Tekaga added, with a gentle smile.

Mike shrugged. “This whole insane venture is a way of doing something for me for a change. I wanted to send Sean to my parents, but he freaked at the thought of being separated from me.”

Tekaga nodded. “During your time here, you learned very little, Michael-san. Surely you must see that.”

Mike’s frown deepened. “But I feel like I’ve learned so much,” he argued.

“Do not mistake my meaning, Michael-san; you are an excellent student — the best I have ever had. Perhaps you discovered things in yourself that you’d forgotten, but you were taught very little that you didn’t know already. Some wonder if you came to prove what you already knew, but your demeanour, your personality, are an unwavering argument against this.

“You have great skill, Michael-san. You seem to be honing it, as if in preparation for something.”

Mike wasn’t sure what to say. “When I go back home, I’ll want to do something — maybe open a

school. If I do that, exposure to the teaching methods of others might guide me.”

This time it was Tekaga who frowned. “I think you are destined for much more than running a Kung-Fu kwoon or a Kenjutsu ryu, Michael-san. I believe there is a much larger path before you. You have many profound talents. It is said that when the gods give so much to one person, much is asked of them in return. I see a difficult path before you, and much change in your life.”

“Is this *maha-tsukai*, the sorcerer, talking?”

“Perhaps.” Tekaga paused, as if giving thought to his next words. “I am concerned about your plans after you leave tomorrow,” Tekaga-sensei confessed. “I know Master Ying; he will delight in meeting and working with you. It is the great power that rules his country that worries me. I know you might have to wait many years for permission to enter China, and that they may grant you only a few weeks to study there. Perhaps you are right in how you have decided to approach this, but I am an old man, and I worry. I have grown fond of you, Michael-san.”

Mike could feel the blush forming and bowed, trying to hide it.

“You are a great warrior,” Master Tekaga continued “There is wisdom in your eyes. You are an old soul; the soul of a great Samurai resides within you. He speaks to me. Call it an aspect of *haragei*. You have it, Cameron-sensei. Aside from being sensitive to the *ki* of others, it often lets you sense what they will do before they do it, and it lets you feel the presence of another master across the room.

“There is one thing that puzzles me: You are at home with two swords; indeed you are ambidextrous. Yet you never use the wakizashi, the traditional second blade of the Bushi. Indeed, I have never seen one in your hands.”

Mike nodded. "We spoke of this before," he began. "I cannot explain it. It will seem too strange."

"Indulge an old man, Michael-san. Please explain again."

Mike eased out a sigh, then went on. "Whenever I have touched the short sword, the mere contact of my fingers to the weapon causes a sharp, sickening pain in my gut." With his hand he gestured to his entire abdominal region.

"Sickening, you say," Tekaga-san prompted.

Mike nodded. "Hot pain and feelings of great nausea."

The old master gave a slow, severe nod. "Any other feelings?"

"Inexplicable grief," Mike replied. "It makes no sense."

"Perhaps it is explainable," Tekaga suggested. He then stood, reached a wrinkled hand to a ceremonial rack, and took down a katana in a silk sleeve. He pulled the sleeve back, exposing the weapon. From the artisanship, Mike placed it as being four to five hundred years old.

"This was crafted by Muramasa, a legend among the great sword makers. Its last owner's story is a sad one. He rid Japan of a dishonourable warrior. He lived a life of honour, but, alas, a short life. Honour and a dictate from the Shogun obligated him to perform seppuku. The wakizashi was destroyed by his father, thrown into a lake, it is said.

Part of his *kami* is believed to be in this blade. I believe the rest of his soul resides in you. An ancestor of mine was one of his teachers. Upon his death, his father, a daimyo, could not bear to have the katana in his house. He gave it into the keeping of my ancestor, partly to keep the Tokugawa from destroying it, as they vowed to do with all Muramasa blades, but mostly to be held until a worthy owner should be found. I believe I have found that owner."

Mike was overwhelmed by both awe and surprise.

“This is a very large honour, Tekaga-sensei — too large an honour for me, I fear.”

The old man smiled and placed the weapon in Mike’s hands.

“I am merely sending it home, where it belongs,” Tekaga said. “It was yours in the past; it is yours once again. In time you will come to know this. I see your friend the Lord Anthony helping you in this.”

A thrill run through Mike as he touched the sheath and the ray-skin-wrapped grip. He felt both rejuvenated and a sense of déjà vu, as if he’d held this katana many times. He knew its balance and felt completely at home with it, as if it had always been his sword.

The mystery deepens, he thought.