

YOUNG
SAMURAI

THE RING OF
SKY

CHRIS BRADFORD

PUFFIN BOOKS



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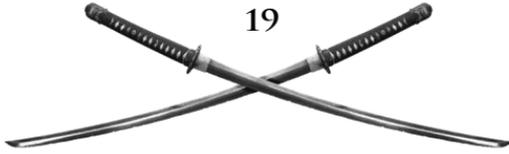
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ROPE BRIDGE

‘That’s no way to greet an old schoolfriend!’ remarked Kazuki, eyeing Jack’s *katana* and keeping his distance.

‘*Friend?* You’ve no idea what friendship means,’ replied Jack, feeling his blood boil at his rival’s arrogance. ‘You betrayed *everyone* at the *Niten Ichi Ryū*.’

‘I was being *loyal* to my family and the future Shogun,’ shot back Kazuki. ‘That is true *bushido*.’

Jack regarded him with contempt. ‘You know nothing of Respect, Rectitude or Honesty. Without those, you’re no more than a common mercenary. And it’s obvious you’ve been well rewarded for your treachery.’

‘This?’ said Kazuki, patting his golden helmet and grinning. ‘This is my promotion for capturing Sensei Kano.’

Jack was too stunned to reply. He’d thought their *bōjutsu* master had managed to disappear after leading the surviving *Niten Ichi Ryū* samurai to safety during the Battle of Osaka Castle.

Kazuki laughed cruelly. ‘No one escapes the Shogun’s wrath, *gaijin*. After sustaining some injuries in the flood during our last encounter, I was recommended to a blind healer.

Imagine my surprise when he turned out to be Sensei Kano!’

‘You handed him over, when he was *helping* you?’ exclaimed Jack, aghast.

‘No, *after* he’d helped me,’ corrected Kazuki, without a flicker of remorse.

‘You’re the lowest of the low, Kazuki!’ Jack couldn’t stand his rival’s bragging any more. He shot a glance in Benkei’s direction. His friend was almost to the other side of the bridge. Jack could make a run for it . . . or confront his enemy. A showdown was long overdue and, fuelled with outrage at Sensei Kano’s fate, Jack raised his *katana* to attack. But as he gripped the handle with both hands, an agonizing fire shot through the stump of his little finger and he winced.

‘Missing something?’ smirked Kazuki.

‘Thanks to Sensei Kyuzo,’ seethed Jack, clenching his teeth against the pain.

Kazuki nodded approvingly. ‘He was always my favourite teacher. That’s why I didn’t turn him in when I recognized him in Yufuin.’ He held up his gloved right hand, his fingers curled into an impotent claw. ‘At least we’re more evenly matched now – although *yubitsume* is hardly enough punishment for Akiko’s arrow through my hand.’

Jack bristled at the implied threat. ‘You vowed to leave her alone!’

Kazuki smirked at his impassioned reaction. ‘Don’t worry, I haven’t gone near your beloved friend . . . yet.’

Struggling to keep his temper in check, Jack advanced on Kazuki. But, rather than going for his sword, his rival retreated.

Jack pursued him into the mist.

‘*Nanban*, it’s this way!’ cried Benkei, stopping several planks short of the end.

Chasing after shadows, Jack realized too late that Kazuki had baited him on purpose. Out of the steam materialized the rest of the patrol. And Jack recognized them all.

The samurai were the four key members of Kazuki’s Scorpion Gang, the unit established in honour of *daimyo* Kamakura’s campaign to rid Japan of foreigners – and Jack was the *gaijin* at the very top of their death list.

Nobu stomped towards him, a solid wall of muscle and flesh like the bulbous body of a walrus. While no match for Jack’s sword skill, he possessed the sheer brute force of a sumo wrestling champion.

Hiroto, on the other hand, was as skinny as a bamboo stalk and had eyes that sat too close together aside a pinched nose. Limping slightly, he wielded a lethal barbed spear and wore thick body armour, clearly worried that Jack would wound him in the stomach for a third time.

A greater threat was Goro, a muscular hardened warrior with devastating sword skills and total lack of honour. The boy slashed the air threateningly with his *katana*, the blade whistling as it cut through the mist.

Finally, a giant stepped out. A good head taller than everyone else, Raiden was like a tree trunk with legs – and just as thick. What he boasted in pure strength, he lacked in brain. Jack had beaten him once in a *taijutsu* match, but the fight had almost been the end of him. On this occasion, Raiden brandished a formidable *nodachi* sword, its blade twice the length of Jack’s *katana*. Such a weapon could cleave him in half.

The last gang member was missing: Toru.

‘If you’re looking for my brother,’ grunted Raiden, ‘he drowned in the flood . . . and it’s *your* fault.’

Kazuki reappeared, his mask back on, his *katana* unsheathed in his left hand.

‘I’ve promised Raiden that he can cut off your head, once I’ve finished with you.’

Kazuki’s eyes fixed on Jack – his unwavering stare certain of victory.

Jack cursed himself for letting his rival trick him so easily. With only a single *katana* at his disposal against five opponents, he didn’t have a hope of defeating the Scorpion Gang all at once.

Divide and conquer.

That had been one of Masamoto’s key strategies in combat training. Somehow Jack had to reduce the gang’s combined fighting strength. The bridge was the answer. Crossing it, they’d be forced to engage him one at a time. But first he had to reach there alive.

Jack’s foot found a loose rock on the lava field. As Kazuki advanced on him, he flicked it into his face and caused his rival to flinch. Then, with lightning speed, he leapt at Hiroto and cut down. The *katana* blade sliced the barbed spear in two as if it were no thicker than a chopstick. Left with a useless stump of wood, Hiroto’s eyes widened in terror as he stood defenceless against Jack’s sword.

‘Not *again!*’ he wailed, trying to protect his stomach.

But a sudden thrust from Goro’s sword forced Jack on the retreat and he had to resort to front-kicking Hiroto in the face instead. The boy crashed on to the lava field, claspings his broken nose and howling. Jack fled from the encircling

Scorpions. As he sprinted away, a blade swiped past his ear, missing his neck by a fraction.

‘After him!’ yelled Kazuki in frustration.

Jack had no idea which direction he was heading. He just ran, the sulphurous steam swirling around him like ghosts.

Then his heart leapt into his throat as the chasm lurched into view. Jack skidded to a halt, his feet almost slipping into the abyss. Through a break in the steam he spotted the rope bridge. Benkei was still there, uncertain whether to flee or await his return.

‘Run, Benkei!’ cried Jack.

As he dashed along the chasm edge towards the bridge, he heard a clatter of rocks and a scream.

‘Help!’ came a cry.

Jack glanced back to see Nobu clinging to the lip of the gorge. But Kazuki ran past, blatantly ignoring his friend’s peril.

‘Leave him,’ he snarled to Raiden and Goro. ‘Get the *gaijin* first.’

Jack reached the foot of the bridge at the same time as Kazuki caught up with him. Their swords clashed and they became locked in combat. As the other Scorpions caught up, Jack shoved Kazuki away and leapt on to the bridge. He heard the *whoosh* of a blade and ducked. Kazuki’s sword sliced through thin air, then straight through one of the supporting ropes.

The bridge shuddered as the tension in the rope pinged loose.

Benkei dived for the safety of the other side, while Jack struggled to keep his footing on the warped planks.

Unfazed, Kazuki forced Jack further on to the swaying bridge. Consumed with bloodlust, he was relentless in his attack. Jack could barely deflect the barrage of strikes as they rained down on him one after the other. With every impact, a spasm of pain rocketed through his arm. He felt his grip weaken on the *katana* and his defences rapidly crumbling.

As he retreated from Kazuki's onslaught, a plank cracked beneath his foot. Feeling himself drop into the chasm, he threw his weight backwards and managed to land on the plank behind. But he'd now left himself exposed to a killing strike.

Kazuki brought his sword high up to spear Jack through the heart.

'Now I *will* have my revenge, *gaijin*.'