

YOUNG
SAMURAI

THE RING OF
FIRE

CHRIS BRADFORD



THE LETTER

Japan, 1614

My dearest Jess,

I hope this letter reaches you one day. You must believe I've been lost at sea all these years. But you'll be glad to know that I am alive and in good health.

Father and I reached the Japans in August 1611, but I am sad to tell you he was killed in an attack upon our ship, the Alexandria. I alone survived.

For these past three years, I've been living in the care of a Japanese warrior, Masamoto Takeshi, at his samurai school in Kyoto. He has been very kind to me, but life has not been easy.

An assassin, a ninja known as Dragon Eye, was hired to steal our father's rutter (you no doubt remember how

important this navigational logbook was to our father?).
The ninja was successful in his mission. However, with the help of my samurai friends, I've managed to get it back.

This same ninja was the one who murdered our father. And, while it may not bring you much comfort, I can assure you the assassin is now dead. Justice has been delivered. But the ninja's death doesn't bring back our father – I miss him so much and could do with his guidance and protection at this time.

Japan has been split by civil war and foreigners like myself are no longer welcome. I am a fugitive. On the run for my life. I now journey south through this strange and exotic land to the port of Nagasaki in the hope that I may find a ship bound for England.

The Tokaido Road upon which I travel, however, is fraught with danger and I have many enemies on my trail. But do not fear for my safety. Masamoto has trained me as a samurai warrior and I will fight to return home to you.

One day I do hope I can tell you about my adventures in person . . .

Until then, dear sister, may God keep you safe.

Your brother, Jack

P.S. Since first writing this letter at the end of spring, I've been kidnapped by ninja. But I discovered that they were not the enemy I thought they were. In fact, they saved my life and taught me about the Five Rings: the five great elements of the universe – Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Sky. I now know ninjutsu skills that go beyond anything I learnt as a samurai. But, because of the circumstances of our father's death, I still struggle to fully embrace the Way of the Ninja . . .



FROZEN

Japan, winter 1614

Jack's limbs were frozen solid. He was so cold he could no longer even shiver. Only sheer willpower kept him putting one foot in front of the other as he battled through the blizzard.

He seriously regretted his decision to take the mountain route. He may have evaded the Shogun's samurai, but he'd barely made it over Funasaka Pass alive. During the night the weather had turned harsh, battering him into submission and forcing him down the mountainside.

The icy gusts cut through his silk kimono straight to the bone like knives. Jack clasped his body for warmth, his head down to the wind, his thin straw hat offering poor protection against the stinging snow. Upon his hip rattled the two red-handled samurai swords his best friend, Akiko, had given him. Slung across his back was the pack that contained her black pearl, five *shuriken* stars and, most importantly, his father's *rutter* – the priceless navigational logbook he'd fought tooth and nail to keep safe. Yet, however precious these items were to him, they were now like lead weights round his neck.

Cold, tired and hungry, Jack felt the last of his strength ebbing away.

Glancing up to get his bearings, there was nothing to see. The landscape was shrouded in a thick blanket of white, the sky swallowed up by endless grey clouds. Behind him, his lone track of footprints was already disappearing beneath a new veil of snow.

At least I'm off the mountain, he thought, taking in the vast featureless expanse of the Okayama Plain. *Perhaps I should rest awhile. Let the snow cover my body. No one would find me, not even Kazuki* –

Jack shook himself. He couldn't allow such self-defeating thoughts to overwhelm him. Fighting his exhaustion, he focused on the burning hope in his heart: of returning home to his sister Jess.

Since leaving his friends – the samurai Ronin and the girl thief Hana – he'd been making good progress with his escape to Nagasaki, the southern port where he hoped to find a ship bound for England. Miraculously, he'd passed unscathed through the outskirts of Osaka. He'd then followed the coastal road, avoiding all the samurai checkpoints, to reach the castle town of Himeji. Here Jack made his first mistake. Having run short of supplies, he'd risked buying some rice in a market with the last of his coins. But the Shogun's samurai were everywhere – on the lookout for foreigners, in particular a *gaijin* samurai. Although he'd tried to keep his face hidden, Jack was spotted and forced to flee. For the next three days, troops of samurai were hard on his trail. He only managed to lose them when, using his ninja stealth skills, he broke from the coastal road and headed deep into the mountains.

But that decision now looked to be the end of him.

Praying for shelter, Jack stumbled on blindly through the snowstorm. Twice he fell to the ground and got back up again. On the third time, his body simply gave in – the lack of food, sleep and warmth finally taking its toll.

The snow quickly began to settle upon his frozen form.

As the ground consumed him, Jack heard the faint voice of his friend Yori in his head . . . *Seven times down, eight times up!*

The mantra, which had been his saving two years before in the *Taryu-Jiai* interschool martial arts contest, repeated itself, growing louder and louder.

Seven times down, eight times UP! Seven times down, EIGHT TIMES UP! SEVEN TIMES DOWN, EIGHT TIMES UP!

The lesson of never giving up was burnt so deep into his soul that Jack overruled his body's failure. Summoning up the last of his energy, he dragged himself to his feet, snow tumbling from his shoulders. In his determination to rise, he thought he saw the flickering orange flame of an oil lamp in the distance. Staggering towards the light, more lanterns came into view until an entire town materialized out of the storm.

Although Jack avoided civilization whenever he could, desperation now drove him forward. In a final burst, he fell into the shelter of the nearest building, huddling from the bitter wind in the corner of its veranda.

Once he'd recovered slightly, Jack took in his new surroundings.

Lights spilt on to the main street in welcoming arcs and the warm glow of fires beckoned the weary traveller inside the numerous inns and eating establishments lining

the road. The noise of laughter and drunken singing greeted Jack's ears as small groups of samurai, *geisha*, merchants and townsfolk hurried between the wooden slatted premises in search of entertainment and refuge from the storm.

Slumped where he was, Jack realized he was in full view of these people and would soon draw attention to himself. Gathering his wits, he pulled his straw hat further over his face and entered the town, acting like any other samurai.

The smell of cooked rice, soy sauce and steamed fish assaulted his senses. To his right, a *shoji* door was partially open. Three samurai warriors sat round a roaring hearth fire, knocking back *saké* and scooping generous portions of steamed rice into their mouths. Jack couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten a proper meal. For the past week, he'd been forced to forage. But winter was a meagre time. Early on he'd managed to kill a squirrel with his *shuriken*; otherwise in the mountains he'd found nothing, the snow having driven all animals to ground.

As one of the samurai closed the *shoji*, blocking his view, Jack knew food had to be his priority. But with no money to his name, he'd have to beg, barter or steal in order to survive.

All of a sudden he collided with something solid, the impact almost bowling him over.

'Watch it!' snarled a burly samurai, accompanied by a white-faced *geisha* girl who began to giggle incessantly.

'*Sumimasen*,' said Jack, apologizing in Japanese and bowing respectfully. The last thing he wanted was trouble.

But he needn't have worried. The samurai was drunk and more intent on reaching the next inn to care any further about Jack.

Up ahead a *shoji* flew open and three men were ejected from the hostelry. A roar of laughter followed as they landed face first in the snow.

‘And don’t come back!’ shouted the innkeeper, wiping his hands of them before slamming the door shut.

The three men picked themselves up and despondently dusted themselves down. Dressed in threadbare smocks and trousers, they looked like beggars or impoverished farmers. Whoever they were, it was clear to Jack that this town had no sympathy for vagrants.

While Jack considered the few options he had left, the three men headed towards him. Although they didn’t look like fighters, they outnumbered him and, given his weakened condition, posed a threat. As they drew closer, Jack’s hand instinctively went to his swords. His frozen fingers could barely grip the handle of his *katana* and Jack wondered if he’d even have the strength to fight them off.

‘Go on!’ said the apparent leader of the group, a sour-faced man with hollow cheeks and thin weathered lips. He shoved the youngest forward.

Jack stood his ground.

The young man, a nervous individual with a missing front tooth and jug-like ears, asked, ‘Are you a . . . *ronin*?’

Jack simply nodded that he was a masterless samurai and made to walk on. But the young man stepped into his path. Jack tensed in readiness as his challenger summoned up the courage to make his next move.

Taking a deep breath, the young man blurted, ‘Do you want a job?’



RICE

Jack was dumbfounded at the suggestion.

‘We can pay you,’ said the third and eldest man, who possessed only a few strands of hair on his otherwise bald head.

Jack hesitated. He certainly needed the money. But looking at their dishevelled appearance, he wondered how they could afford to pay *anyone*. Even if they could, taking a job was too much of a risk. How could he trust them? His identity was bound to be discovered. His journey would be delayed. Besides, their offer was most probably a trap.

Shaking his head, he walked away.

‘*Please . . .* hear us out,’ the old man insisted, an imploring hangdog expression on his wrinkled face. ‘At least join us for supper. We’ve freshly cooked rice.’

Jack’s stomach growled at the thought. And the old man’s desperation appeared genuine. What had he to lose simply by listening? His need for food outweighing his better judgement, Jack agreed. ‘But I’m not making any promises,’ he added.

‘We understand,’ said their leader, bowing in acknowledgement. ‘Come this way.’

Jack followed the three men down a side street to a

dilapidated storehouse at the edge of town. His senses on high alert, he glanced around for telltale signs of an ambush – footprints leading to a darkened alley, snow disturbed from a rooftop, a building that could conceal a surprise attack. But if there were enemies around, they were well hidden.

The sour-faced man pushed open a rickety door and entered first. Jack paused at the threshold, trying to assess the danger within. But it was pitch-black inside and all he detected was the stench of rotting straw.

‘My apologies,’ said the old man, ushering him meekly in. ‘But this is the only lodging we can afford.’

A stub of a candle flickered into life, its weak flame illuminating a spartan room with a hard-packed earthen floor and a rough wooden deck for sleeping.

The young man closed the door behind them as Jack was invited by the leader to be seated upon the raised platform. Unshouldering his pack, Jack removed his swords and placed them, close at hand, by his side. The three men knelt before him on the dirt floor.

‘My name is Toge,’ said the leader, bowing his head. ‘We’re farmers from Tamagashi village. This here is Sora –’ the old man bowed – ‘and the boy is Kunio.’

Offering a gap-toothed grin, Kunio prostrated himself before Jack. Peering from beneath the brim of his hat, Jack now saw Kunio wasn’t much older than he was. Sixteen or seventeen, at most.

Jack nodded his head in acknowledgement, deciding not to reveal his own name. Until he knew these people’s intentions, he had to be cautious, but he didn’t wish to lie to them either. An awkward silence fell and the three farmers began

to fidget uncomfortably as their anxiety grew at this mysterious samurai.

'Your rice is just coming,' said Sora quickly, gesturing towards the far corner of the storehouse.

Only then did Jack notice a fourth person in the room; his fatigue had clearly impaired his warrior awareness. He reached for his *wakizashi*, then, on closer inspection, checked himself. Hidden in the shadows, a girl crouched over the dying embers of a small fire. Scooping out a portion of rice from a battered pot, she scurried over to Jack and presented him with the bowl.

Little more than a waif in a tattered kimono, the fourteen-year-old girl had a tangled bob of black hair and a round pale face that appeared pretty beneath the many layers of grime. As she looked to Jack, he noticed her cat-like eyes constantly flitting between him and the farmers, revealing a lively spirit behind her unkempt condition.

Toge batted his hand impatiently at the girl and she returned to the pot. Working silently, she served out three more bowls of rice and handed these to the farmers.

'Please enjoy,' said Toge through tight unsmiling lips.

'Thank you,' replied Jack, trying not to wolf down the food in one go. He couldn't appear too desperate. No chopsticks were offered, so he used his fingers. As soon as the rice touched his tongue, however, Jack let out a grateful sigh and dug in.

'You like?' said Sora, his expression genuinely pleased.

Jack nodded. Unable to hold back, he stuffed the rest into his mouth, the food disappearing in several ravenous gulps. The nourishing rice warmed his stomach and revived him a little.

‘Have some more,’ insisted Sora, ignoring the vexed look from Toge. The old man gestured to the girl, who collected Jack’s bowl and refilled it.

With his immediate craving satisfied, Jack took his time with the second serving. He didn’t want to gorge himself and end up being sick.

‘So why do you need the services of a samurai?’ asked Jack, aware that he had to uphold his end of the bargain.

‘To guard our rice store,’ explained Toge, chewing steadily on his food as if each grain was his last.

‘That doesn’t seem like a task for a samurai warrior.’

Quickly swallowing his rice, Toge replied, ‘Oh, I can assure you it is.’

‘Our rice is very valuable to us,’ added Sora. ‘It’s vital to our village’s survival and we can’t be too careful, especially during winter.’

‘Do you get many thieves then?’ asked Jack.

‘Once in a black moon,’ Toge replied, putting down his empty bowl.

Jack considered this for a moment. ‘Is your village far from here?’

While Toge explained its remote location upon the edge of the Okayama Plain, Jack noticed the farmers only had a few tiny mouthfuls of rice left, while his own bowl was still more than half full. He glanced over at the girl to see her picking at the dried scrapings from the pot. All of a sudden a wave of guilt consumed Jack as he realized he was eating *all* their provisions.

Though he could have devoured another five bowls at least, Jack stood up and offered the girl his meal. She looked worried

and confused. Lifting up the pot, she showed him it was empty and shook her head to say there was no more.

‘For you,’ said Jack, presenting her with his rice.

The girl didn’t seem to understand his Japanese and Jack had to force the bowl into her hands. Now realizing his intention, she glanced towards Toge but didn’t wait for his permission. Flashing Jack a smile, she scampered off into the corner. The three farmers exchanged surprised looks, astonished at his gesture of generosity.

‘*See! I knew he had a good heart for a samurai,*’ whispered Sora behind his hand to the open-mouthed Kunio.

‘He could have given it to *us*, though,’ Kunio muttered under his breath.

Jack caught all of this but pretended not to hear. He sat back down and pondered his options. The farmers had been honest with him and had sacrificed everything they had in the vague hope he might help them. As a samurai, bound by the code of *bushido*, Jack felt compelled to honour their sacrifice by at least considering their proposition.

The job seemed simple and he was certainly skilled enough to deal with a few thieves. Moreover, with it being mid-winter and no provisions of his own, Jack had little chance of progressing any further on his trek to Nagasaki. He needed to recover his strength first. Yet this had to be weighed against the risk of delay and the Shogun’s samurai catching up with him – Kazuki and his gang couldn’t be too far behind either.

‘I’m on an important pilgrimage,’ Jack explained. ‘I wouldn’t be able to stay very long.’

‘No, that’s fine!’ replied Toge, seizing upon this slightest of hopes. ‘A month is all we need . . . until the next new moon.’

Jack thought about this. The village was off the beaten track, so it was unlikely his enemies would discover him during that time. And there was nothing to stop him leaving as soon as the bad weather had passed and the roads were clear again.

‘What pay are you offering?’

The three farmers looked sheepishly at one another. Toge coughed, then mumbled, ‘We’re farmers, so can only pay you in rice. Two meals a day, plus lodging.’

Jack realized this would allow him to recover, but the pitiful pay didn’t solve his provision problems.

When Toge saw their potential recruit wavering, he added quickly, ‘Three meals a day. And whatever supplies you need for your journey.’

Sora, keen to seal the agreement, suggested, ‘Why not visit our village first? Then you can make your decision.’

The offer had become very tempting. Although Jack knew the sensible decision was *not* to get involved at all, the practical solution to his predicament was to take the work. The question was whether Jack could entrust the farmers with his identity. But this matter could be dealt with when the issue arose. If they reacted badly, he stood a better chance of escaping a remote village than a bustling town.

Besides, did he *really* have a choice? The only alternative to the farmers’ offer was fighting for his survival in Okayama, a hostile place swarming with samurai where he was guaranteed to be discovered and reported.

Turning to the farmers, Jack announced, ‘I accept your offer.’



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