

Lessons of a Master

Alaina took a deep breath as she stepped through the portal and felt the humid southern heat wash over her like the blaze of a bonfire, only more inescapable. The sun held high that morning, and despite the sea's crashing on golden sands she felt no cooler. So why should she come to such an awful place?

Alaina admitted she would do just about anything to be better.

The kraken that loomed over her was almost as terrifying as the idea there was a foe she could not handily defeat, at least not without great peril to herself. She was prideful enough to admit she knew there should be no opponents she could not annihilate when she tried and enjoyed it when she could enjoy a battle without fear of those she loved being hurt. She had one working arm, and the world would not wait for her.

One day, with enough training, she too might be written a Sword Saint... and yet maybe that title was worth little when the Musashi she had met with Lula turned out to be little more than a leech and a wretch, the techniques he promised her meaning little when he held himself with such little valour to the extent she wondered whether that man was Musashi at all. But still... in this land of masters, surely she could find her own. Wearing a flowing robe of local garb to keep out the heat, and a straw hat to stave off the sun, Alaina made her way down the coastline and listened to the crunching of the sand.

Though she soon heard something else.

"Pay up or we'll dook you in your ooker!"

Three hozen surrounded a Jinyu man, likely from the nearby village, and Alaina rushed to the man's aid. She remembered all too keenly how she had saved the people of Unga Ingoos but perhaps bandits were the same no matter where she might go.

She stood in the sand with her hand on Valour's grip.

"Hark! Hozen of the jungle, have you forgotten how you were once pillaged and enslaved? Is this how you repay the people who fought to defend you? Stand down!"

As expected, they turned their attention to her, and did not lay down their weapons.

The first came with a lunging spear, his aim untrue, and a pommel strike to the gut dropped him thus.

The second came with whirling sharpened blades, but with a footful of sand kicked his way he choked and was then kicked away.

The final wielded a tree-trunk sized hammer which shook the ground with each pound, but tired the beastman too quickly. Alaina darted behind him and drove an elbow into him, and let his dropped, falling hammer do the rest.

Alaina reached a hand out to the Jinyu, but he got up on his own. "My apologies. Those should be my responsibility... my wife and I rescued them some time ago. You aren't hurt, are you?"

The Jinyu's scales shone with some argent luster and he seemed unmolested which brought Alaina another smile. Her battle was valorous, a few bruised and embarrassed monkey-men not bringing down her desire for a wholly positive outcome. No lives were spent, and Good was victorious.

The Jinyu spoke with a wispy voice, and said this. "You are a skilled warrior, and I thank you for your aid. What may I call you?"

"My name is Alaina Tinkerbolt... I am a Hero from Kul Tiras."

"And you come to be a Hero in Krasarang?" The Jinyu asked.

Alaina shook her head, wondering the most efficient way to explain it. "I hope to find something that will make me a better hero."

"And what is that?"

"Mastery of my sword."

The Jinyu looked at the hozen. "If that is not mastery, I do not know what is. You barely needed to draw."

"There are far better fights in this world than three drunken hozen I'm sure." Alaina chuckled heartily. "If it was a good fight, I would have needed to draw."

"I used to be a fighter in my day... perhaps not as good as you, but if you are looking for tips maybe I can help?"

Alaina nodded. "I turn up only half an hour ago and have already found something! Amazing. Where shall we go?"

"I have a hut by the water. Follow me."

"Ah, but what is your name, sir?"

The Jinyu seemed to look and think for a moment, and then he replied.

"You may call me Moto."

They went to his hut, and truly it could only be described as such. Alaina battled cobwebs and roaches as she came in.

"May you light these candles and open the windows for me?" He asked, and Alaina first opened the window so when she struck a match on the bottom of her boot it did not ignite the entire room from the ambient dust.

"And can you also get my alcohol from the bottles by the ladder, and set them out for us?"

Alaina did so, assuming that Moto was just a very old man, who perhaps was still shaken from his encounter. She sat down and poured him a cup of ricewine, not one of her favourites, but drank it anyway as a grateful guest would.

"So you say you used to be a fighter. What did you do?" Alaina asked, eager to know.

"Oh, I was no one important. I participated in a few duels... which was the style, at the time. And I had a student, which..."

Alaina noticed he stopped for a moment, and swiftly changed the subject to save himself from answering. He never drank any ricewine of his own.

"When will you be ready to begin?" Moto asked.

Alaina sat up straight and gave a peaceful, attentive smile.

"Right away, sir."

Lesson One, Perfect Focus

Moto struck from all angles, all ends, with a force and focus Alaina struggled to replicate. As far as she was concerned her skill wielding her blade solely left-handedly had handicapped her to such an extent that she could not be trusted wielding it against any threatening foe. She felt her movements and knew they were sloppy, a parry of Moto's sword coming just a moment too late to repel his blade, a thrust aimed an inch too low to find its mark.

They fought for an hour in the sand, but something had to change, and one of them had to budge.

Moto leered at Alaina and said rather cruelly "Is this the best you can muster, flailing against an old man who you only just met? Whoever trained you thus could not be proud of his efforts."

Alaina's eyes turned to him with glare ablaze, and before even she registered it her sword and lanced across his cheek... though she did not see blood ebb.

Moto quickly turned away and placed a webbed hand over the wound, and muttered. "...*silver?*"

"What was that? I didn't hurt you too bad, did I?" Alaina asked.

Moto shook his head, the wound gone when he turned back. "No, thankfully Jinyu have regenerative scales. I apologise for using such a tactic but I could tell you were holding something back."

Alaina chuckled. "I can assure you, I was trying my hardest..."

"Then why did my inciting words work?"

"Because you're not wrong." Alaina, now caked in sweat, removed the top half of her robe to stand there just with her vest and bindings. She drew some water from a bottle and half poured it on herself and then drank the rest as Moto listened. "I was trained by my Father, who is a coward and a weakling and a liar, and I ascribe only the basics of what I know to his teachings. Can you see why I asked for another master?"

Moto nodded along. "But why do you hate him so?"

"Because he left me thinking his life was more important than mine."

Moto fell silent and then again did his best to change the subject. Family matters were, as Alaina thought, not really her problem anymore.

"As it stands, I should say you are skilled enough but perhaps your issue does not lie there but rather with focus. When I incited you, you immediately reacted and struck back far better than you had before. Perhaps that is what we must hone... reaching whatever mental state that is quicker. Tell me, what does it feel like?"

"It feels like... urgency." Alaina said. "Lula has noticed before in my battles I sometimes turn serious, usually in moments of great need. She calls it my tunnel vision. When I see nothing more than what must be done. Is this a well-known... thing? You think it's like a hidden power?"

Moto shook his head. "I have heard of no principle, form or technique of that sort. I think it is rather merely a perfect focus when you eschew all doubts and distractions."

Alaina contemplated that for a moment. Did she have a greater potential than she even realised? Was it just that she was unknowingly handicapping herself this entire time? Could she have saved Joan, if she was better?

"How can I reach this state on command?"
Moto shook his head. "Only you can find that out."

Alaina put on her hat and took her blade with her. "Then I suppose I should go find it. I'll return one way or another."

Alaina made her way through the jungle as creatures screamed and hollered. She saw the dim canopy overhead shimmer as the leaves danced and felt the movement of the ground under her soles. She passed by rushing rivers and more stagnant ones too with crocolisks bathing in the sun. The road was worn and mossy and paved with cobbles older than anything she knew.

She never heard anything but the rustle of a bush as something lept out of her.

Alaina's blade glinted as she drew it to defend, and she expected to see perhaps a tiger or panther leap out at her, not another sword. She hadn't the strength in one arm to beat it back so instead broke the struggle and jumped away, gaining distance. She saw a figure before her.

"Who are you?" She shouted. "Why do you attack me?"

Alaina could see now the slender form of her assailant, and he indeed was another Jinyu. She considered how that would be the theme of her stay here in Pandaria. Unlike Moto though, this one was cold and distant. He would not be a friend.

"I'm not there yet..." he said. "I need more time."

Alaina was perplexed. "Time for what?"

"I'm not speaking to you." Alaina saw his hand reach for his sword, but it was like moments of time had skipped past her for she did not even see him draw before he was upon her again. "Damn, he's fast!"

The unknown warrior struck her twice more with glancing blows she could barely block on both ends of her leg, and saw his sword come back in for a third.

The din of the forest turned silent, and Alaina began to focus. She twisted her leg out of the way just in time to prevent that third strike, but distractions soon rolled back in.

With a swift kick the other man knocked her down into the dirt, but it was clear for him his victory did not mean much.

"No, I'm too far away from it still."

Alaina chased after him but he gained too much distance, and slipped into the treeline again.

"You fought a Jinyu?" Moto asked, his tone low.

"I did. I always say, bandits are the same anywhere... but it seemed strange. I couldn't quite tell what he wanted. If he needed more time, why waste it on me?"

Moto paced around and spoke. "I know who it is."

"You do?"

“He is Mitsuo... a ronin, a warrior with no master, no honour, no loyalty to anyone but himself. I know him well, and it seems he has fallen low enough to attack random bystanders.”

“Then what does he want?” Alaina asked.

Moto said with deep gravity. “The same as you. Mastery.”

“I wasn’t strong enough to stop him. If he attacks others, I need to be able to defend them.”

Alaina felt that urgency, that focus, wash over her once again.

“Teach me, and he will never hurt a soul again.”

Lesson Two, Peerless Speed

Days passed, and in each Moto put Alaina through more and more rigorous training. Hard work pays off, though, and never could it be said that Alaina was not talented. She might lack the intellect for higher study, she may lack the insight for politics, and she most certainly lacked the mind for philosophy... but if there was one time she was a genius, it was in the midst of battle. She stood before Moto as he raised his sword and blocked out the sounds of distant birds and rough tides breaking to focus solely on him. A lifetime's muscle memory of fighting let her fend his every strike, with one arm enough on its own.

"Excellent." Moto said, pleased with her progress. "Though you have still only just started realising the potential in perfect focus, you have enough practice to move on with the next." "The next?" Alaina asked, taking the time to finish a bowl of egg rice she hadn't finished earlier. "Am I not ready now? I have perfect focus. I can beat him."

Moto denied it. "You do not know how strong Mitsuo truly is, not from a short scuffle. He will have a greater mastery of another technique which you will need to match him."

Alaina was listening.

"Mitsuo possesses a technique known as the Lightning Draw. You have perfect focus, now you must use it to surpass his speed. You are purely reactive as you are now and do not control the pace of the fight."

Alaina remembered how during their battle, it seemed Mitsuo attacked without even fully drawing his sword from its sheath. "That was a technique?"

"It is. He will be able to strike from any position in an instant, even if he is at a distance, even if his sword is not drawn. You should take a katana. The curve of the blade flows into an attack faster."

Alaina shook her head. "I'd have to learn a whole new weapon. The fundamentals are similar but I have trained with longswords for years. This is a blade that saved the world, and it is mine. If I am to learn this Lightning Draw I will master it my way."

Moto chuckled. "You remind me of someone."

"Will you tell me who, or will you change the subject again?" Alaina squinted at him, feeling there was something here that Moto refused to do anything but hide.

It began to rain outside, pattering on the wooden hut roof.

"Good. That will help us."

"You mentioned your father before. What sort of warrior was he?"

"I would say he was a Knight but that would imply that he had some degree of honour or compassion. No, he was a mercenary and a warmonger... but to call him a conqueror would give too much credit to his name. Yet if I am to be kind he at least did not seem to enjoy fighting. He always told me the most just fight was one I finish as soon as possible."

"He must regret your dislike of him greatly." Moto uttered.

"He does. But he made his choice, and refused to change." Alaina said.

"Is it too late to make amends?" He asked.

"It is, and the fault is his alone."

Alaina stood in the rain and drilled for hours and hours to draw her blade in perfect focus to cut the rain in half. It felt impossible, even if she swung a razor the rain was too small a target to slice. She had only performed such a feat once and it was after she had drunk the most potent Philter of Evened Odds such that time seemed to slow to a crawl and the rain hang motionlessly in midair. Moto watched her distantly, caught in thought, and Alaina thought it was strange how the rain never seemed to coat his scales. She felt a growing certainty something was strange about him... something of this situation too perfect to believe, but repressed such thoughts as distractions which stopped her from achieving perfect focus.

She would have little more time to practice.

In the distance great plumes of smoke rose even through the rain, for a raging fire burned.

Moto looked in horror. "That is where Fallsong Village is..."

"Is it him?" Alaina, rainsoaked and weary, did not hesitate.

"I fear that it might."

Alaina wasted not a moment longer.

Alaina knew little more of Fallsong than it was a peaceful Jinyu settlement. She had visited here once to save them from a monster's attack, but now she came to rescue them from one of their own. By the volume of flame erupting from beyond the gates it must have been a whole building that burned if not more. She had to stop him.

Mitsuo stepped out from the burning building and shouted. "Is no one going to stand up to me?"

Three men carrying swords with uncertain grips and smoke filled lungs stood against the ronin. They were as ready as they could be to fight him in this urgent moment but perhaps no amount of preparation could bridge their gap in mastery. Mitsuo's sword glinted in the fire like a flash of lightning, and he carved through all of them before they even saw his hand twitch. Mitsuo's face was scarred with anger as he still did not find whatever he was looking for and was nearly ready to execute it upon them.

But by the time he swung, another blade blocked his.

"Stop this! You will not find the mastery you seek challenging bystanders and town guards. If you must have a foe to train on, fight me!"

Mitsuo twisted his blade to try to gain purchase over hers as they danced in a bind, denying each any inch of leverage. "You again? You already proved you're not worth the effort. I seek a real master."

Alaina broke away and launched a blindingly fast attack, but even still it wasn't good enough for Mitsuo deftly parried it. Then Mitsuo threw one of his own and Alaina, still improving, barely managed to catch it. They entered a sort of dance of attack, parry and counter, where tens of clashes passed in just a few minutes. Mitsuo changed pace and tried to sweep Alaina's leg, Alaina used his weaker stance to throw him to the ground, but Mitsuo caught himself at the last second and forced Alaina away with another attack she couldn't afford to be hit by.

"There has to be a reason for this." Alaina asked. "Why go to such lengths to improve?"

"You can't understand. Why would a stranger care?"

“Because I care about stopping you from hurting people no matter what that means!” Mitsuo turned back to the burning house behind him. “No. People don’t understand how much this can mean to you. No matter how much you tried to tell them.” Alaina let down her guard, desperate to end this tonight. “You’re already on the verge of killing people, you’re already so far that surely telling me is nowhere near as hard?”

Even through the storm, that flame raged hard, and as embers were blown from one building to the next another flared and caught fire. Alaina watched as another house’s fragile straw roof collapsed in on itself while the foundations burned.

“Damnit! This isn’t over, Mitsuo!” Alaina shouted, and rushed from the fight to go save those inside. She kicked the door open with force and rescued the children and mother from the house, but by the time she had left Mitsuo was gone once more.

A day later the storm, as well as the fires, had subsided.

Alaina stepped through the charred remains of the house Mitsuo had set ablaze.

Not much had survived, but she did find a room.

A shrine had been made there by someone long ago, surrounded by candles and pearl.

She found an ashy painting saved by the rubble, and saw a father with his baby.

Alaina took it to a villager who could translate what it was titled.

“My pride, my joy, my world: Mitsuo, my son.”

Lesson Three, Effortless Skill

Moto watched the rain fall from outside his hut and heard its clatter on the stairs, like little footsteps which came to greet him. He drew the blade from its saya and took a small mallet, filled with powdered whetstone, and dusted the blade before wiping it off with a cloth. After, he dressed a cloth with a small amount of oil before running it up and down the length with great care. Moto frowned, for in the polished mirror-like steel he could not see his own reflection. When he pressed his fingertip up along the edge... he sharply sliced it. There was no blood. The wound opened then closed before he could even see if there was anything inside.

Heavier footsteps came up the stairs and these were unmistakable. He rested there with his sword on his lap as Alaina came in.

"Did you defeat him?"

"No, but we were matched in skill."

"Then you need but one more technique, my final technique, to gain the upper hand."

Alaina raised her hand. "I do not think defeating him is the solution. I spoke to Mitsuo, or drew what I could from him during our fight. He is hurting. He is trying to prove himself somehow. He has a plight he believes only he can overcome. And I saw he burned down his old house."

Moto did his best to keep a sagelike expression but Alaina saw the muscles in his face twitch and spoke with some measure of difficulty. "Mitsuo is a ronin. You should focus on defeating him."

"You certainly seem to know much about him, do you not? Why are you so insistent that I defeat him rather than understanding him?"

Moto snapped his sword into its sheathe and stood up. "Because he is hurting people, he is a danger to the people who live here. Is that not enough?"

Alaina stood at his height. "There is more than one way to stop someone."

"No. For Mitsuo, there is only one way he will listen. You must surpass him."

Moto turned away. "I have taught you perfect focus. You have, in some primitive degree, achieved the Lightning Draw. I must teach you my greatest technique, and you will need the last two in order to even stand a chance of performing it. The Three-Clawed Dragon."

They went together to the ruins of Dojan, a site where a Mogu fortress once stood. Though many of those ancient warlords had been reanimated and awakened some still lay as statues. They were made of stone, but their armour was still real metal, such that an ordinary blade might shatter on the swing.

Moto drew his sword as Alaina watched, her arms folded. Just how could this technique be enough to cut through it?

Moto drew his blade like a flash of lightning, marking two points in the Mogu statue's chest. They were tiny scratches which barely created an imperfection in the statue's armour. Moto then readied himself, and focused deeply. On his third strike he aimed for the exact centre of the two imperfections he had made, and when it landed his sword cleanly bisected the statue like it had met no resistance at all.

Moto flicked the gravel dust from his sword, and slowly sheathed it.

Alaina snorted. "That's magic. That has to be, surely. You made it look effortless."

Moto said "Do other people consider your own strength, your own skill, as magical in origin? If they did, would that make it any more true?"

"But what I accomplish is within the bounds of what is humanly capable. That," Alaina gestured to the split statue, "is impossible."

"Yet you saw it with your own eyes. You are still young, you do not realise what you could be capable of with skill alone. This is only the beginning."

"Then how does it work?" Alaina asked.

"As you saw in your fight with Mitsuo, even the Lightning Draw is imperfect. You were locked in a stalemate for too long as your speeds were matched. But through that struggle you doubtless marked each other with grazes or cuts. They are tiny imperfections in your opponent's structure. A third strike aimed at the exact centre of two other attacks exploits those flaws and makes an attack that cannot be resisted by any means."

Alaina remembered her first fight with Mitsuo, where he quickly struck two points on her leg and aimed for a third. She had barely dodged that in time. What would happen if it had hit?

"Hold on." Alaina asked. "If it is the exact centre of two points you must land, how is that at all possible to perform in a fight?"

"It is a technique only for a master, after all. If everyone knew it and could perform it, all duels would be borne around this technique. But there is another layer. You must consider then that as Mitsuo knows this technique too, you will not only be preventing him from landing it on you, but also that he will do the same when he realises that you too know it. Only then will the true master prevail."

"You are insistent on this concept of mastery, Moto. I thank you for all the assistance you have given me for I have truly found what I was looking for, but it is beginning to concern me that you are so single minded on this matter. What is it that you are not telling me?"

"I am old, Alaina." Moto said. "I wish to pass down my teachings before I go."

"You remind me of my Father in that way too." Alaina scowled.

"But look at the warrior he forged."

Alaina focused vigorously on her training for days on end, insistent that she would stop Mitsuo one way or another. Moto was always there, watching, correcting, training her eye to intuitively find the two marked flaws and how to remember where she had placed them. She trained on tatami first, then on another mogu, but she was never able to accomplish it. Alaina watched Moto as he watched her. He never ate, even when she ate. He never drank, even after drilling her and speaking for hours. And even at the end of the day, when she was ready to leave, she never saw him sleep.

Alaina always tried to trust people at face value, and she hated to assume a lie. But something did not add up with Moto. Something beyond his visage as a wise man. From how he was clearly effortlessly skilled yet did not defend himself from the Hozen, or how he refused to defeat Mitsuo himself despite having far greater mastery over these techniques. There was one thing that was clear which Moto did not know Alaina knew.

On the final day of her training, she confronted him.

"Moto." Alaina said, holding her sword in its sheath. "Your mastery is clear, and so is your deception of me."

"And exactly what deception is that?"

"Mitsuo was once your student, and you are making up for your mistakes with me."

"And you are not just conflating me with your Father?"

Alaina spat. "Your lies being revealed are your own fault. How else would Mitsuo know what you called 'Your Greatest Technique'? There is much you have failed to tell me, Moto. If you wish me to be your legacy, I demand to know everything."

Moto stood and drew his sword. "I will tell you, if you can strike me with the Three-Clawed Dragon."

Alaina had little choice, and readied herself to fight.

Moto came at her with a ferocity which startled her even after all their training together and was immediately on the back-foot. In all her battles she had perhaps never gone against someone so skillful, so strong nor with such mastery over mind, body and blade. For every lightning-fast strike she parried his with another came and all her tricks of kicking sand and using her own weight as leverage never worked on Moto, who was a master so powerful he surpassed everything but power itself.

"If you will not strike with my technique upon me, then I shall turn it upon you!"

Moto carved a cut on her arm. Even only as a graze, a scratch, would it be deep enough? Would his skill be so great as to exploit a flaw so small? Alaina began to understand how terrifying this technique was, where even the smallest mistake could cost her everything. She had to be perfect.

Moto kept coming as Alaina battled him through the ruins, thick underbrush and whistling willows, past statues of warriors who had slept for a millenia. Alaina hid behind another statue to catch her breath as Moto unleashed three cuts on it and saw it explode out from before her. She drove Valour into his katana to parry it away and kept on going. She had to think of something!

"Time will buy you no mastery!" Moto said, and came at Alaina as she raced across a crumbling bridge. Moto etched two notches into the bridge and with a mighty third swing splintered the bridge under them which caused Alaina to lose her balance and nearly fall. Moto stared into the rubble and saw a cloud of dust and stone but nobody. Then he looked up and saw Alaina swing at him mid-air. He deflected the attack but barely caught it with the grip of his blade and cast her away, lancing her again. One more cut on Alaina's shoulder spelled doom for her, as this would mean she was open for his technique. She could not switch to her other hand for her right arm was still broken and just using her left threatened his final unblockable attack.

If he predicted her, and lay one more cut, it would be over.

Alaina held her sword low and was worn and ragged, barely able to keep up their long battle. She was still a relative novice to these techniques, and to use them in this situation pushed her body to its absolute limit.

"You have such great potential." Moto said. "It is a shame to see it wasted. Maybe you weren't the one."

"I still have room... for one more in me." She said, gasping for air.

"Very well. One more strike, and we end this."

They both sheathed their swords and hovered their hands over them, standing amidst the eroding stone reclaimed by nature.

Sun shone, dappled through dark leaves.

Winds howled through creaking oaks,

The world went quiet, and then, a flash.

Moto's sword was blocked millimeters away from Alaina's arm.

"You didn't attack... you still failed."

Alaina grit her teeth. "And you didn't realise... that I had this figured out from the very start!"

Moto looked down at his blade. Alaina had blocked it. There was one scratch near the top where she had powerfully deflected it earlier, and one on the grip above his hand.

She had blocked his sword in the exact centre of those points. And when she drove it in, his blade was sundered in two.

Moto knelt in the dirt. "You have done it... I have passed on my greatest technique."

Alaina spoke with a calm voice, firm... yet calm. "You have. And I believe we had a deal."

Along the quiet coastline, Moto brought her to a carved stone shrine worn by the elements. He gestured her forward to brush the dust and sand from its surface, and the name on there was but barely readable.

"Here lies Musashi Moto."

Alaina turned to him. "You are Musashi? After all this time?"

"I was." He said. "Age claimed me a year ago, but I found myself lingering. My deepest regret kept me here."

It was too much to consider, too much to take in. But Alaina cast away frivolous questions for what really mattered. This explained his behavior, his lack of bodily needs, even his strange reaction to her sword when they first trained. But she still had one more question.

"Who is Mitsuo to you?"

"He is my greatest failure, and he is my son."

She knew his questions about Fatherhood were not unfounded. It all began to make sense. She breathed deep and began to turn away as the sword saint begged. "You must stop him. Please. I have not moved on yet. My last regret is not finding a true successor. By defeating him, that will prove that you are my legacy. I will finally be able to move on."

All the wrath in the world could not contain the words she wished to give Musashi Moto in that moment, another father desperate to avoid his responsibilities to his children.

Alaina remained calm, and quiet, for she saw another on the horizon.

Another Jinyu who held a katana with purpose and mastery.

Mitsuo had come. And as Moto disappeared, Alaina prepared to prove her own mastery.

Duel on a Windy Day

"Mitsuo." Alaina said, and looked over her shoulder to see she was alone. Musashi Moto was not here to see his successors define his legacy. He, too, had fled.

"I never gave you my name, but we stand here as equals so you should know it. I am Alaina Tinkerbolt. And I have become a Three-Clawed Dragon."

Mitsuo looked at her, his face angry and puffed up as he tightly gripped his katana by the hilt. "You're lying. You barely knew the Lightning Draw days ago, you can't achieve something even harder with just a little training. I have tried for years! My mastery of it, my understanding of it, it must be far greater than yours!"

The winds blew chill for the first time then, on that southern coast, with leaves flitting about them and a sunset drawing over the horizon. The sea had begun to stir.

"You want to prove that your mastery is greater?" Alaina asked, her finger twitching over her sword's grip.

"I have to. It's the only thing that matters now. It's all I ever wanted."

"Is it? Or is that a wish that someone else made for you?"

Mitsuo unsheathed his blade angrily and held it out at her. "Why does it even matter to you? Why are you even here? This is my struggle, this is my path! You came here a week ago and you think you are better than me and then tell me what I'm doing is wrong?"

Alaina held firm and knew that if Mitsuo attacked her then she must defend herself. After all, even two scratches would mark her for death.

"It is not your fault. It never was."

Mitsuo spat on the sand. "You don't know anything about me! Who even are you?"

"Right now, the only thing that matters is that I won't let you do this."

Amber sun sparkled off the sea tide and from Mitsuo's sword. The two successors of Musashi stared each other down, students of a sword saint, who sought to prove the mastery they had fought so hard for throughout their entire lives. Surely, it could only ever be resolved with steel.

"Well?" Mitsuo shouted. "Are you going to come at me or what?"

Alaina's hand reached her sword grip. Her fingers wrapped around, held it tightly, pulled...

And tore off the scabbard, her blade still sheathed inside.

She knelt down on the sand and threw her sword far away.

"I want you to listen to me."

"What?" Mitsuo was infuriated, seeing this as some sort of trick. "You won't fight me?"

"I won't. Not until you hear me out."

"I don't need you..." Mitsuo said. "This is a waste of my time! I'll find someone else to prove my mastery of Three-Clawed Dragon on!"

"There is not a single other person on this continent who you can prove your mastery against. Will you find some sobbing infant, a man who never held a sword, a bedridden grandmother to train your blade against? Would that satisfy you?"

"Then I will attack you." Mitsuo shouted. "I will force you to fight me."

Alaina gestured to her sword out of arm's length. "I will not defend myself. You can run me through and I will not fight back. Will attacking an unarmed woman prove your might?" Mitsuo clenched his fists, his rage and anger building, pent up and almost coming to burst. "Stop talking and just fight me! I have to do this. PLEASE!"

Alaina stared at him with a pitiful sort of look. "Come and sit. Speak, and if it is not enough, then I will satisfy you."

Mitsuo sat with his blade close to him across from Alaina, and Alaina spoke first.

"I wish to understand you."

"Why bother?"

"Because I do not think we are unlike. It takes a mad sort of mind to seek mastery in combat. It is not a normal thing. What drives you to hurt other people in pursuit of it?"

"It's the only thing I have left."

"You keep saying that but say little of context."

"I'm not telling you my life's story."

"Then I will do my best to piece it together." Alaina nodded, and spoke. "You are Mitsuo, from Fallsong Village. You lived there with your father, and he trained you as a warrior."

Mitsuo listened and did not interject, but was not happy. He had no other choice.

"He cared deeply for you, and had great pride in you. But it was not easy, because your father is Musashi."

That name seemed to send shivers down Mitsuo's spine and he snapped a reply. "That's a lie. He didn't care. He didn't have pride in me."

Alaina frowned. "He hurt you, didn't he?"

"No, you don't have any idea what it's like! What it's like to be his son. He's a sword saint.

The legendary Musashi. Everyone expects me to be the next him, and I trained for years and years, desperate for him to see how much I wanted it."

Alaina frowned, feeling this all too familiar. "Was that truly what you wanted, or was it just him?"

"I wanted it too." Mitsuo said. "I want it too! If I can beat you I can prove it, but now he's gone and taken another student because I wasn't good enough!"

Alaina shifted her seat. Rather than sitting with folded legs, she crossed them and put her hands inside and drew her shoulders close. "I know what it's like. I was the same."

Mitsuo replied. "It can't be the same. He left me when he realised I was not enough for him."

"How old are you?" Alaina asked.

"It will be my nineteenth summer this year." Mitsuo replied.

"Fathers, sometimes, will wait till you are grown and leave you thinking a number is enough to justify abandonment. It is like they are itching to shed their responsibility of you, isn't it? It feels horrid. Like it was your fault, that the change in their love had to have changed because you had, not because they did."

Mitsuo clutched the grip of his sword so tight, like a child holding onto their most comforting blanket.

"It is not your fault, no matter how much easier it would make it for you, Mitsuo."

He took a deep breath, and he did his best to center himself, the way his father taught him.

"He'll have to admit he was wrong, when I prove myself." He said.

Alaina frowned. "How do you think he will know?"

"Because he'll hear about it... I know he lives somewhere near here. I know he..."

"Mitsuo."

He looked up.

"You don't know?"

Alaina stood and gestured to the shrine behind them.

"I am so sorry. He did not want to be here to tell you himself."

Mitsuo came up and saw the grave, and the engraving of his father's name.

Alaina could barely watch as a son's tears flowed knowing absolutely everything had been for nothing. He needed closure. He needed to know he was hurting himself for someone who would never be able to be there for him. But as much as Alaina wanted to teach him that harsh lesson, as much as she thought that it would stop this self-destructive quest... she couldn't do it. If she had one chance to repair a family like hers from shattering into a million pieces, if she could champion one child to stand up for themselves and reclaim a father's love that once was so strong... she would go to any means to reach it.

"Mitsuo, I spoke to him."

He looked up. "What?"

Alaina grit her teeth. "I do not know how, if it was a vision or some specter or a trick of the mind but I spoke to him. He taught me himself."

"But he is dead! How?"

"He is, but he tells me something in this world keeps him here. His greatest failure and his greatest regret. He tells me it is him not finding a successor. He is gone, but there must be some way to force him to appear for you. You deserve the right to tell him you are his successor, but that he does not own your life."

"Then why did you not tell me before?" He cried.

"I'm sorry. I do not know if he will come back. But I realised I have to try."

Alaina must have looked mad to Mitsuo, taking him back to a ragged shack on an island off the coast. It was clogged with dust and littered with cobwebs, with a creaky shutter for a torn paper window. The floor was still damp from when rain had leaked through its wooden roof.

"Moto!" She shouted loudly. "I demand to speak with you one final time!"

Her words were met with silence.

Maybe I had hallucinated, Alaina thought. But she knew enough about the dead to know that did not need to be the only answer.

Alaina placed her hand on her hip, considered something for some time, and laid out the futons and the table Musashi Moto had asked her to lay out when first she came here. From a bottle she poured two cups of sake and left one cup on the empty space he would sit at.

"You don't expect me to join you, I hope." Mitsuo asked and Alaina let out an awkward little chuckle. "No. I want it to be clear that he should join us. I'm no witch or spiritualist but we all learn that objects which mean something to the person will help draw them here."

"It will make my father appear to us as he did to you?" Mitsuo asked.

"I don't know if it forces him." Alaina replied. "All we can do is be convincing as possible."

Alaina then took the two halves of Musashi Moto's sword and laid them across the table too, a symbol of not only his broken pride but also a promise completed. There is one who learned his technique here, but perhaps not the one he expected to speak to.

Finally, Alaina brought forth an item Mitsuo thought was long lost. The painting his father made of him when he was a child. Alaina rested it facing where Moto would sit, on the other side of the table.

"Sit on this side." Alaina said. "And reach out to him."

With care, Mitsuo came and knelt on his futon. He gazed at the broken sword and clutched the sake cup.

"Father, I..."

When he looked up, Musashi Moto sat across from him.

"I'm here." He said, and glanced at Alaina. "Did you defeat him?"

"I did not fight him. That is not what he needs." Alaina said, and gestured to them.

Mitsuo welled up and could not find the words to say but had to say something, for he had waited so long to speak. "You were gone? For all this time, and yet here, and you did not see me?"

Moto did not speak.

"I have trained and trained and I have learned your techniques. Do you see? I am your successor!"

Moto said nothing.

"Why did you leave me? Am I not enough for you? Even in death you reject me!"

Moto was silent.

"Say something. Please!"

"I'm sorry, Mitsuo. That I was not there for you. That I cannot be there for you."

"Why not? You're here now! You can stay!"

"I can't. I have found my successor, and now I can move on."

"You're still selfish, after all this time you don't care!"

"You can't move on. Not yet." Alaina said.

"Why not?"

"You already would have. If all your regrets were truly cleansed I could not call you back at all. Your spirit lingers here exactly because your greatest regret still goes unfulfilled."

Musashi Moto nodded, and realised that what Alaina said was true.

"My greatest regret... it wasn't finding a successor. It was that I did not care for my son."

"It seems obvious now, doesn't it?" Alaina said with great pleasure. "If only you learned it sooner."

Mitsuo spoke up. "This doesn't change anything. You still wanted to leave me, and now you're staying because you have to?"

Moto tried to reach out to him but Mitsuo slapped his hand aside. "I don't care anymore. I hate you, and I'll always hate you!"

Alaina then sat next to him. "I know it does not make you feel better. I know seeing him here, and talking to him, it cannot be all you wanted. And it won't fix everything, and that hate may never go away. But you have a father. You know deep down you love him because you would not be so angry if you did not, you would rather feel nothing. And despite it all, and what he says, his love is what is keeping him here... that is more than some get from their fathers."

Musashi Moto agreed. "I am sorry, Mitsuo. I have not been a father to you. But I will not let death stop me. And I will remain here for as long as you need me."

Mitsuo breathed and replied. "I will give you a chance. But only because you want to change."

They needed time to talk, to adjust, time alone. Alaina gave them that at least. The sun had gone down now and she saw the moon's reflection in quiet waves. Fathers were never perfect, and their children always lashed out. But today she gave someone something they didn't have before, and she knew that it had the chance to endure.

She slung her sword over her back and waited to be picked up, to go home, and smiled when she realised she had found what she was looking for too. True mastery was not needing to draw your sword at all.