

C H R I S B R A D F O R D



YOUNG SAMURAI

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

C H R I S B R A D F O R D

Y  U N G S A M U R A I

THE W A Y OF THE W A R R I O R

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Young Samurai: *The Way of the Warrior* is a work of fiction, and while based on real historical figures, events, and locations, the book does not profess to be accurate in this regard. Young Samurai is more an echo of the times than a reenactment of history.

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For my father



PROLOGUE—MASAMOTO TENNO

Kyoto, Japan, August 1609

THE BOY snapped awake. He seized his sword.

Tenno hardly dared to breathe. He sensed someone else in the room. Moonlight seeped through the lucent paper walls, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he searched for signs of movement. But he could see only shadows within shadows. Perhaps he had been wrong. . . . His samurai training, though, warned him otherwise.

Tenno listened intently for any indication there might be an intruder, but he heard nothing unusual. The cherry blossom trees in the garden rustled like silk as a light breeze passed through. There was the familiar trickle of water as it flowed from the small fountain into the fishpond, and nearby a cricket chirped. The rest of the house lay silent.

He was overreacting. . . . It was probably just some bad *kami* spirit disturbing his dreams.

This past month the rumor of war had set the whole Masamoto household on edge. There was talk of a rebellion, and Tenno's father had been called into service to help quell any potential uprising. The peace Japan had enjoyed for the past twelve years was suddenly under threat, and the people were afraid. No wonder he was so tense.

Tenno lowered his guard and settled back on his futon. The moment he did, the night cricket chirped a little louder, and his hand tightened around the hilt of his sword. His father had once said, "A samurai should always obey his instincts." Now his instincts told him something was wrong.

He rose from his bed to investigate.

Suddenly a silver star spun out of the darkness.

Tenno threw himself out of the way a second too late.

The *shuriken* sliced through his cheek before burying itself deep into the futon, where his head had just been. He felt a rush of hot blood stream down his face. Then he heard a second *shuriken* thud into the *tatamimatted* floor, and in one fluid movement he sprang to his feet, bringing his sword up to protect himself.

Dressed head to toe in black, a figure drifted ghostlike out of the shadows.

It was a ninja: one of the Japanese assassins of the night.

With measured slowness, the ninja unsheathed a vicious-looking blade from his *saya*. Unlike Tenno's large curved *katana* sword, the *tantō* was short, straight, and ideal for stabbing.

The ninja took a silent step closer and raised the *tantō* : a human cobra preparing to strike.

Tenno, anticipating the attack, cut down with his sword, slicing across the body of the approaching assassin. But the ninja deftly evaded the boy's sword, spinning around to kick him squarely in the chest.

Thrown backward, Tenno crashed through the paper-thin *shoji* door of his room and out into the night. He landed heavily in the middle of the inner garden, disoriented and fighting for breath.

The ninja leaped through the torn opening and landed catlike in front of him.

Tenno attempted to stand and defend himself, but his legs gave way. They had become numb and useless. He tried to call for help, but his throat had swollen shut. It burned like fire, and his cries became suffocating stabs for breath.

The ninja shifted in and out of focus before vanishing in a swirl of black smoke.

The boy's vision folded in on itself, and he realized that the ninja's *shuriken* had been dipped in poison, which was paralyzing him limb by limb. His body quickly succumbed to the poison's lethal powers, and he lay there at the mercy of his assassin.

Blinded, Tenno listened for the ninja's approach, but could only hear the *chirp-chirp* of the cricket. He recalled his father once telling him that ninja used the insect's calls to mask the noise of their own movements. That must be how his assassin had slipped by the guards undetected.

Briefly his eyesight returned, and under the pale light of a waning moon, a shrouded face floated toward him. He drew so close that Tenno could smell the assassin's breath, sour and stale as cheap *saké*. He could see a single emerald green eye blazing with hatred through the slit in the hood of the assassin's *shinobi shozoku*.

"This is a message for your father," hissed the ninja.

Tenno felt the deadly cold tip of the *tantō* on the flesh above his heart.

A single sharp thrust and his whole body flared white-hot with pain. . . .

Then nothing . . .

Masamoto Tenno had passed into the Great Void.

CHAPTER 1

FIREBALL

Pacific Ocean, August 1611

THE BOY snapped awake. “*All hands on deck!*” bellowed the bosun. “That means you too, Jack!”

The bosun’s weather-beaten face loomed out of the darkness at the boy, who hastily dropped from his swaying hammock to the wooden floor of the ship’s middle deck.

Jack Fletcher, only twelve, was nonetheless tall for his age, and slim and muscular from two years at sea. His eyes—hidden behind the straggly mess of straw-blond hair he had inherited from his mother—were an azure blue, and glinted with a determination and fire far beyond his years. He pushed his hair aside and groaned, his limbs aching from the relentless work the crew had been forced to do while battling a tirade of storms.

Men, weary from the long voyage on board the *Alexandria*, slid from their bunks and pushed past Jack, hastening to the upper deck.

Suddenly there was an almighty crash, followed by a shrieking of the timbers. Jack was thrown to the floor. The small oil lantern suspended from the central beam of the dingy hold swung wildly, its flame spluttering.

Jack landed heavily among a pile of empty casks, sending them spinning across the bucking floorboards. He struggled to find his footing as several grime-ridden, half-starved crewmen stumbled past in the flickering darkness. A hand grabbed the back of his shirt and dragged him to his feet.

It was Ginsel.

The stocky Dutchman grinned at Jack, revealing a set of jagged teeth that made him look like a great white shark. Despite his severe appearance, the sailor had always treated Jack with kindness.

“When will these storms stop hounding us? It sounds as if hell itself has opened up its gates!” growled Ginsel. “Best get yourself up on the foredeck before the bosun has your hide.”

Jack hastily followed Ginsel and the rest of the crew as they scrambled up the

companionway and emerged into the heart of the storm.

Menacing black clouds thundered across the heavens, and the complaints of the sailors were immediately drowned by the relentless wind that ripped through the rigging. The smell of sea salt was sharp in Jack's nostrils, and ice-cold rain slashed at his face, stinging him like a thousand tiny needles. But before he could take it all in, the ship was rolled by a mountainous wave.

The deck flooded and foamed with seawater, and Jack was instantly drenched to the skin. The water had barely cascaded away through the scuppers when another tumultuous wave roared across the deck. This one, stronger than the first, swept Jack off his feet. He barely managed to grab hold of the ship's rail to stop himself being washed overboard.

Jack recovered his footing as a jagged line of lightning scorched its way across the night sky and struck the main mast. For a brief moment, the entire ship was illuminated in a ghostly light. The three-masted ocean trader was in turmoil. Her crew was scattered across the decks like pieces of driftwood. High up on the yardarm, a group of sailors battled against the wind, attempting to furl the mainsail before the storm ripped it away, or worse, capsized the ship entirely.

On the quarterdeck, the third mate, a seven-foot giant of a man with a fiery red beard, was wrestling with the wheel. Beside him was Captain Wallace, a stern figure who shouted commands at his crew, but all in vain: the wind whipped his words away before anyone could hear them.

The only other man on the quarterdeck was a tall, powerful sailor with dark brown hair tied back with a thin piece of cord. This man was Jack's father, John Fletcher, the pilot of the *Alexandria*, and his eyes were fixed on the horizon as if he hoped to pierce the storm and seek out the safety of land beyond.

"You lot!" ordered the bosun, pointing at Jack, Ginsel, and two other crew members. "Get yourselves aloft and unfurl that topsail. Now!"

They immediately headed for the bow of the ship, but as they crossed the main deck to the foremast, a fireball plummeted out of nowhere—straight toward Jack.

"*Watch out!*" cried one of the sailors.

Jack, having already experienced several full-on attacks from enemy Portuguese warships during the voyage, instinctively ducked. He felt a rush of hot air and heard a deep howl as the fireball flew past and plunged into the deck. The impact, however, lacked the fearsome crack of iron against wood that a cannonball caused. This sounded as dull and lifeless as a dropped bale of broadcloth.

With sickening horror, Jack's eyes fell upon the object now at his feet.

It was no fireball.

It was the burning body of a crewman, struck dead by the lightning.

Jack stood transfixed. The dead man's face was etched in agony and so disfigured by fire that he was unrecognizable.

"Holy Mary, mother of God," exclaimed Ginsel. "Even the heavens are against us!"

But before he could utter another word, a wave crested the rail and swept the

body out to sea.

“Jack, stay with me!” said Ginsel, seeing the shock rise in the boy’s face. He grabbed Jack’s arm and tried to pull him toward the foremast.

But Jack remained rooted to the spot, a sickness rising from the pit of his stomach. He could still picture the burned-out eyes of the dead sailor. This was by no means the first death he’d witnessed on the voyage, and he knew it would not be the last. His father had warned him that crossing both the Atlantic and the Pacific would be fraught with danger. Jack had seen men die from frostbite, scurvy, tropical fever, knife wounds, and cannon shot. Still, such familiarity with death did not make Jack numb to its horror.

“Where’re you going?” yelled Ginsel, as Jack ran for the quarterdeck. “We need you aloft!”

Jack, though, was lost to the storm, struggling toward his father in a chaotic battle against the elements as the ship pitched and rolled from one side to the other. He knew he should go with Ginsel, but the need to help his father outweighed any duty to the ship.

He had barely managed to reach the mizzenmast when another colossal wave plowed into the *Alexandria*. This one was so powerful that Jack was whipped off his feet and washed across the deck. The wave bore him in the direction of an open gangway, and he slid inextricably toward the dark seething ocean.

CHAPTER 2

RIGGING MONKEY

JACK HUNG ON to the gunnel and braced himself against the rails, hoping he could withstand the impact of the next wave, but he lost his grip. Then his body was unexpectedly jerked upright, and he found himself hanging over the edge of the ship, the ocean rushing violently beneath him.

Jack looked up at a tattooed hand clamped firmly around his wrist.

“Don’t worry, boy, I’ve got you!” grunted the bosun, who hoisted him back on board. Jack collapsed in a pile at the man’s feet, heaving up mouthfuls of seawater.

“You’ll live. Natural sailor like your father you are, though a little more drowned,” said the bosun with a humorless smile. “Now get yourself up the foremast and unstag the top gallant sail, or else you’ll get a taste of the *cat!*”

“God bless you, Bosun,” muttered Jack, and quickly made his way back to the foredeck, aware that a lashing from the cat-o’-nine-tails was no empty threat.

Still, Jack hesitated when he reached the bow. The foremast was taller than a church steeple, and pitching wildly in the storm. Jack’s fingers, already numb with cold, couldn’t even feel the rigging, and his sodden clothes had become cumbersome and heavy. But he knew the longer he stalled, the colder he would get, and soon his limbs would be too stiff to save himself from falling.

Come on, he willed himself. You’re braver than this.

Deep down, though, he knew he wasn’t. In fact, he was truly terrified. During the lengthy voyage from England to the Spice Islands, he had acquired a reputation for being one of the best rigging monkeys on the ship. But his ability to climb the mast, repair the sails, and untangle fouled ropes at great heights hadn’t come from confidence or skill—it was born out of pure fear.

Jack looked up into the storm. The sky had been whipped into a frenzy, and dark thunderous clouds streaked across a colorless moon. In the gloom he could just make out Ginsel and the rest of the crew among the shrouds. The mast swayed so violently that the men swung like apples being shaken from a tree.

“Don’t be afraid of storms in life,” his father had said on the day Jack had been tasked with climbing to the crow’s nest for the first time. “We must all learn how to sail our own ship, in any weather.”

Jack remembered how he had watched the new recruits attempt the terrifying

ascent. Every one of them had either frozen with fear or puked their guts out onto the sailors below. By the time it was Jack's turn, the wind had got up so much that the rigging was rattling almost as fretfully as his own legs. Back in England he had scaled trees just like any other boy, but never one as impossibly high as this.

Jack had looked to his father, whose face conveyed utter faith in him.

Not wishing to disappoint him, Jack turned and launched himself at the rigging and didn't look down until he had hauled himself over the lip and into the safety of the crow's nest. Exhausted but elated, Jack had let out a yell of delight. Fear had driven Jack all the way to the top. Getting down had proved another matter. . . .

An icy blast of sea spray brought Jack back to the present. Shaking off his memories, he grabbed hold of the rigging and pulled himself aloft. He quickly fell into his usual rhythm, the comfort of habit providing some reassurance. Hand over hand, he gained height and could soon see the white crests of the waves that charged at the ship. But they were no longer the only threat. Fearsome gusts of wind did their utmost to drag Jack off into the night, but he clung to the ropes and continued upward. Before long he was standing next to Ginsel on the yardarm.

"Jack!" yelled Ginsel, who looked worn out, his eyes bloodshot and sunken. "One of the halyards got fouled up. The jib sail won't drop. You're going to have to go out there and unsnag it."

Jack looked up and saw a thick sail rope tangled in the rigging of the gallant, its block and tackle flailing dangerously.

"Has no one else tried?" asked Jack, nodding toward the two petrified sailors hanging on for grim life on the other side of the yardarm.

"I would've asked your friend Christiaan," replied Ginsel, glancing over at a small, terrified-looking Dutch lad, "but he's no Jack Fletcher. You're the best rigging monkey we've got."

"All right," said Jack, though he realized his task was nearly suicidal. "You'd better be ready to catch me!"

"Trust me, little brother, I wouldn't want to lose you now," said Ginsel. He attempted a reassuring smile, but his sharklike teeth only made him appear maniacal. "Tie this rope around your waist. I'll keep hold of the other end. Best take my knife, too. You'll need to cut the halyard free."

Jack secured the rope and clamped the roughly hewn blade between his teeth. He then clambered up the mast to the topgallant. Using the little rigging available, Jack edged along the spar toward the tangled halyard. He hung on tight. If he failed to cut the topsail loose, it wasn't just his own life that hung in the balance, but those of the entire crew. Without that sail, there would be no way the captain could control the ship and steer her clear of danger.

The going was treacherously slow, and the wind was pulling at him with a thousand unseen hands. Glancing down, Jack could barely make out his father on the quarterdeck below. For a moment he swore he saw his father wave at him.

Then out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw the loose block and tackle come flying straight at his head. He threw himself to one side, dodging it, but lost his grip

and slipped from the spar in the process.

Jack snatched for the rigging, grabbing hold of a loose halyard as he fell. His hands ripped down the rope, the rough hemp cutting deep into his palms. Somehow he kept his grip, despite the searing pain.

He hung there, flying in the wind.

The sea. The ship. The sail. The sky. All of them swirled around him.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you!” shouted Ginsel above the storm.

Ginsel pulled on the tie rope strung over the top-gallant and hauled Jack toward it. Jack reached up and flipped his legs over the spar, swinging himself upright. It took several moments for him to regain his breath, sucking in air between teeth still clamped around Ginsel’s knife.

Once the burning pain in his hands had subsided, Jack resumed his painstaking crawl along the spar. Eventually the tangled halyard was only inches from his face. Jack took the knife from his mouth and began to hack at the sodden rope. But the knife proved too blunt, and it took him several attempts before the threads started to cleave apart. Jack’s fingers were icy to the core, and his bloodied palms made his grip slippery and awkward. A blast of wind shunted him sideways, and he let go of the blade while attempting to steady himself. It spun away with the storm.

“Nooooo!” cried Jack, futilely reaching after it.

Shattered from his efforts, he turned to Ginsel. “I’ve only cut half the rope! What now?”

Ginsel, lifeline in hand, gestured for him to come back, but another gust slammed into Jack so hard he could have sworn the ship had run aground. The entire mast shuddered in its bed, and the topsail yanked hard at the halyard. Weakened by Jack’s cutting, the rope snapped as if it were a breaking bone, the canvas unfurled and, with an almighty crack, caught the wind.

The ship surged forward.

Ginsel and the other sailors gave a cheer as the *Alexandria* turned in the wind and the breaking waves stopped battering her decks. Jack’s spirits were lifted by their unexpected turn of fortune, but his joy was short-lived.

The sail, in dropping, had jerked the block and tackle tight against the mast, where it had promptly snapped away and now plummeted like a stone toward Jack, leaving him nowhere to go.

CHAPTER 3

DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

JACK'S ONLY option was to jump.

He let go of the spar and dived out of the block and tackle's path.

Ginsel strained to hold him on the other end of the tie rope as he arced across the sky and crashed into the rigging on the far side of the foremast. Jack looped his arm through the ropes and clung on desperately.

The block and tackle now dropped straight toward the deck, where it struck an unfortunate sailor who was sent spinning into the sea.

Jack could only watch helplessly as the sailor struggled against the mountainous waves, disappearing and reappearing until, with a pitiful scream, he was finally dragged under.

* * *

"You did well up there, boy," commended the bosun when Jack returned to the foredeck. "Now go see your father—he's in his cabin with the captain."

Jack bolted for the companionway, thankful to escape the raging tempest. Within the belly of the ship, the storm felt less of a threat, its unrestrained fury above becoming a muffled howl below. Jack weaved his way through the bunks to his father's berth in the stern, quietly entering the small, low-beamed room.

His father was bent over a desk, studying a set of sea charts with the captain. His wet hair dripped onto the map, and he wiped it away to reveal a broad handsome face with eyes as blue as the ocean, just like Jack's.

"You said you knew these waters!" barked the captain, pounding the desk with his fist. "You said we'd make landfall two weeks ago! Two weeks ago! By the hand of God, I can sail this ship in any storm, but I've got to know where to go! Perhaps there are no Japans, eh? It could *all* be legend. A cursed Portuguese deception designed to ruin us."

Jack, like every other sailor on board, knew about the fabled islands of Japan. Since the islands were full of unfathomable riches and exotic spices, a trading mission would make wealthy men of them all; but so far only the Portuguese had ever set foot on the Japans, and they were determined to keep the route secret.

“The Japans exist, Captain,” said John Fletcher, calmly opening a large leatherbound notebook to a crude map. “My rutter says they exist between latitudes thirty and forty north. By my calculations, we’re only a few leagues off the coast. Look here.”

John pointed to the roughly drawn map within the rutter.

“We’re in striking distance of the Japanese port of Toba—here. That’s several hundred leagues off our trading destination, Nagasaki. So you can see, Captain, the storm has blown us way off course. But that’s not our only problem; I’m told this whole coastline’s rife with pirates. Toba’s not a friendly port, so they’ll probably think we’re pirates, too. And worse, another pilot in Bantam informed me that Portuguese Jesuits have set up a Catholic church there. We won’t know friends from enemies. They’ll have poisoned the minds of many of the locals. Even if we make it ashore, we risk being slaughtered as Protestant heretics.”

There was a deep boom from within the bowels of the ship, followed by the groaning of timbers as a vast wave peeled along the side of the *Alexandria*.

“In a storm such as this, Pilot, we’ve little choice but to make for land, whatever the cost. It may be a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea, John, but I’d prefer to take our chances with a Jesuit devil!”

“Captain, I’ve another suggestion. According to my rutter, there are some sheltered bays two miles south of Toba. They’ll be safer, but getting there won’t be easy. The bays are lined with reefs.”

Jack watched as his father pointed to a small series of jagged lines etched onto the map.

The captain’s fierce eyes bored into John’s. “You think you can get us through?”

John put his hand on the rutter. “If God be on our side, yes.”

As the captain turned to leave, he caught sight of Jack. “You’d better hope your father’s right, boy. The life of this ship and its crew are in his hands.”

He swept past, leaving Jack and his father alone.

John carefully wrapped a protective oilskin around his rutter and walked over to a small bunk in the corner of the cabin. He lifted the thin mattress and slid back a hidden compartment into which he placed the rutter before clicking it shut. He gave Jack a conspiratorial wink as he patted the mattress back flat.

John studied his son with concern. “How are you holding up?”

Jack understood that his father’s confidence in the rutter was unshakeable. For everyone else, though, it was a leap of faith. “Are we going to make it?” Jack asked bluntly.

“Of course we are, son,” John replied, drawing Jack to him. “You got the foresail down. With sailors like you, we cannot fail.”

Jack tried to return his father’s smile, but he was genuinely scared. The *Alexandria* had met with storm after storm, and even though his father claimed they were close to their destination, it seemed like they’d never feel land under their feet again. This was a darker fear than that which he had felt in the rigging, or at any other point on the grueling journey so far.

His father bent down to look him in the eye. “Don’t despair, Jack. The sea is a tempestuous mistress, but I’ve been through storms far worse than this and survived. And we will survive this one.”

Jack kept close to his father as they made their way back to the quarterdeck. Somehow he felt protected in his presence; his father’s unwavering confidence gave him hope.

“Nothing like a good storm to swab the decks, eh?” jested his father to the third mate, who was still wrestling valiantly with the wheel, the exertion sending his face as red as his beard. “Set a course for north by northwest. But let it be known there are reefs ahead. Warn the lookouts to stay sharp.”

Despite Jack’s father’s faith in the direction they were heading, the ocean stretched on and on, wave after wave pounding the *Alexandria*. Jack’s own confidence began to ebb away with the sand in the binnacle hourglass.

It was not until the sand had run dry a second time that the cry of “Land, ho!” came forth. A wave of elation and relief ran through the entire crew. They had been battling the tempest half the night. Now they could ride out the storm, tucked behind a headland or within the shelter of some bay.

But almost as quickly as their hopes had been raised, they were dashed by a second cry from the lookout.

“Reefs to starboard bow!”

Then shortly after . . .

“Reefs to larboard bow!”

Jack’s father began to shout bearings at the third mate.

“Hard to starboard! . . . Now hold your course. Hold . . . Hold . . . Hold . . .”

The *Alexandria* rose and fell over the churning waves, skirting reefs as it ran headlong for the dark mass of land in the distance.

“HARD-O’-LARBOARD!” screamed his father as he threw his own weight behind the wheel.

The rudder bit into the churning sea. The deck heeled sickeningly. The ship swung the other way . . . but too late. The *Alexandria* collided with the reef. A halyard snapped, and the weakened foremast cracked, crumpled, and fell away.

“CUT THE RIGGING!” ordered the captain. The ship was lurching dangerously under the drag of the foremast.

The men on deck fell upon the ropes with axes. They hacked away, freeing the mast, but the ship still failed to respond. It was apparent her hull had been breached.

The *Alexandria* was sinking!

CHAPTER 4

LAND OF THE RISING SUN

THE WHOLE CREW had battled all night to keep the ship afloat, though it had seemed a futile attempt.

Seawater had flooded the bilge, and Jack had worked alongside the men, frantically attempting to pump it out, but the waters rapidly rose past the level of his chest. He had desperately fought to control his panic. Drowning was a sailor's worst nightmare: a watery grave where crabs crawled over your bloated body and picked at your cold, lifeless eyes.

Jack retched over the *Alexandria's* side for the fourth time that morning, remembering the way the dark brackish water had lapped at his chin. Holding his breath, he had still kept pumping. But what other choice had there been? It was either save the ship or drown trying.

Then fortune returned to their side. They reached the safety of a cove. The ocean had suddenly calmed, the *Alexandria* eased down, and the water level quickly fell away. Jack recalled sucking in the rancid air of the bilge like it was the sweetest mountain breeze as his head cleared the surface and he heard the heavy *whomp* of the anchor being dropped.

Recovering now on the quarterdeck, the pure sea air cleared his head, and his stomach began to settle.

Jack stared out to sea, its waves now gently lapping around the hull. The roar of the tempest had been replaced by the early morning call of seabirds and the occasional creak of the rigging.

He let his mind drift with the peace of it all. Within minutes a glorious crimson sun peeked above the ocean, revealing a spectacular sight.

The *Alexandria* was anchored in the center of a picturesque cove with a towering headland that jutted out into the ocean. The bluff was swathed in lush green cedar trees and red pines, and a glorious golden beach rimmed its inner bay. The cove's emerald green waters were alive with an ever-shifting rainbow of colorful fish.

Jack's attention was drawn by something catching the morning light on the peninsula. He lifted his father's spyglass to his eye to get a better look. Among the trees stood an exquisite building that appeared to have grown out of the rock itself. Jack had never seen anything quite like it.

Perched upon a massive stone pedestal were a series of pillars made of deep-red wood. Each pillar had been painstakingly gilded in gold leaf with images of what appeared to be dragons and exotic swirling symbols. Resting upon these pillars were intricately tiled roofs that curled up toward the heavens. At the very peak of the highest roof was a tall thin spire of concentric golden circles that pierced the forest canopy. In front of the building and dominating the bay, a huge standing stone thrust up from the ground. This, too, was engraved with the same ornate symbols.

Jack was trying to figure out what the symbols were, when he glimpsed movement.

A glorious white stallion emerged from behind the standing stone, and in its shadow, barely reaching the height of the saddle, was a slim dark-haired girl. She appeared as ephemeral as a spirit. Her skin was as white as snow, while her jet-black hair cascaded down past her waist. She wore a bloodred dress that shimmered in the haze of the early morning light.

Jack was transfixed. Even at this distance he could feel her gaze upon the ship. He raised his hand hesitantly in greeting. The girl remained motionless. Jack waved again. This time the girl bowed ever so slightly.

“Oh, glorious day!” exclaimed a voice from behind. “One so much sweeter for the passing of the storm.”

Jack turned around to see his father admiring the ruby red disk of the sun as it rose over the ocean.

“Father, look!” cried Jack, pointing to the girl on the peninsula.

His father glanced up and searched the headland. “I told you, son! This land is gilded with gold,” he said jubilantly, pulling Jack to him. “They even build their temples with the very stuff. . . .”

“No, not the building, Father, the girl and . . .” But the girl and the horse had disappeared. Only the standing stone remained. It was as if she had been carried away on a breeze.

“What girl? You’ve been at sea too long !” teased his father, a knowing smile on his lips, which quickly faded as if stolen by a forgotten memory. “Far too long . . .”

He trailed off, gazing mournfully at the headland.

“I should never have brought you, Jack. It was foolhardy of me. Your mother—God rest her soul—would never have allowed you on this journey. She would have wanted you to stay home with Jess.”

“I wanted to come,” insisted Jack. “Like you said, to be the first Englishman to set foot in Japan.”

“Well now, here you are in the Japans,” replied his father, his mood lightening. Jack suddenly found himself enveloped within one of his father’s massive bear hugs. “And by my life, son, you proved your mettle last night. How proud your mother would have been. You’ll grow up to be a fine pilot.”

Jack felt his father’s pride seep into his very bones. He buried his head in his father’s chest, wanting never to be let go.

“Jack, if you’ve already spied someone on the headland, then we had best remain

on our guard,” continued his father, taking the spyglass from Jack. “*Wakou* ply these waters and one can never be too vigilant.”

“What are *wakou*?” asked Jack, pulling his head away.

“They’re Japanese pirates,” explained his father, scanning the horizon. “They’re disciplined, they’re ruthless, and they’re feared in all places. They have no qualms about killing Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and Englishmen alike. They’re the very devil of these seas.”

“And they are the reason, young man,” interrupted the captain from behind, “why we must make haste to repair the *Alexandria*. Now, Pilot, did you get the damage report from the first mate?”

“Yes, Captain,” replied Jack’s father as he and the captain made their way to the helm. “It’s as bad as we feared.”

Jack remained close by. He wanted to hear more about these *wakou*. How could they be any worse than the Spanish or Portuguese pirates they’d already encountered? Yet his father was not one to exaggerate. With a dread fascination, Jack caught snatches of their conversation as he continued to search the headland for signs of the mysterious girl.

“The *Alexandria*’s taken quite a beating. . . .” said his father.

“At least two weeks to get her into proper shipshape . . .”

“. . . I want the *Alexandria* seaworthy by the turn of the new moon.”

“That’s barely a week away. . . .” protested his father.

“Double shifts, Pilot, if we are to be spared the fate of the *Clove*. . . .”

“. . . dead to the last man. Beheaded—each and every one.”

The news of double shifts did not go down well with the men, but they were too afraid of the bosun and his cat-o’-nine-tails to complain. For the next seven days, Jack, along with the rest of the crew, labored like galley slaves, the sweat pouring off them in rivulets under the hot Japanese sun.

While repairing the foresail, Jack often found himself gazing up at the temple. Shimmering in the heat haze, it appeared to be floating above the headland. Every day he had been on the lookout for the girl—but was beginning to think he’d imagined her.

Perhaps his father was right. Maybe he *had* been at sea too long.

“I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all,” complained Ginsel, rousing Jack from his daydream. “We’re a trader ship with no sail. We’ve got a cargo of cloth, sappanwood, and guns. Any pirate worth his salt is going to know we’re a prize for the taking!”

“But there’s over a hundred of us, sir, and we have a cannon,” Christiaan pointed out. “How could they possibly beat us?”

“Don’t you know nothing, you little sea urchin?” spat Piper, a bony man with skin that hung off his scrawny frame like dry parchment paper. “This here is the Japans. The Japanese ain’t no defenseless bare-breasted natives. They’re fighters. Killers! You ever heard of the samurai?”